

Athlone Institute of Technology

MA of Art in Child and Youth studies

The Importance of Parental Involvement within the Early Years Setting:
The Perspective of Early Years Practitioners.

By

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Declaration of Ownership

I declare that this dissertation and the research involved in it is the work of the author.

This project is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Masters of Arts in Child and Youth Studies.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my father Ronnie White, who passed away just before the start of this academic year. It has been extremely difficult but I know he would have encouraged me to no end and was guiding me always through this project. I also dedicate this to my mother Bridin White for the wonderful love and care she has always shown me and my family. You are the strongest person I know. Lastly I would like to place a special dedication to my uncle Father Denis. I will ever remain grateful for everything you have done for me and for the endless amounts of prayers and special intentions throughout the year.

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Abstract

The great majority of parents are concerned to do their best for their children, even if they are not always sure what this might be. (Pugh & De'Ath, 1984). Therefore, it is vital that parents are encouraged to participate by early years practitioners, in order to facilitate and enhance their understanding of their child's overall development (Bruce, 2009).

This thesis examines and outlines the findings from a research study carried out to explore the importance of parental involvement within the early years through the perspective of the early years practitioner. The main aim of the study was to highlight the opinions that early years practitioners have in relation to parental involvement within the early years and to explore the barriers and the benefits of said involvement.

The study was conducted by manner of qualitative research and the data collection method that was employed was carried out by means of semi-structured interviews. The interviews were carried out with five early years' practitioners, all subsequently practicing in five separate early years centres.

The five participants that were selected to take part in the study were selected based on the following criteria; they were all practicing in separate early years centres which ensured a broader range of opinions for the research. Secondly, they were all deemed to have a good level of knowledge on the subject, based on the qualifications that each participant held.

The findings of the research study that are presented are discussed in consideration of the theoretical knowledge that has been investigated in the literature review. The findings highlight the extensive benefits that are to be gained from involving parents in the early years, however, the key finding of the study exposes the fact that although the importance of parental involvement is being highlighted through policy, and is recognised by all practitioners, the fact remains that in reality it is not being implemented to the greatest extent. The practitioners have all outlined the importance of parental involvement, however their understanding of the term, would suggest that they believe the lowest level of involvement is sufficient.

Findings also suggest that the key barriers highlighted in this research relate to parents lack of time, language barriers, lack of knowledge and multicultural differences. However, it is evident from the research that despite the many barriers, practitioners still believe that the level of parental involvement remains substantially high.

It was concluded by the researcher that despite the practitioner's views and revelations of the level of parental involvement within each centre, what actually constitutes parental involvement does not match their revelations. In light of the findings that were obtained directly from this study, some recommendations were made in relation to the implementation of parental involvement within the early years setting. It is recommended that the written policy documents on parental involvement be re-examined and modified in order to include parents who are being neglected due to certain barriers that have been discussed in this study. Another recommendation that has been made based on the findings of this study, is to provide early years practitioners with parental involvement training. This training will ensure that all parents are being respected and valued and will encourage them to participate in their children's early years setting.

Section One

Introduction

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this study was to examine parental involvement within the early years, through the perceptions of the early years practitioners. The primary focus was placed on their opinions in relation to the importance of parental involvement and what their understanding of their term might be. The study also intended to examine the policies and legislation that promote parental involvement within the early years.

In order to explore the aim of the study, the research had two main objectives. The first objective was designed in order to establish, whether or not the practitioners believed there were any benefits of involving parents in the early years setting. In this context, the benefits for the children, parents and practitioners will be included. The second objective of the study was to explore the factors that practitioners perceive to be barriers of successful parental involvement. This includes factors that the practitioners find to be particularly challenging to deal with in relation to parental involvement.

Section Two

Literature Review

Introduction

Many researchers have dedicated a considerable amount of time and resources to both highlighting and documenting the importance of parental involvement and meaningful partnerships within the early years. (EPPE, 2004; Aistear, 2009; Whalley, 2007; Hayes, 2009) They have also demonstrated, and quite convincingly so, the benefits that can be gained from executing positive working partnerships with parents in the early years. (Donohue & Gaynor, 2011; Rockwell, Andre, & Hawley, 2009; Wheeler & Joyce, 2009).

This literature review is an evaluation of the importance of parental involvement within the early years and will examine the benefits and barriers of parental involvement. A broad range of research is included in this review to reflect and consider how the early years practitioner view parental involvement within the early years setting. Jarvis, George & Holland, (2013)

The first section of this review will provide definitions for the terms 'parental involvement' and 'partnership' within the early years. It will then focus on the importance of partnership between parents and early years practitioners and will provide an account of the evolution of parental involvement over a number of decades. This is followed by a review of the benefits that are to be gained from parental involvement for all parties involved, i.e. parents, practitioners and children. The barriers of parental involvement that can contribute to the breakdown of parental participation are then discussed.

Definitions

The term 'parental involvement', according to Sheridan & Moorman,(2015) acts as an umbrella term that broadly categorizes the various different activities that parents can engage in, in order to connect with their child's centre. Epstein (1995), has also noted the widely, broad use of the term and has highlighted the lack of consistency in use of the terminology. Based on the existing literature, it has become increasingly obvious that there is not one true term that can define 'parental involvement', however, this does not underrate the fact that, researchers have provided many definitions of these two terms.

Barnardos, (2006) have defined the term 'parental involvement' as an engaged participation by the parents which includes regular two-way and meaningful communications between parents and the childcare provider. However, according to Siolta, (2009) there has been much debate that surrounds parental involvement and what it actually constitutes. In recent years the term parental involvement has become synonymous with the term 'partnership' with parents. However the distinction between partnership and involvement does not always appear to be recognised by certain user groups and the confusion of the terminology needs to be addressed, Curtis & O'Hagan, (2009).

Reynolds and Clements, (2005) have defined parental involvement through three stages, the behaviour with, or on behalf of the child, the approaches and the beliefs around parenting in relation to education and finally, the expectations that are placed on the child's future. Other definitions refer to parental involvement as a working partnership, such as the definition that has been provided by Mittler and Mittler, (1982). They have defined the elements of parental involvement as a partnership which includes mutual respect and recognition of the essential equality between parents and professionals sharing information and skills, sharing feelings and sharing the process of decision making. Similarly, Pugh and De' Ath, (1989) define a partnership as a working relationship that is characterized by a shared interest of purpose, mutual respect and the willingness to negotiate.

However this was not always the case. Before the 1960's, Early Years and Childcare workers viewed themselves as experts as far as children were concerned and there was little or no co-operation between them and the parents. Ward (2013). They did not recognise the importance and the contribution that parents made to their children's lives and unfortunately this meant that meaningful partnership could not develop. It wasn't until the 1970's that the importance of parental involvement was brought to light. Today, the case for partnership between parents and early educators is very well established and this partnership is agreed by many researchers to ensure best outcomes for children. Wheeler & Connor (2009)

The importance of parental involvement within the early years.

Extensive research has shown that the importance of parental involvement has become a major topic in recent years and the criticality of their role in a child's

education and care within the early years has been examined by many. (Mhathuna & Taylor, 2012, Rodd, 2011,) Today we are provided with literature that confirms that parents are now recognised as experts in their own right and as the children's parents', They should play a very active role in the decision making process within the early years setting. (Aistear, 2009, Hayes, 2009, Spreeuwenberg, 2015; Hornby, 2011). Similarly, Evangelou, Sylva, & Kyriacou, (2010), have also documented the significance of parental involvement and recognise that parents play a significant role in relation to their children's academic achievement as well as in their socio-emotional development.

According to Barnardos (2006), there is consistent evidence to indicate that positive and interested families have a major influence on their children's achievement at all stages through life. When developing a partnership with parents, it is essential that practitioners recognise, but also understand that parents have rights and responsibilities and are an essential resource in the childcare setting. It is now the belief of many researchers that parents, as the main carers are children's first and most enduring educators and so have the right to be involved in meaningful ways in both the care and education process of their child's early years. (Donohue and Gaynor, 2007, Kernan, 2012, Mhathuna & Taylor, 2012). International bodies such as UNICEF also characterise the involvement of parents in the early years as a fundamental right and obligation and when parents are involved in their child's early years, it can extend the experiences that a child has both in and out of the centre. A number of researches have indicated that, parents who understand what their children are engaging in out of the home have a better sense of their child's competency and which areas they need to work on to improve confidence and ability. Spreeuwenberg, (2015) Hornby, (2011).

