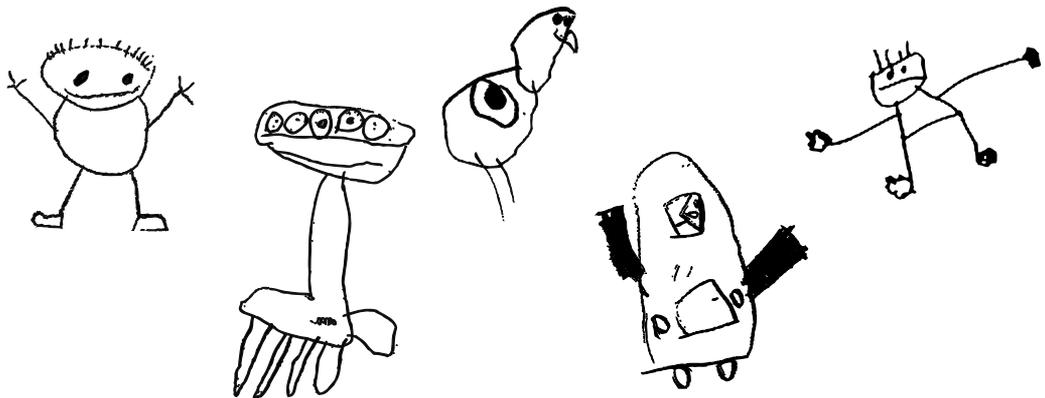




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Editorial

On behalf of OMEP Ireland, I am delighted to be able to introduce this issue of *An Leanbh Óg, the OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies*. I am also pleased to welcome Anna Ridgway and Patricia Radley as co-editors for this volume. Anna is the Professional Practice Placement Manager for the Early Years and Childhood Studies degree in the School of Education, University College Cork, and Patricia has recently completed her doctorate on the topic of children and the media. Both of them have also contributed to this journal in the past, as well as helping to get the journal ready for publication, so both of them bring a wealth of experience and expertise to the task of editing it. In this issue, you will find a selection of papers from the 2012 OMEP Ireland conference, as well as a range of other papers on early childhood topics. Submissions of papers that may be of interest to our readers are welcome at any time. For details of how to submit, please see the guidelines for intending authors at the end of this volume.

Volume 7 of *An Leanbh Óg* opens with two keynote addresses from the 2012 OMEP Ireland conference. Dr Sinéad McNally, from the School of Psychology in Trinity College Dublin, explores the potential of the Growing Up in Ireland study, the first major longitudinal study of children in Ireland, as a strong evidence base for policy development in the Early Years sector in Ireland.

The second keynote address is also from the 2012 conference. Ann Coughlan, Early Intervention Educator with Enable Ireland, Cork Services and Chair of the Irish Association of Educators in Early Childhood Intervention (EECI) and Gino Lerario, an Early Intervention Educator with North Tipperary Children's Services, HSE and General Secretary of the EECI present a powerful argument in favour of the recognition of the role of specialised early childhood educator in multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinary teams dealing with the complex needs of

children from birth to six years of age who have disabilities or who are at risk of developmental delay. They also argue the case for making specialised post-graduate training in this area available.

In Section 1 of this volume, the peer-reviewed papers, many facets of early years education and care from the earliest days of infancy to primary school are addressed. The national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy (Dept of Education and Skills, 2011) places considerable emphasis on the importance of the early years, when children are developing the knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions that will play a significant role in their later learning. Several of our contributors take up this theme.

Geraldine French gives us a comprehensive overview of the findings from the literature regarding the development of early literacy and numeracy, and the implications for parents and early years educators who wish to promote children's development in these important areas. Donna Kotsopoulos and Joanne Lee from Wilfred Laurier University, Ontario, Canada, discuss the role of mathematical play in early childhood, an area that hitherto has received less attention than it deserves; as they point out, much more emphasis has been placed on the development of language skills than on mathematical ones. Their observations of parents and children show that purposeful play can enhance children's learning opportunities in this vital area, and that children are far more capable in this area than is often thought.

Early mathematics, is of course, featured in *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009), particularly under the *Exploring and Thinking* theme. As *Aistear* is adopted in more and more settings, from childminding through pre-school into primary school, we can expect to see greater continuity and integration of learning in many other areas also. The introduction of *Aistear* into the infant classes of primary schools is on-going, and we hope to have several papers on this topic in the next issue of this journal. Meanwhile, we have an account of a collaborative pilot project supporting the implementation of *Aistear* in early childhood settings, from Mary Daly of the NCCA and Lucy Connolly, Máire Corbett and Carmel Brennan of Early Childhood Ireland.

In the previous issue of *An Leabhbh Óg*, we featured two papers on the National Childminding Initiative (Daly, 2012a) and on its impact in Waterford city and county (Daly 2012b). In this volume, Helena Comerford describes the role of networks in supporting childminders in Co. Kilkenny to engage with both Síolta and Aistear, in which she reports that these informal but key learning

opportunities, facilitated by the Childminding Advisory Officer, have been well received by childminders, both as an opportunity to meet one another and to avail of professional development.

Aistear promotes and supports the role of play in early learning and development, and we have two papers in this volume exploring aspects of play and learning. Frances Clerkin explores children's individual and group identity formation within a pre-school community of practices. Her vivid descriptions of the children's play bring the setting to life, while her analysis of the socio-cultural context and the prevailing discourses enlarge our understanding of what is happening. The role of socio-dramatic play is highlighted in *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (Kernan, 2007, NCCA, 2009). Una McCabe brings us some findings from her research on socio-dramatic play in two settings, a pre-school and an infant school, and draws some conclusions on the role of the adult in supporting it.

Complementing our second 2012 keynote address, and reinforcing the message that early intervention is vital, the paper by Grainne Smith and Sinéad McNally describes the Childhood Development Initiative's three pronged approach to delivering speech and language therapy in an under-privileged community. As well as assessing and delivering therapy to children referred to it, the service provided advice and support to parents and to early years educators in the community. As they point out in their paper, "Early speech and language problems can impact on children's literacy outcomes and have a knock-on effect on social competence, school readiness, and emotional development" and this intervention is already showing results.

Bringing us a broader discussion of childhood is the paper from Nico van Oudenhoven and Rona Jualla van Oudenhoven from the International Child Development Initiatives organisation based in the Netherlands. In their view, early childhood development efforts should move away from treating young boys and girls exclusively as 'early learners' but view them more as 'active participants and contributors of culture' and they bring us some vivid international examples from different cultures.

The final section of the journal, "From the Field", begins with an article by Rosaleen Murphy and Marcella Towler, looking again at the Project E.Y.E. early years curriculum, the second edition of which was published by OMEP Ireland in 2006. It re-assesses Project E.Y.E. in the light of *Aistear*, the national early childhood curriculum framework, which is the focus of several other papers in this volume. This is followed by the report of the 2011 annual survey of its

members by Childminding Ireland, which each year reflects the developing nature of this form of early childhood provision, and which provides a context for the papers on aspects of childminding that have appeared in both this and last year's issues of *An Leanbh Óg*.

Next year will be a particularly exciting one for OMEP Ireland, as we prepare to host the OMEP World Assembly meeting in July 2014. We hope to make this a memorable occasion for all. The next issue of *An Leanbh Óg* will be part of the conference pack for all delegates, and this will raise awareness of our work among our sister OMEP organisations in other countries. It is therefore an opportunity to bring Irish research and practice to a worldwide audience, and we would encourage all of our readers to consider submitting a paper in good time in order to be considered for inclusion in Vol. 8. The guidelines for authors are at the end of this volume; they are also available on-line on our website, www.omepireland.ie

Once again, we thank all our contributors and supporters, and in particular our authors, external reviewers and the hardworking editorial team who make publication of this journal possible.

**Dr Rosaleen Murphy, Dr Patricia Radley, Dr Anna Ridgway,
Editors, *An Leanbh Óg, the OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood
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Growing Up in Ireland, the National Longitudinal Study of Children: An Evidence Base for Policy in Early Childhood Education and Care

(Keynote address, OMEP Ireland Annual Conference, 28 April 2012)

Dr Sinéad McNally, School of Psychology, Trinity College Dublin

Introduction

Growing Up in Ireland is the first study of its kind in Ireland. It is a longitudinal study with almost 20,000 children and their families taking part. The study is being carried out by a team of researchers led by the Economic and Social Research Institute and Trinity College Dublin, and this keynote is a reflection of the work conducted by this large study team¹. Many of you will have heard of *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) through media reports of newly available statistics on childhood obesity, for example, or on the positive impact of breastfeeding on child outcomes. The attention which the study receives is due to the exciting and valuable opportunity which it presents for us to learn more about children living in Ireland. In this paper, I will give a brief overview of the study, before outlining the ways in which *Growing Up in Ireland* can act as an important evidence base for policy in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector.

Childhood education and care in the Early Years encompasses the education and care of children from birth to six years of age. In the last decade or so, there has been an increasing emphasis on policy directed at ensuring appropriate and effective care and education for young children. This is within an increasing policy focus on improving the lives of children in general. In 2000, the National Children's Strategy was launched with three goals for children: (1) that children will have a voice in matters that affect them; (2) that children's lives will be better understood; and (3) that children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development (Department of Health and Children, 2000).

¹ I would like to thank Prof. James Williams and the study team for support in preparing this keynote. For more details on the study team, and on published reports, please visit www.growingup.ie.

Under this strategy, the National Children's Research Programme was initiated which included the funding and implementation of *Growing Up in Ireland*.

In the same decade, the *Prevention and Early Intervention Programme for Children* (2006-2013) was implemented. Jointly managed by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Atlantic Philanthropies, the programme oversees the evaluation of several pilot services in three communities in order to inform policy and services in the future. The *National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives 2011-2016* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011) has the potential to impact favourably on the ECEC sector with the strategy highlighting that good information is essential in helping us understand both how children and young people are developing and how policies and services impact on their lives.

With regard to the ECEC sector, a consultation for the *Children and Young People's Policy Framework* has been launched (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2012) which will include a focus on prenatal, infancy, and early childhood (0 to 6 years). An Expert Advisory Group has been established to advise on the preparation of Ireland's first-ever Early Years Strategy, and there is a dedicated Early Years Education Policy Unit in the Department of Education and Skills co-located with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to ensure that policy developments in the early childhood sector are developed within an overall strategic policy framework for children.

It is clearly a time of greater policy focus on children and the Early Years. Part and parcel of the new focus on the Early Years has been the development and implementation of *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (birth to 6 years) (Centre for Early Childhood and Development, 2006), and *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* for children from birth to 6 years (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009). *Síolta* and *Aistear*, which are the main themes of this conference today, share several principles regarding the need for quality Early Years services and both have related frameworks (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009):

[...] each framework plays a role in promoting and enhancing quality provision on a national level. In this way, the frameworks complement and support each other (p. 5).

Both frameworks are directed at practitioners who have responsibility for ECEC from birth to 6 years and both can be used in all Early Years services. *Síolta* and

Aistear share several principles including an emphasis on equality and diversity, the role of the adult in the child's life, the child's uniqueness and the value of early childhood, and the child as citizen. These principles are reflected in the objectives of GUI which include the intention to study the lives of children in Ireland, to identify the key factors that most help or hinder children's development, and to obtain children's views and opinions on their lives.

Síolta, *Aistear*, and GUI thus have similar guiding principles and have been developed at a time of greater emphasis on child policy. However, they have different if complementary objectives: *Growing Up in Ireland* seeks to examine the factors which contribute to or undermine the wellbeing of children and to identify factors which contribute to the setting of effective and responsive policies relating to children; *Síolta* seeks to define, assess and support the improvement of quality across all aspects of practice in ECEC settings (birth to 6 years); and *Aistear* aims to provide the curriculum framework for children that will provide challenging, positive and enjoyable learning experiences for children (birth to 6 years). *Síolta* and *Aistear* are based on the best available evidence for ECEC provision, while GUI seeks to contribute valuable research evidence on child development and the factors that contribute to the best outcomes for children in Ireland.

Growing Up in Ireland has two cohorts: an infant (9 month) cohort and a child (9 year) cohort. The infant cohort studies children at three critical time points for the Early Years sector: nine months, three years, and five years. A significant focus of the infant cohort at each of these time points is early life experience, including childcare provision, and associations with child outcomes during this time. Consequently, this talk will focus on the design, implementation, and some initial findings from the infant cohort, and the older child cohort will not be discussed. The infant cohort in particular can provide critical data for ECEC in Ireland by providing data on how children are developing at three time points from birth to five years, the experiences of the children and their families, and the causal relationships between early experiences and outcomes later in life. While there are several ways in which *Growing Up in Ireland* can impact on research, policy, and practice in Ireland, the infant cohort is particularly poised to provide a strong evidence base for the development of effective, quality ECEC policy and programmes. I will conclude by highlighting the policy implications of the infant cohort study for the Early Years sector.

Growing Up in Ireland: Background and Conceptual Framework

Growing Up in Ireland is funded through the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in association with the Department of Social Protection and the Central Statistics Office. As a longitudinal study, it has several advantages over cross-sectional research. Cross-sectional studies involve independent, representative samples, with different respondents in each sample. Longitudinal designs involve interviewing the same sample of respondents on several occasions which means tracking the progress of the same children and their families over a period of time. As such, longitudinal research allows us to consider why there is a problem and how it developed. It also allows us to explore the factors led to its development and to look at time related factors in children's development such as child temperament. Over time we can look at the stability and instability of factors and experiences such as child poverty or ill health. Because children and their families are interviewed at specific time points, recall difficulties are minimised which leads to more accurate data on children and families experiences at these critical points. Of course, there are some limitations of this approach also, including attrition rates, panel conditioning, and the expense of such an undertaking.

Growing Up in Ireland shares the 'whole child' perspective of the National Children's Strategy (Department of Health and Children, 2000) and uses Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model of development as the conceptual framework for the study (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This bio-ecological model provides a multi-layered, interactive view of child development in his or her different contexts and environments. This theoretical framework looks at processes and interactions between children and their environment, including interactions with other persons. Children's dispositions, resources and demands are taken into account as well as the context for their development.

The Infant Cohort as an Important Evidence Base for ECEC in Ireland: Design and Initial Findings

The large scale of the study has been mentioned previously. 11,000 nine-month old infants take part in the Infant Cohort and 120 households participate in an in-depth qualitative assessment. The 11,000 nine month-olds in *Growing Up in Ireland* were randomly sampled from the 73,662 children in Ireland between the period of 2008-2009. The Child Benefit Register was used as sampling frame and

the data is nationally representative of children in Ireland.

Data on children and their families was collected through interview in the children's homes. As the child was only nine months of age at the first interview in the infant cohort, the primary caregiver provided all details on the child's development to date. The parent's weight and height were also taken. The secondary caregiver (usually the mother's spouse or partner) was also interviewed if available, and if children had a non-resident parent he or she received a postal questionnaire. At nine months, children's measurements were also taken, including the children's length, weight and head circumference. At the second wave of data collection, children were three years of age and were able to take part in several aspects of data collection. The third and final wave of data collection for this cohort will take place in 2013.

The questionnaires for the primary and secondary caregivers encompassed a wide range of domains, including, the composition of the household (number of siblings, grandparents etc), the relationship between parent and child, the child's development and habits and routines, childcare arrangements, pre- and post-natal care, infant health, parent health and lifestyle, socio-demographics, parental relationship and health behaviours, the quality of the neighbourhood and environment. At three years, very similar research domains with additional domains with the study child, including cognitive tests.

Growing Up in Ireland seeks to provide an evidence base for the creation of effective and responsive policies and services for children and families. It can do so in several ways. Firstly, as a nationally representative sample of children data from the study can provide national norms and can establish how Irish families are faring across domains. Secondly, in this sample it is possible to identify which children are doing well and those who are faring less well. Importantly, we can also look at factors which differentiate these levels of wellbeing and the different factors which are associated with various outcomes. The study also looks at the positive, protective factors and factors that increase resilience for children in high risk situations, and importantly we can identify if these factors occur naturally or if they are provided by the state through effective programmes and interventions.

Data has been collected for the first two waves of the infant cohort at nine months and at three years. Only data from the first wave however has been archived for researching purposes and a full report providing descriptive data on infants' lives at nine months has been published. Some key findings with regard to childcare have also been released from the second wave of data collection,

with a forthcoming report to be published later this year (2013)². The nine month report highlights initial findings from the infant cohort, some of which provide key data on early childcare use during infancy. For example, we know from the *Growing Up in Ireland* data that just over a third of children in Ireland are experiencing some form of non-parental childcare at nine months (Williams, Greene, McNally, Murray, & Quail, 2010) and that this increases to half of children at three years (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011). While grandparents provide a large proportion of childcare at both time points (Williams et al, 2010; DCYA, 2011), and are the most common source of childcare at nine months, centre-based care is the most popular form of childcare when the child is three years of age (DCYA, 2011). Informal support is very important for children throughout early childhood, but this is not currently reflected in Irish childcare policy.

On average, infant children were spending 25 hours a week, and toddlers were spending 23 hours a week, in non-parental care (Williams et al, 2010). We know that it is important that each of these settings is of high quality to ensure positive child outcomes (Clarke-Steward, 1987; Howes, 1990). Data on the quality of the childcare settings experienced at nine months was collected as part of GUI in separate questionnaires for childcare providers, and this will be examined in a forthcoming report³. Specifically, with this data we can look at whether childcare settings are meeting quality standards by examining key quality indicators such as the number of children in the childcare setting, educational level of the childcare providers and the child-adult ration. This report will also look at maternal employment policy, maternity leave, and mothers' return to work (and corresponding use of childcare). The report will also explore the determinants of childcare use, such as family size, child temperament, income, and maternal education. As such it will be the first of large scale study of both the use of childcare and the quality of that childcare for infants in an Irish context and will be of strong policy relevance for early childcare and education practitioners and policy makers.

For ECEC policy that are two important ways in which *Growing Up in Ireland* can inform government policy and strategy: (1) the data collected by *Growing Up*

2 A report on the infant cohort at three years by Williams, McCrory, McNally, & Murray is to be published in 2013.

3 A report on maternal leave and choice of childcare by McGinnity, Murray & McNally is to be published in 2013.

in Ireland allows for examination of the effects of new, universal or targeted, policy interventions, wherein those receiving and not receiving new supports or services can be compared; (2) it also allows for examination of the suitability, accessibility, and perceived utility of services by investigating how parents utilise services and whether their needs are being met. At a time of economic change we can look at how children and families are coping with this social change, whether work-life balance is being achieved and if not what needs to be addressed.

At a more fundamental level, the data from the infant cohort provides key descriptive data on the number of children experiencing non-parental childcare at different key stages in early childhood, and data on the duration, age of entry, and type of childcare provider for those children. We can also look at the factors which shape the likelihood of being in a particular type of childcare, and the impact of childcare experiences at these pivotal stages on later child outcomes. The value of having such a complex dataset is that the complex interaction between type of childcare, quality of care, and family context as well as child characteristics can be examined in looking at the impact of early life experiences and child outcomes.

Conclusion

The recent focus and drive to push quality to the fore of Early Years services in Ireland has led to the development of important frameworks such as *Síolta* and *Aistear*. Both emphasise quality, evidence-informed ECEC. *Growing Up in Ireland* has the potential to play a pivotal role in the development of evidence-based policy for ECEC provision with robust research drawn exclusively from data of children in Ireland. It is well recognised that longitudinal research plays a vital role in developing that evidence base for the importance of quality in Early Years service provision:

The critical evidence showing the importance of the early years for life-long development all comes from longitudinal studies. It is absolutely clear that longitudinal studies are an essential resource for sound policy development. (Melhuish, 2011).

Growing Up in Ireland is poised to provide just such evidence specific to Ireland for the first time and represents a significant investment in children's lives in Ireland by seeking to provide evidence for effective policies in the early years and beyond.

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The Critical Role of the Educator in Early Childhood Intervention in Ireland

(Keynote address: OMEP Ireland Annual Conference, 28 April 2012)

Ann Coughlan, M.ED., BA , Mont.Dip in Ed.

Gino Lerario, M.A. in Primary & Sp.Ed.

Abstract

This paper will look at the role of the Educator in Early Childhood Intervention within Multi/ Inter/ and Transdisciplinary teams in Ireland. The role will be viewed historically, currently, and going forward. Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) is a complex area of intervention that involves all six developmental areas as well as medical and pedagogical concerns. In a 'best practice' model these areas and concerns should not be compartmentalised but rather approached within a holistic framework, encompassing the child and family's needs as the core focus. Despite the fact that many Early Childhood Intervention centres in Ireland espouse evidence-based best practice, a "clinical" therapeutic ethic is still influential. Despite a willingness to operate holistically, many ECI teams maintain elements of the medical model, thus retaining disciplinary boundaries. We argue that the role of the Educator in ECI, within the multi/inter/and Transdisciplinary teams, should be to help synthesize the focus of many disciplines. Therefore the role is critical in shaping a holistic approach to intervention. In presenting this case within the context of the Irish system, we will examine the evolving role. In doing so, we will look at

- An Historic Overview of Policy, Legislation, and Practice in Early Childhood Intervention in Ireland;
- The Role of the Educator in ECI on multi/ inter/ and transdisciplinary teams;
- The Establishment of the Irish Association of Educators in Early Childhood Intervention (EECI);

- A clear definition of the evolving role;
- Proposal for Post-Graduate Diploma.

Introduction

Educators in Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) currently provide an integral service on many ECI Teams in Ireland. They work alongside key health therapists to assess and intervene with children from birth to six years of age who have disabilities or who are at risk of developmental delay. The Educator is concerned with the early learning and early educational needs of the child. S/he also supports the child's family and the child's early educational providers (crèche, preschool, junior infant classroom). Currently there are approximately 30 Educators on 10 Early Childhood Intervention Teams in the Republic.

However, there are many problems faced by Educators in ECI in Ireland. Despite the fact that they are employed as Educators within the health system, neither the Health Service Executive (HSE) nor the Department of Education and Skills (DES) recognise or supervise the educational aspect of their work. There is a critical need to establish and officially recognise this role, which operates and liaises between two government departments. A lack of standardisation means that the Educator's specific role varies widely from team to team. Furthermore there is no post graduate course which enables the professionalisation of this role.

As today's service providers in Ireland endeavour to move towards a social model of intervention, it is necessary to widen the boundaries of the current model. In part, this involves the introduction of non-medical disciplines to create a holistic balance of service. The role of the Educator in Early Childhood Intervention in Ireland stands as one of these key disciplines. At this time, however, it is evolving unevenly and, as yet, has not been fully embraced. Ireland has not yet established a cohesive link between the governing departments of Education and Health, a link most developing countries have in place with regard to ECI. The pursuit of a "Best Practice Model" in ECI in Ireland is a relatively new endeavour, an effort impeded by the absence of a National Council or steering group on the subject. There is currently no central office to address the issue of ECI.

Historical Overview of Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) in Ireland

Following a period of “forget and hide” regarding children with special needs (1900-1950), the religious orders opened their doors to provide residential care for children with an intellectual/physical disability (Coughlan et al, 2007). Following this, the state became involved in educational provision and by 1960 there were 33 special schools recognised by the Dept. of Education (Coolahan, 1981, p. 185). The 1980s saw an awakening in Irish public policy in relation to people with disabilities, which until then had remained static (Quin & Redmond, 2003, p. 10). The 1990s and 2000s saw further development of services and an emphasis on policy to move forward.

The first comprehensive review of an ECI service was undertaken in 1990 by the Department of Health, in an effort to draw up a policy document for the intellectually disabled, called *Needs and Abilities*. The ECI service model that it outlined proved to be very progressive for its time. It was family-focused, home-based, and included a teacher as a core member of the specialist team (Needs and Abilities, 1990 6.5/6).

In 1993, the Department of Education’s report, *Special Educational Review Committee* (SERC 1993), underlined the fact that when a child’s early learning is supported it is then more likely that the child will go on to learn more complex skills thus enhancing development. It stated,

If the child is exposed to more stimulating interaction, he/she may well be enabled to make up the ground lost in areas such as social development, play skills, and cognitive and linguistic development (SERC 1993 1.1.2).

SERC strongly urged Health and Education to amalgamate their holistic address of Early Childhood Intervention.

The Education Act of 1998 was the first piece of legislation that outlined the Constitutional right to education and responsibilities of the Government in relation to special education (Dept. of Education, 1998). However, no educational provision was made for children with special needs under the age of 4 years.

In 1999 the Department of Education published its White Paper on Early Childhood Education *Ready to Learn*. This paper presented a model for early childhood intervention which drew from international best practice policies. It

targeted services which were family-focused and community-based and which included a wide range of supports and services. *Ready to Learn* cited pre-school placement as a priority pre-requisite, particularly for children with special needs. It also recommended an extension of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) to include early education. Furthermore it recommended the inclusion of an early educational expert on multidisciplinary teams in supporting the child in early childhood settings.

In 2002, the Department of Education established a five year project for Early Childhood research. Known as the “Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education” (CECDE), it was to be a mechanism to steer policy into practice, particularly that policy drawn up in *Ready to Learn*. One of its three core functions was to develop interventions on a pilot basis, targeted at children who were either educationally disadvantaged or had special needs. Some of the recommendations published by CECDE (CECDE Research Series, 2006) included appropriate access for children between ages birth and four years of age to multidisciplinary teams – teams that included an Early Intervention Educator with specialist knowledge of interventions for young children with special needs. This effort would necessitate the collaboration of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and Department of Health and Children (DHC). In calling for a comprehensive system of early childhood intervention, the CECDE also maintained that high levels of qualification and expertise be a requirement for the Early Intervention Educator and called for a minimum primary level degree qualification for all practitioners in ECI.

In 2004, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found the disability services in Ireland to be insufficient. The OECD conducted two reviews of national early childhood policies and organisation in 20 countries from 1998 to 2004. It found that, among other problems, Irish children with disabilities under 4 years of age had no entitlement to educational provision, with the exception of children with visual or hearing impairment.

In the same year, the Education for People with Special Educational Needs Act, known as the EPSEN Act 2004, ensured that persons with special educational needs can be educated in inclusive environments; however, once again, no provision was made for children under 4 years of age.

In 2005 the Disability Act legislated for the provision of an assessment of health and educational needs for people with disabilities and assured appropriate planning, consistent with resources available, to be undertaken on their behalf. This assessment was to be known as Assessment of Need (AON). In the same year,

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was set up in part to implement the AON process and was given specific functions in relation to the core provisions of the EPSEN and Disability Acts. In 2007 the Assessment of Need process was implemented for children aged birth to 4 years-11 months and entitled families access to an independent multidisciplinary assessment of health *and* educational needs.

Despite this important development, the identified educational needs of children under 4 years of age are still not being addressed by the NCSE. There are currently no specialist early educators employed by the NCSE to address the “special educational needs” of children under 4 years.

Current Provision of Early Intervention Services within the HSE

The provision of early intervention (EI) services nationally comprises of Government and non-Governmental organisations. The Government agencies, in the main, provide the community services while the non-government agencies provide the specialist services. Primary Care teams, employed directly by the HSE, operate in the community and deal with most general referrals. Specialist EI teams are employed almost exclusively by voluntary agencies; these teams receive referrals from Primary teams and medical practices. Currently Ireland is undergoing a revision or reconfiguration of service delivery for children with disabilities and their families. Specialist early education does not formally feature in this plan.

Current Provision of Early Educational Services within the DES

In January 2010, the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) scheme was implemented. This entitles every child, under the age of 4yrs-7ms, to a free pre-school year. Many children with a disability, however, cannot avail of this scheme as there is no entitlement to special needs assistance at this stage. Some children with special needs do get assistance, but on an ad-hoc basis.

The Implementation of Policy and Legislation

The fact that children with special needs require holistic interventions is well documented in most international research. The requirement calls for an early intervention service delivery, one that is coordinated between Health and Education. In Ireland, the practical implementation of recommendations on

best practice in ECI are made difficult due to the lack of a central committee or steering council, one that could coordinate the efforts of the Departments of Health and Education.

The National Departments of both Health and Education are separate bodies. Generally, in accordance with resources available, the Department of Health addresses health needs while the Department of Education and Science (DES) addresses educational needs. The DES, however, does not have a comprehensive brief on the special needs of children under 4 years; therefore, those needs go unaddressed. (Note: in Ireland, children can begin National Primary School at age 4yrs although the official age is 6yrs).

Currently, the Disability and the EPSEN acts have not been fully implemented and will not be for the foreseeable future. This delay is due to the present economic climate that has forced many cutbacks and freezes on services.

Despite numerous recommendations that Health and Education should unite in order to design and deliver an integrated holistic service, there are no plans to do so to date. Furthermore, despite a strong call from a multitude of policy documents to provide specialist early education on EI teams, it remains an ad hoc system.

Early Childhood Intervention Practice

As international practice evolved within the disability context so did practices in Ireland. This was keenly evidenced in a key policy document, *Strategy for Equality* (Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities) 1996, which led to the establishment of the National Disability Authority (NDA) in 2000. As a result of this national focus, interest and discussion arose on best practice and approach within the disability sector.

Arising from this came a government health strategy in 2001, called *Quality and Fairness* (Dept. Health & Children, 2001). *Quality and Fairness* introduced for the first time the principle of “person-centred” services and proposed the idea of an integrated holistic model of early intervention with children and families. This document extended the parameters of disability awareness from health to all government departments, pointing to a need for national best practice in disability. Consequently a broader awareness of disability issues should now be sought in adhering to the government’s commitment of an “Integrated Approach”

Despite this move towards a national best practice, there currently remain diverse variations in ECI practice. In the continuing absence of a definitive

national policy on best practice in ECI, individual agencies have “paddled their own canoes.” The model of service delivery depends on the individual agency or organisation.

Models of Team Working

Early Childhood Intervention teams in Ireland adopt various models of team working. In a Multidisciplinary model of service delivery, therapists or practitioners work parallel to, but independently of, one another. An Interdisciplinary Model adopts a more integrated approach whereby some therapists or practitioners work collaboratively in pursuit of common goals for the child and family. Under a Transdisciplinary model, which is often better suited to services for children under 3 years of age, the team of therapists or practitioners support one ‘key’ therapist to deliver the intervention to the child and family.

One common feature of best practice has become increasingly more evident in Ireland: a strong emphasis on a family-centred approach to intervention. Irish service organisations have heeded the call toward more family-centred approaches as this had been the most salient component of a best practice model identified in contemporary research (Carpenter, 2007; Guralnick, 1997; Sloper, 1999; Moore et al., 2004).

The Role of the Educator in ECI on Multi/Inter/Transdisciplinary teams

The specific function of the Educator in ECI dangles in a grey area. As it is not professionally recognised nor registered with either the Health or Education sectors, it then remains open to varied interpretations and can often be too easily dismissed. In going forward there is a need to define and clarify this role, particularly in the context of the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary teams. If Ireland ultimately is to aspire to a social model of service delivery, it then needs to create a balance between medical and educational practitioners on any specialist team.

