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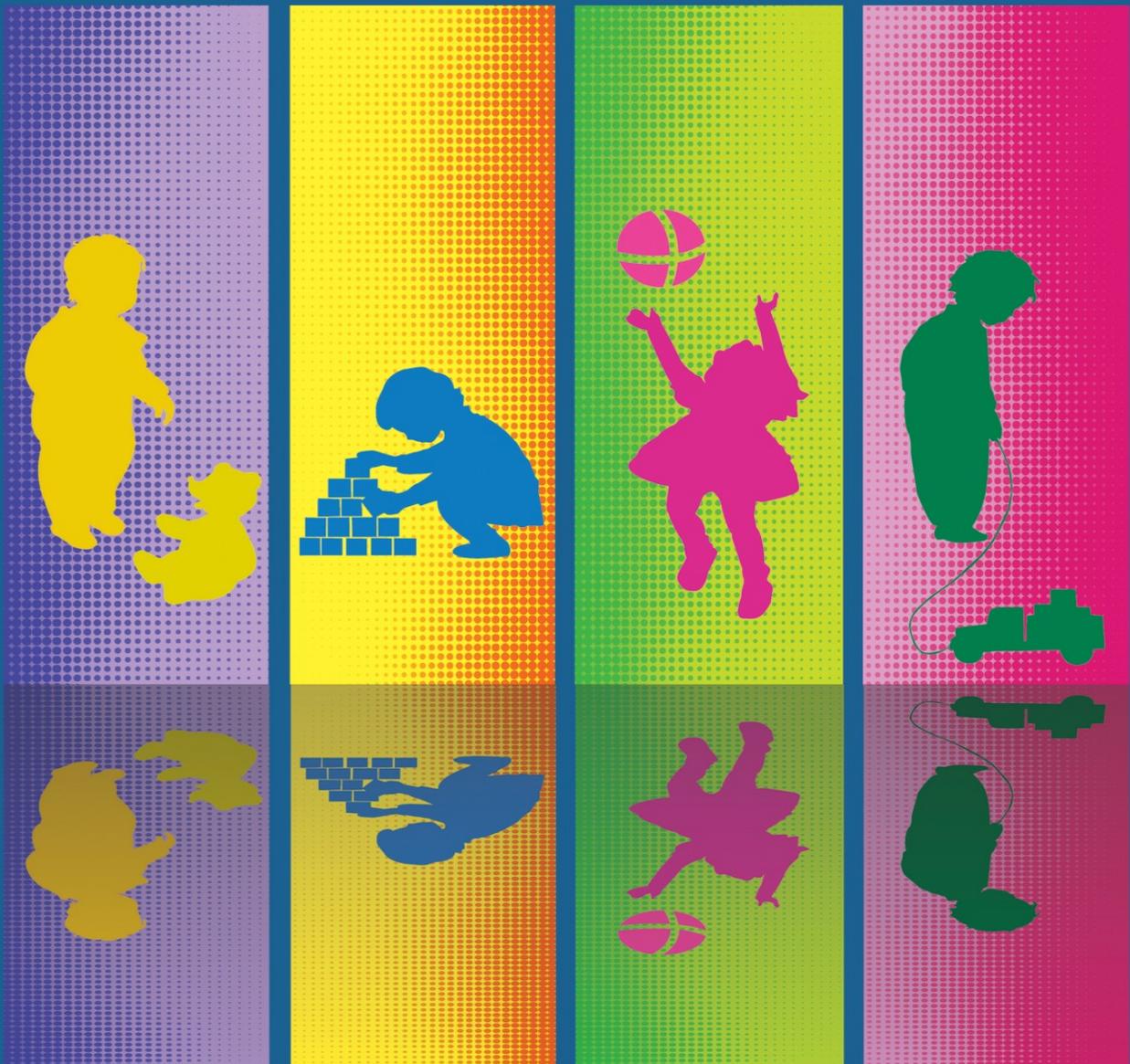


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An Leanbh Óg

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Edited by Vanessa Murphy, Judith E. Butler,
& Frances Clerkin



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Frances Clerkin**

OMEP

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Education and Care Organización Mundial para la Educación Preescolar
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Email: info@omepireland.ie or anleanbhog@gmail.com

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About OMEP

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

OMEP Ireland

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

Mission Statement

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

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Dedication

For Dr. Anna Ridgway, longtime friend and supporter of An Leabh Óg,
OMEP Ireland and World OMEP, with our heartfelt thanks.

Editorial

by Dr Frances Clerkin

On behalf of OMEP Ireland, we are delighted to introduce Volume 14, Issue 1, *An Leanbh Óg*, the OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies.

This year the restrictions to social gathering imposed by the Covid 19 pandemic meant our annual conference was at risk of cancellation. However, with the concerted efforts of the OMEP Committee led by Dr Judith Butler (OMEP Ireland President 2017-2020) and the free technical support/sponsorship volunteered by Dr Wendy Oke (Teachkloud), our annual conference proceeded online with this year's theme *2020 Vision for EYE*; enabling us to reach a wider audience than ever before. Our online conference opened with an impressive array of five keynote speakers. First up was Aoife Nolan, Professor of International Human Rights Law Centre at the University of Nottingham, and advocate for children's rights, followed by Professor Fiona Kearney who has curated numerous art exhibitions in Ireland and internationally, with particular emphasis on how contemporary art practice relates to research directions within academic contexts.

Next up was Tim Gill well known global advocate for children's outdoor play and mobility. Both themes resonate in these times of restrictions and concerns around children growing up in a 'risk -adverse' society. Then followed Cork City based Arran Towers, Director of the arts in education organization *Head Heart & Hands Ltd* or *hehehaha* for short (www.hehehaha.org). Arran enthralled the online audience with his heart-warming descriptions of sustainable practice in 'Mucky Boots' a forest school initiative and his work on the board and as a performer for 'Clowns without Borders Ireland' a humanitarian charity that visits families in Direct Provision Centres and brings fun and laughter there and also to refugee settlements internationally.

Our next keynote speaker was Dr Geraldine French, Head of School of Language, Literacy and Early Childhood Education and the Programme Chair of the Master of Education in Early Childhood Education at Dublin City University. Drawing on her extensive repertoire of research knowledge and experience with our youngest citizens, Dr French invited us all to reflect on the present as well as long term benefits in the adoption of a 'slow relational

pedagogy' with babies and young children. Last but not least was Professor Noírín Hayes, a Visiting Academic at the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, and Professor Emerita, Centre for Social and Educational Research, Technological University Dublin, as well as Patron of OMEP Ireland. Professor Hayes re-iterated the theme of young children as citizens with rights, a thread that ran through all the keynote addresses. Working within a bio-ecological framework of development and through a child rights lens she discussed her research in early childhood education and care (ECEC) with a particular focus on early learning, curriculum, and pedagogy and ECEC policy.

Our online audience were very keen to ask questions and comment on the presentations of our keynote speakers who proved to be engaging, informative and enlightening in their responses. The overall feedback on the experience of the online conference was most positive and bodes well for the future. Full recording of the OMEP Ireland Conference 2020 is available on our website: <https://omepireland.ie/home-1/annual-conference/>

Many of the peer reviewed papers to follow in this volume continue to emphasise the significance of accessing and respecting child perspectives and valuing them as citizens in the present, and not just as future adults. The centrality of relationships and the significance of how children experience environments both indoors and outdoors add to current discussion on what constitutes sustainable practice in ECEC.

Angela Scollan and Dr. Federico Farini provide us with a very thought provoking paper titled 'From enabling environments to environments that enable: notes for theoretical innovation at the intersection between environments, learning and children's agency' Building on the interrogation of the current concept of enabling environment, this article proposes an innovative theoretical discussion focusing on the dynamic relationship between environments, learning and children's agency by introducing a new concept: environments that enable. Environments that enable is a concept that aims to flip the narrative underpinning the concept of enabling environments, in particular the position of children and adults in educational contexts. In this paper, 'Forest school' outdoor spaces with their opportunities for children to explore, risk take, collaborate are offered as a salient example, whilst acknowledging that outdoors environments per se do not necessarily constitute *environments that enable*.

A pedagogy of trust is viewed as central to such environments whether located indoors or outdoors. The image of the child in such relationships is as

agents with autonomous rights and responsibilities. Such interactions can be seen to empower and enable children as decision makers, explorers and problem solvers. The adult role in safeguarding and protecting children is acknowledged within the context of such trusting relationships as opposed to a more adult-centric approach promoting risk aversion. Environments that enable are proposed as an example of ECEC contexts favouring children's agency and *therefore supporting education practice to fulfil the dictate of article 12 of the UNCRC.*

Arlenne Heeney adds to current discourse on what constitutes 'quality' in ECEC in Ireland in her paper titled: 'Investigating the construction of quality within early years settings in Ireland through the Early Years Education-Focused Inspection process'. She observes that: *Although there has been considerable discussion on the topic of quality in early childhood in recent years, there is currently a limited amount of research that exists on the Early Years Education-Focused Inspection process within the Irish context.* This research paper highlights current practices of quality provision in early years settings in Ireland. The first phase reported here, focused on early years inspectors' perspectives of quality through content analysis of a sample of published Early Years Education-Focused Inspection (EYEI) reports. The findings provide evidence of current understandings of quality in early years settings in Ireland through the Early Years Education-Focused Inspection process.

Sandra O'Neill brings a focus to some topical concerns regarding sustainable practice in ECEC in this paper which acknowledges: *The ubiquitous nature of digital technologies in children's lives.* Her paper is titled: 'Hands-on experience has completely changed my perception of technology in Early Childhood'– an exploration on the impact of a technology module on the attitudes of Early Childhood undergraduates'. This study examines the perspectives of early childhood education student teachers (ECEST) in Ireland in relation to children's use of technology in ECEC at a time of: *a changing policy landscape, an excess of varied and sometimes conflicting research on the impact of these devices and the recent pivot to online learning prompted by the COVID 19 pandemic.* The ECEST who participated in this study engage in a compulsory technology module as part of their undergraduate programme. Preliminary study findings indicate that a technology module such as this can prompt student educator's reconsideration of attitudes and beliefs as well as their role in advocating for the appropriate use of digital technology in ECEC.

Amid growing concerns about childhood obesity and its long-term effects on health and well-being, **Dr Jennifer Pope and Dr Maria Dermiki** adopt a life-course approach to understanding how all stages of a person's life are interwoven (Delaney and McCarthy 2011, Delaney and McCarthy 2014) and how this can impact on food choice of older people (aged over 55). The paper is titled 'A lasting imprint: The impact of childhood mealtime experiences on food choices into older adulthood: Short research report'. *According to recent reports, obesity in Ireland is recognised as a major public health challenge, starting from early childhood where 19% of 3-year-olds are overweight and 5% are obese. The Healthy Weight for Children (0-6 years) Framework focuses on prevention at young age, recognising that lifestyle choices are established at young age (HSE, 2018).* In this report, Phase 2 of the study findings with an emphasis on childhood, indicate current and significantly, past experiences, mainly in childhood impact on current food choices. The implications from a child's rights perspective are manifold in terms of child well-being and well-becoming. The authors highlight issues of policy and practice in key areas that need to be addressed as a matter of urgency including: *food poverty in families, children who are homeless or living in emergency accommodation and children living in direct provision.*

The study focus of the paper by **Colette Saunders and Dr Susan McDonnell** continues a thematic thread running throughout the keynote addresses on the centrality of relationships in ECEC. The paper is titled 'Power and Control: Pay and Conditions, Workforce Composition and the Genderised Nature of it all'. It takes the form of a critical evaluation of the impact of power and control within *gendered care relationships* specifically in consideration of the Early Years workforce in the Republic of Ireland and its highly genderised nature and current lack of a professional identity. *Marketisation of the ECCE profession and the manifestation of lack of autonomy, professional identity and the Governments role in developing supportive workforce policies are briefly explored, before a final paragraph which considers the various division of labour models and how one such model maintains gender inequalities.* Consideration is given as to what steps need to be taken in order to raise the role and professional identity of the Early Years educator. One suggestion is that a professional body be assigned a role with the aim of: *promoting a sense of power, control and direction for the workforce which, up to now has been lacking.*

The qualitative study by **Córa Gillic** is titled: 'They'd floor you, they really would...they are capable of learning anything' – Irish preschool practitioners'

self-reported practices on young children learning mathematics'. The study topic reflects the increasing focus on STEM (DES 2017) in its exploration of the perspectives of a sample of early childhood educators in Ireland with regard to their beliefs and practice of mathematics in preschool settings. Findings indicate overall positive attitudes held by participants towards mathematics in pre-school education. However, there were also indicators of a general focus on a narrow range of mathematical concepts such as counting, shapes and measures. *This narrow curricular view of pre-school mathematics is in opposition to the broader perspective of mathematics envisioned in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011). International research also supports the implementation of a broader mathematical foundation at preschool level.* The author recommends that training in early childhood mathematics be made available to all early childhood educators including cross-sectoral training (pre-school and primary school) which could prove particularly beneficial as children transition from one educational setting to another. She furthermore recommends that larger-scale research be conducted: *to ascertain the general standard of Irish pre-school mathematics provision and to investigate the nature of mathematical activities provided*

The themes of relationships as well as why nurturing relationships matter within ECEC environments are prevalent throughout the keynote addresses and are further developed here by **Dr Geraldine French**. The paper is titled: 'Slow Relational Pedagogy with Babies and Toddlers' This paper directs us to three themes derived from literature including the rationale for a focus on children under three years of age, it identifies general characteristics of professional practice in ECEC contexts for engagement with and support of this age group and finally, a specific focus is given *to the slow relational pedagogy* identified as a necessary requirement for young children's optimal experiences in ECEC. A children's rights perspective is reflected in the understanding that: *Babies and toddlers need low-stress-facilitating environments that support physical movement and play organised, literally, from the babies and toddler's perspective.* Post pandemic this paper calls for more robust investment in ECEC because the impact of adverse childhood experiences on the developing brain and other biological systems are now well established (NSCDC, 2020). It is proposed that this requires policies that value, support and offer ongoing training to those working with our youngest citizens in

order to develop the secure attachments and give and take responsive relationships identified within the concept of slow relational pedagogy.

Complementing the children's rights based perspective of the keynote addresses and reinforcing a central message from the previous paper that early intervention is vital, **Dr Shirley Martin, Lyn Buckley and Katherine Harford** present an engaging study evaluation of a government funded community-based prevention and early intervention programme in Ireland. Their paper is titled: 'Child and adult perspectives on implementing a quality improvement strategy in ECEC settings'. *Using participatory research guided by a children's rights framework and informed by UNCRC Article 12, children's voices are being included in the project evaluation through participatory research methods including photo-voice and talk and draw methods.* The findings from the qualitative interviews with early years' practitioners post intervention were merged with the children's data in order to improve the overall implementation of the programme.

Issues of quality in ECEC are further explored in **Jessica Lee's** paper which brings us 'An Exploration of Managers' Perspectives on the Role in Managing Community Early Years Services: Influences and Insights.' Given the absence of a requirement of a qualification for supernumerary managers in Early Years services in Ireland, the study seeks to gain insight into the perspectives of the participants on the relationships between internal and external factors impacting on their roles in leading and managing their services. *A key implication of the findings is the significant impact that the participants' roles had on their emotions, and in turn, the impact of these emotions on their service and how they carry out their roles.* Based on the findings recommendations for the future include development of training for managers in emotional intelligence, and the provision of networking supports at policy level. A further recommendation is for wider research from the perspectives of managers across the private and community ECEC sector in Ireland, particularly relating to emotional intelligence and how this may impact on managers' roles, perspectives, and quality of their services.

Dr Annie Cummins reiterates a message on the expansive and creative possibilities within the use of digital technologies with young children explored earlier in Sandra O'Neil's paper. This fascinating study is centred on children's experience of play in School Age Childcare (SAC) settings in Ireland. The paper is titled: *Capturing children's experience of play through*

animation. Access to children's perspectives is sought and vividly conveyed through the process of using stop-motion animation as a visual research method with children. While the visual narratives that were produced cannot be considered as 'authentic' insights into the experiences of play, they do reflect the ambiguity of play itself and the multiple meanings children give to their experiences. The paper concludes with some valuable reflective insights for future research and practice on some of the strengths and challenges of the use of this form of visual research method.

Rebecca Knox and Dr Mary Maloney explore the recurring theme of *relationships* in ECEC in an exploration of the vital connection between management and quality in ECEC. Their paper has the compelling title: 'Government Inaction is not an option. Exploring the relationship between management and quality Early Childhood Care and Education Provision in Ireland'. The study adopts an ecological lens in the examination of ECEC governance across the domains of macro -level governance involving government departments with responsibility for the ECEC sector in Ireland, meso level governance involving State agencies; Pobal and TUSLA and also micro-level governance involving setting managers in ECEC. *The findings indicate while there is a direct correlation between management and quality, the State, at a macro-governance level, does little to prepare or support ECEC managers for the complexity of their role. The Government is called on to engage in developing a sustainable workforce development plan for the ECEC sector to support managers to: translate the demands of macro-policy into practice in the everyday life at micro-setting level in the best interests of children.*

The final line above is perhaps a good note to bring this editorial to a conclusion because the best interests of children have always been at the heart of OMEP's mission of promoting the well-being of all children and their right to high quality education and care. An Leabhbh Óg continues to serve as an instrument in promotion, publication and dissemination of research in relation to early childhood education and care and also to stimulate discussion, debate and promote positive change in relation to our work with, for and on behalf of children.

We encourage beginner and established researchers to submit a paper to be considered for future editions of An Leabhbh Óg. The guidelines for authors of this peer reviewed journal are available in this issue and also online on the OMEP Ireland website <http://www.omepireland.ie>. Special categories of

paper are sometimes requested (e.g. 'From the field' or Student of the year Award). Please note that we share regular updates on our social media platforms and can be found on Twitter @LeabhAn and on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/OMEPIreland>.

Once again, many thanks to all our readers, supporters, contributing authors and external reviewers of An Leabh Óg. A special thanks also to my dedicated, insightful, helpful and ever good- humoured co-editors, Dr Judith Butler and Dr Vanessa Murphy

Dr Frances Clerkin,
Co Editor of An Leabh Óg, 2021

From Enabling Environments to Environments that Enable: Notes for Theoretical Innovation at the Intersection between Environments, Learning and Children's Agency



Angela Scollan & Federico Farini

Abstract:

This article aims to invite reflection on the features of environments that can enable children's sense of self, well-being and self-esteem. *Environments that enable* refer to social contexts that acknowledge children's capability to construct their own social worlds. The dimensions of practice that contribute towards the development of environments that enable are considered. The article argues that the quality of learning is an outcome of the access and quality of experiences and opportunities for children to explore and reflect on. Whilst this is discussed in both Montessori's approach and Malaguzzi's Reggio Model, it represents the core tenet of environments that enable.

Introduction

Since 2012, the term *enabling environment* has been one of four themes of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), the core document that defines guidelines for pedagogical practice in English and Welsh Early Years settings. An enabling environment is described as a rich, stimulating and safe space offering opportunities to play, to be, to learn and to explore both physically and mentally. The EYFS describes the environment for play and learning in terms of the following three aspects: the emotional environment relating to atmosphere and feelings, the outdoor environment relating to accessible spaces and activities, the indoor environment relating to accessible spaces and activities. Environments that enable strive to be children-centred so that children are valued and encouraged to be independent, resilient, capable, confident and self-assured.

However, the idea of enabling environment is not exempt from criticism and some of its ideological underpinnings can be unpacked. Keevers and Treleaven (2011) invite to deconstruct 'tools of the trade' and 'ways of working' by asking reflective and diffractive questions. An interrogation of the concept of enabling environment as presented by the EYFS reveals an adult-centric vision: adults are the demiurges who construct the rich, stimulating and safe space where children *find* offering opportunities to play, to be, to learn and to explore both physically and mentally that are *offered* to them. Adult-centric refers to the situation where by adults enable children through the environment.

Flipping the Narrative

Building on the interrogation of the current concept of enabling environment, this article proposes an innovative theoretical discussion focusing on the dynamic relationship between environments, learning and children's agency by introducing a new concept: *environments that enable*. Environments that enable is a concept that aims to *flip the narrative* underpinning the concept of enabling environments, in particular the position of children and adults in educational contexts.

Enabling environments and environments that enable do not entertain a dichotomic relationship. Rather, the invite is to see them as two positions of a

continuum of pedagogical practices: the semantic of enabling environments includes the empowerment of children as decision-makers while the role of adults is recognised by the semantic of environments that enable. Nevertheless, a difference between the two concepts concerns the ontological status of children. Both enabling environments and environments that enable acknowledge children's capability to construct their own social worlds; however, environments that enable position children as the *enabled* and as the *enabler* that is, as stakeholders and authors of their own learning within the context of early years educational practice. The ethos and practice of environments that enable recognise the child as an autonomous producer of knowledge and support the child in the expression of that knowledge (Rinaldi, 1998; 2005; Pahl, 2007; Edwards *et al.*, 2011; Edwards *et al.*, 2016).

Enabling environment describes a positive action by adults to transform a previously non-enabling environment, therefore emphasising the role of adults-as-enablers. Environments that enable positions the environment, understood as the network of relationships and interactions, at the centre. It is that network that enables, with the active participation of children as authors of knowledge and responsible decision-makers, not the creative actions of adult demiurges. An introduction to what environments that enable look like does not explain what they are. What is the image of children underpinning environments that enable? What are the characteristics of practitioners-children interactions in environments that enable? What are the characteristics of environments that enable?

These are crucial questions, for an article that argues how environments that enable represent an instance of pedagogical methodology that promises to fill the gap, signalled by pedagogical and sociological research (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Baraldi & Iervese, 2012; Mica, Peisert & Winczowek, 2012; Baraldi & Farini, 2013; Warming, 2013) between theoretical and ideological representations of childhood on the one hand and implementation of children's participation and self-expression in actual practices on the other hand. Paraphrasing Freire's distillation of progressive pedagogy, environments that enable are created *with* children, *for* children, *from* children *for* adults. The concept of environments that enable aligns with a culture of childhood that places particular emphasis on socialising children towards an understanding of their own competencies in planning, designing, monitoring and managing social contexts (Matthews, 2003) rather than towards the

achievements of pre-determined, whether inscribed in curricula or not, states-of-development. Environments that enable can be supported only by adults who welcome the risk of trusting children (Baraldi & Farini, 2013). The next section will discuss trust as a pillar of theory and practice of enabling environments.

1. A Pedagogy of Trust

Trust supports decision-making in situations of risk (Kwong, 2019); following Milona (2019), trust is composed of a *desire* and a *belief* that the positive outcome of risky decision-making is possible. Applying this concept to environments that enable, belief refers to the need of trusting children, albeit within the limits required by safe-guarding policies, as agents with autonomous rights and responsibilities. However, Boronski and Hassan (2015) suggest that trust is intrinsically fragile in the domain of education, because adult-child relationships are based on the position of children as *not-fully-competent-yet* (Baraldi & Corsi, 2016). D'Cruz research (2018) suggesting that trust is domain-specific can explain why the level of trust in children can vary dramatically in different social contexts, for instance moving from the family to education.

With regard to trust in educational contexts, Tovey (2007) and Tovey and Waller (2014) argue that adults may prevent children-decision making because of past experiences, expectations or even fear of their own responsibility. Risk-prevention attitudes *dis-able* environments, limiting the opportunities for children to practice decision-making in situations of uncertainty.

Key to environments that enable is trust in children decision-making. Adults can create enabling environments where the risk of children-decision making is reduced by adults planning. However, the prevention of risk limits the scope and meaning of children's decision making, and with it the meaning and scope of the empowerment of children.

If the focus shifts from the adults and what they can do to combine prevention of risk and children's empowerment as agents to the networks of relationships, the well-known paradox between participation and protection disappears. Both protection and participation are co-constructed in interactions framed by equality in the possibility to contribute to

communication. Equality that extends to the access to the status of enable-r and enable-d.

Environments that enable is a relationship-based culture of education that requires mutual trusting commitment and can only thrive if the expectations that orientate communication concern personal expressions rather than role performances. The example of *pedagogia relazionale* from the Reggio Emilia approach (Rinaldi, 2006) is of course relevant; however, environments that enable are characterised by a peculiar attention to trusting commitments. Empowering and enabling children as decision-makers, rather than promoting risk aversion has been advocated as a core component of children-centred pedagogies (Knight 2012; Tovey and Waller 2014), because shared problem-solving require space for thinking and trial and error that are amplified by hands-on experiences where children deal with risks (Knight 2013; Solly 2015).

Interactions can either reinforce trust or invite sceptical attitudes. Educational interactions are not loose talk: they construct a local context where the adult participants embody the 'adult world' in the eyes of children. Adult participants' attitudes towards children's display of agency in form of choices or personal initiatives can promote children's trust in personal expression but if such attitudes are negative, distrust and risk-avoidance will prioritize a safer retreat into role performances. Domenicucci and Holton (2017) describe the interactive expansions or retreat of trust as a two-place relation. By suggesting that children's trusting commitments are based on lived experiences, because trust is necessarily relational, and levels of trust are influenced by specific interactions, Domenicucci and Holton indirectly, but effectively, make the case for environments that enable as agents of change in adults-children's relationships and therefore in children's disposition towards educational practice. They also make the case for the crucial importance of adult-children interaction and the position of children in it. The unstable foundation of trust in education makes environments that enable a particularly interesting example of pedagogical innovation where participants replace distrust and control with trust and risk. Environments that enable are not only an interesting object of theorising, but also a powerful resource for change.

2. Agentic Environments Built upon Listening

Trust creates favourable conditions for the recognition of children's agency. Moosa-Mitha, offers a clear definition of agency as the possibility for children to "respond, mitigate, resist, have views about and interact with the social conditions in which they find themselves" (2005: 380). This definition of agency accounts for three interrelated dimensions: 1) action (*respond, mitigate, resist*), 2) perspective (*have views*) and 3) social context (*interact with social conditions*). Agency does not merely refer to participation in social situations, but to a form of social participation where children's actions are not determined by adults' actions, and therefore fits neatly with the philosophy underpinning environments that enable.

Although important social constraints for children's autonomous actions are acknowledged, for instance with regard to safeguarding and protection of the child (Bjerke, 2011; Valentine, 2011; Oswell, 2013; Wyness, 2014; Baraldi, 2015; Farini, 2019; Scollan and Farini, 2019), agency entails the autonomous capacity of 'acting' knowledge in social interactions (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Moss, 2009; Bath, 2013; Pascal and Bertram, 2013). Environments that enable can be approached as an example of contexts that favour children's agency, therefore supporting educational practice to fulfil the dictate of article 12 of the UNCRC.

A robust tradition in social research, considers children's capability to both shaping their own lives and influencing their social contexts as evidence of agency, if influencing social contexts is underpinned by children's choices (Lansdown, 2005; Markstroem and Halladén, 2009; Baraldi, 2014). This article argues that children's capability to both shaping and influencing their social contexts is at the same time the presupposition and the pedagogical outcome of environments that enable. Agency in environments that enable relates a communication structured by expectations of personal expression rather than expectation of role performances.

Methodologically, epistemologically and ethically, environments that enable are underpinned by a choice: doing *with* children, rather than *for children* (Freire, 1998). Children in environments that enable are positioned as learners, explorers, decoders but also as problem-solvers, scientists, creators. They are the challengers, the investigators and the risk assessors and are recognised as the authors of valid knowledge. This multifaceted position of children within environments that enable can be facilitated by sustained-shared thinking and listening (Prout, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford & Hallet, 2014;

Waller, 2014) based on a form of educational communication that has recently invited attention of research: *facilitation* of children's agency (Wyness, 2013; Baraldi, 2014; Baraldi & Iervese, 2017; Baraldi *et al.*, 2018). Facilitation is a form of communication characterised by the interaction between adults' actions that enhance, and children's actions that display, agency.

Facilitation can take form in a wide array of actions. A non-exhaustive list may include promotional questions to invite clarifications and further discussions; acknowledgement tokens confirming and appreciating the interlocutors' positioning; comments to support the ongoing interaction; formulations aiming to secure a shared understanding of the gist of previous turns of talk and their implications. Several researches have examined the specific impact of facilitative actions in a range of social context (for instance Bohm, 1996; Gergen, McNamee, and Barrett, 2001; Black, 2008; Baraldi, 2013; Baraldi *et al.*, 2018; Baraldi and Gavioli, 2020,). Notwithstanding their varied morphology, facilitative actions share a common endeavour: upgrading children's status and authority as producers of valid knowledge and decision-makers. Based on the positive value of children's active and equal participation, on the treatment of children as persons who can express their own perspectives, experiences and emotions, and on expectations of unpredictable personal expressions, facilitation is the fundamental structure of any interaction that sustains environments that enable.

Facilitation creates expectations concerning: the fair distribution of active participation in interaction (equity), the display of sensitivity towards the interlocutors' interests and needs (empathy), the treatment of disagreements and alternative perspectives as enrichments in communication. When such expectations become a stable structure of educational interactions, dialogic education is constructed.

Dialogue is "the starting point, whereby children are consulted and listened to", ensuring that "their ideas are taken seriously" (Matthews, 2003: 268). In dialogue, adults' actions show active listening, support children's self-expression, take children's views into account, involve them in decision-making processes, and share power and responsibility with them (Shier; 2001). The adjective *dialogic* thus effectively connotes the methodology of facilitation: adults as facilitators are agents of dialogue because facilitation supports children's authorship of valid knowledge (equity), values personal expressions (empathy) and replaces hierarchical control of the interaction with coordination of different perspectives.

By upgrading children's status and authority in the interaction, facilitation positions children as agents who can choose the ways and contents to express their perspectives and experiences, co-constructing the social contexts of their experiences (Wyness, 2013; Baraldi & Iervese, 2014; 2017). Environments that enable are contexts of dialogic communication where facilitation promotes children's choices; for this reason, agency is at the same time their presupposition and their outcome (Bamberg, 2011). Facilitation promotes and celebrates children's autonomous production of knowledge, and the interactional construction of environments that enable is a possible outcome of it. Facilitation promotes children's agency, including children's autonomous initiatives in different ways. On the one hand, facilitators' actions can enhance children's choices; however, in environments that enable where adults and children are enabler as well as enabled, children's contributions can enhance professionals learning and participation in child-led interactions.

While the 'Reggio Approach' was becoming globally renowned, Malaguzzi wrote the poem *ed invece il cento c'è* (no way, the hundred is there; Malaguzzi, 1997) to communicate the idea that whilst adults impose to the child one world to learn about and to live it, children have the capability to build and inhabit one hundred and more worlds. The poem captures an image of children who are competent and capable communicators, who are able to share their thinking, feelings, interests and knowledge with those who are willing and able to listen. *Listening* is both key to environments that enable and a fundamental condition of children's agency (James and James, 2008; James, 2009; Oswell, 2013; Leonard, 2016). In line with Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2006), facilitation recognises that those working with children need to develop respectful listening to children. Alderson (2006) and Penn (2011, 2014) support a refocus and extension of the somewhat general phrase of 'listening to children'. Lundy (2007) argues that listening is one thing, hearing and responding to what a child is saying or expressing is completely different. Listening, hearing and acting upon what children express are important themes to be explored when considering if, and how, what environments enable is children's agency rather than more effective role performances. Within environments that enable, learning is viewed as a genuine partnership, where voices and choices of all stakeholders are listened to.

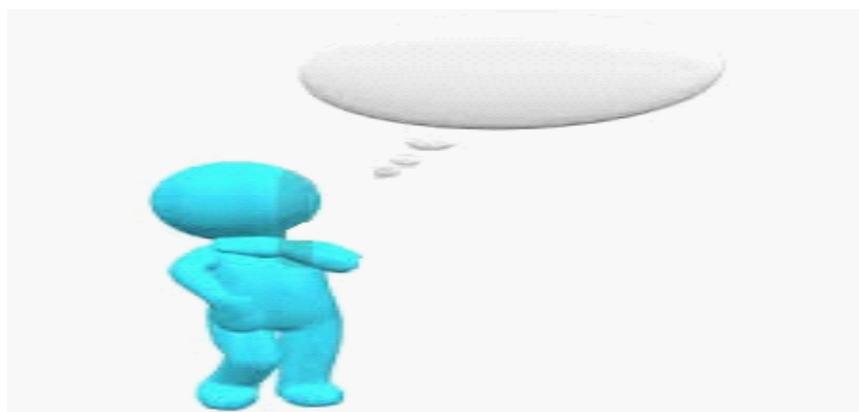
3. The Voices of Children in the Environments that Enable

Similarly, to several voices within the debate on educational practices, Wyness (2000) and the Organisation Mondiale Pour l'Éducation Prescolaire (OMEP, 2010) recognise that if children's agency is to be taken seriously, adults should listen to perspectives and ideas expressed directly by children in all matters that relate to their life experiences. Environments that enable are social spaces where the voices of children are listened to and facilitated in their expression. Critical pedagogy does not rely on slogans, and this is true with regard to 'voices of children'; the articulation of 'voices of children' may be inaugurated with reflection on the concept of 'giving children a voice'. Firstly, it is pertinent to ask the questions: *Who is giving children a voice? Do not children have a voice already?*

Alderson (2008) argues that children's voices are not something that should be given; rather, it is something that children already have. Adult-defined discourse can hold power to the extent that 'voices' from children are viewed as being *given* by the adult. This has implications in practice because it makes the role of the adults pivotal as, for example, within the methodological and epistemological underpinnings of *enabling environment* as opposed to *environments that enable*.

If environments that enable are contexts of communication where expectations that structure interaction concern adults' promotion of the voices of children, it is important to consider, following Lundy (2007) and Jones and Welch (2013), that structures or interactions within educational practice can silence both voices and participation of children, due to dominant rules or behavioural sanctions emanating from pedagogy and power hierarchies.

Adults' professional identities, current legislation, organisational cultures and dominant narratives concerning intergenerational relationships impacts on how children's intentions, expression and voices are heard and responded to (Wyness, 2013). Adults' position within cultures of practice and its influence on patterns and levels of listening can be described using the concept of *listening filters* that can either promote or prevent agentic listening to occur (Farini, Scollan and McNeill, 2020). A model is offered below to illustrate the dynamic relationship between listening filters and children's voices and choices, what has been referred to previously as 'children's agency'.



Inspirational for the concept of listening filters, Osler and Starkey (2010) discuss how perspectives on the rights of the children are based on social, economic and cultural positioning of the actors, thus going beyond a prescriptive approach to their implementation. Trevarthen (2011) and Alderson (2012) build upon Osler and Starkey's point arguing that the contextualized 'child' is dependent upon the environment, available resources and the adults that inhabit their world to capitalise on their innate self-advocacy. This consideration for the influence of the social contexts is surely integral to the concept to children's agency as discussed in section 3 of this article.

Environments that enable can be sustained only if adults access space and time to listen to and interact with children so that children can speak and be heard within a rights-based lens. Jones and Walker (2012) and Jones and Welch (2013) propose an insightful reflection that can be used by professionals who wish to promote children's voice within environments that enable: Jones, Walker and Welch invite adults to see themselves as *commentators* of children's contribution within dialogic interactions. As commentators, adults build their contributions around children's ones, to emphasise a vision of children as active agents with opinions and valid contributions to make. Environments that enable are built upon a pedagogy of listening; what are their characteristics?

4. The Characteristics of Environments that Enable with an Example and some Consideration on Management

Environments that enable are physical and social spaces that promote decision-making and action, where children are empowered to be agents in their own learning, as well as in other participants' learning. As previously introduced, the main characteristic of environments that enable is that they are co-constructed by adults with children. Sylva and colleagues influential report (2004) *The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education* (EPPE) does not explicitly discuss environments that enable; however, the characteristics of positive learning environments illustrated by the report relates the features of environments that enable: continuing dialogue that can be initiated either by the adults or the children, strong parent partnerships, and staff with up-to-date knowledge and understandings of how to combine care and education to respond to young children's holistic needs.

In England, where the authors of the article work and research, important policies and position papers such as the *Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage* (DfE, 2012), the *EYFS framework* (DfE, 2017) and the *Pre-school Learning Alliance* (2017) converge in recognising 'enabling environments' as indoor and outdoor spaces that nurture a sense of belonging, offer children risk-taking opportunities, encourage individual exploration and celebrate diversity and difference. Whilst those characteristics of enabling environments are surely not adverse to children's agency, environments that enable are much more than that, because the position of children at their very foundations concerns the status of children as enabler and constructors of knowledge *for themselves and for adults*.

What marks a difference between enabling environments and environments that enable? The main difference is a shift in the energy that fuels the environment, from adults' decision-making to relationships and interactions, where a variety of contributions and positions are woven together to create a well-organised, planned, safe and challenging learning situation. Environments that enable do not depend on demiurgic agents; rather, the source of enabling is the living amalgamation of spaces, people, identities, emotions, communication and shared experiences. Environments that enable are more than the adult and more than the child, they are *contexts* for intent, agenda and interest. The power of relationship pervades any action and any understanding of action, going much further than what any adult can offer or plan. Environments that enable have a 'more than' affordance and value. More than the child, more than the adult and more than the resources:

they are networks of interactions structured by expectations of personal expressions that favours trust and active participation as persons rather than roles, generating dialogic forms of education.

