

Athlone Institute of Technology

Partnership with Parents in the Early Years Setting

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Declaration of Non-Plagiarism

I hereby declare that this research project is presented in part fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Child and Youth Studies in Athlone Institute of Technology. The information contained in this research project is entirely the work of the author. All information other than my own contribution will be fully referenced within the text, and listed in the reference section at the back of this research project. This includes Internet sources.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

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Abstract

This study examines the views of parents' and staff together with their opinions on partnership, and how it is incorporated in the Early Years setting. The objectives of this study include exploring the staff and parents' views on the concept of partnership in the Early Years setting and to investigate the perspectives of both regarding the experience and implementation of partnership. Also explored are staff and parents attitudes and expectations of the future of partnership in the Early Years setting.

It was noticed that there was not much research evidence carried out in the past on partnership with parents in the Early Years setting in Ireland, therefore, the need for more awareness to be made regarding this topic was needed. Using my thesis as a tool for creating this awareness, this will allow for further research to be carried out by future researchers on partnership in the Early Years and its importance for the child.

A qualitative method in the form of semi structured interviews was used. This method of data gathering provided a vast amount of in- depth knowledge relevant to the research topic and the central objectives. Six respondents in total were interviewed, three staff members and three parents. All participants involved in the research study were professionally or personally involved with the children in an Early Years setting.

The main findings highlighted parent and staff views on what they understood of the term 'partnership'. The results showed great similarities in opinions amongst the staff and parents; they viewed partnership as working in collaboration with one another even in the day to day routine and different activities involving the children. They both felt that the development of partnership is influenced by communication between parents and staff, which in turn has a positive effect on the child and their learning and development in the Early Years setting.

All participants stated that there are many benefits associated with how partnership is implemented and experienced. However there are challenges involved in terms of finding the correct partnership strategy which reflects the best interests of the child. In addition, the parents, too, were positive in their views as they all felt that they had a relationship with the staff, and their children are, therefore, progressing socially and developmentally in the Early Years setting.

These findings imply that more needs to be done for the future with regards to the expectations of the future of partnership in Ireland, in comparison to our European counterparts. It suggests that a lot more research and implementation of policies regarding partnership with parents and staff, needs to be conducted and considered in Ireland in the future. Taking a collaborative approach, having a continuous open line of communication with parents was considered as being very important and was highlighted by the staff and parents in the interviews. More policies on partnership were identified as vital, and the need for more awareness regarding partnership for both the staff and parents in the Early Years setting was highlighted as important for the future.

Section 1: Literature Review

Introduction

This section provides an overview of the literature review in the area of partnership in Ireland in the Early Years setting. The concept of partnership between parents and staff is seen as a new area in Ireland. In my thesis I aim to explore how it is implemented in the Irish learning system and if we have succeeded to reach the standards of our European counterparts. There have been significant negative reports of children being abused by the staff in the Irish childcare setting and the parents being unaware to the extent of these issues. Through my critical analysis, I will explore Irish partnerships between parents and staff in the Early Years settings. Examples of the mistreatment of children occurred in three crèches in Dublin and Wicklow, which was aired on RTÉ Prime Time in 2013 (O' Toole, 2013). By exploring how staff- parent relationships are formed in Ireland, this will provide new areas of development in the Early Years settings. Due to the lack of research in this area of partnership in Ireland, in the Early Years setting, much of the literature reviewed examines areas with similar characteristics for example parent and teacher relationships.

What is Partnership?

Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) in 'Building partnerships between parents and practitioners' define partnership as; "[it] involves parents, families and practitioners working together to benefit children. Each recognises respects and values what the other does and says. Partnership involves responsibility on both sides". The care of children in the Early Years setting is shared between the parents and the staff members. To have a partnership approach is seen as key, especially for the children who are going into the setting who may not have been there before. It will help to facilitate a settling in period, as this is a big step for these children. As parents and staff members work together to share vital information about the child, the staff can help with these matters and make the child feel more comfortable in the setting. In turn this partnership allows for trust to be built upon. Good communication allows a greater understanding of the child's personality and where they come from.

What is Partnership with parents?

In the Early Years setting, partnership with parents is often recognised more as when parents get involved but these two terms are different. Staff members of the setting welcome parents to get involved with the children. Parents get involved in the Early Years setting for many reasons not just for the development and how their child is getting on but for reasons such as fundraising or the management of the setting. The key characteristics of partnership include (Mhic Mhathúna & Taylor, 2012):

- Mutual respect and trust between the staff and parents and also the children.
- Commitment to working together in collaboration.
- A common goal.
- Appreciation of different perspectives.
- Open communication between all bodies.
- Willingness to negotiate.
- Power- sharing and joint decision making.

There are many reasons why staff members should work with parents and the rationale for adopting a partnership approach. “Parents have myriad skills, including caring for and educating their children. Early years providers benefit enormously from finding out about parental skills and tapping into these” (Kay, 2004). These include: Irish legal and policy context, child protection and best practice guidelines which will be further discussed in my critical analysis of the Irish Early Years system.

There can be many challenges with the involvement parents have in the Early Years setting. Some examples of these difficulties can be through communication, cultural, lack of time, and some parents trying to have more control than necessary (Palaiologou, 2013). As the parents can offer their shared understanding of their children’s needs, if a particular issue arises that needs to be dealt with the parents and the staff can work together collaboratively. As a result this gives the parents a sense of ease and understanding that all their hopes and fears are being listened to and taken on board by the staff members in the Early Years setting.

Theoretical Perspectives of Partnership in the Early Years

Influential theorists in the history of early education have recognised the important role of parents in children's learning. For example, Comenius who influenced the formulation of the general theory of education spoke about the 'school of the mothers lap'. Pestalozzi believed "that for children the teaching of their parents will always be core and that the teacher's role is to provide a decent shell around the core and the teachers' role is to provide a decent shell around the core" (Mhic Mhathúna and Taylor, 2012, p. 266). Montessori, Froebel and Margaret McMillan all believed that the mother was the primary care giver for the child before they go to school. Vygotsky, in his development of the socio-cultural theory, was the first to identify the role of more knowledgeable others including the parents and how they support their child's learning and development. An example of this is where the child learns language through their interaction with other people and language learning is embedded in its social context (Mhic Mhathúna and Taylor, 2012).

Ecological model

An important influence in underlining the role of parents in the Early Years setting has been the work of Bronfenbrenner. He explained that "different spheres of influence on the child's life and elevated the role of parents through his belief that the parent/child/educator triangle builds the strongest structure and that home and school should be brought together" (Mhic Mhathúna & Taylor, 2012, p. 266). Bronfenbrenner (1979) uses a hierarchy of five nested levels of influence to illustrate his theory: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and the chronosystem. He emphasises that the contemporary understanding of the place of the family in the society is based on how it 'nested' within the other systems. For example ranging from direct relationships within the family, the early years setting, the neighbourhood setting to the culture and society in which they live in.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development

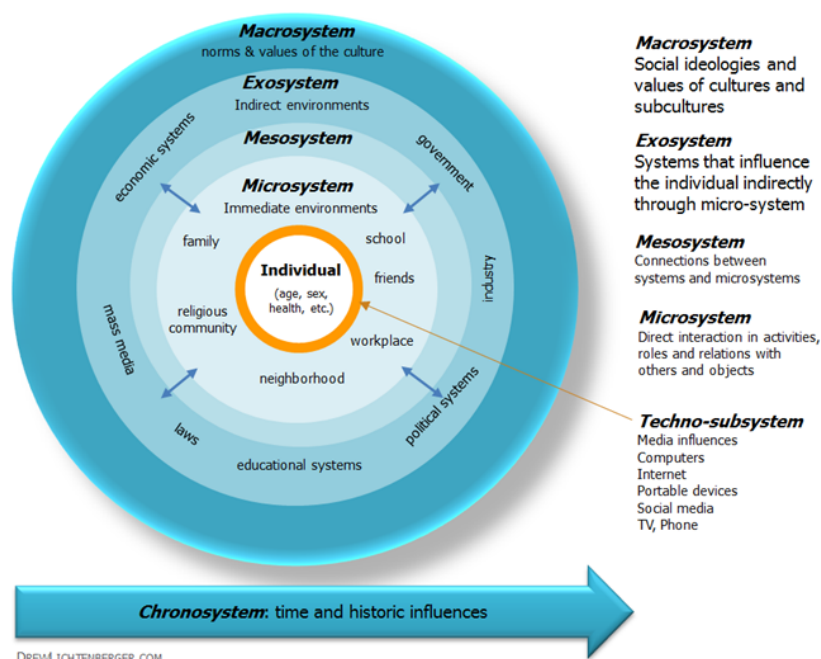


Figure 1 - Bronfenbrenner's Bio ecological Model of Human Development (2012)

This ecological theory enables us to see just how young children's age related changes within the different social contexts and they provide the basis for future observational developments. While according to Mhic Mhathúna & Taylor (2012) there is no single, universally accepted theory of child development, each of the specific theoretical perspectives provide a valuable contribution to the Early Years staff members overall understanding and the knowledge of how to cater for each child's learning and development. This has relevance to the study in that it can be observed by the parents and staff and can therefore offer their perspectives regarding the experience and the implementation of partnership through this model.