There are a number of merits of parental involvement which can be beneficial for parents, early year's practitioners and for the children. For early years practitioner's effective involvement from the parents can improve the relationship between the two. For Parents it has reported increased parental confidence and satisfaction with their own parenting and for children it has been reported to lead to vast improvements on their behaviour, wellbeing and mental health. That is why the importance of parental involvement has been stressed, in particular in the last number of decades. Parents who are in tune with what is happening in their child's early years learning are better

able to establish a connection between what is learned at school and what takes place in the home. Spreeuwenberg, (2015)

However, before the 1960's, childcare workers and practitioners had very little to do with the parents the mentality being that the parents should drop the children at the door and that was to be the height of their involvement. Hughes & Read (2012). Parents were also referred to being "just clients" who lacked any knowledge surrounding children and that it should be left to the experts to make all decisions. Dale (1996). Childcare workers believed that they were those experts and that it was their right and responsibility as the childcare professional to have total control over the child's learning and development and that parents should not interfere. Hughes & Read (2012).

Over the following years, the way in which parents were perceived by the early years practitioners, were beginning to change due to the extensive research that was carried out and documented in relation to the importance of their role in their children's early years (NCCA, 2009); Perry 2002). The 1970's brought about the first major change in the way that parents were viewed. Hughes & Read (2012). Parents and child care workers began to engage with one another as they became more aware of the value of the partnership. However, according to Ward, (2013) the reason behind childcare workers engagement with parents was less to do with the value of it and more to do with the narcissistic view that they thought parents would view them as being more professional if they engaged with parents and shared their expertise. (Bruce, 2004; Hayes & Kernan, 2008, Ward, 2013) From the 1980's onwards parents were being viewed as consumers of the service and were being encouraged to get involved as the focus had shifted to the demands and wishes of the parents.

Turner, 2014 has suggested that, although the involvement of parents in their children's early years setting has been slow to evolve, due to parents and practitioners being identified as separate units, who did not wish to interpose on each other's perceived roles or responsibilities, the pace of change has increased steadily with policy changes that recognise the role of the parents and the importance of their involvement.

Policy context

It is now possible to see through government policy, the growing understanding of the role that parents play and the increasing recognition of the value of parental involvement within the early years (Wilson, 2016). The implication of government policy relating to the partnership between parents and practitioners has taken a more central role in the education and care of children and this is because, the Irish state now recognises the primary role that parents play. (Mhathuna and Taylor, 2012).

Pugh, (1999) has identified that one of the indicators of quality service in the early years, is the close relationship between staff and parents and their involvement and having a strong written policy is essential in order for parental involvement to be successful. According to Cable, Miller & Goodliff, (2012) government legislation has strongly encouraged the working partnership with parents and it is through these public policies that government legislation can be executed, such as the UNCRC, which is being reflected through the Siolta and Aistear documents.

Through the development of parental involvement policies, the principle of parental involvement can be fully supported and the importance of said involvement can be encouraged by early years practitioners. Hodson & Bastard, (2008). Wilson (Kingdon & Gourd, 2014) Hornby, 2011.

The Benefits of Parental Involvement within the Early Years Setting.

Parents have been recognised by many researchers as being the main carers and primary educators of their children and therefore are entitled to be involved in a meaningful way in both the care and education process in the early childhood setting. (Donohue & Gaynor, 2011; Rockwell, Andre, & Hawley, 2009; Wheeler & Joyce, 2009). Every family is different and require different needs, Bruce, (2004) however, it is incontrovertible that despite the diversity among families, there are many benefits to be gained from building positive relationships between the practitioners, the children and the parents. Jarvis, George & Holland, (2013).

Research has indicated that when parents are involved positively in their children's early learning and education, their children demonstrate higher levels of achievement, better attendance and display more positive attitudes and behaviour.

Rodd, (2011). Therefore and unmistakably so, it is very clear that when parents and educators work together in partnership, children's long-term development and learning can be positively enhanced. Schweinhart, Barnes and Weikart, (1993).

Benefits for the child

Over the years, there has been a wealth of research that has highlighted the various benefits for children, when parents and practitioners work together (O'Sullivan, 2009; Hutchin, 2013, Aistear, 2009, Donohue and Gaynor, 2009). Parents have a crucial influence on what their children experience and achieve in the home and according to Rodd, (2011) this influence should extend to their children's early years setting as there are a number of advantages that can be gained for the child. Lopez et al, (2004) has stated that:

“Family involvement predicts children's school success. Developmental and educational research confirms that parental involvement is strongly associated with a child's social development and academic performance.”

Similarly, Aistear (2009) have acknowledged that, when parents and practitioners work together, children tend to achieve more regardless of external factors such as, their socioeconomic status or their background. They generally achieve better results, are consistent in their work and their attendance is higher than those whose parents are not actively involved. Mhathuna and Taylor, (2012) have pointed out, that when parents are involved in their children's early years setting, the children tend to have a much more positive outlook and attitude. Research also suggests the benefits of parental involvement in relation to the transitioning process. (Prior & Gerard, (2006). When parents are involved in their children's early years setting, the process of transition for a child can be a lot easier. For children the process of transitioning can be a time of uncertainty and concern for the unknown, however according to Ward, 2013, when parents are involved in this process, it can be positive and there are strong links associated with parental involvement and a child's overall development.

It is now possible to see with all of the literature on hand, that the fact that children benefit from parental involvement is undeniable. (Palaiologou, 2013)

Benefits for the Parent

Having recognised the many benefits of parental involvement in the early years setting for the child, researchers have also highlighted the tangible benefits that can be gained for parents.

Research shows that parents can experience personal gains from participating in their child's early years setting and when they are provided with opportunities to participate, it can often contribute to the growth of their confidence. Epstein (1983). Furthermore, studies that have been carried out by Epstein show that, when parents and practitioners have a strong working partnership, it can provide them with the opportunity to develop their level of knowledge and to learn more about their child's developmental stages. (Prior, 2011; Pugh & Duffy, 2010; Ward, 2009; Jarvis, George & Holland, 2013). A number of studies have also highlighted, that when parents are involved in their child's early years setting, they are all the time developing their own skills in parenting.

(Cable, Miller & Goodliff, 2002; Pugh & Duffy, 2010; Ward, 2009; Jarvis, George & Holland, 2013) have all examined the number of benefits that parents have to gain by participating in their children's early years. Practitioners provide a broader view of the various different developmental stages that young children go through, because parents are lacking professional knowledge in relation to their child's development, they are then provided with the opportunity to develop their own knowledge. Rodd (2011) has also suggested that when parents are involved, they are offered information and advice about their children which can in turn can lead to a greater confidence in their own parenting skills.

In addition, Aistear, (2009) have documented that when parents are involved in the early years setting of their children, they often develop a feeling of self-worth and respect, they are also provided with the opportunity to provide the practitioners with information regarding their family's values and traditions which enables parents to feel that their beliefs are being understood and accounted for. Rodd, (2011).

Benefits for the practitioner.

Although developing a working partnership with parents has been identified as being the responsibility of both the practitioner and the parent, the responsibility to encourage this involvement still lies with the practitioner. (Aistear, 2009; Donohue & Gaynor, 2011; Hayes, 2009). A strong connection between parents and early years practitioners is essential for creating a quality learning environment for children, Rudd, (2009) and research shows that, while there are many benefits of parental involvement for children and their parents, finding a positive relationship between the practitioner and the parents can be very rewarding for the early year's practitioner.

When parents and practitioners work together, they are provided with information which enables them to better understand the children and their families, which in turn can create a more meaningful environment for the practitioners to work in. (Aistear, (2009). Aistear, Rudd Mhathuna & Taylor Bruce). Furthermore, practitioners can benefit from the parents skills, combine this with their expertise and it can create a more emotionally secure environment for the children. In addition to this, Hayes, (2010) has pointed out that when parents and practitioners work together, they can support parents in their overall parenting which will in turn cause the parents to value their role as their children's educators more.

It is quite evident that a child's most important relationship is the one the child has with its parents and belonging to a family is critically important to a child's development and wellbeing. Naturally developing a working partnership where both sets of experts work together has many benefits for the children, the parents and the centre, (Bruce, 2005; Donohue & Gaynor, 2007; Mhathuna & Taylor, 2012).

The barriers of Parental Involvement

"We need to begin with the firm belief that all parents are interested in the development and progress of their own children" Penn, (2014) however, despite the various benefits that have been discussed, it is not always easy for parents to be, or to become involved in their child's early years setting. Research has indicated that there are many challenges and barriers that can contribute to the breakdown of parental involvement and it is because of these factors that there is in actual fact a

large gap between the literature around the practice of parental involvement and the implementation of that practice. (Parker-Rees, 2006; Hornby, 2011, Rudd, 2008).