If environments that enable are interpreted as a form of communication rather than a set of resources, the distinction between indoor environments and outdoor environments vanishes. Either indoor or outdoor, an environment enables when children are not prevented from developing their 'self' holistically while their individual well-being, health and learning needs are met. Freedom, spaces, resources and well-thought-out opportunities need to be provided to ensure this (Maynard and Waters, 2007). Skilled and knowledgeable professionals can justify choice of resources, how and why environments enable and empower, how and why staff are deployed, and how progress and next steps are being questioned with children via dialogic interaction and reflection (Canning, 2014; Murray, 2017; Ofsted, 2017). The professional who is committed to the maintenance of environments that enable is an organiser of learning that is always ready to learn, a maestro who is prepared to be taken away from the music.

Both indoor and outdoor spaces can be the substratum of those networks of interactions that we define environments that enable. However, it is important to consider important research, for example Leather (2012), and its recognition that outdoor provision enhances life skills, health and well-being, which boost well-being, emotional literacy, and personal, social and emotional development.

An example of how outdoor spaces can be the physical bedrock of environments that enable is offered by the Forest School movement and its ethos based on outdoor and woodland education, celebrating freedom and spiritual connectedness (Forest School Association, 2018). The Forest School philosophy that underpins practice celebrates and promotes enthusiasm for nature, emotional literacy, risk taking and problem-solving skills, which in turn enhance self-esteem and confidence (O'Brien and Murray 2007; Constable 2014; Murray 2017). In fact, during outside exploration and 'being', children can be at one with the environment and in the environment. Steiner's educational approach recognises that being outside, in nature, with a never-ending resource of open-ended opportunities supports children's spiritual and creative dimensions. Children are influenced positively whilst interacting with the natural environment; this is empowered by the presence of an adult who is prepared to offer a balanced approach with repetitive

guidance and interaction when needed, which enables rather than disempowers (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002; Mathers *et al.*, 2014; Wood, 2014 2015).

Against any one-dimensional ontological reductionism of the child, Forest School, and with-it environments that enable, promote and celebrate the unique skills and knowledge of each child, creating opportunities to express them. In the methodology of Forest School, outdoor spaces offer opportunities for children's exploration, risk-taking, co-operation and reflection, and for this reason Forest School can be approached as a methodology compatible with the development of environments that enable. However, outdoor environments do not enable per se; what marks a difference is the network of relationships and interactions between participants that are observed by agents. And, of course, what marks a difference is the positioning of the child as the unique child, who is at the same time a unique person, a learner and a teacher before being a pupil.

Within environments that enable, children's decision-making is not conditional on adults' approval. This is not necessary when interactions are based on trust. Children's choices, decisions and experiences do not wait for an adult to concede their legitimacy. Also, they are not the consequence of adults' planning and decision-making. Rather, they are building blocks of environments that enable. Children's choices, decisions and experiences are embedded in practice and planning by education professionals who are both willing and able to listen to children's unlimited and unique expressions.

However, the centrality of children's empowerment and the willingness of the adults to trust children do not remove the need for a sound and safe management structure to make sure that any pedagogical strategy is fully understood, compliant with statutory regulations and implemented by all staff. In a nutshell: *children deserve to be safe if they get it wrong*. Similar to any other effective educational environments, environments that enable need clear policies and channels of communication. Participatory forms of management, where leadership is exercised by different staff in different situations, is a defining characteristic of environments that enable from an organisational point of view. The possibility to exercise leadership within the framework of the theory, methods and ethos of environments that enable is directed towards fostering professional creativity (Craft 2011; Nutbrown 2012, 2013; Moss 2016). Environments that enable are compatible with organisational arrangements where resources and staff are deployed by

knowledgeable experts who are accountable for their decisions. Staff are key to the success of any educational environment and must share, own and therefore they should be involved in developing the setting's pedagogical vision, strategy and rationale (Pascal and Bertram 2014). This is an organisational imperative: the reasoning behind why resources are chosen or made available to children and where staff are deployed must be shared with, and be understood by, all staff.

5. Conclusion

This article proposes a theoretical elaboration centred on an innovative concept that aims to offer the intellectual foundations for the development of pedagogical practices interested in the intersection of environments, learning and children's agency.

As a concluding remark, the authors would emphasise that risk and pedagogical demands of environments that enable should be acknowledged and recognised; however, if children are to be taken seriously as primary stakeholders in their education, as well as citizens who have a right to be consulted and heard, then avoiding the risk of trusting children's decision making, creativity and social skills is a luxury that education should not, and the authors would say *cannot*, afford.

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Investigating the Construction of Quality within Early Years Settings in Ireland through the Early Years Education-focused Inspection Process.



Arlenne Heeney

Abstract

In 2016 the Early Years Education-Focused Inspections (EYEI) were introduced by the Department of Education and Skills to evaluate the provision of quality in early years services in Ireland. These inspections are designed to evaluate the nature, range and appropriateness of children's early educational experiences. This paper examines the construction of quality in early years services through the Early Years Education-Focused Inspection process. The research was conducted in two phases using a mixed-methods research design. The first phase reported here, focused on early years inspectors' perspectives of quality through content analysis of a sample of published Early Years Education-Focused Inspection (EYEI) reports. The findings provide evidence of current understandings of quality in early years settings in Ireland through the Early Years Education-Focused Inspection process. Although there has been considerable discussion on the topic of quality in early childhood in recent years, there is currently a limited amount of research that exists on the Early Years Education-Focused Inspection process within the Irish context (Duignan, 2019). This research that forms part of a Master's degree, highlights current practices of quality provision in early years settings in Ireland.

Introduction

Children's early years represent the most significant period of growth and development (Sylva *et al.*, 2004; Chopra, 2012), and can impact on their future development as the many skills acquired, contribute to their future life experiences (Sylva *et al.*, 2004 Urban *et al.*, 2011; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019). Therefore, the quality of early years provision is paramount. However, the way in which quality is defined, inspected and regulated requires consideration and has been the focus of much discussion at national and international level in relation to early years provision (Moloney, 2016; OECD, 2019).

Defining and Assessing Quality in the Early Years

The term 'quality' in the context of early childhood education is complex with no fixed definition (Duignan and Walsh, 2004; Hayes and McGrath, 2004; O' Kane, 2005; Urban *et al.*, 2011; European Commission, 2014). However, there have been substantial efforts made by researchers and policymakers to establish an agreed understanding. Some have argued that the complexities in defining quality suggest that it is a multidimensional concept that is context specific and based upon cultural differences and ways of society (Urban *et al.*, 2011; Dahlberg *et al.*, 2013; Chappell and Szente, 2019). For instance, the way in which quality is experienced is dependent on the needs of individual settings and therefore determines the ethos and priorities of a setting.

The diverse cultures of children and families attending early years' services influence the need for quality to be contextualised to recognise diverse needs. The dynamic nature of quality is continuously unfolding through ongoing interactions and is subject to individual's values, beliefs and interests. Therefore, it is crucial that we begin to understand quality as a process that evolves over time within an ever-changing society as opposed to an objective that can be achieved (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2013). Despite ambiguous interpretations of quality in research and policy, it is acknowledged that high quality early childhood programmes positively impact children's long-term development while poor quality services can have a negative impact (OECD, 2012). For instance, the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) report

conducted in England which explored the impact of preschool education on children's development, highlighted the positive impacts that high quality early years experiences have on children's social and emotional development (Sylva *et al.*, 2004).

Process, Structure and Outcomes

One standardised approach to understanding quality is to distinguish between process and structural indicators of quality and measuring outcomes (Hayes and McGrath, 2004; OECD, 2006; Urban *et al.*, 2011; European Commission, 2014; O'Sullivan and Ring, 2016). Structural and process quality are the most prevalent dimensions of quality in the context of early childhood education while the evaluation of outcomes is granted less focus (Sylva *et al.*, 2004; Urban *et al.*, 2011; Slot *et al.*, 2015). Structural aspects of quality are commonly associated with physical regulatory features within the environment such as appropriate indoor and outdoor space, materials, adult child ratios, staff training and qualifications (O'Kane, 2005; Logan, 2010; Fenech, 2011; Ishimine and Tayler, 2014; Eurydice, 2019; OECD, 2019).

Although the requirement of such elements are crucial in safeguarding children, researchers articulate the need to move beyond structural elements as assessment of these aspects may not capture valuable interactions that occur within settings. However, the presence of adequate structural components are considered tangible and easily implemented while regulation and monitoring of these aspects are dependent on external authorities (Duignan and Walsh, 2004; Mahony and Hayes, 2006; Moloney, 2011). Concerns have been raised about the over emphasis on structural elements in determining quality which may lead process quality to become a secondary focus. Though some argue that structural aspects of quality are interdependent with process quality as they provide the context in facilitating quality (Myers, 2004; Nikko and Havu-Nuutinen, 2009).

Although these aspects of quality are interrelated, it is a balanced approach that significantly influences quality provision within early years settings. Process elements of quality relate to children's daily experiences and the relationships and interactions that take place among children and educators within the early years environment. (Urban *et al.*, 2011; O'Sullivan and Ring, 2016; Zhang, 2018; OECD, 2019; Eurydice, 2019;). Such aspects are deemed a

strong predictor of successful outcomes for children's learning and development (Department of Education and Skills, 2018; OECD, 2018). However, the interpretation of process quality is considered complex as there is no single component of process quality, it is rather a combination of such elements that establishes quality provision (Hayes and McGrath, 2004; Herrera *et al.*, 2005; Urban *et al.*, 2011). The way in which process quality evolves is embedded within the relationships that develop and interactions that take place in practice.

Research acknowledges the dynamic nature of these elements as the establishment of relationships may differ within various cultural contexts, although positive meaningful interactions are believed to be universal (Ishimine and Tayler, 2014). The role of the educator is central and is acknowledged as significant in providing the foundations for children's learning and experiences (Urban *et al.*, 2011). The establishment of secure relationships and valuable interactions that take place in practice, shapes the provision of children's daily experiences and positively influences their social and cognitive development. The current practice of the education-focused inspections is the first model in the Irish early years context to highlight these process elements of quality representing a deviation from the predominant focus on structural elements (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013; Murphy, 2015). The ways in which one individual values quality is different to another and therefore shapes pedagogical practice (Grant *et al.*, 2018).

Inspecting Quality

The implementation of inspection is a crucial method used by authorities to determine and evaluate quality provision within settings (Pugh and Duffy, 2014). The practice of inspection has been established in many countries as a way of externally evaluating quality in early years services (Zhang, 2018). In recent years, the issue of quality in early years settings has come under increasing scrutiny in the Irish context (DCYA, 2013; Murphy, 2015; Oke *et al.*, 2019). The necessity for the delivery of high-quality practice within the early years sector is currently a topic of consideration among policymakers and researchers (DCYA, 2019; Eurydice, 2019). The early years sector in

Ireland has experienced increased recognition with a focus on quality provision.

While there has been research on the experience and outcomes of the Early Years Education-Focused Inspections since they were developed in 2016, such research is limited (Duignan, 2019). Therefore, this paper provides relevant research on the areas of quality as determined by the current inspection process. In the past, accountability played a significant role in determining quality within early years settings in Ireland with a predominant focus on compliance of regulations and minimum standards of health and welfare (Moloney, 2016). Prior to 2016, early years services adhered to the Child Care (Preschool) Regulations 2006 which were limited in nature with a primary focus on physical elements of quality while minimal focus was placed on children and their experiences. Critics of this approach argue that although regulatory compliance is fundamental, there is a need to move beyond minimum standards towards a focus on the implementation of quality and enhancement of practices (Murphy, 2015; DCYA, 2016; OECD, 2018).

Development of the Quality Agenda in Ireland and the Evolution of the EYEI

Since the enactment of The Child Care Act 1991 and the subsequent introduction of the Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations 1996, the early years sector in Ireland has developed and fallen increasingly under regulatory scrutiny. The regulations concentrated on structural aspects of provision related to physical features within early years settings. However, the recognition of training and qualifications of those providing early years services was absent (Department of Health, 1996). Although the regulations have been criticised in research as focusing on minimum standards, they represent a starting point of regulating the early years sector in Ireland (Murphy, 2015; Moloney, 2016). A review of the regulations led to the revised Child Care (Pre-school) Regulations (2006) that came into effect in 2007 with an increased focus on improving standards and ensuring adequate safeguarding and welfare of children (Murphy, 2015). The Child Care (Pre-school) Regulations were later amended in 2016 introducing additional regulations for early years services to meet higher standards of quality such as the requirement of qualifications for educators working with children (DCYA, 2016).

In recent years, increased investment at government level and developments within the sector in Ireland have focused on delivery of high-quality provision and placing children as the central focus. For instance, the development of early childhood frameworks such as *Siolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education 2006) and *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009) represent crucial milestones to ensure and support enhancement of quality in practice. The publication of *Siolta* (CECDE, 2006) demonstrates the commitment towards high-quality provision in early years services in Ireland, acting as a mechanism for continuous enhancement of quality (CECDE, 2007). It addresses many aspects of practice in providing a context for quality within several principles and standards that highlight the value of positive and respectful relationships and interactions while recognising play as central to all aspects of children's learning (CECDE, 2007). Informed by the principles of *Siolta* (CECDE, 2006), the curriculum framework of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) highlights the provision of children's learning experiences and development through four interlinked themes of which are used within settings to underpin practice (NCCA, 2013). Children's learning experiences are made visible through the themes of Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communication and Exploring and Thinking. Likewise, the framework suggests a holistic approach towards children's learning placing an emphasis on high-quality interactions between educators and children. Children are acknowledged as 'citizens' who have a right to voice their opinions in decision making that relates to participation in their own learning experiences (NCCA, 2013). However, the roll out of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) and *Siolta* (CECDE, 2006) was considered inconsistent until recent years following the exposure of poor-quality standards highlighted within some early years settings (French, 2013). Therefore, the introduction of the National *Siolta Aistear Initiative* (NSAI) known as the *Aistear Siolta Practice Guide*, in 2016 supports the implementation of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) and *Siolta* (CECDE, 2006) together to inform an enquiry-based curriculum in settings (NCCA, 2017). The guide available online provides information on the foundations of curriculum and incorporates several pillars of reflective practice for early years settings.

Partly in response to this increased focus on quality and media reporting of poor-quality provision in early years settings, the Early Years Education-

Focused Inspections (EYEI) were introduced in 2016 by the Department of Education and Skills (Murphy, 2015; O' Sullivan and Ring, 2016). Prior to the introduction of the education-focused Inspections, early years services merely complied with the Child Care (Pre-school) Regulations (2006). The regulations were criticised for being reductionist in nature with the predominant focus on structural aspects of quality (Moloney, 2016). The enforcement of the regulations was previously the responsibility of public health officials within the Health Service Executive (HSE), though the current monitoring of inspection is undertaken by experienced early years educators working through the Department of Education and Skills with a professional background within the early years sector. These inspections evaluate the quality of education provision within early years settings participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. They represent a significant development at government level as they highlight the process aspect of quality within early years' services in a move away from the previous focus on structural aspects of quality (Murphy 2015). Over the years the changes in the inspection system of early years' services in Ireland has had an impact on recognising quality. However, notably, inspection of early years services in Ireland remains a 'split system' with a care-education divide within two different departments i.e. TUSLA: the Child and Family Agency and the Department of Education and Skills (DES) (Murphy, 2015). While the Early Years Education-Focused Inspections represent positive progression, the impact of the divide in systems can lead to inconsistency with conflicting recommendations and over emphasis on regulation of services (Moloney, 2015).

Implementation of the Early Years Education-Focused Inspections

The purpose of the inspections is to evaluate the provision of quality of education in early years settings in Ireland that participate in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. The ECCE scheme, also referred to as the free preschool year was initially introduced in 2010 as a universal one-year government funded programme available to all children before starting primary school (DES, 2016). This positive development is recognized as a significant milestone in early years education with direct investment for services. Nevertheless, some highlighted the necessity of the scheme to incorporate further collaboration with educators and children in supporting the implementation of practice in meeting quality standards (Oke *et al.*, 2019). In 2016 the extension of the eligibility of the scheme came into effect, increasing from one year to two years of education provision. While the most recent development of the scheme in 2018 provides eligibility of the scheme to children from two years and eight months with the age limit set at five years and six months. The programme offers children their first formal education experience in the two years before beginning primary school (DCYA, 2019).

The EYEI model is based on a quality framework underpinned by the principles of Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009) and Siolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006) and evaluates quality under four broad areas which are:



Figure 1: The Quality Framework for Early Years Education (CECDE, 2006; DES, 2018).

This current development of inspection is acknowledged as a more coherent and holistic approach to children's development and experiences within the recently published First 5 Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (DCYA, 2019). The strengths-based evaluative approach implemented by the inspectors strives to highlight positive aspects of practice and encourages enhancement of practices (DES, 2018). The role of early years educators is acknowledged as one of the key principles that underpins the Early Years Education-Focused Inspection framework (DES, 2018). Early years educators represent significant adults who provide the foundations for children's early years development and experiences. The inspection process incorporates consultation with early years educators to gain insight into practices and offer advice and support of enhancement of quality provision. The publication of the inspection reports online highlights the significance of children's meaningful and enriching experiences (DES, 2018).

Methodology

This research forms part of a two-phased mixed-method study within an interpretive paradigm (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). Combining two methods allows for

triangulation where the convergence of two perspectives provides a complete picture in reaching a desired outcome (Kasunic 2005 cited in Mukherji and Albon, 2010). The first phase reported here, involved a desk-based review of the Early Years Education-Focused Inspection Reports. Phase two semi-structured interviews with early childhood educators will be analysed and reported at a later stage.

The initial quantitative element involved basic content analysis of the inspection reports to highlight the key phrases related to quality. While the remaining qualitative analysis involved further interpretation by exploring the context of key phrases and information within the reports using thematic analysis. A sampling criterion was devised as follows in order to obtain an overall representation of inspection reports that accurately represent the percentage of early years settings within the Republic of Ireland:

Total No. of Reports:	104 Reports
Years Included in sampling criteria:	2016-2019
Geographical Location:	50 % Urban 50 % Rural

Table 1. Sampling Criteria of Inspection Reports

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Following this, the chosen sample of 104 reports were obtained online from the Department of Education and Skills website and input into the N-Vivo software. A word frequency search was conducted to highlight the key terms emerging from the reports related to the literature and the four areas of quality identified within the inspection framework i.e. The quality of context to support children’s learning and development; quality of processes to support children’s learning and development; quality of children’s learning experiences and achievements and; quality of management and leadership for learning, as depicted in figure 1 (DES, 2018). The sample of reports were then condensed further to obtain an appropriate qualitative sample of twenty inspection reports with equal representation of urban and rural samples. Using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach, thematic coding was carried out where the codes were firstly categorized into themes and links between each

of the categories and themes were formed. The final round of coding involved interpretation and summarizing of the main themes.

Ethics

Ethical practice within a research project is an essential part of the process, as the researcher adopts a moral approach to the research (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). Prior to conducting research, ethical clearance was obtained from TU Dublin Blanchardstown and principles of ethical practice were adhered to at all times. As the sample of inspection reports are publicly available documents online, no participants were involved. Confidentiality and anonymity of early years services was maintained as direct quotations from the reports were assigned appropriate pseudonyms i.e. given demographic (urban / rural) and broad geographic descriptors. All data obtained was stored securely in line with the research policy of TU Dublin and data protection legislation.

Findings and Discussion

Key Phrases: Inspection Reports	Total Frequency	Context of Phrases
Quality	1016	
Relationship / Relationships	134	Secure, positive, nurturing, respectful Practitioner-child, Child-child, practitioner-parents, Settings-schools
Experience / Experiences	765	Learning, educational, play, social, continuity
Interaction / Interactions / Interact	322	Positively, warm, welcoming, play, respectful, consistent, central, supportive, encouraging,
Play	1116	Curriculum, Learning, Opportunities
Practitioner / Practitioners	2483	Role, Facilitating Relationships
Children	5975	Central focus

Table 2: Initial Quantitative Analysis: Word Frequency of the Inspection reports

The key phrases identified in the initial analysis of the reports were explored further using thematic analysis. Some of the main themes identified

are relationships, interactions, facilitating children's voices and holistic experiences.

Relationships

The role of relationships was well documented throughout the inspection reports as central to all areas of practice. Various forms of relationships were evident such as educator and child; children and their peers and parent partnerships. Positive and respectful connections between educators and children were evident in practice throughout many of the sessions with an informed awareness of children's individual needs: "Relationships between the practitioner and children are respectful, child-centred and responsive to the individual needs and uniqueness of each child." (Urban: 2017 – South East)

These secure attachments established among educators and children were highlighted within the reports as central and influential to all other areas of practice observed. For instance, the relationships formed were evident through the overall atmosphere and the interactions that took place in the environment. Similarly, in alignment with Siolta's (CECDE, 2006) principle of 'Relationships', research states that children's development and everyday experiences are positively influenced by the development of secure relationships (CECDE, 2006; Urban *et al.*, 2011;).

The inspection reports acknowledged support strategies that are in place in settings to encourage the development of relationships among educators, children and parents. A key worker approach was implemented within most settings: "An effective key person approach further promotes secure relationships whereby practitioners utilise their knowledge of the children to meaningfully encourage their learning." (Rural: 2017 – Northwest)

The use of a key worker approach is considered a support mechanism for establishing strong relationships that involves building communication with families to increase knowledge of children and their family backgrounds. The effective implementation of the approach suggests positive learning experiences are provided for children that are appropriate to their individual needs and abilities. Affirmative and transparent relationships are evidently built with families where parents contributions are valued and respected. Developing strong partnerships with parents provides a sense of security and contentment for families and children. The role of parents is highlighted

within research as ‘important stakeholders’ in early childhood that contribute to their children’s development and experiences (OECD, 2012; DCYA, 2014).

Interactions

A pleasant and inviting atmosphere was experienced in the majority of settings. The friendly demeanour of staff created a relaxed atmosphere for parents and children in attendance:

“The warm interactions between the practitioners, children and their families creates a professional, personable and friendly atmosphere in the setting.” (Rural: 2017 – Northwest)

The recognition of such positive atmospheres highlights the level of passion and commitment from settings in providing high-quality provision. Many valuable interactive moments among educators and children were observed. Educators were regularly described as ‘positive role models’ in their interactive approaches with children:

These strategies include posing timely open-ended questions to extend their thinking, drawing attention to children’s ideas and thoughts, asking ‘I wonder why?’ questions and giving appropriate prompts, guidance and encouragement to individual children. (Urban: 2018 – South West)

Educators respectfully modelled appropriate language use and behaviours in their approach towards children. Such calming engagement with children at the child’s level further supported these positive interaction strategies. Research acknowledges these positive interactions as a strong predictor of children’s development (Ishimine and Taylor, 2014). Some suggest that it is not simply positive interactions that determine quality provision, it is a combination of such process elements within relationships and interactions (Hayes and McGrath, 2004; Urban *et al.*, 2011). Similarly, positive peer interactions were observed among children through their engagement in play and various activities:

The children are developing warm and supportive relationships with their peers. They are respectful of each other’s space when playing and are developing shared interests with their friends. (Urban: 2017 – West)

Children were respectful of one another and confident in communicating their needs and desires in developing peer connections. They portrayed assertiveness in their social skills to develop peer relationships enhancing their learning experiences. In addition, research acknowledges the influence that quality interactions provided by educators reflects on children’s

relationships with their peers. As they begin to engage in quality interactions with educators, this encourages children to become more positive and compassionate in communicating with their peers (O’Sullivan and Ring, 2016). The facilitation of high-quality interactions is emphasised as a key outcome of best practice within Area 2: Quality of the processes to support children’s learning and development of the inspection framework (DES, 2018).

Facilitating Children’s Voices

Children are acknowledged within the reports as ‘active agents’ who portray confidence and enthusiasm in their opportunities of choice. Their contribution in their own learning is encouraged and valued in practice with many learning opportunities provided: “The children are actively involved in selecting and choosing the learning and development activities.” (Rural: 2016 – West)

The children are demonstrating the ability to take responsibility in their learning. They display initiative and self-confidence when they make decisions about what they want to play with next. (Urban: 2017 – West)

The education-focused inspections acknowledge children as active agents in their learning and development as one of the principles that underpins the inspection framework (DES, 2016). In the same way, the commitment of declaring children a voice in matters that affect them is embedded within Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020 (2014). As children make independent choices and are involved in decision-making processes, their unique interests become more apparent. It is evident in most settings inspected that children’s emerging interests are developed further and are incorporated into planning and curriculum. The facilitation of children’s voices brings to life their learning and experiences while supporting them to build their self-esteem (NCCA 2013; O’ Sullivan and Ring, 2016).

Holistic Experiences

A majority of settings inspected, implemented a play-based approach to children’s learning and development underpinned by Síolta (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009). The child-centred approach incorporates planning

of large-group and small group activities based on children's emerging interests. However, variations of implementation were documented within the reports where the curriculum approach in several settings was not evidently informed by children's emerging interests:

There is a play-based curriculum in place and planning is aligned to the principles of Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. The practitioners undertake long-term planning that is divided into monthly themes and weekly topics selected by the practitioners. (Urban: 2018 – East)

Although most settings implemented a play-based curriculum, adult-led learning was valued more than child-led in some settings. However most adult-led planning was based on interests emerging through children's play. The implementation of such play-based curriculums informed by Síolta (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009) suggests a move towards consistency in curriculum approaches. Research suggests it is a balanced pedagogical approach of adult and child-led learning that impacts children's learning and experiences (Chappell & Szente, 2019). Most settings evidently adopted an emerging interest approach informed by children's interests.

The quality of children's positive experiences were best interpreted as being heard throughout some settings where the inspectors describe children expressing their enjoyment in play through 'laughter':

"Laughter is heard frequently as children engage in playful interactions with the practitioners and their peers." (Rural: 2018 – Midlands)

Children's contentment in playful experiences was strongly evident within the environment through observation of children's expressions. The aspect of play is a core element of the inspection framework as central to children's learning and development (DES, 2016). Children are encouraged to explore both indoor and outdoor environments within the settings that are defined as specific areas. For instance, the layout of the environments and the appropriate materials within those, evidently influences children's opportunity to explore. The appropriate organisation of various interest areas were highlighted as easily accessible for children. Practitioners evidently supported children's desire for choice and opportunity that reflects independence:

The indoor and outdoor environments are very inviting and aesthetically pleasing. They are purposefully structured to develop the children's curiosity, creativity imagination and their desire for exploration. Both environments facilitate a wide variety of play... (Urban: 2016 – South)

Most environments were commended as inclusive and well defined with enticing interest areas in allowing children ample opportunities to explore. The presence of adequately structured environments are essential in setting the context for quality. (Myers, 2004; Nikko & Havu-Nuutinen, 2009).

The findings discussed provide evidence of elements of good practice of quality taking place in early years settings. Interestingly, there is some variation in the level of descriptive detail provided by the inspectors reporting practice observed. For instance, some acknowledge quality practices without elaboration through the use of examples although most reports highlight aspects of practice in support of appropriate and comprehensive practice examples. Despite this, the inspection reports include recommended actions for settings on some areas of practice that may require further enhancement. Overall findings suggest a strengths-based approach was implemented by the inspectors in identifying positive aspects of quality provision. The strengths-based approach supports continuous enhancement of quality in early years services through affirmation of high-quality provision and the use of recommendations (DES, 2018). All settings were provided with the opportunity to respond to the outcome of the inspection. However the majority of settings accepted the reports without response suggesting satisfaction with the outcome of the inspection process.

Conclusion

Over the last three decades early childhood education and care has sustained progressive change to enhance quality provision in the Irish context. Increased investment at government level and recognition of the necessity for quality in early years services is well established within research. However, the challenges in defining quality are highlighted within research as the complex term is considered a constructed concept that is constantly evolving and is context specific. The conceptualisation of quality is influenced by a values-based approach and should encompass the perspectives of relevant stakeholders. Although perceptions of quality can vary, dynamic and static aspects shape determinants of quality. Research acknowledges the essential role of structural quality in providing the context for quality. Though it is the process elements of quality that are the best predictor of children's learning and experiences. There is now global consensus that it is high-quality early childhood education and care programmes that are most effective in shaping

children's early years experiences. The development of secure relationships and positive interactions undoubtedly enhance provision of children's experiences in their formative years. This paper set out to investigate the construction of quality in early years services in Ireland through the Early Years Education-Focused Inspection process in Ireland. It examined the ways in which quality is being defined and measured through the inspection process. Research findings highlight the shift in focus of practice from structural quality to process quality emphasising dynamic elements relating to children's experiences. The findings provided illustrate elements of best practice detailed within the Early Years Education-Focused Inspection guideline documents. The strengths-based approach reporting the level of quality provision in settings is evident throughout as commendable quality practices are acknowledged and valued. In the context of multiple perspectives, the following phase of the research will involve early childhood educators' perspectives on quality through the Early Years Education-Focused Inspection process representing a shift in focus.

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Hands-on Experience has Completely Changed my Perception of Technology in Early Childhood’– An Exploration on the Impact of a Technology Module on the Attitudes of Early Childhood Undergraduates



Sandra O Neill

Abstract

The aim of this two-year study was to examine early childhood education student teachers' attitudes to the use of technology by children in early childhood education and care (ECEC). An anonymous 20-item questionnaire was distributed to 68 undergraduates. Findings suggest that attitudes are multifaceted and at times, contradictory. Respondents believe that digital technology skills are critical for children's futures and that ECEC settings are an appropriate place for children to acquire these skills. However, findings also indicate that fears around the impact of technology on children's health and wellbeing remain. Implications for initial ECEC teacher education and CPD are discussed.

Introduction

Children are growing up in a digital age, surrounded by devices that influence their daily experiences and interactions. Young children use digital technologies for information, entertainment, creation, communication, and learning (Chaudron, Di Gioia & Gemo, 2018) with children in early childhood using screen media for an average of 2 and half hours a day (Rideout & Robb, 2020). Since 1997, time spent engaged with technology in early childhood has increased by 32% (Goode, Fomby, Mollborn & Limburg, 2020) and the age at which children first use touch screen devices is lowering (Burns & Gottschalk, 2019). The ubiquitous nature of digital technologies in children's lives, a changing policy landscape, an excess of varied and sometimes conflicting research on the impact of these devices and the recent pivot to online learning prompted by the COVID 19 pandemic, require early childhood education and care (ECEC) educators to consider their role in advocating for the appropriate use of technology with young children, and the optimal use of digital technology in early childhood settings.

This study examines the perspectives of early childhood education student teachers (ECEST) in relation to children's use of technology in ECEC. Research has shown that personal factors such as beliefs, values, digital skills, and positive dispositions towards technology; external factors such as access to resources, support from supervisors; and cultural factors such as the educator's country of origin and national ECEC policy approaches, influence the use of technology in early childhood classrooms (Blackwell, Lauricella, Wartella, Robb & Schomburg, 2013; Palaiologou, 2016a; Aldhafeeri, Palaiologou & Folorunsho, 2016; Ailincal & Gabillon, 2018; Fotakopoulou, Hatzigianni, Dardanou, Unstad & O'Connor, 2020). However, the impact of the same factors on ECESTs is under-theorised, and explorations of the education they receive are under-reported. Continuing professional development (CPD) interventions have been shown to change attitudes and practice relating to tech use in ECEC (Nikolopoulou & Gialamas, 2015; Vidal-Hall, Flewitt & Wyse, 2020) but the impact of training on ECESTs needs to be examined further.

Research Questions

This study aims to explore the attitudes and beliefs of ECEST in the Republic of Ireland around the use of digital and analogue technology with children from birth to six years. The primary research question is to investigate whether a pre-service module on the use of tech in ECEC would have an impact on perspectives in three key areas

- 1) technology use in early childhood
- 2) the suitability of specific devices
- 3) perceived impact of technology on children's well-being and health

A broad definition of technology is used in this study encompassing all analogue and digital devices, apps, programmes and software that can be used by young children.

Current Debates on the Use of Technology in ECEC Settings

Little is known about the emerging digital pedagogies of educators, as much of the dominant research is focused on benefits of, or negative impact on children (Fleer, 2020). The impact of screens has attracted negative attention in the media, and there are legitimate concerns around the effect of screens on children's overall health and development. Health studies have identified connections between technology use and language delay in young children (Ma, van den Heuvel, Maguire, Parkin & Birken, 2017; van de Heuvel *et al.*, 2019), aggression (Daly & Perez, 2009; Gabbiadini, Riva, Andrighetto, Volpato & Bushman, 2014; Gentile, Bender & Anderson, 2017), musculoskeletal complications (Howie, Coenen, Campbell, Ranelli & Straker, 2017), negative psychosocial well-being (Hinkley, Brown, Carson & Teychenne, 2018), poorer sleep patterns (Cain & Gradisar, 2010; Cheung, Bedford, De Urabain, Karmiloff-Smith & Smith, 2017; Green, Cohen-Zion, Haim & Dagan, 2017), lower physical activity (Kardefelt-Winther, 2017; Chen *et al.*, 2020) and adiposity and insulin resistance (Nightingale, Rudnicka, Donin, Sattar, Cook, Whincup & Owen, 2017). Consequently, moral panic often underscores discussions about children's tech use in wider society and concerns remain about the suitability of technology use in ECEC (Dubicka, Martin & Firth, 2019). While educators and parents are no doubt aware of these reports, the drive to prepare children for the 21st century persists. International economic and educational targets often focus on the

development of skills and knowledge related to technology and other Science, Technology, Education and Mathematics (STEM) subjects, connecting the early development of these skills to children's later academic success (OECD, 2017a; OECD, 2017b; World Bank, 2019). Irish politicians and policy makers value the skills and knowledge associated with technology use as core requirements for future employment and industry, perceiving educational technology as a tool to transform educational pedagogy (Department of Education and Skills [DES] Inspectorate, 2015a, 2015b, Educational Research Centre [ERC], 2018 DES 2020).

In 2017, a STEM education policy and implementation plan was announced in Ireland 'to achieve an improved STEM education experience and outcomes for learners from early years to post-primary school' (DES, 2017: 12). Its impact has been seen in ECEC policy (Government of Ireland, 2019), inspection (DES Inspectorate, 2018) and continuing professional development support systems (DES, 2018). In 2018, the Early Years Education Inspection Tool was updated to include explicit criteria related to the use of educational technology and the development of 'STEM dispositions' (DES Inspectorate, 2018: 22). Accordingly, it's now necessary to provide learning opportunities supported by technology as settings are inspected based on these indicators. Yet, half of Irish early years professionals report feeling unprepared to integrate technology into their classrooms (DES, 2016) stating they are 'unsure as to how to approach digital learning in a way that was appropriate to the age of their learners' (DES Inspectorate, 2020: 26). As a consequence, the DES have recommended that a sharper focus on educational technology should be included in initial teacher education at all levels (DES, 2016; DES, 2019; DES Inspectorate, 2020).

Play and Technology

Technology is a cultural tool in children's lives that enables them to read, play, create and communicate. The 'powerful informational, communicative and interactive learning possibilities' (Richards, 2006: 239) associated with tech create opportunities for children to explore and take control like never before. Children can manipulate and playfully transform spaces and create artefacts in way that is not possible with more traditional resources. Digital or overhead projectors can create a play landscape in an instant, apps and tablets can allow children to insert themselves into any situation /environment using

green screen technology and digital microscopes allow children to see images impossible to view with the naked eye. Children can move from being consumers of digital media to being the producers of media and digital artefacts, moving seamlessly from role of actor, director, editor and back again, supporting the development of metacognition.

Unsurprisingly then, a new category of research has begun to emerge focusing on the benefits of tech use in ECEC. In the past year alone, tech use had been shown to support children's agency (Scollan & Farini, 2020), include children with disabilities in EC settings (Al-Attayah, Dababneh, Hamaidi, & Arouri, 2020), enable children to create digital artefacts and stories (Undheim & Jernes 2020) and support computational thinking (Bers, 2020). Investigations into the use of digital technologies by young children demonstrate the transformative and powerful agentic possibilities that are created when children have access to digital tools (Dandy, Fler, Davidson & Hatzigianni, 2018). In the right conditions, the emerging digital pedagogical practice in early childhood can lead to 'digitally amplified practice' enriching the play experiences of children (Fler, 2019). Parette, Quesenberry and Blum have voiced concerns that the early childhood field has 'missed the boat' by failing to embrace the use of technology in early childhood classrooms, claiming that while 'technology use permeates virtually all aspects of twenty-first century society...its integration in early childhood settings and recognition as a developmentally appropriate practice remains problematic' (2010: 335).