Partnership in the Early Years in Ireland

In the Irish State, it recognises that the parents are the primary care givers for their children's education which originates from the Constitution. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and Síolta and Aistear also reflect this right. Article 42.1 of the Irish Constitution states that: " [The] primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide,

according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children” (Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937).

The UNCRC, under Article 18 on the Rights of the Child, also expresses that the right and the duty of the parents is to provide for their children’s education which gives them the right to be involved with the educator i.e. the staff members of the Early Years setting. Article 18 states that: “[All] state parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their childrearing responsibilities” (UNCRC, 1989). Síolta the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) both identifies that the parent is seen as the primary educators of the child and that they have the role in promoting the child’s wellbeing, learning and their development. Finally, the Guidelines for Good Practice (NCCA, 2009) focus on how parents and the staff members can work together.

Ireland has implemented the Children First national guidelines (DCYA, 2011); these are set out for the children’s protection and welfare. They state that partnership with parents is a principle of best practice in order for the protection of the child. By exploring staff and parents expectations of good practice my thesis will help highlight the valuable partnership of parents and staff for the future of the Early Years settings. The Children First highlights “the importance of early intervention and support in promoting the welfare of children and families and as a way of minimising risk (DCYA, 2011, cited in Mhic Mhathúna & Taylor, 2012, p. 266).

Also “The Early Childhood Care and Education” (ECCE) Programme (DCYA, 2015) is one of five programmes of the Childhood Development Initiative. The ECCE Programme is designed to develop and enhance all domains of the children’s physical, psychological and social well-being. This includes their cognitive skills and language development, social and emotional development, and their capacity for learning. It also seeks to support the child’s family by focusing on parents’ psychological health, building on their parenting strategies and encouraging a positive parent–child relationship. It is incorporated into the Early Years setting by the designated staff members to run this programme for the children.

Partnership in the Early Years in Sweden, Norway & Australia

In Sweden it states that “co-constructed responses developed in partnership with teachers, parents, children and communities can greatly enhance the local appropriateness of curriculum aims and objectives” (OECD, 2001, cited in Taguma et al. 2013. p. 18). Parental engagement is an important aspect of ECEC curricula as parents are seen as an important source of constructive feedback into the ECEC programmes. Having the cooperation between practitioners and parents ensures that the children receive the opportunity of developing their own potential. According to Taguma et al. (2013) having parents feedback, through interactions and consultations with the setting and the ECEC practitioners can contribute to making parental preferences. The important input of ECEC frameworks and with their opinions and expectations are as a result echoed in the curriculum. “In Norway and Sweden in particular, children and their parents are expected to contribute to activities and be included in processes” (Taguma et al. 2013. p. 32). As I have previously mentioned, it is important for parental- staff cooperation to ensure that all of the children receive the opportunity for their development and their potential. Swedish parents are involved in the curriculum development process and they are also expected to contribute to the activities.

According to Taguma et al. (2013) the parents have a right to at least one development discussion per year with the staff of their child’s ECEC setting. In Australia, the importance of the parent’s role in the Early Years setting has been given increasing recognition. “Parent involvement, defined as representing a parent’s active commitment to spend time to assist in the academic and general development of their children” (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012, p. 20, cited in Daniel, 2015, p. 119). As mentioned earlier, it has been recognised as the promotion of the children’s developmental and educational outcomes. Australia is known for its policies, their diverse culture and their long history of limited parental involvement opportunity in schools. According to Daniel (2015) there have been few large- scale studies of family- school partnerships in Australia. The studies that were carried out confirmed that there was in fact a relationship between parental involvement and children’s literacy and numeracy development. An example of a national study that was carried out, investigated 61 family-school partnership projects as part of the Australian Family- School Partnerships Framework. The results from this study recognised that it provides the parents’ self-growth and provides the staff with professional rewards (Daniel, 2015). In comparison to Ireland,

these countries seem to be far more advanced in promoting partnership and through the implementation of partnership in the childcare setting between the staff and the parents and I want to raise the question as to why this is the case.

To finish, the NCCA (2009) states that one of the hallmarks of a quality early childhood service in Ireland is that it operates successfully in partnership with parents. This in turn provides an environment in which the children feel content and that they have a sense of belonging and can develop to their full potential. In this environment, parents and staff can work together to share knowledge and skills. In theory this sounds encouraging but the implementation process needs to be worked on for the future of partnership in Ireland to even reach the standards of these other countries.

Partnership between parents and staff

“The case for partnership between parents and early educators is now well established and a partnership approach is widely agreed to ensure best outcomes for children” (Wheeler and Connor, 2009). Partnership is based on numerous factors. These include the parents’ fundamental right to have an active role in their child’s life in the Early Years setting. Research evidence has shown that the best outcomes for the children are achieved when parents and the staff members work together in partnership (Mhic Mhathúna & Taylor, 2012). Parents have a right to take part in every aspect of their child’s life. As stated by Aistear “a child’s most important relationship is the one the child has with its parents” (NCCA, 2009). Parents are seen as the experts on their own child and know everything about their wellbeing and their personality. Staff members in the Early Years setting are seen as the educators. They are the ones who are dealing with the children and developing their learning and of course their personal development both physically and cognitively on a daily basis.

Statistics on Partnership

A UK study that was conducted in 2007 found that 67% of parents that were surveyed wanted to be more involved in the life of their child in the Early Years setting (Peters et al, 2007). This further suggests that the parents do not want to shy away in the background and let the staff members in the Early Years setting do all the work with their children. The

staff members should believe that the parents are therefore interested in the development and the level of progression of their own children who are part of the Early Years setting.

The combination of the parents' knowledge and perceptions of the Early Years staff members assists in safeguarding positive outcomes for the child. As stated by Thornton and Brunton (2007), the Reggio Emilia approach is a three-way process which combines the relationships of the parent, practitioner and the child. The staff member gains knowledge from the parents of the child and, in turn, the parent learns then from the staff members. It's a process that goes round in a triangular motion. This is seen as vital for the child as everyone has an equal opportunity for shared communications, listening and through cooperation. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF, 2008) has said that having parents getting actively involved with the child from an early age has an effect on the educational achievements of the child. The outcomes for the child's cognitive development are better when the parents are involved in the learning and development.

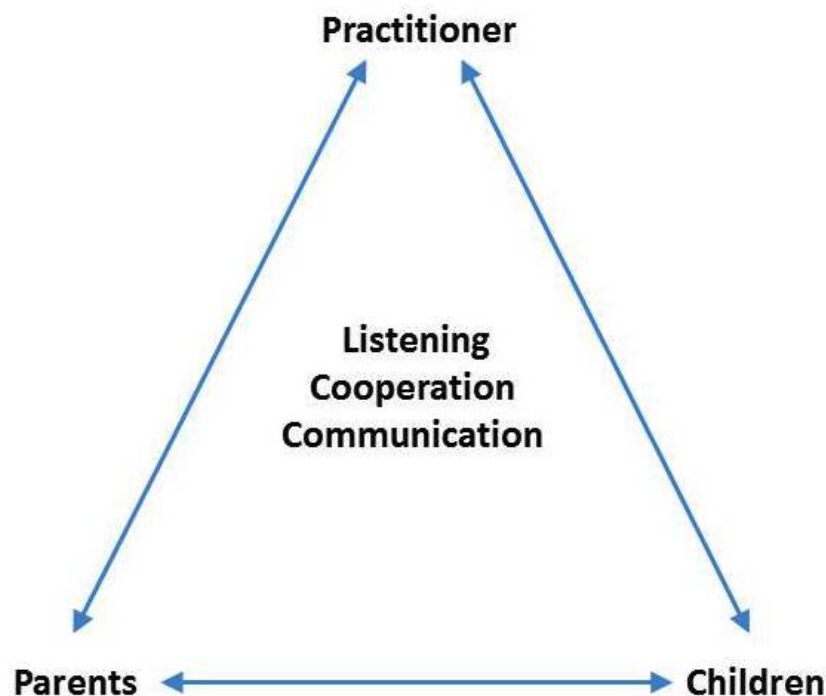


Figure 2 - The Triangle of Relationships (adapted from Thornton and Brunton, 2007).

A study conducted in Melbourne by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, called Child Care In Cultural Context (CCICC) (Wise & Sanson, 2000) compared the children's home and the child care setting. In the study, less than half of carers in the family day care group reported that they actually engaged parents to discuss their children's perspectives. This reiterates how important it is to communicate with the parents about the children and I want to question why Ireland hasn't tried to adopt this approach in the Irish Early Years setting. It also shows that the staff members respect the parents and want to have a relationship with them and focus on the important aspects of the child's learning and development.