As examined by Donohue and Gaynor (2010), many parents feel that they are unable to fully involve themselves in their child's early years education due to a number of reasons. These reasons include parent's lack of time, lack of commitment, lack of knowledge, cultural differences, language difficulties, confidence and resources in relation to the early years setting and their children's development (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2010). Similarly, Hayes (2013) provides, that a lack of parental involvement can stem from various parent characteristics and experiences such as a lack of time, energy or various economic resources.

It has been clearly defined in literature, that partnership between parents and practitioners requires time and commitment. A number of researchers have outlined a lack of time as being a major barrier of parental engagement and involvement in the early years setting. (Prince, Griffiths, 2007 Bruce 2012, and Hayes, 2008). Donohue and Gaynor, (2007) also concur that the main barrier of parental involvement is the lack of time that parents can afford to communicate with their child's educator. Pugh De' Ath have also highlighted the importance of time and how a lack of time can contribute to the breakdown in communication amongst parents and practitioners

Another barrier to parental involvement that has been identified by researchers, is the perception that parents can have in relation to practitioner's invitations of involvement. (Fitzgerald, 2010; Wilson, 2015) Parents will not become involved if they believe that practitioners don't want them there or that they are impeding on their professionalism. According to Hodson and Basford, (2010). When parents believe that their involvement is hindering the work of the early years practitioners, then they are not likely to engage with the centre. However according to Byres and Taylor, (2004) the foundation of successful partnership is mutual respect and a sharing of purpose. Practitioners should encourage parents to be involved because the more involved a parent is, the more support can be offered to both parties.

Prince, Griffiths, (2007), has stated that cultural diversity has affected parental involvement, substantially and that there is numerous amounts of research to that point. In relation to cultural diversities, language barriers in particular can have a

huge impact on communication between the early years practitioners and the parents. Lewis and Henderson, (1997); Prince Griffiths, (2007). Communications enable parents to feel included and involved in the decisions which affect and relate to their children in the setting, so if a parent is of a different cultural origin, than they may not understand written communications such as the policies in the setting. Hayes (2013) has stated that, in order to build a partnership between the parents and practitioners, there must be both recognition and respect of the different cultures, opinions and values.

Barnardos (2006) have also outlined the significance of devising a curriculum that reflects the cultures, values and concerns of all parents and children. There are a number of communities living in Ireland today and it is important when focusing on the subject of parental involvement that the various different cultures and ethnic groups are considered. Aistear (2009).

Another barrier that can contribute to the failure of parental involvement, might be the lack of policy. Hornby (2000) has outlined that by having no consistent method and an absence of any specific legislation on parental involvement can result in irregular and unbalanced practice. According to Cable, Miller & Goodliff, (2012) government legislation together with guidance has strongly encouraged the working partnership with parents.

Conclusion

This literature review has evaluated the importance of parental involvement in the early years setting and has looked at some of the issues relating to parental involvement within the early years setting. It is recognised that parents are the primary educators of their children and so, effective parental involvement is essential in order to enable parents to support, care for and educate their children to the highest standard. This study has recognised that parents and practitioners may need support to make these learning partnerships work and with the added aid of written policy documents, the importance of parental involvement and guidelines for implementing said involvement can be highlighted.

Finally the literature has shown that an involved parent has a better understanding of their child's development and abilities than a parent who is not involved. If a delay exists, an involved parent may notice the issue early and being involved enables the parent to pursue interventions that a child may need (Frost, 2014). Parental involvement has a large and positive impact on a child's learning, not only this but, this was the single most important finding from this research. This particular finding raises a number of questions in relation to the cause of breakdown in parental partnerships and overall involvement. In other words, the author will try to disentangle the question of whether or not the benefits parental involvement are being articulated well enough to encourage parents to be involved in their children's early years' education despite the obvious barriers and challenges.

Section Three

Methodology

Introduction

In this section, the author will provide an overview of the research method that was exercised and will provide the rationale for selecting the particular method. It will also describe the research design, sampling and participation selection, procedure and the ethical considerations that were applied. This section will end with a discussion of the limitations that were encountered in this research study.

Research Design

The aim of this research was to examine the early year's practitioner's views on parental engagement within the early years setting and in doing so, the participation of EYP was a vital part of this research project.

A research strategy refers to a generalised plan for a problem which includes structure and an outline of planned devices necessary to implement the strategy, Singh, Kumar, (2007) There are two main approaches to collecting data and these are: qualitative and quantitative. The author has explored both methods before making the final decision in which one to use.

Due to the nature of this particular study and in order to achieve the main aims of the study, the researcher had thought it more appropriate to use only one research strategy in the study. A qualitative research method was chosen over the quantitative method in order to get in depth information around the subject of parental involvement, through the participants' perspectives. Quantitative methods can be very valuable in certain research studies, however the researcher did not believe that it would be applicable to this particular study. Through a qualitative method of research, the author is able to probe the participants for detailed and valuable answers. It will allow me to better understand the data that is obtained.

A pilot study was also carried out, before the actual interviews went ahead. The criteria for the study included both full time, part time and sessional childcare services. The managers of each facility where I obtained my participants were all contacted and the purpose for the research was explained. Permission was granted in each of the five cases. Consent forms and information letters were provided to each of the five EYP's who agreed to take part in the study. Interviews were chosen as the author considered them to be the most effective method of gathering quality

and truthful answers. There were some drawbacks in using the interview method, such as it was difficult to arrange the meetings for all five participants. And because the research was dealing with five different centres it was impossible to get all five to stick to the agreed date that each had decided upon. The interviews took place after work hours in order for it not to be intrusive upon their work and manager. All five participants answered all the questions to the best of their ability.

Sampling and Participants

The participants in this research study were chosen by using a purposive sampling method. This particular method is based on selecting the individuals as samples according to the purposes of the researcher at their controls. Calmorin-Paler & Calmorin (2008). This particular study required the researcher to engage with a number of EYPs in order to understand how they view parental engagement within the early years. For this reason, the participants that were chosen to partake in the study were all currently working in the childcare field which is relevant to the researchers chosen topic.

The participants that were chosen for the study consisted of five EYP's from five different child care centres. All participants were in full-time employment and had various degrees of knowledge in terms of the childcare sector. The five EYP's were chosen on the very basis that they all worked in different centres. The reason behind this was to reduce the similarities of the answers obtained, as it was considered that their experience of parental engagement in one centre would only vary slightly.

The starting point for the selection of the sample for participation in the research was the researcher's access to both private and public child care centres and the researcher recognised that by carrying out an interview among five EYP'S from different centres, the information obtained would be well informed.

Participants were assured of their confidentiality and anonymity and that all data would be destroyed at a stipulated point in the future. No person other than that of the researcher and the supervisor will have access to the records. Written consent was given by all respondents.

100% of the participants were female. All five participants, (100%) were aged over 25. No harm or upset came to any of the participants during the research as the subject of the research was not one that could cause any distress or offence.

Research Materials

According to Hennick, Hutter & Bailey, (2011), qualitative research is an approach that allows you to examine people's experiences in detail, by using a specific set of research methods such as interviews, focus group discussions and observations. In this particular study, the method of interviewing was employed. Interviews range through a continuum from structured, through semi-structured, to unstructured. Edwards & Holland (2005). The researcher used a semi structured interview which allowed the participants to detail their perceptions all the while having answered the researcher's fundamental questions.

Ritchie, Burns & Palmer (2005), describe an interview as being an interaction following a question-answer format or an interaction more akin to a conversation. However as it is the researcher who controls the conversation it is not a case of equal partnership. According to King & Horrocks (2010), interviewing is the most commonly used method of data collection in qualitative research. In this study the researcher was able to focus on the participants' actual experiences as well as their opinions and beliefs. According to King, Horrocks (2010), interviewing is the most commonly used method of data collection in qualitative research.

Data Analysis

According to Immy, (2005) qualitative research primarily uses methods of inquiry that produce text rather than numbers. Textual data includes transcript of interviews and conversations. When considering the many forms of analysis available, one distinction that is often made is between approaches that focus on language and those that are more concerned with the context of what participants' have to say. King and Horrocks, (2008)

The data analysis technique that the researcher has adopted for this particular study, is the 'thematic analyses' technique, as it was most appropriate in analysing the data produced from the semi-structured interview. The thematic analysis technique is

normally associated with experience focused methodologies and involves a number of steps including transcription and descriptive coding. King and Horrocks, (2008).