Traditional Views

When children arrive in ECEC settings they already possess knowledge and competencies related to technology 'partly as a result of varying levels of parental intervention and modelling' (O'Hara, 2011: 220) but these funds of knowledge and developing skills don't appear to be acknowledged, let alone nurtured. Even with strong evidence of the digitalisation of home environments 'few teachers so far have integrated digital devices into a play-based pedagogy' (Palaiologou, 2016b: 305). Technology is still underused in early childhood settings. The devices available in most preschool settings are limited and rarely used for 'authentic' activities (Plowman *et al.*, 2010). Access to new forms of mobile technology such as tablets, remains low (Wartella, Schomburg, Lauricella, Robb, & Flynn, 2010; Edwards, 2013) and in Ireland,

technology is seldom used to support children's playful endeavours (McCormack, 2013). Early childhood teachers continue to value traditional early childhood pedagogies and are 'concerned and challenged' by children's desire to play with digital technologies (Schriever, Simon, & Donnison, 2020). Perhaps because of the cost and fragility of some of these devices, educators often take a more didactic approach to their introduction. Consequently, Fleer (2017) suggests that educators are motivated by the desire to 'teach' how the device should be used while children's motivations appear to be more play-based and exploratory

Influence of Education and Experience

The term 'digital native' was originally coined by Prensky (2001) to describe third-level students who have grown up using digital and internet-enabled devices. On the contrary, many ECEST are more suitably described as 'digital immigrants' when considering the use of technology as a pedagogical tool. ECEST have strong grounding in play and may be adept at using technology for entertainment, communication, or socialising, but many have never considered how technology might be used to support children's learning or to enhance play. ECEST have shown ambivalence to the use of technology in ECEC settings (Lindhall & Folkessen, 2012), a position which could be attributed to their limited experience in using, or observing others use, these tools in practice. This fact is exacerbated by research that suggests the more experienced an educator, the more negative their attitude to technology use in ECEC (Blackwell, Lauricella & Wartella, 2014; Nikolopoulou & Gialamas, 2015) implying that ECEST are unlikely to receive a positive response to the proposal that she/ he introduce technology in professional practice. Educators are confident using technology in their personal lives but are reluctant to integrate into the classroom (Aldhafeeri, Palaiologou & Folorunsho, 2016; Palaiologou, 2016a; Fotakopoulou, Hatzigianni, Dardanou, Unstad & O'Connor, 2020), which could explain why students rarely get the opportunity or permission to use tech while on professional practice.

An educator's educational attainment is linked to their access to tech in ECEC. Research in the US has found that ECEC graduates are more likely to have access to tech in their ECEC classrooms, regardless of the type of setting, and were more likely to have access to newer forms of technology such as tablets and MP3 players (Wartella *et al.*, 2010, Blackwell *et al.*, 2013). If this

fact holds true in Ireland, it is the minority of those working in ECEC, approximately 16% of the total workforce who hold degree level qualifications (Pobal, 2019), who would have access to these tools. Moreover, educators have noted the variation in experience, confidence and capacities to use digital technologies in their settings and are requesting the introduction of supports for ECEC including additional policy advice and continuing professional development (DES Inspectorate, 2020).

Methods

Sample

The ECEST who participated in this study engage in a compulsory technology module as part of their undergraduate programme. The module includes time for students to explore a variety of digital and analogue devices including digital microscopes, programmable toys, and tablets, and is structured to support students' awareness of appropriate technology for ECEC. In small groups, students use, discuss and evaluate digital devices, software and apps. Finally, working in groups the ECESTs are asked to reflect on the integration and application of this device in an ECEC classroom and consider; suitable age group; safety considerations; the traditional toys and materials that can be used alongside it; and the broad learning outcomes that could arise from its use.

A purposeful convenience sample was utilized, restricted to undergraduates registered for an early childhood education degree programme in Ireland. Over a two-year period (2018-2020), two cohorts of ECEST (total of 107 students) were invited to complete a questionnaire immediately after engaging in a 'technology in education' module. 68 questionnaires were returned in total. The return rate for the first cohort was high at 96%. The response rate for the second cohort was significantly lower at 25%, a figure that may be attributed to the restriction of classes at the end of the semester.

Ethics

Ethical approval was sought and granted from the university where the research was conducted. A plain language statement was provided detailing information about the study and intended research outputs, and participants

granted consent online before completing the questionnaire. Attention was placed on ensuring participants fully understood the aims of the study, how their data would be used and provided informed consent. Participation took place outside of class hours after the module concluded and was not linked to student marks.

Research Tool

The research tool was an anonymous online questionnaire consisting of 20 questions that assess ECEST's perspectives and attitudes about: (1) technology use in early childhood; (2) the suitability of specific devices and; (3) perceived impact of technology on children's well-being and health. Participants were presented with a series of statements such as 'the use of technology is appropriate in early childhood' or 'technology use will negatively impact young children's physical health' and asked to use a Likert scale to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with each statement. The remainder of the questions were open-ended in nature. The design of the tool allowed for specific and comparable data be generated, and the open-ended questions enabled the collection of more qualitative data identifying and describing elements that were of importance to participants.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed in two ways. Firstly, the data from closed questions were imported to SPSS, cleaned, and prepared for analysis. A simple codebook was developed to assist with this process. Descriptive statistics were generated, looking at each cohort separately and then as a combined sample, aiding comparison across the two groups. Using specific questions allowed for less ambiguous answers and easy comparison between the two data sets. Secondly, answers to opened-ended questions were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's 6-step Thematic Analysis Framework (2006), which allows for the identification, analysis and reporting of patterns. Using this frame, open ended answers were read several times, and through an iterative process, initial themes were identified, defined and labelled by the researcher, before being reviewed and refined.

Findings

Findings are presented using the three main areas for investigation as headings; suitability of tech for young children; perceived impact of technology on children’s well-being and health; and perspectives about the most appropriate devices for use by young children. Unless otherwise stated, findings represent the answers of two cohorts combined (N=68). Where the two cohorts differed greatly in their answers, this is identified.

Suitability of Technology for Young Children

There were nine questions in this section concerning perspectives on the appropriateness of digital technologies in early childhood. When asked to respond to the statement ‘most children have access to technology at home, and should also have access to technology in early childhood settings’ responses were split three ways; those who agreed (24% agreed, 9% strongly agreed), disagreed (30% disagree, 1% strongly disagree); with the remainder (36%) taking a neutral stance. Further detail is outlined in Figure 1.

Statement	Strongly Agree - SA	Agree - A	Neutral - N	Disagree - D	Strongly Disagree - SD
	SA	A	N	D	SD
1. I have strong feelings about the use of technology in early childhood	-	32%	61%	7%	-
2. The use of technology in early childhood education is appropriate	-	44%	38%	13%	5%
3. Most children have access to technology at home, and should also have access to technology in early childhood settings	9%	24%	36%	29%	2%
4. Babies (birth-2 years) should have access to technology in early childhood settings	-	4%	25%	53%	18%
5. Toddlers (2-4 years) should have access to technology in early childhood settings	2%	50%	23%	22%	3%
6. Young children (4-6 years) should have access to technology in early childhood settings	9%	64%	18%	9%	-

Figure 1 Respondents perceptions of technology in ECEC.

Figure 1 Respondents perceptions of technology in ECEC.

Participants were asked to comment on whether different age ranges (birth- 2 years, 2-4 years and 4-6 years) within ECEC settings should have access to technology. These age ranges were chosen to mirror those often

cited in screen time recommendations. 71% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the provision of technology to children from birth to 2 years, with the remainder of respondents taking a neutral stance. This figure drops significantly to 25% who disagree with its use for 2-4-year age range. For the 4-6-year age range this fell again, with only 9% of respondents disagreeing with the statement “young children from 4-6 years should have access to technology in ECEC settings”. Findings were similar across the two cohorts. Interestingly, there was a correlation between negative responses to this question and negative answers across all other questions in this section, suggesting that these respondents have a wholly negative view of the use of technology in ECEC.

In general, ECEC appear to have positive perspectives toward the development of children’s digital skills with 85% stating that these skills were important to support children in the future. Half of respondents felt that early childhood settings are an appropriate place for children to acquire skills in using digital technologies and 44% stated they believed early childhood educators should play an active role in building children’s digital technology practices and skills before school.

Statement	Yes	Maybe	No
7. Do you think early childhood educators should play an active role in building children’s digital technology practices and skills before school?	44%	44%	12%
8. Do you think early childhood settings are an appropriate place for children to acquire skills in using digital technologies?	51%	31%	18%
9. Will digital technology skills assist young children in the future?	85%	15%	-

Figure 2. Respondents’ perceptions of the role of technology in ECEC.

Figure 2. Respondents’ perceptions of the role of technology in ECEC.

Impact of Technology on Children

Eight statements were posed relating to the possible impact of digital technology on children’s well-being and health. The three points on the rating scale were labelled agree, not sure and disagree. When comparing the cohorts, findings were relatively similar. Responses indicate that a significant percentage of participants think that tech use can be harmful to children’s

health and well-being in a variety of ways. Almost three quarters of respondents believed that young children’s use of technology would make them less active and could therefore contribute to obesity. A similar percentage reported that tech use could expose children to risks such as accessing inappropriate content, cyberbullying or online predators. A smaller but still significant percentage believe that tech use can negatively impact children’s physical health (53%), creativity (51%) and supplant play (44%). Detailed results are outlined in Figure 3.

Statement	Agree	Not sure	Disagree
10. Technology use will affect young children's <i>sleep patterns</i>	35%	65%	N/A
11. Technology use will affect young children's <i>creativity</i>	51%	22%	27%
12. Technology use will make young children <i>more aggressive</i>	20%	31%	49%
13. Technology use will make young children <i>more socially isolated</i>	38%	40%	22%
14. Technology use will make young children <i>less active</i> and could <i>contribute to obesity</i>	73%	20%	7%
15. Technology use will <i>displace young children's play</i>	44%	36%	30%
16. Technology use will negatively <i>impact young children's physical health</i> (for example eyesight, cause repetitive strain injury)	53%	42%	5%
17. Technology use will expose young children to <i>online dangers</i> (for examples, bullying, predators, violent/sexual content)	73%	20%	7%

Figure 3. Respondents’ perceptions of impact of technology on young children’s health and well-being.

Figure 3. Respondents’ perceptions of impact of technology on young children’s health and well-being.

Appropriate Devices

Respondents were provided with a list of analogue and digital devices and asked to select those they felt were appropriate for use in ECEC settings by children under 3 years; and by children 3-6 years. It should be noted that there was a difference between the two cohorts’ responses to this question. The second group were almost 50% *less* likely to identify apps, software and tablets as appropriate for the 3-6 years group. Answers for the birth- 3 years group were consistent across cohorts. Figure 4 outlines responses.

Device	Percentage who identified item as suitable for birth- 3 years	Percentage who identified item as suitable for 3-6 years
Digital Camera	34%	78%
Radio, CD or MP3 player	54%	75%
Light Table	54%	75%
Digital Microscope	36%	67%
Digital Books	42%	62%
Overhead projector	25%	58%
Tablet	31%	56%
Video camera or go-pro	29%	55%
Digital Projector	22%	51%
Apps	29%	47%
Programmable Devices (for example Kibo robot)	0%	27%
YouTube or streaming platforms	2%	20%
Computer (PC or Laptop)	0%	13%
Online software (for example Voki or blabberize)	0%	11%
None of the above	11%	0%

Figure 4. Percentage of respondents who agree with use of specific devices in ECEC settings.

Figure 4. Percentage of respondents who agree with use of specific devices in ECEC settings.

Participants were provided with the opportunity to include additional comments. Only 22% of participants from the first cohort and 9% of participants from the second cohort responded to this open-ended section of the questionnaire. A thematic analysis carried out identified a number of common themes including the importance of time limits for screens, and the monitoring and modelling of tech use; the importance of digital tech skills for children's futures; integrating tech into children's play (rather than supplanting it) and lastly; the learning and/or change of opinion that participants experienced by taking part in the module. Examples of comments are provided in the next section. There are significant limitations to this study. The small sample size, differing experiences of the two cohorts (the second cohort had classes cancelled at the end of the semester) and the small number of responses to opened ended questions, particularly in the second cohort, should be considered when reading the discussion that follows.

Discussion

Beliefs and attitudes are often impacted by experience and according to Pajares 'the potent affective, evaluative, and episodic nature of beliefs makes them a filter through which new phenomena are interpreted.' (1992: 325). It appears that the experience of participating in this module has had some impact on ECEST's attitudes. The second cohort had classes cancelled at the end of the semester and therefore did not experience the use of apps/ tablets and online software. Findings indicate that this group were less likely to identify these items as suitable for use by children in the 3-6 age range. All of the devices selected as being appropriate for use in ECEC settings were used by ECESTs as part of the module; items including digital microscopes, digital projectors and light tables are typically unavailable in ECEC settings. It could be argued therefore, that the ECEST hands-on use of these items alongside more traditional materials such as water, sand and junk materials has made them more open to the use of these devices in ECEC settings, and helped to identify the possible learning opportunities for children. This position is supported by ECEST's Comments

my hand on (sic.) experience has completely changed my perception of technology in EC as I now understand how to integrate technology into my planning and curriculum and how they can enhance a learning experience that may not be possible without technology.

Hands on experiences have shown me how we can support the learning of new vocabulary by using each device e.g. when using the light-box we used works (sic.) like transparent, tones, contrast, light and dark.

I am now aware of how to effectively use technology with children and to use apps and devices that are active, open-ended, promote creativity and provide opportunities for social interaction.

Findings demonstrate that participants see age as an important factor in evaluating suitability of technology as a pedagogical tool in their classrooms. The module that ECESTs participated in is designed to encourage a critical consideration of screen time recommendations, as it is now widely recognised that 'children's digital skills are affected by the quantity *and* quality of their digital experience [my emphasis]' (Burns and Gotschalk, 2019:24). However, respondents appear to have taken screen time recommendations seriously. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2016) and the Canadian Paediatric Society (2017) recommend no screen time for children under 2 years and the strict monitoring of screen times for older children, limited to up to two hours a day.

These recommendations are evident in participants' responses. For example, participants commented

Technology in moderation in the early years is not necessarily a bad thing. What needs to be monitored is what technology is being used, and for how long.

The use of technology in early childhood settings is appropriate if there is a limit to how much it is used. It also depends on the age of the children.

Almost three-quarters of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the provision of tech for children under 2 years, falling substantially to one quarter for 2–4-year-olds. These findings strongly suggest that the older the child, the more likely ECESTs are to consider technology an appropriate material to support children's play. In addition, there were significant differences noted in the types of equipment deemed appropriate for the birth to 3-years, and 3- to 6-year cohorts. This suggests again that the age of the child has an impact on ECESTs' attitudes toward tech use in ECEC.

Interestingly, a number of contradictory findings were identified in the study. Responses indicate that a significant percentage of participants think that tech use can be harmful to children's health and well-being in a number of ways; by exposing children to online predators or inappropriate content; impacting negatively on their creativity; contributing to poor physical health and obesity by making children less active. However, 85% believe that digital technology skills assist young children in the future, and half felt that ECEC settings were an appropriate place for children to acquire those skills. Perhaps these results allow for the possibility that opposing opinions can be held at once; a belief that when not used effectively or without monitoring it can be dangerous, but when supported by professionals using appropriate technology, it can be beneficial. This position is summed up well by one respondent

I am now more considerate of the possible health implications technology can have on young children including obesity, behavioural issues, effects on sleep, online dangers etc. I am now aware of how to introduce technology to young children in a way that is safe and interactive. Technology should be used as an additional educational tool alongside the traditional play activities to enhance and enrich learning and social interactions.

Pajares (1992) proposes that researching people's beliefs and attitudes requires complex consideration, which can make empirical research fraught with difficulties. Moreover, MacDonald (2017) found that reporting attitudes

of early childhood practitioners towards technology use with young children is problematic, as nuanced attitudes are more common than simply positive or negative ones. In her study, many ECEC educators wished to quantify their responses with 'it depends on...' statements and explain the reasoning behind their beliefs and attitudes. Similarly, ECEST attitudes to tech use in this study seem to be multifaceted and not easy to unpack. Many of the open-ended responses from ECESTs provide examples of the quantifying statements MacDonald spoke of. For example

I believe that technology has a place, provided that it is developmentally appropriate, it is active and is integrated into the curriculum.

It depends on the type of technology used, I think cameras are appropriate however I do not believe computer and iPads are appropriate or necessary.

In addition, a number of the questions across the research tool elicited a high percentage of 'unsure' or 'neutral' responses, which could indicate that students did not want to answer questions without being afforded the opportunity to provide an explanation for their answers. It is clear that further empirical research is required to delve further, identify the skills and knowledge required to empower practitioners to support learning through technology and integrate digital devices into their learning environments and pedagogy.

Conclusion

Currently, in Ireland, there is inadequate tech integration in early childhood education settings, and the DES Inspectorate (2020) have identified the need for more focused supports in initial training. While not a mandatory component of undergraduate or level 5 and 6 ECEC programmes, this study suggests that a technology module can prompt student educators to reconsider their attitudes and beliefs regarding tech use in ECEC. This is increasingly important as contemporary research points to the benefits and expansive possibilities that technology can offer young children. In addition, the necessary move to online learning during the Covid 19 pandemic has forced many early educators to consider the effective use of technology with the children they care for. ECEC educators have quickly adjusted to the use of online platforms such as zoom, mastering its features to host, share and record sessions with children and their families. Clearly it's more difficult to reproduce the in-person experiences that encourage play, independence, and

investigation in an online environment (Ostroff, 2020). Consequently, some have argued that moving forward, ECEC educator initial training and CPD should ensure participants have the digital skills to utilize these platforms to support and engage with young children appropriately (Szente, 2020).

The hands-on use and evaluation of specific devices provides student educators the opportunity to consider the optimal use of digital technology in early childhood settings *and* ensure that health and safety concerns are addressed. A quarter of educators still feel digital media is inappropriate in ECEC (Billington, 2016) but the scepticism and fear that many educators possess regarding the use of tech in ECEC are unfounded and unsupported by research (Lindahl & Folkessen, 2012). Many will re-examine their position having been forced, out of necessity, to engage in remote teaching during setting closures in 2020 and 2021. Therefore, those already working in the sector may also benefit from similar CPD modules, enabling educators to act as well-informed advocates for the appropriate use of technology by young children. While the Irish government has published multiple policy documents in relation to STEM and tech in ECEC, funding has not yet been provided to offer CPD to ECEC educators. This study contributes to the body of empirical evidence, by investigating Irish ECEC's beliefs about technology as a tool to support play in ECEC settings. The limited sample size and its origin from one university in the Republic of Ireland do not allow for broad generalisations. Further and more in-depth study is required to tease out the complexities surrounding ECEC's attitudes and their impact on practice, especially in light of remote teaching undertaken since the outbreak of Covid 19. Nevertheless, findings of this study are useful for early childhood educators, lecturers, researchers and education policymakers.

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A Lasting Imprint: The Impact of Childhood Mealtime Experiences on Food Choices into Older Adulthood: Short Research Report



Jennifer Pope & Maria Dermiki

Abstract

A life-course approach to understanding factors that affect our health and well-being recognises that all stages of a person's life are woven together and intertwined with each other. Previous research has shown that life-course can have a significant impact on food choice of older people (Delaney and McCarthy 2011, Delaney and McCarthy 2014). Food choice is a complicated process that takes place throughout our lives every day. There are many changes associated with ageing which affect food choices and food-related life of older adults. The aim of this study was to investigate the factors affecting food choice of adults older than 55 years who live in the community. This study adopted a mixed methods approach using a questionnaire (adapting two previously standardised research tools) in phase 1, and phase 2 comprised of semi-structured interviews of six respondents pooled from those who had completed the questionnaires in phase 1. The interviews adopted a life-course approach and data was entered on a line-scale to represent this perspective. Life-course as described by Sobal and Bisogni (2009) includes the experiences and the events, which affected the present food choice of the individuals, and it is not just life cycle, such as growth, maturity and ageing. This pragmatic paradigm helped to describe the complex process of food choice which is expressed in food shopping, food preparation and food intake. It was found that current life situation affects the food-related behaviour of the participants, but past experiences and mainly childhood also impact significantly on the current food choices. This short paper will present an

overview of the findings specifically from Phase 2 of this study and focus on those findings relating to childhood.

Introduction

The life-course approach takes a temporal and societal perspective on the health and well-being of individuals and generations, recognizing that all stages of a person's life are intricately intertwined with each other, with the lives of others born in the same period, and with the lives of past and future generations. Adopting a life-course approach involves taking action early in the life-course, appropriately during life's transitions, and together as a whole society. (World Health Organisation, 2018 p.4)

According to recent reports, obesity in Ireland is recognised as a major public health challenge, starting from early childhood where 19% of 3-year-olds are overweight and 5% are obese (HSE, 2018). The Healthy Weight for Children (0-6 years) Framework focuses on prevention at young age, recognising that lifestyle choices are established at young age (HSE, 2018). The above is further supported by previous research, which has shown that life course can have a significant impact on food choice of older people (Delaney and McCarthy 2011, Delaney and McCarthy 2014). Food is an important part of older people's life, contributing to their physiological and mental well-being and to their satisfaction with life (Grunert *et al* 2017). As people age there are changes in their lives, which influence their food-related life. Most of the studies in the field use the life-course perspective in order to understand how events in one's life will affect food choices (Furst *et al.* 1996, Devine 2005, Delaney and McCarthy 2011, Delaney and McCarthy 2014). Devine (2005) highlights the advantages of using this approach to understand how people construct their food choices and how changes in food and eating environment affect those choices.

A life-course perspective can help explain how social and biological pathways for nutrition and health are linked together. The paper uses three frameworks to explain food choice which are temporal, social and historical. Temporal framework is comprised of food trajectories, transitions in these trajectories and turning point events in one's life. The trajectories are characterised "as a person's persistent thoughts, feelings, strategies and actions with food and eating developed over life course" (Devine 2005 p. 122). Transitions take place when people move from one stage of their lives to the other. The other component to life course perspective is the social framework, since social location, social class, gender, age, race, ethnicity can

affect their food choice. These can also be affected by time since they are dynamic and can change in a person's life (Devine 2005).

Furst *et al.*, (1996) developed a conceptual model of food choice in which life course influences the ideals, personal factors, resources, social framework and food context, and then the personal system that would make the food choices. These choices incorporate value negotiation and behaviour strategies. The values identified were sensory perception, quality, price, convenience, health, nutrition and managing relationships. The behavioural strategies would translate these influences into the actual choice of food. The habits of the past influence the choices of meals and food in the present, and the ones that were developed in the past are more difficult to change in the present (Edfors and Westergren 2012) and as Falk *et al.*, (1996) found in their study, childhood has an important role.

Life-course plays an important role on food choice of people because the historical era will significantly affect their personal system. This may be particularly pertinent within the Irish context given the historical implications of the famine on the Irish psyche. A study that compared food choice of older Europeans found that they share many common historical events where food was scarce, or the era of advancements on food technology, leading to development of similar food habits. The latter were affected by events at macro and micro level in the lives of the participants. For example, the microstructure related to their families and their household content. For women, an important transition in their lives was when they got married and became the food givers (Sydner *et al.*, 2007). In the case of Irish older adults, life course perspective along with ageing and health helped the exploration of the way current food habits are influenced by past experiences and changes in the environment. Food choice is a complicated process that takes place throughout our lives every day. There are many changes associated with ageing which affect food choices and food-related life of older adults. The aim of this study was to investigate the factors that influence the decisions around food choices of adults older than 55 years who live in the community.

Methods

Phase 1 of the study involved a survey to investigate how sociodemographic characteristics, food habits, mood, self-perceived health and income are linked with the items from the food choice questionnaire

developed by (Steptoe *et al.*, 1995) and the items from the satisfaction with food-related life (SWFL) questionnaire developed by Grunert *et al.*, (2007). A convenience sample of 81 adults older than 55 years (54 women) who live in the community, participated in phase 1 of the study. The second part of the study consisted of the collection of qualitative data through semi-structured interviews, conducted between February and April 2018, with a focus on life-course perspective (Delaney and McCarthy 2011, Delaney and McCarthy 2014). This method has been used by many researchers in the field of food choice and gives rich data in terms of the complex process being involved when choosing food (Edfors and Westergren 2012).

For the qualitative data, sampling was conducted based on the information gained from the analysis of the quantitative data (Teddlie and Yu 2007). Participants who participated in the semi-structured interviews were pooled from the ones who had answered the questionnaires and agreed to be interviewed. Men were more difficult to recruit for both phases of the study, 4 women and 2 men were interviewed in phase 2. Some of the interviewees were also recruited through snowball sampling, where in this case subjects were asked to nominate another person. In the case of the semi-structured interviews, the questions were developed from two sources; the literature review and through the analysis of a number of questionnaire responses. This resulted in the first draft of questions, which were further piloted with people from different ages (older than 50 years old). The questions focused on the way the participants choose, shop (Lesakova 2016, Pettigrew *et al.* 2017) or prepare their food now and throughout their life course. Interviews were facilitated with the use of the line where participants discussed about important events in their lives and how their food was affected by those. Previous research has shown that life-course can have a significant impact on food choice of older people (Delaney and McCarthy 2011, Delaney and McCarthy 2014) and for this reason this approach was employed for the current study. This study was granted ethical approval by MIREC and ethical considerations guided the study design, collection, analysis and presentation of the data and anonymity was ensured when quotations of participants were chosen. In this paper, the key findings from Phase 2 of this study focusing on childhood will be discussed.

Interviews were transcribed and coded. The coding process was repeated several times to find as many codes as possible. Then data were grouped based on codes into categories and themes (Cohen *et al.*, 2005). The steps described

by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed in order to use inductive thematic analysis to build up a theory that could explain the food choice of older people (Braun and Clarke 2006). Deductive analysis was also employed in some cases, when the qualitative data from the interviews were used to explain the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires (Elo & Kyngäs 2008). In this case, text from the interviews was organised in codes and themes derived from the questionnaires. The combination of inductive and deductive thematic analysis has been employed by other researchers (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006) and proved to bring rigor to the analysis of the data. For the analysis of the results from the life course perspective, the line with the main events in their lives studied and by comparing information throughout the life-course, it was found which habits had changed and which had remained the same

Findings in Relation to Childhood

Life-course as described by Sobal and Bisogni (2009) includes the experiences and the events which affected the present food choice of the individuals, and it is not just life cycle, such as growth, maturity and ageing. This pragmatic paradigm helped to describe the complex process of food choice which is expressed in food shopping, food preparation and food intake. The interview data was charted on line scales to represent the life course (see Figure 1 as an example). In the current study, a significant finding was that childhood was an important period during which many of the food habits and food attitudes were developed. The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard (2010) stress that the foundations of lifelong health are built in early childhood, with nutrition as a core foundation. Through their interviews, the respondents highlighted significant memories from their childhood around food and mealtimes that still resonate with them today.

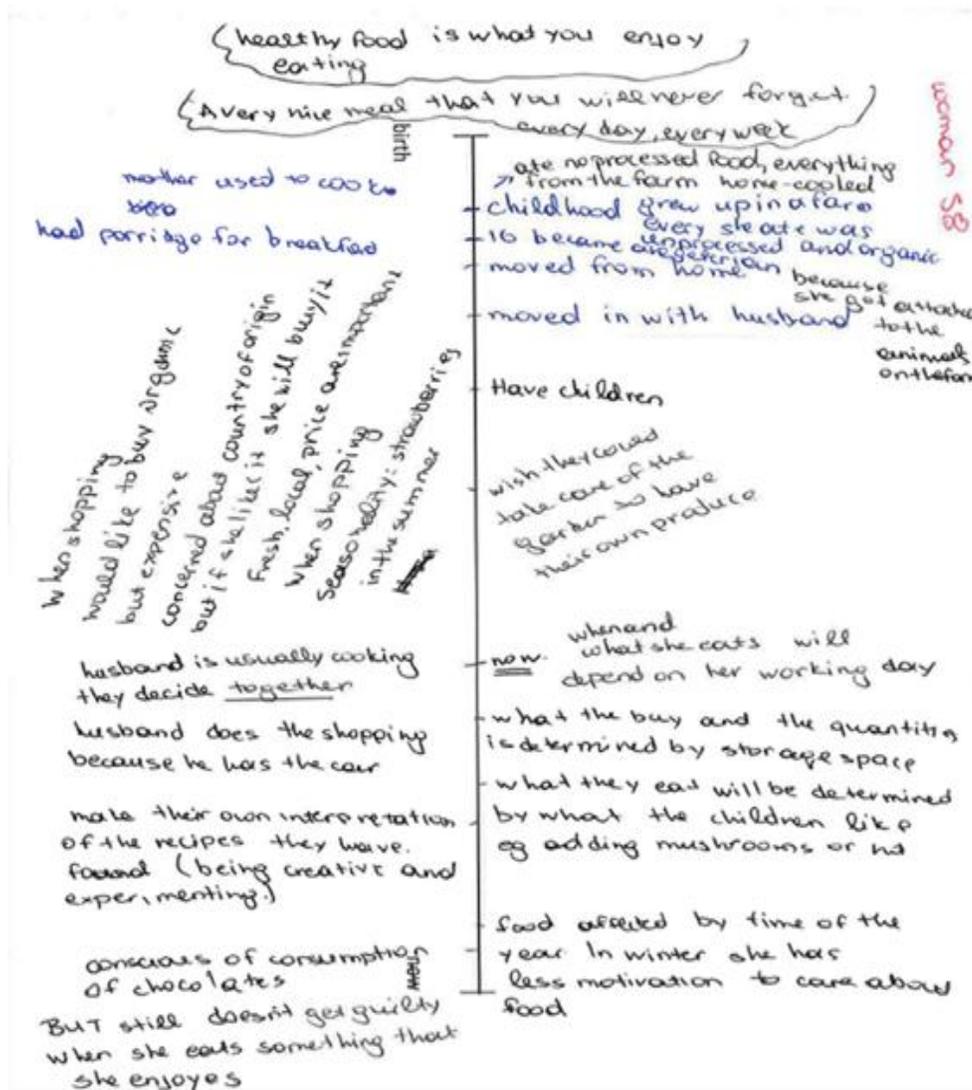


Figure 1: Example of collection of information online-scale representing the life-course perspective

A common theme that arose from the analysis of the data is that during childhood, all the participants ate what was available at the period and the place where they lived. Especially the ones who grew up in the countryside, they ate vegetables from the garden, fish from the sea and animals from their farm, or as one of the participants mentioned [...] and the occasional wild rabbit (P2, woman aged 78). Therefore, the availability depended on the environment they were growing up in. It is characteristic that the participants older than 75

years old (born or growing up during the war), did not experience shortage of food because they grew up in the countryside and ate what was available there. One participant said: “*We had a great childhood, our food was perfect*” (P2, woman aged 78). These findings confirm the observations of other researchers who highlight that food choice depends on the environment one lives in (Furst *et al* 1996).

Despite the fact that the participants who grew up in the countryside “*never went hungry*” (P2, woman aged 78), for one of the participants who grew up in the city things were different. He characteristically says that: “*things were not plentiful, and the food they had was very plain*” (P4, man aged 55) and for a treat he would have bread and some sugar, and they could not eat butter because it was expensive. If there was money his mum would bake a cake, and he remembers having to share an egg with his brothers. A memory that has strongly affected this participant was:

[...] my dad had steak and we were never allowed to have steak (P4, man aged 55).

This could be attributed to the hierarchy in that family and the respect towards the father. Fathers were the breadwinners (Ferguson 2001), so they deserved to have the best meal in the house, according to the participant. The consumption of steak by his father has affected his food choice in the present. For example, whenever he has money now he will buy himself a steak. Moreover, when asked which was his favourite meal, he described a meal that included a steak.

Another difference between the participants who grew up in the countryside and the one who grew up in the city was the fact that in the countryside they would consume brown bread or corn bread depending on the available flour, whereas in the case of the city white bread was common and brown bread was considered a luxury. This is another example of the effect environment has on food choice. Food during childhood in most of the cases was “*simple, nothing fancy, plain*” as characterised by the participants, which concurs with the findings of (Delaney and McCarthy, 2011). The common finding was that food was homemade; mothers would be the ones who prepared the food or baked the cake, which the family would have as a treat. For the ones who grew up in the country, there were no shops, so everything was homemade. They could not buy biscuits or cakes from the

shops, but the mothers would be creative in using the available resources to make something different for the family. In other words, as a 58-year-old woman (P6) mentioned, *everything was organic and unprocessed*, concurring with the way food of the past was characterised by the participants of the study conducted by Delaney and McCarthy (2011). These changes in perception of food between now and the past can be attributed to the food processing developments of the last decades. Moreover, the economic development led to consumption of processed food and the fact that participants would occasionally eat out.

There are various traditions and habits in relation to food and meals which have remained unchanged throughout the life-course of the participants. For example, Sunday meal remains up to now a family meal for most of them, despite the fact that the number of people in the household is decreasing, as they grow older. Food consumed during this meal seems to remain unchanged as well, since it has always included roast beef, potatoes and vegetables, and a desert (P4, man, aged 55). Sunday would be a special day; they would have roast potatoes instead of boiled potatoes which were consumed on the weekdays. *Sunday meal remains until now a meal enjoyed by the whole family* (P4, man, aged 55). Sunday wasn't the only day that the family would sit together. Saturday, as mentioned by one of the participants would be the day they would have a big fry-up for breakfast and for the whole family (P4, man, aged 55).

Breakfast has been an important meal for all the participants throughout their lives, starting from their childhood. For most of the participants it was porridge which remains up to this time (5/6 participants). Even though porridge is still consumed and could be characterised as a tradition, there are some additions to it, such as fruit. Interestingly, fruit was not consumed to a great extent during the childhood of the participants. The youngest participant talked about an apple he was given every day at school (P4, man aged 55). Other fruit were not consumed probably because they were not available at the time, while changes in the food supply chain led to the availability of a variety of fruit in Ireland nowadays. One of the participants for example remembered to this day the time she first had plums as a child:

“[...] one time my dad brought a bag of plums and oh my god how beautiful they were (P1, woman aged 65)”.

Breakfast in some occasions turned into a brunch where breakfast and lunch were combined (P1, woman aged 65). Another important finding was that religion affected food choice to some extent, which has been reported before for Irish older adults (Delaney and McCarthy 2011, Delaney and McCarthy 2014) but also for christian orthodox believers (Lazarou & Matalas 2010). For example, one participant stated that he does not consume meat on Fridays because he is Catholic. Moreover, for the interviews that took place during lent, participants stated that at that time of the year they would not consume any sweets or chocolates, or they would try to cut down on their sweets due to religion. On the other hand, one of the participants who was interviewed after Easter mentioned that she had eaten too many sweets because of the Easter holidays (P6, woman aged 58 years).

Experiences with food during childhood affected their preferences or their behaviour at present as has been shown by other researchers as well (Falk *et al* 1996; Sydner *et al* 2007). One participant does not like to consume mushrooms because she felt sick while having mushroom soup when she was a child (P1, woman aged 65), developing in this way a food aversion towards mushrooms. For another participant, the consumption of steak by his father has affected his food choice in the present, buying himself a steak now and constituting this is his favourite meal. The fact that food was scarce during childhood made him crave food as a treat for himself. During his childhood whenever he had money, he would buy himself a biscuit as treat. Now as an older adult he has kept the habit of treating himself with some kind of food.

These findings support the theory that early family customs and traditions lead to the development of food choices which were persistent over time (Sobal & Bisogni 2009, Edfors & Westergren 2012) and they concur with Falk *et al* (1996) who highlight the important role of childhood on food choice development. Through their interviews, the respondents highlighted significant memories from their childhood around food and mealtimes that still resonate with them today.

Health promotion policy encouraging healthy eating habits should address all age groups and it should start from early childhood and the current study found that many food habits were developed in early childhood. Despite the small number of participants, these findings corroborate with the research of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2010) highlighting that the foundations of lifelong health are built in early childhood and lasts a lifetime.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to highlight some of the findings from a study investigating the factors affecting food choice of adults older than 55 years who live in the community. The study included interviews adopting a life-course approach to include the experiences and the events which affected the present food choice of the individuals, and not just life cycle, such as growth, maturity and ageing (Sobal & Bisogni, 2009). Through this pragmatic paradigm, despite the small number of participants, it helped to describe the complex process of food choice which is expressed in food shopping, food preparation and food intake. It was found that current life situation affects the food-related behaviour of the participants, but past experiences and mainly childhood impact significantly on the current food choices. As a society, we have a responsibility to ensure that children have the best foundation for lifelong health and well-being. From a children's rights perspective, we need to ensure that children have access to healthy food for their well-being now and not just because of the long-term consequences (a focus on their well-becoming). Therefore, in terms of current policy and practice, key areas that really need to be addressed as a matter of urgency include food poverty in families, children who are homeless or living in emergency accommodation and children living in direct provision. The experiences that children have now will leave a lasting imprint.