Partnership in terms of Quality in the Early Years

Quality in the Early Years is an area being looked at on a continuous basis. According to the Goodbody Report (1998) which states that: "quality childcare has a beneficial impact on the development of children and especially disadvantaged children. This impact is enhanced when the childcare provision includes an element of early education. The benefits to children persist through to adulthood and are garnered by the child, the State and society as a whole". There are many factors which can influence quality of care in an Early Years setting these include (Kay, 2004);

- Child development- By having good quality 'educare', it should enhance the child's development.
- Rights and expectations- By having good quality 'educare' this should be based on achieving the rights of the child, as a result will cover all aspects of their development.
- Value based- Through assessing quality in an Early Years setting it requires making value judgements and these judgements should then be discussed and given a valuable reason as to why they were made.

Woods (1998) states that; "quality is a value-laden and dynamic term, often meaning quite different things to different people within the same organisation". Quality in the Early Years setting is hard to define. As different settings move in different directions, no two settings are the same. In Ireland, Start Strong (2010) is committed in making sure high quality care and education is available to all young children. By having high quality care and education, it can bring benefits to the children but also the economy and the society of Ireland. The 'Children 2020: Planning Now, for the future' (Start Strong, 2010) report presents the

recommendations for how Ireland can bring about the provision of high quality care and education. The hope is that by 2020 all the children born will have the high quality supports and services that they may require so they have a better start out in their lives. This shows how quality and partnership is experienced by both the parent and staff in terms of how it is experienced and implemented and maybe how they might expect quality and partnership to be carried out into the future.

Summary

There is vast evidence to support the importance of parental partnership in the Early Years setting but there is little of it in relation to the Irish Early Years setting. However, the expectations of parents and staff in Ireland are currently more of an ideal suggestion than a reality. I hope to interview parents and staff to get a further insight of how this partnership is working in today's Early Years setting. In Ireland it is evident the areas of partnership than in other countries is not on par for example, Sweden, Norway and Australia. As I have mentioned communication is a key aspect of partnership and that of the parents and staff relationship. The Early Years environment has shown that partnership is central in promoting the physical development as well as the cognitive development of the child at a young age. There is great need for research to be carried out on this topic to focus on its significance and that is why I am using my thesis as a tool. It is important for the parents and staff that they are knowledgeable and are aware of the important role that partnership has in the Early Years environment for their children. With my study I hope to develop this aspect and explore further what needs to be done in order for Ireland to make changes and implementations in the Irish Early Years setting.

Section 2: Methodology

Introduction

The aim of my research project is to explore staff and parents views, perspectives and expectations regarding partnership in an Early Years setting. The objectives are to explore the staff and parents views on the concept of partnership in the Early Years setting and to investigate the perspectives of parents and staff in an Early Years setting regarding the experience and the implementation of partnership. I also wish to explore staff and parents attitudes and expectations of the future of partnership in the Early Years setting.

This section outlines the method that is most suitable for gathering data required to fulfil the objectives. It describes measures used to gather data as well as taking into account the participants, the ethical considerations involved, limitations and the intended method that is going to be used to analyse the data.

Research Design

The primary research design for my thesis was qualitative research also known as exploratory research. According to Wyse (2011) "it is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations". Examples of Qualitative research include: interviews and focus groups. Plenty of information can be gained from interviews and focus groups, nevertheless these methods can be time consuming and participants may feel intimidated with one on one interaction. According to Wyse (2011) "provides insights into the problem or helps to develop ideas or hypotheses for potential quantitative research". Examples of Qualitative research methods are face- to- face interviews and telephone interviews.

For the purpose of this research project, interviews will be used as the methodological approach as they can collect information from a number of participants. The main reason for the use of the interview method is that "...qualitative research interview seeks to describe and the meanings of central themes in the life world of the subjects. The main task in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say" (Kvale, 1996). There are many advantages and disadvantages associated with using the interviewing

method. The main advantage of interviewing is that they can target a large group or a number of participants. The participants are anonymous and the information gathered is completely confidential. The disadvantage of interviewing is that the size of the sample is limited to the size of interviewing participants. In relation to the study I interviewed three staff and three parents; therefore my sample size was small for my study on partnership with parents in the Early Years. Ultimately, to resolve this issue is by introducing closed questions and if the participants are eager to express more information allow them in the interview process. Based on the research gathered it helped me form my opinions of the topic in conjunction with sources already in place. For my study I needed to use qualitative research because this topic is relatively new in Ireland and there are not enough primary resources so therefore, I needed to create my own by discussing such objectives as how partnership is experienced and implemented and the future of partnership.

Alignment of instrument

Questions 1-4 gather information needed to satisfy objective one which explores the staff and parent's views on the concept of partnership in the Early Years setting. Questions 5-24 gather information needed to investigate the perspectives of parents and staff in an Early Years setting regarding the experience and the implementation of partnership. Questions 25-28 gather information needed to satisfy objective three which explores staff and parent's attitudes and expectations of the future of partnership in the Early Years setting.

Participants

"For virtually all qualitative research it will be necessary to consider carefully how we will choose those research participants, our sample, from whom we will collect data to answer our research question and meet our research aim" (Saunders, 2012, p. 2). For the purpose of this study the interviews were carried out with three staff members of the Early Years setting and three parents whose children were attending the setting. I chose these groups as it was understood that these staff and parents would be able to fulfil the objectives of the research project. The staff and parents would have more knowledge of the topic based on their experience within the Early Years setting. As I have mentioned, these participants included three staff members. For confidentiality reasons, they will be referred to as EYS1, EYS2 and EYS3.

The semi structured interviews were conducted with parents of children who were attending the Early Years setting. According to Whiting (2007) these are “scheduled in advance at a designated time.” For confidentiality reasons, they will be referred to as P1, P2 and P3.

Among the participants was a female staff member (EYS1). She is a room leader in the pre-school room and has over six years’ experience. The children in her class range from three-four years of age. Within her classroom she has one other staff member who works alongside of her.

EYS2 is also a female staff member with over 10 years teaching experience. She teaches children in Montessori ranging in age from 2-3 years of age. She works alongside the room leader and one other staff member.

The third participant (EYS3) is also a female who takes care of the wobblers in the setting. These children range from six months – two years. She has worked in the setting for four years.

P1 is a mother of three children. She has brought her three children to the setting right up until two of them went to big school. She has one child who is still attending the setting but will soon be leaving to make the big step to big school in September. Her child attends the setting in the morning for three hours as part of the ECCE programme.

P2 is a mother of one. Her child is in the wobbler room as he is just 12 months. He attends the setting from nine- one on a daily basis. This is the first time this mother has put her child into the Early Year setting.

P3 is a mother of two. One of her children is also in the wobbler room whilst the other child is attending the Montessori room. The child attending the wobbler room is two years of age whilst the other child attending the Montessori room is three years of age. The mother has had four years’ experience with the Early Years setting and volunteers on a regular basis with outings and different activities.

Materials

The use of a tape recorder was used when carrying out the interviews with the participants. All participants agreed that the use of a recording device was acceptable which is outlined in

the information sheet and the signed consent form (see appendices). Each participant signed a consent form prior to the recording taking place and I also outlined the purpose and the reason behind for the recording. In addition, to the recorded interviews, observations were made and notes were taken to support the information as well as paying full attention to the participant which was outlined in the interview guide that was given to each of the participants. Kalpesh (2013) recommends "...the audio recording of interviews [as it] gives an accurate summary of the interview, as all the answers captured during the interview, as well as the comments by the researcher, are saved for reference".

Procedure

The author initially had a meeting with the managing director of the Early Years setting and explained the outline of the study. The managing director agreed to facilitate access to the organisation and typed up an acceptance letter to enter her setting to carry out the interviews. Due to confidentiality reasons this letter will not be included in the appendices. An information sheet and a letter of consent was given to both staff and parents who were willing to take part in the interview process, my name and contact details as well as assurance of confidentiality for any information attained was also included (see appendices). The three parents and three staff members agreed to take part in the study. All participants were offered the choice of carrying out the interview at a time that best suited them.

The qualitative interviews were then conducted with the professionals and parents during April 2016. The interviews involving the professionals took place in their workplace whilst the interviews with the parents took place in their own homes. As I was interviewing parents and staff in the interview, I adapted the questions slightly to suit the situation (see appendices). There was an allocation of 10 minutes at the start of each interview to have a brief read of each question and ensure that each individual understood what they are being asked. The participants were informed that at any stage during the interview they could request that the interview be terminated or even decline in answering a question being asked. Each participant was asked if they would like to receive a copy of the transcript once the interview was completed. All of the parents and staff members declined this wish.

After each interview, the tapes were listened to and transcribed word for word. Notes were also written up after each interview. The tapes were then listened to for the second time to ensure that all the information was recorded before the process of analysis could start. During the analysis process a number of key themes arose from each interview, by extracting the themes it allows me to discuss the views and experiences revealed by each of the participants.