Most analyse of qualitative data often begin with establishing the key themes and patterns which also depend on the processes of coding data. However the actual process begins by the transcribing the interviews. By transcribing the content of the interview, it allowed the researcher to be able to go through the interviews again and familiarise with the textual data.

The interviews with all five participants working in separate early years centres were all transcribed verbatim, which allowed the author to gather a significant amount of in depth knowledge. Three of the interviews were carried out the corresponding centre, while the remaining two interviews were carried out in the participants' homes.

These particular venues were chosen as they were considered to be, the most suitable and most convenient to the participants. With each of the five interviews, the researcher made sure that there was nobody around that was going to disturb or interrupt the interview. All participants' were made aware that the conversations would be recorded but that they would not be played to anyone one other than the researcher.

The next stage of the analysis, involved interpretive coding. This allowed the researcher to highlight the important parts of the interview that were deemed to be relevant to the study. This step then led to particular themes being generated from the qualitative data. The research also used examples from the interviews, such as quotations to support the results which will be discussed in the following section.

Ethical Considerations

When conducting any research study, ethical approval must be granted. This study has been accepted by the ethics board of Athlone Institute of Technology as it satisfies the guidelines. According to Green, (2002) in an interview situation, there can sometimes be an issue of power. The researcher must ensure not to control the interview negatively and always be aware how the interview may affect the participants. This study should ensure that all practitioners understand that their participation in the study is completely voluntary and they have the right to withdraw at any time.

All five participants were informed of this prior to the interviews. Consent forms and information sheets were sent to each of the five centres and permission from the managers and directors was sought and granted. As well as the information sheets that were provided, each participant was contacted and asked if they had any questions regarding the interview. After the phone calls were made, it was confirmed that all five practitioners would participate. Details of the childcare centres were not disclosed and the information that was obtained via the interviews was stored secure and confidentially.

Limitations

According to Thomas, Silverman & Nelson (2015) every study has limitations. They define limitations as being shortcomings that cannot be either controlled or are the results of the restrictions imposed by the researcher. As was previously stated, the interview was chosen as it was considered to be the most efficient method of gathering the information required from all five participants. However, interviews can also take a lot of time as they require the researcher to meet separately with each respondent. Organising a time to meet all five participants proved rather difficult, as a couple of the EYP's had to reschedule a number of times. Each individual interview lasted between 40-45 minutes, and the time spent transcribing and analysing each interview was onerous.

Section Four

Finding

Introduction

This section of the study will outline the results from the transcripts of the five interviews and highlight the key findings. The aim of the study was to identify the perceptions of early year's practitioners of parental involvement within the early years. The findings are broken down into three main themes and correspond to the objectives of the study. The themes are, the importance of parental involvement, the benefits of parental involvement and the barriers of parental involvement. This section has obtained the information as a result of the interviews and therefore will be organised in relation to the questions that was asked. Below the key findings are presented along with side notes from the author, direct quotes from the interviews will be used, however the most diffident words have been extracted.

Key Findings

The opening questions of the interview were devised in order to identify how early years Practitioners viewed parental involvement and what their understanding of it was. The next section of questions were designed in order to examine what the benefits of parental involvement were, and the closing questions were asked in relation to the barriers that the participants have faced or believe to be a contributing factor to the breakdown of parental involvement within the early years.

The importance of Parental Involvement

Under this theme, practitioners were asked questions in relation to the level of parental involvement within their centre and whether or not they believed it was important. They were also asked questions as to why they believed it was important and whether or not their beliefs are being achieved within the current childcare framework and the quality of the centre.

The first research question that was asked in the interview was in relation to the importance of parental involvement. There was a unanimous agreement between all of the participants, declaring that "it is an extremely important element of the early years". The researcher was happy and confident that all of the participants were aware of the importance of parental involvement within the early years. Below are examples of this fact.

Early Years Practitioner A:

“...I believe that the quality of a good early years centre is dependent on the collaboration between parents and practitioners...”

“...the parents’ level of participation is a strong factor in the quality of the child’s education and care...”

Early years Practitioner B

“...it’s really important to involve parents in the early years because they know their child...”

“...they know what works for the child and what doesn’t...”

“...they’re going to work, so a child could be there from half seven in the morning to six in the evening, which is a serious chunk out of their day, so it’s really important to work together and for them to have as much input as possible...”

Early years Practitioner C

“...parents are they most important people in a child’s life, and it’s only natural to involve the parents in their children’s day in the preschool...”

“...it is so important to have a good relationship or partnership with the parents...”

Early Years Practitioner D

“...I believe that it is paramount to a child’s overall experience of the early years...”

The reasons as to why they believed parental involvement was important varied somewhat, but the principle belief was that parents are they most important people in a child’s life. The majority of the participants outlined that the main reason as to why

they would suggest that parental involvement is important, is because parents have a right and a responsibility to be involved. "...It's "only natural to involve the parents in their children's day in the preschool..." Respondents stated:

Early Years Practitioner A

"...Parents are the primary caregivers and they entrust us with their children."

Early year's practitioners B

"As their primary caregivers parents should be involved in every aspect of their children's lives this extends to the time they spend away from their children..."

Early years Practitioner D

"...Its important for them to be involved because they are their first form of authority, they educate and care for them, and will continue to do so, long after they have been in my care..."

The next question that was put to the respondents was to determine the extent of parental involvement within the centre, this related to what they think the level of involvement should be, but also to determine what the level currently is. In order to distinguish the levels of parental involvement, the participants were asked to rate the level of involvement between one and ten. All participants indicated that there was a strong level of involvement within each of the centre and that what they asked of parents they received, however when asked to describe the extent of the involvement the answers that were presented did not represent the high figures that were given. Some of their comments are outlined below:

Early years Practitioner A

"The level of parental involvement is very high in this centre" "Parents are always asking me questions about their children..." I would rate it eight out of ten..."

Early Years Practitioner D

"...I would rate the level of involvement a nine, there is always room for improvement, but it is defiantly very strong... We always provide our parents with information and advice..."

Early Years Practitioner E

“...I would think that it’s a high standard, I know I converse regularly with my parents...”

The final question that was put to the respondents was asked in relation to their understanding of the ‘parental involvement’. Only one participant mentioned that parental involvement was about more than just communication, her response being; ““...I believe that parental involvement is a collaboration, a partnership between the parents and us the early year’s practitioners...”

However the majority of the participants, had a vague understanding of the term, with the general view being, that parental involvement, involved some level of participation from the parents. Some of the responses included:

Early Years Practitioner A:

“...It means, well...parents getting involved, they participate. Remind the child to bring in their show and tell, make sure they do their reading, that kind of thing...”

Early years Practitioner B:

“...My understanding of parental involvement is the latter word, involvement...parents are involved in the centre, can come and talk to me, ask questions, provide relevant information...”

In recent years, it has become very clear, with the aid of research, that when parents are actively involved in a way, that they share their time with the children and the centre, then there are many benefits to be gained. However none of the participants in this particular study identified that the parents in the centres are involved in this way.

Benefits of parental involvement.

Researchers have identified that parental involvement within the early years has many benefits for children, parents and practitioners Mhathuna & Taylor, (2012). Under this theme, practitioners were asked questions in relation to the various

benefits of parental involvement within the early years. They were asked to identify who they believed benefited from it and to highlight what they perceived to be the main benefits, for parents, children and for the early years practitioners. In response to these questions, all five practitioners stated that there were many benefits to be gained from involving parents in the early years. Participants agreed that it is the child that is in receipt of most benefits to be gained from involving parents. Four of the participants outlined the benefits for the parents and all of the participants identified that there are benefits for the practitioners' themselves.

The general consensus was that all parties benefited from parental involvement within the early years. "Parental involvement benefits us all, the parents, the children and the staff"

Benefits for the child

The participants of the study identified a number of benefits of parental involvement for children in the early years setting. These benefits included the positive impact on the child's development, successful transitions and continuity. Other benefits for the child included their relationship with adults and their attitudes towards the centre.

All of the participants' voiced the opinion that, the main benefit of parental involvement for children is the impact that it has on their overall development, with emphasis being placed on their social emotional and cognitive development. Some of their comments included:

Early Years Practitioner A:

"...Children who experience their parents' involvement in the early years develop more positively and enter the school stage more easily ..."