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Power and Control: Pay and Conditions, Workforce Composition and the Genderised Nature of it All



Colette Saunders

Abstract

This article is an extract taken from a literature review within an MA thesis, written with an Action Research methodological approach titled *How I improve my practice as a volunteer activist supporting trade unionisation of Ireland's Early Years Workforce* (Saunders, 2019). The focus of the thesis was on how to support trade unionisation of the Irish early years workforce. Within a short time of beginning the study, it became evident that it was not going to be possible to undertake such a study without considering the impact of power and control within gendered care relationships, and the many forms power and control assume. The piece begins by setting the scene in terms of pay and working conditions. This is then followed by some consideration of the composition of the early years workforce in the Republic of Ireland and its highly genderised nature. The concept of a “gender regime” is then presented alongside a brief exploration of power and control within gendered care relationships. Following this, the idea of “dual powerlessness” is addressed before moving onto a short overview of the marketised nature of early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Ireland. Marketisation of the ECCE profession and the manifestation of lack of autonomy, professional identity and the Governments role in developing supportive workforce policies are briefly explored, before a final paragraph which considers the various division of labour models and how one such model maintains gender inequalities.

Setting the Scene

Generally, poor pay and working conditions have become associated with employment in ECCE in Ireland, and internationally, as identified in reports such as those published by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) and the European Union (ICTU, 2016:4; EU, 2019:C189/12). Poor pay and working conditions have become compounded by further issues of gender [in]justice, poor opportunities for advancement within the sector and poor professional status associated with employment in a predominantly female, ECCE workforce (Moloney, 2018:11-12). Currently, 98% of all early years educators working in ECCE services are female (Pobal, 2018: 92). Gender justice came to the fore in a report from the Houses of the Oireachtas, which focussed on working conditions for Irish early years educators. The report emphasised the need for gender proofing of early childhood policy in Ireland (Funchion, 2017: 9-10) so that the workforce can move from the position of being under-resourced, undervalued and predominantly female, to the position of being “qualified and diverse, gender mixed, and, in terms of career choices, a satisfying, respected and financially viable one” (OECD 2001:11 cited in Moss, 2006:30). Various stakeholders provided feedback on the Oireachtas report. FÓRSA formerly IMPACT Trade Union highlighted an issue synonymous with gender justice, namely the gender pay-gap (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017). It has been argued this limitation is demonstrated when some sessional early years educators, who are predominantly female, are forced to sign-on for minimal social welfare payments during the summer months, to ensure they have a source of income not provided for outside of Government funded preschool ECCE year. This process of having to “sign-on” is as a direct result of what FÓRSA describes as the precarious nature of employment contracts early years educators find themselves working within (IMPACT, 2017).

In relation to the predominantly female composition of the workforce, the Pobal 2016/2017 Early Years Sector Profile Report highlighted that only 4% of the workforce is comprised of male employees (Pobal 2017: 74). This predominantly female composition of the workforce was subsequently considered in light of Amartya Sen’s humanitarian approach to social justice, his contribution to the development of feminist economics and gender analysis. Sen’s work underpinned the development of significant topics and concepts. One such concept which was found to resonate with the focus of the

thesis this article was developed from was functionings and capabilities (Argarwal, Humphries and Robeyns, 2003). The capabilities approach, as described by Nussbaum (2003:56), makes possible the examination of gender issues, such as the highly genderised nature of early years educators, within social justice. It explores the area of gender justice through the lens of the social contract tradition.

The social contract tradition is based upon the ideas of “freedom and equality” and “all contracting parties are considered to be rough equals”. It proposes that a “balance is struck between those who are care-giving and care-receiving”, case in point early years educators, and stresses that care givers are not to be exploited, “a central issue for gender justice” as argued by Nussbaum (2003:51). This view presents a challenge because of the “conflation between caring for and caring about which equates feminine duty with caring as an occupational role” (Skeggs, 2002:49). Historical legacies which position caring mainly as a woman’s duty, continue to inform the location of women in terms of their class, race, gender and sexuality. When women engage with the occupational role of caring they are essentially entering a long history of classifying practices which perpetuate the division of labour within society (Skeggs, 2002:54). It may be argued therefore it is these same legacies which inform to a certain extent how Irish society views the early years profession today.

Power and Control: Gender Regime

Wider society’s contribution to this “gender regime”, a turn of phrase coined by Moss (2006) whereby the early years professional is regarded as a type of “substitute mother”, preserves the existence of a predominantly female workforce (Moss 2006:37). Furthermore, this type of work has been described as located within a traditional perspective which views the role as “care undertaken by women without training and a natural outgrowth of maternal instincts [whereby] the rewards are intrinsic rather than material” (Jalongo, Fennimore, Pattnaik, De Anna, Brewster, and Moses (2004:); OECD, (2006); Lobman and Ryan, (2007) cited in Moloney, 2010:172). A possible means of overcoming this traditional view would be to approach it from the perspective of Foucault’s power/knowledge discourse, within which he articulates “the best way to introduce changes into larger structures of power is through local actions” (Foucault 1980 cited in Moss (2006: 34). This idea, as it suggests,

would see “early years educators confronting what has been described as the gendering of the workforce by re-envisioning how they are organised, their material conditions and their sectors composition” (Moss, 2006: 31-34, 37).

It may be argued one possible form Foucault’s “local actions” may take could be collective organisation within a trade union in order to ameliorate issues such as gender inequality and lack of professional recognition in wider society. Otherwise, without such local actions, there is an omnipresent risk that the gender pay-gap, gender segregation and division of labour, may continue to contribute to a lack of equality (IHREC, 2016: 47-48) for those working in ECCE. As a result, such inequality may inhibit the ability of those, “who choose their occupation freely ...to come up to the same level of capability to function” on a par with other comparable teaching professions in society (OHCHR 1996-2019; Nussbaum, 2003:35).

Power and Control

The complete range of discourses (Osgood 2012:149) associated with the gendered role, and the identity and position of the early years educator in wider society will not be explored in this article, however, there are aspects of one such discourse worth considering. This is the discourse concerned with power and control within gendered care relationships, elucidated upon by Osgood (2012) and others. As articulated by Katz, (1995); Freire, (1999) and Moyles, (2001) cited in Osgood (2012:10), “nurturance, caring and emotion ...” are considered vital personality traits of those working with young children but, as they are mainly constructed as feminine characteristics in wider society and demeaned in public discourses, they have become equated with low status professions. A 2006 UK study by Vincent and Ball highlighted how the issues of power and control contributed to the relationships between (middle class) parents and the carers of their children. Their study found relationships therein were often characterised by conflicting agendas. For example, parents were found to hold strong (often negative) opinions about their children’s carers and the child carers were found to hold equally forceful opinions about motherhood. The relationships tended to be characterised by absences and silences with “silence surrounding issues of power, and control shaping the carer-family relationships” (Vincent and Ball, 2006:134).

Power and Control: Dual Powerlessness

This type of situation has been described as “dual powerlessness” (Uttal 2002:110), arising as a result of “the political economy of the childcare market which privatises care and devalues [ECCE] labour”. An example of this has been offered by Gewirtz, (2001) cited in Osgood, (2012:44) who described how the economic and political concerns over meeting the childcare¹ needs of the (middle class) working mother appear to override and occupy greater space in the public and policy domains than the needs of the child carer, also a working mother, albeit positioned within the working class. An important point illustrated by Osgood (2012:14) which relates to female participation in the workforce, such as that described above, has been articulated as follows. In order to facilitate the equalisation of some women (middle class working mothers) in society, other women for example, working class working mothers are “positioned in servitude to them”, thus perpetuating the cycle of power [lessness] and control associated with this particular care relationship. This view is informed by research which proposes that women working in childcare do not enjoy the same recognition and respect as is suggested to be the case for other mothers working in what are perceived by society to be more professional occupations (Hochschild 2003 cited in Osgood 2012:15).

Power and Control: Marketised Nature and Lack of Autonomy

As a result of Irish ECCE related policy making, ‘care’ has become mainly positioned as a private good “to be dealt with within the family and/or paid for by the private market” (Kiersey, 2011: 40). This marketised nature of ECCE has been described as positioning those working in ECCE as always needing to be accountable to the customer (parent/family), employer and society. They are regarded from within a regulatory gaze (Foucault, 1979; Osgood, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c cited in Osgood, 2012:18-19). Without a doubt, accountability and regulation are key components associated with the delivery of high-quality early years provision. This area has been widely researched, discussed and written about. See Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2003; Whalley and Allen, 2011; Hayes, 2013; Pugh and Duffy, 2014 for detailed insights. The point being made however, is the impact all of this has had on the early years educators’ sense of power and control in relation to their role and vis-à-vis their care relationships with others. This level of scrutiny has been described

as “harden[ing] the relationship” between parents/working mothers and those employed in childcare. The needs of those working in childcare appear to be pushed to the margins of government policy, thus becoming obscured from view by the structural confines of power and control (Osgood, 2012: 25).

Canella (1997:137) has suggested discourses, practices and actions associated with professional institutions have generated disciplinary and regulatory powers over early years educators who are mostly women. Therefore, an argument has been made that the generation of these powers has led to the escalation of workload to the detriment of autonomy (Novinger and O’Brien, 2003; Osgood, 2006a, 2006b cited in Osgood 2012:126). Osgood (2012) has also highlighted that ECCE is frequently driven by authoritarian discourses promoted by and through government (Osgood, 2012: 123). This overt emphasis on control and compliance [along with standards and accountability] have been described as harmful by Novinger and O’Brien, (2003:4) and sets a sombre tone with little hope for those working in ECCE, to develop any sense of power and control over the future directions of their chosen profession. Unfortunately for those negotiating these care relationships, inequalities may be consolidated, reproduced and lived within them (Skeggs, 2002:75).

Gallagher (2018) considers the marketisation of ECCE provision in contexts where the state is seen to step back from its role as provider of a public service to promoting markets and competition instead. Ireland has adopted this approach in the delivery of ECCE and currently, ECCE provision is approximately 74% privatised as per a recent early years sector profile report (Pobal, 2018:41). As described by Gallagher, the state remains the regulator of quality but makes funding available for both *for-profit* and *not-for-profit* providers, so that ECCE provision becomes a state-funded business opportunity (Gallagher, 2018:706-708). Penn (2007:193), cited in Gallagher (2018:708), highlights that the social and economic gains stemming from such business opportunities are seen as justifying the privatisation of its provision. The detrimental impacts associated with minimising autonomy of a profession in this way are documented by Gregory (2008) who associates the marketisation of ECCE provision with: lack of political intervention to promote trade unionisation; arguments that the state is not the employer; and concerns that the only stakeholders making money, when it came to trade unionisation of the workforce, are unions themselves (Gregory, 2008:277-287,280-282,289-290,300).

For those employed in ECCE, the work at the heart of care labour is described as being undermined, because the market “equates value solely with economic value” (Folbre, 2001 cited in Gallagher, 2018:711) and not the value of the workforce itself. This is compounded by the requirement of minimum standards of qualification [only] in order to work with children (Government of Ireland, n.d.). Bretherton (2010), cited in Moloney (2015:9), has suggested such minimum qualification requirement enables employers to “source cheap labour”, resulting in economic gains being made by some *for-profit* providers. Consequently, it may be inferred that the value of the workforces’ contribution to wider society is low, their professional needs are not considered and ultimately remain unheeded. The next paragraph will consider professional needs in more detail.

Power and Control: Professional Identity

Alongside the challenges of being a predominantly female workforce compensated by low pay and poor conditions of employment, there also exists the challenge of the absence of a professional identity for the ECCE workforce. In the Irish context, much has and continues to be written about the importance of regular professional development, training for a new profession, the need for a graduate led workforce, moving progressively towards a graduate led profession, the professionalisation of the sector and the pathway to professionalism (OECD Thematic Review, 2004; Dineen, 2005; Workforce Development Plan, DES 2010; First 5, Government of Ireland, n.d.; Right from the Start, DCYA 2013; Rodd, 2013). Further research and pre-budget submissions highlight the constraints of insufficient funding illustrated by the poor pay and working conditions experienced by those employed within the early years sector (ACP, 2009; Madden, 2012; Moloney and Pope, 2013, ECI, 2014, and SIPTU, 2019).

Particular research has explored the need for an early years council, and its authors believe this to be “a plausible solution to inordinate fragmentation”. Such a council would oversee the role of ensuring “the protection of the status and position of its members”, with the members themselves sharing “a singularly focused interest, a common bond which sets aspirations for the occupation” (Moloney and McKenna, 2017). More recent research considers the plethora of award criteria and qualifications on offer, with a view to bringing “some consistency to the experiences and outcomes for students

undertaking the BA Ordinary Degree and BA Honours Degree” early childhood programmes of study. The research also looks at wider issues such as: induction for newly qualified professionals; professionalisation and working conditions; and the establishment of a professional body (Moloney, 2018).

To this end, a professional identity for the early years workforce has been described as “a ball of knotted string” (Friedman, 2007:126 cited in Moloney, 2015:3), with the knots essentially obscuring from view the professional at its core. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) has acknowledged that the early years educators’ role “is no less critical [than that of a primary school teacher]” (DES, 2011:27 cited in Moloney, 2015:6) but the points system offered by Higher Education Institutes (HEI) in Ireland would suggest otherwise, with differences in excess of 150 points in some cases (Moloney, 2015:7). As articulated by Moloney (2015), when potential 3rd level students are considering points requirements for entry into Institutes of Teacher Education and Early Childhood Care and Education programmes, this discrepancy at entry level serves only to undermine the professional identity of those seeking a career in the early years. European Council recommendations in 2019 highlighted that member states, of which Ireland is one, must support the professionalisation of their early years workforces by creating high professional standards and offering attractive professional status and career prospects to those working in the early years. The recommendations concluded with various quality related statements, including the need for well qualified staff to engage with ongoing Continuous Professional Development (CPD) so as to fulfil their professional roles. This was highlighted, alongside the need for supportive working conditions including professional leadership (European Union, 2019:C189/12).

Research has shown that without a clear public policy and government support necessary to address the needs of the workforce in relation to power and control, changes regarding recognition and remuneration of early years educators cannot happen and the profession will continue to struggle. One such study, completed from within a Canadian context, highlighted how non-government organisations, such as unions and advocacy groups, are described as being able to inform public policy regarding the needs of those working in the early years, but leadership for the development of such supportive workforce policies must come from within national government (Child Care Human Resources Steering Committee n.d.:4,8,10). Beach, Bertrand and

Cleveland (1998:124) cited in Doherty and Forer (2002:42) identified how unions have had a long history of involvement with other groups in advocating for public policy and funding in respect of ECCE workforces. They highlighted too how the mutually supporting strategies of advocacy, [trade]unionisation and professionalisation can work together to improve the pay and working conditions of those employed in the early years (Doherty and Forer, 2002). Informing public policy may be within the remit of trade unions, but various national /federal governments ultimately develop the policies (Friendly, 2000:11).

Power and Control: Division of Labour Maintaining Gender Inequality

Research by Bleijenbergh and Ciccia (2014: 50-79) considered how various division of labour models contributed to inequality and the results the application of these models had on the provision of ECCE services in welfare states, such as Ireland (Jones, 1985). Their study highlighted variants to the universal breadwinner model, as proposed by Lewis and Giullari (2005) cited in Bleijenbergh *et al.*, (2014) who felt this model applied to countries such as Ireland. Bleijenbergh *et al.*, (2014) identified the variant as the “unsupported male breadwinner model”. The research suggested this model applied to the Irish context because, although separate gender roles are not explicitly promoted, the scarceness of affordable ECCE tended to implicitly perpetuate such roles. They described how the labour model identified not only maintained gender inequalities but it also overlooked issues relating to quality and the working conditions of people occupying the caring roles.

Conclusion

To conclude, this short article has highlighted how power and control within gendered care relationships, in whatever form they may take, are further challenges which the Irish early years educator must contend with. It has been highlighted they are not factors considered to be conducive to quality ECCE experiences either. The larger body of work from which this extract was taken considers steps that may be taken as a means of raising the value of the role of the early years educator. This article identified the necessity of

challenging the genderised view of ECCE, which serves only to undervalue working in the early years as a profession. The need for the development of a professional identity was highlighted alongside the possible role a professional body could have in promoting a sense of power, control and direction for the workforce which, up to now has been lacking. Finally, Governments were identified as having a role to play in developing supportive workforce policies, in order to enable early years educators to take the necessary steps needed to awaken a sense of power and control, which in many ways has been lying dormant up to now.

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“They’d Floor You, They Really Would...They are Capable of Learning Anything” – Irish Preschool Practitioners’ Self-reported Practices on Young Children Learning Mathematics



Córa Gillic

Abstract

With increasing focus on STEM (DES, 2017) and mathematics education (DES, 2011) in early childhood, this paper reports on the findings of a qualitative study that explored the beliefs and practices of eight early childhood educators in relation to mathematics in preschool settings. Findings show that while participants held positive attitudes towards mathematics in preschool education, they focused on a narrow range of mathematical concepts: counting, shapes and measures. This study recommends that training in early childhood mathematics be made available to all early childhood educators and suggests that a larger study of mathematical activity in preschool settings be conducted.

Introduction

Preschool mathematics has become a prominent focus for discussion both in research literature and in national and international educational policy contexts over the last decade. Against this backdrop of increasing emphasis on mathematics in early childhood contexts, this study reports on an exploration of the beliefs and practices of eight Irish early childhood practitioners in relation to mathematics education in early childhood (preschool) classrooms. This research contributes an Irish perspective to the growing body of international research on the beliefs and practices of early childhood educators towards mathematics.

Policy Context

Internationally, governments are placing increasing emphasis on Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education (Murphy *et al*, 2019). Ireland too has experienced increased interest in STEM education across the continuum of education, from early childhood to adult-learning (DES, 2011; DES, 2017a; DES, 2017b; DES, 2020), affording special importance to mathematics as a key subject underpinning other STEM disciplines (DES, 2017b). Even countries with a traditionally socio-cultural approach to early childhood pedagogy, for example, Norway, Sweden and Germany, are including specific learning goals in relation to mathematics in their early childhood curricula (Benz, 2012; Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017; Skolverket, 2018:). The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011) positions early childhood educators as being one of the most important resources the country has in terms of developing young children's mathematical thinking and exploration, therefore, it is important to explore what practitioners think about the role of mathematics in early childhood practice and their role in developing a child's mathematical thinking and learning in preschool.

The Irish Preschool Context

In 2010, the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme which provided young children with a year of preschool education before they entered primary school was introduced. This was extended to two years of

preschool education in 2018. Under this scheme, children access 15 hours of preschool education a week. The number of children attending preschool education currently in Ireland is 128,429 (69% of the total number of children attending childcare services) (ECI, 2018). In order to avail of the ECCE scheme, settings must ensure that the lead practitioner in the preschool room holds a minimum of a QQI level 6 qualification in Early Childhood Care and Education (DCEDIY, 2020), equating to a Further Education (FE) diploma. Irish preschool practice includes a variety of curricular approaches e.g., Montessori, High Scope, Steiner, Naíonraí (Irish speaking preschool settings) and play-based practice. Of these approaches, both Montessori and High Scope contain specific mathematical activities for young children to engage with. A further stipulation of availing of ECCE scheme funding is ensuring alignment of the chosen curricular approach with *Aistear The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009; DES, 2018).

Aistear The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) is the framework used by Irish early childhood practitioners working with children from birth to six years. It spans both the preschool and primary school educational sectors. Positioned as a unifying framework, it supports the continuation of a playful pedagogy into the early years of primary education (O’Kane, 2016). Aistear considers early childhood development and education across four broad themes: *Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking*. Mathematics is explicitly covered in both Communicating and Exploring and Thinking, reflecting the communicative and creative aspects of mathematics. Although some of the learning goals in Aistear do not mention mathematics explicitly, they do describe the goals for quality early mathematical activities. For example: justifying, making connections, reasoning problem-solving, predicting and analysing feature in Exploring and Thinking. Aistear also positions adults as being instrumental in helping young children to develop positive dispositions towards learning. Dispositions such as curiosity, persistence, concentration and determination feature in both Well-being and Identity and Belonging (NCCA, 2009). Each theme is accompanied by a series of sample learning opportunities (SLOs) to support practitioners in supporting children’s learning.

Table 1: The Range of Mathematical Concepts in Aistear (NCCA, 2009)

Exploring and Thinking	
Aim	Learning Goals
1. Children will learn about and make sense of the world around them.	<i>In partnership with the adult, children will:</i> 5. develop a sense of time, shape, space and place
	6. come to understand concepts such as matching, comparing, ordering, sorting, size, weight, height, length, capacity and money in an enjoyable and meaningful way.
Communicating	
Aim	Learning Goal
3. Children will broaden their understanding of the world by making sense of experiences through language.	<i>In partnership with the adult, children will:</i> 6. develop counting skills and a growing understanding of the meaning and use of numbers and mathematical language in an enjoyable and meaningful way.

Beliefs

How early childhood educators feel or believe about incorporating mathematics in their classrooms can impact the learning experiences that children receive. Educator beliefs are identified as a critical component of ‘teacher competence’ in conjunction with subject content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (Dunekacke, Jenßen, Eilerts and Blömeke, 2016). Despite having been identified as an important factor of ‘teacher competence’, there is a lack of research generally exploring the beliefs of preschool educators towards mathematics in preschool (Sumpter, 2019). Little research has been carried out in the Irish context (Dunphy, 2017).

Kagan (1992:65) defines educator beliefs as, ‘tacit, often unconsciously held assumptions about students, classrooms, and the academic material to be taught’. Beliefs can influence pedagogical practice (Chen *et al.*, 2014; Fives & Beuhl, 2016), impact on daily decisions (Anders & Rossbach, 2015), affect curriculum implementation (Platas, 2015), and may also impinge on a practitioner’s ability to see mathematical concepts in children’s play (Oppermann *et al.*, 2016). Benz (2012) notes that beliefs impact the incorporation of mathematics in early childhood settings generally. Similar findings by Anders & Rossbach (2015) in their study of 221 German preschool teachers demonstrated that educator’s sensitivity to mathematics in children’s activity was strongly influenced by their attitudes towards mathematics.

In the Irish context, where the national curriculum framework, Aistear (NCCA, 2009), states very broad learning goals for mathematics, beliefs

towards mathematics can influence whether all of these concepts are explored in a real and meaningful way in preschool settings.

Beliefs about Intentional Teaching

Hachey (2013) notes that many early childhood educators are reluctant to teach mathematics in preschool and tend to emphasise the importance of social, emotional and literacy development. Reasons for this belief are thought to stem from a firm conviction in the adoption of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). DAP reflects a pedagogical approach where educators facilitate child-initiated learning by providing a rich and stimulating environment, where learning is opportunistic rather than intentional (McCray & Chen, 2011). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC; 2020:5) in a position statement on DAP, define the term as, “methods that promote each child’s optimal development and learning through a strengths-based, play-based approach to joyful, engaged learning”. This definition positions young children as being central to a responsive, playful pedagogy.

Pre-service preschool teacher education has, in the past, focused on supporting young children’s social and emotional development. Some pre-service programs advised that intentionally teaching mathematics in preschool classrooms was unsuitable (Lee & Ginsburg, 2009) and unnecessary and potentially harmful to child development (Gifford, 2003; McCray & Chen, 2011). Lee & Ginsburg (2009) suggest that these beliefs have held a long-lasting effect on early childhood pedagogy, where mathematics is often linked with direct instruction and the use of didactic equipment, strategies that are seemingly in opposition to the existing beliefs and established practices of free play and a play pedagogy.

Pollitt, Cohrssen and Seah (2020) note that these beliefs continue to influence the incorporation of mathematics in preschool curricula, despite current research that demonstrates that young children are capable of engaging with complex mathematical concepts (Hachey, 2013). Pollitt *et al* (2020) see the continuation of these beliefs as problematic. McCray and Chen (2011: 256) concur with this statement and suggest that this belief and commitment to DAP coupled with a belief about what mathematics education is, facilitates the assumption that it is ‘developmentally inappropriate’ to engage young children with mathematics. Platas (2015) identified the effect of

beliefs on the implementation of mathematics instruction in the early childhood classroom as a major challenge facing the ECE field regarding the support of mathematical development.

Methodology

A Qualitative research approach was chosen to elicit the thoughts and views of eight Irish early years educators on the provision of mathematics in their early childhood practice. An interpretivist perspective was engaged as it was believed that participants hold their own views and opinions on a given subject based on their own lived experiences (Bryman, 2016).

Research Method

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were employed in this study. Semi-structured interviews provide a flexible method of gaining insight into participants' views on a topic (Greig, 2013) and allow participants to expand on issues that are significant and meaningful to them (Bryman, 2016). Interviews allow participants time to think over responses and to consider answers carefully (Mack *et al.*, 2005). Semi-structured interviews were chosen over questionnaire survey data collection methods, as it was thought that questionnaires would provide insufficient detail about beliefs and practices (Walliman, 2014) or reveal only limited aspects of participants' thinking (Hochschild, 2009) about mathematical activity in preschool. The majority of participants were interviewed in their preschool classroom. This enabled participants to refer to mathematical equipment and activities as present in the room.

Research Sample

Eight early years practitioners were interviewed over a three-month period. Convenience sampling was initially used as practitioners who were known to the researcher were interviewed. However, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were also utilised to recruit participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). The eight participants varied in level of qualification and length of practical experience - from those completing a level 6 qualification in Montessori teaching to those with an honours Bachelor degree in Early Childhood Care and Education.

Table 2 Participants' Qualifications and Years of Experience

Participant	Gender	Qualifications	Years of Experience	Type of Setting
1	Female	Level 8 Degree Early Childhood Level 6 Montessori Teaching	19	Play-based
2	Female	Level 7 degree in Early Childhood Level 6 Montessori Teaching	15	Play-based
3	Female	Level 7 Diploma in Early Childhood Studies & Practice	5	Play-based
4	Female	Student Montessori Teacher (working as an assistant)	4 months	Montessori
5	Female	Level 6 Montessori Teaching	26	Montessori
6	Female	Level 6 Montessori Teaching	15	Montessori
7	Female	Diploma in Preschool Practice Diploma in Montessori Teaching	15	Montessori
8	Female	Level 6 Montessori Teaching	12	Montessori

Data Analysis

The transcribed data was analysed by *thematic analysis* (Braun & Clark, 2006). Bryman's (2012) four stages of data analysis was applied to the transcriptions: familiarisation with the data, labelling the data, coding the data and interpreting the data. Codes were assigned to ideas presented in the data and categories were decided by grouping these codes together. Coding is a way of identifying themes throughout the data (Bryman, 2016) and determining themes or categories stemming from these codes. Connections between the themes were made based on the researcher's literature review.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was sought from all participants. Participants were given an information sheet detailing the research procedures and outlining any potential risks that might arise from engaging with the study. Participation was wholly voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Confidentiality was assured and pseudonyms were used to maintain privacy. Participants were recruited from a range of settings and practitioner qualification levels. A 'leave no harm' policy was upheld by the researcher for the duration of the study and beyond. The researcher committed to honest and ethical research practice. All participants were treated with respect and dignity.

Findings

Findings are presented across three main themes: Mathematical activities provided; Practitioner perceptions of mathematics in early childhood and Role of the practitioner.

Mathematical Activities Provided

Practitioners reported a range of pre-mathematical and mathematical activities being completed in their preschool rooms (see Table 3). The table clearly shows that participants engage children in counting and number related activities far more often than other mathematical play types. Measuring activities were next in frequency. Activities such as matching, division, subtraction and problem-solving were only mentioned once throughout the interview process.

Table 3 Mathematical Activities Mentioned by Participants

Practitioner Perceptions of Mathematics in Early Childhood

Maths is a fundamental skill for life and for understanding the world. Data analysis showed that the majority of participants thought that developing mathematical skills in young children was vital in order for them to understand the workings of the world around them. “They (maths skills) have a place, cos in order for the child to understand the world around them, they have to understand maths” (Participant 3). One participant commented on how the focus on concrete, practical mathematics such as weighing, measuring and estimating should be the focus of early childhood mathematics.

All participants mentioned recognising numbers and counting as a chief skill for young children to master, as numbers feature heavily in children’s everyday environments. There was a consensus among participants that numbers (naming and recognising) and counting were the most important mathematical skill young children should master, “my understanding of children and mathematical learning is mostly about counting” (Participant 1). However, participant responses varied as to the emphasis that should be put on numbers and counting during the pre-school phase, referring to children’s interests and pace of learning: “I’m not a big believer in them knowing numbers and they leaving here, if they do, it’d be brilliant” (participant 3).

When asked if there were any mathematical concepts that pre-school children should not learn, participants mostly agreed that children could learn anything, but that abstract concepts such as addition and subtraction should not be taught formally, rather informally through play and songs. Montessori participants disagreed, where three participants referred to children doing ‘sums’ in a copybook.

The Child as a Learner

The majority of participants agreed that young children are capable learners:

I think we underestimate children drastically...they are capable of anything and learning anything (Participant 5).

Children want to be challenged, they want to be doing something a little harder” (Participant 8).

Most of the participants valued the role of free time for play in children’s mathematical learning and development. The two participants with Bachelor degrees in early years articulated clearly how a child can learn through play and from their environment, providing several rich, descriptive examples of mathematics, observed in children’s play, for example:

...at the playdough, when they’re rolling it out and they’re making a necklace or a bracelet, they have to get the length of it, they’ll test it out on their neck...it’s not long enough, I’ll have to get another bit (Participant 3).

Most of the participants felt that mathematics needed to be introduced in a fun way, to foster early positive dispositions towards mathematics early on: “It’s all about liking it, making it fun, and if it’s boring, then you have to do something about it” (Participant 6)

Two participants (Montessori practitioners) did not place much emphasis on free play in terms of fostering developing mathematical skills, preferring to follow the sequential mathematical exercises of the Montessori curriculum: “I don’t think it’ll (play-based pedagogy) focus them (children) as it should do” (Participant 5).

Most of the participants were adamant that young children should be allowed to learn at their own pace. These practitioners were mindful of not pushing a child to learn mathematical concepts they did not want to learn or when they felt the child was not ready to learn them: “pushing a child to do something he doesn’t want to, just to tick a box...that would be terrible” (participant 7). One participant noted that if a child was particularly interested in mathematics, they would endeavour to encourage them on their mathematics journey: “I think if they have an interest in it, they have that interest for a reason...show them, give them a taster of it... what harm would it be?” (Participant 5).

Findings show that participants viewed children as being capable and competent learners, who are adept at learning complex mathematical concepts. This view is shared by researchers in early childhood mathematics education (Perry & McDonald, 2015). Participants also believed that mathematics should feature in early childhood curricula as it was strongly linked to everyday life.

Fear of Doing Too Much

Five of the eight participants admitted that although they follow the child's lead in readiness to learn mathematical concepts, they were concerned about doing 'too much' in case the child would be bored in primary school. One participant expressed concerns that the ECCE pre-school years scheme may result in children becoming bored in the Junior Infant Class in primary school: "I mean with this new Free Preschool Year scheme, children will be five, or nearly five, going to primary school and will have many of the math concepts already learned" (Participant 2). This belief affected the type of mathematical activities done in this participant's setting: "I do focus on shapes, numbers and matching and sorting, but I try not to copy Junior Infant work" (Participant 2). Participants three, five and seven agreed with these sentiments, stating:

I know when they go to National (Primary) school they do 1-5 in Junior Infants and 6-10 in Senior Infants, so you don't want to go beyond that in preschool. (Participant 5).

I could teach addition...however, when they go into school then they'll know all that already. (Participant 3)

Sometimes I worry about sending a child to school with too much...I fear that the child will, be bored and have less respect for the teacher because she's not moving at the pace the child needs to move at. (Participant 7).

Social, Emotional and Language Development more Important than Mathematics

Two of the participants felt that it was more appropriate to focus on social, emotional and language development rather than on mathematical development: "I'm very focused on language, you know, having conversations and explaining things...I'm more socially minded, so I focus on emotions and feelings" (participant 1). Participant 2 was very clear that personal and social development is an important component in an early years curriculum. This participant referred to boosting resilience, building confidence, and fostering respect for others.

Role of the Practitioner

Laying the Foundations

Four of the participants stated the importance of the early years as an important time to introduce mathematical concepts to young children, with one participant acknowledging that early childhood is the optimal time for children to absorb ideas (participant 4). These practitioners favoured a more interactionist approach, where the adult actively supports the child in learning new mathematical concepts and fostering dispositions.

You have to sow the seed for them, in order for them to pick it up and run with it because sometimes they don't notice the concepts of mathematical things until you actually show them (participant 3)

Facilitator of the Environment

Participants saw their role chiefly as that of facilitator, one who provides the environment and mathematical resources for play and exploration. Participants stated that children benefit and learn from a richly resourced environment. Montessori trained participants noted the importance of the environment in free exploration and facilitating choice in child-led mathematical activity: "I have to provide an environment that challenges the children to think...to extend the child's math ideas in their play" (participant 2). When questioned about their adult role in fostering mathematical skills, the two degree-holders noted how experience counts when knowing when to intervene in play (to develop it) or when to step back, they saw themselves as guides to lend support. The two degree holders also stated that they had an important role in extending children's play activities and in challenging the child to think about mathematical concepts through open-ended questioning: "you're constantly using open-ended questions...you're conscious of getting them (children) to just think about things" (participant 3).

Discussion

Findings revealed that participants provided, in the main, a limited number of focused mathematical activities, centred on numbers, counting, shape and measures (See table 3). This practice is well noted in the literature (Trawick-Smith *et al.*, 2016; Lee & Ginsburg, 2007). However, many researchers claim that young children should be exposed to a broader

mathematical foundation, including concepts such as pattern (algebra), space, data handling and operations (NCCA, 2014: Early Math Collaborative; 2014). Indeed, Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) calls for children to engage in a range of mathematical concepts (Table 1). Participants believed that a role of the early childhood educator was to lay the foundations for future mathematics learning. This study asks, how can participants be laying the deep mathematical foundation called for by Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and by researchers (Dunphy *et al.*, 2014) if they are focusing on the teaching of numbers, counting and shape? Could it be that the mathematical content, outlined in the learning goals for the themes of Communicating and Exploring and Thinking in Aistear (NCCA, 2009) focus too narrowly on counting, shape and measures and that aspects of mathematical thinking e.g. problem-solving, justifying, reasoning etc. are not explicitly linked to mathematics? Could this prevent practitioners from identifying these processes as being mathematical in nature? Other aspects of mathematics, such as pattern feature in the sample learning opportunities section for Exploring and Thinking, but are not stated in the learning goals. Data handling is explored through comparing, sorting, categorising and ordering in learning goal 6 in Exploring and Thinking. However, these activities were rarely mentioned by participants.

Given that specific mathematical goals are explicitly stated in Aistear, it is interesting to note that participants did not refer to the aims and learning goals relating to mathematics in Aistear during the interviews. Further studies are needed to explore practitioner engagement with Aistear from a mathematical perspective and to investigate the types of mathematical experiences offered in Irish preschool classrooms daily. All participants were adamant that they adopt the mantra of following the child's lead, in terms of waiting for the child's readiness and willingness to engage with mathematics. Research (Lee & Ginsburg, 2009; McCray & Chen, 2011) suggests that these beliefs and practices stem a firm belief and commitment to DAP and this has prompted practitioners to hold off introducing more complex abstract mathematical concepts until the child is developmentally ready.

The philosophy of following the child's interests and needs could lead to the exclusion of some children, in terms of mathematical input from educators. Adults decide what information to share and with whom. Adults hold a powerful position and must ensure that all children are afforded time to develop their mathematical knowledge and mathematical interests. Several

participants voiced concerns about ‘doing too much’ for fear of children being bored in primary school. One participant admitted that, although they would follow a child’s interest in mathematics, they would fear that the child may become disruptive in primary school because the teacher would go at the pace of the majority and not that individual child, who may have covered the concepts already in preschool.

There appears to be a conflict of beliefs here. The belief of ‘following the child’ and the belief or fear of crossing the line between what is perceived as mathematics for preschool and what is required in primary school. For future studies, it may be worth exploring why this is the case. Aistear (NCCA, 2009) is a unifying curricular framework, it bridges practice between preschool and primary education, and yet, we see evidence of a perceived divide in required curricular practices. Findings from this study suggest that there was uncertainty among participants as to what mathematical content should be covered in preschool education. This is worrying as Aistear (NCCA, 2009) provides a list of mathematical concepts that young children should engage in (see table 1). It appears, however, that the mathematical concepts listed in Table 1 do not provide enough guidance. The current separation of the learning goals from the sample learning opportunities (SLOs) may be hindering practitioners’ ability to connect the goals to mathematical activity. There may be a case for combining the goals and the SLOs in future revisions of Aistear to ensure coherent guidance for practitioners.

Findings suggests a number of questions for future exploration:

- What do practitioners understand by mathematics in preschool?
- Are these findings a sign that practitioners do not understand the mathematics that children engage with daily in the preschool environment and in their play e.g. matching, sorting?
- Why are practitioners afraid to follow a child’s mathematical interests?