Ethical Considerations

This research study complies with the guidelines set out by the Athlone Institute of Technology. The guidelines state that the researcher should maintain the welfare of the participants and recognise any concerns, which may arise. It is the duty of the researcher to explain to the participants all aspects of the research project. Research participants should have their anonymity and privacy respected and their personal information should be kept in confidence. In certain cases, as is the situation in the study, access to the research setting is gained through a 'gatekeeper'. In this study the manager of the Early Years setting is the 'gatekeeper'.

An important aspect of the study was gaining the trust of the participants and guaranteeing confidentiality. It was extremely important that the parents and staff understand that any information they give will not be shared. Each recorded interview be kept in confidence to the researcher in a secure location and destroyed on the specific date outlined in the information sheet.

Limitations

Qualitative research has its own limitations which can appear in the research study. As the interview is the main tool used in this research project of collecting the information, it is they who decide what to focus on. According to Anderson (2010) "research quality is heavily dependent on the individual skills of the researcher and more easily influenced by the researcher's personal biases and idiosyncrasies". One of the limitations to be acknowledged about this research study was the small scale nature of the study. Similar research on a larger scale may produce different results as it would include responses from more participants. Representativeness was another limitation as I have mentioned above it was a small scale study and not all parents and staff had the opportunity to voice their opinions as

a result, my study was not truly representative to the whole community of participants. Similar research on a larger scale within the Early Years setting may gather different results as it would include a larger response from more participants.

Summary

This section outlined in detail the method used to conduct my research study. I decided to use a qualitative method with interviews taking place with parents and staff members involved in the Early Years setting. This section outlined the research design, materials used to collect the information and it gave a clear account of the procedure that occurred. The findings from the research and themes that arose are presented in the next section.

Section 3: Results

Introduction

This section describes the results of the qualitative study which explored partnership with parents in the Early Years Setting. It presents the findings based on the research questions, objectives and themes that emerged from the data collection. The findings are presented under main headings using illustrated narratives. As I have mentioned previously the key in the methodology section, the staff members will be known as EYS1, EYS2 and EYS3. Also the parents will be referred to as P1, P2 and P3.

Method of Analysis

I was aware that there are a number of ways to analyse the qualitative data for the research study. As Boyatzis (1998, p. vii) states thematic analysis is a process of "encoding qualitative information". Thematic analysis is seen as flexible in what the researchers do with different themes once they have them figured out based on the intentions of the research study and the process of the analysis of the data. The semi- structured one on one interviews were examined using a thematic analysis to identify patterns that link to each other. It is stated by Braun & Clarke (2006) that thematic analysis is "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79). For the purpose of this research study I chose a thematic analysis in order to explore the findings in a qualitative approach.

The themes that were uncovered reflect the content attained from both the interviews with the parents and staff are as follows:

- Concept of Partnership
- Experience and Implementation of Partnership
- Looking to the future- Expectations of the future of Partnership

Concept of Partnership

Partnership

Having staff in the Early Years setting assessing and structuring a child's learning and development through working with the parents is vital. Seeking the parents' views, valuing their opinions and also the observations of the staff is an important aspect of creating a complete image of the child's overall capabilities in the setting. When asked their views on the concept of partnership in the Early Years setting, there was general consensus among the staff and parents that 'partnership' means working together for the best interest of the child and to have a partnership approach is seen as key for the children in the Early Years setting. Communication was identified as key for both parents and staff working with each other in the Early Years setting. This is illustrated in the following quotes:

EYS1 says that partnership is:

"Working together with staff, parents and the children".

Whilst both EYS2 and EYS3 bring in the term 'collaboration' and their strong opinion that the parents work with the staff in involving them in the routine of the pre-school as well as the activities that are carried out. The parents had a similar opinion regarding what their understanding of the term 'partnership' meant. P1 expresses that:

"Partnership to me personally is when I leave my child into the crèche, she is happy and content to go in therefore I know partnership exists between her and the staff and for me and the staff. Also, that the staff are very good and hands on and keep me updated".

P2 and P3 express their opinion that 'partnership' is where the parents and staff work together and have a good relationship.

Partnership Approach

With regards to how the partnership approach is viewed by the parents and staff do they see it as key for children who are attending the setting for the first time. P3 stressed that it is as:

“Important as the change from coming from the home environment to the Early Years setting is huge for any child and to have the parents and staff working together in partnership is vital.”

The consensus for P1 and P2 were in agreement with the statement because the child needs to be happy and comfortable in their environment and a new setting can be a big ordeal for them. The staff were also in agreement as EYS2 said:

“Yes, it is, it’s vital, because you need to know a little bit of background of the child and also letting the parents know that they are invited and more than welcome to stay with the child, so it’s absolutely huge.”

EYS1 and EYS3 expressed a similar view that it makes the settling in period a lot easier when both staff and parents are on board with one another and having parents stay for a while with the children is very beneficial.

Communication

Communication was an important aspect stemming from both the parents and staff from the interview. They expressed their views and opinions on the development of partnership and that it was influenced by communication with staff and parents in the setting. EYS1 felt that:

“It is if you’re not communicating with the parents then the partnership isn’t going to be there so it’s important they feel involved in what the children are learning or whatever.”

Whilst EYS2 introduced another view by saying that:

“It’s abit of both isn’t it? It would be because over time you’re getting to know the parents as well and building up a certain relationship getting to know them and you’re getting to know the kids from them as well.”

Keeping the line of communication open at all times is vital on a daily basis when you communicate with parents about the children. The parents also were in agreement and had similar views as the staff as P1 reiterates that:

“The child needs to be happy in their environment and a new setting can be an ordeal for them”.

So by having a partnership approach is seen as key for the children and that of the parents and staff. With particular regards to the settling in period for the children who are attending first time P3 expresses that:

“It is important as the change from coming from the home environment to the Early Years setting is huge for any child and to have the parents and staff working together in partnership is vital.”

Experience and Implementation of Partnership

This theme will address the experience and implementation of partnership that was highlighted by all participants in the research study. The staff and parents all agreed that there are many benefits that come with implementing partnership and express the different experiences they have had with implementing partnership in the Early Years setting. The following quotations from both the parents and staff show this. The staff expressed their views regarding their experience and the implementation of partnership as a whole first of all. EYS1 stated that they are:

“Trying to engage with the parents more. So parental partnerships we’re trying to foster a lot at the minute but it’s trying to find out when parents have the time or whatever to come into the setting so that can be difficult sometimes.”

However, EYS2 and EYS3 expressed that they do it on a daily basis as much as they can and they try to incorporate parental partnership into their planning for example EYS3 said by:

“Finding out what occupations the parents have”

This will make them feel that they can come in at any time. P2 expressed that:

“If you have a good relationship with the staff and find it easy to talk to them if there is a problem and feel at ease”.

P3 and P1 were in agreement with P2 and expressed a similar view that by implementing partnership would be most important as both staff and parents would benefit greatly.

Parents spending time in the Early Years Setting

EYS1 believes that parents spending time in the setting while the child is attending may not be a positive thing as:

“I feel it can be abit challenging sometimes as well in the fact that the child might not be themselves when their child is in the setting”.

However, EYS2 and EYS3 were not in agreement with EYS1. They believed that it is as a positive:

“because they can come in and spend time and like that we’ve had a parent in lately making butter with the kids and that was great you know” (EYS2).

Having the open door policy in place for parents to come in at any time is a positive as well.

Parents had a similar view:

“Feel more at ease if the crèche is amenable to the parent calling in unannounced” (P1).

P2 and P3 expressed another side that the importance for the parents to spend time in the setting is:

“To get familiar with the setting and spend time to see what is happening and how the child is getting on” (P2).

Bronfenbrenner (1979)

Bronfenbrenner (1979) believed that the parent/child/educator triangle builds the strongest structure and that home and school should be brought together (Mhic Mhathúna & Taylor, 2012). Both parents and staff expressed their views on the statement and they were in agreement with one another. As EYS1 said:

“I would agree with it I think it is important that the interests of the children have are fostered in both the learning environment and the home environment and as well use the parents to give you feedback on what the children like to be doing”.

An example EYS3 gave was with regard to ‘potty training’. It is important that the parents and the staff work together but EYS2 however drew on the point about how:

“The parents are the first educators, home is the most important I think. From the day they are born it starts from the home but yes we contribute and work together so yeah”.

It just shows how cooperation and the parent/child/educator triangle are successfully carried from the home into the Early Years environment. In contrast P1, P2 and P3 felt too that:

“having the parent, child and staff work together will have a positive effect on the child and whatever is being taught in the setting should be incorporated at home or at least try to” (P3).

Suggestions/ Feedback Process

The overall development of the child is being recorded therefore the best interests of the child are at heart. It is important for any Early Years setting to have opportunities for both parents and staff to voice their own opinion on what truly matters regarding the welfare of the child. The question was put to both staff and parents regarding was there a way for them to make suggestions or offer feedback in the setting. EYS1 stated that:

“We had a parent survey and it was anonymous and they filled it in on how they found their experience so yeah I believe there is”

EYS2 said:

“I think at one point we had a suggestion box. And then if anything goes on any activities or any visits they do, they come back with verbal feedback”.