In fact, in taking on an inter- or trans-disciplinary view, each practitioner on the team ideally looks more broadly at how their discipline blends with others. In many respects, the success of the Educator in ECI depends largely upon an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary effort. The educator’s training and outlook differs from the medical or para-medical team members in that the educator takes a broader view. The Educator draws on all developmental

disciplines and seeks to ‘synthesise’ goals from various developmental areas to help the child grow holistically through play. Therefore the effectiveness of the educator in ECI depends largely upon liaising as an ‘equal’ with members of all other disciplines on Multidisciplinary, Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary teams.

The Establishment of the Irish Association of Educators in Early Childhood Intervention (EECI)

In May 2005 a small number of Early Childhood Intervention Educators from various services around the country convened to discuss the similarities and differences of their roles and to consider a pathway towards standardising the role. An Association was formed under the name *The Irish Association of Educators in Early Childhood Intervention* (EECI). The principal aims of the EECI included creating an awareness of the unique role of the Educator on ECI teams, defining and standardising that role, establishing professional recognition, and attaining national registration as a professional body. In addition EECI are advocating a post Graduate-level course in Ireland specifically to ensure an accredited high quality qualification for the educator.

Defining the evolving role of the Educator in Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) on Inter/ transdisciplinary teams

The concept of Early Childhood Intervention was born of the need to provide specific programmes of support to vulnerable children and their families at critical early stages of children’s development, usually earlier than traditional forms of early education would be available to them (Wolery, & Bailey, 2002). It is the role of the *Educator in ECI*, therefore, to highlight the need for early specialist educational input and deliver that service in collaboration with health disciplines.

In the process of defining the role of the Educator in ECI, members of the EECI established the general aim of their work practice to be:

To consider the child’s whole development and work to embed specific developmental targets into a meaningful, functional play-based programme of activity for the child and family (EECI membership, 2009).

Based on this premise and upon the reflective practice of the authors, the following definition for the Educator in Early Childhood Intervention in Ireland is proposed.

The Educator in Early Childhood Intervention in Ireland: A Role Definition

The hallmarks of an Educator in Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) are the promotion of development and learning through play in collaboration with specific disciplines to embed goals into functional routines, supporting parent-child relationships to enhance critical development, supporting child, family and educators through early educational transitions into pre & primary schools.

Within the above definition, there are five major roles for the Educator in Early Childhood Intervention:

1. Advocate & Promoter of Play:

- Focus on Development of Play Skills, targeting ‘whole development’;
- Offer ‘expertise’ on play;
- Play is the Educator’s ‘clinical discipline.’

The Educator in ECI focuses on the development of Interaction and Play Skills, offering ‘expertise’ on play functions, styles, characteristics, and levels. The Educator focuses on play as the context for assessment and intervention. While the Educator views play as promoting growth in each developmental area, the emphasis is on play ‘itself’ – as its own developmental area – rather than just to make therapy ‘playful.’

It is the nature of the role of the Educator in ECI to adopt an assessment tool that is holistic in design and has a real life, play-based focus. From the perspective of a non-standardised assessment in a consultative role, the Educator gathers a rich information base across the developmental areas of each child and more importantly has made a real life assessment of the child’s learning style in going forward.

2) Partner & Coach of Caregivers

- Enrich Parent-Child Relationships;
- Coach caregivers to be “teacher/ therapist;”
- Enrich family interactions & routines.

Bernheimer & Keogh (1995, p.419) suggest, families respond to circumstances in which they live; they build and organize environments that give meaning and direction to their lives. The family’ activities are shaped by several factors, including: the physical and social context of the child and family, the families’ perceptions of the disability/delay, their sense of what is possible to do, and their sense of what is important to be done. It is of crucial importance that the intervention programme is taught to – or awakened from within – the family in order that it is continued and translated into everyday home & community life. The process involved in each therapy session is of critical importance. Therapy sessions should up-skill carers and give them the confidence to carry out the intervention within their everyday routine. Therefore, the quality of intervention depends upon what occurs *between* sessions. Very often this ‘how’ (or the process-part of the ‘therapy’) requires a teaching skill that can often be lacking on many teams.

A vital role of the Educator in ECI is to translate the play-based intervention programme into the family’s everyday routine. Clinical therapists are not necessarily trained to *teach* as educators are. The specialist educator plays a significant role in helping the parents/carers to understand the fundamental purpose of play and therapeutic interventions through their training as Educators.

3) Synthesizer & Weaver of Therapeutic Targets

- Collaborate with Specific Disciplines;
- Assess & intervene with team through play;
- Synthesize developmental targets into functional routines.

For young children with disabilities, the literature points to the challenges involved in delivering an intervention practice which can meet the diverse and complex needs of children and their families (Guralnick, 2005, Wolery & Bailey, 2002). The educator in ECI collaborates with specific team members

to synthesize therapeutic/ developmental targets into play-based, functional routines. The educator's expertise lies in one's knowledge of overall child development, both typical and atypical, across the developmental domains and early childhood play and learning styles. The educator does not have the specific medical expertise held by other team members in their individual field areas; yet this is where education and therapy should complement each other in a symbiotic approach to delivering an early intervention service.

4) Binder & Blender of Service Provision

- Assist Family through Service & Community Transitions;
- Guide family through 'care' & 'education pathways';
- Blend Health Service & Education.

Specific therapy input must be incorporated into a real life context. Therapy must be normalised for the young child. It must be incorporated into their real life learning and everyday functioning. Shonkoff & Meisels state (1990 pg46):

“The progressive and inevitable ambiguity of disciplinary boundaries represents one of the central challenges facing the field of Early Childhood Intervention.”

Specialised early education and early therapeutic intervention can and must coalesce. The Educator in ECI assists families through service and community transitions and guides them through 'care and education pathways,' blending health and education services. The educator in ECI can be an agent for an easier 'blending' of disciplinary boundaries.

5) Teacher & Translator to Pre-Schools & Primary Schools (Educational Consultant)

- Facilitate Inclusion of Child in Pre- & Primary-Schools;
- Translate therapeutic targets to curricula/ I.P.s;
- Support teachers in classroom to adapt to child's needs.

In an early intervention best-practice model, community inclusion is all-encompassing. The most significant earliest transitions for young children and their families are those that involve the beginning of formal early education. In the main, it is the role of the educator on the team to bridge this gap, to help the child and family progress from a clinical to a community based early educational setting.

The Educator facilitates the inclusion of the child in pre- and primary schools. The Educator helps the staff to translate developmental targets into the curricula or IEP and supports teachers in classrooms to adapt to the child's special developmental/ educational needs and learning styles. The Educator considers the child's social development and functional skills within the preschool and school environment.

Proposal for Post-Graduate Diploma in Ireland

A number of graduate and post-graduate courses in “specialist early childhood education/ intervention” are offered around the world. The specific modular composition of these varies. While some might offer training for early educators, not all are directed at training the early educator to work within specialist ECI teams. At present in Ireland there is no specific training for a profession in Early Childhood Intervention – for *any* discipline. While there is a need for broader training in ECI, the authors of this paper have designed a draft proposal for a post graduate higher Diploma for Educators working on ECI teams. The course is primarily designed for those early education graduates who are interested in working as part of a professional ECI team.

Course Rationale

Over the years in Ireland many national policy documents (Needs & Abilities 1990, SERC 1993, White Paper 1999, etc.) have recommended the need for a specialist early educator as part of a quality ECI service. This recommendation, however, has never been formalised.

It has also been well documented that more than one discipline is required to meet the needs of young children at risk of developmental delay and their families. To deliver a comprehensive and quality service, the government health strategy, “Quality & Fairness 2001,” called for an interdisciplinary, coordinated service system that was to be inclusive of health, educational, and social

professionals. An appropriately designed curriculum for a higher diploma in specialist education in ECI represents one step towards addressing those recommendations.

Conclusion

To this end, the authors of this paper have drawn up and proposed a curriculum for which they are currently seeking approval in a national university in Ireland. The proposed post graduate diploma is inter/ transdisciplinary in construct and will be a fulltime two-year or part time three-year course. It consists of Generic modules and Specialist Modules. The Generic modules cover early childhood intervention, special education, the significance of play, and functions of teamwork. The Specialist modules covers atypical development, implications of disability, models of assessment and intervention, and development of communication & language.

The underpinning philosophy of this course is based on an inclusive community-based model of Early Childhood Intervention. It is designed to give the Educator in ECI the skills, understanding, and knowledge needed to fully collaborate with the wider team in supporting the child and family at home, in the community, and in early educational settings. It is hoped that this course, or its equivalent, will meet with approval and that Ireland can finally move toward standardising the role of the much needed Educator on Inter/transdisciplinary ECI teams.

The authors

Ann Coughlan, B.A., M.Ed., Mont. Dip in Ed., is an Early Intervention Educator with Enable Ireland, Cork Services, and Chairperson of the Irish Association of Educators in Early Childhood Intervention.

Gino Lerario, M.A. in Primary & Sp. Ed. is an Early Intervention Educator with North Tipperary Children's Services, HSE, and General Secretary of the Irish Association of Educators in Early Childhood Intervention.

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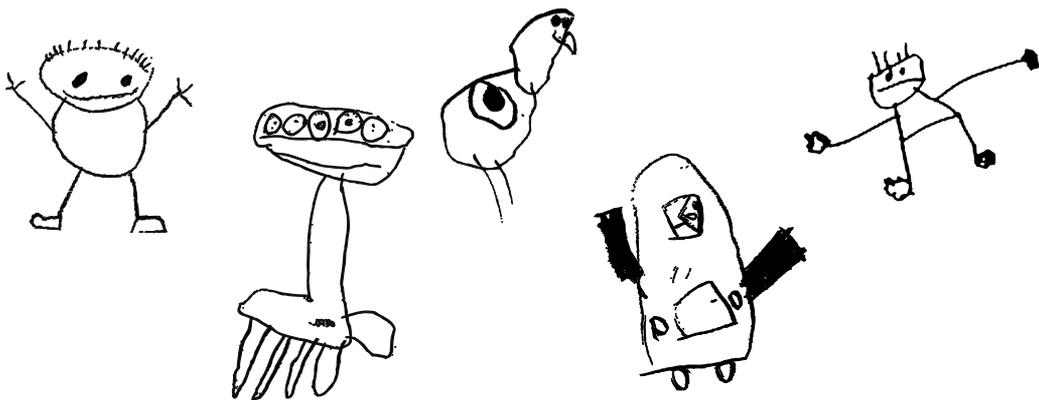
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SECTION 1
**PEER-REVIEWED
PAPERS**



An Leanbh Óg

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Early literacy and numeracy matters

Dr Geraldine French, Early Childhood Specialist

Abstract

The beginning of literacy and numeracy development is embedded in the everyday communications, actions, thoughts and drawings of babies, toddlers and young children. Parents and the home learning environment are critically important in the development of both. Research has also demonstrated the positive impact of attending early childhood settings on early vocabulary development, literacy and numeracy skills (Barnett & Esposito Lamy, 2006). Therefore, those who work with very young children have a unique opportunity to get it right from the start and to enhance children's literacy and numeracy today, as the quote below suggests, through rich learning opportunities. Drawing from French (2012) this paper responds to the questions: what do we mean by early literacy and numeracy, why they are important, what research and theory have revealed in relation to these topics and what are the key concepts for early childhood educators to encourage in early childhood?

Introduction

Many of the things we need can wait. The child cannot. Right now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made and his senses are being developed. To him we cannot answer 'Tomorrow'. His name is 'Today'. (Mistral, 1998)

We know that the beginning of literacy and numeracy development is embedded in the everyday communications, actions, thoughts and drawings of babies, toddlers and young children. Parents and the home learning environment are critically important in setting the foundations for later learning (Dickinson & Tabors, 2002). Research has also demonstrated the positive impact of attending early childhood settings on early vocabulary development and literacy and numeracy skills (Barnett & Esposito Lamy, 2006). Therefore, those who work with very young children have a unique opportunity to get it right from the start and to enhance children's literacy and numeracy *today*, as the above quote suggests, through rich learning opportunities.

Drawing from French (2012), this paper begins by defining what we mean by literacy and numeracy. The paper highlights the importance of early literacy and numeracy, referring to the disappointing international assessments of the performance of Irish post-primary students, the subsequent policy developments and the negative consequences of a lack of skills in these areas. *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009) emphasises the role of the adult in providing children with experiences which will enrich their understanding of the role of literacy and numeracy in the world around them. This paper outlines what we know about the development of literacy and numeracy in early childhood and what early literacy and numeracy experiences should be provided. The paper aims to enable early childhood educators to enrich their pedagogical practice (where one individual contributes to the learning and development in another) to develop children's dispositions, knowledge and skills in these areas.

What do we mean by early literacy and numeracy?

Literacy has previously been thought to comprise of the skills of reading and writing. Today our understanding of literacy is broader than that. Before the results of three decades of research became known, formal reading instruction often began when children were deemed 'ready' for it at six. However, we now know that literacy 'emerges' gradually in the early years (Epstein, 2007). Literacy begins with learning language and looking at books in early infancy. This process continues from birth throughout the early childhood years. The definition of literacy in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy includes "the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media"

(Department of Education and Skills [DES] 2011, p.8).

This broad definition acknowledges the impact of technology on literacy. Central to literacy is the search for meaning and understanding – stories, books, and visual, technological and cultural literacies are significant (Whitehead, 2007). In early childhood, the development of literacy involves babies hearing sounds and having them identified by sensitive adults, babbling and repeating sounds and rhymes, later sharing books or stories on DVD or TV or other information communication technologies such as computer-based texts, images, voice and music recordings or games on mobile phones – listening, looking at and talking about the pictures with others, and making marks in sand and on paper (Epstein, 2007). Literacy is therefore the integration of listening, speaking, reading and writing, for communication and learning to learn (Department of Education and Science, 2005). Literacy learning occurs during meaningful interactions, experiences with a broad range of materials, texts, digital technologies and events.

Numeracy is more than the ability to add, subtract, multiply, divide and use numbers.

Numeracy encompasses the ability to use mathematical understanding and skills to solve problems and meet the demands of day-to-day living in complex social settings. To have this ability, a young person needs to be able to think and communicate quantitatively, to make sense of data, to have a spatial awareness, to understand patterns and sequences, and to recognise situations where mathematical reasoning can be applied to solve problems. (DES, 2011, p.8)

In early childhood, the development of numeracy involves babies hearing the language of mathematics in play by singing number rhymes (one, two, buckle my shoe...), fitting ‘smaller’ boxes inside ‘bigger’ boxes, learning that some things are the ‘same’, whilst others are ‘different’, experiencing going ‘faster’ or ‘slower’ (Epstein, 2007; NCCA, 2009). Young children learn to make sense of data through practical experiences such as sorting all the yoghurt cartons into the recyclable plastics bin and the paper into the recyclable paper bin, or putting things together that have a connection, such as a cup to a saucer. Developing spatial awareness involves children moving freely in space, or filling and emptying water containers at the water table. Understanding patterns and

sequences involves children knowing what comes next in a song (pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker's man...) or in a pattern on a pegboard (Montague-Smith, 2002). Babies use problem-solving skills such as trial and error, for example to make the mobile move by using a sequence of body movements to reach the mobile.

Why are early literacy and numeracy important?

In Ireland, the performance of post-primary students in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2009) conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2010) has declined in the areas of literacy and numeracy. PISA 2009 demonstrated that almost one in five of all Irish fifteen year olds and almost one in four teenage boys lacked the literacy skills to adequately function in today's society. Similarly, one in five Irish teenagers did not have sufficient numerical skills to cope with everyday life. These results have given rise to the development of a National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011) and the commissioning of research reports by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, to support a new primary language curriculum, one of which has a focus on literacy in early childhood and primary education (Kennedy et al., 2012).

Children who do not learn to read, write and communicate effectively at primary level are more likely to leave school early, be unemployed or in low-skilled jobs, have poorer emotional and physical health and are more likely to end up in poverty and in our prisons (National Economic and Social Forum [NESF], 2009). Literacy difficulties are linked to truancy, exclusion, social consequences such as alcohol or drug abuse, increased health risks and greatly reduced life chances (KPMG Foundation, 2006; NESF, 2009).

Children with unsatisfactory literacy ability may struggle in other academic areas (NESF, 2009). This has profound negative consequences for individuals in the long term in relation to their choice of employment, as many careers call for reading proficiency. Reading failure affects school achievement, job choice and economic prosperity in adulthood (Dugdale & Clark, 2008). But it is not just an economic problem; children's self esteem may be lowered and low self esteem can have other negative effects on children's achievement of their full human potential.

Numeracy not only forms the basis of many other subjects such as physics and chemistry, it is a critical element in our everyday lives. The use of counting (e.g. shopping for specific items), ordering (e.g. turning right at the second set of

traffic lights), and quantifying measurement (e.g. estimating when to cook dishes so that all are ready at the same time) is universally recognised (Pound, 1999). Without literacy and numeracy skills, children may develop a lack of confidence in their ability to succeed.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2011) consider ‘Literacy as Freedom’. Every child has a *right* to a good quality education which equips them with literacy and numeracy skills for life and further learning. Literate and numerate parents are enabled to support their children’s learning in school; literate and numerate people are better able to access continuing educational opportunities; and literate and numerate societies are better geared to meet the demands of competing markets, ensure economic prosperity and societies’ well-being (UNESCO, 2011).

Communication and oral language skills of babies, toddlers and young children underpin their development of literacy and numeracy (Epstein, 2007, NCCA, 2009). As a component of basic education and a foundation for lifelong learning, literacy and numeracy are the keys to enhancing human capabilities and achieving many other rights. In short, literacy (and numeracy) carries wide-ranging benefits not only for individuals but also for families, communities and societies (NESF, 2009).

What we know about early literacy

The following, drawing on a review of the literature, summarises what we know about early literacy:

- Literacy is not rooted in letters and words initially, but in communication and language. That is, non-verbal communication (smiling, gestures, pointing) and warm reciprocal relationships. Therefore, literacy development starts from birth (Whitehead, 2007). Speaking, listening, reading and writing develop concurrently (together) rather than sequentially (one after the other) (Epstein, 2007).
- Emergent early childhood literacy skills that have been identified as strong predictors of later literacy achievement include: a large vocabulary, being capable of explanatory talk, demonstrating some letter identification before age five, understanding narrative and story, understanding writing functions, knowing nursery rhymes, and demonstrating phonological awareness (sounds of a language) (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006).

- The greater children's experiences of literacy and language, the greater the chance of reading fluency (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). However, the converse is also true. The fewer experiences children have with literacy and language (i.e. vocabulary and talk), the greater the chance that they will have difficulty learning to read. A high correlation between vocabulary size at age three and language test scores at ages nine and ten in areas of vocabulary, listening, syntax (sentence structure, grammar, language rules) and reading comprehension was evidenced in one study (Hart & Risley, 1995). In that study, the size of each child's vocabulary at aged three correlated most closely to a single factor: the number of words the parents spoke to the child in the home. It follows that early childhood settings (crèches, play groups and so on) can also play a significant role in exposing children to vocabulary and talk.
- We know that children are "most likely to experience conversations that include comprehensible and interesting extended discourse and are rich with vocabulary when their parents" (and, logically, early years educators) "obtain and read good books and when their teachers provide classrooms with a curriculum that is varied and stimulating" (Dickinson & Tabors, 2002, p. 13). In a seminal research project children who were read to frequently by a variety of people, had access to a large number and broad range of books and who used a library regularly scored highest "on all three measures of early literacy (receptive vocabulary, narrative production, and emergent literacy)" (Dickinson & Tabors, 2002, p. 13).
- Language and literacy learning happens naturally during play and everyday experiences. Some aspects however depend on explicit instruction from observant and sensitive adults. Through play all of the domains of a child's development (cognitive, social-emotional, language and literacy, physical, spiritual) are interrelated and interdependent (Epstein, 2007).
- Differences in children's home language and culture can affect literacy development in each of their languages. Strategies for supporting biliteracy (children reading and writing in their first and second language) could be considered (Kennedy et al., 2012). Educator knowledge, respect and support for the diversity of children's families, cultures and linguistic backgrounds are important in early literacy development. In other words, the socio-cultural context of children's families should be included in a

literacy curriculum. This involves effective strategies for enhancing the language used in the early childhood service, together with support for the language and culture of the home (Whitehead, 2007).

- It is what parents, carers and educators *do* with children (reading with children, talking to them, sharing stories), more so than their socio-economic status, which makes the difference to children's literacy learning outcomes (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart, 2004).

The literature has clear implications for early education practice:

- The importance of the development of children's language and communication skills from birth is recognised.
- Aspects of children's communication environment are identified, which can positively enhance children's language, communication and hence literacy skills.
- Children's exposure to a broad vocabulary range, through parent and educator-child interactions, in all early childhood settings is particularly significant.
- An appropriate communication environment can offset educational inequality to a significant extent.

What early literacy experiences should we provide?

The early childhood literacy skills that have been identified as strong predictors of later achievement include:

- **Oral language**, which includes listening, comprehension (understanding narrative and story – the process of making meaning from action, speech, and text by connecting what one is learning to what one already knows), oral language vocabulary and being capable of explanatory talk (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). Oral language is encouraged by talking to children about what is happening around them, supporting them to describe events and build background knowledge, story telling and the use of story sacks, where stories are brought to life through puppets, drama and

extension learning experiences linked to the story (French 2012). Reading stories in an interactive way also supports children's language development (Whitehead, 2007).

- **Phonological awareness**, which constitutes the general ability to decipher the sound patterns within words (Kennedy et al., 2012). Phonological awareness supports the development of early decoding and spelling ability, both of which are precursors to later reading and spelling achievement. When exposed to, and supported to repeat, a range of sounds through nursery and action rhymes and finger plays children develop an awareness of the important constituent sounds within words, such as those that rhyme, syllables and phonemes. A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound within a language. It can be represented by one letter (grapheme) such as 't' or more than one letter, such as 'th'. Phonemic awareness involves the insight that every word can be broken down into sequences of constituent phonemes e.g. 'sat' is made up of 's' /'a' /'t'. Phonemic awareness is a precursor to the understanding of alphabets (Kennedy et al., 2012).
- **Alphabetic code**, which includes alphabet knowledge (knowledge of letters) (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). Children need lots of exposure to the alphabet in their surroundings (in books, on refrigerator magnets, on blocks, in soup, in cereal, in having their names, stories, titles of paintings written for them, in their own attempts to write, in the reading and writing area; generally in ways they can physically access them in their environment).
- **Print knowledge/concepts**, which include knowledge and experience of environmental print (stories, notices, signs), how print is organised on the page, and how print is used for reading and writing. Children must learn that reading and writing (in English) follows basic rules such as flowing from top-to-bottom and left-to-right, and that the print on the page is what is being read by someone who knows how to read (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006).
- **Emergent writing or mark-making**, which includes how marks are representations of ideas and can develop into letters and then words which can be read (understanding writing functions). Early writing – i.e. drawings, marks on paper, in sand, in yoghurt, on a steamed window, in gloop, a child's first attempts at letters or his name – is important. It

provides a means through which children may communicate their feelings and thoughts to others. Learning about writing – as with reading – begins in infancy (Whitehead, 2007). For young children, dictating words and ideas to an adult (story dictation) who can then read them back to the children in their own words can be a very empowering and enlightening experience. This is also known as scribing.

What we know about early numeracy

There has been a growing body of interest in numeracy in young children. Key points that have emerged are:

- The basics of numeracy are present from a very early stage. Babies learn very quickly that taking away results in less and adding results in more (Post & Hohmann, 2000).
- Traditional views of teaching numeracy based on Piagetian theory have been challenged; in particular his underestimation of children's competence and an overemphasis on classification, sorting and matching exercises. In contrast, Vygotskian theory, with its emphasis on the role of the adult and/or more knowledgeable peers in social interaction in learning and development, supports professional practice in numeracy in the early years (Barber, 1998). Therefore, numeracy development is supported by good quality interactions. Such interactions are most likely in small groups and key person systems (where an educator is responsible for a specified group of children) (Epstein, 2007).
- However, interactions based on numeracy are infrequent. They occur as part of stories and songs but not always other experiences. In one seminal study, it seemed as if educators were not aware of the mathematical potential in a shared game or meal times (Munn & Shaffer, 1993).
- Skills in counting should underpin numeracy. Large numbers (from the number ten on) should be included in counting (Barber, 1998).
- Children need to use numbers in a context that makes sense to them. Children's experiences of numeracy should be based in firsthand experiences and familiar contexts (Rich et al., 2005). An emphasis on worksheets and

colouring-in activities fails to tap into the mathematical understanding and knowledge that most young children have (Moyses, 2001).

- McCray (2007) addressed a myth about early numeracy, which is that for young children numeracy is less important than learning language and literacy skills. The widespread nature of this myth has been documented in several studies. For example Barnett & Esposito Lamy (2006, p.7) reported that “little effort is devoted to math education in preschool programs”. Kotsopolous and Lee (2013, p. 48; in the paper that follows this one), cite other studies where “those caring for young children prior to the start of formal schooling tend to focus more on literacy than on numeracy (Tudge & Doucet, 2004). This reality is true for both children who attend structured childcare/early learning programs and for those who are cared for in private settings (i.e., their homes or other’s homes) (Barbarin et al., 2005; Cannon & Ginsburg, 2008; Winton & Buysse, 2005).”
- However, learning numerical skills early has far reaching consequences. In a longitudinal study it was found that early numerical skills not only predict later abilities in numeracy, but also predict later abilities in literacy (Duncan et al., 2007). The converse cannot be said to hold true for early literacy scores; abilities in early literacy at age five seem not to predict numerical abilities at age 10. The answer to this finding seems to be that the kinds of thinking that are involved in numeracy, such as logical thinking, abstraction and problem-solving, have broader application to learning generally than the more specific skills required for literacy (McCray, 2007).

These findings from the literature have clear implications for early education practice:

- Early childhood educators need to connect and build on the variety and range of children’s everyday experiences of numeracy in the home and early childhood settings.
- Children need to be enabled ‘to understand the value of numeracy as a mode of communication in everyday life. This is essential if young children are to see any real purpose in engaging with numeracy related learning’ (Dunphy, 2006, p. 72).

- In brief early childhood educators need to be informed about numeracy related concepts, to plan everyday experiences, communicate about those experiences, reflect on their practice and continually strive to improve their practice.

What early numeracy experiences should we provide?

The role of early childhood settings is to develop children's enthusiastic dispositions towards seeing numeracy in the world around them, having knowledge on which to draw from and develop a numeracy related language. The role of adults is to sustain motivation, to provide resources, to aid children in seeing numeracy through modelling, using the language of numbers, measures, patterns and shape and critically capitalising on interactions to enhance children's experiences. The core content of a curriculum for babies, toddlers and young children, therefore, could include concepts about (Montague-Smith, 2002):

- **Number** by hearing stories that have numbers in them (e.g. 'The Three Little Pigs') and providing materials that have numbers on them such as phones, clocks, calendars, price lists, money, calculators, keyboards and so on.
- **Counting** by providing children with opportunities for counting in many different contexts and for real purposes. When adults are observed counting out loud for a reason, children have a greater chance of grasping the abstract nature of what they see. In play, children could be asked: 'Are there enough chairs for the dolls? Let's count them.'
- **Pattern** (algebra) by bringing children on pattern walks inside to examine patterns in curtains, clothes, floor tiles and wallpaper. While outdoors notice the patterns in the pavement blocks of the footpath, the patterns on the bricks of houses and in nature (e.g. the wings of a ladybird). Play clapping games (e.g. A sailor went to sea, sea, sea...)
- **Shape and space** (geometry) by identifying, naming and describing 'shapes'. Support children to change the shape and arrangement of objects (wrapping, twisting, stretching, stacking, enclosing). Working with three dimensions (pyramids, balls and cubes) can better support children learning and explorations with shape. Organise the environment so children independently find and return objects to develop spatial awareness. Support

filling and emptying, putting in and taking out. Interpret spatial relations in drawings, pictures and photographs.

- **Measures** (making comparisons) by encouraging children to compare size, such as the biggest teddy; length, such as the longest piece of play-dough; height, such as who is the tallest; volume, such as the amount of milk that can be poured from the jug into a cup; weight, such as carrying a heavy bucket of sand from the sand pit; and time, as it may be ‘time to tidy-up’. Even complex measures including area and speed may be talked about, and if valued by the children’s settings and broader culture, will be learned.

Guiding the increasingly knowledgeable participation of children as numerical thinkers requires educators to have (Anning and Edwards, 2006):

- Knowledge of numeracy within experiences provided, aided by team planning/discussion. For example, children’s exposure to the concrete experience of dividing and naming things in halves and quarters (sharing fruit or playdough ‘half for you...’) supports the understanding of fractions. Children learn what is ‘big’ and what is ‘little’ when choosing what size spoon to eat with, or when hearing the story of Goldilocks and the three bears. Later they will use centimetres, kilograms and degrees to measure and compare. Children need many of these experiences.
- Knowledge of what specific children already understand through observation.
- Content (what we want children to understand – one-to-one correspondence, cardinal numbers, distinguishing between a square or a rectangle).
- Orientation (how we would like children to tackle the experiences – dispositions to engage numerically, for example, finding a way of remembering where they started counting, organising into sets, aiming at accuracy when measuring, learning to record, know patterns).
- Knowledge of how we pace our support (for example, while playing a card game).

Children also need to engage in certain processes such as using the language of numeracy, problem-solving and mark-making. Children engage in the **language of numeracy** by hearing those around them talk about volume, length, pattern and so forth (Barber, 1998). **Problem-solving** is not just about good ideas, it involves playfulness and creativity. It is also about deep reflection and time and space to work out solutions. Wait until children ask for assistance or until they have made an attempt at a solution and seem to be about to abandon the effort. Respond supportively and immediately to children's calls for assistance and attention. Provide many natural, open-ended materials both indoors and outdoors. Give children time to work out how to balance or attach things for themselves. They learn more by solving their own spatial problems, in any event they learn that there is often more than just one solution (Epstein, 2007). **Mark-making** is important. In order for young children to communicate numerical concepts, they must first recognise that there is a connection between the mark they make and what it stands for. For example, that a dot they made outside the circle represents one person at a table (Anning & Edwards, 2006). This learning takes time and opportunities to represent through clay, dough, paint, and all forms of artistic expression should be encouraged.

Conclusion

We now know that high quality literacy and numeracy experiences in the early years can have a beneficial impact on children's later achievement (Sylva et al., 2004). We know that children's learning and development are best supported through play and immersion in meaningful, direct, hands-on, interactive and challenging experiences. We need early childhood educators willing and able to engage in continuing professional development regarding early literacy and numeracy to keep abreast of current professional practice and latest developments. Such educators will be able to articulate the serious intellectual content of what is happening as children engage with literacy and numeracy experiences – and explain how that content is likely to pave the road to successful engagement in learning.