Findings also indicate that there is a necessity for training in early childhood mathematics for preschool educators. This echoes the recommendations put forward by Dooley *et al.*, (2014). Research concurs that training is beneficial to a practitioner’s ability to pick out mathematical concepts in children’s play (Cohrssen *et al.*, 2016) and also to the ability to extend the mathematics in episodes of play (Oppermann *et al.*, 2016). German research (Anders & Rossbach, 2015; Oppermann *et al.*, 2016), suggest that early childhood practitioners need to be schooled in not only pedagogical strategies to enhance mathematical development but also in the subject of

mathematics itself. Both degree-holder participants had received training in mathematical pedagogy during their degree programmes.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Irish pre-school educators value mathematics as an essential component for developing life-skills. However, findings show that, in the main, practitioners provide a very narrow mathematics curriculum, focusing heavily on numbers, counting, measures and shapes. Other mathematical concepts such as pattern and space did not feature in participant interviews as often. This narrow curricular view of pre-school mathematics is in opposition to the broader perspective of mathematics envisioned in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011). International research also supports the implementation of a broader mathematical foundation at preschool level. While this research study has not overtly examined the mathematical knowledge of the participants, the fact that they provide such a narrow range of mathematical activities and focus might suggest that they have not been adequately trained in the area of early childhood mathematics. Only two participants had training on mathematics through play. The other play-based participant had no training in preschool mathematics. With this information in mind, this study recommends that all Irish pre-service courses in Early Childhood Care and Education include a mathematics module that covers both pedagogical strategies and mathematical subject knowledge. The needs of in-service practitioners should also be addressed.

In order to address the concerns highlighted, this study recommends that Irish educational policy needs to work towards developing a more cohesive system within the early childhood phase. A cross-sectoral curriculum framework (Aistear) is already in place, but this research advocates the provision of mathematics teacher education across the pre and primary sectors. Such a training initiative may help practitioners to understand the mathematics education that children experience on entering primary school, and so alleviate any concerns they may have in relation to acknowledging and responding to children's mathematical interests. It is also of great importance that primary teachers need to respond to the varying mathematical funds of knowledge children bring with them to primary school. Cross-sectoral

training may serve to facilitate the mathematical needs of children as they transition from one educational setting to the other.

This study explored the beliefs of a small sample of early years practitioners regarding the provision of mathematics in their pre-school rooms, thereby contributing an Irish component to the increasing international research on this topic. It has shown that, in the main, participants demonstrate a positive outlook towards mathematics in the preschool classroom. Findings revealed that participants were unsure what to cover mathematically, and there was a major focus on numbers, counting, measures (capacity) and shape. However, due to the small-scale nature of this piece of research, it cannot be taken to represent Irish early childhood practitioners in general. Therefore, this study recommends that further, large-scale research be carried out to ascertain the general standard of Irish pre-school mathematics provision and to investigate the nature of mathematical activities provided. There is a necessity to explore the complex interplay between beliefs and practice – beliefs about the nature of mathematics, early childhood mathematics education and appropriate pedagogies for mathematics in early childhood.

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Slow Relational Pedagogy with Babies and Toddlers



Geraldine French

Abstract

Children are born primed to engage with people, to explore, learn and make meaning from the world around them. As the number of babies and toddlers participating in out-of-home early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings is rising, the experiences and relationships that children encounter in these settings is of the utmost importance. What babies and toddlers experience from moment to moment is what drives their development and emotional well-being in the present and the future. This paper addresses three themes derived from literature with the aim of enhancing the learning and development of babies and toddlers responsively, respectfully and sensitively. The themes include the rationale for focussing on children under three years of age, the general characteristics of professional practice in ECEC settings for working with this age range, with a specific focus on the slow relational pedagogy required for very young children's flourishing.

Slow Relational Pedagogy with Babies and Toddlers

‘Never will a time come when the most marvellous recent invention is as marvellous as a new-born child’ (Sandberg, 1948: 7). Children are born primed to engage with people, to explore, learn and make meaning from the world around them. As the number of babies and toddlers participating in out-of-home early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings is rising, the experiences and relationships that children encounter in these settings is of the utmost importance (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2020). Indeed, it has been hypothesised that substantially better outcomes, for vulnerable young children who face adversity and educational inequality: *could be achieved by greater attention to strengthening the resources and capabilities of the adults who care for them rather ... than ... the provision of child-focused enrichment, parenting education, and informal support* (Shonkoff and Fisher, 2013: 1635).

This paper draws, in part, from French (2018) and French (2019) and attempts to address what those working in ECEC settings could do to support our youngest citizens. The paper centres on three themes derived from literature with the aim of enhancing the learning and development of babies and toddlers responsively, respectfully and sensitively. The themes include the rationale for focussing on children under three years of age, the general characteristics of quality ECEC settings for working with this age range, with a specific focus on the slow relational pedagogy required for very young children’s flourishing. Note that in this paper the term ‘babies’, refers to children from birth to eighteen months, the term ‘toddlers’ refers to children from 12 months to 3 years, while acknowledging that there is considerable variation between individual children in their learning and development. The age breakdown derives from Ireland’s ECEC practice frameworks Aistear (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009) and Síolta (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006).

Why Should we Focus on Babies and Toddlers?

The arguments, as presented in this paper and articulated below, include: the amazing capacities of babies, previously under-estimated; the acceleration of brain development at this time; the research and public policies that focus

on the impact of ‘quality’ ECEC and young children’s right to optimal experiences; the impact of poor ‘quality’ ECEC and finally how this particular time of life builds the foundation for all later learning and development.

For much of the 20th century, the cognitive and social capacities of babies were severely underestimated. We used to believe that babies’ experiences and thinking were limited, that babies were irrational, they had no idea of cause and effect or the ability to take another person’s perspective (Nugent, 2015). We now know that babies are born knowing a lot; they learn more, feel more, create more, think more, care more and experience more than we could ever have anticipated (Kuhl, 2010; Gopnik, 2016). For example, in social contexts which have meaning and purpose for a child, children as young as 18 months show evidence of self-regulation and metacognition (thinking about their thinking - learning from past experience) and ‘spontaneously use error-correction strategies in solving problems’ (Robson, 2010: 228). In contrast to the vulnerability and dependence of a new-born baby, a typically developing 24-month-old toddler may be independently walking, talking and feeding themselves. Such leaps of learning and development require that the youngest children need adults with high expectations of their capacities and the skills to support them.

During their first two years, children learn and develop at a faster rate than at any other time of their lives (OECD, 2020). This acceleration is enabled by the development of the brain and biological pathways in the first 1,000 days of life. Half of the postnatal growth of the brain volume occurs during the first year of life, and the brain attains about 75% of its adult size by the end of the second year (Huelke, 1998). Synapses (brain connections from one neuron to another) multiply 20-fold in the first 1000 days, producing more than a million neural connections each second (Gerhardt, 2005). What is going on in baby’s brains is nothing short of rocket science (Kuhl, 2010). The complexity of children’s development at this age, requires particularly nurturing and responsive support from the adults around them.

Whilst acknowledging the term ‘quality’ is problematic (‘quality’ being socially constructed and context dependant [Moss and Pence, 1994]), decades of research point to how, in general, high ‘quality’ ECEC leads to measurable gains in thinking and social skills (Sylva *et al.*, 2010). For this reason, the 11th principle of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) states that all children, including babies and toddlers, have the right to good ‘quality’ ECEC (European Commission, 2018). This is in line with the Charter of

Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2012) which recognises education as a right, along with the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 asserts that all girls and boys should have access to 'quality' early childhood development, care and pre-primary education by 2030 (Sustainable Development Goals -Education 2030 Steering Committee, 2019). Therefore, young children's *right to optimal ECEC experiences*, appropriate to the context of their learning and development, should be honoured.

Whilst there is research evidence that highlights the benefits of optimal ECEC particularly for children from the age of two years living at risk of educational inequality (Sylva *et al.*, 2010), there is also evidence, however, that attendance in non-parental care can bring about negative effects (Melhuish *et al.*, 2015). Despite these inconsistencies in findings, comprehensive reviews of research conclude that knowledgeable, skilled and 'attuned' early childhood educators and low stress appropriate environments are known to have positive impact on very young children's learning and development (Dalli *et al.*, 2011; Melhuish *et al.*, 2015).

Building "a strong foundation in the early years is a precondition for higher level competence development and educational success" (EU Council, 2019: 3). The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (NSCDC, 2020) have provided us with evidence on the impact of every day moments on not just the developing brain but also on the physiological system (such as digestion, heart and lung function, fighting infection). They provide five facts about health that are often misunderstood as follows. The experiences we have early in life are at least as important for the biological foundations of physical and mental health as the lifestyle choices we make as adults. Poor health outcomes are not inevitable after experiencing adversity early in life, but they are more likely if we do not adequately support children and families experiencing persistent hardships or challenges.

When the developing brain and other biological systems adapt to what they experience in their environment, it may be positive in the short-term, but negative in the long-term. The body's stress response is the same, no matter what causes it, but an accumulation of stressors over time means there's less time for recovery. All policies and delivery systems serving young children and families across sectors can support both early learning and the foundations of lifelong health (see NSCDC, 2020 for more detail). In short,

this time of life is the foundation for all later learning, development and physiological health. Given the evidence above, on the importance of those early years, the general characteristics of ECEC that best supports young children's early learning and development are now considered. For further detail see French (2019).

What are the Key Elements of Professional Practice for Babies and Toddlers?

The elements of professional practice now considered are: knowledgeable and committed staff in early education and care (with a focus on birth to three in their education); low-stress-facilitating environments; play-based curriculum specific to the baby and toddler; attention to communication and emerging language within holistic development; family involvement enhanced by, finally, the key person approach (French, 2019). We know that the higher the qualifications enjoyed by early childhood professionals, the greater the impact on staff ability to provide responsive, nurturing, sensitive care and education to children under three years (Melhuish *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, specialised professional development opportunities (after initial qualification), formal and informal professional development and supervision while working in ECEC all impact positively on staff's ability to enhance children's learning and development (Dalli, *et al.*, 2011; Mathers *et al.*, 2014; Melhuish *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, a key element of professional practice in ECEC settings is knowledgeable and committed staff in early education and care (with a focus on children from birth to three in their education).

Such staff know about children's rights; how children learn and develop; how to use daily routines to build attachments; emotional engagement through responsive interactions; planning for babies' and toddlers' learning and development; awareness of diversity and inclusion; working with families with multiple needs; self-evaluation and critical reflection, ideally, through film-stimulated reflective discussions; all supported by on-site mentorship embedded in a team approach. The importance of interactions and experiences in young children's daily lives was highlighted by the OECD, with the recommendation that they be facilitated through training and investment in the ECEC workforce (OECD, 2018).

The richest environments for supporting very young children's learning and development are those that promote positive interactions and

relationships and “educators’ intentional provision of careful and responsive challenges” (Westwell, 2016: 23). Babies and toddlers need low-stress-facilitating environments that support physical movement and play organised, literally, from the babies and toddler’s perspective. Babies spend a lot of their time at ground level; seeing what they see and feel should influence the environment. They need comfortable spaces to meet routine care needs (for both adults and children). Small, cosy spaces that cater for small groups may work better for very young children. Soft furnishings and lighting can provide a calm and reassuring atmosphere; including enriching resources appropriate to the context of the developing child. Young children need space which promote physical activity, movement experiences and play integrated throughout day, indoors and critically outdoors. Natural features (trees, loose wooden parts, natural pathways) appear to be particularly important in challenging children and enabling experiences which are not always possible indoors (Kemp and Josephidou, 2020). Therefore, a well-planned, carefully organised environment indoors and outdoors, provides the basis of professional practice. It is what happens in those environments that truly determines the quality of the experience (Touhill, 2017).

Mathers *et al.*, (2014) cite two types of play considered to be particularly effective for the youngest children - to make choices and take the lead. Firstly, they recommend floor-based play which supports babies and toddlers to explore objects and experiences moving to secondly, representational symbolic play in the second year of life. A play-based curriculum specific to the baby and toddler is based upon a sound understanding of child development and pedagogical practices, while taking into account the individual needs, interests and temperaments of each child. Play-based curriculum which is appropriate to the context of the child support babies and toddlers as agentive, active learners. The role of the educator is particularly important in the provision of sensory play materials and the understanding that curriculum is everything that the child experiences (including intimate bodily care routines, see further elaboration below).

Attending to communication and emerging language within holistic development is particularly important for children from birth. Studies which cross disciplines from neuroscience, psychology, machine learning and education have further confirmed that language is developmentally linked with cognition and social processes (Dalli, 2014). In learning about language “babies appear to use the three social skills of imitation, shared attention and

empathetic understanding” (Dalli, 2014: 3). Focus on enhancing children’s communication and emerging language through the pedagogical skills of narrating, informal conversations, songs, rhymes and sharing books is recommended. Narrative is particularly important and involves the retelling and recalling of children’s experiences. It allows children to give meaning to the range of their experiences, helps develop tools for thinking and supports children’s appreciation of their own achievements.

Babies and toddlers in Ireland come from a diversity of family backgrounds. Background can refer to an individual’s ethnicity, culture, religion and language of origin, in addition to social, economic and family status. Professional practices, ideally, reflect the values and beliefs of the families and the cultures of their communities (Dalli *et al.*, 2011). In their work with families, educators respect differences and strive to become more culturally competent. Through supportive family involvement parents are recognised as the first educators of their children, with duties and rights to actively participate in their child’s learning and development. Respect-based partnership with parents (and carers) is key, which means deeply engaging with parents and in practices that promote diversity and inclusion.

This involves sharing of information, skills, decision-making, responsibility and accountability. There are three important dimensions of effective engagement with parents: taking account of parents’ priorities, preferences and cultural difference in all aspects of planning and implementing the curriculum; ensuring that procedures are in place in the setting for regular and continual two-way communication between educators and families and finally, educators noticing and responding to signs of stress in the family or other challenges to supporting children’s learning and development (Mathers *et al.*, 2014). The strengthening of the relationship between settings and families and supporting families’ involvement is enabled by use of the key person approach. The concept of the ‘key person’ was created by Goldschmied and Jackson in 1994.

The negative and disruptive impacts of abrupt changes in personnel for babies and toddlers, related to high educator turnover are too often disregarded. In Ireland in the twelve months up to June 2019, the annual staff turnover rate was 23.4% (Pobal, 2019). High staff turnover is not confined to Ireland. A recent study of four countries (Norway, Denmark, Germany and Israel) who have the highest proportion of children from birth to three in their settings report ‘that staff shortages and staff absences are an important

barrier to their [settings'] effectiveness' (OECD, 2020: 18). In the UK, Jackson and Forbes (2015) reported an alarming number of people changing children's nappies over a period of time. This is detrimental to babies and toddlers as 'repeated 'detaching' and 're-attaching' to people who matter' is emotionally distressing and can lead to enduring problems. Being 'handled by many different people—each with their different way of holding, soothing, talking to and changing the child's nappy...impedes babies' sense-making (Fleer and Linke, 2016: 9). Babies and toddlers need the stability of an enduring and personal relationship with a person who will recognise that they have special interests. This key person is assigned to, and has special responsibility for, a small number of children and helps each child build a special bond of belonging in the ECEC setting. Ideally, children up to three years of age should have the same key person who engages with parents and in all transitions and intimate bodily care (see below), with the benefit of a secondary key person. The key person approach is one significant step in implementing a slow relational pedagogy as follows.

What do we Mean by Slow Relational Pedagogy and how do we Ensure it?

Dalli (2014) reports on the rise of research evidence in relation to pedagogy with babies and toddlers in group-based settings, with key findings converging on the notion of a specialised 'relational pedagogy'. Indeed, a concept called a *neuro-relational approach* has emerged (Lebedeva, 2018) in recognition (as discussed above) that experience, not simple maturation, changes the brain (neuro) and that all learning happens in the context of relationships (relational). In other words, the brain is an organ that is changed in interactive and complex ways by relational experiences with others. Combining these ideas with Alison Clark's promotion of the need for time for listening and slow pedagogy and slow knowledge, the concept of slow relational pedagogy emerges. Clark (2020: 142 - 143) refers to "lingering, revisiting, rethinking"... listening again or differently' or 'dwelling'. This requires attention to tempo, pace, place, materials and the role of the adult and the uncomfortableness of uncertainty. However, intensity is also part of slow pedagogy. Consider the richness and depth that a toddler experiences when he

is drawn to squatting down and staring intently at an insect followed by an equally fascinated adult.

This idea of slow relational pedagogy, speaks to what educators *do* within relationships, environments and experiences in their daily care of very young children (Benson McMullen, Buzzelli and Ra Yu, 2016). Very young children require sensitive responsive caregiving from educators who are *in tune with* and on the same wavelength as them, are affectionate and available and who use all aspects of the daily routine to enhance children’s learning and development. In early childhood settings “the routines of caring for children under age 3 (e.g. feeding, nappy changing) are equally important aspects of education and care” (OECD, 2020: 84). In fact, babies and toddlers experience a considerable number of transitions within their daily routine which demand individualised support (OECD, 2020).

A young child in full day care could experience the following: arriving at the setting and handover to the key person, playing, having breakfast, nappy changing, resting, re-joining group, playing outside, having lunch, nappy changing, playing, snacking, resting, nappy changing, playing and finally departing. Imagine if each of these daily experiences were mediated by a different person? The key person approach, with a consistent nurturing adult or small number of adults, supports children to negotiate these many transitions.

Slow relational pedagogy involves meeting these care, play and emotional needs of babies in a predictable, consistent, calm and loving manner. Babies need those around them to follow their lead and focus on them as people (not just the task). Bodily care routines (feeding and nappy changing) are seen as opportunities for learning and managed in a calm unhurried, interactive way, with the young child given time and space to eat at their own pace and to be held and physically moved with respect. Respect is important and is demonstrated in how the child is talked to about what is happening. The difference between task-based care and a slow relational pedagogy is outlined in Table 1 (adapted from Fleer and Linke, 2016: 9).

Table 1 Task-based care versus slow relational pedagogy

Task-based care	Slow relational pedagogy
Related to <i>getting</i>	<i>Relating to the whole child</i> , not just the task – seeing opportunities for learning

<p><i>the task done</i> e.g. quickly change nappy or feed child</p>	<p>and communication, e.g. narrating the experience for the child, using the nappy changing experiences to offer choice – hold the powder or the tissues, playing games, singing songs and nursery rhymes.</p>
<p>Adult routine/schedule-based</p>	<p><i>Infant rhythm and need-based</i>, e.g. the child is gently placed in their cot when they indicate that they are tired, and are fed when they should be hungry after the last feed.</p>
<p>Do what has to be done</p>	<p><i>Pause, look, listen and think about what it means for the child first</i>, e.g. if the child has to have a nappy changed, think what it would like to have an adult (sometimes an unfamiliar person) pick you up and change your clothes, without explanation.</p>
<p>Doing things <i>to</i> the child, e.g. wiping their face with a cloth after feeding</p>	<p>Doing things <i>with</i> the child, e.g. offering the child the cloth to respectfully wipe their own face, if not accepted gently, unhurriedly wipe her face while explaining what is happening.</p>
<p>Focus on the task</p>	<p><i>Focus on doing things in the relationship with the child</i>, e.g. talking through everything that is happening, pointing</p>

things out to the child and seeing the situation from the child's point of view.

Clark (2020) asks the question how can we be with very young children in a slow way? To apply this to the experiences of young children in ECEC settings we can consider: How can we be together with a baby and toddler in a slow way when arriving and leaving the setting; when changing a nappy; when feeding; when sharing books; when playing; when outside? The specific features of engaging in a slow relational pedagogy include the importance of attunement, responsiveness, supporting intentions, emotional and physical presence, being an interesting companion and importantly self-regulation (see also French 2018 and French 2019).

Attunement involves being in harmony through careful observation and tuning into young children's unique traits. The educator responds gently and appropriately to the child using voice or touch. The response is neither too intrusive nor too passive. "Attunement is a natural extension of attachment" (Dowling, 2014: 6). Through the emotional bond of closeness and loving relationships a baby and educator become familiar with each other.

Interactions between young children and educators that are responsive and attentive—with lots of back and forth (*serve and return*) interactions build attachments and a strong foundation in a young child's brain for all future learning and development (Center on the Developing Child, n.d.). Fler and Linke (2016) acknowledge that the younger the child the more reliance there is on adults to learn to *read* the signals of each child: Reading these signals, or cues, requires sensitivity, responsiveness and intimate knowledge of each baby. It means listening and watching and thinking about what the baby is trying to 'say', and basing our care on this (Fler and Linke 2016: 4).

Supporting babies' and toddler's intentions involves focusing on the child's strengths and interests (ability to suck, reach out for materials, intentionally build a tower with bricks); anticipating the child's explorations and encouraging their choices in play and explorations (arranging furniture so the toddler can move from one to the other without falling). Supporting babies' and toddler's intentions means helping the toddler achieve what they set out to do (reach the stair) and slowing down, giving time for the baby and toddler to solve problems.

To avoid stress, children of this age need consistent and available care. Adults who are not emotionally available or responsive to children (who may

locate themselves nearby but are not engaged in children's play) have a negative effect on children's experiences; their social interactions and cognitive activities are less complex (Lobman, 2006). In a study cited by Dalli *et al.*, (2011) the idea of emotional and physical presence was encapsulated in the idea of *lingering lovingly* (White, 2009). Intersubjective interactions (and thus slow relational pedagogy) rely on being there, truly *with* the child. Presence "refers to both a physical and emotional presence, active listening processes, and an ability to orient oneself towards the relationship with the child and the child's experience" (Dalli *et al.*, 2011: 4). Babies and toddlers thus feel appreciated as unique personalities.

Being an interesting (and playful) companion with babies and toddlers involves all of the above, forming partnerships with children, noticing their cues and responding with warmth, interest and affection, being attentive and tuning in to the mood of the child (Trevvarthen, 2004). Some practices include: when not holding the child, always interacting face to face, at their physical level; respecting children's preferences (for tastes, toys, books, experiences, and people); playing simple games like 'peekaboo' or 'round and round the garden'; reading stories, singing songs, supporting movement and play outdoors and critically respecting individual temperaments.

The input and example of the adult helps the young child to moderate stress, which contributes to the child's developing capacity for self-regulation. This process takes place via the attachment system - dyadic (two-way) regulation of the child's stress. In other words, the secure attachment figure regulates (calms) the child's shifting arousal levels, which in turn affects and serves to calm the child's emotional states. If a sustained calm stage can be reached due to soothing, the child develops self-regulation skills. The child begins to learn how to self-soothe, and these skills form the building blocks of healthy and significant future relationships. The ability to self-regulate and be regulated is a prerequisite to the ability to form healthy attachments (Grebenik, 2008). To support self-regulation in children, Shanker (2012) advises to ***always, always*** consider the situation from the child's perspective and think, why are we seeing this behaviour? What are the causes of the stress? How can we mitigate these stresses? How can we support the child to regulate themselves?

Conclusion

Early Childhood Ireland (2018) report that 3,542 children from birth to one year and 30,060 from 13 months to 36 months attend early childhood settings in Ireland. If the setting is providing the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme (for children from two years and eight months), all ECCE room leaders must hold a minimum Quality and Qualifications Ireland Level 6 Major Award in Early Childhood Care and Education (or equivalent). A higher capitation fee is payable to ECEC providers where all ECEC leaders in settings hold a bachelor degree in childhood/early education (minimum of Level 7 on the National Framework of Qualifications or equivalent) and have three years of experience working in the sector.

There is an unfortunate consequence of this policy for babies and toddlers in ECEC settings in Ireland. Currently there is no capitation scheme for that age group and consequently no higher capitation incentive for higher qualifications. The literature acknowledges the importance of the quality of nurturance that babies and toddlers receive, and that the higher the level of qualification, the better the experience for the young child (Melhuish *et al.*, 2015). However, given the current policy and the demands on settings, babies and toddlers are likely to be left in the care of the least qualified personnel. With the implementation of *First 5*, the ten-year whole-of Government strategy for babies, young children and their families (DCYA, 2018), there is the opportunity to redress this unintended consequence. Given the explosion of learning and development during their earliest months and years, babies and toddlers should be educated and cared for by the most qualified personnel.

Arising from the impact of COVID-19, we could be on the cusp of a new world, as it should and could be (Draghi, 2020). Indeed, it was the ECEC sector that supported frontline workers to undertake their critical roles during the pandemic. We need more robust investment in ECEC as a public good and on an equal par with any other level of education. Development of appropriate policies must be part of this new world, because significant adversity in the lives of young children can disrupt the development of the brain and other biological systems (NSCDC, 2020). We know that adversity and educational inequality may undermine young children's opportunities to achieve their full potential.

What babies and toddlers experience from moment to moment is what drives their development and emotional well-being in the present and the future. The key message from this paper is that those who work with very young children must be valued and supported to build attachment with

reciprocal (give and take), nurturing relationships, understand and think about what the baby and toddler is experiencing, from their perspectives, and practice a slow relational pedagogy with them.

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Child and Adult Perspectives on Implementing a Quality Improvement Strategy in ECEC Settings



Shirley Martin, Lynn Buckley and Katherine Harford

Abstract

This article presents findings from a mixed methods research project which sought to include the voices of young children in an ongoing evaluation of a government funded community-based prevention and early intervention programme in Ireland. The main objective of the intervention programme is to measurably improve the lives of children (pre-birth to six years) and their families through universal and targeted services in an urban community which experiences high levels of socio-economic deprivation. A key aspect of the programme is an Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) strategy which involves the delivery of a suite of Early Years quality improvement measures to seven ECEC centres (both crèche and preschool rooms) in the catchment area.

The core elements of the quality improvement strategy focused on language supports for practitioners (Hanen Learning Language and Loving It™ training), curriculum enhancement (HighScope™ curriculum training), onsite mentoring for practitioners, and an Environment Enhancement Fund for each centre. The project evaluation utilised a mixed methods approach including pre and post programme Environmental Rating Scale (ERS) assessments (ECERS-3) at seven early years centres. Post programme implementation ERS results show significant improvements in many areas, in particular scores related to adult-child interactions. Using participatory research guided by a children's rights framework and informed by UNCRC Article 12, children's voices are being included in the project evaluation through participatory research methods including photo-voice and talk and

draw methods. The article presents findings from post-intervention ECERS-3 assessments and qualitative interviews with early years' practitioners which were merged with the findings in the children's data to improve the overall implementation of the programme.

Introduction

This article will present findings from a mixed-methods research project which is part of an ongoing evaluation of a government funded community-based prevention and early intervention programme in Ireland. The main objective of the programme is to measurably improve the lives of children (pre-birth to six years) and their families through universal and targeted services in an urban community which experiences high levels of socio-economic deprivation. Nugent (2015) states, 'Communities and nations that value families and create environments where children are supported to achieve their full potential, perform better across a range of health and social indicators'. This programme has sought to deliver evidence-based programmes and activities set firmly in the context of existing early childhood services, enhancing the service provision of local practitioners, sustainably meeting locally identified needs and delivering services within an interdisciplinary framework (Buckley & Curtin, 2018, p.21).

Research into prevention and early intervention programmes highlight how such initiatives can break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and disadvantage that can have life-long positive effects on outcomes for children and young people (Prevention and Early Intervention Network (PEIN), 2019; Camilli *et al.*, 2010). Such programmes are most effective when they are implemented with fidelity and are adapted to meet the local needs of communities. Capacity building, integration and quality improvement have been identified as three interconnected approaches which are essential to drive any successful local intervention (Hutchings and Gardner, 2012). High-quality care and education, particularly for children aged 0 to 6 years, has been found to significantly influence development and learning later in childhood (OECD, 2011; HighScope Educational Research Foundation, 2019). Recent findings also show the importance of early years practitioner training plans within the voluntary and non-profit sectors which have been found to impact positively on service quality (Melhuish & Gardiner, 2019).

The main focus of the quality improvement strategy in this study was on process quality (Slot 2015) with a particular focus on curriculum improvements and the quality of children's experiences and *et al.*, relationships in the settings. This article will explore how the findings from post-intervention ERS assessments and qualitative interviews with early years' practitioners can be merged with findings in the children's data to improve the overall

implementation of a community-based prevention and early intervention programme. This paper will outline the development of the ECEC quality improvement strategy, the research methodologies employed, the results and the merging of child and adult data, and a discussion of the findings and the value of including child-centred participatory research when evaluating intervention programmes to shape practice and to ensure that children remain at the centre of such programmes.

Developing the ECEC Quality Improvement Strategy

A key element of the prevention and early intervention programme is an Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) strategy which involves the delivery of a suite of early years quality improvement measures to all ECEC centres (both crèche and preschool rooms) in the catchment area. Between 2015 and 2018, a programme to support quality improvement in early years settings in the community was developed and implemented in seven ECEC settings. These settings were diverse in their pedagogical approach and context, and included a Montessori centre, a primary school Early Start centre, a targeted early intervention centre, and a community preschool using a play-based approach. The strategy was guided by an Early Years Co-ordinators Group and aligned to the national early years curriculum and quality frameworks of *Aistear (2015)* and *Síolta*.

The core elements of the strategy are focused on language supports (Hanen Learning Language and Loving It™ training for practitioners), curriculum enhancement (High/Scope curriculum training), onsite mentoring for practitioners provided by the ECEC Specialist Mentor and an environment enhancement fund for individual centres. Implementation of the suite of ECEC quality improvement measures was coordinated by members of an interdisciplinary team which included an ECEC Strategy Co-ordinator, an ECEC Specialist Mentor, and a HighScope facilitator. Speech and Language Therapists also called ‘Oral Language Officers’ were responsible for delivery of the Hanen Language Programme to ECEC practitioners (Weitzman, Girolametto, & Greenberg; 2006). The implementation was overseen by a local ECEC Strategy Coordinator, who was also the manager of one of the local settings and this contributed significantly to successful implementation of the initiative.

The ECEC Specialist Mentor was an independent ECEC Policy and Education Specialist who was contracted to provide onsite mentoring and

coaching to ECEC practitioners which will be further discussed. There were also some supports of structural quality including a grant for each setting for environment enhancement. The implementation of a Mentoring Programme involved weekly site visits by the ECEC Specialist Mentor specialist onsite mentor in which the implementation of curriculum content and the suggested environmental changes and teaching strategies were overseen and supported (Buckley, Martin and Curtin, 2020).

Rationale

Among recommendations stemming from the process evaluation was the need for outcome and impact studies in order to document and realise the full potential of the intervention programme, as well as the need to capture the perspectives of the youngest in the community (Buckley & Curtin, 2018). How to measure this impact and where the space for children's voices existed was considered. A collaborative participatory research project sought to include the voices of young children involved with the early years' quality improvement initiative. The inclusion of practitioner and child voices in the evaluation design allows for triangulation of results and multiple voices and perspectives to be included in the programme evaluation. One common challenge of evaluating a quality improvement programme is the tendency to focus on quantitative outcomes. This article will explore how the findings from post-intervention ERS assessments and qualitative interviews with early years' practitioners can be merged with the findings in the children's data to improve the overall implementation of the programme.

Methodology

Supported by an integrated research and evaluation process, a process evaluation of the intervention programme was conducted three years after implementation to ensure transparency and accountability, and to share learnings about how a community-based programme can be a mechanism to translate evidence and science into prevention and early intervention practice (Buckley & Curtin, 2018). A mixed methods approach was adopted to evaluate the early years quality improvement strategy.

Data Collection

Quantitative Data

Quantitative research comprised of analysing pre and post improvements using Environmental Rating Scales (ERS) assessments at seven early years centres. Qualitative research included the collection and analysis of early years' practitioners' perspectives and experiences of the processes of the quality improvement strategy. ERS assessments have been used extensively in order to measure quality in ECEC settings internationally and the measures have high levels of inter-rater reliability (Melhuish & Gardiner, 2019). For example, this has been used to measure process quality in ECEC settings in the largescale Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) longitudinal study in the UK study (Melhuish, and Gardiner, 2019).

In January 2015, prior to the roll out of the quality improvement strategy, independent evaluators, A+ Education, were contracted to conduct baseline ERS assessments in the seven early years centres in order to quantitatively measure the quality of early years settings and service provision prior to the implementation of the suite of quality improvement measures. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised (ECERS-3) was designed to evaluate quality of provision for children aged 2½ to 5 years in centre-based settings and measure quality in a broad sense and examine seven broad dimensions of quality: space and furnishings, personal care routines, language and literacy, learning activities, interaction, programme structure and finally an overall quality rating.

Qualitative Data

Alongside ECERS-3 quantitative data, assessors provided qualitative descriptions of the quantitative findings. Additional qualitative data collection took place post-intervention including small groups interviews conducted with Early Years practitioners (n=9), a focus group conducted with Early Years Managers (n=5), and a one-to-one interview with the onsite Early Years Specialist Mentor.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data

Post ECERS-3 assessment scores were analysed and compared by A+ Education independent assessors. The assessor assigned a descriptive value on a scale of 1 to 7 (1=inadequate and 7=excellent) to describe the quality of specific items within the early childhood environment for each of the seven subscales within the ECERS-3 tool. MS Excel was used to generate descriptive charts to illustrate results.

Qualitative Data

Guided by the Framework for Programme Evaluation in Public Health (CDC, 2013), qualitative data was subject to thematic analysis guided by The Framework Method (Richie & Lewis, 2003) which provided a systematic and flexible guide to conducting data analysis which focussed on commonalities, differences and relationships between the data (Buckley & Curtin, 2018). NVivo 12.0 was used to collate qualitative data for thematic analysis. Data were categorised, coded and expanded into themes. Reflexive dialogue ensured codes and themes were driven directly from the data set of the lived experiences of the Early Years practitioners, managers and ECEC Specialist Mentor. Sub and overarching themes were repeatedly refined through the analysis of patterns across the data set and direct quotes were used to group and illustrate themes. Early Years practitioner data appear in the results section as italicised quotations and qualitative ECERS descriptions appear in the results as non-italicised quotations.

Children's Data

In 2018, child-centred research was conducted with children at one of the seven centres. Using participatory research guided by a children's rights framework and informed by UNCRC Article 12, children's voices are being included in the project evaluation through participatory research methods including photo-voice and talk and draw methods. For the research with children, the study used visual, story and picture-based materials and prompts to introduce the study to children in their preschool settings (Clark and Moss, 2011; Einarsdottir, 2014). Children were offered the opportunity to share their views with the researcher through a variety of participatory rights-based approaches including drawing, photography, and conversations (Dockett *et al.*, 2012). Photovoice methodologies were used which involved the children being supported to take their own photos within their preschool setting and these

photos were used as a motivation and basis for conversations with the researcher (O'Connell, 2011; Woodgate *et al.*, 2017) (see Martin & Buckley, 2018 for full discussion of these methods). Alaca *et al.* (2017) found that Photovoice methodology is a very effective research tool with children aged three to five years in preschool settings as it supports and encourages their expression. Photovoice methods allow children to exercise power during data gathering as they choose and take the photographs themselves and the subsequent interviews and conversations with children will revolve around the images which they have photographed allowing them to direct the interview process (Martin and Buckley, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Child-centred research methodology was guided by the DCYA *National Guidance for Developing Ethical Research Projects Involving Children* (DCYA, 2012) and ethical approval was granted by the Social Research Ethics Committee in University College Cork. One of the key ethical issues arising through this research was ensuring that specific people, settings and families are not identified and that any sensitive issues arising, perhaps relating to individual children and family circumstances, are anonymised. A strict policy of confidentiality and anonymity was adhered to throughout the research process. The research adhered to child protection guidelines already in operation in the preschool settings. Parental consent for their child's participation in the study was sought and all issues related to the study were explained to parents both through the study information sheet and verbally by the preschool practitioners in the Centre. Informed consent was sought from the children through two steps: informing and consenting. To inform the children about the study the researcher developed a picture book about the research project, which introduced the researcher and explained the purpose of the study in a visual and child friendly way following a 'non-narrative-fiction' approach identified by Mayne *et al.* (2016). The storybook was developed in conjunction with the preschool practitioners to make sure it is appropriate to the children's age and cultural understanding. Once the informing step was complete consent was sought from the children verbally and children could also answer yes or no or give a thumbs up and thumbs down sign. The children's ongoing assent was monitored by the researchers and by the preschool practitioners who were very familiar with the children

and work with them on a daily basis. For the adult-centric research, fully informed consent was obtained prior to all interviews and focus groups. All participants were provided with an information sheet which included details about the study and the researcher's contact details.

Study Limitations

The study has a number of limitations and challenges. Family voice is not included in the programme evaluation reported in this article and this is currently being addressed in the on-going evaluation. Some aspects of Structural Quality including practitioner qualifications and child-adult ratios was not collected at the time of the study partly to protect the anonymity of the settings within the community; this obviously has some implications for comparisons between settings in relation to the study outcomes. A further limitation of the research is that the participatory research with children was only conducted in one of the ECEC settings in the programme and it is important to replicate the opportunities for child-participatory research in each of the seven participating centres and embed it into on-going programme evaluation.

Results

The article will explore how the findings from post-intervention ECERS-3 assessments and qualitative interviews with Early Years practitioners can be merged with the findings in the children's data to improve the overall implementation of the intervention programme. Both quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that the quality within the seven early years centres improved significantly following the implementation of quality improvement measures. Areas within pre-school rooms that experienced most notable improvements included programme structure, language, literacy and interaction. Post programme implementation ECERS-3 data have shown significant improvements in many areas, in particular scores related to adult-child interactions. Notably, a number of key themes and commonalities emerged between post-intervention adult-level qualitative data and the findings from the participatory research with children.