EYS3 however introduced, interestingly, the manager in the setting; they said:

“There’s always the office upstairs and it’s always open to talk to the manager if they don’t want to talk to the staff”.

For parents to know that the manager is always there too has to be comforting to them. The parents expressed the ways they could make a suggestion or feedback in the setting. P1 brought up the suggestion box and surveys as did P2 and P3, as these surveys are carried out on different occasions.

Combating Challenges

In an Early Year setting challenges do arise every so often, so knowing how to solve them and make sure they do not happen again is vital in terms of the partnership approach. The question was put to the staff and parents, if there are challenges faced between them and how they would be resolved. EYS1 said:

“It depends really what the challenges are. So if it’s a parent enquiring something maybe like to do with a fee or something then they would come to the room leader first and if it’s something personally if I was unsure of then I would say that I will speak to the manager and

get all the information I can from it then get back to them about it and then if there not happy about it make the suggestion to speak to the manager”.

EYS2 and EYS3 expressed similar views and mentioned the manager taking control of the situation if needs be but EYS3 expressed that they would:

“Hope that it wouldn’t get to that level” (EYS3).

P1, P2 and P3 expressed in the interview that they have never encountered any challenges in the Early Years setting in particular but did feel that they should express how they feel the challenges should be addressed if it were to happen. P1 said that:

“If there is an issue the only way it can be solved is that if both parties come together and try to come up with a resolution”.

P3 said:

“I feel if there was challenges faced staff and parents should work together to solve the issue and if not then go further to the manager and see what can be done”

And P2 spoke about taking the best interests of the child at heart as to try and talk to staff and get to the bottom of the issue and come up with an agreement.

Parental Participation Policy

In addition to parents and staff working together in partnership with one another an important aspect of this is, is whether there is a written policy on parental participation implemented in the Early Years setting. EYS1, EYS2 and EYS3 were all in agreement that parental participation incorporated into their policies an example EYS1 gave was the open door policy. EYS1 and EYS3 did not however express what the policy involved but EYS2 did however states that:

“Everything that we have talked about above in the interview. Having an open door policy, parents can come in. inviting them in either to take part in activities or to contribute in any way or bringing stuff in. Like one of the kids their parent has a business, she brings in stuff, like recycling stuff and we can make stuff out of them. So we can approach her to bring stuff in”.

P1, P2 and P3 spoke about a policy manual that they received from the Early Years setting.

P1 states that:

“All policies and procedures are quoted in this”.

Parental Participation in the Early Years Setting

It is important to draw upon the views of the parents and staff participating in the setting together in partnership. EYS1 was under the opinion that:

“I think it is important that they are welcomed in the setting but I don’t think that they need to be in the whole time”.

EYS2 and EYS3 however, have saw it as a positive opportunity:

“It really works well and it’s nice for the kinds and they can see that their parents are allowed into their school and show off their stuff” (EYS3).

P1, P2 and P3 felt it was important as P1 expressed that:

“If you haven’t a great relationship with the staff then you will be reluctant to leave your child in the crèche”.

The happiness of the child was also expressed by P2 and the progression of the child’s development was expressed by P3.

Sweden, Norway and Australia

Unlike Ireland, in Sweden and Norway parents can get involved in the formation of the curricula for the children and offer their views and opinions on what should be done to better their children’s development. The question was put to both parents and staff on what their views on this statement was. The results from both parents and staff differed. EYS2 had a strong opinion on this stating that:

“It is positive and it’s great they would contribute but I wouldn’t like to be told how to do my job. Because if they were a guard or working in the bank I wouldn’t be going into them. So they have to appreciate that I’m the professional of doing my job. But absolutely I would take on their views”.

EYS3 was in agreement stating that:

“I wouldn’t necessarily say that we need their parental participation unless they have the qualifications in this because it’s kind of what we are qualified in so we know how to cover all areas”.

However, EYS1 shared both views stating that:

“they say that the parent is the child’s first educator so I suppose it is important and we really don’t have a set curriculum to follow, in the room I’m in we try and go on the interests of the child and parents to be fair will always give you feedback anyway and there is some that might like to writing and they want their child to write their name whatever and it is something we take on board and sort of try to work on anyway”.

With regards to the parents views on this statement P1 felt that:

“The staff are trained professionally to do their job and would have more knowledge of the current curricula but if I feel that my child is struggling on a task therefore it would be important to be able to give my view on what I think can be done to improve and solve the problem together”.

P3 was in agreement with P1 and felt:

“It would be beneficial for the parent to work with staff to develop the curricula for their child and my own as all children develop differently but I do feel that the staff are capable at developing their curricula themselves as this is their job at the end of the day”.

P2 had similar view but expressed it in greater detail stating that:

“The parents know their child and what their capable of and the staff should work with the parents as all children develop differently”.

Ireland and the ECCE Programme

In Ireland the ECCE programme was implemented in all Early Years setting and is recognised as supporting the child’s family by focusing on the wellbeing, learning and development of the child and on parents’ psychological health, building on their parenting strategies and encouraging a positive parent–child relationship. EYS1 had a different view compared to that of EYS2 and EYS3:

“I don’t really see how it would affect parent-child relationships because if a parent is disengaged from a child then coming to an ECCE programme won’t make a difference for we as staff to interact with the parents that might still be a stumbling block. But I do believe it is good for the children and it supports the children and if maybe the family is having difficulty

having the time away from the child it gives them the chance to build on their personal health and what they need to do away from the child so it is good in that sense” (EYS1).

EYS2 believed that:

“It does most definitely, and especially developing on circumstances with parents, example single parents. It gives them a break if there child is coming in for a few hours every day and also through talking to them, they are learning from us as well of what the children are doing here. They can extend on that at home”.

EYS3 was in agreement that it was a positive outcome as it gives the parents 3 hours in the morning away from the children and the children can be socially interactive with other children for that time as well. As a result it benefits everyone. P1 stated that the ECCE programme is:

“A great incentive for low income earners first and foremost and it also prepares the child for their move to big school which is done by the staff in the crèche”.

P2 and P3 were in agreement and stated that it’s beneficial for parents, children and staff.

“It is good for the child and the parent. The parents can pursue a career. The child can mix with other children. As a result the staff can support all of this” (P2).

Children, parents and staff benefiting from staff- parent partnership

It is important to draw upon children, parents and staff benefiting from staff- parent partnership. First of all regarding children benefiting from staff- parent partnership EYS1 believed that if the:

“Parent can see the staff working with the parents then it looks that we have a sharing relationship with the parent and it looks that their parents are valued in the setting”.

EYS3 was in agreement with EYS1 and had a similar response. EYS2 stated that:

“Everybody has knowledge of what is going on around them, everybody has an understanding. Both parents and staff on both sides. If there was something going on at home that the child may come in upset. You don’t need to know anything that is personal. It might just be that “mammy was away for the night” any little that may upset them”.

P1, P2 and P3 all felt it of benefit for the child as P1 stated:

“They would benefit because if there is a good partnership the child will benefit greatly as the triangle as we spoke about before have no issues and therefore the child is content and is able to focus on their daily tasks and developments”.

P2 and P3 were in agreement to it being beneficial as the parents know they can trust the staff and are able to communicate if they have any issues when their parents are not in the setting.

Second of all parents benefiting from staff- parent partnership, EYS3 believed that parents are seen as building friendships in the setting.

“Parents are seen as friends and have to build on that so they don’t feel if they have an issue that they can still come and talk to you” (P3).

Whereas EYS1 stated that the parents:

“Feel they are welcome in the setting. So they see that their child is being looked after the way they are being treated is key as well. It will have an impact on how they think their child is being viewed in the setting”.

EYS2 was in agreement with EYS1 and EYS3 on the benefits. P1, P2 and P3 believed that for themselves as parents benefit:

“if the child is happy and content in doing well therefore the parent will be stress free and know that their child is getting the best care” (P1).

P2 and P3 stated that they can benefit by being able to communicate with the staff about any queries they may have it can make them feel more at ease.

Finally, staff benefiting from staff- parent partnership, EYS1 believed that:

“There is a good bit of information that you do get from the parents that you wouldn’t necessarily get from any other sources. So yeah you do get valuable information from the parents”.

EYS3 was in agreement with EYS1 in relation to EYS2 response echoes the same response that:

“You’re hopefully gaining information about the child and again anything that’s going on that could upset the children day to day. That you always know what’s going on. Even if it is

something for example: that 'they didn't eat their breakfast and had a fight with mammy' simple things. Not complicated things".

P1, P2 and P3 in contrast felt that:

"Staff would benefit as they want to run the crèche with no issues and parents can come to them freely and express their views. It is important for everyone to cooperate and communicate together" (P1).

P2 and P3 were in agreement that staff can therefore form bonds with the parents and the staff can therefore learn about the child and can work on how they can take care of the child to the best of their abilities.