Early Years Practitioner B:

"...if a parent is involved in their child's early years then the child will benefit greatly, in a number of ways... They children become more social...because the parents are involved, they have such positive attitudes, they enjoy coming to the centre, and you can see this reflects in their academic work... "

Early Years Practitioner C:

“...I have found that the more invested a parent is in their child and their early years, the more we are able to get out of the child... They are very outgoing...enjoy engaging with other children, and actually exceed in certain activities...”

Early Years Practitioner D:

“...Well, parents are their children’s educators from the very beginning, so if the parent is involved in their child’s learning in the childcare centre as well as at home, then the child is receiving a more positive learning experience and we get to see the results that it has on the child’s development first hand... It’s brilliant...”

When the participants were asked to provide examples of the types of benefits for children, four of the participants mentioned the positive impact that parental involvement can have on a child transitioning both out of the centre and into school or transitioning into another class. Some of their responses in relation to transitioning include:

Early years Practitioner B:

“...when parents are involved, children feel more secure and their confidence improves so much so that it makes it easier for the child to move on...When a child is transitioning to another class for example...the child accepts the change more readily...”

Early Years Practitioner D

“... A child’s willingness to transition is strongly influenced by their parents’ involvement...if a parent is involved throughout the year, then when the time comes for them to move into another class, the child knows that their parents are still going to be there...”

Early Years Practitioner E

“...Parental involvement leads to better adjustment later on...when parents are involved with the child’s centre, the child’s develops very good social skills, which means when the time come for the child to go to school they are much more

prepared than say a child whose parents weren't as involved or even involved at all..."

One participant identified that the child notices when a parent is involved.

The general consensus was that the participants of the study saw the benefits of parental involvement for the child before the benefits for themselves or the parent.

Benefits for the parent

All of the participants were asked to outline the main benefits of parental involvement for the parents, when they had indicated in the original question that there were benefits to be gained by all parties. All of the participants expressed that the main benefit to be gained for the parents was, that it provided them with the opportunity to develop their knowledge in relation to their child's development. Some of their comments are mentioned:

Early years Practitioner B

"...Will get to know their child better... provided with information and receive advice about their child's development..."

Early Years Practitioners C

"...Parents benefit from being involved, because we can help them to understand their child's developmental stages..."

This was followed by the participant's belief that involvement can enhance a parent's feeling of value and respect. One participant stated that;

Early Years Practitioner D

"...Parents know that we respect them as individuals when we converse with them on a regular basis. When we ask their advice, they feel that their opinions are worth something, and that as a parent they are a valuable asset..."

Early Years Practitioner C

"...It makes sense to involve the parents, there are so many benefits...if you respect the parents they will respect you...when you need to talk to a parent then,

they respond openly, rather than getting defensive from the onset...We can combine what we know...Like, what happens at home or what the child has shown interest in at school... we can bounce of each other..."

One of the participants believed that when a parent is involved it will allow them to understand their child better because they have access to information and advice about their child. Two of the participants mentioned that parents who are involved feel valued and respected, while another participant stated that it allows the parent to build a relationship with the practitioner which will in turn create trust.

"...it also can create an ease for parents knowing that they have this added support and can ask questions whenever they need to..."

Benefits for the practitioner

When the participants were asked to provide some examples of the benefits of parental involvement that were to be gained for the practitioner the main benefit that was noted and the general consensus was that it allowed relationship between practitioners and parents to develop. Other benefits that were mentioned by the participants were that it allowed the practitioners to gain a better understanding of the child, a number of the participants provided similar answers that it made their job easier.

Early Years Practitioner A

"...It's easier to work with the parents than against them, it just makes life that little bit easier..."

Early Years Practitioner E

"...Well I know from experience, if you are constantly at loggerheads with parent over making certain decisions, then you will inevitably go home most evenings with a massive headache...I always try to encourage my parents to converse with me on a regular basis, it's just easier that way..."

Early years Practitioner C

“...It’s 100 times easier to work with parents than against them...we both want the same thing at the end of the day, the best for their child...”

Early Years Practitioner A

“...I know I feel less stressed when the parents are involved, parents who provide input regularly tend to be so much happier than the parents who do not...It makes my life easier when I know what the parents are thinking...”

Early Years Practitioner B

“...I find that when the parents are involved, and you engage with them often they are so much nicer to deal with, because they know you respect their opinions and then they are more willing to help out at cake sales and plays and different things that go throughout the year...”

“...parents It means that when either of us have any concern about the child or want to ask a question we can go straight to each other and have a conversation. There is no animosity...”

Early Years Practitioner D

“...I have always tried to involve parents in my classroom, the more you know about the parents, the more you know about the child...I can help the child in the way they need when I know what way their life works at home...”

Early Years Practitioner E

“...For me the best thing of all is that, when I work with the parents, it allows me to understand the child a great deal more, which means I can create activities that are suited to the child’s way of leaning...when they achieve in something that I have provided for them it makes me feel like I have done my job, I am helping this child to

meet their full potential...but only because of that support I receive from the parents...”

“...If I didn’t get along with a parent, or there were issues with conversing with them, then the child would suffer because the relationship would be strained from start...the child can pick up bad vibes and then can start reacting badly...when we get along the child respects my authority because the parents do...”

Early Years Practitioner B “...when parents are involved and have an active partnership with you, It makes you more confident in your own abilities to do your job...”

Barriers to parental involvement

Under this theme, the participants’ were asked questions in relation to any challenges or barriers that they have either faced personally, or that they would consider to be main factors that contribute to the failure or breakdown of parental involvement. They were also asked to provide examples of the types of barriers or issues that can arise in relation to the involvement of parents within the early years setting. In the findings for this section, the qualitative data revealed that there were a number of factors that can be considered to be barriers to parental involvement particularly, a lack of time, language, multicultural differences, and the attitudes of parents.

In response to this question, the factor of time or rather lack of, has been identified by all five of the respondents as being a major barrier that impedes parents from being involved in their children’s early years. The participants noted that because parents have outside commitments such as work, actively involving parents can be quite difficult. Some of their comments are mentioned below:

Early Years Practitioner A

“There is an issue with time for a lot of parents...When parents have no time because they are rushing off to work, it can cause pressure and sometimes tension...”

Early Years Practitioner B

“...A lot of parents and carers just don't have the time...it can be work, parents who are working very hard and long hours can often mean then their involvement in their child's early years and the centre is limited...”

Early Years Practitioner C

“...they are always rushing, trying to get older children to school, dentist appointments, doctor appointments, and work...there always seems to be something that gets in the way for parents...”

Early Years Practitioner E

“...Life gets in the way... mothers and fathers are now both working which means they don't have the time to spend in the centre... they drop off and collect... as much as they are encouraged, they just don't have the time any more, unfortunately...”

Participants also exposed, language as being a barrier for many parents that prevented them from being involved. Practitioners believe that, parents do not want to be involved or participate because they cannot speak English, or they aren't confident enough to try. They all agreed that trying to encourage a non-English speaking parent is one of the biggest challenges that they can face. Furthermore, all of the participants suggested that, all the information that is provided to parents via email, text and letters are produced in English and that trying to explain the information first hand to some of the parents can be very difficult. Participants supplied the following comments:

Early Years practitioner B

“...it's really sometimes very difficult to engage with parents when English isn't their first language... I think there are over six different languages in this centre at the moment... and unfortunately we can't translate too many of them...”

, I think maybe they don't feel comfortable having to communicate in English with us when it's not their first language.

Early Years Practitioner C

“...It’s so important to make contact with the parents, but it is very hard when a parent you need to converse with doesn’t speak the same language...”

“...when we have to make announcements about upcoming events or even just to provide general information, we provided it through form of letters or emails, and these are obviously written in English...it must be very difficult for them to be involved when they may not even understand the letter...”

Early Years Practitioner E

“...One of the biggest challenges that I have faced, and is ongoing, is trying to engage with parents who don’t speak English...trying to encourage them to be involved when you can’t even explain to them the simplest of things is so hard...it’s frustrating for them and it’s frustrating for us...”

When the participants mentioned the issue of language barriers, they were then asked, whether or not the centres policies on parental involvement were written in languages, other to English to cater for non-English speaking parents. All of the participants confirmed that none of the policies were written in English and they believed that it was an issue that needed to be addressed. The following are some of the comments that were provided:

Early years Practitioner B

“...Our policies have always been written English, and to be honest they were devised so long ago, I don’t think it was even thought about...”

Early Years Practitioner C

“...it’s an English country, they should be written in English...”

Early Years Practitioner D

“...The policy is in English, but other than at the start of the year, the parents don’t really look to see them...”

Early Years practitioner A

“...To be honest I don’t remember, I only saw the policy once...”