A whole setting approach (where all adults in the setting are informed on the importance of early literacy and numeracy and empowered to support those skills in children) could fully embrace the importance and indeed responsibility that educators have to enhance young children's life chances. Early childhood educators have a unique opportunity to get it right from the start, at such a crucial stage in children's learning and development.

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What are the Development Enhancing Features of Mathematical Play ?

Donna Kotsopoulos, Faculty of Education, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario Canada

Joanne Lee, Faculty of Science, Department of Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada

Abstract

In this research, our objective was to identify development enhancing features of play between parent-child (ages 26 to 39 months) dyads that may be more supportive for mathematical learning. While the adult in this research is a parent, the results can be applied to other early year settings where the adult may be an early childhood educator or caregiver. Emerging from a qualitative analysis of 23 30-minute naturalistic play sessions, three development enhancing features were identified: (1) reinforcing learning, (2) checking for understanding, or (3) advancing learning. Combinations (one or more) of these development enhancing features formed the basis of the conceptualization of “purposeful play.” Purposeful play is defined and potential implications for mathematical learning and parent-child play are discussed.

Key words: Learning, mathematics, number, parents, play

Introduction

Many play theorists and researchers argue that play *is* learning for young children (Broadhead, Howard, & Wood, 2010; Fisher, 2008; Hirsh-Pasek, Michnick Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008). This view has captured the intense interest of researchers who are eager to understand the mechanisms by which children develop cognitively, socially, and emotionally. Consequently, theorists and researchers have proposed and studied

many different types of play including free or unstructured play (J. Duncan & Lockwood, 2008; Piaget, 1962; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978), pretend or imaginative play (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009; Sawyer, 1997; Singer & Singer, 2005), play-based learning (Fisher, 2008), block play (Hanline, Milton, & Phelps, 2010; Park, Chae, & Foulks Boyd, 2008), and so forth. Research suggests that play has been shown to improve “school readiness in two broad domains: cognitive skills (literacy, math, problem solving, imagination, and creativity) and social and emotional skills” (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009, p. 19).

Howard (2010), however, argues that “despite decades of research, it has proved difficult to determine that play has unique developmental qualities, and to isolate the benefits of play from other causal determinants” (p. 145). Causal determinants which have been shown to have important consequences for young children may include the way in which play is structured, supported, encouraged, and perceived by adults, and the nature of participation of adults (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Other causal determinants could include family culture, gender, motivation, and personal dispositions (Broadhead et al., 2010; Chaplin, 2005).

Some suggest that play *belongs to the player* and should be exclusively child-initiated and guided solely by the child’s interests (Piaget, 1962; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Others argue that adults have a crucial role in shaping the play environment and guiding potential learning opportunities emerging out of play in ways that advance the learning of the child (Fisher, 2008; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Howard, 2010). For example, research has shown that play guided by adults who are supporting executive function skills (e.g., attention, problem-solving and inhibition) were related to improvements in mathematics and reading (Uren, 2008). Adults’ role in play is proposed to have three functions: planning for play, supporting play, and reviewing play (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009, p. 56). Across each of these roles, play is inextricably linked to assessment as the basis from which planning, supporting, and reviewing emerge.

Remarkably, little research exists examining the role of adults in children’s play in the area of mathematics learning and development. What is known, however, is that those caring for young children prior to the start of formal schooling tend to focus more on literacy than on numeracy (Tudge & Doucet, 2004). This reality is true for both children who attend structured childcare/early learning programs and for those who are cared for in private settings (i.e., their homes or other’s homes) (Barbarin et al., 2005; Cannon & Ginsburg, 2008; Winton & Buysse, 2005).

Research Objectives and Question

In this research, our objective was to examine the intersection of play and mathematical learning between parent-child dyads to identify potential development enhancing features. For the purpose of this research, “parent” will be used to denote the adult in the play. However, the adult could be a childcare provider (private home or public facility) or another significant adult caring for the child such as a grandparent. The question guiding our research was *what are potential development enhancing features exhibited by parents that support mathematical play?* We identify three development enhancing features and introduce *purposeful play* which is a form of play that has as its core features one or more of the development enhancing features that we describe shortly.

Development enhancing features are defined as those pedagogical processes used by parents that are potentially useful in furthering or advancing learning of the child. In the present research, those developmental features are also ones that are seen as particularly supportive of mathematical learning. Mathematical play is defined as play that supports the learning of mathematical concepts such as number sense (i.e., counting, identifying numbers, addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and proportional reasoning), patterning and algebra, geometry, measurement, and data management. In the present research, we look most closely at the number sense and specifically counting and identifying numbers. However, the developmental enhancing features of play that are proposed can be potentially applied to any of the mathematical concepts outlined above.

We state at the onset that our research is admittedly preliminary. However, given the dearth of research exploring the parent’s role in mathematical play, foundational research in this area is needed and this research aims to be an early contributor.

Literature Review

Young children are cognitively capable of engaging in activities geared towards developing mathematical abilities from a very young age (Andersson, 2007; Butterworth, 1999a, 1999b; Clements, 1999; Clements & Sarama, 2009; Ginsburg, Lee, & Boyd, 2008; Sarama & Clements, 2009; 2006; Wynn, 1990). Shortly after birth, infants have been found to be able to discriminate between one to three objects (Starkey, 1980). By about six months of age, children will consistently chose two biscuits when given a choice between one or two (Feigenson, Carey, & Hauser, 2002; Feigenson, Carey, & Spelke, 2002). By nine

months old, children are able to discriminate between four and six objects, and then between larger sets (Xu, 2000).

There is some suggestion that the ability to discriminate between sets of objects is linked to the humans' innate capacity to subitize which is the ability to estimate small sets of objects *without* actually counting but by inspection only (Dehaene, Molko, Cohen, & Wilson, 2004; Dehaene, Spelke, Stanescu, Pined, & Tsivkin, 1999). The ability to subitize is linked to the development of counting (Le Corre, Van de Walle, Brannon, & Carey, 2006; LeFevre et al., 2006). The propensity to count, therefore, also appears to be innate. Consequently, Gelman and Gallistel (1990; 1986) suggest that between birth and age four, children have the ability to learn five counting principles that become the cornerstone of more advanced mathematics. These counting principles include one-to-one correspondence (i.e., counting of objects in a set once and once only), cardinality (i.e., last number counted is the numerosity of the set or the total number of elements in the set), order irrelevance (i.e., counting objects at any starting point in the set, with the resulting cardinality remaining constant), stable order (i.e., the repeatable order of counting tags; one, then two, then three, etc.), and abstraction (i.e., the tags of "one, two, three, . . ." applied to any objects). In addition to counting and understanding concepts of more or less, very young children have also been shown to also be able to engage in addition and subtraction (Wynn, 1992), patterning, sorting, and geometric and spatial reasoning (Aslan & Arnas, 2007; Clements, 1999; Sarama, Clements, Swaminathan, McMillen, & Gonzalez Gamez, 2003; van Hiele, 1999) – with appropriate environmental stimulus and support.

Children's innate mathematical potential, especially prior to formal schooling, is tremendous. It is linked closely to their environments and even the kinds of talk they hear from parents and other adults (Gunderson & Levine, 2011; Klivanoff, Levine, Huttenlocher, Vasilyeva, & Hedges, 2006). A large-scale evaluation of preschool curricula in the United States found that children in mathematically-rich preschool programs showed better mathematics ability than children from a control sample at the onset of kindergarten (Clements & Sarama, 2009; Klivanoff et al., 2006; National Center for Education Research, 2008). Moreover, numerous studies provide evidence that lags in mathematics achievement can be identified as early as the onset of formal schooling (Klivanoff et al., 2006; National Council of Teachers of Mathematics/NCTM, 2006; PISA, 2006; Stannard, Wolfgang, Jones, & Phelps, 2001). Factors contributing to lags in mathematics achievement identified at the start of formal school have been

shown to be less related to parental education and socioeconomics than to the level of mathematical readiness for schooling acquired by the child at the onset of formal schooling (G. J. Duncan et al., 2007).

Theoretical Framework

Wood (2010) proposes an *integrated* theory of play which is a combination of the *emergent/responsive* and a *culturally transmission/directive approaches* to play. The emergent/responsive approach “privileges children’s cultural practices, meanings and purposes” (Wood, 2010, p. 11). The culturally transmission/directive approaches “privileges adults’ plans for play and their interpretations of play and educational outcomes” (Wood, 2010, p. 11). As Wood explains, in an integrated approach “adults are involved with children in planning for play and child-initiated activities, based upon their observations and interactions. Planning and pedagogical decision-making are informed by children’s choices, interests, capabilities and knowledge, which feed forward into further curriculum planning” (Wood, 2010, p. 12). An integrated theory of play requires co-constructive processes between teaching and learning “where the focus is on dynamic interactions between the people, resources and activities in the setting, with the curriculum being used as a framework” (Wood, 2010, p. 12). It is important to note that Wood’s (2010) approaches to play have been conceptualized primarily with the early childhood educator and formal curriculum in mind. Differences may exist when considering parents and play. For example, parents may select certain activities or toys with the belief that there is “educational value” when this may not be the case. Additionally, parents during play may interpret outcomes against their perceptions of what their child ought to know or should be learning. The level of sophistication in the planning and interpretation may also differ.

A mathematical context to Wood’s (2010) approaches to play can be made with the propositions made by van Oers (1996) about *mathematics made playful* and *mathematising elements of play*. Mathematics made playful occurs when “the primacy of the mathematics is the starting point, and the elements of mathematical body of knowledge are transformed into some play activity” (p. 5). An example of this type of play occurs with the use of a shape discrimination toy where faces of a three-dimensional object are pushed through openings corresponding to one of the faces of the object (e.g., triangular prisms are pushed through a triangular opening). Mathematics made playful is well aligned to the emergent/responsive approaches to play (Wood, 2010).

Mathematising elements of play occurs when the adult attempts to naturally and spontaneously introduce or infuse “elements of mathematics into the child’s play... by taking up the child’s spontaneous mathematical (or mathematics-like) actions, such as counting, comparing, relating, measuring; or by actively elicit new mathematics-like actions and subsequently trying to improve these actions” (p. 5). For example, a child playing with figurines may be prompted to count or even sort the figures (e.g., by shape and colour). The figurines are not geared intentionally geared towards mathematical concepts. Mathematising elements of play is well aligned to the culturally transmission/directive approaches to play (Wood, 2010). The task of mathematising elements of play is perhaps more complex because the requisite knowledge of mathematics, mathematical cognition, and developmental trajectories may be more elusive to many parents as opposed to trained early childhood educators. Consequently, opportunities might be missed. Additionally, parents may not engage in either type of mathematical play during natural play time with their child or it may be that one type of mathematical play is more prevalent than the other.

Methods

Participants

Participants for this research were drawn from a larger longitudinal research exploring the role of adult talk and children’s development of number sense and most specifically counting and identifying numbers. In the larger research, 145 native English-speaking preschool children between the ages of 12 and 39 months were recruited. From this larger sample, a sub-sample was constructed that consisted of 23 preschool children (12 girls, 11 boys), between the ages of 33 to 41 months ($M_{\text{age}} = 36.250$, $SD = 2.066$), accompanied by their primary caregivers. Participants within this sub-sample were typically developing preschool children with no known deficits (e.g., learning disabilities, developmental disorders, social disorders, etc.) who used English as their first language within the home environment. These participants were selected because they were the age group closest to starting formalized school which is a temporal period at which much is known about the predictive nature of mathematical knowledge and later academic achievement (G. J. Duncan et al., 2007).

The primary caregivers who participated were between the ages of 21 and 59 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 30\text{-}39$ years, $SD = 0.612$). The primary caregiver in 21 of our

observations was the mother, followed by one observation with the father as the primary caregiver and one observation with both the mother and father present. Parents education on average was university level education ($M_{\text{mother}} = 3$, $SD = 0.792$; $M_{\text{father}} = 3$, $SD = 0.891$). Pseudonyms are used throughout when referencing participants.

Data sources

The present research analyzed qualitatively 23 naturalistic 30-minute play sessions between a parent and their child. These sessions were videotaped in the participants' home. During nine of the naturalistic play sessions one or more sibling was present. Demographic questionnaires completed by all families prior to the videotaping were also included as data sources. It consisted of 12 items including questions concerning family composition (e.g., age and number of siblings), parent demographic information (e.g., occupation, education, and age), and information concerning the child's activities (e.g., reading, television watching, playing with blocks and puzzles).

We focus the presentation of our results on the play interactions of two children: Miguel and Sofia. Their play videos were selected for their explanatory potential and the representativeness of the observations of the overall data set. Miguel was a 36-month boy at the time of the home visit. His mother has a university degree and his father has a college degree. Sofia was a 39-month girl at time of the home visit. Both her parents had secondary school education only. Miguel was reported to watch more television and read less than Sofia. The mother, for both children, participated in the play session and no siblings were present although both had one older sibling.

Procedure

In the context of this research, "child" refers to the participant described above and does not refer to any siblings that may have been present. Additionally, no coding of sibling interactions occurred. Before each phase of the research, a consent form and demographic questionnaire were completed and signed by the parent. The parent, child, and sibling(s) participated in a naturalistic 30-minute play session which was videotaped by two research assistants in their home environment. Other adult caregivers (e.g., the other parent, grandparents) were also invited to participate in this play session if they were usually present in the

home. Parents were instructed to interact with their child naturally as they would typically do during play in the home and to play with any objects provided to them for the play session (described shortly). They were unaware that the research was exploring mathematical play and were only debriefed on this aspect after the data collection.

The play session between the parent and child in their home environment was recorded using Noldus Observer XT portable laboratory and software program (Noldus Information Technology, 2008). The portable laboratory recorded video observations through the use of portable cameras and two wireless microphones to ensure reliable audio quality. Two research assistants controlled the cameras from another room when possible, reducing any distraction or disturbance during the play session. The use of the portable laboratory (e.g., remote control cameras and wireless microphones) ensured that the play session between the parent and child recorded within the home environment was as unobtrusive as possible.

In order to reduce variability in the immediate environment and the activities that the children and parents engaged in, each parent-child dyad was provided with a standard set of toys which included small counting artefacts (animals and vehicles), soft blocks, puppets, number and shape books, shape sorters, foam shapes, and large foam dice. Therefore, any observable differences can be potentially attributed to inherent differences between individuals, instead of differences in the environment or toys available during the session. This is not to suggest that other factors such as familial interaction patterns, family culture, gender, motivation, and so forth, may not influence the play; the immediate environment was controlled in as much as it is possible in a naturalistic setting. At the near end of the 30-minute session, one research assistant joined in the play. Using hand-sized connective fish toys, the research assistant asked the child to count arrays of up to 10 or more fish, starting with small sets of four. The purpose of the counting task was to determine the child's counting ability, and to assess the child's understanding of one-to-one correspondence and cardinality.

All utterances by the parent(s), the child and any sibling(s) produced during the naturalistic 30-minute play session were transcribed. Coding was done by two independent coders and then compared for consistency. Discrepancies were discussed and then resolved.

Data analysis

The qualitative analysis involved simultaneously and holistically observing both interaction and discourse to evaluate if any differences could be observed in play that appeared to be mathematical. This included mathematisation of play involving patterning, sorting, counting, reading of number books, block building, and so forth. Therefore, play that was, for example, pretend play or imaginary play that did not involve numbers was not attended during the analysis. Thus, we sought to identify development enhancing features of the interaction using emergent grounded theory approach whereby codes emerged during and from a constant comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2000). The mathematical content of the videos focused primarily on aspects of number sense: counting and identifying numbers. While children did engage in some other aspects number sense (i.e., additive reasoning) and of measurement (i.e., identifying objects as big and small), and a significant amount of colour identification, this was not the focus of our present analysis.

As stated earlier, our aim is to identify potential developmental features of play. Our research is intended to identify observable but not necessarily quantifiable elements of play that may be worth attending to for future studies. Our identification of potential trends is intended to raise further questions about the nature of parents and mathematical play with their children for future inquires.

Results and Discussion

Three developmental features of play were identified and these were (1) reinforcing learning, (2) checking for understanding, or (3) advancing learning. Reinforcing learning involves affirming knowledge that a child might demonstrate and that may be evidenced by a variety of approaches including re-voicing or repeating the aspects of a conversation or child talk (i.e., “Yes, that’s two!”) and positive reinforcement or praise (i.e., “Good job!”). Checking for understanding often involves questioning where the questioning is part of the conversation or framed as a game (i.e., “Is that three or four?”). Advancing learning involves assessing or confirming what the child knows and scaffolding learning in order to enhance the development potential of the child (Vygotsky, 1978). An example of this could be in the use of naming of mathematical objects to provide a cognitive tag or to indicate membership of something to a conceptual idea (J. Duncan & Lockwood, 2008; S. A. Gelman,

2006). Each of these three developmental features involves some form of assessment of the child's understanding (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009).

These developmental features of play appear to be differentially connected to van Oers' (1996, 2003, 2010) mathematisation of play and making mathematics playful. Reinforcing learning and checking for understanding occurred exclusively in the context mathematising play. For example, parents were observed asking "Good job!" and "Are you sure?" when engaging in spontaneous counting with their children when the children played with the soft blocks. Whereas advancing learning was also observed while parents were attempting to make mathematics playful and also often involved parents initiating a particular episode of play. Examples of this were seen when parents read a counting book to their children and in the counting of dots on the face of large dice. Parents in these instances were observed prompting their children for the next number in the sequence or even engaging in additive reasoning. Reinforcing learning and checking for understanding occurring exclusively during the mathematisation of play could have been as a result of the data collection protocol which provided a standard set of toys. Therefore, opportunities for parents to engage in making mathematics playful may have been limited.

Building on the above, the play observed in our research is described as purposeful play which is similar to but conceptually slightly different than *guided play* described by others (Fisher, 2008; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). We define purposeful play as the intentional and spontaneous engagement of talk or actions by the adult with the child with the implicit intent of facilitating learning (Kotsopoulos & Lee, Forthcoming). Guided play is slightly different in that the activity is largely child initiated. In contrast, purposeful play can be either adult or child initiated and is distinguished by one or more development enhancing features of (a) reinforcing learning, (b) checking for understanding, and/or (c) advancing learning. Purposeful play can be enacted either with the intent of mathematising play or making mathematics playful, or with other disciplinary areas (i.e., literacy, science, etc.). The identification of purposeful play is an important unanticipated result of this research.

With respect to the two videos we detail next, Sofia's video had more evidence of purposeful play related to mathematical content than Miguel's video. Sofia's mother engaged in frequent and spontaneous counting of objects. However, Sofia's mother was also observed taking over her play compared to

Miguel's mother. The contamination of play with adult intention is a concern amongst many theorists (Kotsopoulos & Lee, Forthcoming; Piaget, 1962; Sutton-Smith, 1997), and may be a corollary risk to purposeful play. For the purpose of presenting the results we focus on play with large foam dice, small animal and vehicle counters, and two story books related to colours and shapes, and numbers. In the present research, reading is viewed as part of play.

Reinforcing learning

Reinforcing learning was observed exclusively during parents' mathematisation of play. One of the toys available to the children during the play session was a set of three dice. We anticipated that the dice could be used for block play, recognition of numbers, and for counting. Two of the dice had numbers (i.e., 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6) on them and the other dice had dots (i.e., one dot on one side, two dots on another side, three dots on yet another side, etc. up to six dots on the sixth side). All the children played with the dice. Some children identified the numbers on the sides of the numbered die and others counted or attempted to count the dots on the other die.

Miguel could easily identify numbers up to 10 on the dice when asked by his mother to do so. Additionally, when asked, "What number is this?" he was able to answer even if the number was first, for example, four and then two. Miguel's mother was frequently observed offering positive reinforcement by saying, "Good job!" or "Good!" However, when the opportunity arose to count the dots on one of the dice, this does not occur although the mother asked him if he would like to count the dots. Miguel did not take up this invitation but instead moved to another toy and the mother did not pursue this line of play.

There were numerous examples observed of Sofia's mother also reinforcing her learning during the play session in similar ways to Miguel's mother by offering positive reinforcement or praise. Sofia played less with the dice than Miguel. However, Sofia's mother used the dice to reinforce her knowledge of her age and her brother's age. She asked Sofia to find a number and then asked about her age in an attempt to relate the two numbers. She extended this play, but not the learning *per se*, to also have Sofia think about her brother's age:

Mom: What number is that? (*pointing to the three on the dice*)

Sofia Three!

Mom: And, how old are you?

- Sofia: Hmm.
- Mom: Which number? How old are you? (*Sofia is seen tossing the dice looking at the numbers*)
- Sofia: Three! (*pointing to the three on the dice once she locates it*)
- Mom: And, how old is Kevin? (*Sofia's brother*)
- Sofia: Umm. Umm.
- Mom: How old is Kevin?
- Sofia: Let me see . . . he's five!
- Mom: He's five. Good job!

Like Miguel she appeared to be able to recognize numbers, which is consistent for children of this age (Fuson, 1988 ; Geary, 2006).

Reinforcing learning appeared to be very much through positive reinforcement praise and often through repeating the child's final response as observed above with Sofia and her mom. In Sofia's case, her mother also made connections to numbers relevant to her own life. These approaches of positive reinforcement, naming and revoicing, and connecting to real life are consistent with those documented as effective and often routine strategies used for early learning (Clements & Sarama, 2007, 2009; Sarama & Clements, 2009; Whitebread, 2010).

Checking for understanding

Checking for understanding occurred exclusively during the parents' mathematising play. Children in all the videos also played with the animal and vehicle counters. Sofia's mother was frequently observed engaging in spontaneous counting and in the comparison of cardinality of sets. She was also observed engaging in "Are you sure?" games which requires the child to double check and/or explain and justify their thinking (van Oers, 1996). Sofia's mother's approach is reasonable given where Sofia should be developmentally in terms of understanding numbers up until 10 (Fuson, 1988 ; Wynn, 1990) and understanding magnitude concepts of "more," "less," and "the same" (Feigenson, Carey, & Hauser, 2002).

Sofia, at the start of her play session, was observed sorting her animal counters and arranging them in what appeared to be two piles, one for her and one for her mother. Throughout the entire time she was sorting, her mother

quantified the sorting by asking questions about how many she had and how many Sofia had in their respective piles:

- Sofia: There's a purple horse.
- Mom: So, how many horses do you have?
- Sofia: Two of them. (*pointing to the first and then the second but not counting aloud*)
- Mom: Two? Just two?
- Sofia: Yeah!
- Mom: Are you sure?
- Sofia: No, three of them.
- Mom: Three?
- Sofia: Yeah.
- Mom: And, how many horses do I have, Sofia?
- Sofia: Um, you have two of them too.
- Mom: Do I have two? (*pointing to her horses*)
- Sofia: You have three of them too! And, I have three of them too.
- Mom: Oh, that's fair.

The previous excerpt shows Sofia's mother mathematising elements of play (van Oers, 1996), whilst at the same time checking for understanding by asking, "Are you sure?" Her approach is consistent with the integrated theory of play, which by privileging both children's own intentions of play and the parents plans for supporting learning (Wood, 2010).

Sofia's mother was also observed checking for an understanding of cardinality when counting the animals. According to Gelman and Gallistel (Gallistel & Gelman, 1990; R. Gelman & Gallistel, 1986; S. A. Gelman, 2006), children develop an understanding of cardinality by approximately 36 months of age. Children who have not developed an understanding of cardinality may be inclined to state another number or the next number in the counting sequence as opposed to the last number counted. In this next excerpt, Sofia counts four but then states five as the cardinality.

- Mom: How many rabbits?
- Sofia: One, two, three, four, (*pause*) five. Hmm.
- Mom: Are you sure?
- Sofia: Yeah.
- Mom: Do you want to count them again? Look.
- Sofia: No.
- Mom: Yeah.
- Sofia: No, I don't want to.
- Mom: What's that number?
- Sofia: No.
- Mom: Sofia?
- Sofia: Don't want to.

This last excerpt between Sofia and her mother is slightly different than the earlier one. Sofia's mother asked her, "Are you sure" when the numbers she reports is not accurate. However, her persistent or gentle questioning takes over Sofia's play. Sofia's reaction shows resistance her mother's inclination to take over her play. While parents should be picking up on "cues for action" within the play to support learning (Howard, 2010, p. 153), caution should be exercised to not take over the play (Whitebread, 2010).

Miguel also played with the counters but was not observed counting. His play session showed much more limited evidence of purposeful play and the development enhancing feature of checking for understanding. Miguel was able to identify numeral representations of numbers on the foam dice when asked, "What's that number"? However, he was not observed to engage in any counting on his own initiative or at his mother's invitation to do so.

Advancing learning

Advancing learning was observed during parents' mathematising play and making mathematics playful. To focus the results and discussion, we will highlight specifically making mathematics playful through parent-child dyads' reading of the counting book that was provided in the standard toy set. During the book

reading, both parents attempted to be playful by using voice intonation, gesture (pointing), and enthusiasm. To some extent Sofia's mother was more successful than Miguel's mother.

Both Miguel and Sofia, during their respective play sessions, read each of the two books provided in the toy set. We detail an excerpt from Miguel's play where a missed opportunity to advance learning occurred and one from Sofia's play where her mother did try to advance her learning – albeit with minimal success. Miguel did not spend much time with the counting book. His mother initiated reading the book but he became distracted with another toy and the reading stopped by the third page:

- Mom: Should we start at the beginning of the book? . . .
(opens book to first page)
- Miguel: And, this. . . I like this? And this . . . I like this on . . .
(pointing to something on the page)
- Mom: Oh, look who this looks like! Who does that look like?
- Miguel: Train!
- Mom: It looks like, almost looks like Thomas the Train, doesn't it?
 What's on the next page? I think there's a number that you know. What's that number?
- Miguel: Two, Three, . . . *(not clear from the video what he is counting)*
- Mom: Three.
- Miguel: The end. *(he closes the book and moves on to another toy).*

Miguel's mother focused on the objects and did not use the book to count. The opportunity to provide scaffolding was missed by Miguel's mother. It may be that she does not see her role in play to advance the learning of counting or that she is simply unaware of her potential to influence Miguel's learning (Tudge & Doucet, 2004).

Similar to Miguel's mother, Sofia's mother also initiated reading the counting book. In contrast, Sofia and her mother read the counting book from start to finish. Some studies have documented how adults will work alongside the child by modelling, gently leading, commenting upon or reinforcing the child's action and discovery of the environment (Duncan & Lockwood, 2008; Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2008). Sofia's mother was observed interacting with

her in this way and often this led to attempts to advance her learning. For example, when counting, she would ask her to progressively count bigger sets, engage in counting on (e.g., starting at four and then counting on rather than going back to one), or if she counted the set partially, her mother would try to redirect her, as is seen in this next excerpt:

- Mom: How many jack-in-the boxes?
Sofia: One, two, three, four.
Mom: Oh, here's some more. (*pointing to others missed on the page*)
Sofia: One, two, three, four, five.
Mom: So, how many all together? (*asking her to add the two sums*)
Sofia: Um . . . two.
Mom: What number's that? (*pointing to the number nine on the page*)
Sofia: That's three.
Mom: No, nine.

This pattern of interaction occurred two more times during the reading of the book. Sofia would count half of the objects. Her mother would redirect her to the others suggesting she count on from the last object. Instead of counting on, which is shown to be a considerably more advanced concept of number (Curtis, Okamoto, & Weckbacher, 2009), Sofia instead counted from the beginning as though the additional objects were an unrelated set. Sofia's mother also tried to encourage additive reasoning and she was unsuccessful. She also tried to extend the learning by also asking for the cardinality of the total set of objects by asking how many there were all together which developmentally should have been possible for smaller sets that are counted again but not perhaps for sets combined in the way in which the mother was combining the sets (Freeman, Antonucci, & Lewis, 2000; Fuson, 1988; Gallistel & Gelman, 1990).

Sofia during the reading of the book did not appear to be able to engage in the additive reasoning but showed an understanding of cardinality for counting objects fewer than five but her mother nevertheless tried. When asked how many in total she did not recount the full set but only visually estimated the full set and this visual estimation of the set has been shown to be closely related to counting performance (Zhou, 2002).

Counting Task

At the conclusion of the each of the play sessions, each child played a short counting (task) game with one of the research assistants. Miguel, although observed to be able to count orally to four, did not demonstrate one-to-one correspondence and repeated counting some of the fish counters used in the game. Additionally, he did not show the appropriate number of fingers to represent the cardinality of what he counted when he used his fingers spontaneously. Studies have shown that adults' lack of mathematical development may result in either missed opportunities to support, for example, counting and number development and may simultaneously underestimate children's actual ability (Fluck, Linnell, & Holgate, 2005). This may have been the case for Miguel.

In contrast, Sofia was able to count up to 10 of the fish counters but became uncooperative when the string of fish counters was made larger by the research assistant. Her reluctance was similar to other instances observed during the play session and appeared to potentially be related to the level of cognitive challenge of the counting task that may have extended beyond her zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). This is unknown for certain, however. We did observe some consistency in the ability of children to count sets of up to 10, with evidence of an understanding of one-to-one correspondence and cardinality (albeit less infrequently observed), who had engaged more so with their parents in purposeful play. The extent to which this observation is idiosyncratic is unknown and more and different testing is needed.

Conclusions

Most children at home and/or in early learning settings are being exposed to some mathematical play and some of their own play is inherently mathematical (Seo & Ginsburg, 2004). However, an understanding of the types of play that support the development of early numeracy prior to former schooling is relatively unexplored. The present research begins to contribute some understanding by examining the role of parent play.

Our analysis of the naturalistic play of parent-child dyads suggests that there are potentially three developmental features of mathematical play that are noteworthy. These features are: (1) reinforcing learning (2) checking for understanding and (3) advancing learning. Two of these development enhancing features, reinforcing learning, and checking for understanding, may be more prevalent during the mathematisation of play only.

A combination of the three development enhancing features of play which we propose may form the foundations of what we refer to as purposeful play. This form of play involves the intentional and explicit interactions of parent with their child to check for a child's emergent understanding or reinforce or advance learning without contaminating a child's ownership of their play. It requires parents to take advantage of unexpected opportunities to engage a child in learning about numbers. While the focus of this research is mathematical learning, the development enhancing features identified may be relevant to other disciplinary learning through play and this remains an area open for further inquiry. Whitehead (2010) describes this as acting upon play cues to promote cognitive challenge which then furthers learning. There was some evidence from the counting task that children who engaged in more purposeful play with the features identified above were able to count larger sets and had an understanding of one-to-one correspondence and cardinality. Additional research is needed to explore these preliminary findings.