Looking to the future- Expectations of the future of Partnership

This final theme addresses the future of partnership in the Early Years and the expectations of partnership from both the parents and staff. Throughout the interviews with the staff and parents, there was a general consensus that more needs to be done in order to support partnership for the future in the Early Years environment. The following quotes represent several recommendations from the participants on what could be focused on for the future in the Irish Early Years setting.

Parent- Staff Relationship

A question regarding the views on the relationship that the parent has with the staff in the setting and vice versa was put to both parents and staff in the setting. EYS1 had an interesting comment to make:

"Some of them can be more difficult than others and you'd have better relationships with parents than others. And some of them can be more difficult to talk to than others but it's important to gauge when they can talk and when they can't talk and just be sensitive I suppose about what you're saying and how you speak to them".

Whilst EYS2 and EYS3 felt that they had a good relationship with the parents in the setting and that they are:

"Generally all fine, all very approachable" (EYS2)

As did EYS3 believed that:

“All the parents they’re all fairly outgoing. You ask them to do anything. We have parents dropping in stuff like toys they don’t want, they are happy to help in any way. And we’re happy to receive it”.

P1, P2 and P3 all believed that they had a positive relationship with the staff in the setting as they:

“Have a great relationship or partnership with the staff in the crèche in which my child attends as my child runs in the door happily and I feel a sense of ease to leave her there” (P1).

Parent- Staff Relationship into the Future

The views on how both staff and parents see the relationship into the future was also put to them. EYS1 stated that:

“If we were doing more parental partnership or bringing the parents in then yeah, you might have a stronger bond with parents or past parents might come back and do talks or whatever they have done before”.

And as a result of having a strong bond with the parents EYS3 drew on the fact that:

“You miss parents when their kids go to big school because of the odd jobs they used to do for you but some parents call back and if you need them as I have said before to volunteer they will”.

EYS2 also brought up the level of progression as:

“From September to now you do see a difference because you get to know them and they get to know you, they get familiar”.

So you can see from the staff that the relationships do progress into the future. P1, P2 and P3 are all in agreement with one another that they see their relationships progressing into the future as P1 has had plenty of experience with the Early Years setting in particular shared the positive view:

“As this is my third child in the crèche with no issues the future I feel is bright for the happiness and development of my child and my relationship with the staff”.

P2 and P3 had the same view that when their child is leaving for the move to big school they can come back and help out if they need them in the future.

Future of Partnership in Ireland

In relation to Ireland, is there a need for more research to be carried out and the implementation of more policies regarding partnership with parents and staff on its importance for the child? Both staff and parents were in complete agreement that more needs to be done. EYS1 stated:

“It might be useful maybe. I know we have an open door policy and stuff like that but I know we do have to utilise the parents but its knowing how to utilise them and their skills and stuff and some parents might not want to be involved so you need to know how to approach the parents and if they’re going to be comfortable. You might get a parent that might not be comfortable with what they are doing so it’s good to know what to do in that sort of situation”.

As too did EYS2:

“Yeah, I definitely think so. I don’t think all parents get how important pre-school is to their children. So I think that needs to be drawn upon”.

EYS3 believed that it needs to be emphasised more and that partnership is a big deal in the service and:

“This is where you leave your child from nine to six everyday” (EYS3).

P1, P2 and P3 all agreed that Ireland needs to work on this issue. As P1 stated that:

“I wasn’t aware of the term ‘partnership’ at the start of this interview, I feel now that more research would be more beneficial regarding how it is implemented and carried out with regard to the best for the child”.

P2 and P3 feel:

“there needs to be more research and implementations of policies on partnership as I feel there is not much awareness on just how important partnership is and how it benefits the wellbeing of the child and their best interests at heart” (P3).

Overall Summary of Results

This section described the results of the qualitative study which explored partnership with parents in the Early Years Setting. It presents the findings based on the research questions, objectives and themes that emerged from the data collection. The findings were presented under main headings using illustrated narratives as described below.

The concept of Partnership highlighted the parent and staff views on what they understood the term 'partnership' to mean to them in the Early Years setting also did they view the partnership approach as key for the children settling in in the setting. The results showed great similarities in opinions amongst the staff and parents, EYS1, EYS2 and EYS3 viewed partnership as working in collaboration with one another even in the day to day routine and different activities. In contrast, P1, P2 and P3 expressed their positive views on how important it is to have both parents and staff working together and having a good relationship. They both feel that the development of partnership is influenced by communication between parents and staff, which in turn has a positive effect on the child and their learning and development in the Early Years setting.

The experience and Implementation of partnership focused on many aspects on the experience and implementation of partnership in the Early Years setting. All participants stated that there are many benefits associated with how partnership is implemented and experienced but also that there are challenges involved finding the correct strategy to combat them for the best interests of the child. By having communication, policies, programmes and everyone working together can build on partnership in the Early Years. The staff stated that these examples build confidence, create friendships and learn from one another and act as positive role models for the children. In addition, the parents too were positive in their views; all feel that they have a relationship with the staff and their children are therefore progressing socially and developmentally in the Early Years setting.

Finally, looking into the Future with regards to the expectations of the future of partnership suggests that a lot more research and implementation of more policies regarding partnership with parents and staff on its importance for the child needs to be carried out in Ireland in the future. Taking a collaborative, having a continuous open line of communication with parents, staff and children together is very important and was

highlighted by the staff and parents. More policies on partnership was mentioned and the need for more awareness for both the staff and parents. One parent wasn't aware of the term 'partnership' at the start of the interview. All participants stated that there are many benefits associated with how partnership is implemented and experienced but also that there are challenges involved finding the correct partnership strategy in the best interests of the child.

Section 4: Discussion

Introduction

This study explored staff and parents views, perspectives and expectations regarding partnership in an Early Years setting. It has investigated the views on the concept of partnership, experiences and implementation of partnership and the expectations of the future of partnership in the Early Years setting. This section discusses the findings in relation to the literature and their implications, together with suggestions for future research and some recommendations. Finally, it also offers an evaluation of method, and concludes with a summary and some final recommendations for the future.

Summary of Findings

The results of the qualitative study which explored partnership with parents in the Early Years Setting presents the findings based on the research questions, objectives and themes that emerged from the data collection.

The concept of partnership highlighted the parent and staff views on what they understood partnership to mean and also did they see the partnership approach as important in the Early Years setting. The results showed a general consensus amongst both parents and staff that partnership was viewed as working in collaboration with one another on a day to day basis. For the development of partnership, based on the results from the parents and staff it was expressed that communication was vital as having an open line of communication can have a positive effect on the child and their learning and development in the Early Years setting.

All participants stated that there are many benefits associated with how partnership is implemented and experienced but also that there are challenges involved finding the correct partnership strategy in the best interests of the child. The parents were positive in their views as they all felt that they have a relationship with the staff and their children are therefore progressing socially and developmentally in the Early Years setting.

Looking into the future with regards to the expectations of the future of partnership suggests that a lot more research and implementation of more policies regarding

partnership with parents and staff on its importance for the child needs to be carried out in Ireland in the future. From the results, taking a collaborative, having a continuous open line of communication with parents, staff and children together is very important and was highlighted by the staff and parents.

Discussion of Findings

From the literature review and the research I carried out the Early Years setting has been successful in the countries mentioned (Sweden, Norway and Australia). However, in Ireland these structures are in place but not fully implemented. In the body of this thesis I interviewed a small selection of parents and staff alike to get an overview of how this structure would benefit their child. This study found that all the participants held a variety of views with regard to partnership and how it is understood in the Early Years setting. Based on the findings of the study, partnership with parents and staff is important for the children within the Early Years environment. There are various opinions amongst the staff on how partnership is implemented for the parents and the children. All participants agreed that having a partnership approach is a positive in the step in the future of Early Years learning but it will have its challenges too.

Some examples of challenges faced in this setting, were discussed by Palaiologou (2013). He mentioned lack of time, conflict of opinion, cultural for example children from different ethnic backgrounds, and parents trying to have more control than necessary in the setting. Based on the results from the research, the parents had no experience with conflict but did feel that they should offer their own opinions on how they felt the challenges should be overcome. The staff were under the same understanding, and when challenges arise in the future both staff and parents can for a resolution. As a result of overcoming these obstacles, both parents and staff are working together and have a sense of ease and understanding that partnership exists, and their views are being taken on board. Another point of interest that I asked the participants during the interview was how they felt about parents spending time at the setting. There was both positive and negative feedback from the results. One staff member said when a parent is in the setting "I feel it can be abit challenging sometimes as well in the fact that the child might not be themselves when their child is in the setting" (EYS1, p. 22). Another staff member said "...they can come in and spend time and like that we've had a parent in lately making butter with the kids and that was great you know"

(EYS2, p. 23). These results prove that it will be beneficial to the Early Years setting when there is a structure put in place.