Another factor that was considered by participants, in response to this question was the challenge of involving parents from different communities who have very different needs. Some of their comments are outlined below:

Early Years Practitioner B

“...Sometimes, I find it a challenge to connect with certain families...There are many children who practice different religions attending this centre, and each parent have different requests...”

“...In some religions, the mother cannot collect the child with the father...which is fine, accept when they arrive they just take the child and go... they don’t want to communicate with you at all...”

Early Years Practitioner C

“...There are certain events that not only do the parents not want to be involved but they don’t let their children be involved which can be quite difficult sometimes, if we were practicing or making something that the parents don’t want their child involved with, it can be very exclusive for the child...”

The final barrier that was mentioned by the participants of the study in relation to parental involvement, was the issue of parent’s attitudes. They mentioned that the parent’s attitudes had a major influence over their level of involvement. Three of the participants mentioned that some parents have a very poor attitude when it comes to being involved. Some parents don’t want to be involved, they still view the centre as being a place where their children go during the day when they can’t mind them.

The participants also noted that some parents believe that they know what’s important for their child and they don’t see the point in receiving advice or information from the practitioners. The majority of the participants also highlighted that

Following are some of the comments that were made in relation to parent’s attitude.

Early Years Practitioner B

“...Some of the parents really don't care at all to be involved, we just mind their children as far as their concerned...”

Early Years Practitioner C

“...Attitude...a lot of parents have the wrong mind frame when it comes to involvement...they compare their children to other children all the time...if they don't get on with a certain parent over something minor and then won't be involved in school outing or activities if they know the parent they dislike is attending...it's ridiculous...”

Summary

The study set out to identify the perspectives of early year's practitioners on the importance of parental involvement within the early years. It is clearly evident from the results of the study that, although the answers vary slightly from one participant to another, the main consensus is that parental involvement within the early years is regarded as being a highly important factor in the early years. There was a unanimous agreement that there are many benefits to be gained from collaborating with parents for all parties involved. The results also indicated that there are many challenges and barriers to overcome regarding the involvement of parents, but the level of challenges varied somewhat.

All participants acknowledged that the parents as the children's caregivers, are the most important figures in their children's lives, therefore should be involved in their child's early years as much as possible. One of the biggest reasons for parental involvement was outlined through the early years practitioners Perspectives as being wanting to have some influence over their children's education. However when the researcher asked the questions surrounding the level of involvement, the majority provided that a few words in a copybook at the end of the day was sufficient for most parents.

The early years practioners, all concurred that although they valued parental involvement and that it is an extremely important element of the early years setting, the level of involvement was not an indicator of such importance. Parents' lack of

time was considered to be the main barrier to maintaining a working partnership with parents, however it was multicultural diversity of the parents that was viewed by all participants as being the biggest challenge. Two participants also mentioned that with an initial (first) child, parents want to participate to no end, while parents with two or more children become less involved over time.

Section Five

Discussion

Discussion

Introduction:

The research study that has been outlined in this dissertation was of an exploratory nature and as a result, a number of findings were obtained. The aim of this section of the study is to evaluate the results obtained from the interviews and to compare the significant findings with the relevant literature around parental involvement within the

early years as outlined in section one of this study. Five Early years Practitioners working in separate centres were selected in order to determine their perspectives on the importance of parental involvement within the early years setting. The findings from the research are compared and discussed under the main objectives of the study. The author will also conclude the discussion section with some recommendation that she feels would be beneficial in the practice of parental involvement in the early years.

The researcher will now discuss the results in relation to the studies examined in the Literature Review.

The Importance of Parental Involvement

In this study, the overall consensus among the practitioners was that, parental involvement within the early years setting is extremely important. This finding coincides with that of previous literature accomplished by, Mhathuna & Taylor, (2012); Rodd, (2011); and Hayes, (2009), which revealed the significance of parental involvement and the current recognition of parents as experts, in their own right. This finding also concurs with Donohue and Gaynor, (2011), who have indicated that, parents are children's main carers and most enduring educators, and in so, should be involved in deep and meaningful ways, in both the care and education process of their child's early years.

Although the importance of parental involvement was agreed upon by all the participants, the reasons as to why they believed it to be important varied slightly from one participant to another. The general outlook of the participants was that, parents are the most important individuals in a child's life, however the main explanation that was provided, was that parents are their primary educators and so, have the right and responsibility to be involved in every aspect of their children's lives. International bodies such as UNICEF, would agree that the involvement of parents in the early years, is a fundamental right and obligation. Other literature suggests that parental involvement is important in the early years setting, as it has a significant effect in a child's academic achievement and their overall development. (Evangelou, Sylva, & Kyriacou, (2009).

The participants provided answers, in relation to the extent and level of parental

involvement within the early years setting. There was again a unanimous agreement that, the level of involvement within each of the centres was no less very high, with all five participants indicating that the level could be rated no less than an eight out of ten. However despite this finding, when they provided examples of the levels of involvement, it was revealed that the level was actually quite low despite their perceptions. Participants indicated that they involved parents by communicating with them on a regular basis, via email, text, notice board and copy book. Furthermore, the participants were asked to reveal their understanding of the term parental involvement. It was discovered that, each participant, to a varying degree had a basic understanding of the term 'parental involvement'. The general belief was that it involved participation from the parents on some level. "...parental involvement means that parents are actively involved in their children's lives..." Barnardos, 2006 and Curtis & O'Hagan, have both outlined that the term 'parental involvement' as an engaged participation by the parents, which includes regular two-way and meaningful communications between parents and the childcare provider. Only one participant acknowledged that parental involvement goes beyond, communication. "...I believe that parental involvement is a collaboration, a partnership between the parents and us the early year's practitioners..." Reynolds and Clements, (2005) also recognise that parental involvement goes beyond communication, in fact they have defined parental involvement through three stages, the behaviour with the child, the approaches and the beliefs of the parents and the expectations that are placed on the child's future.

In addition, other definitions provided by researchers, have referred to parental involvement as a partnership, such as the classification that has been made by Mittler & Mittler, (1982). They have identified parental involvement as a partnership which includes, mutual respect, and recognition of the essential quality between parents and professionals sharing information, skills, etc... Another participant of the study reflected this definition in one of their answers, providing that, "...parental involvement is just that, the latter word of your question, involvement, however it's also about partnership, after all how can, they be involved if they are not encouraged by us to do so..."

Pugh & De'Ath, (1989), also suggest that parental involvement goes beyond information sharing, and that it is a partnership characterized by mutual respect and

willingness to negotiate. The findings in the study imply that, although the participants recognise and value parental involvement, they do not acknowledge the fact that it should be encouraged and improved upon. The findings thus far, have also indicated that, despite the participants obvious qualifications, (cannot practice without), they are not as well informed of the importance of parental involvement as they may have suggested. In light of this, the participants were then asked questions in relation to policies around parental involvement. Three of the participants acknowledged the fact that there was a policy on parental involvement, but that they weren't sure of the actuality of content or what the guidelines were. The remaining two participants, were not sure if there was one, but that they were aware of the importance of having one. One participant stated that "...I'm actually not sure if there is one, I know we had one in the last centre I worker in... A written policy is so important, it gives us direction and assistance in maintaining a partnership with parents..." This concurs with the research of Wilson, (2015) who recognises, that through government policy, the growing understanding of the role that parent's play and the recognition of their value can be distinguished. Similarly, Hodson & Basford, (2010) have implied that through the development of parental involvement policies, the principle of parental involvement can be fully supported and the importance of said involvement can be encouraged by the early year's practitioners. i the responses from the other participants suggested that they had a vague understanding of why there should be a policy. The findings suggest that the participants, are not aware that the lack of policy, in relation to parental involvement can discourage parents from becoming involved. Furthermore, the findings also suggest that, despite the fact that government legislation both highlights and strongly encourages the provision of public policies on parental involvement, (Cable, Millar & Goodliff, 2012), none of the participants identified this as a factor of the importance of having a written policy in the centre.

Overall the findings for this section, have indicated that the participants of the study, did not fully understand nor appreciate the importance of parental involvement within the early years setting. However, despite this revelation, it is not completely unpredictable, given that the term according to, Sheridan & Moorman, 2015 and Epstein, (1994), acts as an umbrella term that only broadly categorizes the elements of parental involvement.