The ability to act upon cues in play to encourage mathematics during play requires the parents to have a more advanced understanding of the learning potential of their young children. Recognizably, this perhaps is the most significant challenge. Yet, the increased literacy rates in homes over the last few decades suggest that increased numeracy development in the homes is also possible with public awareness. Unlike early childhood educators, parents may not have the requisite knowledge and likely do not have access to professional development to acquire the knowledge.

There are some limitations to this research. The sample size is small ($n = 23$). Additionally, our use of a standard set of toys may have overly structured some of the play. Also, the extent to which the counting task revealed an accurate depiction of counting ability is also limited. Different types of testing are necessary. Despite these limitations, the research begins to raise questions and identify features in a relatively unexplored area. Persistent questions from this analysis conceptualizing the potential development enhancing features of purposeful play include: *What is the relationship of purposeful play to learning about numbers? Do all three development enhancing features need to be engaged in to advance learning? What is the relationship between the development enhancing features and mathematical ability or achievement?*

Notes

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Donna Kotsopoulos, Faculty of Education, Wilfrid Laurier University, 75 University Avenue, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, N2L 3C5. Email: dkotsopo@wlu.ca

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Aistear in Action in South Tipperary and North Cork

*Dr Mary Daly, National Council for Curriculum
and Assessment*

Máire Corbett and Lucy Connolly, Early Childhood Ireland

Abstract

Aistear in Action is a collaborative initiative between Early Childhood Ireland and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). The initiative involves seven early years services in South Tipperary and North Cork using *Aistear; the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) to enhance their practice with a group of children in their pre-school year. Early Childhood Ireland and the NCCA will use the learning and materials gathered from this to develop resources for the wider Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector. Through monthly on-site visits and cluster meetings practitioners are supported to share, analyse and explore their practice as it develops and changes. They are encouraged to use technology to document children's learning and to improve their own practice. Video clips from the initiative are shared with the children themselves and with their parents and some of these will be used by the NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland on their websites to support the implementation of *Aistear* in other early years settings. Materials gathered may also be used in publications, training materials or presentations. The initiative began in late 2011 and will be completed in June 2013. This paper explains the purpose and design of the initiative, the intended outcomes, and reports on progress to date.

Introduction

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and Early Childhood Ireland are involved in a two-year collaborative initiative called *Aistear in Action*. The seven services taking part are using *Aistear*;⁴ *the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) to enhance their practice with a group of children in their pre-school year. This paper explains the purpose and design of the initiative. The intended outcomes are also outlined and an update on progress along with some information on the use of video to document children's learning is also described as this type of work is a key part of the initiative.

Aistear in Action participants

The seven services involved in the initiative in South Tipperary and North Cork include community and private providers, large full daycare services and small sessional services. The 24 practitioners in the initiative are working with children in the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (ECCE), whereby the state provides a free year of early childhood care and education for children of pre-school age by paying a capitation fee to participating services in return for the services providing a pre-school programme free of charge to all children within the qualifying age range for a set number of hours over a set period of weeks.⁵

Initiative purpose/objectives

The *Aistear in Action* initiative aims to support the practitioners involved to develop their practice using *Aistear* which is the curriculum framework for all children in Ireland from birth to six years (NCCA, 2009). It describes learning and development using four themes: *Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking*. *Aistear* also includes four sets of guidelines on *Building partnerships with parents, Interactions, Play, and Assessment*. The practitioners worked with all the elements of *Aistear* as part of the initiative.

4 *Aistear*; the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework will be referred to as *Aistear* from here on.

5 More details on the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (ECCE) may be found on the website of the Dept. of Children and Youth Affairs: <http://www.dcy.a.gov.ie>

Initiative design/methodology

The initiative involved monthly cluster meetings with all services along with monthly on-site visits to each setting facilitated by two Early Childhood Ireland mentors. The practitioners' learning in the initiative came from their work in the pre-school rooms and from their inquiries, discussions and reflections with others in the initiative. Initially, baseline data on each of the services was compiled. Through monthly cluster meetings co-facilitated by Early Childhood Ireland and an NCCA mentor, practitioners were supported to question, analyse and explore developments in their practice with one another. The monthly on-site support visits involved the Early Childhood Ireland mentor observing, modelling and recording in the session. This was followed by a feedback discussion with staff immediately afterwards.

The use of technology was an important part of the initiative. Video cameras, laptops and scanners provided by the NCCA enabled the practitioners and children to capture the interactive, social and dynamic nature of early learning and development. This documentation was then used to critique practice, to identify and plan changes, to make these changes, and to re-enter the reflective cycle. For the purposes of learning in this initiative, this equipment proved very helpful. In particular they helped to provide evidence of learning that could be shared with children and families. Photos were displayed on setting walls and parents and children were invited to look at video clips of different experiences. At the same time this documentation informed NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland's understanding of curriculum for the wider early childhood community. In year one, along with the equipment, each service received a grant of €2,000 from NCCA to purchase resources such as play props, books for the children and practitioners and where possible, to release staff to work collaboratively on developing their practice.

Initiative outcomes

Table 1 sets out the intended initiative outcomes for the various participants—practitioners, children, parents and Early Childhood Ireland/NCCA, as well as the wider early childhood sector.

Table 1: Intended outcomes from the initiative

Initiative practitioners will be:	supported to enhance their practice using <i>Aistear</i> to develop an inquiry based, reflective curriculum that supports learning and development.
Children will have:	improved learning experiences and learning outcomes.
Parents will be:	supported to build stronger partnerships with the staff in the service and will be more informed about their child's learning.
NCCA/Early Childhood Ireland will gather and learn from materials and will:	share these with others on their websites, in publications and for training purposes.
The wider early childhood sector will have access to:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • multi-media examples of <i>Aistear</i> in action • tools to develop their practice • insights into the seven services' change stories.

Resources from the initiative will be shared through the *Aistear* Toolkit (www.ncca.ie/aistear toolkit) and on the Early Childhood Ireland website at www.earlychildhoodireland.ie

Using video as part of *Aistear* in Action

As already mentioned, the seven services participating in the initiative were given equipment to help the staff to reflect on their practice and to carry out the documentation process. All parents/guardians of the children in rooms involved were given information on the initiative. Following this they were asked to sign a consent form if they were happy to give permission for their children to be video/ audio recorded or photographed. The majority of parents in all services were happy for their children to participate. In each of the services the children were shown the video camera and had the opportunity to use the video with support from the staff. Children could choose not to participate if they so wished. They could also ask staff to video their play and to view what had been documented. If not involved (i.e. parents did not consent), staff videoed and photographed the children (as all services had consent to do this within their own services) but these materials were not shared with Early Childhood Ireland or NCCA.

While initially staff were nervous about using the equipment, with familiarity their confidence built up around using the camera and also about being filmed themselves. The camera was always close by and it quickly lost its novelty value for the children- it became part of the daily routine. Learning to review video clips critically took time, and using clips for further planning needed discussion with co-workers. This skill of self-reflection using the camera developed slowly. After only six months in the project, the video clips stimulated reflection and challenged some assumptions among the staff, for example

- How the children used the indoor/outdoor environment in their play
- Access for the children to materials and equipment
- How children connected with their peers and staff
- How flexible the daily routine was
- Whether or not staff were planning activities linked to children's interests.

Reflection on the video clips also highlighted early concerns about children and their *Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating and Exploring and Thinking* (the four themes of *Aistear*). Practitioners discussed what they saw and heard on the clip, linked it to *Aistear's* themes, aims and learning goals and then looked at opportunities to improve practice and to extend and deepen learning. In year two of the initiative, the equipment continued to be used to document children's learning and to support reflective practice. Some of the video clips and photographs will also be made available on the *Aistear* and *Early Childhood Ireland* websites to share with others.

Cluster meetings

The focus of the *Aistear in Action* initiative was to support the practitioners in their understanding and use of *Aistear* - its principles and themes and the four sets of guidelines. Practitioners were supported to use these to enhance the children's experiences. Cluster group meetings were held monthly to give an opportunity to explore theories and ideas and to gain new knowledge of how children learn. Initially the clusters involved all services for two hours.

However, due to geographical issues it was decided to have most cluster meetings in smaller groups in three different locations, closer to where the participants lived and worked. This was particularly important for the people who worked in full daycare services. At each cluster meeting, there was a reflection on the process to date, the presentation of a previously assigned task, along with time for discussion and reflection. This was followed by the presentation of a new concept or a different view point on previous knowledge linked to *Aistear*. The tasks were generally video-based, requiring the practitioners to video the children and themselves and to reflect on what they saw and heard. Each month there was a different focus, for example interactions, following a child's interests, or pretend play. These tasks enabled practitioners to use video to reflect on their practice, with the aim of developing their practice in relation to improving the way in which they supported and scaffolded children's learning.

In year one, the cluster meetings mainly focused on understanding partnerships with parents, play, interactions and environments. There was a focus on *Aistear's* themes throughout. Early on in the process, each setting was supported to draw up a value statement based on *Aistear's* principles. Support was also given to help with planning linked to children's interests and the need to devote ample blocks of time to play (at least one hour). Draft short-term planning templates and learning records were developed to help with the planning and documentation process. These are being used by services, and following feedback they will be available on-line in the *Aistear Toolkit* (www.ncca.ie/aisteartoolkit).

The learning environment

For some services, a large portion of their time during the first year was spent on making the indoor environment more child-friendly: rooms were repainted, materials were moved to be within children's reach, a lot of de-cluttering took place and more re-cycled, open-ended and natural materials were provided. An environmental audit tool was developed to help services assess their indoor and outdoor environment. The tool has helped services to ensure that their environment is the best it can be, in accordance with *Aistear*: *'The learning environment (inside and outside) influences what and how children learn. An inviting environment encourages and helps children to explore and to take advantage of opportunities for fun, choice, freedom, adventure, and challenge'* (NCCA, 2009, *Principles and themes*, p. 12). One of the services focused on developing the

outdoor area while others worked on revising the daily routine to incorporate more child-led play. In addition, new resources and books were purchased to enrich experiences. These different elements of a quality curriculum were also supported in year two of the initiative, along with a focus on early literacy and numeracy. Documenting learning, interactions and other pertinent aspects as identified by the groups were also focused on in year two.

On-site visits

On each of the monthly on-site visits, the Early Childhood Ireland mentor observed practice, sometimes using video or still photography. The practitioners and mentor then discussed the session, identified significant moments and explored how these linked to *Aistear's* themes, aims and learning goals. The mentor gave guidance and support in relation to different aspects of the curriculum during the course of the year. While this was different for each service, many of them looked for assistance with making a better learning environment, improving the daily routine and enhancing adult/child interactions. Almost all services looked for support in the area of planning and in particular, planning based on children's interests.

Reviewing the video clips helped practitioners tune in to children's play and learning. One of the things that emerged on an on-site visit was that staff realised children were taking on very stereotypical roles – boys sitting down at the table, sometimes reading the newspaper and girls busy cooking and cleaning up! One of the many things suggested by the mentor to counteract this was to invite parents who had jobs that challenged stereotypes to visit the setting. The staff asked a mother who is an army reservist to come and visit the children and discuss the job she did. This exploration of roles/jobs was a topic of interest for children over the following weeks.

Another service noticed from a video clip that there was a shortage of props available to support hospital play which occurred following a nurse's visit. In discussion with the mentor, the staff and children made a list of props. The stacking beds from the toddler room formed the ward beds and chairs were lined up to create a waiting area which included books from the book area. Drawings became X-rays and the doctors and nurses wiped 'blood' (tomato ketchup) from the patients, put on bandages and administered 'medication' (spoons of water). Many new words were introduced during the play such as X-ray, prescription, casualty, anaesthetic and fracture.

One service, when the mentor visited on a rare sunny day in early May, decided to avail of the good weather, applied the sun screen and moved outdoors for the day. This service has said that through their involvement in the initiative they now ‘view the outside as a valuable learning environment for all types of play whereas before we would have viewed it as just a valuable physical activity space.’ Outside on that particular day there was a quiet book area, a lunch area with bins, and space for gross motor play. They also brought out some construction materials and writing materials. Children had access to a water tray and when it overflowed, the children on bikes rode through the puddles and were fascinated by the tracks the wheels made. The children explored the running water, where the water flowed, how it flowed, where it pooled and why. There was lots of discussion about levels, slopes, lines, spinning, twirling. When children were hungry they went inside, brought out their lunch and sat at the outdoor lunch table to eat it. Parents got a text asking them to bring a change of clothes at going home time, so all went home dry. One little girl exclaimed several times that it was ‘the funnest day ever.’ A number of photos were taken during the course of the day and were added to children’s portfolios so that they were able to talk about the one day of summer that came in 2012! The day was the result of flexible planning on the part of the staff who seized the opportunity of the fine day to make use of the outdoor environment and created many positive memories for all involved, including the Early Childhood Ireland mentor.

Overview of progress to date

Feedback from participants on year 1 of the initiative was very positive. Participants liked the opportunity for discussion and to learn from each other. They also really enjoyed visiting each other’s services to get new ideas. They felt that the mentor input at the cluster groups was ‘very good’ and feedback on the visits and the email and phone support between visits was very positive. One respondent said it was ‘the mentor visits that set this initiative apart’. The on-site visits also helped the mentors to understand the services’ ethos and to identify the elements of practice that needed to be focused on. Participants were asked to outline two of the most significant changes to their practice during year 1 and the four main responses were:

1. Allowing more time for child-led play.
2. Facilitating children to have a range of choices during the day.

3. Better communication with parents.
4. Changes to the physical environment.

Suggestions for changes to how the initiative was organised and planned were sought. While most people said they were happy with things as they were, a couple of suggestions were made including:

- Better understanding of camcorder, help with editing and transferring material from the camera to the laptop.
- Encouraging all rooms in a service to take *Aistear* on board.

There was a lot to think about as we entered into the second year. At the end of year one, from an NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland perspective it could be said that:

- *Aistear* was **being used** by all the services.
- The **daily routine had become more flexible** and the **time for child-led play had increased** in many of the services.
- Services were beginning to **plan linked to children's interests as well as planning creatively around seasons/festivals**. Following children's interests and inquiries leads to extending and deepening their learning experiences and enriching their play.
- Children have **more access to props, recycled and natural materials** to support their play and learning. In particular children have more access to open-ended/loose materials such as boxes, shells, stones, fabric, baskets, twigs, leaves.
- Adults were **tuning in to children's play more** and were beginning to **document more** using photographs and video as well as noting what children were saying.

- Adults were linking what the children were doing to **Aistear's themes, aims and learning goals** so they could understand what children were learning through their play.
- The **physical layout of the room** improved in many of the services.
- Services **built stronger partnerships** with parents and this helped them to understand the value of play more, inside and outside.

Action plan for Year 2

In Year 2 of the initiative (2012-2013), it was intended to continue much of the foundational work undertaken in Year 1. All of *Aistear's* themes and guidelines underpinned the work. In addition, a number of other priorities were identified including a focus on planning, documenting and assessing. Literacy and numeracy was another important focus. In year 1, significant improvements were made to the indoor environment of many of the services. The focus in Year 2 was on making improvements to the outdoor spaces and using the outdoors more to support learning and development. The second phase of the initiative was also focused on gathering examples of the curriculum-in-action.

There will be a follow-up paper at OMEP 2013 to outline progress and to share some of the materials which will be available on the NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland websites in 2013 at www.ncca.ie/aistear toolkit and at www.earlychildhoodireland.ie

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Websites

Aistear; the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework: www.ncca.biz/Aistear/
Aistear Toolkit: www.ncca.ie/aistear toolkit
Early Childhood Ireland: www.earlychildhoodireland.ie

The Role of Networks in supporting the engagement of Childminders in County Kilkenny with Síolta and Aistear

Helena Comerford (Childminding Advisory Officer, Kilkenny County Childcare Committee)

Abstract

Kilkenny has two childminder networks. This paper will explore the development of these networks and how Síolta and Aistear have become woven into the fabric of the networks. It has been our experience that the networks have offered an informal but key learning opportunity to childminders who report these as a positive resource, sharing experiences, exploring new ideas and keeping up-to-date with key developments in childcare. Facilitated by the Childminding Advisory Officer these meetings are guided by Síolta, the National Quality Framework and by Aistear, the National Curriculum Framework. Facilitating the implementation of Síolta and Aistear - the Irish early years practice frameworks supports continued professional development for childminders.

Introduction

In May 2005 the post of childminding advisory officer (CMAO) was filled in the Kilkenny County Childcare Committee. This post was and continues to be a part time position, two and a half days per week. The role of the CMAO was to support childminders through information dissemination, training opportunities and networking. (See Daly, 2012, for a discussion of the role of the CMAO). This paper will examine the area of networking for childminders in particular and how it has progressed over the past six years.

“A childminder is a self-employed person who minds other people’s children in the childminder’s own home” (National Guidelines for Childminders, 2008, p.2)

Childminding is widely accepted as being an isolated profession where one works alone, makes decisions alone, deals with challenges alone and experiences key stages of children’s development alone. Being part of a network helps alleviate this isolation and on the basis of our experiences so far in Kilkenny, this certainly seems to have been the outcome.

Continuing professional development (CPD) is a key part of any childcare worker’s career and we in the Kilkenny County Childcare Committee strongly feel childminders should be encouraged and have access to on-going training in line with all other childcare professionals. The principles of *Siolta* and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) form the basis of all training and networking events, which are ultimately aimed at sustaining and developing quality services for children across Kilkenny city and county.

What is the value of joining a network?

Before we can look at the value of networks, let us first look at exactly what a network is. In her book *Leadership in Early Childhood*, Gillian Rodd outlines two types of network structures:

Networks can be informal where individuals with common interests and goals link up to share information and to plan action on a regular basis. They can also be formal networks where committees or working parties are formed with official representation from professional organisations, institutions or agencies. (Rodd, 2000, p. 176)

In Kilkenny, childminders networks would be classed as informal, where childminders attend meetings when possible.

Regardless of the structure of the networks, the value of them remains the same. They offer a means for childminders to come together share experiences and knowledge, to access training and information sessions and above all to network with others who work in the same profession. From experience, a network is only as strong as the people that are involved in it; in other words

childminders need to acknowledge a network's worth and take ownership over it to mould it into a forum that meets their needs as a group of childcare professionals.

The growth of childminders networks in Kilkenny

In 2005 the first childminders' network meeting was held in the city. It was organised by the CMAO and was advertised in the local paper and in parish newsletters. At that meeting four childminders turned up. One might say "only four" but these four women were full of enthusiasm and energy and were delighted to hear that a childminding advisory service was now available in their county. Those four women are still actively involved in the networks today and continue to show vigour and commitment to their network.

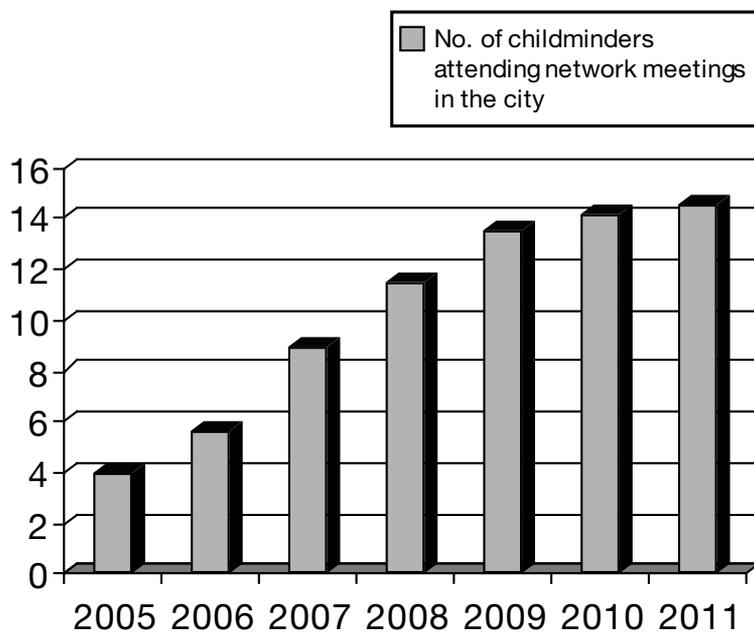


Table 1: The growth of the network in the city

Table 1 above shows the continuous growth of the network through the years. In the beginning, when numbers were low, childminders would be notified of meetings by post. Today childminders receive notice by text message; this system seems to work well and is far less time consuming from an administration point of view. Childminders are never asked to confirm attendance unless there

is a speaker attending the meeting; in other words, no pressure is put on the childminder to attend, they come along when possible.

The meetings are held in the evenings usually from 7.30 pm and usually last around two hours. The childminders themselves decide which evening suits them best and the CMAO tries to meet their wishes. For some time, network meetings were held on Friday evenings as that was the preferred evening by childminders. At present the majority of meetings take place on Mondays.

The venue for the meetings is the Kilkenny County Childcare Committee (KCCC) office. This means that there is no cost involved for the childminders, and they also have access to the resource library during every visit. The KCCC office has a meeting room, set up in a board room style where the childminders and CMAO can sit around comfortably for the meeting.

The format of the network meetings varies according to need. It can be as follows:

- A meeting where the CMAO draws up an agenda containing notice of upcoming events, requiring input from childminders re planning events, new resources available etc. There is always time after the agenda for childminders to raise and discuss their own issues or to share information with each other.
- A regular meeting as outlined above followed by a practical element such as actually taking part in arts and crafts, reading and reviewing children's books, watching a DVD on child development etc.
- A meeting where an external person attends to give training and/or information for example a talk on nutrition, physical activity etc

On average, six to nine meetings would be held throughout the year which would be made up of the above formats. No network meetings are held in January, July or August. Records of these meetings are recorded on file at the KCCC office.

Due to the size of county Kilkenny, a second network was established in 2008 in the south of the county. This made sense as people could access the childminding advisory service at a local level rather than travelling to the city. Training and information sessions are held at both locations to allow

people a chance to attend and develop their services to their fullest potential. The numbers in the south of the county are not as high as the network in the city; however numbers are growing steadily (Table 2) and they certainly have a sense of their own identity.

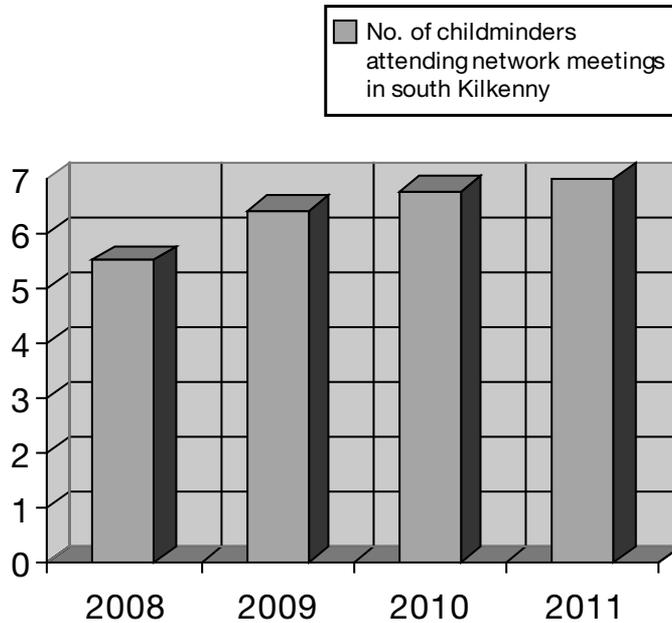


Table 2: The growth of the network in south Kilkenny

These two networks are the main childminders networks in Kilkenny. Running alongside these are several smaller networks. In these smaller networks, childminders come together themselves, either during their working day or in their spare time. They meet to offer each other support and advice, but also to take the children out to the park etc. Childminders love the opportunity to meet other childminders and it helps them feel supported in an otherwise isolated profession:

Childminding is, on the contrary a demanding occupation and can become stressful. It is important therefore that childminders should engage with each other for support and information sharing. (Hayes Murray, 2007:29)

Childminders value and access both types of networks, and both types complement each other. In general, childminders in Kilkenny have a huge sense of ownership over their networks and are actively involved in offering ideas and suggestions for training and information sessions. When asked to describe the benefits of belonging to a network some responses from childminders included:

- It is a chance to meet other childminders,
- It is an opportunity to discuss issues/challenges,
- To receive advice and reassurance,
- To keep updated on developments relating specifically to childminding
- It is a social outlet for childminders.

Síolta and Aistear

Síolta and *Aistear* are the practice frameworks for the early childhood sector in Ireland. *Síolta* (www.siolta.ie) was introduced in 2006; it outlines the quality standards to which all childcare services should aspire (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006). *Síolta* is designed to support practitioners in the development and delivery of high-quality care and education services for children aged from birth to six years.

“*Síolta* is underpinned by twelve principles of best practice. The twelve principles underpin sixteen standards, which childcare and education services work towards achieving.” (Donohoe & Gaynor, 2011:12)

Aistear was published in 2009 by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. *Aistear* is a curriculum framework for children from birth to six years, providing a set of shared principles and themes that guide whatever curriculum is in place in the childcare setting. The four themes of *Aistear* are:

- Wellbeing
- Communication
- Exploring and thinking
- Identity and belonging

According to Donohoe and Gaynor (2011, p. 14), “Aistear recognises that there are many roads that can lead to the same destination and helps to support children’s learning in a safe but challenging, stimulating and caring environment”.

Both *Siolta* and *Aistear* work alongside whatever curriculum is in place in any early years setting. This of course includes childminding settings. In Kilkenny all childminders linked into networks have a copy of the *Siolta* and *Aistear* manuals. Through the networks, childminders are currently being encouraged to become familiar with the practice frameworks and relate them back to their own practice with children. During network meetings reference is constantly made to *Siolta* and *Aistear*. For example if the childminders are engaged in practical skills such as art and crafts, we then relate the activities back to the themes of *Aistear*. Childminders enjoy linking the theory to the practice and it is often easier for them to do this in groups rather than on their own in their own homes.

Likewise with *Siolta*, at network meetings we choose a standard of *Siolta* and explore it through the signposts for reflection from a childminder’s point of view. Becoming familiar with the practice frameworks is an on-going process and takes time, at the network meetings both *Siolta* and *Aistear* give rise to debates and exploration of issues relevant to childminding. In Kilkenny, we have had workshops on both *Siolta* and *Aistear* where we invited all childcare providers to attend; however on reflection, we find it more beneficial to have separate meetings for childminders as they are working alone in their profession and therefore have different issues to that of a childcare worker working in a large crèche for example.

Professional development

The role of the childminder is defined in many books and resources, all of which emphasise the important and pivotal role that a childminder plays in the lives of the children that she/he cares for.

A childminder cares for a small group of children of mixed ages in a “home from home” setting. Children are welcomed as individuals, they are offered affection and respect, and their developmental and recreational needs are met. Childminders offer a flexible service, tailored to each child. The child’s welfare must be the prime consideration of the childminders. Childminders have the sole responsibility at all times for the health, safety and well-being of each child entrusted in their care. (National Guidelines for Childminders, 2008:2)

In order to develop and maintain a high quality service as outlined above, continued professional development is crucial to the role of all childminders. Kilkenny County Childcare Committee has a good working relationship with the local Vocational Education Committee, and childminders are encouraged to take part in accredited FETAC training where possible. Alongside this accredited training, other in-service training is available to childminders each year, for example first aid training, fire safety, nutrition training etc. Childminders acknowledge the importance of taking part in training, and they add the certificates they receive to the folders that they keep and show to their current and potential parents.

In line with this professional development, *Siolta* and *Aistear* need to be part of each childminder's service. Each childminder is encouraged to have the manuals in their possession and to use them to reflect on their current practice. Becoming familiar with the themes of *Aistear* and the standards of *Siolta* is a key part of professional development for all childcare professionals.

Parents are now starting to ask childminders about their training and qualifications. This seems to be a new development which has happened where parents are moving from county to county where they have no extended family support network and are relying on the list of childminders they get from their local Childcare Committee to find a childcare provider. We encourage parents to ask these questions (e.g. in the leaflet 'Choosing a Childminder, A Parent's Guide', published by the KCCC and also available on-line from their website at <http://www.kkccc.ie/choosing-childcare.html>). This in turn can encourage childminders to avail of training opportunities.

"The value of undertaking training and obtaining qualifications cannot be over-emphasised... training will benefit the childminder through increased skills and qualifications and benefit the children they care for also"
(Hayes Murray, 2007:68)

In Kilkenny we acknowledge the importance of training for all childcare professionals and we use the networks to reinforce the learning, all of which is aimed at supporting high quality childminding settings across the city and county.

Conclusion

To conclude, the childminders network was originally set up in Kilkenny in 2005 and has seen constant growth since then. Today there are two networks with over forty childminders linking in to them. This has been a challenging but rewarding process. We have found, that as Rodd (2000, p. 176) states:

The advantages of establishing and participating in a network system are that isolation is broken down, awareness of others' interests and activities is increased, barriers to communication are decreased and misunderstanding and miscommunication is diminished. **Successful networking takes time.** Early childhood professionals will require all their skills in communication and interpersonal relationships to build the cooperation of others.

The main learning from the process for those of us who work to support childminders is the importance of laying good foundations: this means taking time getting to know childminders and more importantly identifying their needs. Building trust and a strong professional working relationship is also key to maintaining the networks.

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Worlds within worlds- an exploration of children's formation of individual and group identities in a pre-school community of practices

Frances Clerkin, University College Cork

Abstract

This paper stems from a larger, doctoral study which seeks to understand pre-school children's world/s as evidenced in a sample of Irish children in their day-to-day pre-school settings. The research lens foregrounds the socially constructed nature of meaning making and individual and group identity formation. Within this perspective children are seen as both active and agentic. The individual whether child, practitioner, parent or researcher is viewed as embedded in rather than separate to his or her culture. It is argued that the world or 'worlds' of children's cultural experiences are not universal but must be viewed contextually within communities of practice. (Wenger, 1998, Corsaro,1992). The 'side by side' or 'participant observer' research role adopted illuminates aspects of children's moment by moment participation in pre-school activities. It considers the situated contextuality of children's construction and improvisation of individual and shared repertoires of being seeing and doing. It considers constraints, potential and possibilities of children's evolving sense of self or selves through everyday pre-school practices.

Introduction

This paper stems from a wider study which follows young children's transition from home to pre-school. It then tracks their ongoing transitions from 'novice' to experienced membership of a pre-school community of practices

(Lave & Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 2008). This paper's focus is on children's cultural worlds conceptualised here as 'worlds within worlds' of their self initiated play and learning interactions. Within this a 'participant observer' research role is adopted seeking insights into children's formation of individual and group identities. This approach sometimes involves adopting a learner role guided by children's own expertise in their play worlds and recorded in sample child-initiated play episodes. A socio-cultural lens is adopted in order to contextualise, interpret and analyse the research data from child, adult and broader societal perspectives. Discourse analysis is also applied throughout the study as a methodological tool to interpret cultural and social understandings embedded in everyday practices. The intention is to make visible aspects of the cultural community studied that may normally be taken for granted or go unnoticed. A core aim of early years settings reflected in the literature on early years transitions is to support children in achieving a positive sense of self (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002, Brooker, 2008, Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 2011). This paper considers what may contextually support enable or constrain children in this process. Interpretation and analysis of this study is grounded in a socio-cultural framework which will first be elaborated.