Quantitative Findings: ECERS-3 Results

Results from ECERS-R assessments are presented in Figure 1 and demonstrate that at baseline (pre-intervention) the overall quality of the pre-school rooms across the seven sites was rated to be an average of 3.5 out of 7 on the ECERS-3 scale, a ‘sub-optimal’ score on the ERS ratings scale. On average, the seven sites rated below a score of four out of 7, indicating that there was opportunity for improvement in general across all areas of childcare in each of the seven ECEC centres. Follow-up (post-intervention) ECERS-3 scores revealed significant improvements for ‘programme structure’ (+2.3) and ‘personal care routines’ (+1.8). Pre-ECERS-3 (pre-school) assessments recorded an average score of 3.5. Post-ECERS-3 assessment recorded an average score of 6.0, thus pre-school rooms across seven ECEC centres experienced an overall improvement of 2.5 in childcare quality.

Figure 1: Overall Pre and Post ECERS-3 Results by Sub-scale

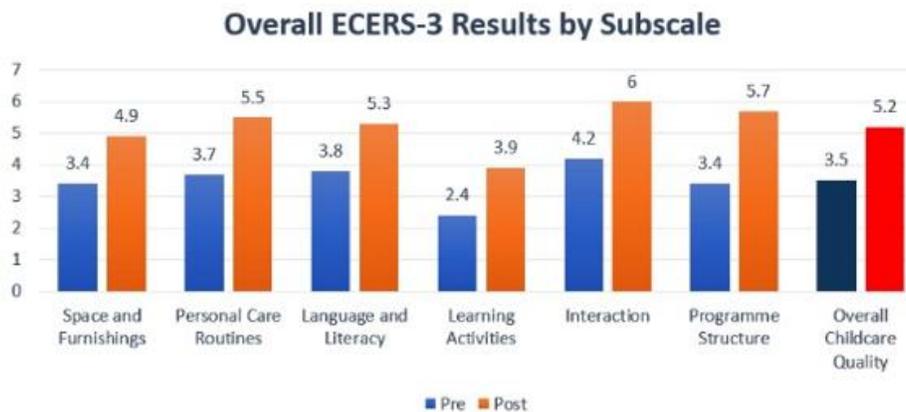


Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of Early Years centre’s pre and post ECERS-3 results by sub-scale. ‘Programme Structure’ experienced the greatest impact across six ECEC centres, three centres in particular recording significant results: centre A increased from a pre ECERS-3 score of 1.0 to a post score of 5.4 (+4.4); centre C increased from a pre-ECERS-3 score of 2.4 to a post score of 5.7 (+3.3); and centre D increased from a pre-ECERS-3 score of 1.6 to a post score of 5.7 (+4.1).

Table 1: Pre and Post ECERS-3 Results by Sub-scale

Overall ECERS-3 (Pre-school) Results												
	Centre A		Centre B		Centre C		Centre D		Centre E		Centre F	
<i>Sub-scale</i>	<i>Pre</i>	<i>Post</i>										
Space and Furnishings	3.6	5.0	3.5	4.6	2.0	3.9	3.3	5.2	4.0	5.5	3.8	5.2
Personal Care Routines	3.3	5.8	4.3	5.5	4.0	4.3	2.7	5.7	4.5	5.5	3.5	6.0
Language and Literacy	2.6	4.4	5.4	5.8	2.6	5.2	3.3	4.9	4.2	5.4	4.4	5.8
Learning Activities	2.1	4.4	1.8	3.3	2.3	2.5	2.2	3.9	2.6	4.2	3.4	5.1
Interaction	3.0	4.6	5.4	6.6	3.2	6.6	3.1	5.3	5.0	6.2	5.2	6.4
Programme Structure	1.0	5.4	3.7	5.7	2.4	5.7	1.6	5.7	6.0	5.0	5.4	6.4
Overall Childcare Quality	2.6	5.0	4.1	5.3	2.8	4.7	2.8	5.2	4.4	5.3	4.3	5.9

The results indicate overall improvement in childcare quality across the seven ECEC centres following the implementation of the ECEC quality improvement programme. These areas are further analysed in the children’s data.

Main Findings from Interviews with Early Years Practitioners, Managers and ECEC Specialist Mentor

Interviews with Early Years practitioners identified a number of key themes and supported the findings of the ECERS-3 assessments. Capacity building through curriculum and language trainings, supported by the specialist ECEC Specialist Mentor, was found to have benefitted practitioner knowledge and service delivery. Early Years practitioners observed direct impacts of this upskilling on children attending the Early Years centres. Practitioners felt empowered and were found to have fostered an increased sense of confidence and stronger sense of being valued. In addition, some felt that they had an improved relationship with Early Years centre managers. Managers interviewed also noted that participation had positively impacted on service delivery. They described observed improvements in child behaviour outcomes and noted that the environmental enhancement fund and onsite mentor support were central to effective implementation of the quality improvement programme. In particular, onsite mentoring was identified as being a core factor in improving quality within the settings. The ECEC Specialist Mentor delivered her observations to settings via presentation with

photographs and video clips and follow up emails which practitioners identified as being effective, clear and practical.

Merging the Child and Adult Data

The following section will explore how findings from the post-intervention ECERS-3 and the qualitative interviews with Early Years practitioners can be merged with the findings in the children's data. The section will examine some of the key themes from the children's data in light of the findings from the overall project evaluation (see Buckley & Curtin, 2018, for full report on evaluation).

Evidence of Positive Adult-Child Interactions in Practitioner and Child Data

Qualitative descriptions of ECERS-3 quantitative findings show that Early Years practitioners were found to be 'calm, kind, warm, and fully involved' and that 'children were encouraged, accepted, valued and respected'. In the area of *Listening and Talking*, practitioners were found to 'talk very easily to children, both conversationally and as part of learning' and to 'show warmth and respect towards the children and this is reflected in children's positive behaviour'. These findings are reflected in the children's data through an overwhelmingly positive view of early years practitioners observed in children's photography and imagery descriptions. A very positive view of practitioners based in their preschool room was observed on several occasions. Photographs of children with their key worker show the practitioners interacting with the children in a positive, child centred approach such as playing with children on the ground, table top activities with staff and children or hugging the children. Strong adult-child relationships are observed in photos where children are smiling, hugging and taking numerous selfies with their key workers.

Importance of 'Circle-Time' and Focus on the Relational Aspects of Care

Children also took photos of the early years practitioners demonstrating positive socio-emotional regulation through the use of the puppets and engaging in circle time activity with them. In the interviews and focus groups,

practitioners noted the visible the improvements on child learning, development and behaviour, noting children's increased sense of independence through a more child-led approach to learning, "although sessions are more structured now it is much more child-led, they are so much more independent now. They love making their own plan and choosing what to do". Practitioners also frequently referred to children's increased responsibility in cleaning up after themselves and placing objects in their correct places, "because of all of the labelling we have a new approach to tidying up and the children take more responsibility now". Children took a number of photos of the circle time mat and activities related to socio-emotional regulation and appeared to be comfortable articulating the language and techniques, which the practitioners had been using to support socio-emotional development and conflict resolution in the setting. Early years practitioners noted, "we learned how to talk to children, how to find out what the problem is and how to deal with it". Friendship and peer relations was a key theme in children's data, this emphasises the centrality of relations with peers for the children involved. A large number of photographs of the practitioners emerged; many of these showed the staff interacting with the children in a very positive, and child centred way such as playing with children on the ground, table-top activities with practitioners and children or hugging the children.

Language and Literacy

Improvements in language and literacy were reported in the quantitative data and in the qualitative post ECERS-3 data, for example in the pre-intervention report practitioners were asked to reflect on 'the range of books accessible to children and opportunities for them to access books supported by staff'. Evidence from the children's photographs demonstrated the children were engaged with books within their setting and six of them took photos of books within their setting including story time. The children were enthusiastic describing the books to the researchers and many picked a particular book that they had been focusing on in the setting as one of their favourite photo subjects. Children took photos of practitioners during story time. There is evidence then in the children's data that literacy was an important part of their daily experience in the setting which does reflect the findings from the adult-centred data.

Evidence of Improved Programme Structure in Staff and Child Data

In post-intervention evaluation interviews, the EY staff reported improved programme structure and while the children were not explicitly asked about this, there is evidence from the children's data that they were aware of key activities and transition times such as tidying-up and moving from one activity to another. These events appeared in their photos and several children spoke about these transitions in their PhotoVoice interviews indicating they could articulate what was happening during these periods. This reflects the post-intervention ECERS-3 findings that "transitions and routines are explained visually and verbally by interactive use of the timeline of the session. Children are actively engaged in the use of this". An increased sense of responsibility and independence in children was observed by early years practitioners post-intervention, "they are so much more independent now, they love making their own plan and choosing what to do", and some of the children did discuss their responsibilities such as tidying and the *child of the day* jobs which they undertook in their conversations with the researchers. Also in relation to programme structure, post ECERS-3 qualitative descriptions found "children spent most of their time in free play and there are plenty of materials to use" and this is reflected in the large number of photos that children took of the materials which were freely available to them and the different play spaces where they had plentiful access to materials in their setting. Children frequently took photos of materials they liked playing with such as mask making materials, paint and Lego, and the children's photographs demonstrated good provision of materials for fine motor development. The children's data did reflect post-intervention ECERS-3 findings which refer to the "many interesting materials for children to choose in all rooms".

Evidence of Positive Peer Interactions

In terms of interactions within the early years centres, post intervention ECERS-3 assessments found that "children's peer interactions are supported and staff encourage them to play together and to be considerate towards others". This was reflected in the participatory research with the children. The issue of peers and friendship was the most common theme in the children's

data and was observed frequently within their photographs. Children were very positive about their relationship with their peers and most identified a close group of friends in the setting which were frequently the subject of their favourite photographs. Among interview responses, one early years practitioner described how the HighScope curriculum had increased conflict resolution and considerate play among the children, “before they would have just hit each other and walked away, now they try to talk about what’s bothering the”. This finding appears to be reflected in the PhotoVoice data as a number of children mentioned issues of conflict with their peers in their conversations with the researchers.

Access to Spaces within the Setting

Children’s data presented some interesting findings regarding their perceived access to spaces within the setting and what was perceived as adult or child only spaces. They took photos of the stairs leading to a playhouse on a platform but there were no photos inside of the playhouse. Children may have felt this was one private space which was not subject to an adult gaze as it is a difficult space for adults to physically access and tends to be a children’s only space. Children took a small number of photos of the kitchen area and comments on the rules in this space. For example, one child commented that “a child went in there last week but he wasn’t allowed he is too small and she (the Chef) caught him”. Post-intervention ECERS-3 findings highlight that there was practitioner recognition of the outside area as being an equally important part of classroom, but this was not reflected in the children’s PhotoVoice data. While four children picked outdoor play spaces as their favourite places in the Photo-elicitation session and there was some discussion of outdoor space in the Talk and Draw session. There was almost no discussion or photos of outdoor space in the PhotoVoice sessions. Children seemed to restrict themselves to taking photos in their classroom and the kitchen and did not use the photos to take photos of the outdoor spaces. The conversations in the Photovoice sessions tended to focus on the concrete objects or areas that the children photographed, and this meant there was very little discussion of outdoor spaces as these were absent from the children’s photos.

Discussion

Overall similar themes emerge in the child and adult data, and in particular there is strong evidence on improvement in peer and child-adult relations across both sets of data as well as improvements in programme structure. Kernan & Singer (2010) describe how children within early years care and education settings seek, in adult caregivers and peers, the emotional bonds and feelings of security that they first established with family members. Friendship and peer relations was a key theme in the child generated data, and this emphasises the centrality of relations with peers for the children involved.

Children's early years are critical for development and a strong, responsive relationship between children and their carers are important in facilitating children's communication development (Brebner, 2015). Findings from the children's data also highlight the very positive views they hold of the practitioners in the early years setting, in particular the very positive views of their key workers. The key workers are featured extensively in the children's photographs which is particularly positive given the research evidence on the role of a key person in ECEC settings promoting positive attachment and attunement for young children (French, 2019). Triangulation of data in this study provides evidence to indicate that the implementation of a quality improvement strategy within early years centres can encourage responsive child-adult relationships. Highlighting the significance of such relationships, McKelvey *et al.*, (2015) describe how caregiver-child relationships form the proto-type for subsequent relationships throughout the course of a child's lifespan, and the quality of this attachment has significant impact on future physical and health outcomes.

Findings from the adult and child data demonstrate improvements in socio-emotional regulation such as the emphasis on circle time space evident in the children's data. Previous research has pointed to the negative impact of poor quality ECEC on children's socio-emotional regulation. For example, Melhuish and Gardner (2019, p.12) noted that children with "more reactive temperaments are both more likely than other children to exhibit behavioural problems when exposed to low quality ECEC and are also more likely to exhibit good levels of socio-emotional skills when exposed to high quality ECEC". Supporting children's socio-emotional regulation is an important aim of the overall programme and it is affirming to see evidence of positive socio-emotional regulation in the findings.

The positive impact of the intervention on language and literacy in the settings is reflected in both adult and child data. The quality improvement

strategy had a strong focus on literacy, implementing the Hanen Learning Language and Loving It™ training which views a child's development of language, social skills, and emergent literacy within the context of the early caregiver-child relationship and interactions. Previous research has demonstrated the impact of Hanen Learning Language and Loving It™ on educators' ability to support children's peer interactions and increase opportunities for children's successful language-based social interactions (Girolametto, Weitzman and Greenberg, 2006) and results from this current study reflect similar findings.

The improvements in quality which are evidenced by the improved post-intervention ECERS-3 scores are demonstrative of the positive impacts of supporting practitioner training and development in ECEC settings. This reflects findings from other research such as that of Melhuish and Gardiner (2019) who contend that improving both practitioners qualifications and in-service professional development are central to any attempts to improve quality in ECEC provision. The role of the ECEC Specialist Mentor was identified by the adult participants as being particularly important for the successful implementation of the quality improvement strategy and the importance of supporting capacity building has been identified as essential for supporting successful interventions (Hutchings and Gardner, 2012).

Interrogating the adult findings in light of the children's data also helps the programme focus on areas where there may be a disconnect between adult and child perceptions of how they experience the ECEC setting. The findings draw attention to potential discontinuities between indoor and outdoor settings and the need to address these (Fabian, 2005). For example, the focus on outdoor space in the environmental enhancement aspect of the early years quality improvement strategy of the programme is not reflected in the children's data. The children's data draws attention to the children's experiences of transitions in the settings and the need to further support children to feel a sense of ownership and belonging in all areas of the settings.

Conclusion

The quality improvement strategy implemented in this study was complex for a number of reasons including both the diverse types of ECEC setting in the programme and the complex child development and family support needs identified within the wider community (Buckley and Curtin, 2018). However, despite these complexities the results from the study demonstrate some very

positive outcomes in relation to quality improvements after programme implementation. A key challenge for the programme will be ensuring that gains in quality improvements in the ECEC settings are not lost due to ongoing sectoral issues with staff retention in the ECEC sector (Thorpe *et al.*, 2020) and new and unprecedented challenges emerging due to the Covid -19 pandemic. For example, the positive findings related to friendship and peer interactions might be impacted by the extended closures of the settings, as emerging international research is showing that lack of direct interaction with friends and other family members due to the pandemic is likely to have a significant impact on children (Darmody, Smyth and Russell, 2020).

The inclusion of child-centred participatory research in the ongoing evaluation work of an intervention programme was an opportunity to allow children's voices to contribute to the evaluation and to challenge adult-centric data which emerged from predetermined measures. It is also an important tool in supporting a children's rights approach in ECEC. It will furthermore allow for opportunities for children's voices to shape how practice in the programme can move forward and ensures that children remain central to the programme.

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An Exploration of Managers' Perspectives on the Role in Managing Community Early Years Services: Influences and Insights



Jessica Lee

Abstract

This exploration into the perspectives of managers of community Early Years services stems from the absence of a requirement of a qualification for supernumerary managers in Early Years services in Ireland and the resulting ambiguity of defined functions of such managers and contextually specific requirements. The aim of the study is to gain a deep insight into the perspectives of the participants on their roles in leading and managing their services. The objectives are to understand what internal and external factors have shaped their roles, to locate the dichotomies and harmonies between what is contextually required of managers and what the true reality of a manager's role is, and to understand how managers perspectives influence the quality of their services. Grounded theory and social constructivism form the theoretical framework for the research, which is qualitative in its design. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with six managers of community Early Years services in Dublin, Ireland. The findings highlight the key roles and functions of the participants, the factors that influence this, the degree to which each factor is influential, and how this impacts on their service. Additionally, the findings outline the participants' perspectives on networking, staff and change management, advocacy, and the impact that these functions have on their emotions. A key implication of the findings is the significant impact that the participants' roles had on their emotions, and in turn, the impact of these emotions on their service and how they carry out their roles. Recommendations for the future include development of training for managers in emotional intelligence, the need for provision of networking

supports at policy level and further research from the perspectives of managers across the private and community ECEC sector in Ireland, particularly relating to emotional intelligence and its impact on managers roles, perspectives, and quality of their services.

Introduction

In the Irish policy context, there is a distinct focus on educators in Early Childhood Education and Care [ECEC] in relation to their roles, responsibilities, qualification requirements, professionalism, quality standards of practice, and training. However, there is little focus on managers, despite extensive empirical research linking effective ECEC management and leadership to the provision of quality services (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart, 2004; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2012; Sims, Forrest, Semann and Slattery, 2014). It is not only imperative, considering the rapidly changing nature of the sector in Ireland, that this link is recognised, but that the true reality of the manager's role is revealed. The aim of the study was to gain a deep insight into the perspectives of the participants on their roles in managing their services. The objectives were as follows:

- To understand the internal and external factors that have shaped their roles.
- To locate the dichotomies and harmonies between what is required of managers and what the true reality of a manager's role is.
- To understand the influence of managers roles on quality.

The terms 'management' and 'leadership' are often used interchangeably to describe positions and roles of power, responsibility, influence, and accountability in the ECEC sector (Dunlop, 2008). They have been described as distinct (Rodd, 2006), complementary (Dunlop, 2008), or inextricably amalgamated (Moyle, 2004). For the purposes of this paper, the term 'manager' represents the individual that holds the formal position of manager, and that he/she occupies the dual role of managing and leading the service.

Policy Context

Within Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in Ireland, the brief reference to management is that it is one of two elements of all educators' roles (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009), which suggests an inaccurate assumption that managers usually work directly with children. The tenth standard of Siolta, the National Quality Framework (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Care [CECDE], 2006; DES, 2017) is based upon management and leadership research from an international context (Rodd, 2006), but utilises Irish literature that is limited to individual service policy development.

A manager is described in the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 as the “registered provider” who has “day-to-day charge of the service” (Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA], 2016: 6). While this description is vague at best, it is reflective of the all-encompassing nature and general ambiguity of the role; that a manager has “ultimate responsibility” (Moloney and Pettersen, 2017: 86) for service provision. Due to similar challenges experienced by Australian managers in balancing a dual role of service management and pedagogical leadership, the separation of these two roles was introduced in 2009 (Clarke, 2017; Sims, Waniganayake and Hadley, 2017). As no such legislation exists in Ireland, and as the quality of pedagogical leadership and management is one of four categories of inspection (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2018), managers must typically assume this dual role.

Chambers (1997: 42) states that “many professionals seem driven to simplify what is complex and to standardize what is diverse” (cited in Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2007: 116), a sentiment that is echoed in the Irish context by Moloney and Pettersen (2017), who refer to a “legislative quagmire” in ECEC in Ireland (2017: 5). Urban, Robson and Scacchi (2017) state that such a non-contextualised approach will lead to management practices that are inappropriate for the complexity of the Irish sector. In Finland, high-quality management flourished without direction and monitoring by policymakers (Sahlberg, 2013). Adherence to the national discourse surrounding quality may prioritise compliance and undermine contextually situated means of achieving quality (Ishimine, Tayler and Thorpe, 2009; Cumming, Sumsion and Wong, 2013; Sims *et al.*, 2014).

The Report on the Quality of Preschool Services (Hanafin, 2014) found that 46.2% of services were non-compliant in governance and management under Regulation 8 of the Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations 2006 (Department of Health and Children, 2006). This data contributed to the commencement of the revised regulations and subsequent inspections, emphasising management (DCYA, 2016), which has led to an increased administrative burden (Moloney and Pettersen, 2017). Despite the embedding of management and leadership in the regulations and associated inspections, there is little provision to equip managers with the necessary resources to carry out their roles effectively.

The Role of the Manager

Literature outlining the importance of effective management in ECEC, key skills and attributes of effective leaders (Moyles, 2004; Rodd, 2006; Aubrey, 2007; Callans and Robins, 2009), practical guides for leading and managing (Price and Ota, 2014; Hearn and Hildebrand, 2015) and their theoretical underpinnings is now abundant, however, this can be problematic, due to the variety of approaches and understandings of the role that are presented, thus obscuring clarity for managers (McDowall Clark and Baylis, 2012).

Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007), and Whalley and Allen (2011) explain that the dual role of managing and leading is necessary, however, Price and Ota (2014) explain that a leader must communicate the vision, but a manager must provide the environment through which that vision can be consistently communicated and worked towards. Hearn and Hildebrand's US guide on ECEC management specifically prioritises fiscal, organisational, human relations, marketing, and personnel management (2015).

The adoption by educators of leadership responsibilities, separate to the manager, is conceptualised as distributed leadership (Waniganayake, 2000) and was further clarified as "distributed, participative, facilitative or collaborative" paradigms of leadership (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007: 20). Torrance (2013) challenges the assumptions about distributed leadership that "every staff member is able to lead" or that "every staff member wishes to lead" (2013: 362), which highlights that effective leadership cannot be practiced by all who assume the role.

The Office of Standards in Education [OFSTED] in the UK (OFSTED, 2009) indicates that supervision of educators is one of the most essential managerial roles for the improvement of quality. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2007), however, found that for effective change management, managers must not be restricted by supervision and administration, but must prioritise pedagogy. Price and Ota (2014), and Aubrey (2011) caution that managers often find themselves over-encumbered, at the expense of the pedagogical leadership and supervision. Spouse and Redfern (2000) suggest that supervision may be delegated to other competent staff, which Gray (2010) opposes.

Empirical Research

Managing and supervising staff and maintaining contact with parents and other professionals (34.2% and 22.4% respectively) were ranked as the most important responsibilities by participants in Rodd's study (1997). Aubrey (2007) found that managers' time was mostly spent on administrative activities, which was mirrored by Moloney and Pettersen (2017) who found that 47% of managers prioritised such tasks. Ang (2012) evaluated the perspectives of managers following engagement with accredited leadership training. The findings showed that managers perceived training as essential for promoting critical reflection and engagement with change. The data, however, emerged from a low response rate (8% of questionnaires were returned, and the interviews represented 4% of the sample). The negative implications of a heavy administrative workload, the lack of formal and continuous professional development, and compliance were also recurring themes in Preston (2013)'s study of 28 managers in an ECEC service chain. McDowall Clark (2012)'s research highlighted the low confidence levels of managers, however, the findings cannot be generalised, as the sample was small, and all participants were degree graduates, which is not reflective of the Irish sector. The gender balance of participants, however, mirrored that of the sector. Cafferkey (2013) found that motivation of staff (21%), communication with parents (16%) and advocating for children, the community, and other stakeholders (16%) were identified as the three most important managerial components.

Emotionality

Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2014) identify an emotional drive as unique in the ECEC sector, which Aubrey describes as "emotional investment" (2011:56). Rodd (2013) acknowledges that managers must be continually responsive to the needs and expectations of all stakeholders, which elicits emotional responses in managers. Taggart (2011) notes that emotionality can be perceived as innate to a predominantly female sector, which may lead to assumptions of low intellectualism and unprofessionalism. Despite Osgood's similar findings that the dominant discourse surrounding professional management being underpinned by rationalism, without space for emotion, she states that this falls short of the realities of managers in ECEC (2011). Sevenhuijsen (1998), like Urban *et al.* (2017) and McDowall Clark and Murphy (2012), proposes that characteristics of managers such as empathy,

compassion, intuition, and relationality are central to effective leadership. Osgood (2011), however, cautions that managers must ensure a balance between emotionality and potential emotional burnout. Goleman (2006) highlights that emotional intelligence is an important management competency, while Rodd (2013) suggests that supportive strategies must be put in place. Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2014), and Rodd (2013) refer to reciprocal and respectful communication, underpinned by emotional intelligence as an essential practice of ECEC managers, reflection upon which is essential (Nolan, 2008). Chu (2014) describes human's predisposition to mirror the emotional state of those in our environment, which Davis and Ryder (2016) suggest can be separated by manager's reflection on emotionality.

Managers' Networks

In literature relating to the Irish context, there is little reference to networking. Aubrey (2007), and Robins and Callan (2009) emphasise the importance of cultivating and systems of support between managers, while Briggs and Briggs (2009) identify networking as central for transformational leadership. Bella and Bloom (2005) in the US, and Thornton, Wansbrough, Clarkin-Phillips, Aitken and Tamati (2009) in New Zealand, outline that networking is the most effective tool for developing leadership skills. In 2018, the Early Years Network was launched in the UK to encourage professional support and advocacy (Gaunt, 2018). In Australia, a resource kit has been made available to services to develop and sustain networks (Western Australia Council of Social Service, 2016). In a Finnish study, Hujala and Eskelinen (2013), stated that a focus on collaboration, rather than individual development, is key to developing the sector. Within their study, managers identified this as the third most important aspect of their role. In Ireland, the only formal interorganisational networking opportunity for community services is the National Childhood Network [NCN]'s networking initiatives (NCN, n.d.). Selden, Sowa and Sandfort describe formal networking as "interorganizational relationships" (2006: 412) and despite the fragmented nature of the sector being "fertile ground" (2006: 415), they are not commonplace.

Managers as Catalysts for Quality

It is an undisputed assertion that the improvement of quality for children and families is inextricably linked to the effectiveness of ECEC managers (Richards, 2012). As the manager's expertise is a mediating factor in quality (OECD, 2011; Sims *et al.*, 2014), limited training for managers is linked to quality levels. This may account for the diversity of perspectives that managers have on their roles and how this shapes the overall service. Appropriate training in management has a significant impact on service quality (Hadfield, Jopling, Needham, Waller, Coleyshaw, Emira and Royle, 2012). Urban *et al.* (2017) remind us that ECEC graduates are increasingly questioning how they are to act as leaders and agents of change, while the sector remains characterised by experienced yet lower qualified staff. Critical reflection and systemic thinking must be incorporated into professional development (Osgood, 2008). A study on educators in the UK who underwent advanced training in leadership, management, and pedagogy, found that 87% of participants had increased leadership confidence (Hadfield *et al.*, 2012).

The reluctance of educators to assume management roles has been widely documented (Aubrey, Harris and Briggs, 2004; Dunlop, 2008; Mujis, Rodd, 2013; Torrance, 2013; Waniganayake, 2014). This may be due to being removed from working directly with children (Mistry and Sood, 2012), requirements such as administration, governance, and financial management (Mulligan, 2016), or lack of interest, low self-confidence, and inadequate remuneration (Rodd, 2006; Waniganayake, 2014). Despite there being no qualification requirement for supernumerary ECEC managers (DCYA, 2016), many graduates are appointed manager as they are viewed as proficient educators but are often ill-prepared for management (Sims *et al.*, 2014). McDowall Clark (2012) notes that UK managers, in a similarly market-led sector, are often recruited with limited theoretical or practical management expertise. Bella and Bloom (2003) found that US participants consistently reflected on training as empowering. Waniganayake (2014) argues that single modules on leadership are insufficient for preparing graduates for the complex and multi-faceted role of manager. French (2003) outlines that clear communication, community engagement, financial skills and responsiveness to staff needs are key factors in ECEC management. Additionally, centre-specific working conditions (Diamond and Powell, 2011), as well as professional support and development (Ackerman, 2006) are integral to high-

quality management. Moloney and Pettersen (2017) assert that to provide a sustainable service, entrepreneurship and business acumen are essential.

Theoretical Framework

Schwandt (1993: 9) notes that a researcher cannot enter the research process “tabula rasa” but must be guided by certain frameworks to consider available and relevant knowledge (Punch, 2009). These are labelled as “qualitative inquiry frameworks” by Patton (2015: 84) and “informally held concepts” by Ravitch and Riggan (2012: 19). Patton (2015) outlines sixteen such approaches, of which Social Constructivism [SC] and Grounded Theory [GT] were chosen for this study. Waniganayake, Cheeseman, Fenech, Hadley and Shepherd (2012) assert that management roles must be considered in relation to the individual occupying the role, the position itself, and the organisational setting. SC emphasises that the manager’s construction of knowledge and meaning is socially situated (McKinley, 2015), is developed through their cultural and historical experiences, and interaction with children and staff, and is an ongoing and iterative process (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Lambert (2003) asserts that the manager is an active participant in the social construction of their role. This study asks how the managers have constructed their perspectives, and what the consequences of these are.

GT asks what theory, generated from the analysis of data, explains these constructions (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Creswell intertwines SC with the interpretivist paradigm, as subjective meanings derived from experiences are “varied and multiple”, rather than a universally held reality (2014: 8). As highlighted by Andrews (2012), SC is innately compatible with GT, which has become a dominant framework in social research (Denzin, 1997; Morse *et al.*, 2009) as many scholars view it as “part of the general lexicon in qualitative research” (Charmaz, 2009: 127). Gomm (2009) argues that GT is the generating of findings and locating of theoretical explanations for those findings - a theory or model that is grounded in data. Charmaz (2005) reminds us that no qualitative method can be wholly inductive, as theoretical influences are present before the collection of data. Constructivist GT adopts a reflexive stance by locating the researcher in the realities of the participants and acknowledges the theoretical framework that the researcher used as an initial frame of reference.

Methodology

Qualitative design, the chosen methodology for this study, is concerned with the understanding of groups or individuals, as opposed to testing theories (Creswell, 2009) which supports the expression of subjective meaning (Bryman, 2012). It is characterised by relatively smaller sample sizes that enable a richness of understanding (Denscombe, 2014). More specifically, a phenomenological approach has been utilised as it focusses on the lived experiences of the individual, or as Denscombe (2014:4) explains, seeks to understand the “essence” of personal experience through the participants’ eyes.

Ethics

As the collection of data may be obtrusive or reveal sensitive information (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), it was essential to ensure informed participant consent. The applicable seven of Seidman’s eight essential elements of informed consent were chosen, carefully considered, and outlined to participants, to ensure due ethical consideration (2013). These are: invitation to participate, participant risk, participant rights, possible benefits, confidentiality, dissemination, contact information and copies of the form. Ethical approval was also applied for and granted by the researcher’s university Head of School.

Sampling

Due to the small number of participants required, non-probability purposeful sampling was used (Seidman, 2013). Purposeful sampling is the selection of participants based on certain criteria (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). In this study, the only criterion was that participants must be managers of a community services, as the roles of private providers and community managers differ greatly and inclusion of both is beyond the capacity of this study. Despite all services being not-for-profit, each service had contextual variations.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study consisted of six semi-structured interviews. This method of interviewing, described as “structured conversations” by Cannold (2001: 179), gave the participants scope to expand upon topics that resonated with them (Punch, 2005), and enabled the researcher to guide the interview in line with the aim and objectives.

As GT is an iterative process, the first phase used open-coding to identify potential categories by extracting verbatim samples from transcripts (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). For the second phase, as categories emerge, they are linked together using causation coding, which searches for combinations of variables to map influences. Comparing and contrasting managers’ perspectives was used to link categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A conditional matrix (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was generated to illustrate the degree to which the managers’ perspectives were influenced by differing factors. An integrative approach was used, which provides for a small number of predetermined codes to be designed, and emerging codes. Where a deviant case (a contribution that is coded once, but is still valuable) emerged, it was included in the analysis. The codes were then applied to establish themes to interpret the data collected.

Reflexivity

The researcher is the data collection instrument and, as such, a “potential contaminant” (Fine, Weis, Weseen & Wong, 2000:108). Barbour (2008) remarks that the researcher must acknowledge his/her values and biases during the research process and demonstrate “methodological frankness” (Miles & Huberman, 1994:294). As the researcher has read and critically analysed literature concerning the research topic, her view of the research question may differ from that of the participants. To mitigate this and ensure accurate representation, the researcher used direct quotes.

Limitations

A clear limitation of this study, given the qualitative methodology, the relatively small sample size and that as experiences are from the perspective of the participant, the findings cannot be generalised (Greene & Hogan, 2005) but apply only to the participant by whom they were expressed.

Silverman (2017) notes that some information may not be reported by the participant to the researcher. Furthermore, according to Mason (2003:237),

“vagaries of memory”, selectivity and deception by participants are often cited in the literature as criticisms of interview.

Findings and Discussion

The findings are grouped into three sections, which represent the primary categories that emerged during coding. The three categories are as follows:

1. The managers’ perspectives of their role
2. Influences on their perspectives
3. How their role is linked to quality

1. Managers’ Perspectives of their Role

A prominent subcategory that emerged was managers’ perspectives on their roles in relation to administrative tasks. A further recurring subcategory was staff management which overlapped with change management, specifically supervision, reflective practice, and communication styles. Fig. 1 outlines the roles as perceived by the participants.

Perspectives on Administrative Tasks

A significant reality of five participants was the time that was required for administrative tasks. Owing to this, the participants could not work directly with children as it would negatively affect the children due to their managerial role distracting them.

Despite 'Anna' having a part-time administrator, she noted that she does most of the financial tasks, as these are a "biggie" for her role. 'Carol's' role largely requires grant applications while Anna engages in "a massive amount of fundraising". 'Emma' opted out of the current funding subvention scheme due to the administrative burden. 'Freda' and Emma both expressed missing working directly with the children, but pressures arising from administrative tasks prohibit this. Freda explained that, despite wanting to spend time in classrooms, she enjoys administration as it is "straight-forward" and "black and white although it is all-encompassing". Beth explained that she does many administrative tasks in her own time as "the children and the rooms are the top priority [...] I often have to do [the paperwork] at a later stage".

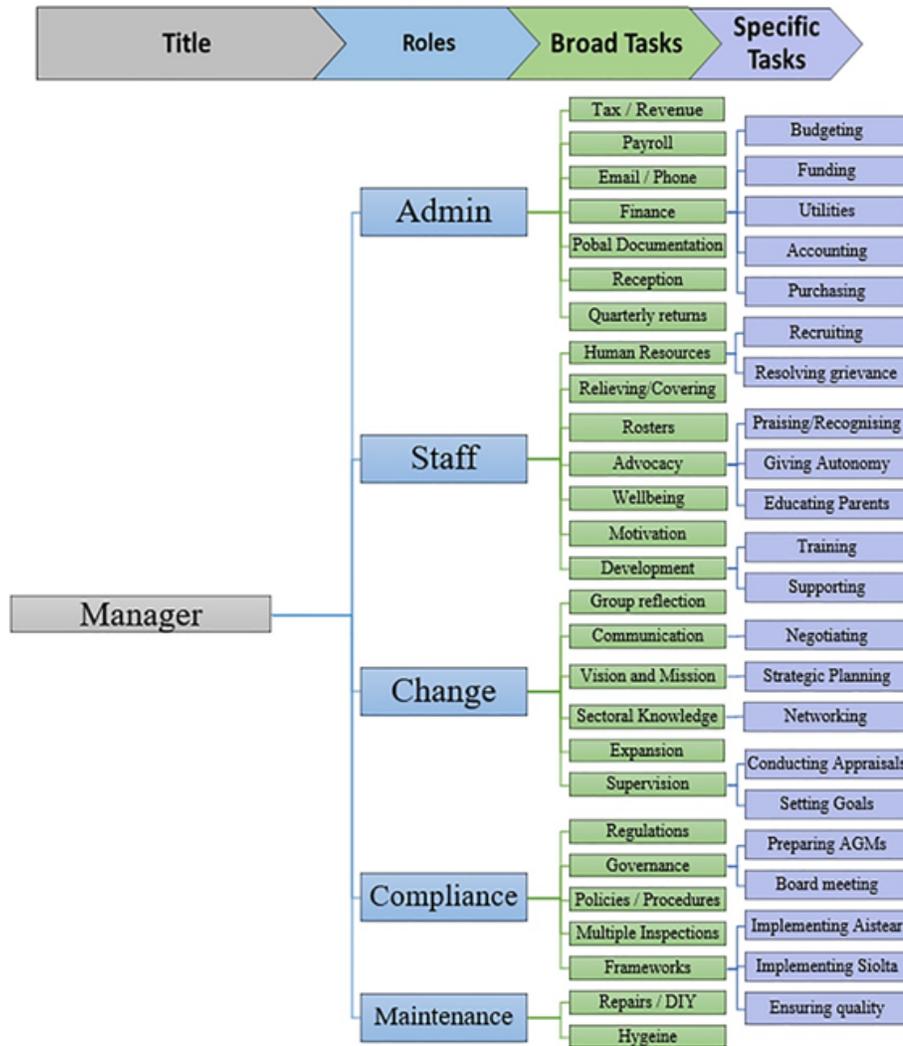


Fig. 1: Managers' roles, as perceived by the participants

Perspectives on Staff Management

'Diane asserted that she does not supervise staff as she has confidence in her staff to resolve challenges independently. In relation to staff development, she observed peer pressure within her team as a motivating factor.