Benefits of Parental involvement

From the findings that were obtained and presented in the previous section of this study, a number of similarities were identified in relation to this particular objective. Participants were in agreement that there were many benefits to be gained from involving parents in the early years setting. The majority of the respondents indicated that children, parents and practitioners were all beneficiaries. This finding corresponds to that of the researcher of Jarvis, George & Holland, (2013) who have highlighted that, it is incontrovertible that there are in fact many benefits to be gained from building positive relationships between the practitioners, the children and the parents. Schweinhart, Barnes and Weikart, (1993) also believe that it is unmistakably clear, that when parents and educators work together in partnership, children's long-term development and learning can be positively enhanced.

The results also found that, the majority of participants identified children as being the biggest beneficiary of parental involvement. This finding concurs with the literature of (Rodd, 2011) who has confirmed that parents have a crucial influence over what their children experience and achieve at home. He continues on to provide that, this influence should extend to their children's early years settings there are a number of advantages that can be gained for the child. All of the participants provided that there are multiple advantages of parental involvement for the child. Some of their comments included;

"...If a parent is involved in their child's early years, then the child will benefit greatly in a number of ways...They become more social...have positive attitudes...enjoy coming to the centre..."

"...Children who experience their parent's involvement in the early years, develop more positively and enter the school stage more easily..."

"...The more invested a parent is in their child and their early years, the more we are able to get out of them...They are more outgoing... enjoy engaging with other children...exceed in certain activities..."

These viewpoints from the practitioners, have all been highlighted through literature over a number of decades. For instance, Lopez et al, (2004), has stated that

“Family involvement predicts children’s school success. Developmental and educational research confirms that parental involvement is strongly associated with a child’s social development and academic performance.”

In addition, Mhathuna and Taylor, (2012) have pointed out, that when parents are involved in their children’s early years setting, the children tend to have a much more positive outlook and attitude.

The participants also suggested that transitions can be a lot easier for children when their parents are involved. A number of examples were provided two of the participants in the study, such as:

Having highlighted the benefits of parental involvement in the early years setting for the child, the findings have also suggested that, the participants of the study believe that there are tangible benefits that can be gained for parents too. This finding is reiterated by the studies of Cable, Miller & Goodliff, 2002; Pugh & Duffy, 2010; Ward, 2009; Jarvis, George & Holland, 2013) who have all examined the number of benefits that parents have to gain by participating in their children’s early years.

The participants of the study also highlighted the benefits that can be gained for parents as well as the children. They acknowledged the fact that parents are beneficiaries of parental involvement too. This finding concurs with Epstein, (1993) who has identified through research, that parents can experience personal gains from participating in their child’s early years. He has also suggested that when they are provided with opportunities to participate, it can often contribute to the growth of their confidence. However the majority of the participants recognised that the main benefit to be gained for parents, is that it provides parents with the opportunity to develop their knowledge in relation to their child’s development. Epstein, (1993) has stated, in relation to this particular finding that, when parents and practitioners have a strong working partnership, it can provide them with the opportunity to develop their level of knowledge and to learn more about their child’s developmental stages. Another benefit that was mentioned by three of the participants, was that it allows parents to feel respected, and valued within the centre. Their opinions matter. The opportunity to provide input into their child’s learning and development. Similarly, On Participant suggested that:

“...Parents know that we respect them as individuals when we converse with them on a regular basis. When we ask their advice, they feel that their opinions are worth something, and that as a parent they are a valuable asset...”

The above finding, coincides with that of the national framework Aistear, (2009), where it is documented that, when parents are involved in the early years setting of their children, they often develop a feeling of self-worth and respect. Rodd, (2011) also provides that, when parents are provided with opportunities to converse with the practitioners, they can provide the practitioners with information regarding their family's values and traditions which enables parents to feel that their beliefs are being understood and accounted for. Rodd, (2011).

Other findings from the study suggest that the participants have varied opinions about the benefits for parents, aside from those that have been mentioned. One participant suggested that “... When we work together, the parents can trust us and seek advice when they need to...” Another participant mentioned; “...Parents benefit from involvement in the sense that, they can provide input in to their child's learning and development...”

Research also suggests, that, when parents are involved in their children's early years setting, they are all the time developing their own parenting skills. (Jarvis, George & Holland, 2013).

Benefits for the practitioners

The results of the study also found that participants believed that they too, were beneficiaries of parental involvement within the early years setting. The results of this particular question varied quite substantially, however and none the less, the majority of the participants, believed that the main benefit that is to be gained for early years practitioners is that is allowed the relationship between the parents and the practitioners to develop. Some of the comments they made in relation to this factor, were;

“...Well, when parents are involved we can actually work with them...”

“..We can work together instead of against each other. Equal partners, that way we are both happy....”

“...friendship can be created, it sounds silly, but there is a lot to be said with having a good and happy relationship with parents...”

Having a strong connection between parents and practitioner is essential for creating a quality learning environment for children. In relation to the above finding, and according to Rodd, (2011), creating a positive relationship between the practitioner and the parents can be very rewarding for the early year’s practitioner.

Other varied benefits that were mentioned by the participants, included the fact that it enabled the practitioners to gain a better understanding of the children in their care and, “...When I develop a relationship with the parents, it means that they will confide in me, and I will be able to support the child when the parents provide me with information...” One of the participants added the benefit of “an easier life” stating that, “...It’s easier to work with parents rather than against them...if you are constantly at loggerheads with a parent, then you are sure to go home with an unnecessary headache...”

In addition to this, Hayes, (2010) has pointed out that when parents and practitioners work together, they can support parents in their overall parenting which will in turn cause the parents to value their role as their children’s educators more.

The Barriers of Parental Involvement

This study has revealed that parental involvement is not always easily achieved. There are a number of factors that can hinder the active participation of parents in their children’s early years setting. These factors have been outlined by the participants in the study and each respondent has acknowledged in some form, that some of these barriers can be quite challenging for them to overcome. Research has also indicated that there are many challenges and barriers that can contribute to the breakdown of parental involvement and that it is because of these factors that there is in actual fact a large gap between the literature around the practice of parental involvement and the implementation of that practice. (Parker-Rees & Leeson, 2015; Hornby 2011. Rudd 2011.)

The participants were asked whether they believed that there are barriers in achieving successful parental involvement. The findings of this study reveal that all

of the participants believe that there are a number of barriers. This finding concurs with that of Goodall, (2010) and Hayes, (2013) who also agree, that the breakdown of parental involvement fundamentally comes down to a number of factors.

All of the participants have identified that the main barrier of parental involvement is the parent's lack of time. This barrier was closely related to outside commitments. In response to this question all five of the participants identified the factor of time or rather lack of as being a major barrier that impedes parents from being involved in their children's early years.

"...There is an issue of time for a lot of parents, when parents have no time because they are rushing to work, it can create pressure and sometimes even tension..."

"...A lot of parents and carers just don't have the time, it can because of work, parents who are working very long hour can often mean then their involvement in their child's early years is limited.

"...They are always rushing trying to get older children to school, dentist appointments, doctor appointments, and work...there always seems to be something that gets in the way for parents..."

Donohue and Gaynor (2010) have highlighted the fact that one of the reasons as to why parents are unable to fully involve themselves into their children's early years education is due to the parent's lack of time due to outside commitments. Goodall, (2010) have similarly suggested that a lack of parental involvement can stem from parental expectations such as work, which in turn limits the amount of time that parents can afford to communicate with their child's educator.

The participants have also suggested that the issuer of language barriers can sufficiently effect the level of involvement from parents. This response echoed the research of Lewis and Henderson, (1997) and Prince-Griffiths, (2007)) who have highlighted the fact that language barriers in particular, can have a huge impact on communication between the early years practitioners and the parents.

This finding was not all together surprising however, as it has been reported that parents who do not speak English as their mother language tend to not involve themselves as much as those who do. Some of the responses included statements such as, it is really difficult to engage with parents when English is not their first

language. "... I think that they do not feel comfortable having to communicate with us in English and so avoid us as much as possible..."

It's important for us to make contact with the parents, but this can be quite difficult when a parent you would like to talk to doesn't speak the same language..."

When we have any upcoming events we make announcements through letters or emails but it must be very difficult for non-English speaker to be involved when quite possibly they do not understand what it is we are trying to portray..

However when participants were asked were the policies, written in English and do they cater for non-English speaking parents, or for parents from different communities, the majority responded that they were not, the response was mixed for example, One participant, stated: "...Our policies have always been written English, and to be honest they were devised so long ago, I don't think it was even thought about..." While another, stated that, "...it's an English country, they should be written in English..."

Hayes, (2013), has stated that in order to build a partnership between the parents and practitioners, there must be both recognition and respect of the different cultures opinions and values. Barnardos, (2010) have also outlined the significance of devising a policy document that reflects the cultures, values and concerns of all parents and children.