Multiple perspectives through a socio-cultural lens

The socio-cultural theoretical framework of this study is rooted in the psychological theories of Lev Vygotsky (1978) which emphasise the mediated social nature of early learning. Vygotsky challenged traditional views that development is an individual process that necessarily precedes learning. Vygotsky (1978, p.57) asserted that "every function in the child's development appears twice: first on the social level and later on the individual level: first between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological)". Contextually, Vygotsky was critical of assessment of children that focused on what they currently knew as individuals rather than their potential knowing or pathways for learning as evidence through his seminal concept of a 'Zone of proximal development.' Through ZPD the child is said to learn at a level higher than is currently known through interaction with more experienced peers or adults. In this perspective development follows rather than leads experience. Vygotsky (1978) viewed play as the primary means for children to develop a cultural sense of self. Vygotsky (1978 p. 129) vividly evokes the potential in children's play experiences in the description "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". Children's imaginative use of symbols, as they participate in play, supported by the tools of language helps them transcend the limits of their material resources (Vygotsky, 1962).

In this social, cultural and mediated view of learning; how enlarging, enriching or constraining children's participation is will be influenced by cultural practices that have evolved across time and space. Childhood through these lenses is not conceptualised as a universal state or stage of being but must be viewed contextually within communities of practice. The 'Communities of Practice model (Lave & Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 2008) builds on Vygotskian theory and forms part of the methodological approach informing this study. Accordingly, I enter and participate in a community of practices and seek 'insider' perspectives. Each participant including myself as participant observer brings with them their own historic, social and cultural experiences to bear on the research context. The inference from this understanding is that any one context represents multiple realities which are under constant change. The broader context and rationale for this study will now be outlined.

Rationale for the study

The landscape of early years' education in Ireland has been characterised by recent and rapid change. Historically, the provision of pre-school education in Ireland was viewed as the responsibility of families with government investment usually confined to provision for children viewed to be at risk. The government decision in 2009 to provide children one year universal free access to pre-school is an unprecedented investment in early year's education in Ireland. At macro policy level this may be reflective of a new consciousness of early learning perceived in terms of 'lifelong learning' (Wells & Claxton, 2002). This is underpinned by developments in neuroscience that emphasise early relationships (between infants and carers) and emotional connections to learning (Gopnik, Meltzoff, and Kuhl, 1999, Trevarthan, 2002, Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). These emphasise children from infancy as both shaping and being shaped within their early learning environments. Internationally discourses on children as 'citizens with rights' with expertise in their own lives; with voices and a right to be heard have been established in the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child (1989). The Convention was ratified by Ireland in 1992. These views of children as competent and agentic

challenge discourses that view children as primarily vulnerable and in need of protection. Ireland has experienced an abundance of recent policy initiatives in relation to early years care and education. Not least of these was the launch of 'Aistear' (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009) an Irish framework for early learning supported by Síolta, a national quality framework (Centre for Early Childhood Development, 2006). Aistear is intended to support all children's learning from birth to six years. This potentially bridges the gap between home cultures, play based care and education and the junior and senior infants cycle of primary schooling (O'Kane, 2007). Play in its many forms has a long tradition of association with early years care and education.

Play and learning – The Irish context

It has also been argued that particularly in the Irish context there has been a traditional split both institutionally and conceptually in the nature and functions of pre-school and formal school (Hayes, 2004, 2007). The very term 'pre-school' has a future orientation and a different connotation to terms such as 'play school' or 'kindergarten' which lack the inference of preparation for the next stage of schooling. At macro policy level the introduction of a free pre-school year emphasises pre-school as an investment in the next stage of education or possibly as an 'inoculation' against later school failure. Bruner (1996) elucidates on this idea of preparation for school or 'school readiness' as "a mischievous half-truth, because a teacher does not wait for readiness to happen; you foster or 'scaffold' it by deepening the child's powers at the stage where you find him or her now" (Bruner, 1996, p120).

In contrast to the 'school ready child' Bruner (1996) supports the idea of the 'child ready school'. It has been argued that top down demands for 'school readiness' may create tensions on the play based cultural tradition of pre-school (Carr, 2001, Woodhead, 1998, Fabian and Dunlop, 2002). The introduction of Aistear with its emphasis on play based early learning offers a ground up alternative or what O'Kane (2007, p. 28) described as "a step towards providing coherent links between preschool curricula and the infant level curriculum in the primary classroom". With many children attending pre-school on a part-time basis from age three, at the start of a new term some of the children could be considered 'experienced' pre-schoolers enculturated into the everyday routines and rituals while others may be considered as 'novices' learning to navigate their way (Wenger, 2008). How children form 'participation repertoires' (Carr, 2001)

within their old and new roles and how their membership of these local cultures change over time is a focus of the study.

Data collection and analysis

The Setting

The research setting is a pre-school which adopts a play based curriculum. The school operates five mornings per week from 8.30 a.m. to 12.00 noon and is located in a mainly middle class urban area. It was selected primarily as a convenience sample on the basis of ease of access geographically. Added to this was the school's reputation for accommodating research students. These factors were important in terms of accessibility and in view of the intended long-term ethnographic nature of the research.

Participants/key informants

Adult participants include the Manager who acts as an administrator/teacher in the setting, as well as one full-time and one part-time teacher (all female). Parents/carers of the children participate through daily informal interactions as children are brought to and from the setting. The child participants consist of ten girls and twelve boys between the ages of three and five. In my participant observer role I adopt the role of teacher but also a 'least adult' or 'novice' role (Corsaro, 2003, Warming, 2005) when seeking entry and participation in children's play worlds. Written consent from the adult participants in this study was obtained, as well as ongoing informed consent/assent from the children themselves. All names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

The participant observer role/s

The participant observer role is as suggested an active rather than passive role. It affords access to 'insider' information about events and groups under study in a manner that would otherwise be unavailable (Yin, 2009). The children in this study frequently appropriate my help with requests ranging from access to materials to mediating disputes with their peers. Children also appropriate me as a willing participant in play. Bodily positioning has proved significant in this process (Corsaro, 2003, Warming, 2005). Seating myself on the floor places me at more of a child eye level and elicits the likelihood of invitations to join the play and experience 'guided participation' where children act as experts (Rogoff,

1995). The children quickly became used to my constant note-taking which is explained as ‘writing down the stories about the interesting things that happen in pre-school’. An underlying tenet of any research must include respect for the person. In this regard a child’s right to be heard and the ‘right to voice opinions and influence decisions in matters relating to their own lives’ informs this study (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, article 12). Requests to ‘read back’ notes, or for children to add their own comments sometimes occurred and were always met with.

Methodology and research questions

The methodological tools and approach are adopted to answer the following key questions:

- What individual and group identities are forming?
- What are the explicit and implicit rules of participation?
- How might this world look and feel from child perspectives?
- What if any are the implications for practice?

This article focuses on observational and field notes data generated around two key informant children during their self-initiated play activities. It was decided early on not to use video camera as this would have necessitated a more passive research role than envisaged. It is acknowledged that the presence of a second researcher to share flexible roles for note taking and recording of events could have expanded and enriched the data.

Data analysis

The themes of *Aistear*, the early childhood curriculum framework (NCCA, 2009), are applied as a tool to interpret aspects of children’s transitional development and identity formation as presented in two linked vignettes. These themes of *Well-being*, *Identity and belonging*, *Communication*, and *Exploring and thinking* are applied because of their resonance with the literature on early years’ transitions. Within this the significance of social and emotional connections to learning, identity formation, and a sense of wellbeing and belonging were found

to be recurring themes (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002, Brooker, 2008, Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 2011). The field notes add layers of information by contextualising informal discussions with teachers and parents. They also provide details of daily pedagogical practices, rituals and routines of the pre-school.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is also applied as a means to explore what “the taken-for-granted, insider scripts and discourses are, and how they might enable and constrain what is doable, sayable and thinkable” (Hall and Chambers, 2011 p.6). Language and its use as a mediating tool to share meaning forms a significant part of this process, analysis of which is applied to make visible hidden or implicit meanings embedded in situated social, cultural and historical practices.

Limitations

Drawbacks to the socio-cultural and associated participant observer approach of this study relate to the potential for the production of bias including a bias in favour of the organisation studied (Becker, 1998). Increased participation can result in a ‘fish in water’ effect and reduce the possibility of seeing what has become an unquestioned part of socially and culturally embedded practice. The use of discourse analysis aims to counter these possibilities as does the adoption of flexible roles. This enables viewing and reflection on what is happening from multiple perspectives. The participant/observer role can also make demands that reduce time to take notes, follow observational themes or raise questions about events witnessed (Yin, 2009). Furthermore children themselves may resist or reject adult efforts to enter their cultural worlds and this must always be respected (Warming, 2005).

The observational data: Two vignettes

A typical morning in the setting starts with meeting and greeting routines between 8.30 a.m. and 9.00 a.m. As children arrive they can choose to play individually, in pairs or groups, with or without teacher assistance. A wide range of resources are provided (books, construction toys, sand and water play, arts and crafts, role play clothes, and props etc.). Morning circle time is then introduced with songs and conversation. This is also the forum where teachers introduce a daily structured activity such as art, crafts or cookery. There is further ‘free play’

between 10.00a.m. and 10.30 a.m. This is followed by snack time and outdoor play. At 11.30 a.m. there is a group circle time indoors with interactive games, songs and story time. At noon parents and carers arrive and the transition from pre-school to home or after-school care commences. The following vignettes were recorded after the morning structured activity.

The vignettes were initially recorded in a ‘common sense’ style (Hedegaard, Fler, Bang, & Hviid, 2008) where basic details of the participants’ actions, tool usage and dialogue are recorded without attempts at analysis. Becker (1998) advises researchers to use the ‘trick’ of assuming all actions ‘make sense’ (at least at the point of action) from the perspective of the actor. It is not intended to suggest here that the participant observer role allows the researcher a direct access to the child’s view but rather a mediated view as proposed by Warming (2005) and James (1996).

5th March 2012 : Vignette No 1 – The ‘Animal keep away’



‘The Animal Keep Away’

‘Common sense’ description of event

Danny (4 years, 3 months) and Rory (4 years, 8 months) make an ‘animal keep away’. This includes a type of enclosure for a ‘dangerous tiger’. When I ask if I can photograph this scene Danny says “not now he is too dangerous”. I agree to

take a photograph later when it may be ‘safer’ to do so. The play continues until the tiger ‘breaks out’, ‘look he is pushing the walls down’ says an excited Danny. The boys then reconstruct stronger versions of the animal keep away and re-enact the scenario of allowing the tiger and other animals to break out. The enclosures get bigger and each time the animals break out they ‘fight’ amongst themselves for a while and then ‘stronger’ enclosures are built. Finally I am allowed to take a photograph with the caution from Danny not to get ‘too close’.

Table 1. Interpretation and analysis of Vignette 1

Aistear Theme	Interpretation and Analysis
<i>Well-being</i>	The boys enjoy and share a group intermental understanding of their improvised play (Vygotsky, 1978). This appears to satisfy individual and group desires to break out from the constraints of their environment (Corsaro, 2003).
<i>Identity and Belonging</i>	The boys appear to be expressing a group attraction to and masculine identification with danger and transformative power elements of the play. This is located in the plastic animals they manipulate during this game. In a sense they ‘become’ the ‘tiger’ or other ‘dangerous’ creature. They also identify with and navigate the implicit rules of acceptable behaviour in the setting (Carr, 2001). They exert levels of control over their impulses towards aggressiveness or destructiveness. This enables them to identify with multiple roles, and other ways of expressing masculine identities (Davies and Banks 1995).
<i>Communication</i>	The boys share a group intermental understanding of where the play can lead without which the play could not be sustained (Sawyer, 1997). They develop participation repertoires (Carr, 2001) involving fluid identities, switching from ‘dangerous animal’ to builders and protectors of public safety.

<p><i>Exploring and Thinking</i></p>	<p>The boys negotiate ways to remain within the parameters of what is institutionally deemed acceptable (Carr 2001, Hedegaard, Fler, Bang, & Hviid, 2008). My invitation to participate in this scenario is in a very peripheral capacity, as a 'novice' participant I must accept the 'rules' of play (Wenger, 2008).</p>
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Individual and group identity formation

The appeal of this and other play fighting games to boys in the setting may relate to broader cultural influences also witnessed in 'superhero' play and games such as 'transformers' or 'power rangers' which seem to be particularly aimed at and attractive to boys (Browne, 2004). Any form of play fighting especially if it involves 'weaponry' is discouraged, particularly indoors. Some parents have expressed a dislike of such play influences and censor or limit their children's exposure to related TV programmes, toys, computer games, etc. In the setting there is a tacit acceptance of 'superhero' and other play fighting games, particularly outdoors. There is a policy that related toys not be brought to school. Children sometimes find ingenious ways to bypass this rule but parents generally are supportive and approving of its implementation. Tensions are evidenced in the explicitly disapproved yet tacit acceptance and expectation of some 'play-fighting' particularly from boys in the setting. Browne (2004) relates such tensions to a 'boys will be boys' discourse. This conflict also exists in the home cultures as children appropriate to themselves toys and role play from the macro culture which parents may have reservations about but to which children have exposure to a greater or lesser extent. A recognition of the implicit rules of play in this setting potentially interfered with the play intentions of the boys and resulted in their group adoption of creative strategies to sustain their play. In the process of navigating the rules on what is sayable or doable the boys explore multiple ways of expressing themselves, individually and as part of a male group.

Explicit and implicit rules of participation

The description of the 'animal keep away' rather than some kind of animal park/zoo has an underlying inference of danger or threat. The intention appears to be to protect the play space and keep others especially more powerful adults including myself at bay. The 'Animal keep away' cleverly allows the boy

participants to embrace and embody the masculine power elements they identify with in the play. Simultaneously they use a danger discourse engendered in the title to bypass implicit rules of play and ensure their legitimate enjoyment of their play scenario. Danny directed my participation level in this play incident. I was kept at a safe distance out of 'concern' for my safety, but my adult presence also acted as a validation of the play and guarded against the likelihood of another adult intervening and bringing it to a halt. While my intended role was somewhat marginalised in this scenario, the 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave and Wenger, 1991) that I experienced afforded insights into the children's play intentions. It illuminated their expertise in collectively sustaining, adapting and transforming their play and role play identities.

13th March 2012: Vignette No 2 - 'Finished'

Common sense description of event

Eileen (4 years, 5 months) carefully constructs a building with tall side walls. Danny (4 years, 3 months) says 'I think it's a factory'. Eileen says 'No it is a hotel'. I ask if I can take a photograph and Eileen says 'yes, when I am finished'. Rory (4 years, 8 months) and Danny have some coloured blocks and Danny tentatively stacks them on a piece of the building. Eileen seems to like this effect and says 'ok you can do that' to a smiling Danny. I ask if I can help too and she hands me various blocks and directs where I should place them. Later she says 'ok you can take a picture I am finished'. Danny jumps up excitedly and knocks the side of the building over. Eileen and I react loudly 'No Danny' He looks puzzled as she says crossly 'don't do that' he remarks 'but you said 'finished''. I explain to Danny that Eileen wants me to take a picture of the hotel and does not want to knock it down yet. Danny offers to help re-build, Eileen accepts and re-directs his involvement. When she seems satisfied with the results she asks me to take a photograph.



'Finished'

Table 2. Interpretation and analysis of Vignette 2

Aistear Theme	Interpretation and analysis
<i>Well-being</i>	Eileen exudes confidence, competence and an associated sense of well-being (Laevers, 2004) as she constructs her 'hotel'. She appears to be intensely interested and involved in this experience. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Eileen conveys this enjoyment. Her intense interest level attracts the attention of other children and myself to find ways to participate with her.
<i>Identity and belonging</i>	Eileen identifies herself as a leader by the confidence with which she owns the play and directs the rules of participation (Corsaro, 2003). The participants acknowledge this and we accept the participatory roles she assigns us. When a crisis erupts my switch of identification to an adult mediating role enables all participants to retain an on-going sense of identity and belonging.

Communication	Communication is good between all participants until the crisis erupts when Eileen says ‘finished’. Danny appears to react to this word as a type of sign or signal (Vygotsky, 1962) and starts to knock the tower down. Eileen and I communicate our disapproval. Danny stops immediately, but seems puzzled by our reaction.
Exploring and Thinking	The play scene starts with all participants exploring various roles from Eileen’s leadership role to the novice participatory roles taken up by Danny, Rory and I (Wenger, 2008). The crisis leads to a new negotiation of meaning facilitated by the children’s acceptance of my switch to an adult mediating role. Danny processed the idea that understanding does not necessarily transfer from one situation to a new one (Rogoff, 1995). Eileen expertly led the challenge of re-building (Wenger, 2008). My own research role required me to think reflectively both in and on my participatory actions (Schön, 1987).

Linking the observational data

What individual and group identities are forming?

Reflection on field notes and observations revealed a certain pattern emerging from the above ‘slices’ of pre-school life. A theme of meaning making through construction deconstruction and reconstruction emerges. However both Danny and Eileen appropriated and reflected different ideas on how and when these phases could or should happen. ‘Finished’ for Danny signals time to deconstruct the ‘hotel’ whereas for Eileen it means time to consider if her shared vision of what she wished to create meets with her expectations. Eileen adopted a leadership role which Danny appeared to understand and accept up to the point of crisis. Danny’s experiences with the ‘animal keepaway’ game appear to have embedded in his thinking an understanding that ‘finished’ infers time to deconstruct. In the first Vignette, this process was related to group masculine identities of power and dominance and culturally embedded perceptions on ways of being a boy. While this is one perspective, field notes revealed examples of other ‘novice’ pre-schoolers (male and female) making a beeline to constructions such as this with the intention of knocking them down. The teachers soon anticipated such actions and often diverted these more novice children into roles where they would guide and support their participation. Sometimes teachers

would express concern at the ‘destructiveness’ of such behaviour; particularly where it was repeated and a child did not appear to show any remorse.

How might this world look and feel from child perspectives?

Metaphorically this behaviour could be compared to young children jumping on sandcastles before the tide comes in. The ‘tide’ in this case might also be viewed as practices such as adults announcing ‘clean up time’. Adults have to make decisions dependent on time, space and resources but ultimately we have the final say on what happens, there can be a very fine line between knowing when to intervene and when to stand back. Children’s frustration level at their lack of power or ability to exert choices can sometimes lead to crisis where they appear to disregard or ignore the rules. What appears to be senseless or simply ‘destructive’ behaviour arguably makes sense to the perpetrator (Becker, 1998). In Danny’s case mediating his understanding of the rules of the play enable him to explore a play role of greater complexity and shared meaning making than he has previously attained. Teachers in the setting frequently and expertly pre-empt or mediate situations of crisis. My participation in a novice play role enabled insights into Danny’s play intentions that might not otherwise have been available.

In the above episodes my own fluidity of identity from ‘novice’ participant in children’s play to adult teacher or mediator during a crisis was presented. Over time children in this setting are guided from what has been described as ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (Lave and Wenger 1991) to increasing levels of participatory ‘mastery’ or ‘expertise’. Less evident though not without incidence in this setting is the adoption of an adult ‘novice’ participant role which it is posited may be of particular value in the analysis interpretation and ultimately development and expansion of children’s pretend social play.

Discourse analysis of pre-school roles and identities

Informal discussions with the staff suggest that while ‘playfulness’ and good humour are valued and viewed as intrinsic to their roles, they also feel it is important that the children identify them as ‘teachers’ and not as ‘one of them’ in order for their adult roles to be effective in the setting. Children themselves display much fluidity of identity in relation to the multifarious roles they adopt in pre-school, ranging from adult personas such as ‘teacher’, ‘doctor’, ‘pilot’,

pretending to be ‘babies’, ‘puppies’ or switches in gender identity. Identities also vary across relationships with some children becoming more confident or likely to push boundaries of what is viewed appropriate when identifying with a gender or other group rather than as individuals.

Interestingly the discourse of the ‘teacher’ role is challenged by the some of the responses of the children themselves. Children usually refer to adults in the setting as ‘teacher’ when appropriating some form of help related to adult power (such as acquiring materials from the arts and crafts cupboard). At other times when children want to share confidences or invite playful interactions we (adults) are usually addressed by our first names. How children addressed me became a useful means to gauge when access to their cultural play worlds might be open.

Conflicting Discourses - The ‘child in nature’ versus the ‘school ready child’

Both parents and teachers in this study consistently emphasise pre-school matters in terms of developing children’s social interactions more than academic or pre-academic skills. The discourse of ‘pre-school’ as a ‘getting ready’, encouraging ‘independence’ or ‘preparation’ for more formal schooling also evidenced. The discourse of ‘school readiness’ and of the ‘school ready’ child is sometimes at odds with the ‘natural’, play based, ‘fun’ or child initiated experiences espoused as important by parents and teachers and implicit in learning through a play based curricular approach. Given the high pupil teacher ratio in Irish primary schools (often one teacher to thirty children) Bruner’s ideal of the ‘child ready school’ may still be aspirational. In this sense the discourse around identity formation in pre-school has a future oriented perspective and an implied time scale for the child to develop from novice ‘pre-schooler’ to ‘school ready’ child.

Micro to macro implications for pre-school practices

Many children in Ireland make the transition to formal schooling as young as four. For some parents this will be influenced more by financial considerations than expectations of ‘school readiness’. Parents from more middle class settings such as the study sample tend to be better placed to delay their children’s entry to formal schooling and most of the parents in this study context choose to do so. There has been much critique of this cultural and historic practice of sending very young children (aged four and five) to formal schooling. In much of Europe

higher investment in play based early years services, teacher training and parental supports delays formal schooling until age six or seven. The high pupil/teacher ratio of formal school and an over use of a didactic approach to early learning experiences has been questioned (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2004) as has the possibility of providing children in this context with 'appropriate play based' learning opportunities (Hayes, O'Flaherty and Kernan, 2009). Children themselves displayed a value in their play cultures and especially in their evolving friendships and their growing senses of confidence and competency in these shared social interactions.

The findings suggest children can also engage in similar productive and enlightening ways with adults. In the context of children's play and learning this infers participation in without 'hi-jacking' children's pretend play (Goouch, 2010). The study also suggests a value in exploring culturally and socially embedded values and understandings that emerge from a closer look at children's play intentions. Incorporated in this study is a challenge that goes against the grain of dominant discourses embedded in historically mediated social and cultural practices. The intention is to explore new ways to interpret and support children's navigation of and experiences of the cultural worlds within worlds of every day pre-school practices.

Note: Frances Clerkin is currently completing a PhD at the School of Education, University College Cork. This paper was first presented at the OMEP Ireland conference in April 2012, and is based on her PhD research.

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Learning to Play through Drama: A study of Irish Preschool and Primary children's experiences

Dr Una McCabe, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra

Introduction

Drama is an exciting learning medium that builds on children's natural ability to explore the world through pretence. Children's level of engagement in pretend, or dramatic play, does not always offer evidence of natural ability (Woolland, 1993; Davidson, 1996) and this article explores a way of working which can support children's ability to access pretend play worlds.

Literature concerning children's socio dramatic play (e.g. Wood and Attfield, 2005; Murphy, 2006; Gussin Paley, 2004) frequently cites the work of Smilansky (1968; 1990). Smilansky's work is described as seminal (Rogers and Evans, 2008, p. 32) and provides a criterion referenced rating scale for children's engagement, based on six behaviours that she believed should be present in socio-dramatic play. This was developed through extensive study of this kind of play, which she carried out with her colleague Leah Shefatya. The in-depth nature of their study also allowed them to make a clear case for the involvement of adults in socio-dramatic play and for the importance of socio-dramatic play in children's development. Research continues to support socio-dramatic play's crucial significance. Studies have been carried out which link dramatic play to specific cognitive strategies such as self-regulation, narrative recall, divergent problem solving, and rule understanding (Winsler and Diaz, 1995; Krafft and Berk, 1998; Rogers and Evans, 2008). Literature and research (e.g. Smith et al., 1981; Kitson, 1994) also continues to build on the play training intervention methods proposed by Smilansky and Shefatya (1990). In spite of the overlap between socio-dramatic play and drama (Neelands, 1992; Warren, 1996) one method they did not propose for improving socio-dramatic play was drama

itself. They did investigate the use of story enactment but found it unhelpful. Story enactment differs from the methodology proposed by much of the current literature concerning Drama in Education today (Baldwin, 2004) and this study investigates the use of drama pedagogy as a way of better enabling children to access the world of socio-dramatic play.

The Rationale for Using Drama to improve Socio Dramatic Play

The Irish Primary School Drama Curriculum describes drama as “a more conscious and sophisticated form of make-believe play” (NCCA, 1999, p. 37) and emphasises the importance of establishing a continuum from make-believe play to drama (1999, p.37). *Aistear* (the Irish Early Childhood Curriculum Framework) gives examples of how adults can be involved in children’s pretend play (NCCA, 2010, p. 64). Bergen (2002) describes drama as rooted as pretend play which “requires the ability to transform objects and actions symbolically; it is furthered by interactive social dialogue and negotiation; and it involves role taking, script knowledge, and improvisation” (2002, p. 194). Toye and Prendiville (2000, p. 9) imply that dramatic play is drama, saying, “When children are engaged in dramatic play, they create fictional contexts, they use symbols, they take on roles and they generate narrative.” Their definition echoes that of other noted drama educators (Slade, 1954; Heathcote and Bolton, 1995; Warren, 1996; Neelands, 1992; Baldwin, 2004; Murphy and O’ Keefe, 2006). The key difference between the child’s experience of dramatic play and of drama may be the presence of the educator who in a drama experience, according to O’ Neill (1995, p. xvi) functions inside the imagined world as playwright and participant. The presence of an adult as co-player does not necessarily mean that drama methodology is being used, although the adult may play with some natural instincts that are inclined towards the use of drama. Toye and Prendiville (2000, p.12) note that all adult intervention is not necessarily positive because “adult intervention can enhance or repress the play” and this is also asserted by others (Rogers and Evans, 2008; Fromberg, 2001).

When constructive adult involvement is advocated, it is on the basis that the adult can provide a structure within which children are challenged to extend their play (e.g. Gussin Paley, 2004; Frost *et al*, 2005; Dunn, 2003; Fleming, 1997). Warren (1998) believes that when play is of poor quality the adult who planned the experience needs to possess the skills to model the inherent behaviour and in this way provide the catalyst (drama) that unearths the

knowledge and understanding that children seek to explore when they engage in socio-dramatic play. Winston and Tandy (1998, p. 40) ask, “when everyone has written a prescription, sorted the clothes ready for the washing or served the umpteenth cup of tea, what will happen next?” They suggest that what needs to happen is that problems, tension and surprise should be introduced, or in other words, drama. As dilemmas and new elements of imagined worlds are the building blocks of a drama lesson (Heathcote, 1981; Toye and Prendiville, 2000), drama was selected as the play training method for the study.

The Drama and Play Research Project

The research was conducted in a preschool and an infant school in the same area and the children were aged between three and six. Thirty-seven children in total were involved in the study. Both the preschool and the infant school receive funding from Ireland’s Department of Education and Skills for tackling socio-economic disadvantage. There were two classrooms and two preschool rooms involved in the study. All of the children in the two experimental classes who received the intervention and eight control group children were observed. The names of the children are changed in the study. Parental and children’s consent was obtained. It is reasonable to assume that all of the children came from an economically disadvantaged background, as the school they attend caters for children in this group. Smilansky’s study showed that that socio economic background affects the ability of the child to engage in socio-dramatic play (Smilansky, 1968) and this was later supported by other research (e.g. Smith and Dodsworth, 1977; Udwin and Shmuckler, 1981), although it is counteracted by some more recent research (Multjat Bailey, 2011; Rogers and Evans, 2008).

Research Method

The research project was a doctoral study and was summarized in the ‘plain language statement’ as follows: The project involves working with two groups of children with the goal of developing their drama and dramatic plays skills. The project also involves a partnership approach with the teachers, childcare workers (and students if applicable) in the selected classrooms. It is intended that the educators would meet with the researcher on the day of the project to reflect together on the session of that day, discuss strategies used and their effect on children and plan for the next session. It is hoped that the educators would

eventually partner the researcher in running the drama sessions and depending on comfort levels, ultimately lead a session themselves.

Setting A (the preschool) had thirteen children, with a corresponding control group (Setting B) of four children. Setting C (the infant school) had sixteen children with a corresponding control group (Setting D) of four children. The researcher visited each setting prior to the intervention to increase the children's familiarity with her. Each setting was observed prior to the intervention to ascertain the level of drama activity that occurred, either through play or structured drama activity. Given that socio dramatic play is expected to occur in groups, one observation included a multiple of children but an individual rating scale was required for each child under observation. The scales were scored as soon as possible after the observations were completed. Following the pre intervention period described above, a Drama in Education Project consisting of ten sessions commenced in settings A and B.

On the days of the project children were first observed with the use of video in the role-play area. A drama session then took place, either with the children who had become involved in the role-play area or the whole class/group. (The decision of whether to work in a whole or small group context was made in the previous week's reflective session with the teachers/practitioners, on a weekly basis.) After the drama session a group of children were invited to play again in the role play area and this was also recorded using video. Transcripts were created from the video recordings. Non-verbal behaviour related to socio dramatic play was also noted, as well as the role play items that were available. These records were then coded for elements of the Smilansky scale (see below), in line with Smilansky's rating guidelines, in relation to all of the children in the session. Detailed rating guidelines accompany the scale and were followed.

The application of the Smilansky categories was also made during the Drama period but is not a use of the Smilansky scale as outlined by Smilansky and Shefatya (1990); instead it an event sampling system based on the elements of play they outline. Their scale was developed for child-initiated play; therefore the scale itself is invalid during teacher-led drama. In other words, for the purposes of the research, during the Drama period, if children showed behaviour related to the categories below they were scored, but it could not be said they were engaging in socio dramatic play, even though the behaviour is similar.

Outline of the Smilansky Scale

The six Smilansky play categories to be evaluated were: Imitative role play, Make-believe with objects, Make-believe with actions and situations, Persistence in role play, Interactions with others in socio-dramatic play, and Verbal communication in the play context. A rating of 0, 1, 2, or 3 (ranging from the element is not present, is present to a limited degree, is present to a moderate degree, and is present consistently and in many situations during the child's play) was assigned to each of Smilansky's categories of socio-dramatic play. A time-sampling schedule of 5-minute intervals was used, yielding a sum score (maximum possible = 18) for each element and an overall summary score. A brief description of the six categories is outlined below:

- *Imitative Role-Play*: The child undertakes a make-believe role and expresses it in imitative action and/or verbalization.
- *Make-Believe with objects*: Toys, non-structured materials, movements or verbal declarations are substituted for real objects.
- *Make Believe in regard to actions and situations*: Verbal descriptions are substituted for actions and situations.
- *Persistence*: The child continues playing in a specific episode for at least ten minutes.
- *Interaction*: There are at least two players interacting within the context of a play episode.
- *Verbal communication*: There is some verbal interaction relating to the play episode.