Like Diane, Anna highlighted the importance of trusting her staff. Unlike Diane, the other five participants spoke at length about both the importance of, and the methods through which, they support staff. Anna advocated for consistent support, training, and even counselling for retaining loyalty and commitment. Similarly, 'Beth' explained that a manager is "a figure there that they can turn to if necessary and also pick up the slack". Diane outlined that

the staff do not “take advantage” of her being in the classroom, as they are aware of the requirements of her role.

In relation to valuing staff, Freda described a regulatory inspection of her service, during which the inspector only questioned the degree qualified educator. Freda stressed that all educators are equal partners in the service, and that the educators with lower qualifications, in this case, felt like “second-class citizens”. Anna cited the empowerment of staff as a critical function of her role. Beth, like Anna, empowered her staff by ensuring their involvement in all decision-making, as former employers made all decisions off-site, which she critiqued.

Perspectives on Managing Change

Carol, Emma, and Anna referred to monthly supervision as key elements of their roles in change management, to set goals (Anna) or to maintain relationships with staff (Emma). Diane, on the other hand, commented that she deems supervision unnecessary, due to the educators being more experienced than she. Freda surmised that there is a supervision imbalance, as managers rarely receive it, which she maintains is important for a manager’s wellbeing. Emma cited the most effective method of creating a shared vision is adapting her communication style. Beth commented that before her commencement, staff were discontented as there was no clear vision. Emma and Beth both advocated that it must be developed and communicated collegially. Likewise, in relation to the introduction of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Siolta (CECDE, 2006), Freda stated that the team faced the challenge together. Conversely, Diane shared an example of managing change in her service in an authoritative manner. Akin to Beth and Freda, Emma described how she encouraged a shared understanding of concepts such as play, interactions and frameworks. She challenged her staff’s convictions and biases by encouraging deep reflection on the theory of play. As well as promoting critical self-reflection, Beth highlighted the importance of a manager’s ability to critically self-reflect, as she described her former manager who prohibited sand-play because she disliked untidiness.

2. Influences on Managers’ Perspectives

The factors that influenced the participants’ perspectives on their roles most significantly are represented in Fig. 2. The further the distance from the

central element of the model ('role'), the lower level of influence the factors exerted over the participants' roles.

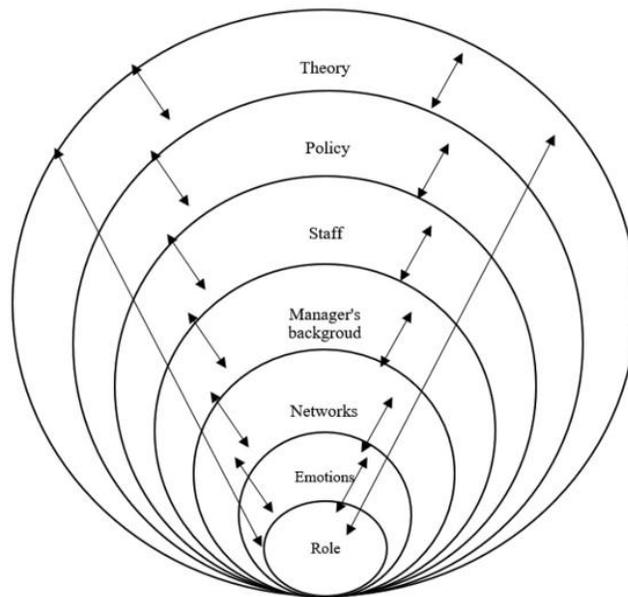


Fig. 2: Units of influence on a manager's role, as perceived by the participants

Emotions

The managers' emotions were cited as the most frequent and prominent influence on their perspectives and functions. Emma felt emotional empathy towards her staff that were re-qualifying, therefore she prioritised supporting these staff. Beth had felt unsupported in her previous service, hence, she prioritised providing emotional support to her team.

Carol cited high stress levels due to funding changes, which had resulted in inadequate classroom and hygiene staff. Consequently, she worked predominantly with the children, and spends her spare time cleaning and prioritises sourcing new funding streams. Diane recalled a staff member that declined to undergo mandatory QQI Level 5 training, which caused high levels of stress for Diane. Anna recalled feelings of anxiety throughout her services ongoing financial difficulties, and when she attended court for a child protection case. Similarly, 'Freda' revealed emotionally arduous incidents which affected her confidence: "I thought it was just my management. I thought that I am just not managing this well".

The discussion on the impact of participants' emotions on their roles mirrors the identification of emotionality as key factors in the shaping of managers' roles in the literature. The participants acknowledged the impact it

had on their mental health, which mirrors Osgood (2011)'s suggestion that a balance must be struck. Anna noted that she ensures that she has strategies in place, both in her service and in her personal life, to ensure the management of stressful emotions.

Administration and Managers' Emotions

Administration accounted for a proportionately large amount of the participant's time. The effect of this on other functions appeared to have led the participants to feeling perplexed and hindered. These findings concur with Moloney and Pettersen (2017)'s and Aubrey (2007)'s findings.

Three participants outlined that the administrative burden prevented them from working directly with the children. In addition to this, the participants described the volume of administrative tasks negatively impacted on their emotions, thus causing a change to the prioritisation of tasks. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2007) state that managers should not focus on administration, to the detriment of quality and pedagogy, however this study shows that they have little alternative.

Staff Management and Managers' Emotions

The influence of staff management was intertwined with most functions of the participants. Several participants described cases of staff discontentment or conflict as sources of emotional difficulty, which was also described by Rodd (2013). The participants described how it impacted on their personal lives and the atmosphere in their services for periods of time, thus impacting on the focuses of the managers' roles.

The participants acknowledged the importance of ensuring that staff are valued, supported, given ownership, and communicated with appropriately, which corresponds to the literature. Goleman (1995) and Urban *et al.* (2017) highlighted the importance of emotional self-management, openness and understanding the applicability of varying communication styles.

Diane, Anna, and Freda all recalled cases of their own emotional distress, following staff conflict, during which staff members exhibited heightened emotional reactions. Chu's description of human's predisposition to mirroring emotional states of those in our environment (2014) can be observed, as the participants conveyed their emotional reaction to interactions with staff.

Several participants named tailored communication as an important function of their role for ensuring commitment and understanding by staff,

which Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet (2014) emphasised.

Networking and Managers' Emotions

All six participants highlighted networking as a key mediator in the emotional wellbeing of managers. Diane's and Freda's perspectives were that a manager must prioritise communicating with other managers. Diane stated, "I needed someone to tell me it was going to be ok and not to worry", while Freda wanted "just to know that you are not the only one".

Diane cited a low level of provision for networking as caused by the focus on the macro-levels of policy, such as governance and regulation. Freda also commented, "we are all getting caught up in ridiculous red tape". Beth and Anna highlighted networking as imperative for emotional support, professional growth, and continual learning from other managers.

Freda referred to the many contacts she formerly had in networks, who provided her with support, but that this has changed. Emma was a member of a weekly networking group, for which funding had since ceased, which has negatively impacted on her. All participants expressed that they are also constrained by time, owing to the administrative and financial responsibilities. Anna, Carol, Diane, and Freda conveyed that this results in feelings of isolation, which affected their emotions, confidence, and problem-solving skills.

Managers' Backgrounds. The Influence of Managers on Quality

Qualifications and Experience

All participants discussed their professional, academic, and personal backgrounds and the resulting influences. As Emma stated, "you are a product of all your experiences [...] everything shapes you and who you are".

Diane had never received training in administrative responsibilities prior to entering the sector, which she and Beth also described as essential. Diane, like Anna, later enrolled in a diploma in management and leadership. Carol felt that her Masters in Mentoring, Management and Leadership in the Early Years has reassured her that she is "on the right track". Freda admitted that she enrolled in a degree program to "have the piece of paper". Emma emphasised

the value of “in-house training with actual hands-on work experience”. She maintained that to effectively manage and understand the perspectives of staff, “managers need to have worn the t-shirt” and that “it wasn’t enough just to do a course”. Beth stated that both experience and training at all levels is required. Anna considered her former training and roles as manager in the disability sector and as a trainer for new managers as equipping her with management skills. Conversely, Beth believed that her previous assistant manager position taught her what not to do in management. Mujis *et al.*, (2004), when referring to US evaluations of Head Start programs, highlighted that less successful programs were characterised by managers with less experience in leadership roles.

Although the literature recommends training for managers for the development of emotional intelligence, this was not explicitly referred to by the participants. All participants, excepting Beth, noted that they had not received adequate training in financial management.

Policy

Anna explained that Siolta changed how she worked with staff, as it affected all service requirements. Beth stated that Aistear served as a helpful resource but that regulations sometimes conflicted with her values, particularly ratio requirements. Emma described the regulations as mirroring her perspectives, as she believes both are grounded in best practice. Carol stated that regardless of her perspectives, compliance is her primary concern: “If it’s not going to work with the regulations, you can’t do it”.

Anna, Emma, and Freda described how the changes to the current fee subvention scheme negatively influenced how they manage. This scheme sees capitation removed from families if children’s arrival times, collection times or days of attendance are inconsistent. Emma and Anna expressed that a child’s time with their family should be valued rather than penalised. Freda noted that this requires additional administration and financial loss.

Diane referred to the opposing requirements by different policymakers and its impact on her mental health. Her decision of which stakeholder to comply with was based on the level of consequence. Diane stated that Pobal remove funding based on non-compliance, therefore she prioritises their requirements over those of Tusla.

Theory

Knowledge of theory was highlighted by Emma, Diane, Freda, and Carol as essential for carrying out their roles. Emma described how she enjoyed linking theory and practice. Carol emphasised the importance of managers having a deep understanding of child development and theories around play.

Diane stated that she was influenced by and applies theoretical knowledge acquired through her training to all aspects of her role. Carol's perspectives were significantly shaped by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, as her service caters to families experiencing homelessness. Carol explained that research has shown that when a manager has a degree in ECEC, the service will be of higher quality, thus having a positive impact on children's outcomes.

Linking the Manager's Role to Quality

While all six participants showed that they viewed their roles as having a significant impact on the quality of their services, it was only referred to explicitly in brief. Emma described her perspective on choices for the children. She facilitated communication and reflected with staff members on the concept of choice. Anna concurred that the availability of someone to communicate with staff, parents and families when required is essential. Emma shared her perspectives on the importance of facilitating new ideas, while ensuring that the service complies with regulation. Diane linked the emotionality of the manager to the quality of the experiences of the children. Carol outlined that when she feels stressed in her role, the children are impacted. This is comparable to Diane's awareness that a manager's state of mind will affect the whole service. Beth identified this as a "domino effect". Anna stated that she could have a more significant impact on quality if she had additional administrative staff, which would enable her to focus on practice and future planning.

Conclusion

While the correlation between managers' training and qualifications is discussed frequently in the literature, the participants did not overtly focus on it when sharing their perspectives on their roles and the functions of their roles. Instead of outlining a direct link between managers' roles and quality, the participants described how they see their roles as inherently connected to administrative functions, financial responsibilities, advocacy, supervision,

communication, emotions, and the practice of staff, all of which affect the overall service provision.

Fig. 1 represented the predominant functions of the participants' roles. The influences that have shaped the managers' perspectives on their roles are presented in Fig. 2. When considered together, the influences depicted in Fig. 2 have served to influence the perspectives that led to the generation of Fig. 1. Despite the consensus in the literature of a manager's impact on quality, the participants did not focus on this. Instead, emotions and their profound impact on all other elements of the participants' perspectives and roles were outlined.

This study has brought to the fore, insights that are not prevalent in the literature, particularly in the Irish context. Significantly, Fig. 2 depicts emotions as having a direct and encompassing influence on the participants' perspectives. However, the presence and influence of emotional intelligence and emotionality on managers' perspectives is not widely cited in the literature. Rather, emotional intelligence is highlighted in the research as being an important skill for effective management. In this respect, this study adds an important dimension to the literature.

In addition, the study revealed that many of the influences in Fig. 2 are interconnected. For example, connections were found between staff management and staff emotion, thus having an emotional impact on the participants. Policy and the associated responsibilities evoked varying emotional reactions in the participants, which shaped the prioritisation of their functions and their perspectives on their roles. Policy also affected the participant's ability to develop and maintain networks, which substantially influenced their emotions.

Recommendations

Training

As outlined in both the literature and this study, emotionally intelligent managers raise standards of the organisation, encourage the development of staff, and embed organisational sustainability. Such managers facilitate this by being emotionally self-aware, being emotionally interactive, practicing empathy and being capable of healing emotional damage in the self and others Goleman (1996). Given the varying educational and training background between all participants and the assertion that emotional intelligence is a skill

required by managers in the ECEC sector, it is recommended that all managers receive formal training in the importance and development of emotional intelligence. Scouller (2011) proposes six ways that managers can develop their emotional intelligence. Three of these methods involve engagement in differing types of training, including experiential training, two methods involve engaging in coaching and one suggests familiarising oneself with relevant literature.

Policy

It is also recommended that additional collegial channels are facilitated for managers, such as networking opportunities. This was cited as a desired provision in the ECEC sector by the four participants that described emotionally challenging incidents in their roles. Kitt (2017) highlights the importance of managers seeking out feedback and appraisal from, and discussion with, other managers to narrow the gap between how they see themselves and how others see them. This, based on the concept of the Johari Window (Luft and Ingham, 1955), is a useful method of developing emotional self-awareness.

It is equally imperative, as can be seen in the findings, that managers in the ECEC sector are afforded additional support in their roles to attend off-site events such as training and networking. Donohue (2003) proposes that technology may be an effective vehicle for the facilitation of professional networks. This has been successfully implemented in New Zealand for the sharing of information, advice, and support (Thornton *et al.*, 2009).

Research

Despite the growing focus on research in management in the early years, there is a paucity of research from the perspectives of managers themselves. It is recommended that further research is carried out in this area that will account for a larger sample, across both the private and community ECEC sector.

There is reference to and description of emotional intelligence in management in ECEC in the literature (Miller and Cable, 2011; Nolan, 2008; Osgood, 2011; Rodd, 2013; Siraj-Blatchford and Hallet, 2014), however there is a paucity of empirical research in the ECEC context on both the influence of emotional intelligence on managers and the subsequent impact on their

services. It is also suggested that research is carried out in relation to the impact of staff on managers' emotions and how this affects their role.

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Capturing Children's Experience of Play Through Animation



Annie Cummins

Abstract

Based on research carried out on children's experience of play in School Age Childcare (SAC) settings in Ireland, this paper will reflect on the process of using stop-motion animation as a visual research method with children. While the visual narratives that were produced cannot be considered as 'authentic' insights into the experiences of play, they do reflect the ambiguity of play itself and the multiple meanings children give to their experiences. The paper will conclude by reflecting on some of the strengths and challenges of using this form of visual research method.

Introduction

Children's participation in research has gained political and academic support (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2015). At times, children's participation in research can be tokenistic and not reflect a commitment to their involvement in the whole research process (Palaiologou, 2014). Child-centred methods need to move beyond data gathering techniques and empower the child's voice throughout the research process (Lundy, 2007). Therefore, research with children must support participation, enhance engagement and facilitate their agency during the production and analysis of the research findings.

This paper draws on research carried out with sixty-nine children between the age of five to 12 years, on their play experience in three SAC settings in Ireland. For this research, a qualitative mixed-method approach was used, which consisted of participant observations, focus groups, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, artwork and animation. The focus of this paper will examine the use of stop-motion animation as a creative method of involving children in research. While creative research methods are still relatively new, there is a growing body of literature supporting its development (Barrett and Bolt, 2010; Kara, 2015; Dickerson, 2018).

The paper will argue that using animation as a research method can lead to the gathering of rich collective and individual narratives of children's experiences and provide a visual representation of 'children's voices' that can be disseminated to those who participated in the research. According to Thomson (2008), there are two ways of incorporating the visual in research. This first involves the use and interpretation of visual artefacts, which Chaplin (1994) refers to as the sociology of the visual. The second approach involves participants in the creation of visual artefacts during the research process. Chaplin (1994) refers to the second approach as visual sociology. The use of animation in this research can be considered visual sociology as the young participants were actively involved in developing the storyline and creating the images.

Using Animation to Support the Child's Voice in Research

There is a growing interest in developing new and innovative methodologies for researching children's views and experiences (Robinson and Gillies, 2012). Since the emergence of the New Social Studies of Childhood in the 1990s, there has been a growing demand for children's voices to be included in matters that concern them (James and Prout, 1990). Up to this point, children were generally ignored in social research as 'they were seen as not-yet-social beings' (Prout, 2005: 1). However, without children's input on matters that concern them, 'we have a very incomplete account, from a scientific perspective, of what it is that causes any person, adult or child, to act as they do' (Greene & Hill, 2005: 2).

Research has found that children can interpret traditional methods of inquiry, such as interviews, as a form of 'interrogation' or 'investigation' (McWilliam *et al.*, 2009: p. 70) and surveys as 'intimidating, inappropriate or boring' (Barker and Weller, 2003: p. 36). Therefore, the development of child-centred research methods such as visual methods can support and facilitate children to express their viewpoints (Pimlott-Wilson, 2012). According to Bennett Woodhouse (2003), the solicitation and inclusion of children's 'voice' in research need to evolve from children's interests and experiences. Whilst it is essential to develop child-centred methods that are appealing to children, the research method should also yield scientific insights for researchers. Therefore, researchers should only engage in creative research tools if they are beneficial to both the participants and the research (Palaiologou, 2014; Kara, 2015).

Stop-motion animation is the process of creating moving images on screen by showing a series of frames or photographs in quick succession (Ternan, 2012). Animation works in the same way as traditional flipbooks but instead of drawings, a series of photographs are used. According to Barker and Smith (2012: p.92), school-age children, especially in Western society, have a working knowledge of photography due to the "endemic use of mobile phone-based cameras in youth culture". The process of animation involves joining together a series of photographs called frames and making small changes in between each progressive frame (Greenberg, 2004). Due to the speed of change between each photograph, the images appear to move on screen as our eyes are unable to keep up. This illusion of movement is referred to as the persistence of vision (Greenberg, 2004).

Animation has both an inquiry (process) and representational (product) phase. During the process phase, multiple strategies of inquiry (artwork,

storyboards, prop making, focus groups, brainstorming, song-writing, interviews, focus groups) can be used to facilitate children's engagement in the research. Ensuring engagement in research enables researchers to accurately capture and reflect on children's experiences and concerns by prioritising their voice (Green and Hill, 2005; Prout and James, 2015). Without agency, children's voice in research can be overshadowed by the researcher's own biases or agenda. As Fielding (2001) points out, the accuracy of the child's voice is contingent on the adult's interpretation and framing of the data. To avoid misinterpretation, children should be given the opportunity to contribute, reflect upon and evaluate the research findings. The representational stage (filming and editing) supports children's agency as it enables children the opportunity to critically evaluate the visual presentation of the findings.

Setting the Scene: The Research Method

The research reported in this paper is taken from part of a doctoral research project entitled 'Ag Súgradh²', which used a qualitatively driven mixed-methods approach to explore children's experiences of play in SAC settings in Ireland. SAC is an umbrella term for centre-based settings that cater for the care of primary school-age children outside of school hours and during school holidays. The Action Plan for School Age Childcare (DCYA & DES, 2017) found that primary school-age children identified play opportunities in both indoor and outdoor spaces as essential components of SAC.

The Ag Súgradh research project set out to explore children's perspective of their play experiences in SAC settings. A total of sixty-nine primary school-aged children took part in this research across three SAC settings. For the purpose of this paper, the settings will be referred to as SAC A, B and C. Fieldwork was carried out during a six to eight-week block in each of the settings. Although the research was carried out over several consecutive weeks, there were discrepancies in attendance due to illness, changes in parental work shifts, prearranged playdates, or one-off events such as confirmations or parties. A summary of the participants can be found in Table 1 below.

	SAC A	SAC B	SAC C
Participants in the Junior age bracket (5-7)	6	5	0
Participants in the Senior Age Bracket (8-12)	16	19	23
Girls	7	19	18
Boys	15	5	5

Table 1: Summary of participants

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The research sought to gather information about the children’s experience of play in their SAC settings. Some of the questions or themes explored included:

- Where the children liked to play and why?
- Who/what the children liked to play with?
- What was their favourite play activity and why?
- What could adults do to improve their play experience?
- How they negotiated their play space?

Using this information, the children were asked to consider how they would want their play experience visually represented. The participants were made aware that adults, such as parents, SAC staff and other researchers interested in children’s play, may see the final animation short³ and this was an opportunity to present their experience of play to a broader audience. The animation element of the research took place over a series of three workshops over three consecutive weeks, which enabled participants to have hands-on experience of the process of animation while creating their animation short. Each workshop addressed separate but interconnected elements of the process: storyboarding, prop design, and filming/editing. Kara (2015) notes the growing concern among some academics about the use of art-based research methods by researchers who are not properly trained in these artistic techniques. Therefore, I felt the research would benefit from collaborating with a visual artist⁴ for the filming and editing element of the research.

Lights, Camera, Action: Animated Visual Research Method

There is a lot of planning involved in creating an animation as everything that appears on screen needs to be planned, created and placed in position (Blair, 2014). The planning process mimics traditional qualitative research techniques by drawing out information and ideas from the participants. The first part of the inquiry phase of animation is the development of the storyboard. According to Greenberg (2004), storyboarding facilitates children to reflect upon and articulate the contents of the animation. Through the use of storyboards, the children were able to visually or verbally express their experiences of play and actively decide how they would like to represent their findings. Animation can exist in either two-dimensional (drawings or images) or three-dimensional (clay, inanimate objects, or people) forms (Blair, 2014). During this first workshop, the different animation forms were introduced to the participants to help them make an informed decision on how they would like to visually represent their play experiences.

The second workshop was dedicated to creating the props needed for the animation. Two of the SAC settings (A and B) used two-dimensional techniques to capture their play experience and therefore, created hand-made drawings and images for the animation. The last setting (SAC C) decided to use a three-dimensional technique known as pixilation, which involves 'using the human body as a tool for animation' (Blair, 2014, p.8) and therefore, did not require the prop making workshop. Using images of children in research raises some ethical issues (Thomson, 2008). While children may consent to their image been used, the researcher has a duty of care to ensure that these images are not misused (Walker *et al*, 2008).

In the final workshop, the visual artist and I collaborated with the participants to capture their animation. A Logitech C615 webcam was used to capture the two-dimensional animation and a compact digital camera was used for the three-dimensional filming. Two types of software were required for creating an animation: capture software and editing software. Many software and editing packages can be downloaded for free or are relatively inexpensive. For this research, the software package called *Monkey Jam* was used to capture the frames of the animation and the editing software *Movie Maker* was used to edit shots together, add sound effects and include credits. After each participant finished filming, they were given the opportunity to review the final product and either start over, make some amendments or submit unaltered. A complete account of the animation process in each of the SAC settings will be given in the next section of the paper.

After-School Rush by SAC A

SAC A was located on the grounds of a primary school and it offered a pick-up service for two other schools. In the morning, the service provided a play-based early year's programme between the hours of 8.30 am – 12 pm. The after-school programme began at 1.20 pm for junior and senior infants⁵ and 2.20 pm for children from first class upwards⁶. As this setting catered for younger children in the morning, the equipment and play material was more suitable for the early-years (3-6 years) age bracket. The outside area of this SAC had a fixed swing and slide set, a wooden pirate ship (for the pre-school children only), a small wooden house (for the pre-school children only), a planting area (for the pre-school children only), some wooden logs and a few old tyres.

In the week's preceding the animation workshops, I had observed the children collectively playing a game of *Formula1*⁷. Using the wooden logs as steering wheels, some of the children raced around the outdoor area. Others took on the roles of flag-waver, pit-stop crew or catering staff. Three of the children designed and created trophies for the winners. During the storyboarding workshop, the children expressed an interest in animating a version of their game using paper cut-outs. Once the flag-waver signalled 'go', each child wanted to drive across a racetrack while the crowd was cheering. Some children wanted to make their own car sound, while others wanted to add the sound effects later.

In the second workshop, the children designed their car and trophy for the animation. Furthermore, some of the children wanted to create other characters from their play activities such as *Darth Vader*, *Pokémon*, and *Angry Birds*. A flag waver, some trees, a few bales of hay and a podium was also created. The background scenery consisted of a green A1 poster-size paper with a racetrack running from one side to the other.

In the filming workshop, the children reviewed the storyboard and set out the background on a hard surface (desk) beneath the webcam, which is mounted on a full-size tripod. As the webcam is connected to the capturing software on the computer, the image sequence can be viewed straight away. Each child took turns animating their race car moving across the track. For each frame, four photographs were taken using the webcam. Then the child

would move their car very slightly along the track. When the car was in place, an additional four photographs were taken. This process was repeated until the car came to the end of the track. Each child had the opportunity to review the image sequence before the file was saved and either record their voice for the sound effects or use one of the recordings available on the editing software.

While most of the children followed the script developing during the storyboarding workshop, one child drove their car backwards and made barking sounds instead of the noise of a race car. Another child crashed their car into the tree, causing it to fall over before driving the car to the end of the track (see Figure 1). The last child, drove their car into the hay bales, causing it to catch fire. The contrast between order and disorder represented in the animation captured the diverse ways children engaged with the physical *Formula1* game they had played in the weeks preceding the filming workshop.

Figure 1: Animation Still



Play Talk by SACB

SAC B was a community-based service, which aimed to challenge issues of disadvantage. In this setting, there was one room dedicated to after-school services for primary school-age children, which was filled with tables and chairs, much like a classroom. One section of the room was used for doing homework and once completed, the children were able to either go outside or play a board game at another table. The outdoor area was limited in size and although there was a tree in the middle of the outdoor space, children were not permitted to climb it. The play equipment for the outdoors was stored in a locked small shed, which children needed to get permission to access. Older children did collectively engage in soccer matches but these were contingent on a staff member playing. Once the staff member stopped playing, the game would fall apart.

During the storyboarding workshop, the children could not agree on one activity that captured their experience of play in the setting. Instead, the children decided they wanted to create an animation where they got to verbally articulate their individual play preferences. While the children agreed that they wanted their voice on the animation, they did not want to use their image. It was decided that they would design their own two-dimensional faces. These 'talking heads' would allow the characters to present the children's ideas and experiences.

During the second workshop, the children designed their characters using various art and craft materials. The paper plates were used for the face and some children used craft paper to change the skin tone on their face. Wool was used to create hair and some children added accessories such as hats to their character. Finally, two sets of eyes and mouth were created: one with the eyes and mouth open and the other with them both closed to give the illusion of movement.

In the filming and final workshop, each child took turns animating their character. This animation was relatively easy to complete, as it only required three frames to be taken: one with the eyes open and the mouth closed, another with the eyes and mouth open and the last with the eyes and mouth closed. The frames were then put on a loop, which made the eyes appear to be blinking and the mouth moving (Figure 2). The children were given the opportunity to review the sequence of images before recording the audio data.

Figure 2: Animation stills of the talking heads



After completing the visual element of this animation, a digital recorder was used to capture the audio data. Interestingly, none of the children discussed the activities that they engaged in at the SAC setting. Instead, they talked about unstructured activities beyond the confines of the setting, such as playing soccer in their estate, online gaming, or playing at home with family, friends or inanimate objects. This animation illustrated a key finding emerging from the research: The participants in this research did not associate their activities in the SAC setting as play. SAC was considered a service for delivering care and containment during the liminal time between school and home, which was aptly captured by one participant who described the SAC setting as *'a prison but with more games'*.

An unexpected problem presented itself during the postproduction editing stage. Some of the children's audio data were so soft that it made it difficult to understand without listening to it multiple times. To address this issue, subtitles were included throughout the animation. Once the animation was completed, the children reviewed it one last time to ensure they were satisfied with the final product.

After-School Fun by SAC C

SAC C encouraged children to play outdoors once homework was finished and mealtime was over. It had a number of spaces for children to play and interact outside of the main building. A large shed affectionately referred to as 'The Cabin' by the children, served as a private indoor space where the children could interact away from the gaze of an adult. The Cabin was situated across from the main building and contained a number of chairs, mats, storage space and some board games. Another makeshift building served as a sensory room and had a toy kitchen, a sandpit, pots and pans and some chairs. In the garden, there was a wooden boat, a soccer pitch, swings, a slide and a climbing tree.

The children in SAC C chose to use pixilation to visually represent their play experience in the setting. Pixilation is a three-dimensional animation technique, which involves using people rather than objects or paper cut-outs. This meant that the children's movements would be filmed, which would make it impossible to protect their anonymity when disseminating the research. Thus, using pixilation presented an ethical dilemma. On the one hand, I wanted to respect children's voices in the research and facilitate them to produce the visual representation using the technique of their choosing. On the other hand, protecting participants' anonymity was one of the specifications set out by the research ethics committee. The issue of anonymity and confidentiality was discussed with the participants and it was agreed that the group wanted to have their images used and they also wanted their family to be able to access the animation. However, when disseminating the research to the academic community, only screenshots of the children playing at a distance or with their backs to the camera would be shared (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Children playing on a hooped swing in the privately-owned after-school



Due to the nature of pixilation technique, no props needed to be made for this animation. Instead, the participants used materials from their environment. During the filming workshop, friendship groups demonstrated their favourite play activities, such as soccer, swinging, gymnastics and climbing the tree. One interesting and unexpected development occurred during the editing workshop. The children were unhappy with the sound effects for the short and wanted to create and record a song as background music. Although beyond the scope of this paper, the song aptly captured the children's multiple layers of selfhood and their struggle to negotiate relationships in the setting. Due to my lack of musical ability, additional support from a local musician was sought. While the children were initially enthusiastic about the project, most were unwilling or unable to commit to the full workshop. Some children got bored and went to play elsewhere, while others got collected early and had to leave. In the end, the song was recorded using only one participant and although there were some mistakes made, it was decided to leave it as an imperfect piece.

Concluding Remarks

This paper discusses the use of animation as a visual research method and reflects on some of the strengths and challenges of using this approach. This visual mode of inquiry can be considered a multimodal approach that incorporates a range of different forms of communication and representation. To facilitate children's voice in the research, a range of techniques were used, such as brainstorming/focus group sessions, storyboarding, artwork/prop

making, filming and song writing. Visual research methods can contribute to the research findings by encouraging active participation, engagement and agency, which enable children to have a direct voice in the research findings (Johnson, 2008). As Veale (2005: 255) notes, creative methods aim to “facilitate reflection, debate, argument, dissent and consensus, to stimulate the articulation of multiple voices and positions, and, through the process, to lay the foundations for empowerment”. Using animation as a research method enables children to determine the research findings, from conception to final product.

It was evident from the children’s active engagement in the animation process that they took pleasure in developing a new skill. As Thomson (2008: p.11) notes, children value engaging in visual research methods as ‘they are “getting something” out of their participation, ... and the enjoyment gained from doing something different’. In terms of inquiry, the process of using animation as a research method offered a creative and imaginative way of reflecting upon and communicating the children’s experience of play. However, the method is not without limitation and the process has taught me some key lessons around interpreting visual data, managing the unpredictable and dealing with ethical issues.

Visual data offer snapshots that are unique to a particular time, place, or occasion (Thomson, 2008; Noyes, 2008) and invite the viewers to *see* the child’s perspective (Clark, 2010). However, image, like any other text, can be interpreted in multiple ways and therefore, researchers need to ensure that children’s voice is included in the analysis of the data (Thomson, 2008: p.10). Without children’s input, the analysis may take too literal interpretation (Kaplan, 2008) and not reflect the child’s intention (Thomson, 2008).

It was hoped that the animation would result in a powerful dissemination medium that would have a positive impact on the way children’s play space was organised and governed within SAC settings. However, I was unable to get the children to engage critically on their play environment or experiences, which meant that they were reluctant to explicitly discuss or visually represent conflict or tensions that I had observed throughout the research. Instead, the children wanted to provide a ‘positive message’ (Foster, 2012, p. 46) about their play experience. Furthermore, as a stand-alone piece, the animation lacked the reflective content or context in which they were produced. For example, the *After-School Rush* animation produced by SAC A is a snapshot of an actual game that was played preceding the workshops and therefore, makes

invisible the diverse range of games played in the setting. Likewise, the children in SAC B demonstrated their discontent with the play environment in the setting by refusing to recognise it as a play space in their *Play Talk* animation. Instead, they focused on spaces that they considered conducive to unstructured play, such as the home, neighbourhood or schoolyard. When disseminated to a wider audience, such as SAC staff, parents or academics, viewers would get a glimpse of what sort of play environments or activities the children valued but would not have a sense of their play experience in the SAC setting. If repeating this research, I would be reluctant to change the content of the animations but would include a follow-up session that encouraged the children to reflect on why they chose to make visible certain experiences and not others.

The ethics of using actual images of children from SAC C emerged as a concern during the dissemination stage. Negotiating between what the children wanted and what the research ethics committee would allow presented an interesting and challenging dilemma. As Noyes (2008) points out, it is difficult for researchers to ensure that children understand the implications of having their image displayed around the world at conferences or permanently in the public domain. Therefore, identifying images of children were 'not made publicly available for re-use (Noyes, 2008, p. 143). On reflection, I would be reluctant to use this method of animation in the future. Instead, limiting the animation to two-dimensional techniques would ensure the images are detached from the participants.

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Government Inaction is not an Option. Exploring the Relationship between Management and Quality Early Childhood Care and Education Provision in Ireland



Rebecca Knox & Mary Moloney

Abstract

This paper draws upon research undertaken in 2020 with Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) managers in Ireland, as well as representatives of membership bodies and the City and County Childcare Committees regarding the relationship between governance and management, and quality ECEC provision. It uses an ecological lens to examine ECEC governance across three domains: macro-level governance involving government departments that hold responsibility for the ECEC sector in Ireland, meso-level governance involving two State agencies; POBAL, and TUSLA, and micro-level governance involving ECEC setting managers. Focussing specifically upon micro-level governance, this paper addresses how unprecedented policy initiatives between 1996 and 2019 have shaped the roles and functions of the ECEC manager in an Irish context. In doing so, it questions the extent to which managers are prepared for their increased accountability responsibilities as determined by policy initiatives. The findings indicate while there is a direct correlation between management and quality, the State, at a macro-governance level, does little to prepare or support ECEC managers for the complexity of their role.

Introduction

In Ireland, an increasing demand for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECEC) provision and growing awareness of its benefits for children and families has resulted in multiple policy initiatives and concomitant sectoral change over the past twenty-five years. Prior to 1996, the sector in Ireland was unregulated. However, the introduction of the Childcare (Pre-School Services) Regulations 1996, marked the beginning of the regulatory trajectory, which not only determines sectoral standards, but also the roles and responsibilities of the ECEC manager at micro-setting level. As such, managers must address and respond to the rapidly changing policy and practice landscape, balancing the needs of Government ministries and State bodies with the needs and rights of children, families and staff within the setting. In doing so, they face increasing accountability pressures, rendering their role as highly complex, expansive and dynamic, requiring considerable knowledge and skill (Moloney and Pettersen, 2017; Knox, 2021). Although the quality, skills and effectiveness of the ECEC manager are central to the quality of provision (Moyles 2006; Moloney and Pettersen 2017), ECEC managers in Ireland are not required to hold a qualification, and at a macro-policy level, the State pays little attention to management knowledge, skills and competencies.

ECEC Management

While the quality of ECEC is underpinned by the quality of staff working directly with children in services (OECD 2012), the quality, skills and effectiveness of the early childhood manager is equally important (Moyles 2006). As such, the ECEC manager is “the lynchpin of quality...providing the link between policy and practice” (Moloney and Pettersen, 2017 p.4). But what is management and why is it so central to the quality of ECEC?

The relationship between quality ECEC and the quality of leadership and management of early childhood settings is well documented (Muijis, Aubrey, Harris, Briggs 2004; Robins and Callan, 2009; Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2008). Broadly speaking, leadership and management are seen as complementary and essential for the optimum functioning of an early childhood setting (Jorde-Bloom, 2003, in Thornton *et al.*, 2009; Miller and Cable, 2011; Moloney and Pettersen, 2017). As noted by Gill (2011, p.10)

while “managers may be good at managing and nominally regarded as leaders...the most effective managers exercise effective leadership”.

In their 2008 study on “Effective Leadership in the Early Years Sector” (ELEYS), Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, found that a trained and skilled leader or manager with the capacity to reflect upon and engage with changing contexts, and who can communicate and ensure the setting’s vision, directly impacts the overall quality of the setting. They concluded that effective settings are almost always characterized by strong leadership with relatively minimal staff turnover, where leaders and educators share a clear vision of the setting’s practices, especially in relation to pedagogy and curriculum. Hearn and Hildebrand (2011) suggest that management focusses upon the day-to-day work required to fulfil the mission and make the vision a reality. It involves setting specific goals, allocating human and material resources to achieve goals, undertaking actions required to achieve goals, monitoring the outcomes of actions based upon established standards (e.g., regulation, curriculum) and making the necessary adjustments to ensure that performance meets or exceeds the goals set (Ibid., 2011 p.4). Many researchers identify Human Resource management as a core responsibility of the ECEC manager (e.g., Langston and Smith, 2003; Moyles 2006; Kearns 2010; Preston 2013). Managers also play an important role in how early childhood educators perceive professional development and high-level qualifications (Kendall, Carey, Cramp and Perkins, 2012). Accordingly, they are seen as gatekeepers to the development of a better qualified and skilled workforce (Pascal, Bertram and Cole-Albäck 2020).