All participants of the study were in agreement with one another that the concept of partnership was about working together constructively whilst having the best interests of the child taken as top priority. This was especially evident in the remarks from one parent when she stated what her understanding of the term 'partnership' meant to her "partnership to me personally is when I leave my child into the crèche, she is happy and content to go in therefore I know partnership exists between her and the staff and for me and the staff. Also, that the staff are very good and hands on and keep me updated" (p. 20). This expresses how important it is to have partnership amongst one another in the setting and building on the relationships. As stated in the literature Aistear (NCCA, 2009) defined partnership as; "[it] involves parents, families and practitioners working together to benefit children. Each recognises respects and values what the other does and says. Partnership involves responsibility on both sides". It is important to note that having the partnership approach is seen as key when children are settling into the Early Years setting for the first time. By having the parents and staff in collaboration with one another, this helps the child feel more at ease. One staff member in the interview stated that "yes, it is, it's vital, because you need to know a little bit of background of the child and also letting the parents know that they are invited and more than welcome to stay with the child, so it's absolutely huge" (EYS2, p. 21). This point is further reiterated by Kay (2004) who believes that parents have the skills, such as caring for and educating their child.

Partnership requires an intensive effort on behalf of all staff members and parents where opinions and views must be expressed, explored and most of all listened to. This is where communication comes into play in the Early Years setting. From the interviews with the parents and staff, it was interesting to note that both parents and staff believed that communication was very important. One of the key characteristics according to Mhic Mhathúna & Taylor (2012) is keeping open communication between all bodies at all times. Findings from the interview further reinforce the idea of having the line of communication open at all times when you are dealing with a child's development and progression. In the interview a parent expressed that "it is important as the change from coming from the home environment to the Early Years setting is huge for any child and to have the parents

and staff working together in partnership is vital” (P1, p. 22). Based on my critical analysis of the importance of communication between parents and staff within the Early Years settings, this allows for greater understanding of the child’s personality and everything about their background.

The theoretical perspective of partnership in the Early Years setting is something I feel has not been explored fully by both parents and staff until the term ‘partnership’ was put under the spotlight recently. Now staff have more knowledge in this area thanks to the influential theorists such as Montessori, Froebel, Vygotsky, Bronfenbrenner and so on. Parents however would not have this background knowledge. An important influence in underlining the role of parents in the Early Years setting was that of Bronfenbrenner. He explained that “different spheres of influence on the child’s life and elevated the role of parents through his belief that the parent/child/educator triangle builds the strongest structure and that home and school should be brought together” (Mhic Mhathúna & Taylor, 2012, p. 266). In the interview I introduced this statement to both parents and staff to see if they felt that this triangle was an important influence in the Early Years setting. I found that both parents and staff were in agreement on this point and stressing its importance in regards to learning at home and in the school environment. As a result there is positive feedback from the parents to see if the child is in progression in the Early Years setting. An example that was given was ‘potty training’ as this needs to be taught both at home and in school for it to be a success. This is where you can see how vital partnership truly is and the relevance this model has to the study. Therefore this offers a clear perspective regarding the positive experience and implementation of partnership and how it could really benefit Ireland and the ECCE scheme.

“The Early Childhood Care and Education” (ECCE) Programme (DCYA, 2015). It is one of five programmes of the Childhood Development Initiative. It was born out of Article 42.1 of the Irish Constitution. It states that: “ [The] primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children” (Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937). There was no mention of any other body that takes on caring for the welfare of the children in different environments until the United Nations on the Rights of the Child in 1989 introduced under Article 18 that

the parents do have a duty to provide for the education of their children but it does however give them the right to be involved with the educator i.e. the staff members in the Early Years setting.

In 2011 Ireland did implement the Children's First National Guidelines and brought in the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme also known as 'ECCE' shortly after. By exploring staff and parents expectations of good practice in my interviews, my thesis will help highlight the value of partnership between parents and staff for the future of the Early Years settings for Ireland. Both parents and staff recognised that the ECCE support the child's family by focusing on the wellbeing, learning and development of the child. It also helps build and parenting strategies and encouraging a positive parent-child relationship. However as previously mentioned in my results, both parties agreed that having the staff working with the children for the 3 hours in the morning positively influence the children's social interaction with children and adults alike. On one occasion a staff member interpreted the question a little differently to the other participants by saying: "I don't really see how it would affect parent-child relationships because if a parent is disengaged from a child then coming to an ECCE programme won't make a difference for we as staff to interact with the parents that might still be a stumbling block.." (EYS1, p. 27). The staff and parents acknowledged by working towards a partnership 'stumbling blocks' can be dealt with in a more effective manner which further reinforces the importance of partnership in the Early Years setting.

Furthermore, from the results it was revealed that there was a difference of opinion on whether the parents should actively get involved with the staff in the development of the curricula for the children. As previously discussed in the literature, Sweden states that "co-constructed responses developed in partnership with teachers, parents, children and communities can greatly enhance the local appropriateness of curriculum aims and objectives" (OECD, 2001, cited in Taguma et al. 2013. p. 18). Whilst conducting the interview, a staff member expressed that parents should let the staff do their job that they are qualified to do but saying that if the parents wished to express their views on a certain topic the staff would be more than welcome to take it on board. Partnership is important in the perspective that children can practice new language and develop socially as the example stated by Mhic Mhathúna & Taylor (2012); is where the child learns language through their

interaction with other people and language learning is embedded in its social context. This ties in with the importance of the parents and staff involvement in partnership with the child.

Participants acknowledged the benefits for the development of more policies on partnership for the Irish Early Years setting like the other European Counterparts for example Sweden, Norway and Australia. As stated in the literature, a journal by Daniel (2015) expressed that there have been few large- scale studies of family- school partnerships in Australia. Other studies that were carried out afterwards confirmed that there was in fact a relationship between parental involvement and children's literacy and numeracy development. To coincide with these findings I further examined the opinion of staff and parents when having parental involvement in the Early Years setting as a positive or negative influence on the child's development. Unsurprisingly the opinions were split down the middle with parents having a more positive outlook compared to staff who felt that it was not a great idea.

Research evidence has shown that the best outcomes for the children are achieved when parents and the staff members work together in partnership. Parents are viewed as knowing everything about their child and what's good and not good for their wellbeing and development. Parents have a right to take part in every aspect of their child's life. As stated by Aistear "a child's most important relationship is the one the child has with its parents" (NCCA, 2009). The staff members in the setting are seen as the educators that work with the children to develop their cognitive and social skills. This further reiterates the importance of the Reggio Emilia approach as discussed in the literature, which is a three way process which combines the relationships of the parent, child and the educator (Thornton and Brunton, 2007).

The parents believed that based on this triangle process the idea of having no issues therefore the child is content in the learning environment. The triangle also benefits from staff- parent partnership and this can be seen clearly in the interview section. Furthermore, studies that were carried out UK study that I have mentioned in the literature found that 67% of parents that were surveyed wanted to be more involved in the life of their child in the Early Years setting (Peters et al, 2007). This further proves that having parent- staff

partnership benefit all involved in the sense that they gain a lot of valuable information first hand. As a result problems are dealt with more efficiently.

Based on evidence gathered throughout this study I believe that with more research and implementation of policies solely on partnership with the parents and staff will bring Ireland to the level of their European Counterparts. As one participant stated “...I know we have an open door policy... You might get a parent that might not be comfortable with what they are doing so it’s good to know what to do in that sort of situation” (EYS1, p. 32). By having a more collaborative approach and having communication with parents, staff and children together was highlighted more than once throughout this study. It is clear that more awareness needs to be put in place for both parents and staff in the Early Years setting for it to come close to its European counterparts. I think the future will be positive regarding partnership, but I do believe that from my study I have opened another window as to why it is important in the Early Years setting and why more awareness needs to be raised. Therefore, Ireland may in the future be on par with other European counterparts.

Evaluation of method and suggestions for future research

The overall aim of the study was to explore staff and parents views, perspectives and expectations regarding partnership in an Early Years setting. I was successful in achieving this aim alongside the specified objectives that have been outlined in the research study. This was fulfilled by researching the literature at length along with the completion of semi structured interviews.

All the participants were either professionally or personally involved with the children in the Early Years setting. This was specifically useful as I could gain the relevant information for my study from them. I had concerns about interviewing only six participants; three staff members and three parents as it was such a small number of people from the Early Years setting and I would not receive the in- depth knowledge that I required. I was however, successful in achieving my desired outcomes from both parents and staff.

The semi structured interview method was employed for the research study for the participants. This ensured that rich in- depth information was received from the parents and

staff. The interview guide (see appendices) were structured so that the questions would achieve the relevant information and in doing so achieve the research objectives.

The findings from this research study are limited as it was a small scale study. As a result, the findings were not representative of all the parents and staff of the Early Years setting. Similar research on a larger scale may produce different results as it would incorporate responses from more participants. This would provide a better indication on how partnership is experienced and implemented from a larger amount of parents and staff.

Section 5: Conclusion

It can be recognised that partnership with parents in the Early Years can be empowering when all aspects of the triangle i.e. the parents, staff and children are working together. This can only be achieved where Early Years settings are adopting the partnership approach where everyone can benefit rather than an Early Years setting where the open line of communication is just not there.