A child must score in the final two categories to move beyond dramatic play to socio-dramatic play, according to Smilansky and Shefatya (1990).

The Drama in Education Approach

Mages (2008, p.143) advises that drama research has been weakened by a lack of clarity and would be strengthened by more comprehensive descriptions of what was done and how it was done. Boulton and Ackroyd (2004, p.1) say that “many teachers are expected to use drama activities with little or no relevant training, often resulting in a lack of both confidence in and understanding of educational drama practice”. It seems useful then to describe the approach used in the intervention stage of the project (and to state that the researcher/drama practitioner had twenty years of experience in Drama in Education, including preschool and primary contexts). The approach used was drama that was, “improvisational in nature” (Bowell and Heap, 2001, p. 7) and was informed by literature concerning early years drama (e.g. Dau, 1991; Toye and Prendiville, 2000; Boulton and Ackroyd, 2004; Tandy and Howell, 2009). Drama sessions were linked to the various role play area which were set up such as a hospital, a garden centre and the three bears’ cottage which Goldilocks visited. (Role play areas were set up by the teachers/practitioners according to their monthly plans and linked in with themed curricular planning.)

The session described here reflects the approach used throughout the intervention phases: In session three in the preschool setting, the children were introduced to the teacher in role as park keeper who greeted them as fellow park keepers. In this role the teacher asked the children to tell her and or/show all the things that we could do in the park. This is identified as the context building phase of a Drama lesson by those such as Bowell and Heap (2001, p.29). The intention was to give the children ownership of the imagined world and move beyond the buying and selling of plants that had been the main activity in the garden centre. The children became involved in cleaning the swings, watering the plants and feeding them, sweeping up leaves and preparing and having a well-earned cup of tea. It was hoped that this would also encourage ability in the categories of make believe with objects and actions and situations. Still in role as park keeper, the teacher received an (imagined) phone call which she relayed to the children, announcing that an important visitor was coming to our park. The purpose here was to enable the children to engage further in the imagined world by making sure (through imagined action) it was clean and looking as well as possible for our visitor.

The tension in the Drama structure which Heathcote (2005, p. 1) advises is essential was introduced by the arrival of an educator who, using the important costume signifier of a crown and sparkly material, arrived in role as a Queen.

The intention here was to introduce a character who the children might not have thought to incorporate into the pretend world of a garden centre and park, and to reflect a current visit of a Queen to the city in which the children live. The visit of this character invites simple dilemmas which are seen as appropriate for these three and four year olds (Boulton and Ackroyd, 2004). How shall we behave? Shall we bow? What gift shall we present to her? What part of our park will we show her first? The intention here was to further engage children in their roles as the story becomes more interesting. If a 'queen' requires to speak with a child, it may promote participation, interaction and verbal engagement, which according to Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) raise dramatic play to socio-dramatic play. If children's verbal skills are not strong, all of this can be done through nonverbal behaviour, modelled by the teacher, working inside the Drama. After the Queen departed, thanking the children (and thereby praising their ability to engage in the shared Drama), there were further possibilities. Does the queen need directions to her next engagement? Shall we write and thank her for coming? Should we invite someone else to our park? Do we need to plant something else now spring is coming? The overall intention in this session and all of those which took place in the project was to work in a way which creates a bridge between the adult as co-player and the adult who develops Drama (Dunn, 2003), using frame and structures rooted in the art form of drama and theatre (Neelands and Goode, 2000) and which also reflect the Smilansky scale categories.

Drama increases Engagement in Socio-dramatic Play

At the end of the project there were completed rating scales for all thirty-seven children of their engagement in socio-dramatic play just before, during, and just after drama. There were differences between the picture that emerged from the preschool (three to five year olds) and the infant (four to six year olds) experimental groups. The scores for each child were averaged over ten days. In the infant group nearly 75% of the children had an improved score in the post drama period relative to the pre drama period. Overall, in this group the average score of children ranged from 2.82 pre-drama to 3.4 during drama and up to 4.44 post-drama. In the preschool group, after averaging the scores for each child over the ten days, it is seen that about a third, or approximately 38% of the children had a decreased score in the post-drama period relative to the pre-drama period while 62% showed either significant improvement or no change. The average pre-drama score was approximately 2.8, rising to 5.2 during drama

before falling to 3.5 in the post-drama session. Their post-drama scores were still over two points higher than the control group whose scores averaged 1.0. The results suggests that the younger children in the study responded best to the drama phase and therefore have a particular need for an adult working in role with them in order to successfully play. The junior infants group's improvement in the post-drama suggests that they particularly benefited from the experience of interacting with an adult and peers in a structured dramatic context and were more able than the younger group to assimilate and accommodate that experience when playing alone.

Extending Socio Dramatic Play from 'Doing' to 'Being'

Qualitative data generated from transcripts required to complete the Smilansky scales generated information about how children's experience of Drama helped them to improve their capacity to engage in sociodramatic play. Smilansky and Shefatya's research showed that "children from lower socio economic levels were limited to focusing on *things to do* whereas children from higher socio economic levels were free to focus on *persons to be*" (1990, p. 53). The research project described in this current paper showed that, in contrast to Smilansky's findings, there were in fact some children in the group who showed the characteristics of what Creaser (1990) terms "master players" who are "are skilled at representing their experiences symbolically in self-initiated improvisational drama" (Jones and Reynolds, 1992, p. 1). These children intuitively use the elements of drama (Dunn, 2003) and so can move beyond doing to being. The study showed that they still benefited from the opportunity to engage with an adult who invited them into the drama world who could scaffold their ability in the area of socio dramatic play. For example Hannah's scores (age five, primary school setting), in the course of the study, showed an ability to engage in socio-dramatic play alone but especially to engage in drama. In play she worked with others to build a house to protect it from a visit from the wolf, using construction toys (doing) but in drama she negotiated, explained, included others in the play script and extended the action of the story as she interacted with the teacher in role as the wolf who had come to apologise. The drama context offered her a world to 'be' in, as there was an event and a constraint:

Experimental Group Session Two: *“We’ve only got one house, we haven’t got another. We only made it yesterday, didn’t we pigs? We’re a bit upset cos you blew our house but maybe you could just stay for tea, as long as you wanted”... [Sipping imaginary tea] “Do you know what our mam said when we left? She said look out for the big bad wolf”. (Hannah: Age 5)*

Overall, children who received the drama sessions became more familiar with using the rules of drama, and as a result, of dramatic play, at whatever level they were capable of. For example they were more likely to introduce the characters they met in drama into their play, thus expanding their play scripts. They were more likely to suggest events that could occur in play and to act on those. Some less able players still clung to more typical roles such as mother or father when playing alone but they were more likely to use items symbolically and to accept imagined contexts such as the world at the top of Jack’s beanstalk when engaged in drama.

By contrast the control group children (whose scores generally didn’t go above 1), as Smilansky and Shefatya’s (1990) research suggested, focused on the use of play objects rather than becoming the person who used the objects through the use of voice, attitude and action. One boy in the control group did not follow this pattern, and showed the ability of a master player. Yet without a shared dramatic context that a drama session might have scaffolded, he often became frustrated in play. Frequently when no response to his initiation of pretend contexts came from his peers his play script became more aggressive:

Control Group Session Three: *“I’m going out to see who’s good and bad. I’ll see you at two o’clock” (the time he finishes in the preschool). There is no response from the other children in the role play area. He picks up a cardboard tube from wrapping paper and says “I’m going to look in my telescope for elves” and peers through. He bangs the tube against his leg and says “Time to kill someone”. (Alex: Age 4)*

Conclusion

Smilansky’s work offers a crucial reference point for the understanding of children’s socio-dramatic play. The rating scale provides a paradigm through which early childhood educators can assess the level of children’s engagement.

This study suggests that Smilansky's work should be well understood but also elaborated upon. Mages (2008) points out that that Smilansky was a psychologist rather than an educator who took a purely interventionist, patient and cure approach. The use of drama positions the educator as someone who combines elements of dramatic activity to engage children in an experience that they may not have the skills to create alone. In this way children are consistently scaffolded to work in a more elaborate (drama) context than they might without help. It is true that it changes the experience from child initiated play in which children engage in oral playwrighting, because the educator might be referred to as the 'chief' playwright although the children develop the story through improvised activity. This article does not advocate for a replacement of child-initiated socio-dramatic play, instead the results of the study show that the experience of drama gives a richer experience of playing with others and of playing alone. It seems an integrated approach is necessary, supporting Wood (2010) who recommends a range of pedagogical approaches in which there is space for adult led activities, in combination with child led activities and free and structured play. This study suggests that we cannot assume children can engage in socio-dramatic play (and also shows that we must be wary of agreeing with Smilansky's finding that children from disadvantaged backgrounds cannot engage). Children in the experimental groups of the study conceptualized their experience as integrated, or blended, frequently asking (even when role play areas were available) when they would be "playing drama" although the phrase was not used by adults. Wood notes that "practitioners need a sound understanding of the qualities and characteristics of play" (Wood, 2010: 19) if they are to help children play. An adult who possesses the skills to understand drama and to 'play drama' is the kind of educator who can best support children's socio-dramatic play.

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A Three-Pronged Approach to Early Intervention Speech and Language Therapy Delivery in the Community

Gráinne Smith, Childhood Development Initiative

*Dr Sinéad McNally, Childhood Development Initiative,
and School of Psychology, Trinity College Dublin*

Introduction

This paper describes the design and implementation of the Childhood Development Initiative's (CDI) Speech and Language therapy (S&L) service in Tallaght West, Dublin. Findings from an independent evaluation of the service are also cited (Hayes, Keegan, & Goulding, 2012) and the paper concludes with the next steps for the service.

CDI is one of three sites which constitute the Prevention and Early Intervention Programmes (PEIP) in Ireland, and it is jointly funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and The Atlantic Philanthropies (AP). The three sites (CDI, Youngballymun and Preparing for Life) were set up with the objective of testing innovative ways of delivering services and early interventions for children and their families in a community setting. CDI operates in an area of disadvantage. The early intervention S&L service was one of a number of evidence-informed programmes designed and implemented by CDI and delivered through existing structures and services as part of a ten year strategy. As well as developing new services to support children and their families, the strategy aimed to promote better integration of education, health and social care provision with the ultimate objective of improving outcomes. CDI's S&L service began in September 2008 as a component of an Early Years Programme and later as a component of CDI's Healthy Schools Programme.

Most children develop S&L skills without any serious difficulties. Some children, however, struggle to acquire these skills, with potential implications for later academic and social outcomes (Roulstone, et al., 2011). It is well established that children living in disadvantaged areas (such as Tallaght West) are likely to

be at greater risk of S&L and other developmental difficulties in the early years (Schoon, et al., 2010). A very high proportion of children in disadvantaged areas can experience S&L difficulties, with estimates as high as 55% (Locke, Ginsborg & Peers, 2002). Children with impaired S&L are at risk of mental health difficulties (Snowling, et al., 2006) bullying and lower self-esteem (Conti-Ramsden, 2004). S&L impairment may also impact negatively through a greater propensity for behavioural difficulties in school (Harrison, et al., 2009). In a longitudinal study of children's early S&L impairment and later outcomes at primary school, Harrison et al (2009) found that such experiences had as big an effect on later language, mathematical, and learning skills as family socio-economic status after controlling for child characteristics. It is important to note the protective aspects of these skills, in that strong communication skills can increase resilience among children otherwise at risk of poorer outcomes (Blanden, 2006). Supporting S&L development is thus important for a range of outcomes.

The age at which S&L problems are identified is important. Parental reports of early S&L difficulties have been found to be reliable predictors of later difficulties in schools, and have been shown to be useful in helping identify the need for early and targeted support from Speech and Language therapists (Harrison et al., 2009). The critical role of parents in promoting S&L development has also been highlighted in research which shows that collaboration between practitioners and parents is important for the effective management of children with S&L needs (Wright, 1992). The child's communicative environment at home also has a significant impact on school outcomes (Roulstone et al., 2011), with the home learning environment found to be even more critical than family socio-economic status (Melhuish, 2010).

CDI's S&L Service: Design and Governance

At the outset, the CDI S&L service was a component of an Early Years Programme, which aimed to support children's development in order to 'smooth the transition to primary school'. The Early Years programme consisted of a range of wrap around supports which were designed, based on national and international research and best practice, commencing in September 2008, with nine early years' services involved, having a total population of just over 160 children. The CDI S&L service became a part of CDI's Healthy Schools Programme, as a direct response to School Principals' concerns about the lack of an adequate community S&L service. Promoting a whole-school approach

to health promotion and connections between school and health services, the early intervention S&L service was integrated into the HSP in September 2009. Five primary schools were involved in this programme. Details of the design and implementation of the CDI S&L service are given below.

One of the aims of CDI's overall strategy is to encourage better integration of education, social care and health provision. Therefore, a 'three-pronged approach' to S&L therapy was adopted, alongside delivering onsite in early years' and school settings. The model included:

- Assessment and therapy (where necessary) to **children** referred;
- Training and support to **parents** of children receiving therapy;
- Training and support to **staff** in the early years' services and primary schools.

The CDI S&L service was designed to give parents a key role in their child's language development. As well as parents receiving one to one support from the therapist, information sessions were held for parents both who did and did not have children receiving therapy. At the start of each academic year, coffee mornings were held with parents to introduce the service and therapist. Training needs were identified through these coffee mornings with over 20 information sessions being held and over 100 parents attending. In this way, parents were aided in their ability to identify their children's S&L needs, to refer children to the service and to support their child's development.

As well as providing assessment and therapy to children and support to parents, the third element to the three-pronged approach involved providing training and support to staff – both in the early years and school settings. Staff in the early years services received accredited training, in Hanen⁶ and Elklan⁷, which enabled them to apply key strategies to provide a rich and stimulating language learning environment for young children, encourage language development, build early literacy skills, and provide a physical and social environment that

⁶ Hanen training provides practitioners with practical, interactive strategies for promoting children's language development which also helps lay the foundations of literacy.

⁷ Elklan training helps practitioners promote the communication skills of all young children but particularly those with speech and language difficulties.

encourages peer interaction. Similar accredited training was also offered to primary school teachers. Whilst some attended information sessions provided by the therapists, none attended the accredited training.

Interagency collaboration was a central aspect of CDI's work with the S&L service. At the very outset, discussions with the local Health Service Executive's (HSE) Principal Speech and Language Therapist (PSLT) were held to design and establish the model of service delivery. Support from the PSLT remains constant throughout delivery of this service. As well as collaborating with the HSE, CDI felt that the employment role for the therapists should be through a community based organisation. The rationale for this decision was based on the notion of mainstreaming service delivery, with CDI eventually withdrawing from the overall project and a principle of delivering services through existing and established service providers. Consequently, *An Cosán*, a community-based organisation, took on the employment role, providing Human Resource support, pay roll and administrative support. Both the PSLT and *An Cosán* were involved in the recruitment process for the therapists.

A senior Speech and Language Therapist (SLT) was employed to deliver the CDI S&L service in the nine early years' services and a second staff grade therapist was employed to deliver the service to the five primary schools which were part of the Healthy Schools Programme. Garda vetting was provided through CDI. In addition CDI's Quality Specialist provided support in the design, delivery and managing implementation issues of the CDI S&L service. The senior SLT received role support from the HSE community Principal SLT and in turn provided role support to the staff grade SLT. Both SLTs worked closely with the HSE speech and language therapy team, actively taking part in joint Team Based Performance Initiatives and team meetings, which was important for both professional development and support, and enabling strong links across the services. In addition, the CDI SLTs submitted quarterly reports referring to assessment/therapy and training to CDI's Quality Specialist.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was drawn up to reflect the four way partnership of the programme highlighting the respective roles and responsibilities of funder (CDI); employer (*An Cosán*); role support (HSE); and the CDI SLTs. Given the close collaboration with the HSE, job descriptions, employment conditions and filing systems were aligned with the HSE's practices where possible. In addition, all case files are owned by the HSE and a policy agreed between CDI and the HSE at the outset, to facilitate the ready transfer of children into mainstream services, should this be appropriate.

A dual policy system was also drawn up. This policy gave clarity on how to: (1) deliver the early years' S&L service; (2) optimise access to the SLT for all children attending the participating services; and (3) ensure a continuation of service delivery from the CDI S&L service to the HSE S&L services, both during their time attending the early years' service and when they leave to go to school, or for any other reason. This policy outlined referral pathways for the HSE, CDI SLT, and other S&L services. It indicated courses of action given certain situations, and was reviewed and signed off by all concerned – for example, if a child was receiving therapy from a community based S&L service, then the CDI S&L would not take the child onto their casework.

Discussions were held with the relevant early year's services and primary schools to discuss the model of service delivery. In order that all relevant parties had clarity of expectations, a service level agreement was drawn up by the SLT, highlighting the model of service, and the roles and responsibilities of all involved. Services and schools agreed to provide a dedicated space for the SLTs to perform assessments and therapy. In addition, services/schools committed to supporting child/parent attendance at therapy sessions and to attend training sessions/programmes run by the SLTs. This agreement was reviewed and signed off by all parties.

There were some challenges in this type of approach. For example, while accredited training was offered by CDI to schools, this was not taken up by teachers. This stresses the importance of setting and agreeing clear expectations from all parties involved. The need for clarity regarding reporting structures was also raised as an issue by the CDI SLTs and this is an ongoing challenge for the service. Having an employer, funder and role support through the HSE can lead to 'confusion' as to the best structure to go to in the event of an issue arising. Nevertheless, the enthusiasm with which the service was greeted made the challenges surmountable. The support from the HSE was crucial in ensuring that the service was set up properly and that good working relationships existed between the CDI SLTs and the HSE S&L service. The relationships developed with services and schools also lent itself to ensuring the model of service delivery ran smoothly. As mentioned earlier the HSE PSLT supported every step of the process. This relationship worked in many ways, the first of which was the development of a dual policy. This ensured no duplication of service delivery and, in some instances children on the HSE list were referred to the CDI list. Having strong working relationships was pivotal in ensuring the smooth transfer of cases between both services. In addition, when children who attended the early years'

services transitioned into primary school requiring continued S&L support they were referred to the HSE. Again, every effort was made to minimise difficulties and the HSE ownership of individual files was critical in this. An agreement was reached between the HSE and the CDI service so that children referred to the HSE would not go to the bottom of the list. Instead, their date of assessment in the CDI service was taken as the initial referral point and the children continued with their intervention. This did not prejudice children already on the HSE list, as date of referral was used to determine therapy dates. The strong relationship between the two services was evident in the participation of the CDI therapists in HSE team meetings, as well as availing of professional opportunities.

Evaluation of the CDI S&L service

As with all of CDI's programmes, rigorous evaluation was viewed as central in contributing to the provision of evidenced-based and evidence-informed programmes. While the overall evaluation of the Early Years programme included some evaluation of the Speech and Language support provided to services, it did not look specifically at the service in terms of number of referrals or outcomes. CDI recognised the importance of looking at the impact this model of service delivery was having for children, families, staff and other S&L services. Following consultation and discussion with the HSE, CDI SLTs and Early Years programme research team, a decision was made to undertake a specific evaluation of the CDI S&L service. Given that the S&L service was in operation, a retrospective approach was taken.

This model of delivery was independently evaluated by the Centre for Social and Educational Research (CSER), at the Dublin Institute of Technology. The evaluation was a retrospective impact study which reported key characteristics and data on the children who attended the CDI S&L service. The key findings of this evaluation are reported here and contextualised by evidence from the field on the effectiveness of the service for children, their families, and practitioners. For more details on the evaluation please see the full report (Hayes et al., 2012).

Having early and convenient access to the S&L service was found to make a significant positive impact on children, families and staff (Hayes et al., 2012). Attendance at appointments and uptake of the community based S&L service has always been a concern and issue for both the service provider and families. However, in this programme, onsite delivery supported improved attendance with minimal disturbance to the child's day. The evaluation report showed 83%

of children attended 75 to 100 percent of appointments (Hayes et al., 2012). Parents were encouraged to attend therapy sessions and if they could not make the appointment the therapy still went ahead, ensuring that the child did not miss out.

Children entered the CDI service on average aged two years nine months and were seen within two to four weeks, while some children were on a period of review and were seen after six months. (Hayes et al., 2012). Receiving therapy at such a young age meant that some children did not need to be in the service for any great length of time. The onsite delivery of the service was highlighted as an important part of the service. Parents often spoke to the Quality Specialist about feeling stigmatised when they had to bring their child to a clinic or the hospital, but felt much less so with the onsite delivery model. A positive knock-on effect of the service was reported by parents who felt that their child, having better language outcomes, would be less likely to be bullied: “I think we realised his talking was different ... [we were] so afraid ... that he'd be bullied.” (Hayes et al., 2012, pp. 42).

The evaluation found that environments were more visibly literacy rich, with staff labelling areas and games, using pictures and symbols to promote phonetics and that staff training resulted in staff feeling more confident in identifying speech and language concerns, and having an increased ability to support parents in making a referral to the service. This had a knock on effect of reducing the number of inappropriate referrals (Hayes et al., 2012).

Conclusion

This onsite model of service delivery is not new but the structures involved, such as CDI's role and its rigorous evaluation are unique. Funding for the service is continuing in 2013 and CDI are pursuing ways to extend the service in the current location, in addition to replicating the model in other areas. In May 2012, CDI submitted a proposal to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) requesting the continuation of the SLT service. It was decided that the continuation of service delivery should be integrated into current national structures, so in September 2012, South Dublin County Childcare Committee (SDCCC) took over the employment role of the CDI SLTs, with on-going support from the HSE. Two strong lessons were learned: one is that the purpose and benefits of speech and language therapy and services in the community needs to be communicated in such a way that parents are aware of its importance and utilise the service effectively, with the common

aim of supporting speech and language development in all children, which as many research studies show can impact on educational attainment, especially in areas of disadvantage. Secondly, all practitioners working with children, both in early year's settings and primary school settings need to be competent and confident in developing speech and language and in supporting children who have S&L needs.

The learning from the evaluation, and the policy implications of this model of S&L service have been presented and discussed with key policy makers and influencers through round table and other dissemination events. A follow-up study on the impact of the S&L service on children in the community is being developed and the findings from this learning will also be disseminated. CDI will continue to share the learning from this model of delivery for S&L services in Ireland, and to promote an integrated, on-site delivery of SLT where needs are identified.

Being part of this model of delivery has generated a lot of learning - early intervention works, and this model of SLT intervention is yet another strong example of the positive impact of early intervention on the lives of children and their families. Strong interagency collaboration is vital to ensure effective service delivery, whilst parental engagement is also central and requires scaffolding of targeted supports. A highly skilled, trained workforce will ensure that quality is top of the agenda at all times. Everybody wants the best for children, and those of us that are lucky enough to work with children need not only to recognise the importance and impact of early intervention, we need to demand that it is the norm.

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There's more to ECD than teaching the '3-Rs' at ever earlier ages

Nico van Oudenhoven and Rona Jualla van Oudenhoven, International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI)⁸, Netherlands

This paper could be summarized in one sentence: early childhood development efforts should move away from treating young boys and girls exclusively as 'early learners' but view them more as 'active participants and contributors of culture'. More to the point, Early Child Development (ECD)⁹ should be foremost a 'cultural enrichment' affair. It took us a long time to come to this realisation despite the fact that the signals have been hitting us everywhere we visited with tremendous force and frequency. Whenever we entered the domains of children, so to speak, and interacted with them in their homes, pre-schools,¹⁰ playgroups, orphanages or other places where children could be found, we were taken aback by the role that culture plays and ought to play in the learning process. The 'cultural dimension' – we will use these words for the time being for lack of a better term- was always there, either by elaborate festivities or by its stark and painfully felt absence.

Thus, in the kindergartens of Yakutia, the indigenous Sakha people, teachers and parents, together with their 'native' Russian citizens, hold special days where everyone is attired in the traditional Sakha dresses; Sakha food is cooked, and Sakha music is played, with a dominant position for the national

8 International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI), Netherlands, www.icdi.nl.

9 We use the term ECD -Early Childhood Development- here to denote the wide range of processes, events, services, policies, interventions and practices that impact on the growth and development of children in the 0-8 age group. It subsumes other acronyms such as ECCE -Early Childhood Care and Education, ECED -Early Childhood Education, or ECCD - Early Childhood Care and Development.

10 In this texts the labels 'preschool' and 'kindergarten' will be used indiscriminately and denote any formal ECD service for groups of boys and girls under the age of six or seven.

instrument, the mouth harp. In doing this, their rich traditions are not only be remembered but also, more notably, built and expanded upon so as to keep them relevant for now and the times to come. At the same time, the mothers of the West Bank and Gaza lamented that their children didn't see 'beauty' any more, that there were no colours in their lives, no green fields to play on, nor music or dances to enjoy. In Thailand, when asked what they really valued, parents in the Burmese refugee camps expressed appreciation for the education their young children were receiving, but indicated that what they missed most were the customary celebrations of special events such as weddings or birthdays or losing touch with the ceremonial rituals and songs of funerals¹¹. In the multicultural Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago traditional cultures form an integral part of the official school curricula at pre-school, primary, secondary and even at tertiary levels.

When gold was discovered in the Klondike in North-West Canada in 1896, the First Nation Han were quickly bought off their land and moved to Moosehide, a site downriver from sprawling Dawson City, which had sprung up out of nothing, but then teeming with all the trappings of European 'high life'. The Han's leader, Chief Isaac, foreseeing the demise of their culture, actually sent their songs and dances to the Han in neighbouring Alaska for safekeeping, teaching their cousins the Klondike words and rhythms. Moosehide and Dawson City have since vanished, but the Alaskan Han have retained the dances and songs, and nowadays the 'Return to Moosehide' has become a regular celebration (Ferguson, 2005, p.264)

Box 1.

During a break from writing these lines, we strolled over the Saturday market in Leiden, an old town in the Netherlands. Earlier that morning, sheets with music scores were dealt out with the invitation to a 'play in'. Anyone who could play an instrument and were so inclined to do so on that morning would be welcome. Rehearsals were at 10.30, and 12.30. The concert started at 15.00 hrs on the same day. An audience of some 60-100 people watched and listened to the spontaneously-formed orchestra of a similar number of musicians. Among them were children as young as five years old, but also men and women who were well

¹¹ Personal communication with authors, East Jerusalem, November 2010, Mae Sot, June 2010.

over sixty. Everybody seemed to enjoy this friendly, delightful, engaging and, as we saw it, meaningful event.

Why are we so keen on sharing this little activity with the reader? It was just a simple occurrence in and of itself and one that could be done almost anywhere; but it was also more than that as it shows that so much takes place outside the school, in informal and non-formal situations that it is worthwhile to the wellbeing, growth and education of the child: multi-generational interaction, modelling, approval, challenge, exploration and much more. We were impressed that these children have the skills to participate in this orchestra; skills that may serve them and give them satisfaction and meaning during a lifetime. And almost as an afterthought: money or profit did not feature here at all. But then, where would they have learnt to play the flute, the guitar, the violin? Were they so fortunate as to have parents who taught them or got them music teachers? Would it not have been ideal if they had developed these talents in school; or rather if all five-year-old and younger boys and girls had this opportunity, including those whose family backgrounds are not conducive to music, creativity and ‘culture,’ or financially able to facilitate it?

There are, of course, many more voices that promote this idea that ‘culture’ and not ‘reading, writing and arithmetic’, be the core elements in ECD. One that should be heard wider and louder is that of Okwamy and her colleagues (2011). By using participatory and strength-based methods of data collection and appreciative inquiry in villages in Kenya and Uganda, including in-depth ‘respective listening’ to mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers, they show how ‘culture’ provides a strong and beneficial setting for ECD policy and practice, which is not only relevant in those countries, but also for Africa and far beyond. They press the need for developing culturally and particularly Africa-centred approaches to development and make a strong case for the need to root the dominant narrative of child development in the diversity of local narratives. They also urge the international donor community to work within a more culturally relevant framework and motivate the state, the ultimate duty bearer for child well-being, to promote and support culturally relevant child policy and programming (Okwamy *et al* 2011).

Cultural or even ‘culturisation’ activities increasingly appear to be healthy for everybody, especially for those with little incomes and without the means to travel widely or attend major festivals or concerts. The Burbank Senior Artists Colony in Los Angeles is, in this respect, exemplary. Elderly people, often without any artistic experience or background of high levels of ‘cultured’

education are invited to engage in theatre, film making, visual arts, music and all with great success.

The classes are demanding — “no one is gluing macaroni to paper plates”— and the teachers are pros, either laid-off schoolteachers or artists. In addition to pure pleasure, socialisation, and confidence building, after four weeks, the improvement in cognitive function was beyond belief. The theater trainees scored nearly a 60 percent increase in problem-solving ability, and these gains were sustained.

(Rosenberg, New York Times online, 16 August 2012)

Now, if senior citizens benefit so much, would it be too risky to claim that very junior citizens would not also benefit or even more so? However, regardless of the common ‘arts and crafts’ activities that most kindergartens have as part of their regular curriculum, the main thrust of current ECD thinking is to turn ever younger children into ‘early learners’ so that they can do well in the primary school and a few years later in secondary schools and so on, this with the ultimate and defensible objective of making them employable and employed citizens. Another reason vigorously promoted is that children’s early school attendance facilitates women’s participation in the workforce, which is correct, but is not always directly related to children’s interests.

An illustration of this movement to transform even the smallest children into students is evinced by the Canadian *Early Years Study 3: Making Decisions, Taking Action*, which recommends school attendance of two-year olds (McCain *et al*, 2011). Also USA state governors are recommended to “develop aligned birth-to-grade 3 assessments that help monitor children’s progress toward academic... goals...” (US National Governor’s Association, 2012, p.1). This all is proposed with the explicit goal of seeing them graduate from high school, move into post-secondary education and attain higher earnings. These advocates of ‘early learning’ are not alone and are often stalwartly supported by the children’s parents, even, it is argued, to the point of permanently damaging their children’s eyesight, due to long hours of poring over texts: concern over the increased rate of myopia in children in China has led to students at Bayi Xiwang elementary and primary school in Guangzhou, China, to be given 45 minutes of outdoor instruction

each day in a clinical trial aimed at offsetting myopia and counteracting obesity, although educators and parents in other schools have resisted this initiative (Pierson, 2012). Asked about the benefits of full-day kindergarten in Pickering, Ontario, Tosha Goldberg, mother of the five-year old Isaiah Jones, answered that “her son’s reading and writing skills had improved dramatically and that he now reads above age level” (Dillon, 2012, p. 1). Abu Gosh (undated/ 2003) laments the fact that Palestinian parents on the West Bank feel that their three-year old children should be in school to learn, and not to play.