ECEC managers clearly bridge policy and practice within the setting, fulfilling many differing roles, which underscore the need for knowledge and understanding of the management role, and how it influences the quality of ECEC. Moreover, the higher the qualifications of ECEC managers, the richer the curriculum experiences for children and the richer the relationships with and between staff and parents (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Tagart, 2004). However, in the UK (Preston, 2013) and Ireland (Moloney and Pettersen, 2017) indicate that in the main, managers assume their roles by default, tending to perfect their knowledge and skills by learning on the job. Nonetheless, when ECEC educators fulfil a long-term ambition to work as a manager, they are more likely to undertake pre-service training (Kendall, Carey, Cramp and Perkins, 2012) and tend to look for more responsibility, showing confidence in their ability (Moloney and Pettersen 2017).

Irish Policy Context

Before exploring the Irish Policy context, it is important to look at the composition of the ECEC sector in Ireland. According to Pobal (2021), of the 4,300 approx., services in Ireland, 74% are privately run, while the remaining 26% are community-based and overseen by a Board of Management (BoM). Prior to 1996 services in Ireland were unregulated. However, the introduction of the Childcare (Preschool Services) Regulations 1996, (Figure 1) not only introduced regulations for the first time, they also marked the beginning of the management trajectory, requiring ECEC services to adhere to regulation and facilitate inspections by Public Health Nurses (Department of Health (DH) 1996). The manager's role was straightforward, with the regulations requiring them to notify the Health Authorities of their intention to open a service, ensure the physical environment was structurally sound, and safeguard the children attending. Additionally, the manager was required to ensure that a 'competent adult' worked with the children in the setting (DH 1996, p.11). From the beginning therefore, although the State focussed upon children's safety and welfare, it overlooked the need for either staff or management qualifications.

Figure 1. Overview of Policy Development relative to ECEC Management 1996 to 2019

The childcare regulations underwent revision at 10 yearly intervals, in 2006 and 2016. Each revision resulted in significant expansion of the manager's role. Although managers embraced their ever-expanding role and increasing accountability responsibilities (Knox, 2021; Moloney and Pettersen, 2017), the State paid little attention to the need for management training, support and/or resources.

ECEC Management - From Humble Beginnings to Full Regulatory Gaze

Following revision of the 1996 regulations, the State introduced the Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations 2006 (DHC, 2006), thus

increasing the accountability responsibilities of the ECEC manager, in the following areas:

- Human Resource Management
- Child Protection and Welfare
- Health and Safety
- Physical Environment
- Curriculum Management
- Partnership and Collaboration with State Inspectors
- Policies and Procedures (DHC, 2006)

These regulations again called for a suitable and competent adult to work with the children. Even though the regulations recommended that at least 50% of staff should hold a relevant qualification, and despite the increasingly complex nature of the manager's role, this recommendation did not extend to management qualifications.

A decade later, the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016, acknowledged the central role of the manager in upholding quality ECEC provision. Regulation 9 – *Management and Staffing* therefore, provides an expansive list of management responsibilities. For instance, it requires managers to establish effective management structures, engage in rigorous recruitment processes, and provide staff training, supervision and appraisal (Government of Ireland 2016; TUSLA 2018a). Hence, the registered provider must:

Ensure that an effective management structure is in place, and appropriate people are recruited to ensure the quality and safety of the care provided to the children attending the service...ensure that staff are competent to perform their roles by providing appropriate training, supervision and performance evaluation⁸. (TUSLA 2018a, p.2)

Congruent with others (e.g., Kearns 2010; Langston and Smith, 2003; Moyles 2006; Preston 2013), these regulations positioned Human Resource management as a core aspect of the manager's role, placing a legal obligation upon the ECEC manager to engage in rigorous and transparent HR processes by setting out the procedures and systems of recruiting employees (TUSLA 2018b). Furthermore, a manager must ensure that “all recruitment is in line with **employment and equality legislation**, and that recruitment and selection processes are informed by **evidence-based human resource practices**⁹” (TUSLA 2018a, p. 120).

Furthermore, since 2016, the Department of Education and Skills has undertaken inspections on the quality of educational provision in settings participating in the ECCE scheme. These inspections focus upon four broad areas: quality of the context to support children's learning and development; quality of processes to support children's learning and development; quality of children's experiences and achievements, and critically, in the context of the present study, the quality of management and leadership for learning (DES, 2018). An additional layer of accountability applies to community-based managers. Thus, the Charities Governance Code, a code of practice for the governance of community ECEC provision, sets out a framework of minimum standards (The Charities Regulator 2019). This code ensures the organisation is managed in an efficient, effective, accountable, and transparent manner, including the need to abide by all legal requirements and regulations, to be accountable and transparent regarding all matters of the service, and to have competent and capable people on the BoM (Ibid.).

It is apparent that the ECEC manager's role is multi-faceted and complex, straddling Human Resources, Early Childhood Education and Care, Child Protection and Welfare, Health and Safety, Leadership for Learning, and collaborative working with parents and external agencies. As mentioned however, in Ireland, no training requirement exists for ECEC managers to support them in fulfilling these demanding responsibilities.

Administrative Responsibilities

In recent years, the manager's role in Ireland has extended beyond regulatory compliance, to compliance with the 'administratively complex' Government funding schemes (Walsh, 2016, p.74). The Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (2010) for example, which provides free, universal access to two years of programme-based activities to children aged between 2 years and 8 months and 5 years and 6 months (DCYA 2019a), significantly altered the manager's roles and responsibilities. Under the scheme's contractual arrangements, managers must ensure the provision of an appropriate pre-school educational programme, which adheres to the principles of *Síolta*¹⁰ and *Aistear*¹¹, and ensure staff hold the relevant qualifications required by the scheme (DCYA 2019a). The ECCE scheme places significant administrative responsibilities upon managers, requiring

them to employ appropriately qualified staff, undertake rigorous record keeping, completing online registration, and financial accountability for State funds (Moloney and Pettersen, 2017).

Established in 2019, the National Childcare Scheme (NCS), further exacerbates administrative responsibilities. This single scheme of State subsidised childcare, underpinned by the Childcare Support Act 2018, guarantees financial support to parents towards the cost of ECEC for children aged 6 months to 15 years (DCYA 2019b; 2019c). Although the DCYA (2019b) suggest the NCS lessens the administrative burden for managers, the legislative responsibilities of the scheme require robust financial accountability and oversight of subsidy payments, weekly reporting of children's attendance, and in-depth knowledge of the scheme's registration process and online platform (DCYA 2019b). All of this adds further to the manager's roles and responsibilities.

Many researchers in Ireland (e.g., Mulligan 2015; Moloney and Pettersen 2017; DES 2018a; Oke *et al.*, 2019) highlight the ever-increasing administrative burden placed upon ECEC managers. Indeed, managers have expressed concern about the increased time spent on administration and non-childcare duties as opposed to time spent with children (Mulligan 2015; Moloney and Pettersen 2017), which can affect the quality of ECEC provision (Moloney and Pettersen, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

According to Moloney and Pettersen (2017) ECEC management occurs within an ecological framework, where the manager works within and across different ecosystems. In Ireland, where a deeply entrenched split system of care and education prevails (Moloney and French in press), this involves working collaboratively at macro-level with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and the Department of Education and Skills (DES) both of which share responsibility for the ECEC sector. At meso-level, the manager works with agents of the State, i.e., TUSLA which holds responsibility for safeguarding the wellbeing of children attending ECEC services; and POBAL which inspects compliance with the governance and financial aspects of State funding schemes. The interplay between these various eco-systems illustrates how a decision at macro-level (e.g., a change to regulation or a funding scheme) directly affects the meso-

system in terms of how State Agencies enact change, which in turn, affects the quality of provision at micro-setting level vis a vis the roles and responsibilities of the ECEC manager.

Methodology

This paper uses an ecological lens to examine ECEC management across three overlapping domains: macro-level governance; meso-level governance and micro-level governance within settings.

From January 2014, all ECEC services must be registered with TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency, and included in the National Register of Early Years Services (<https://www.tusla.ie>) The sample in the present study comprises full day care provision only. In this regard, it was considered that full day care managers would have the full range of management experience relating to ECEC provision for children aged birth to six years in centre-based services. The sampling frame comprised all full day care services (n=40) in a particular County on the National Register of Early Years Services. Of these 40 services, ten services representing, urban/rural and community and private provision were randomly selected for inclusion in the study,

In terms of meso-level participants, the City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) are a key source of support for ECEC managers across Ireland (POBAL 2019c), thus their inclusion in this study was paramount. Drawing upon the list of CCCs nationally (see <https://www.pobal.ie> and, using random selection, three CCC representatives were invited to participate in the study. As Membership Organisations provide information, advice, support, and training to managers regarding business management, legislative compliance and sectoral changes, their inclusion in the study was also essential. Following an invitation to the national manager of two Membership Organisations, two representatives (one from each organisation) agreed to participate.

As mentioned, TUSLA inspect management practices at micro-setting level in accordance with the Early Years Services, 2016 (TUSLA 2018a), while the DES undertake inspections of services participating in the ECCE scheme. Additionally, Better Start Quality Development Mentors, under the auspices of POBAL, provide information, advice, support and training regarding the development and implementation of Aistear and Síolta (POBAL 2019b). While the DES, TUSLA and Better Start were invited to participate in the

study, all advised that because of regulations within State governed bodies, research conducted under third level institutions was not permitted. From an empirical stance, data relating to inspections, emerged through the accounts provided by the participating managers, CCC and MO representatives.

The paper therefore draws upon a series of 15 semi-structured interviews undertaken with ten ECEC managers at micro-setting level, three City and County Childcare Committee, and two membership organisation representatives who work with and support managers at meso-level. These interviews enabled participants to tell the story (Tracy, 2019) of their experiences and perceptions of governance, management, and quality ECCE provision in their own words (Patton 2002).

In keeping with institutional ethical approval (granted by Mary Immaculate College), each participant received an information letter setting out the parameters of the study, advising their participation was voluntary, of their right to withdraw at any point, without reason or consequence. Each participant signed and returned an informed consent form prior to engaging in the study. Identification codes apply throughout the presentation and discussion of findings to mask participant's identity and maintain the confidentiality of the information provided.

Data Analysis

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, data was thematically analysed, enabling the researchers to identify and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences. Firstly, interview transcripts were inductively analysed i.e., without pre-existing themes or categories, to condense and summarise the raw data by assigning codes (Thomas 2006). As 'coding is a cyclical act' (Saldaña 2013, p.8), numerous rounds of coding and re-coding were undertaken to consolidate overlapping codes, eliminate redundant codes and condense the data into manageable chunks of meaning. During this iterative process, themes began to emerge across the empirical data, until finally, five overarching themes materialised. Namely: Pathway to Management, Differing Micro-Setting Governance, Core Management Responsibilities, Core Management Knowledge and Skills and Attitudes to Macro-Level Governance.

Findings

The remainder of this paper presents and discusses the research findings. The discussion begins by exploring the participating manager’s pathways to ECEC management. It then examines the many roles and responsibilities of the ECEC manager, focussing specifically upon the administrative burden and the challenges of Human Resource management. The paper then discusses sources of support for managers, and attitudes towards a management qualification.

Pathways to Management

Overall, the management experience of the ten participating managers ranged from three years to 18 years. While three managers had less than five years management experience (the lowest being three years), two had six years’ experience, and the remaining five had ten or more years’ experience of managing an ECEC service (Table 1). The manager of a private service (M6-P) was the longest serving manager, having 18 years of management experience.

Table 1. Overview of Management Experience

	Community-based ECCE managers				Private Sector ECCE managers					
Manager:	1 (M1-C)	2 (M2-C)	3 (M3-C)	4 (M4-C)	5 (M5-P)	6 (M6-P)	7 (M7-P)	8 (M8-P)	9 (M9-P)	10 (M10-P)
Management Tenure (Years)	4	12	3	16	16	18	6	3	6	15

Each manager described how their experience of working in the sector, or other life experiences influenced their decision to become an ECEC manager. Nine managers had worked directly with children, prior to managing an ECEC service. Private Manager 10 (M10-P), for example, had “worked in the toddler room”, while community manager 3 (M3-C) “ran [her] own preschool for over 10 years” and M6-P “worked in the sector for about 2 years...working in preschools and crèche”. By contrast, M5-P had a “nursing background” and, while she did not hold an ECEC qualification, nor have experience in the field, she became the manager of a private service.

Diverse Pathways to Management

As mentioned earlier, the lack of attention at a macro policy level to the complex and demanding role of the ECEC manager may leave managers unprepared for the reality of managing an ECEC setting (Moloney and Pettersen 2017). As the findings indicate, the multiple pathways to management compound this issue. Thus, only two of the ten participating managers actively sought a management role from the outset of their career. M8-P whose “long-term goal was always to open up my own creche” provided insight into this approach:

When I was working in my previous job, a position arose for an assistant manager and I suppose me being me I said okay, I would like to go in, get to grips with it and see what it is like

Congruent with Kendall, Carey, Cramp and Perkins (2012), M7-P who also fulfilled a life-long ambition to work as a manager, undertook specific training at the commencement of her management role to enhance her managerial capacity. She therefore completed:

a level 6 in supervision in early childhood care and education in 2014 when I began my managerial role. I did it on my own accord to ensure I had the knowledge and skills to feel confident in carrying out my new role.

Thus, she sought more responsibility, showing confidence in her ability (Moloney and Pettersen 2017).

When management results from natural career progression, it emerges from middle management positions e.g., supervisor, room leader (Moloney and Pettersen 2017). Thus, in the present study, two of the participating managers gradually progressed from one position to the next throughout their career. M2-C, with 12 years management experience, “started as a childcare worker, working [his] way up to a supervisor”. *He* spoke of his desire to achieve increased influence and autonomy within his role, articulating how “becoming a manager was just the yearning of being able to put my stamp on something and try different things”. Similarly, M10-P, a manager who had previously worked directly with children was “covering maternity leave for a girl... and then by the time she came back off maternity leave, I actually owned the place”. She was motivated by a long-held ambition to get to the top of the career ladder in ECEC and, “always would have wanted to go up and up as far as [she] could”.

Various reasons motivated the remaining six managers to undertake management, including the desire to become self-employed, and a need for their own children to access childcare. Influenced by her experience of “office positions and administration” and motivated by her desire “to be self-employed”, M6-P, explained that she “went back and did the childcare course” whereas, M5-P (nursing background), established an ECEC service because of her own lack of childcare. She explained that because she “couldn’t find anyone else to mind [her] own kids... [she]...set up the only childcare facility at the time”. Consistent with Preston (2013) and Moloney and Pettersen (2017), the findings indicate that for other managers, their journey into management was accidental. For example, M3-C articulated how she was “landed in at the deep end [after] the manager left”, when the Board of Management offered the position “to the three supervisors... and I got it”.

The findings indicate that these various pathways to management affect managers’ ability to translate macro-level policy into everyday practice at micro-setting level. They further suggest that managers seem affected by the lack of role specific training and, consistent with previous research (e.g., Preston, 2013; Moloney and Pettersen, 2017), appear to gain core management knowledge and skills on the job. Accordingly, CCC representatives agreed that overall, “people are learning on the job” and “they figure it out” (CCC3) through “trial and error” (CCC1). From a management perspective, M3-C reflected on how unprepared she felt for her management role. Referring to the various government funding schemes, she confirmed, “I didn’t do any of that before I took over as manager, I had nothing to do with any of that”. She therefore learned how to administer the funding schemes without any formal training or assistance. She simply “sat in front of the computer and started doing it”.

Management Responsibilities

As mentioned previously, ECEC managers work within and across multiple layers of an ecological framework, as they interact with the various stakeholders involved in the sector (Moloney and Pettersen 2017). Participating managers articulated these various layers, noting that at micro-level, they are responsible for “dealing with parents [and] taking on new families” (M9-P) as well as “dealing with children [and] dealing with staff” (M5-P). Furthermore, at meso level, managers make sure that “everything is

in place for inspections” (M1-C). Participating managers, CCC and MO representatives spoke of the vast array of ECEC management responsibilities.

As indicated earlier, the Early Years Services Regulations 2016 increased the complexity of the management role. All fifteen participants referenced this complexity, noting it requires managers to use “different hats” (Membership Organisation representative 1 (MO1); M10-P). CCC2 suggested that managers are overwhelmed by their roles and responsibilities, “the managers role is many roles in one... and the list of things that they are responsible for are so overwhelming for many of them”. Likewise, MO1 suggested that ECEC managers “have to be all things...it’s a really complex role”. Five of the ten participating managers (four of whom work in private services) acknowledged they were overwhelmed with responsibility.

M6-P, who has 18 years’ experience managing a private service, articulated how the enormity of her management responsibilities, resulted in her acquiring additional assistance to share the management burden. Having operated the service alone “for 15 years... [she reached] ...“breaking point”. Referencing “the responsibility” associated with management, she noted, “you’re so responsible to make sure everything is right. It’s a lot on one person”. Likewise, M5-P and M7-P were cognizant of the huge breadth of roles and responsibilities associated with ECEC management, describing their role in terms of an “umbrella” being responsible for “literally everything” (M7-P) “from A to Z...it’s very multi-faceted” (M5-P).

Compliance and Administrative Responsibilities

Mirroring the legislative context in which managers work, all fifteen participants identified legislative compliance as a core management responsibility. CCC2 described the depth of responsibility and the extent of the manager’s role:

From the early years regulations, TUSLA inspections and the early years education inspections from the Department of Education...but also...the compliance with their funding and the funding that is administered by POBAL from the Department...So, it’s quite extensive from the ECCE scheme to... the introduction of the National Childcare Scheme as well (CCC2.)

The findings further illustrate that from micro-setting (managers) and, meso-level (CCC and Membership Organisation) perspectives, the administrative responsibilities associated with regulation, inspections and

government schemes significantly hampers the manager's capacity to provide a quality ECEC service. Participants concurred with Mulligan (2015), Moloney and Pettersen (2017), and Oke *et al.*, (2019) that managers spend increasing and unsustainable time in the office, overwhelmed by the myriad administrative responsibilities. Participants felt, "the focus [of management] has completely changed" (M6-P) as "managers [are] held up in an office all day" (MO1) due to "the amount of admin [that] seems to be mounting up" (M2-C).

As mentioned earlier, the Director of Quality Assurance at TUSLA, Brian Lee (2019) asserts that quality provision is underpinned by a good management and governance. Accordingly, if that's lacking, the service will never be successful. In this study, the findings indicate that increasing administrative demands associated with differing Government initiatives, results in less time for managers to engage in the day-to-day work, such as setting specific goals, undertaking actions to achieve goals, monitoring the outcomes of actions based upon established standards (e.g., regulation and curriculum), and making adjustments to ensure performance meets or exceeds goals set (Hearron and Hildebrand, 2011).

M8-P, with 18 years of ECEC experience articulated how over time, she has become progressively removed from caring for the children due to the exponential growth in administrative responsibilities. She stated how "in the early days it [management] was definitely more hands on, it didn't have the same rules and regulations". Currently however, she "hardly see[s] the kids at all...you are constantly thinking about the paperwork or the policy...and not necessarily the kids anymore". Likewise, M1-C articulated how her lack of availability "obviously leads to difficulty on the ground because staff don't see me visible in rooms, that's not a good thing". Thus, reinforcing the notion that the administration associated with regulation and funding schemes can in some instances, undermine the relationship between management and quality provision (Moloney and Pettersen, 2017).

Human Resource Management

All research participants acknowledged the relationship between quality management and quality ECEC provision, which features prominently across the literature (e.g., Sylva *et al.* 2010; OECD 2012; Rodd 2013). CCC1 for

instance, noted, “The manager is really important for setting the culture [and] the expectations that you have of your staff”, while MO1 associated “good management” with “happy staff” which, in turn, leads to “happy children”. M1-C similarly stated that a “strong manager leads to strong lead staff on the ground, and in turn leads to quality on the ground with the children”. More broadly, CCC2 suggested that ECEC managers should be aware of the importance of effective management and, an “understanding... [of] why it’s a good idea and why and how it could be beneficial, if used properly”.

Consistent with the OECD (2012), managers highlighted the critical importance of staff in developing and sustaining quality. In the words of M2-C, “having a good strong staff team sort of makes or breaks a centre”. Establishing and maintaining a good staff team requires considerable management input (Government of Ireland, 2016; Moloney and Pettersen 2017). Consequently, all fifteen participants identified Human Resource Management (HR) as a core management responsibility, referring specifically to managing, supporting and training staff.

The Early Years Services Regulations 2016 require managers to comply with employment and equality legislation during recruitment and selection processes, as well as ensuring the use of evidence based human resource practices (TUSLA 2018a; 2018b). Referring to the “significant” responsibility of “staff management as a HR element”, CCC2 asserted that managers must look to the broader legislative context when carrying out their HR responsibilities - “the manager is a HR manager as well...that comes hand in hand... keeping everybody, I suppose, happy while meeting all the employment law requirements”. Additionally, MO1 addressed the manager’s role in ensuring staff are appropriately trained and aware of ECEC policy and legislation. Therefore, “while the manager might... be aware of the rules and regulations, it’s making sure that that information is disseminated throughout their setting amongst their team and staff and ancillary staff”. Three managers spoke of the need to ensure staff are appropriately trained and “aware of the rules and regulations [so] everybody [is] on the same level” (M7-P). Likewise, M6-P explained how she; “lead[s] a team of staff to make sure they are happy and content with the work, and that they are carrying out their roles... and everybody understands what is expected of them”. In keeping with her responsibility under Regulation 9 – *Management and Recruitment* of the Early Years Services Regulations 2016, M3-C ensured her staff are competent to

perform their roles by providing training on the services' policies and procedures:

We're doing up our new policies and procedures, and we have to feed all that back to the girls. We're going to have a workshop and do a PowerPoint on all the policies and procedures for the girls...because, it's okay for me to know them...but the girls have to know what's in them as well.

Ensuring high-quality ECEC is dependent on the quality and training of the personnel involved in the service (OECD, 2012). The findings clearly indicate that HR management is a core aspect of the ECEC manager's responsibilities, requiring significant time and effort. Critically, the extent to which staff are managed and supported determines the quality of care and education provided to young children (Ibid).

Management Support

Findings indicate that because community-based managers are accountable to a Board of Management (BOM), they draw upon and rely upon the support of the Board to help with their management responsibilities. By contrast, private services, in the main, operate a flat management structure comprising of a manager, a deputy manager and a supervisor (Moloney and Pettersen, 2017; Knox, 2021). As such, a private ECEC manager is solely responsible for all aspects of managing the service, relying upon their own skills and expertise to support them in carrying out their core managerial roles and responsibilities, with little recourse to macro-level support. Accordingly, participating private managers who studied business for instance, felt more prepared for that aspect of management. M6-P explained how she "was very lucky that I did business when I went to college, I worked in offices I have no fear of doing accounts, payroll, all that". Likewise, M8-P noted that because she "did one year of business... [it gave her] ...the groundwork of what is needed to run a business". Private Managers also looked to owners/co-owners and managers outside their service for support and guidance. M5-P has "two service managers that I am very close to...so if I ever have a question, I always just ring them and just make sure... their advice is invaluable". In terms of peer support, CCC3 confirmed "there's a huge colleague support network, so, they talk to each other [and] get support from each other".

Meanwhile, community-based managers who are "accountable to boards" (MO2) have "ultimately less responsibility" (CCC3). All four community-

based managers considered themselves “lucky” (M2-C) and “blessed” (M1-C) to have administrative assistance, access to funding and, the expertise of their BoM, without which, M3-C “probably would have given it up”. Consistent with the Charities Governance Code (The Charities Regulator 2019) community-based managers explained that the BoM requires a “really good skill base” (M4-C). Thus, in the case of M1-C, the Board comprises “a financial lady...a lady who has a childcare background... [and] two tutors in childcare”.

In the present study, the findings suggest that private managers felt more overwhelmed by their responsibilities by comparison to participating community-based managers. Private Manager, M8-P was acutely aware of the supports within community-based provision, noting that because their governance structure involves a BoM, community-based managers “have a lot more people around them” and thus, they are “at more of an advantage”.

Clearly, the management and accountability structures within community-based services are indicative of a strong culture of micro-level governance. Therefore, while private and community-based managers share the same core responsibilities and knowledge requirements (Moloney and Pettersen, 2017; Knox, 2021), the ecological nature of community-based governance, where the manager is the “middle bit in terms of management” (CCC1), and the BoM “another layer” (MO2) of management, is more conducive to effective management. More broadly, it is also conducive to quality provision because of the potential for its BoM to include members with the knowledge base required to advise and support community based ECEC managers.

However, all ten participating managers referenced an overall lack of “on the ground” support. In the words of M1-C, “the difficulty is the supports on the ground for managers...there definitely needs to be more assistance around the governance and the policies and procedures and things like that”. Mirroring this perspective, M8-P stated, “in terms of support, like, we don’t have any, there’s nobody there to help...you’re totally isolated”. M6-P wished to see increased State support, “you’re not given any extra resources, as such, to manage all this extra work... I think if they [Government] gave us support like that to help with the governance of the place”

Participating managers identified the City and County Childcare Committees as their main source of support, with all ten availing of advice and assistance from their local CCC. M3-C described the CCCs as “fantastic” and her “saving grace”. Participating CCC representatives confirmed that they

are “one of the main supports to managers... we’re in contact daily with managers on various topics” (CCC2); “we are the port of call if the manager has an issue” (CCC1). Acknowledging the overall lack of support for managers, CC1 felt “there is a need for more formalized support...there’s not a huge amount of specific support given to the particular area around management”. CCC2 also believed that in terms of the supports available to managers, “there aren’t that many beside ourselves”. While clearly beneficial to participating managers, CCC support represents minimal State input to enhancing management capacity. As such, the State and by extension, managers seem to depend almost exclusively upon CCC support.

Management Training

According to Sylva *et al.*, (2004), the higher the qualifications of ECEC managers, the richer the curriculum experiences for children and the richer the relationships with and between staff and parents. Furthermore, by engaging in higher-level training, managers are seen as gatekeepers to the development of a better qualified and skilled workforce (Pascal, Bertram and Cole-Albäck 2020).

In the present study, when asked about the need for a management qualification, although 12 participants (ten managers, 2 MO and 3 CCC representatives) responded positively, they also expressed reservations. For instance, CCC2 recognised that a mandatory management qualification would “assist in the delivery of a more stable sector”, whereas MO1 highlighted the stresses and strains on managers in the current, constantly changing policy landscape, “there would be great resistance to it because managers are just so tired at the moment.”

Nevertheless, CCC and MO representatives highlighted the need for training in areas of business and finance. MO2 for example, suggested that “running a business, basic HR skills, finance, accounting skills [and] business planning” should be included in a management qualification. However, some managers disagreed, arguing that these areas have “absolutely nothing to do with childcare” (M7-P). Reiterating the complexity of the management role, M4-C called upon the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) to “allow funding for that administrative support...because [managers] can’t do everything well”.

Three managers mentioned the need to develop current undergraduate ECEC degree level programmes, to include a managerial element. M6-P would like to see management form part of core ECEC training. In her view, “the manager needs a childcare qualification [as well as] an admin or a management qualification to go along with it”. Training in these business elements would clearly have benefited M1-C, who acknowledged that she was out of her depth having to deal with finance, accounting, and HR. Signifying a lack of currently available management training in these areas, she would like to see more “training around the accountancy stuff...[and]...definitely training around the HR side of things. I think it’s something a lot of managers are missing, it’s a massive area”.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings draw attention to the increasing complexity of the management role. In the case of the present study, the findings indicate that participating managers felt overwhelmed by the enormity of their role and the myriad demands stemming from the policy and practice landscape. Managers in the present study clearly understand the relationship between their role and quality ECEC at a micro-setting level. They recognise the increasing complexity of their role in line with macro-level legislation and funding schemes. As indicated in this paper, their role involves balancing the needs of State bodies with the needs and rights of children, families and staff within the setting. Given the absence of a management qualification, specific management CPD, and on the face of it, a lack of support for ECEC managers, it seems logical to ask if policy requirements are in fact unreasonable. In light of the relationship between management and quality, is it enough that managers simply “learn on the job” “figure it out” or learn through “trial and error”?

This does not mean that we are unappreciative of the valuable experience that results from working within the sector. However, experience without training or CPD to familiarise managers with the legislative context for management, Human Resource Management, Sustainability and so on seems facile. We therefore argue that pre-service management training for intending ECEC managers and upskilling for existing managers is a political imperative. The fact is, that in the absence of good management, an ECEC setting will not be successful (Lee, 2019). Consistent with Pascal, Bertram and Cole-Albäck

(2020), we suggest that management training would raise quality standards across the sector, and perhaps, reduce the need for on the ground support. That said, it is evident that the CCCs play a crucial role in supporting managers. We suggest that CCC capitalise their relationship with managers to facilitate peer-management support groups, thus building on the foundations intimated in the current study.

This small-scale study illuminates certain challenges associated with ECEC management in Ireland. It points to vulnerabilities in the management-quality dyad in the Irish context, indicating a mismatch between macro-level expectations and manager's capacity to meet them. As the Irish Government engages in ongoing work to develop a workforce development plan for the ECEC sector, we are hopeful that it will address the need to support managers to translate the demands of macro-policy into practice in the everyday life at micro-setting level in the best interests of children.

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APPENDICES

Submitting A Paper

A Submission Form and Signed Statement should accompany papers submitted for journal consideration. Papers should be formatted in accordance with the guidelines and the stated criteria. All documents should be sent to An Leanbh Óg: anleabhog@gmail.com

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The Editors An Leanbh Óg, Dept. of Sport, Leisure and Childhood Studies, Munster Technological University, Bishopstown, Cork, Ireland.

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Submission Form

A submission form should accompany the paper submitted to An Leanbh Óg, Journal of Early Childhood Studies. It may also be downloaded in MS Word format from the Publications page of the OMEP Ireland website: <http://www.omepireland.ie/publications.html>

- Title of Paper;
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- Affiliation (organisation, university, etc., if applicable);
- Corresponding author;
- Address for correspondence;
- Email address.

Signed Statement to accompany paper:

- The paper being submitted herewith is my/our own original work. It has not previously been published elsewhere.
- I have followed ethical guidelines throughout this research.
- I have obtained permission in writing from parents/guardians for any photos of children that are included (if applicable). I have obtained all necessary permissions for contents, including tables, graphs, and images from works by others (if applicable, please contact the editors for clarification if you have any doubts as to whether this applies).

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

- Papers should be formatted in accordance with the guidelines below. Attention should be paid to the specified length (3,000 to 5,000 words). The specified length does not include the bibliography/reference list.
- Please apply Harvard or APA referencing system for both in-text citation and bibliography listings.

Non-academic papers (e.g. practical suggestions for activities to promote early learning or factual accounts of programmes or visits) may be submitted for publication in the From the Field section of the journal.

- Non-academic papers - specified length or referencing criteria do not apply.

- These papers may be published at the discretion of the editorial committee.

Papers Submitted should Meet the Following Criteria:

- Papers should be original, and the work of the author(s). They should not be under consideration by another journal and they should not have been published elsewhere.
- The name, address, institution or affiliation, if applicable, and contact details (phone, e-mail) of the author(s), and title 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 5,000 words in length; bibliography/reference list is not included in word count.
- All works cited in the paper should be properly acknowledged; see referencing guidelines below. Where the paper is taken from a larger work (thesis or dissertation), it is not necessary to include all works consulted, only those cited in the paper submitted.

Format

- Submit paper in Word format; 1.5 line spacing, font Calibri 11 or Times New Roman 12. The use of sub-headings is recommended to enhance readability.
- Diagrams, tables etc. should be clear, legible, and 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 be sent separately, with the place where they are to be inserted clearly indicated in the text (e.g. Photo 2 here).
- Tables and other graphics should be clear and legible, and the formatting should be kept as simple as possible. The journal may be printed in monochrome, and not in colour, so please take this into account when providing graphics, charts, and other illustrations.

Referencing

All research builds upon the work of others but use of the work of others must be fully and appropriately referenced in the text and credited to the original authors. There are many online reference generators and guides with examples of in-text citation/bibliography entries or use the 'References' feature in Word.

- <https://www.mendeley.com/guides/harvard-citation-guide>
- www.citethisforme.com/harvard-referencing
- <https://support.office.com/.../add-or-change-sources-citations-andbibliographies-15926...>

- https://eulibraries.files.wordpress.com/2012/.../apa_word_2010_templateinstructions.do.

The author, date system should be used for citations in the text, including indirect/paraphrased quotes, and page numbers given for direct quotes. Here are three examples:

- It may be that the pressure for children to achieve academic readiness impinges on the time available for play (Bergen, 2020).
- According to Rogoff (2019, p150) ‘transitions across childhoods can also be considered cultural, community events’ and our research clearly demonstrates this.
- If citing a website name the site/organisation, year e.g. (NCCA, 2009) not www...

Direct quotes can be short or long. They can be direct or indirect (paraphrasing); see next section for how each is formatted/presented in-text.

Format of Quotes

Short quotes (3 lines of text or less) should be enclosed in quotation marks “quote”, followed by author, date, and page number in brackets e.g. “Follow instructions for referencing to avoid penalties” (Murphy, 2018, p5). NOTE: Full stop comes after brackets, and not before. Longer quotes more than three lines do not have quotation marks, start on a new line, be indented from the left margin, or put in single-line spacing. Citation is the same though, i.e. must be followed by author, date, and page in brackets. Full stop after brackets.

A paper that overly relies on quoting the work of others or which does not reference cited works adequately will not be considered for publication and will be returned immediately to the author. Plagiarism in academic work can have very serious consequences. See, for example, the MTU policy on plagiarism; similar policies operate in most universities (Murphy, 2005: 37).

Bibliography/Reference List

All works referred to in the text, and only those works referred to in the text, must be included in the bibliography/list of references at the end of the paper.

- This list should be in alphabetical order.
- The style preferred by An Leanbh Óg is the Harvard or APA style of referencing.

Examples of the Preferred Style of Referencing

BOOKS

Rogoff, B. (2003). *The 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

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

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.

WEBSITES / ON-LINE MATERIAL

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 15 October 2011 at <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v4n1/bergen.html>

Early Childhood Ireland. (2018). *School Aged Childcare: A Guide to Good Practice*. Accessed 28 September 2018 at <https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie>

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2009). *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Accessed 14 January 2013 at <http://www.ncca.biz/Aistear/>

UNPUBLISHED THESIS

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

Plagiarism Policy

Plagiarism is using the work or ideas of others and not contributing them to the author/origin [citation]. This includes not just text but graphics, tables,

ideas etc., and includes material found online as well as in print. It is the responsibility of authors to ensure that they have permission to reproduce any images, graphs, tables or other material taken from the work of others.

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- In addition, privacy and intellectual property rights must not be violated. Sources of funding or other assistance that supported research or the development of submissions should be clearly outlined. Research guidelines regarding the ethical treatment of subjects of study, both animal and human, are required to have been followed.
- Upon discovery of any errors after submission to An Leabhbh Óg, authors are expected to immediately contact the editors in order to alert them of the situation.

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Contact OMEP

Dr Mary Moloney, President OMEP Ireland

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Website: www.omepireland.ie

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(<http://www.worldomp.org/en/>)

Work Organisation for Early Childhood Education and Care

Organización Mundial Para La Educación Preescolar

Ag t-Eagraíocht Dhomhanda um Oideachas agus Chúram Luath-Óige

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Luath-Óige

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Full details of other publications and along with order forms and memberships forms can be found at

<http://www.omepireland.ie/publications.html>

Notes

[←1]

[←2]

Ag Súgradh is the Gaeilge term for at play or playing

[←3]

Animation short is the term used by the Academy of Motion Picture Art and Science to refer to short (less than 40 minutes) animation cartoons. The first animated cartoon, Fantasmagorie (1908) lasted one minute 20 seconds and required a staggering 700 drawings to be created. Each second of this film required 16 frames (images) to be taken.

[←4]

Belinda Walsh is an animator, community art worker and artist. Among other projects, Belinda has worked closely with a number of schools to incorporate animation into the curriculum. More information can be found on the artist webpage at <http://scribblemore123.simplesite.com/>

[←5]

Junior and Senior infants are the first two years of primary school. Legally, children must start school by the age of six. However, children can enroll from the age of 4 years.

[←6]

There are 8 years in the primary education system. The first two years are for the infant/reception classes. This is followed by first, second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth class.

[←7]

Formula1 is an international motor racing competition

[←8]

Author's emphasis

[←9]

Author's emphasis

[←10]

Síolta (Irish word for seed): the National Quality Framework (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006)

[←11]

Aistear (Irish word for journey): the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2009)