It is apparent in the study that some parents and staff highlighted the views on what the term 'partnership' meant to them in the setting, they viewed it as working in collaboration with one another on every aspect of the day to day running of the setting. Whereas one parent was unaware of what partnership meant but by the end of the interview she had more knowledge and appreciated the word more and felt it should be used more often. It was also evident that communication plays an important part in partnership with parents and staff but most of all with the children. This aspect overall has a positive effect on the child and their learning and development in the Early Years setting.

In addition, in the study partnership was apparent from the staff and parents experiences and the implementation in the Early Years setting to some degree. The staff and parents were vocal about the benefits that were associated with how partnership was implemented and how they personally experienced but also not forgetting that challenges do arise and how they are overcome for the sake of the children. As a result they felt that having a relationship with one another positively will aid their children in the right direction to develop and progress as they should.

I believe that future of partnership needs a lot more research and the implementation of more policies regarding partnership with parents and staff on just how important it is for the child's needs to be carried out in Ireland in the future. As from evidence in the literature review we are not coming close in the level of progression to the other European counterparts. The question needs to be asked as to why this is the case. Based on the study both parents and staff were in agreement with what I believed in. This concluded that more policies solely on partnership was needed for more awareness in the Early Years setting.

Section 6: Recommendations

Having completed this study, I would like to make the following recommendations, they are as follows:

1. There needs to be a clear definition of 'partnership' implemented into the Early Years setting with a clear explanation attached.
2. More needs to be done in order to promote the partnership approach in the Early Years setting in the future. Parents and staff need to adapt to partnership for the best interests of the child.
3. More policies need to be implemented in relation to partnership with parents on its importance for the child in order to develop their knowledge and understanding of the various elements that can be presented in the Early Years setting in Ireland.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Information Sheet: Parent

Chloe Farrell,

Co. Roscommon.

Dear Parent,

My name is Chloe Farrell and I am a postgraduate student at Athlone Institute of Technology. I am currently carrying out a Masters in Child and Youth Studies. My research project is entitled 'Partnership with parents in the Early Years setting'. The study will focus on partnership with parents of the children in the setting.

I would be grateful if you could take the time to participate in an interview. The interview should take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. Total anonymity and confidentiality of individual responses is guaranteed. Your name will not be included in any part of the study.

The transcripts and information gathered will only be seen by myself and possibly my supervisor, and will not be available to any other third party such as the Early Years setting. The tapes and transcripts will be destroyed on the 30th of September 2016.

I hope you can agree to take part in the study if that is what you would like to do. If you agree to take part, please read the consent form below and sign your name. I would be very grateful if you could please inform me of your willingness to participate by the end of next week (29th April 2016). If you have any other queries or problems regarding the interview please feel free to contact me.

Yours Sincerely,

Chloe Farrell.

Postgraduate Student.

(086) 0806645.

Appendix 2: Information Sheet: Staff

Chloe Farrell,
Co. Roscommon.

Dear staff member,

My name is Chloe Farrell and I am a postgraduate student at Athlone Institute of Technology. I am currently carrying out a Masters in Child and Youth Studies. My research project is entitled 'Partnership with parents in the Early Years setting'. The study will focus on partnership with parents of the children in the setting.

I would be grateful if you could take the time to participate in an interview. The interview should take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. Total anonymity and confidentiality of individual responses is guaranteed. Your name will not be included in any part of the study.

The transcripts and information gathered will only be seen by myself and possibly my supervisor, and will not be available to any other third party such as the Early Years setting. The tape and transcripts will be destroyed on the 30th of September 2016.

If you could please inform the managing director of your willingness to participate by the end of next week (29th April 2016) I would be very grateful. If you have any other queries or problems regarding the interview please feel free to contact me.

Yours Sincerely,

Chloe Farrell.

Postgraduate Student.

(086) 0806645.

Appendix 3: Consent Form Parent

‘Partnership with parents in the Early Years setting’

I agree to take part in this research project that will focus on partnership with parents of the children in the setting. I understand that my name will not appear in the report and the information that I will give will only be used for the study.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Is it okay with you to have the session taped?

Yes: _____

No: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 4: Consent Form: Staff

'Partnership with parents in the Early Years setting'

I agree to take part in this research project that will focus on partnership with parents of the children in the setting. I understand that my name will not appear in the report and the information that I will give will only be used for the study.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Is it okay with you to have the session taped?

Yes: _____

No: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 5: Interview Questions: Parent

Question 1: What does partnership mean to you?

Question 2: To have a partnership approach is seen as key especially for the children who are going into the setting for the first time and need to get settled in. What are your views on this statement?

Question 3: What kind of things do you expect to happen with regards to partnership?

Question 4: Tell me about your views on the development of partnership, is it influenced by communication with staff and parents?

Question 5: Tell me about your views regarding your experience and the implementation of partnership?

Question 6: What are your views on spending time in the setting when your child is attending?

Question 7: In your opinion are parents welcome at the setting at any time?

Question 8: What kinds of issues arise in conversation when you meet with the staff?

Question 9: Bronfenbrenner (1979) believed that the parent/child/educator triangle builds the strongest structure and that home and school should be brought together (Mhic Mhathúna & Taylor, 2012). What are your views on this statement?

Question 10: Is there a way for parents to make suggestions or feedback in the setting?

Question 11: What happens in your opinion, if there are challenges faced between staff and parents?

Question 12: How are they resolved?

Question 13: Is there a written policy on parental participation with regards to parents and staff working together?

Question 14: What does it involve?

Question 15: If 'no', what are your views on this?

Question 16: Tell me about your views, are parents made clear about the opportunities that exist for partnership with parents?

Question 17: Who makes the decisions about whether or not parents participate in activities at the setting?

Question 18: What are your views on parents participating in the setting with the staff?

Question 19: Like Sweden and Norway parents can get involved in the formation of the curricula for the children and offer their views and opinions on what should be done to better their children's development. What are your views on this?

Question 20: Is this a good idea?

Question 21: What are your views on the ECCE programme does it support the child's family by focusing on parents' psychological health, building on their parenting strategies and encouraging a positive parent-child relationship?

Question 22: What is your view on children benefiting from staff- parent partnership?

Question 23: What is your view on parents benefiting from staff- parent partnership?

Question 24: What is your view on staff benefiting from staff- parent partnership?

Question 25: What are your views on the relationship that you have with the staff in the setting?

Question 26: How do you see the relationship into the future?

Question 27: Tell me about your views, does Ireland need to carry out more research and implementation of more policies regarding partnership with parents and staff on its importance for the child?

Question 28: Are there any other comments you would like to make in relation to the issues raised in the interview?

Appendix 6: Interview Questions: Staff

Question 1: What does partnership mean to you?

Question 2: To have a partnership approach is seen as key especially for the children who are going into the setting for the first time and need to get settled in. What are your views on this statement?

Question 3: What kind of things do you expect to happen with regards to partnership?

Question 4: Tell me about your views on the development of partnership, is it influenced by communication with staff and parents?

Question 5: Tell me about your views regarding your experience and the implementation of partnership?

Question 6: What are your views on parents spending time in the setting when their child is attending?

Question 7: In your opinion are parents welcome at the setting at any time?

Question 8: What kinds of issues arise in conversation when you meet with the parent(s)?

Question 9: Bronfenbrenner (1979) believed that the parent/child/educator triangle builds the strongest structure and that home and school should be brought together (Mhic Mhathúna & Taylor, 2012). What are your views on this statement?

Question 10: Is there a way for parents to make suggestions or feedback in the setting?

Question 11: What happens in your opinion, if there are challenges faced between staff and parents?

Question 12: How are they resolved?

Question 13: Is there a written policy on parental participation with regards to parents and staff working together?

Question 14: What does it involve?

Question 15: If 'no', what are your views on this?

Question 16: Tell me about your views, are staff made clear about the opportunities that exist for partnership with parents?

Question 17: Who makes the decisions about whether or not parents participate in activities at the setting?

Question 18: What are your views on parents participating in the setting with the staff?

Question 19: Like Sweden and Norway parents can get involved in the formation of the curricula for the children and offer their views and opinions on what should be done to better their children's development. What are your views on this?

Question 20: Is this a good idea?

Question 21: What are your views on the ECCE programme does it support the child's family by focusing on parents' psychological health, building on their parenting strategies and encouraging a positive parent-child relationship?

Question 22: What is your view on children benefiting from staff- parent partnership?

Question 23: What is your view on parents benefiting from staff- parent partnership?

Question 24: What is your view on staff benefiting from staff- parent partnership?

Question 25: What are your views on the relationship that you have with the parents in the setting?

Question 26: How do you see the relationship into the future?

Question 27: Tell me about your views, does Ireland need to carry out more research and implementation of more policies regarding partnership with parents and staff on its importance for the child?

Question 28: Are there any other comments you would like to make in relation to the issues raised in the interview?