The push for better test-scores affects children in other ways as well, if the situation in the USA is anything to go by, then we see again a widening gap between the rhetoric of politicians and the reality on the ground. In spite of an increasing obese child population, physical education and other fitness/movement activities are being cut, even below the minimum requirements, and this, it is suggested, is mainly to attain better tests scores (Baker, 2012).

Of course, there are also moves away from the ‘all eyes on learning’ as educators, policy makers and perhaps parents are becoming concerned about the ever-growing number of obese and unhealthy children. ‘Healthy living’ is now becoming part of the school curriculum in many places. It is more and more accepted that healthy eating and activities such as yoga classes alleviate anxiety, result in children eating better, being physically more active, feeling more self-confident, experiencing less bullying and developing better personal skills. Hard-working high-achieving children do not see their grades drop when they ‘hang around with friends’ or sleep more instead of studying long hours (Teotonio, 2012, and WHO, 2011). These are steps in the right direction, and, yes, concern about one’s health and wellbeing should be considered as a major cultural good.

There is indeed an ever-increasing amount of research data that backs up the reasons for promoting ECD. Almost any review on the benefits of ECD lists a multiple of them. The World Bank (2011), the largest financer of ECD services in low-income countries, mentions the following outcomes for children who participate in these programmes:

- Higher intelligence scores
- Higher and timelier school enrolment
- Less grade repetition and lower dropout rates
- Higher school completion rates

- Improved nutrition and health status
- Improved social and emotional behaviour
- Improved parent-child relationship
- Increased earning potential and economic self-sufficiency as an adult
- Increased female labour force participation

The World Bank also cites numerous sources which show that ‘developing’ countries stand particularly to show remarkable improvements in the following domains as a result of the children’s partaking in ECD:

- Nutrition and health.
- Cognitive development and school achievement.
- School enrolment and wastage –repetition and dropping out.

They also state that affordable ECD programmes help to reduce social inequality, and that it increases the participation of women in the labour force (World Bank, undated).

Similar outcomes continue to be regularly mentioned in research reports. ECD seems indeed the silver, if not golden, bullet in monetary terms also, as the reported rates of return on investment are phenomenal and vary from 4 US dollars (Barnett and Masse, 2007) to 17 US dollars (Schweinhart *et al*, 2005) on each single US dollar invested. In tandem with the World Bank, China’s national government also looks at ECD as a path to sustainable economic growth (Beige Zhao, 2012) and to improving future economic competitiveness (Kin Bing Wu *et al*, 2012). An entry in the *Voices and Views* blog hosted by the World Bank (Wright, 2012) is indeed not at all coy about presenting its pro-pecuniary stance. They value the benefits as follows: children who enjoyed formal ECD are – (and please note their jubilant comments between the parentheses):

- More ready for primary school than those who did not (*not surprising*)

- More likely to graduate from secondary school (*also not surprising*)
- More likely to be employed (*good news*)
- Better paid in the long run (*great news*)

It is indeed good to see that ECD will result in children having higher incomes when grown up, but is it too naïve to wonder whether life is only about money? Again, what happened to the ‘whole child’? But then, the Bank stands not alone, of course: for example the debate on Germany’s Conservatives’ proposal for a subsidy to women to keep their toddlers at home is framed in economic terms, rather than how this affects the wellbeing of children (Eddy, 2012).

Not investing in ECD is also costly. For example, this is the case with the rather dismal situation in Mississippi, USA, which has the highest rate of childhood poverty in the country and test scores that belong to the nation’s worst. From 1999 to 2008, the state spent 383 million US dollars on children who had to repeat kindergarten or first grade. Many are so far behind that they never catch up (Willen, 2012). And those who repeat one or more grades are much more likely than their classmates to drop out of school (Anderson, Whipple and Jimerson, 2002). Here the argument put forward is that children need to be prepared for kindergarten, which is remarkable, as kindergartens themselves were traditionally supposed to be a preparation for formal schooling. One may wonder, though, as to whether it is a solely a matter of a need for ‘early learning’ in this case, as the majority of children in Mississippi who do not go to pre-school or who fail in kindergarten are poor and Black. There is no exact data to be had on this point, but it seems obvious that rich and White children do well in kindergarten and beyond even without having been to preschool; thus the discussion should be framed much wider than only in terms of preschool attendance. Family background, environmental, social-economic and cultural factors seem to be of much more importance in determining school success (Rouse and Barrow, 2006) whether justly or unjustly, but this is a challenge that is much more difficult to address and one that needs urgent attention.

Nonetheless, it is not surprising that, given this set of extraordinarily positive outcomes, all over the world, hardly without an exception, governments and NGOs are pushing for having more and younger children in school. Currently, this mainly happens by extending downwards the entry levels of children enrolled in basic schools. Most European basic schools now have five- and four-

year old children under their roofs; while a few decades ago the age of entrance was six or seven years. Less resource-rich countries are also following suit. In Turkey, for example, where children traditionally enrolled in basic schools at the age of seven, five- and six-year olds are now being ‘let in’ (Özgan, 2010), while in Zimbabwe, to mention another rather arbitrarily-chosen country, all basic schools are now required to take in children age five (Rwatirera *et al*, 2011).

The school attendance rate is increasing across the board. UNESCO’s *Strong Foundations* provides data on enrolment in pre-primary education over the five-year period 1999-2004; the growth is dramatic, wherever one looks, both for girls and boys, even in ‘difficult places’, such as those visited by hostilities, natural disasters or radical movements, or where the absolute number of children is actually shrinking. There is no reason to believe that this trend is slowing down (UNESCO, 2007). It is likely that the targets set by the European Union in 1995 and reconfirmed in 2008 – ‘childcare’ places for 35 percent for children from birth to 3 years and 90 percent for 3 to 6 year olds- will be common practice in a growing number of countries and not only those belonging to the Union (European Economic and Social Committee, 2010),

Table 1.

Number of Children Enrolled in Pre-Primary Education (UNESCO, 2007)		
Area	Numbers in 000	
Sub-Saharan Africa	5,129	7,359
Arab States	2,356	2,625
Latin American and the Caribbean	16,392	19,119
‘Developed’ countries	25,386	25,482
‘Developing’ countries	80,070	91,089
World	111,772	123, 685

More children, wherever in the world, are being sent to ‘school’ at ever earlier ages. Most of the four-and five-year olds are registered in schools that have ‘extended downwards’; younger ones are still cared for and taken care of in special provisions such as crèches and day care centres, but also this approach is under pressure as in many places these services are being modified and subsequently absorbed by the formal school system. A notable exception is the

prevailing Russian kindergarten. Still based on the old Soviet Union's model, children up to seven years are comprehensively taken care of in specially designed buildings with a wide range of facilities and services, and very much different from the regular Russian primary schools, both in outlook and functioning (Shmis, 2012). But they form a rare, but, in our opinion, a beautiful spectacle when set on the ECD stage worldwide.

Although the horrendous and almost incomprehensible fact remains that many children die at an early age of easily preventable diseases, the fact is that their numbers are decreasing and that the global child mortality rate has fallen dramatically in the past 20 years; an estimated 6.9 million children died before the age of 5 in 2011, compared with 12 million deaths in 1990, or around a 40 percent reduction in the rate (Lake, 2012, UNICEF, 2012). The time is ripe for a shift from exclusively looking at the survival of children to qualitative aspects, including those of how to embed and engage children with culture, as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: see Box 2.

Article 29 (1) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child seems a far cry away from the current view on early childhood education, it reads:

"1. States Parties agree that the Education of the child shall be directed to:

- (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;*
- (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;*
- (c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;*
- (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;*
- (e) The development of respect for the natural environment."*

Box 2. UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 29(1).

Given all the good outcomes that have been documented for the provision of ECD, and with the appreciation and understanding of the benefits of ECD growing worldwide, how could we possibly complain? Why don't we choose, instead, to assist, in every way we can, increasing the coverage and bringing to scale the existing services and programmes to including larger number of children, especially those with special needs, from discriminated ethnic backgrounds, with minority status, and difficult-to-reach boys and girls, rather than promoting a different approach? The abstracts for the annual conferences of the European Early Childhood Education Research Association also show how mature the state-of-the-art of ECD is and how almost any issue is being extensively researched and talked about (EECERA, 2012). Why not rejoice that, in addition to the rapidly expanding coverage, quality issues are now also given more attention? Indeed why not?

Frankly speaking, however, an uneasy feeling gnaws on our innards whenever we hear policy makers and big-scale implementers speak about ECD. Their rhetoric is always correct and cannot be faulted; they constantly talk about the 'whole child', that 'education' is more than 'learning' and that they need to play, explore and 'have fun', and, above all, that ECD should look at the 'whole' child. And although it is widely accepted that, in the words of Maria Prochukhateva, an experienced headmistress of a special education or 'inclusive' kindergarten: "Children know how to learn",¹² most schools go full out to instruct their pupils how to learn. Indeed, in practice, the aim of schools seems to be to get children to 'work' at almost all times: children are in school to study and especially to acquire literacy and numeracy skills. It seems that in every country the most important goal of basic education (pre-primary to lower-secondary) is assuring that the next generation be able to read and write. There is, of course, no arguing that literacy is of the utmost importance, as knowing how to read and write is pivotal in enabling countries to escape from extreme levels of poverty. "With few exceptions, literacy at or above 80 percent is the necessary - if far from sufficient - condition for a country to escape extreme poverty... Furthermore, better health cannot be separated from basic education. Few countries have achieved respectable population health outcomes with female literacy below 80 percent" (Richards, 2012, p. 1).

Why do so many keep on pushing a 'learning agenda' in ECD, while life demands and offers so much more? We so often get the feeling that only lip

¹² Personal communication during 1 June, 2012, visit to the 'Resource Center for Inclusive Education', DS 288, Moscow.

service is paid to the social needs of young boys and girls, as well as to their spiritual lives, their fantasies, and, even less so, to their worlds outside the school, how they live at home with their parents, siblings, pets, and with the many big and little things that they value and make them who they are (see photo 3).



This is Ricardo, a ten-year old Dutch boy, who became a member of the exclusive 'One Metre Club' after catching a pike of 103 cm. He goes out fishing a lot in his own little boat that he bought with monies he saved up. His amateur-fisher uncle, not yet a member of the 'Club', and his adult fisher friends are charmed by Ricardo, but also take him seriously. He is an above-average student, but doesn't excel. If he were to spend the hours he devotes to fishing to his school work he would most likely become an A+ student. But would this be better for his well-being and healthy development?

(Photo: Anita van der Laan)

The same goes for the street, the neighbourhood, the community in which they grow up. The overemphasis on preschool education seems also rather out of place given that most of a child's development occurs outside the school: "...70 % of our knowledge and skills are developed through informal [we would like to add 'and nonformal'] education" (European Economic and Social Committee, 2010, p. 5). In the ultimate analysis, however, it is the school and schooling that really matters to those who pull the strings.

The 'learning environments' of early childhood in Asia, traditionally took into account the informal and non-formal aspects of the environment (IDRC, 1988). Abdul Bari Jahani, the 'poet of Kandahar', Afghanistan, when interviewed about poetry when he was young, tells us: "there definitely were opportunities those days for young poets... there were literary conferences in schools, where students recited poetry and read essays that their uncles or they themselves had written, or copied from some magazine or paper... They would gather in homes or in restaurants". (Mashal, 2012). Likewise in neighbouring Pakistan, also in kindergartens, non-formal and formal, poetry and reading poems is common practice (Children's Global Network- Pakistan, 2012). But these 'learning environments' seem to be fading out rapidly, to the point of no return, in Asia also.

Luria (1990) approaches the issue from a different angle. According to her, small children form and are members, as it were, of a tribe with their own codes, mores, symbols, language and behaviours. Turning pre-schools and kindergartens into institutions of learning erodes this tribe, bowdlerises their stories and songs and allows it to be invaded by strangers. Perhaps it is also for this reason that 'literacy' is being re-defined in much wider terms, such as the "capacity to participate constructively in a pluralistic democracy facing complex domestic and global problems" (Murnane *et al*, 2012). In their view, having an extensive vocabulary is more than knowing a lot of words, it means having experience with and access to a wider world and to such things as nature, current events, relationships, shops, other customs and values, ...or, in shorthand, to a widest possible culture. But we are not sure as to whether promoters of 'early learning' are inspired by this broader definition.

We are not inclined to come up with a definition of culture; we just assume that everybody knows what it is, and we are not concerned by the many variations or even contradictory notions. Most definitions draw on the one given by the anthropologist Edward B. Tylor in his book, *Primitive Culture*, published in 1871. According to him, culture is "that complex whole which

includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” Varenne (2001) provides a list of definitions of culture, approached from a range of social sciences; we feel close to his quote from Levi-Strauss: “culture substitutes itself to life, in another way culture uses and transforms life to realise a synthesis of a higher order” (Levi Strauss, 1949, p.4). For us, the concept of ‘culture’ consists of dynamic constellations of interlinked views, perceptions and emotions. We, therefore, will use the term in a rather cavalier way, but will, when needed, try to be clear in our intentions. At this stage, we will use it to indicate that culture is also something that requires an effort, challenges children, fosters their curiosity and eagerness to explore, increases their faculties, talents and skills and makes them ‘better’ persons in the sense that it helps them to find, search for and value beauty and meaning in life as well as appreciate the connectedness of things organic and inorganic. ECD should therefore be much more than providing schooling to young children, or rather it should be far more concerned about understanding and responding to the multiple ‘cultural’ roles young boys and girls have. They act, among others, as

- Enjoyers
- Recipients
- Renewers
- Transformers
- Creators
- Channels
- Corrupters,
- Critics and also
- Victims of culture.

Middle-class people who live in high-income societies and who are concerned about the well-being and healthy development of young children living in high-income societies may find much of what follows less pertinent or even altogether irrelevant. The reason is that this text is intentionally biased in

favour of young boys and girls whose families lack the common privileges, freedoms, opportunities and prospects that the middle classes enjoy. “There is an unfair access to the arts for our children, which brings consequences of major importance to our society” (Fiske, 1999).

We intend to try to find words for our disquiet and see whether we can find ways to make a positive contribution to the debate on ECD practices and policies, but at the same time we know that we will only partially be successful, if at all, and that this text will result in a piece of work similar to what sculptors used to call *non finito*, a combination of some detailed work and vague contours or just raw, unhewn material.

The assignment set before us is fivefold. Convincing arguments should be formulated that ‘cultured’ ECD has an advantage over ‘learning-based/scholastic-achievement-oriented approaches as to:

- First, how does it affect the current, *hic et nunc*¹³, wellbeing of children; this regardless of their future, inside or outside the school or employment market? Thus questions should be tackled such as do the ‘cultured’ children feel better, are they healthier and do they enjoy life more?
- Second, what is its impact on the longer-term development of children; do they become more resilient, experience fewer obstacles when enrolling in formal basic education, perform better in school, enjoy a better physical and mental health, have a more positive outlook at life, participate more in social activities, and when adults, will they fare better, socially and economically?
- Third, to what extent do they succeed better in addressing such ‘hot topics’ as violence, discrimination and social exclusion of children of disadvantaged backgrounds, with impairments or handicaps and bridging the gender gap?
- Fourth, does it contribute more to reducing poverty, or help young boys and girls, both as children and later as adults, to cope with poverty?
- Fifth, does it contribute more to reducing inequality or help young boys and girls, both as children and later as adults, to cope with inequality?

¹³ Latin, meaning ‘here and now’

This is a tall order and perhaps it would have been wiser and more feasible to take in hand the first three issues; as it is, even in this cluster, addressing even only one poses a daunting task. But then, a discussion of this nature within the context of ECD cannot be avoided. And we also would like to reflect on the more than vaguely-felt inkling that cultured ECD can play a positive role in dealing with deprivation, destitution, discrimination and inequity.

To be continued...

Note: This paper is based on part of a forthcoming publication from International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI), a Dutch non-profit organisation with a world wide brief, and a focus on developing countries. ICDI (<http://www.icdi.nl/>) promotes the well-being of children growing up in difficult circumstances.

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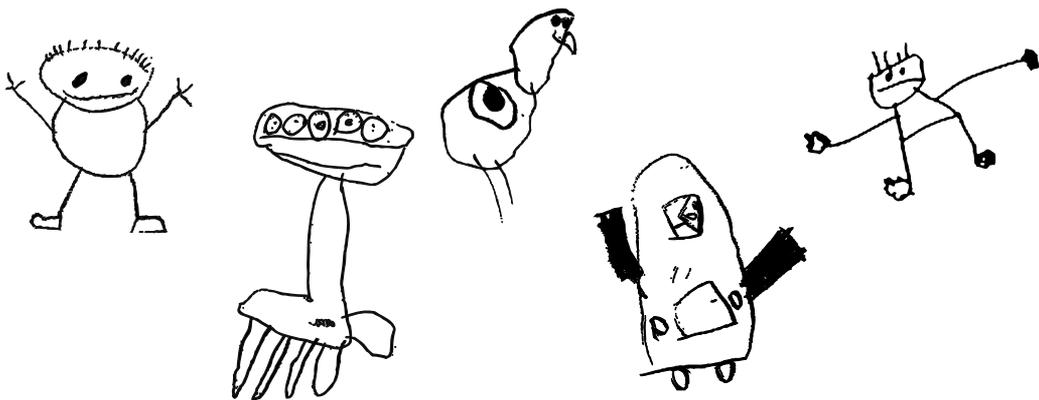
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SECTION 2

FROM THE FIELD



An Leanbh Óg

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Project E.Y.E. and Aistear: Making the Links

Rosaleen Murphy and Marcella Towler
School of Education, University College Cork

Introduction

Recent years have seen major changes to early years education and care in Ireland. From being an ad-hoc and largely unregulated sector, early years services have become increasingly regulated, supported and professionalised, as the recognition of the vital role they play in promoting the early educational and developmental needs of children has become accepted at official level. In particular, efforts have been made to improve the quality of the experiences that children have within these services. The publication by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2009) of *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, marked a major step forward. Together with *Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (2006) which was developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills, *Aistear* supports the development of quality provision in early childhood services. The third important initiative in recent years is the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECEC) scheme introduced in 2010, an initiative intended to widen access to early years education by making a free pre-school year available to all children in the year before they began primary school.

Aistear and *Siolta* were intended to support early years practitioners in providing a high-quality early years experience for all children. While *Siolta* is targeted specifically at early childhood services and concerns itself with the various elements (structural elements as well as interactions and underlying principles), *Aistear* focuses on curriculum in the broadest sense, includes parents and caregivers as well as early years practitioners among its target audience,

and is aimed at babies, toddlers and young children from birth to six. *Aistear* is a curriculum framework rather than a curriculum *per se*. The NCCA, in developing it, recognised that many early year services already operated well established curricula such as the Montessori, Naíonraí, HighScope, Steiner, and play-based approaches. One such existing curriculum was *Project E.Y.E.* (OMEP Ireland, 2006) and in this paper, we focus on the challenge of reviewing and expanding it in the light of the *Aistear* curriculum framework in particular. *Aistear* not only encourages people to review their practice and make sure that it addresses all aspects of children's learning and development, but give them many ideas and suggestions on how to do so.

How compatible is Project E.Y.E. with Aistear?

The impetus for Project E.Y.E. arose from the recognition by Dr Francis Douglas and Dr Mary Horgan, both based in the then Department (now School) of Education in University College Cork (UCC), and the co-founders, in 1995, of the first honours degree in early childhood studies in Ireland. They had found in the course of their research and their contacts with early years practitioners that many of them would have liked to be able to access a written curriculum, which would give them confidence in their own abilities as well as new ideas for activities with children. The aim was to help them to interact with children in a positive and meaningful way that would promote the holistic development of the child. With the help of Cora O'Brien, a primary teacher and early years researcher, Francis Douglas and Mary Horgan contacted the many experienced early years educators they had encountered in the course of their work and asked them to document the activities that they had found to be most successful with young children. Those who responded came from a variety of settings- playgroups, Montessori, Naíonraí, crèches, and so on. The activities they submitted were sorted into categories, expanded on and extended, trialled in other settings, and revised accordingly. A list of books and other resources was also compiled. Project E.Y.E. was a collaborative work, containing descriptions of 120 activities, contributed by experienced early years practitioners from playgroups, Montessori and Naíonraí, together with suggestions for extending them and using them with parents.

The first edition of *Project E.Y.E.* was published in 2000 by the Early Years Research Unit in UCC and it was distributed through the Irish Preschool Playgroups Association (IPPA, which merged in 2011 with the National

Children's Nurseries Association to form Early Childhood Ireland). The first edition sold out rapidly, both to people working in early years services and also to teachers of infant classed in primary school, since the activities in Project E.Y.E. are targeted at children aged 3 to 6, and the revised Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 1999) introduced in 1999 emphasized play and active learning in the infant classes. Project E.Y.E. was reprinted by OMEP Ireland in 2006, largely unchanged apart from a new Foreword which made some links to the new curriculum framework then being developed which eventually became *Aistear* and also to the relevant parts of *Síolta*.

Project E.Y.E. thus pre-dates *Aistear* and *Síolta* by several years, and some of the activities contained therein date from earlier still, as many of the contributors were early childhood practitioners of long standing. On re-reading, this is apparent in the way that many of the sections are written and in the organisation of the publication itself into domains of learning rather than the more integrated and socio-cultural approach (see e.g. Rogoff, 1990) taken in presenting *Aistear*. *Project E.Y.E.* consists of a set of nine books, an Educator's Handbook plus eight books of activities, each of which includes suggestions on extending them for use with parents and caregivers. The books are categorised by developmental domains:

1. Spiritual, emotional and moral development
2. Physical development
3. Cognitive development
4. Creative development
5. Language development
6. Social development
7. Cultural development
8. Environmental Awareness and Development Education

This organisation by domains in many ways reflects the dominant view at the time that early years curricula should be developmentally appropriate above all else, although Project E.Y.E. also manifests a burgeoning awareness of the socio-cultural and inter-woven nature of learning and development (Rogoff, 1990).

Each volume carries a caveat to the effect that each domain should not be seen in isolation, and that the nature and needs of the individual child should be taken into account. The ideas for extending the activities recognise that parents and caregivers also have a role to play. However this falls short of the type of partnership embodied in the *Aistear* guidelines, and there is a tendency at times to over-emphasise the role of the adult.

In *Aistear*, in contrast, the most important parts are the principles and guidelines. The suggested activities are given merely as examples of learning activities that might be undertaken with children, and are secondary to the broad underlying principles and the four themes of *Well-Being, Identity and Belonging, Communication, and Exploring and Thinking*. The influence of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum *Te Whariki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) is evident in this thematic approach. Nevertheless the finished *Aistear* curriculum framework is quite different from the New Zealand one, and it is deeply embedded in an Irish context. This did not happen by accident, and it reflects the socio-cultural theories of learning and development that underpin it. An extensive period of research and consultation took place during the development phase of *Aistear*, including consultation with children themselves as well as parents, practitioners, early years organisations, policy makers and other stakeholders. A preliminary discussion document “Towards a Framework for Early Learning” was published by the NCCA in 2004. Dr Mary Horgan of UCC played an important (though uncredited) role in the production of this document. Thus it is unsurprising that many of the fundamental principles underlying *Aistear* and Project E.Y.E. are similar.

OMEP Ireland has begun an audit of the activities in Project E.Y.E, relating them to *Aistear*, in order to support the many practitioners who would like to continue using ideas and activities from Project E.Y.E., but who are uncertain about how they relate to the current guidelines and the principles of *Aistear*. A preliminary and partial audit was presented in poster form at the 2011 OMEP Ireland conference in Cork- see Appendices A and B to this paper. A colour version of these posters will shortly be available on the OMEP Ireland website: www.omepireland.ie

Comparing the underlying principles of Aistear and Project E.Y.E.

The principles underlying Aistear are categorised in the Aistear publications (NCCA 2009) into three broad headings:

1. Children and their lives in early childhood:
 - the child's uniqueness
 - equality and diversity
 - children as citizens
2. Children's connections with others:
 - relationships
 - parents, family and community
 - the adult's role
3. How children learn and develop:
 - holistic learning and development
 - active learning
 - play and hands-on experiences
 - relevant and meaningful experiences
 - communication and language
 - the learning environment.

The principles underlying Project E.Y.E. are not as explicitly stated, although there is a detailed presentation on each of the developmental areas in the Educator's Handbook. There are some commonalities with Aistear:

- The role of the adult and of the learning environment are addressed in the Book 1, the Educator's Handbook. It is emphasised that the activities in the various sections are presented as a stimulus, and that the early years educator needs to think about how they might be adapted or modified to suit a particular setting or group of children.
- Respect for the rights of the child is a fundamental principle throughout Project E.Y.E., and specific references are made to issues of equality and diversity in the opening section.

- Active learning is also emphasised throughout
- The activities in Project E.Y.E. are all play-based, giving the child relevant and hands-on opportunities to learn.
- The activities in Project E.Y.E. are organised into developmental domains, but the holistic nature of early learning and development is emphasised throughout, and each book carries a reminder of this.
- Each activity has suggestions for involving parents and caregivers
- The importance of relationships, family and community are implicit throughout, and to the fore in Book 1.
- Communication and language pervade Project E.Y.E. – see the tables in Appendix B.

However, reflecting the prevailing trends in educational discourse towards greater accountability for learning, *Aistear* goes much farther than Project E.Y.E. in terms of specifying learning outcomes, and in promoting the role of assessment (both assessment *of* learning and assessment *for* learning) in early years settings, categorising sets of learning aims and goals under each theme, specifying the kind of outcomes that are desirable in each case. The NCCA has also been developing a range of supports for people wishing to implement *Aistear* in their settings, and has been making supplementary materials available on-line. *Aistear* provides sets of guidelines on building partnership between parents and practitioners, learning and developing through interactions, learning and developing through play, and supporting learning and development through assessment (NCCA, 2009b). Adopting *Aistear* is an evolutionary process in most cases, as people are required to reflect on their existing practice, plan for learning in greater detail, and think about how they will assess whether learning has taken place. Many of those who are in the process of adopting *Aistear* will have been working with young children for many years, and many of them will have been using activities drawn from or similar to, those in Project E.Y.E.. According to the *Aistear* User Guide (NCCA, 2009c, p. 9):

Aistear is designed to work with the great variety of curriculum materials currently in use in early childhood settings. Using the broad learning goals of *Aistear* you can decide how best to adapt your current curriculum to

make learning even more enjoyable and rewarding for the children you work with.

We have therefore started to audit Project E.Y.E., with regard to how the activities fit in with the Principles and Themes of *Aistear*. The discussion below provides some examples from the preliminary stages of this work. When the work is completed, all of the activities in Project E.Y.E. will be cross referenced in detail to the *Aistear* Aims and Learning Goals. We intend that this will form the basis of a booklet for practitioners. This will complement the existing Project E.Y.E. books, and will help practitioners and parents who wish to continue to draw on the wealth of ideas contained therein while also embracing the ideas contained in the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. Appendix A (overview poster), provides an overview of the content, principles and target age groups of *Aistear* and Project E.Y.E.. Each *Aistear* theme has four sets of aims under which their associated learning goals are listed. For the purposes of this initial audit, we focused on Aims One and Two from each the *Aistear* themes ‘Well-being’ and ‘Communication’, as shown in Appendix B. The discussion below provides a more detailed example of how some sample activities from Project E.Y.E. connects with the aims and learning goals in these two *Aistear* themes.

Familiarity with the *Aistear* principles of early learning and development and with the content of the four *Aistear* themes is the foundation for connecting to other curricula. The detailed content and learning experiences therein provide a practical illustration of how activities link to the themes, aims and learning goals of *Aistear*. The next step in the process focused on making specific links between Project E.Y.E. and the aims and learning goals of ‘Well-being’ and ‘Communication’. Using the knowledge gained from the first step above, two activities from Project E.Y.E. were chosen to link to the aims and learning goals for ‘Well-being’ and ‘Communication’ respectively. The summary tables of aims and learning goals in *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009, pp.17, 26, 35, 44) provided the basis for making connections with the sample learning opportunities and learning experiences providing a reference point for any areas of ambiguity. During this process, it became evident that many of the activities linked to more than one *Aistear* theme and that within a theme multiple links to aims and learning goals were sometimes evident. The first example below will focus on the theme of ‘Well-being’ and will identify the many connections between and an activity from Project E.Y.E. and the aims and learning goals within this theme.

The second example will explore an additional activity from Project E.Y.E. in relation to the theme of ‘Communication’.

Activity One: Welcome to Pre-school

The *Aistear* theme of ‘Well-being’ will be discussed in relation to the comprehensive suggestions included in Activity 1, ‘Welcome to Pre-School’ of Book 1 (*Spiritual, Emotional and Moral Development*) of Project E.Y.E. (Cosgrave, 2006, pp. 6-9). The suggestions therein relate to introducing the child to the setting, skills to focus on in the first few weeks, pre-school rules and play based activities. Using ‘Table 1: Aims and learning goals for Well-being’ (NCCA, 2009, p.17) it is evident that the aforementioned activities link to Well-Being Aim 1: ‘Children will be strong psychologically and socially’. In particular, learning goals 1,3,5,6 relate to the recommendations put forward in the Project E.Y.E. activity highlighted above. Well-Being Learning goal 1 (NCCA, 2009, p.17) states that:

In partnership with the adult, children will... make strong attachments and develop warm and supportive relationships with family, peers and adults in out-of-home settings and in their community’

This is incorporated in all aspects of ‘Welcome to Pre-School’ as is learning goal 3: ‘In partnership with the adult, children will ... handle transitions well’. The ‘Pre-school Rules’ suggestions tie in with learning goal 5: ‘...children will ... respect themselves, others and the environment’ (NCCA, 2009, p.17). Many of the ideas put forward for play-based activities correspond to the content of learning goal 6: ‘...children will ... make decisions and choices about their own learning and development’. The proposed play-based activities can further be linked to Aim 3 of ‘Well-being’: Children will be creative and spiritual’ (NCCA, 2009, p.17). Most notably, Aim 3 learning goals 1 and 2 are connected. The focus activities in relation to hygiene mentioned in Project E.Y.E. activity above also link with Aim 2, learning goal 4 of the ‘Well-being’ theme.

Activity Two: How do I feel today?