Most of the factors practitioners mentioned reflect that the failure of practicing parental involvement in the school was as a result of parents attitudes.

However, when the participants were asked to identify the challenges that they have faced in parental participation, interestingly they responded that dealing with families from 'certain communities' was very challenging in that, it often was difficult to facilitate their needs and expectations of the centre. They commented that;

"...Sometimes, I find it a challenge to connect with certain families...There are many children who practice different religions attending this centre, and each parent have different requests..."

"...In some religions, the mother cannot collect the child with the father...which is fine, except when they arrive they just take the child and go... they don't want to

communicate with you at all..."This response was considered relevant as it reiterates what Aistear, (2009) have documented, stating that there are a number of communities living in Ireland today who have different expectations, however it is important that when focusing on the subject of parental involvement the various different cultures and ethnic groups are considered. Prince-Griffiths (2007) has stated that, cultural diversity has affected parental involvement substantially and in relation to cultural diversities language barriers can have a huge impact on communication between early years practitioner and parents.

Another barrier that was outlined by the participants as being a subsequent factor of ineffective involvement from parents, was the issue of parent's attitudes. Some of the participants responses included:

"...Some of the parents really don't care at all to be involved, we just mind their children as far as their concerned..."

"...Attitude...a lot of parents have the wrong mind frame when it comes to involvement...they compare their children to other children all the time...if they don't get on with a certain parent over something minor and then won't be involved in school outing or activities if they know the parent they dislike is attending...it's ridiculous..."

This coincides with the literature of Fitzgerald, (2010) and Wilson, (2015), who have both established that one of the reasons that parents do not involve themselves in their children's early years is down to their particular attitudes. They have suggested that the perceptions that parents can sometimes have, in relation to the practitioners invitation of involvement, can often result in parents not wanting to be involved at all, however It was also revealed that, parents attitude was a contributing factor in the breakdown of parental involvement, with participants stating that, "some parents just don't!.. "It's a case of drop and go..." According to Hodson and Basford (2010) however, when parents believe that their involvement is hindering the work of the early years practitioners then they are not likely to engage with the centre.

Evaluation

As the field of early childhood care and education has responded to the demands of significant change in recent years, it has become evident that one of the core elements that has been a primary focus for many practitioners is the effectiveness of parental involvement within the early years. There is copious amounts of literature to suggest that an effective relationship between practitioners and parents is essential for creating quality learning environments for young children. Quality is another factor of parental involvement and factors such as written policies on parental involvement were discussed.

The researcher believes that, the respondents of the study provided a detailed insight on the early year's practitioner's perspective and were very aware of the importance of parental involvement. However their understanding of the term was not concrete, although to be expected given that, there is no definitive definition of the term. While it was understood that the participants were well informed of the benefits that can be gained from parental involvement, none of them provided this as a reason behind the importance of said involvement.

There are many barriers that can contribute to the breakdown of parental involvement and many of these obstacles that influence the level of parental involvement were discussed in detail by the participants. These include, lack of time, lack of commitment, language and communication skills, lack of confidence etc... the issues around parental involvement that the participants find challenging were also discussed. The final section of this study will present the conclusions and recommendations that have been drawn as a result of the study.

Section Six

Conclusion and

Recommendations

Conclusion and recommendations

Introduction

The overall aim of this research study was to examine the early years practitioners' views on the importance of parental involvement within the early years setting. Before this could be established, the author needed to research other literature in order to compare the findings to that of the researchers. It is evident from copious amounts of literature, (Hayes, 2009; Donohue, Gaynor, 2011; Bruce, 2009; Aistear, 2009) that the best outcomes for children can be achieved through parental involvement within the early years and that the most important relationship a child has is the one it has with its parents. Mhathuna & Taylor (2012). This qualitative study was used to evoke the opinions and views of early year's practitioners, through the process of interviewing. This section of the study will display the researchers' conclusions that were derived from the other sections of this study. The author will also include her own recommendations for future practice of parental involvement within the early years.

Conclusion

Through this study it was identified that all participants were in agreement in relation to the importance of parental involvement and the benefits that can be gained from

maintaining a good working partnership between practitioners and parents. However, it became evident that their understanding of the term varied from one participant to another. This is not unpredictable as there is still no absolute definition for the term 'parental involvement'. The challenges that are faced in relation to parental involvement and the barriers that contribute to the breakdown of said involvement varied slightly from one participant to another, however the general consensus was that the issue of time or rather a lack of was the main contributor to the failure of effective parental involvement. It was also evident from the completion of this study that the participants were not very well informed in relation to policies on parental involvement.

Recommendations

Based on the findings obtained as a result of this study, the author would recommend the following:

Early years practitioners should be provided with the opportunity to attend a training course in relation to parental involvement. Other programmes of parental participation should also be encouraged among the early year's practitioners. The reason the author would recommend this, is to enable practitioners to become aware and to develop their understanding of the importance of parental involvement, and to understand what it should entail. Management should encourage them to no end in the endeavour to develop their professionalism when it comes to partnership with the parents.

The second recommendation that the author would suggest, would be to develop a written policy on parental involvement that is both available and comprehensible to all parents and practitioners. The policies should be flexible and there should be an option of language translations to help encourage non English/Irish nationalities, to become involved on a deeper level of commitment. With an available policy, practitioners will be able to fully understand the guidelines that the centre has employed and will be able to use it as an aid in their future implementation of parental involvement programmes.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.

Consent form

Consent form

Parental involvement in the early years setting (Partnership with parents)

Consent form

I agree to take part in this study on parental involvement within the early years. I understand what my participation involves and will comply with the best of my ability. I have been made aware that the data I will provide will be strictly confidential and the information I give will be used only for the purposes of the study.

Signature_____Date_____

Appendis 2

Information sheet

Dear participant,

My name is Frances White. I am currently studying for my MA (Honors) in Child and Youth Studies in Athlone Institute of Technology. As part of my dissertation, I am conducting a particular research relevant to the childcare setting: Parental engagement with Early Years practitioners.

I would greatly appreciate it if you would take the time to help me with the research.

The aim of this research is to examine parental involvement in the early years setting (Partnership with parents). The research is examined under three main objectives. The first objective is to examine the early year's practitioner's views and experiences of parental engagement. The second objective aims to explore the challenges and benefits of parental engagement.

The final objective is to explore the relationship between the early year's practitioner and the parents. In order to progress my research, I will carrying out a number of interviews.

This will involve answering a number of questions around the area of parental engagement in the early years. The interview should last no longer than 40 minutes and you can answer the questions at your own pace. The interview will consist of a variety of questions surrounding the topic such as, the difficulties surrounding parental involvement and what parental engagement actually entails.

Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to take part in the interview if you do

not wish to do so.

All responses will be anonymous. This means that your name will not be mentioned at any stage of this research process. Your responses are also confidential which means they will be used for research purposes only.

Thank you very much for your help.

Appendix 3.

Parental involvement within the early years

Interview questions

Q1. Do you think that it is important to involve parents in the early years setting?

Q2. Why do you think that it is important?

Q3. Do you converse with parents on a regular basis?

Q4. Do you think there are benefits to be gained from engaging in parental involvement?
Any disadvantages?

Q5. Do you believe parents have the time to ask about their children?

Q6. What is your understanding of the term 'parental involvement'?

Q7. What would you rate the level of parental involvement in your centre. Rate between One and Ten, one being the lowest, ten being the highest.

Q8. What is usually the reason for their communication?

Q9. Would you say that you have a good relationship with the parents?

Q10. Have you ever reached out to a parent who wasn't willing to engage with you? If so how did they respond?

Q11 Do you believe that there are any benefits of parental involvement

Q12. Do you think that parental involvement is an indicator of a quality service?

Q13. How would you like parents to be involved in your centre?

Q14. Why would you like parents to be involved?

Q15. Who decides if parents should be involved?

Q16. What do you think are some of the reasons that parents may not want to be involved?

Q17. Are there opportunities for parents to engage with the centre?

- Q18. Do you believe that there are any barriers in relation to parental involvement?
- Q19. Does your policy include any information of the parental involvement?
- Q20. Are there any children from different cultural backgrounds attending the centre?
- Q21. Have you found that the parents from different cultural backgrounds are able to engage with the centre?
- Q22. Are your policies written in English only?
- Q23. Have you ever engaged in any cultural days for the parents to partake in?
- Q24. Have you ever invited a parent to come in and speak to the children?