The activities proposed in Project E.Y.E. Book 1 (*Spiritual, Emotional and Moral Development*), Activity 5 ‘How do I feel today’ (Cullen, 2006, pp. 24-28) will be examined with reference to the *Aistear* theme of ‘Communication’, although a connection to the theme of ‘Well-being’ is apparent. The suggestions from Project E.Y.E. include a circle time activity comprised of verbal and non-verbal exploration of emotions. Expressing feelings through a variety of media such as clay, art materials, books, songs, rhyme and dance is also proposed. The circle time activities relate to Communication Aim 1, learning goals 1, 2 and 3, while the other expressive media activities relate to Aim 1, learning goal 6 and also tie in with Aim 4, learning goals 1 and 4. The discursive aspect of the circle time emotions activity ties in with Aim 2, learning goal 1.

Conclusion

The examples above show how activities from an existing curriculum can be specifically related to the aims and learning goals of *Aistear*, and the tables in Appendix B show how many activities in Project E.Y.E. might be used when planning to meet these learning goals. *Aistear* itself has many suggested sample learning activities for children of different ages, but most early years practitioners will not only wish to supplement these but to demonstrate how their existing practice might fit in with *Aistear*. In so doing, they will need to look at the overall framework, and to reflect on the principles underlying their practice as well as their daily activities with the children. *Aistear*’s extensive guidelines on good practice (NCCA, 2009b), on building partnerships with parents and families, on interactions, on learning and developing through play and on supporting learning and development through assessment all need to be kept in mind when planning a pre-school programme, and activities need to be cross-referenced, as we have done in the examples above, to ensure that all of *Aistear*’s aims and learning goals are met over the course of a medium or long-term plan. If these guidelines and aims are kept in mind, Project E.Y.E. can still be an immensely valuable resource, full of tried and tested ideas for activities with young children.

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Appendix A: Project E.Y.E and Aistear: An Overview

<p style="text-align: center;">PROJECT EYE and AISTEAR <i>Rosaleen Murphy and Marcella Towler,</i> <i>OMEP Ireland 2011</i></p> 	 <p>Project EYE (2nd Edition) OMEP Ireland, 2006</p> <p style="text-align: center;">PROJECT EYE CONTENTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Educator's Handbook > 8 books of activities, including suggestions on extending them for use with parents and caregivers: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Spiritual, emotional and moral development 2. Physical development 3. Cognitive development 4. Creative development 5. Language development 6. Social development 7. Cultural development 8. Environmental Awareness and Development Education  <p style="text-align: right;">OMEP Contact Information</p> <p style="font-size: small;">OMEP: The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment OMEP: An tAonad Náisiúnta na n-Údair Eorpacha OMEP: Organización Europea para la Evaluación y el Desarrollo Educativo Website: www.omep.org Email: omep@omep.org</p> <p style="font-size: x-small; text-align: right;">Project EYE and Aistear ©MEP Ireland 2011</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">OVERVIEW</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Project EYE is a practical curriculum, with a sound theoretical base. > It contains over 120 detailed activities, each with suggestions on how they might be extended for use with parents or caregivers. > It contains a wealth of ideas for activities and projects that help the early years educator to put Aistear's themes and principles into practice > OMEP Ireland is developing a handbook for use with Project EYE, showing how the activities link with Aistear's principles and themes. <p style="text-align: center;">COMMON UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > The role of the adult and of the learning environment are addressed in the educator's handbook, with respect for the rights of the child is fundamental > Active learning is emphasised throughout Project EYE > The activities in Project EYE are all play-based, giving the child relevant and hands-on opportunities to learn. > The activities in Project EYE are organised into developmental domains but the holistic nature of early learning and development is emphasised throughout, and each book carries a reminder of this > Each activity has suggestions for involving parents and caregivers > The importance of relationships, family and community are implicit throughout, and to the fore in Book 1. > Communication and language pervade Project EYE - see <i>Well Being and Communication</i> poster <p style="text-align: center;">TARGET AGE GROUPS</p> <p>Project EYE: Children aged 3 to 4. Project EYE activities are particularly suited to the Young Children age group of Aistear, as most of them can be adapted to suit slightly older or younger children</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">AISTEAR CONTENTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principles • Four Themes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Well-being > Identity and Belonging > Communicating > Exploring and Thinking  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four sets of Guidelines for Good Practice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Building partnerships between parents and practitioners > Learning and developing through play > Supporting learning and development through assessment • Key Messages from Research • On-line support materials <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > The Aistear Toolkit > Research papers <p style="font-size: x-small;">Aistear (2009) is published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Website: www.nccs.ie</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">OVERVIEW</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Aistear is a curriculum framework designed to support good practice in the early years. > It can be used with many different existing curricula > Provided they share the same underlying principles (as Project EYE does) > Aistear's Aims and Learning Goals can be used to ensure that all aspects of learning and development are covered. > The Sample Learning Opportunities in Aistear are suggestions to illustrate the themes- they are not a complete curriculum in themselves. <p style="text-align: center;">AISTEAR UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Children and their lives in early childhood: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the child's uniqueness • equality and diversity • children as citizens 2. Children's connections with others: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relationships • parents, family and community • the adult's role 3. How children learn and develop: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • holistic learning and development • active learning • play and hands-on experiences • relevant and meaningful experiences • communication and language • the learning environment. <p style="text-align: center;">TARGET AGE GROUPS</p> <p>Aistear: Birth to six years Sample learning experiences grouped into Babies, Toddlers and Young Children</p>		

PROJECT EYE AND AISTEAR WELL BEING and COMMUNICATION THEMES: AIMS 1&2 <i>Rosaleen Murphy and Marcella Towler, OMEP Ireland 2011</i>	
 <p>WELL BEING Aim 1: Children will be strong psychologically and socially</p> <p>Project EYE</p> <p>Book 1, Spiritual, emotional and moral development Activity 1- Welcome to Pre-School Activity 2- Fair play to you Activity 3- Becoming independent Activity 4- Let's shake hands Activity 5- How do I feel today? Activity 6- Likes and dislikes Activity 10- Saying I'm sorry Activity 12- Preparing for a new arrival Activity 13- Together we can make this world a wonderful place Activity 15- My autobiography</p> <p>Book 3, Cognitive development Activity 12- Hurrah! Hurrah-It's my birthday. Activity 13- Sharing how we feel through the expressive arts.</p> <p>Book 4, Creative development Activity 11- Sharing how we feel through the expressive arts.</p> <p>Book 5, Language development Activity 4- Let's talk about Henry. Activity 11- The People who help us</p> <p>Book 6, Social development Activity 1- Nice manners Activity 2- A helping hand Activity 4- Sharing is caring</p> <p>Book 7, Cultural development Activity 7- Children just like me</p> <p>Book 8, Environmental Awareness and Development Education Activity 2- The beauty that surrounds us</p>	<p>WELL BEING Aim 2: Children will be as healthy and fit as they can be</p> <p>Project EYE</p> <p>Book 1, Spiritual, emotional and moral development Activity 6- Let's celebrate together-let's eat Activity 9- Yoga, Yoga, Yoga</p> <p>Book 2, Physical development Activity 1- Let's move Activity 1- Let's move Activity 4- Let's roll, throw and catch-basic ball skills Activity 6- I walk the line Activity 7- Scooby-doo I want to move like you Activity 8- Let's play chase Activity 11- More fun with beanbags Activity 14- Let's shape up</p> <p>Book 3, Cognitive development Activity 1- Let's play together Activity 2- Playing with sand Activity 5- One of these things is not like the other-let's sort and match Activity 8- Looking at dimensions Activity 13- Constructing our town</p> <p>Book 4, Creative development Activity 6- Let's collage together Activity 7- Let's play with clay Activity 9- I can create</p> <p>Book 5, Language development Activity 1- Speech and drama time Activity 13- Mime and drama time</p> <p>Book 7, Cultural development Activity 1- It's fun to move to music Activity 6- One two three, one two three, one two three four five six seven. Irish music and Irish dance</p> <p>Book 8, Environmental Awareness and Development Education Activity 3- Tutti Tutti Fruitti Let's talk about fruit</p>
<p>COMMUNICATION Aim 1: Children will use non-verbal communication skills</p> <p>Project EYE</p> <p>Book 1, Spiritual, emotional and moral development Activity 5- How do I feel today? Activity 6- Likes and dislikes</p> <p>Book 2, Physical development Activity 7- I want to move like you</p> <p>Book 3, Cognitive development Activity 3- Making sense of our world</p> <p>Book 4, Creative development Activity 11- Sharing how we feel through the expressive arts Activity 13- The free play period- providing time to create</p> <p>Book 5, Language development Activity 1- Speech and drama time Activity 12- New babies Activity 13- Mime and drama line Activity 15- Memory games</p> <p>Book 6, Social development Activity 1- 'Nice manners' Activity 3- Enhancing the social development of the child Activity 10- Creative drama and play therapy Activity 11- Let's play copycat!</p> <p>Book 7, Cultural development Activity 1- It's fun to move to music Activity 6- Irish music and dance</p> <p>Book 8, Environmental Awareness and Development Education Activity 3- Hurrah, it's Autumn!</p>	<p>COMMUNICATION Aim 2: Children will use language</p> <p>Project EYE</p> <p>Book 1, Spiritual, emotional and moral development Activity 5- How do I feel today? Activity 6- Likes and dislikes</p> <p>Book 3, Cognitive development Activity 5- One of these things is not like the others Activity 15- What's time?</p> <p>Book 5, Language development Activity 1- Speech and drama time Activity 2- Let's talk about Henry Activity 7- Looking at feet Activity 10- Fun with prepositions Activity 11- The people who help us Activity 12- New babies Activity 14- Old Macdonald had a farm Activity 15- Memory games</p> <p>Book 6, Social development Activity 1- Nice manners Activity 3- Enhancing the social development of the child Activity 5- The Hello game Activity 12- Let's be pen pals Activity 13- Our Christmas nativity play Activity 14- Co-operative musical games Activity 15- Let's rap the piggy rap!</p> <p>Book 7, Cultural development Activity 4- Let's go shopping Activity 5- Let's talk about the Down Under Activity 6- Let's use the Irish language to children in the pre-school setting Activity 11- Where's Africa? Activity 14- Irish fairytales and Irish legends</p> <p>Book 8, Environmental Awareness and Development Education Activity 3- Tutti Tutti Fruitti-Let's talk about fruit Activity 4- Learning about the plant Activity 8- Eeency weency spider Activity 9- Let's look at tails Activity 11- Down town</p>

Childminding Ireland: Report on Survey of Registered Members in 2011

Introduction

Childminding Ireland is a membership organisation and a Registered Charity. Founded in 1983 by a small group of Childminders, it has grown to become the National Body for Childminders. This is *Childminding Ireland's* seventh annual Survey of its Registered Members. It is the only annual snapshot of Childminding and of the experiences of Childminders in Ireland.

This Report presents the findings of the Survey and will guide *Childminding Ireland's* focus of activity. Further details on Childminding Ireland and its activities can be found on its website, www.childminding.ie

Aim of the Survey

The aim of this Survey was to:

- Provide information on Childminding, whereby trends can be identified
- Establish the type of services members of *Childminding Ireland* wish to be provided with.
- Identify the members' self-reported training and development needs.
- Identify trends within the Childminding sector.
- Identify current issues facing Childminding in the delivery of their role.

The Sample Selection

The Sample Selection consisted of Registered Members actively engaged in Childminding who are members of *Childminding Ireland*. Registered Membership of *Childminding Ireland* requires:

- Compliance with the Regulations for Pre-school Services 2006 i.e. notify to the HSE if caring for more than 3 non-related pre-school children
- Insured for Childminding
- Cleared by their GP for undertaking Childminding or Statutorily/ Voluntarily Notified
- All household members free of conviction of any offence in relation to a child

A questionnaire was posted to all Registered Members (768) of *Childminding Ireland* in November 2011. The response rate was 34% which is an increase on previous years. Due to the anonymous nature of the survey, no individual feedback was given to the participants.

Please note that some questions allow for more than one answer to be provided thus accumulated percentages exceed 100%

The Findings

Demographics

The indications are that the age spread of Childminders who participated in these surveys has not varied significantly between 2008 and 2011.

Age	2011	2010	2009	2008
34 years and under	22%	20%	25%	32%
35-44 years	47%	48%	53%	48%
45-54 years	23%	23%	16%	14%
Aged 55 or over	8%	9%	5%	6%

While the majority of Registered Childminders are Irish [79%] the membership of *Childminding Ireland* continues to reflect increasing diversity. Amongst its members are British, Scottish, American, Indian, Polish, Chinese, French, German, Swedish, Italian, Czechoslovakian, Nigerian, Lithuanian, Slovakian, South African, and Ghanaian Childminders.

Geographic Locations

Twenty four counties were represented in this 2011 Survey. There were no responses from counties Laois and Longford. Twelve participants did not provide their county details.

Gender

99% of the Participants were female Childminders. One male Childminder participated.

Childcare Responsibilities

A 5% increase has been noted in the number of participants [Childminders] who have their own children. The analysis would indicate that 90% of Participants have childcare responsibilities. Of these, 28% have pre-school children, 57% have school-going children and 24% have older children. 10% of the participants have no children of their own.

Length of time Childminding

The majority of Participants have been Childminding for less than 10 years (78%). 46% have been Childminding for longer than 5 years. The breakdown is as follows: Less than 1 year (12%), 1 -2 years (17%), 3 -5 years (25%), 6-10 years (24%) and more than 10 years (22%).

Qualifications

Childcare Qualifications

In all, 57% of the participants hold nationally accredited childcare qualifications. These figures would indicate a decrease from the number reported in 2010 [69%].

Within this number: 20% hold the Major/Full Award at FETAC Level 5. A further 23% hold one or more modules at FETAC Level 5. The most cited modules include Childcare, Caring for Children and Special Needs.

36% of the participants hold 'Other' childcare qualifications. Listed amongst these other qualifications are: Montessori (Diplomas, Certificates & Introduction courses); Special Needs Assistant, Supervision in Childcare, Registered Nurse, Nursing (BSc), BA (Psychology), BA in Social Work. 26% of the participants chose not to provide information on holding childcare qualifications.

70% of the participants who responded have completed the Quality Awareness Programme (QAP) for Childminders. 36% of the participants who responded have undertaken training in caring for children with additional needs. First Aid training continues to be the most popular form of training among Childminders. 86% of the participants have indicated that they have undertaken First Aid training.

Excellent engagement with City and County Childcare Committees continues with 74% of the participants reported to have attended training events. The findings, however, would indicate an overall decrease this year [79% in 2010]. Of the number of participants who had attended a training event organised by their local City or County Childcare Committee, 54% had attended two or more events [68% in 2010] These included events, activities and topics such as: QAP, Arts & Crafts, First Aid, Fire Safety, Nutrition, Creative Play and Child Protection.

Non Childcare Qualifications

Responses from those holding non-childcare qualifications [52%] would indicate that there is considerable diversity amongst those choosing Childminding as a professional career. This diversity is reflected in the broad range of *qualifications and experiences*. These include Accommodation Management, Dental Surgery Assistant., BA (Adult & Comm. Ed.), H. Dip (Counselling), Bookkeeper, Certificates in Healthcare, Computer Studies, Dip in Catering Management, ECDL, Food Hygiene and Child Protection, Insurance, Life & Pensions & Banking, Manual Handling and Make-up Artistry, Mother of four, Marketing, Qualified Chef, Secretarial, Teacher of Russian Language Degree, Tourism & Hospitality, SAGE Accountancy, Trilingual Secretary, Holistic Massage, Yoga teacher.

Síolta, National Quality Framework

Having established through previous Childminding Ireland surveys [2009 & 2010] the level of awareness of Síolta amongst Registered Childminders [75% knew of Síolta] the question here asked: Would you like to implement the Síolta National Quality Framework in your Childminding practice? 34% replied 'Yes', 14% replied 'No', while 52% replied 'Don't know'. With this question 97% of participants responded.

In last year's survey responses [2010] 55% indicated that they would like to implement Síolta in their Childminding practice. This year [2011] however, results would indicate that fewer Childminders favour implementing Síolta.

Number of Children minded, per Childminder

At the time of this survey [2011], 53% of Childminders reported minding 3 children or fewer at any one time. At the time of this survey, 70% of participants were not related to the children they minded; this represents a decrease on the 2010 figure of 86%. The percentage number of participants minding Babies & Pre-school children Babies [under 15 months] and Pre-school children [children over 15 months old but not yet attending primary school] this year stands at 91%.

After-School Care

In terms of providing after-school care, 45% of the participants reported minding children of school age [i.e. after-school care]. These findings are similar to the previous year [2010] and again show a decrease in after-school care provided by Childminders. While Grandparents and members of the extended family are providing after-school childcare other factors may come into play.

Vacancies

At the time of undertaking this survey, 56% of the participants reported having no vacancies. Of the remaining 44% who did have vacancies, 43% of these reported having between 1 – 3 vacancies. Both these percentage figures would indicate a small increase in the number of vacancies from previous years. In response to the question 'How long have you had these vacancies?' 47% indicated that they had vacancies of 6 months to 1 year [or more].

As with previous survey findings, participants have listed their choice of methods to fill vacancies as: *Word-of-mouth*, *Childminding Ireland's Vacancy Service*, *the City & County Childcare Committees*, *Childminder Advisory Officers* and *Local Resources* [local papers, shops, facilities and centres]. Many of these Childminders described using more than one method to fill their vacancies.

Terms and Conditions

Rates of Pay

Survey results would indicate a considerable variance in fees for Childminding throughout the 24 participating counties.

The national average weekly rate for a full-time place remains the same as the findings last year (€151) as does the range of fees charged: these ranged from as low as €123 to €201. The national average part-time rate also remains the same at €5.00 per hour with the national average hourly rate for after-school also at €5.00. The after-school hourly rate ranged from €3.00 to €7.00. The national average for Sibling discounts would indicate an increase, on last year, in the number of Childminders offering it. Participants from 23 of the 24 counties represented indicated that 96% offer these discounts. A 10% discount was the most popular but discounts ranged from 5% to 50%. The national average number of participants who do not offer a discount for a child attending pre-school/playgroup is 67%. 46% of participants report a reduction in fees for parents in 2011 (34% in 2010).

At the time of this survey, 85% of participants reported having a written Contract or Agreement in place with parents, indicating a small decrease from 2010 (89%) and from 2009 (93%).

Hours Worked

The average figure of 57% of Childminders reported working for 40 hours or more per week reflects a decrease in weekly working hours when compared to previous years [e.g. 63% in 2010]. For those participants who reported working 50 hours or more the findings would indicate an increase of 4% in 2011 [26%]. Many Childminders work part-time with 42% of the participants reporting that they work less than 40 hours per week [28% of these less than 35 hours per week].

Last year *Childminding Ireland* set out to ascertain the impact of the current economic position in Ireland on Childminding. At the time of this survey

(November 2011) 53% of the participants reported a reduction on the number of hours for which parents sought Childminding services. This is an increase (reduction in childcare hours) on the findings from 2010 (45%). The reasons given are varied, with 30% citing family-related financial issues on the part of the parents.

Holidays & Sickness (Absenteeism)

34% of the participants reported that they are paid for their own holidays and 66% are paid when parents take holidays. These findings would indicate a slight decrease from the previous year. [70% reported being paid when parents took holidays with 36% being paid for their own holidays in 2010].

With regard to Childminders charging when children do not attend (parent or child sickness), the responses would indicate:

Yes, usual rate	70%	[73% in 2010]
Yes, but reduced rate	8%	[15% in 2010]
No	22%	[8% in 2010]

The findings from 98% of the participants who responded to the question on Levels of absenteeism – due to children’s illness - from Childminding services would indicate: 46% reported that children (in their care) are ‘rarely sick’, with 23% reporting that children may be absent for ‘one or two days per year’, 24% reporting children may be absent for ‘up to one week per year’, and 5% for children who may be absent for ‘two weeks per year’. Two percent of participants did not answer this question.

Tax

At the time of undertaking this survey, 82% of the participants had registered for tax indicating a 10% increased level of tax compliance from last year’s findings (72%). Of the 94% of participants who responded to the question on availing of the Childminder’s Tax Relief, 58% reported that they avail of this facility. The findings would indicate a slight increase from last year’s figures [54%].

Garda Vetting

At the time of undertaking this survey, 77% of the participants reported to having Garda Vetting. This figure represents an increase on last year's survey figures [69%]. 23% of the participants reported to not yet having Garda Vetting. This figure represents a decrease in last year's number [33%]. Responses would indicate that, of those who do not currently have Garda Vetting, 25% of them have applied for it.

Children with Additional Needs

8% of the participants reported minding children with additional needs. The nature of the additional needs varied, and included Autism, Downs Syndrome, Deafness, Asperger Syndrome, Hydrocephalus and Speech & Language Delay.

Of the 90% of participants who responded to the question on 'pre-school children's language skills', 86% reported that their pre-school children had 'good' language skills.

Free Pre-school Year Scheme

92% of the participants do not operate the Free Pre-school scheme and the majority do not intend to do so in the future [82%]

Childcare Employment and Training Support (CETS) Scheme

85% of the participants reported that 'No' the introduction of this scheme had not impacted on their business while 7% indicated that it had impacted negatively on their business. The findings would indicate that there is a 6% increase, from last year, on perceived negative impact with regard to the CETS.

Sources of Support

The participants have indicated that they avail of a variety of supports in addition to the support provided by *Childminding Ireland*

City/County Childcare Committee

81% of participants indicated that they were in contact with their CCC. These figures would seem to indicate a decrease on 2010's figure [89%]

Childminder Advisory Officer

58% of participants indicated that they were in contact with their CMAO.

Childminders' Network

51% of the participants have indicated that they were involved with a local Childminding Network which is a slight decrease on 2010's figure [53%].

Notification & Inspection

Voluntarily Notified to Childminder Advisor and City /County Childcare Committee

77% of the participants have indicated that they were Voluntarily Notified to their Childminder Advisor and City /County Childcare Committee. At the time of the survey, a further 5% of the Participants indicated that they were engaged in the Voluntary Notification process while 8% reported that they were 'not Voluntarily Notified'

Notified to Pre-school Officer/ Health Service Executive

At the time of undertaking this survey, 49% were notified to their Pre-school Officer/ Health Service Executive. These findings would indicate a slight decrease on last year's figures [51%]. 17% of the participants reported that they have not been inspected.

From those who reported that they had been inspected [83%] their perceptions on how they found the inspection were generated from Q20: *If yes, did you find the inspection positive?* From the responses provided, 85% found the inspection positive. The inspection process was seen as helpful, informative and thorough. Some comments would seem to indicate that some participants found it long, daunting, sometimes intimidating, too formal, with unrealistic demands and expectations [within the context of minding children throughout the inspection].

Issues, Concerns & Challenges

Participants were provided with the opportunity to describe what they saw as the most challenging aspects of their *professional practice*. From a prescribed list of 6 items [including 'Other'] the findings would indicate that the following were the most challenging:

- 1st. Negotiating/Dealing with parents was the most challenging aspect
- 2nd. Staying up to date with changing legislation
- 3rd. Keeping Accounts
- 4th. Keeping Child Records
- 5th. Meeting standards for Inspection (if notified to the Pre-school Officer)

‘Other’ challenges cited by participants included: Filling vacancies, collecting fees, changing standards, policies and legislation, sense of isolation, and paperwork.

The question ‘*What do you find the most difficult in terms of the Childcare element of your work?*’ provided participants with 5 items [including ‘Other’] to report on.

The difficulties reported by the participants included the following:

- 46% ‘getting out and about’ as the most difficult [41% in 2010]
- 25% ‘providing planned activities’ [37% in 2010]
- 22% ‘children’s eating habits’ [29% in 2010]
- 14% ‘sleeping habits’ [19% in 2010]

(The differences here between 2010 and 2011 may reflect the low response rate to these particular items.)

18% of the participants cited ‘Other’ difficulties and these included: constant preparation and planning, balancing family/work life/ homework, managing challenging behaviour, and providing a varied range of activities appropriate to all ages to ensure quality experiences for the children.

Each year Childminders are asked to indicate how often they bring the minded children ‘out and about’ [as a separate activity to the school runs]. This activity of bringing children ‘out and about’ is one of *Childminding Ireland’s* Quality Indicators in Family-based Childcare.

	2011	2010	2009	2008
Daily	33%	35%	36%	30%
At least twice a week	29%	29%	23%	32%
Less often	22%	16%	23%	28%
Hardly ever / never	16%	20%	18%	10%

The two primary barriers reported by the participants were ‘transport’ (21%) and the ‘age of children’ (39%). Insurance was also reported as a barrier (17%). Other barriers which were reported included: needing too many car seats, the adult: child ratio for outings, sleep routines, weather, and parental permission.

The participants were asked to identify what they saw as the three (3) most important issues for them, as Childminders. From a prescribed list of nine (9) items, these issues, of most importance, are listed here:

- Being valued by parents [74%]
- Balancing family and work life [61%]
- Training and professional development [43%]
- Insurance [29%]
- Information on regulation and best practice [25%]
- Fees [24%]
- Tax Compliance / Contributory Pension [19%]
- Marketing your Service [12%]

The participants who responded to the item ‘Other’ [most important issue to you as a Childminder] provided such comments as:

‘being a place minded children want to go’, ‘being valued by minded children’, ‘providing the best possible service to parents with best interest of their children’, ‘giving the best care to the children in my setting’.

Limitations of Survey

As the population surveyed consists of the Registered Members of *Childminding Ireland*, who are self-selecting in seeking to provide a quality, professional childminding service, the survey does not claim to represent the childminding sub-sector as a whole, but it can provide useful information on trends by comparing data obtained with previous, similar self-reporting surveys.

Guidelines for submissions to An Leanbh Óg

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* are Dr. Rosaleen Murphy, Dr Anna Ridgway and Dr Patricia Radley.

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

Papers should be emailed to the Editors at info@omepireland.ie Any queries should also be sent to that address.

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 Editors is final in any matter relating to the publication or non-publication of papers. All papers published in Part One of *An Leanbh Óg* will have been through the process of peer review.

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 Part 2 of the journal *From the Field*. 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. 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. (*except in exceptional circumstances and by prior consultation with the Editors).

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. Please be aware that the journal will also be published on-line on the OMEP Ireland website as a PDF, with a 3 year delay from when the print version is published. See www.ompeireland.ie

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.

REFERENCING

The author, date system should be used for citations in the text.

Examples:

Rogoff (2003, p. 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 of more than three lines should be single-spaced and indented.

All works referred to in the text should 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 below.

EXAMPLES OF THE REQUIRED STYLE OF REFERENCING

BOOKS- examples

Rogoff, B. (2003). *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Roskos, K.A. and Christie, J.F. (eds.) (2000). *Play and Literacy in Early Childhood* Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

CHAPTER IN AN EDITED BOOK- example

Devine, D. (2009) 'Dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in children's social world in school'. In S. Drudy (ed.), *Education in Ireland: Challenge and Change* (pp. 57-72) Dublin: Gill and Macmillan

JOURNAL ARTICLES- examples

Certain, L.K. and Kahn, R.S. (2002). Prevalence, Correlates, and Trajectory of Television Viewing among Infants and Toddlers. *Journal of Paediatrics*. 109, 634-642.

Malaguzzi, L. (1993). For an Education based on Relationships. *Young Children*, 49 (1), 9-12.

ON-LINE MATERIAL- examples

Bergen, D. (2002). The Role of Pretend Play in Children's Cognitive Development. *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, Vol. 4, No. 1. On-line journal article, accessed 14 October 2011 at <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v4n1/bergen.html>

Elliot, J. (2002) *Action Research as the Basis of a New Professionalism for Teachers in an Age of Globalisation*. Presented at a conference to celebrate the centenary year of Beijing Normal University: Beijing, August 2002. Accessed 14 November 2009 at <http://www.research-edu.net/download/JE03.pdf>

NCCA (2009). *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Accessed 26 January 2010 at <http://www.ncca.biz/Aistear/>

UNPUBLISHED THESIS- example

Murphy, Mary R. (2001), *Parental involvement in early years education and care in the Cork area*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University College Cork.

About OMEP

OMEP (Ireland) is a registered charity (Charity Number CHY 14213) dedicated to working for children's needs in Early Education and Care.

Membership of OMEP (Ireland) is open to any person or organisation that supports its aims, including professionals from any discipline with an interest in the well-being of children and their families, administrators, parents or politicians. The benefits of full membership include the annual OMEP (Ireland) journal, *An Leabhbh Óg, the OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies*, the *International Journal of Early Childhood* published by the wider OMEP organisation, and reduced fees for the annual OMEP Ireland conference and other OMEP events. Group membership is available to any organisation with an interest in early childhood.

OMEP (Ireland) is affiliated to OMEP – the World Organisation for Early Childhood Education. This is an international, non-governmental organisation, founded in 1948 to benefit children under the age of 8 years throughout the world. OMEP is currently established in over 70 countries and has a consultative status with UNESCO, UNICEF, the Council of Europe and other international organisations. The aim of OMEP is to promote for all children the optimum conditions that will ensure their well-being, development and happiness in their families, institutions and communities.

OMEP (Ireland)'s Aims and Objectives

OMEP (Ireland)'s aim is to promote the optimum conditions for all children, in order to ensure their well-being, development and happiness, both within their family unit and the wider communities in which they live.

OMEP assists in undertakings that have the objective of improving early childhood education and care in its broadest interpretation. OMEP supports scientific research that positively influences the conditions in which children live, grow and develop.

The organisation is founded on, and will continue to have a commitment to education for peace.

To this end, OMEP

- champions children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
- supports research which may influence the conditions in which children live, develop and play
- helps in any undertaking which will improve early childhood education
- carries out projects which contribute to an understanding between peoples and to peace in the world.
- includes all those who wish to make the world a better place for children, whether as a parent, carer, researcher or policy maker. This includes all those who are interested in health, social policy, early education, psychology, sociology, the law as it relates to children, special education, disadvantage etc

The Patrons of OMEP (Ireland) are Prof. Francis Douglas, Emeritus Professor of Early Childhood Education, University College Cork, Dr. Mary Horgan, School of Education, UCC, and Prof. Nóirín Hayes, Dublin Institute of Technology.

Mission Statement

OMEP (Ireland)'s objective is to use every possible means to promote the optimum conditions for the well-being of all children, their development and happiness within their families, institutions, and society. To this end, OMEP assists any undertaking to improve early childhood education, and supports scientific research that can influence these conditions.

CONTACT OMEP

Patricia O'Connor, President, OMEP Ireland.
c/o School of Education, Leeholme, Donovan's Road, University College Cork.

Email: info@omepireland.ie

Website: www.omepireland.ie

OMEP: World Organisation for Early Childhood Education

OMEP: An Eagraíocht Dhomhanda um Oideachas agus Chúram Luath-Óige

OMEP Éireann: An Eagraíocht um Oideachas agus Chúram Luath-Óige

Please see our **website** for OMEP news, information, downloads and links to early years websites. **Volumes 1, 2 and 3 of An Leanbh Óg** may be downloaded from the Publications section

You will also find full details of our other publications along with order forms and membership forms.



