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Foreword: Our children, our future

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We are delighted to present the proceedings of the international conference in early childhood care and education, 'Our Children, Our Future', hosted by the Institute of Technology, Sligo, Ireland, in October 2011. The first conference of its kind in Ireland, it was attended by over 150 practitioners, policy-makers, politicians (including the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Frances Fitzgerald TD), researchers, managers, academics and, most importantly, students who will be the early years professionals of the future.

The years of the Celtic Tiger, although now much critiqued and even derided, saw a fundamental shift in the extent, nature and role of early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Ireland. The sector witnessed key policy developments and a significant investment in infrastructure. Although this period of transformation is ongoing, it is always worthwhile to reflect collectively on our journey to date, particularly with the objective of informing future strategic policy and practice direction for our children.

The conference involved national and international keynote speakers: Professor Sheila Greene, Director of the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin; Professor Nóirín Hayes, Dublin Institute of Technology; Professor Diane Levin, Wheelock College, Boston; Professor Ronny Bruffaerts, Katholieke University, Leuven; and Fergus Finlay, Chief Executive Officer of Barnardos. These speakers provided an informative and deeply engaged context for subsequent analyses, complemented by a similarly incisive and passionate input from Minister Fitzgerald.

There followed presentations of the papers included in this volume. These papers centre on the three key aspects of ECCE: policy, practice and professional identity. Stimulated by these contributions, discussion fora, or *agorae*, explored, discussed, reflected upon and reviewed the complexity of the sector.

What emerged from the presentations and *agorae* were some distinctive and persistent themes, which you will also discern in the full papers presented here. These included the complex and often contradictory pathways followed by Irish government policies in relation to ECCE. There were hints in the analyses of recent strategy

documents, and in the Minister's speech, that a more coherent and child-centred approach is emergent, but its realisation – like so much of contemporary Irish social policy – will ultimately be shaped by the financial and political crises within which the country and the economy are now ensnared.

Notwithstanding the fiscal uncertainties, ECCE practitioners across the island continue to engage in innovative and exciting practices that challenge the status quo and seek to support positive social change, for example in the fields of creativity and social inclusion, or the celebration of diversity. Innovative practices are increasingly supported by a research base of evaluation and analysis that allows for reflection and dissemination of best practice. This will help to drive the enhancement of quality provision, which in turn will benefit practitioners, parents, communities and – necessarily – children.

At the centre of this practice base sit the ECCE practitioners, a group engaged in a challenging and sometimes frustrating project of professionalisation. While our communities and politicians claim to want the best for their youngest members (those aged from birth to six years), are they prepared to pay for the best? At the moment it appears not, and the conference was reminded of the harsh reality for many ECCE practitioners: low pay; insecure employment; lack of professional recognition and respect; and poor or non-existent career paths. This situation must be addressed urgently.

Education and training programmes, in particular the degree programmes offered by members of PLÉ, and conferences such as this one, are key steps towards the development of the professionalisation project. They are a means by which practitioners can develop the essential professional competencies, critical knowledge and reflective capacities that will make them effective supporters, educators, guides, facilitators and advocates for all our children.

It is hoped that this highly accessible and interesting set of papers will provide a rich source of ideas, information and challenges for the current and future generations of practitioners, managers, policy-makers and educators. Please read and debate the material here, and if it stimulates you to think, say or do something new, that is fantastic!

Rich discussion, networking opportunities and developing research alliances were all features of this conference. But perhaps the most important outcome was an unequivocal agreement amongst key stakeholders to work together in providing quality holistic care and education to our children today and in the future.

We want to thank all those who presented at the event, who submitted papers for review and who provided manuscripts for publication in these proceedings. We also wish to thank our peer reviewers, whose time and dedication to this process were greatly appreciated. In relation to the event itself, we thank the Irish Social Science Platform; PLÉ; the staff and students of the Institute of Technology, Sligo; AVA (audio-visual services); and Wheats (catering). In regard to the publication of these proceedings in eBook and printed form, we acknowledge the support of the Higher Education Authority funded National Digital Learning Repository.

Abbreviations

BA	Bachelor of Arts
CCC	county childcare committees
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
CPD	continuous professional development
DES	Department of Education and Science/Skills
DHC	Department of Health and Children
DJELR	Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
ECCE	early childhood care and education
ECEC	early childhood education and care
EHO	environmental health officer
ELI	Early Learning Initiative
EOCP	Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme
ETL	Enhancing Teaching–Learning Environments
EU	European Union
EYDU	Early Years Development Unit
EYEPU	Early Years Education Policy Unit
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
HSE	Health Service Executive
MIFC	Media Initiative for Children
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCIP	National Childcare Investment Programme
NDLR	National Digital Learning Repository
NI	Northern Ireland
NVCC	National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative
NVCO	national voluntary childcare organisations
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OMC	Office of the Minister for Children
OMCYA	Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs
PCHP	Parent Child Home Programme
PHN	public health nurse
PLÉ	Pedagogy, Learning and Education
ROI	Republic of Ireland
RPL	recognition of prior learning
SEN	special educational needs
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VEC	vocational education committee



Thematic strand: Early childhood care and education policy

Policy-making and the needs of children

While approaches to policy-making per se in Ireland have been characterised as secretive and clandestine, the old maxim that ‘children should be seen but not heard’ perhaps aptly epitomises Ireland’s neglect of a child-centric social policy dialectic. The emergence of purposeful campaigning groups such as the Children’s Rights Alliance has served to underscore the absence of state mechanisms capable of formally capturing children’s voices in the policy-making arena. Children’s awareness of their rights is not reflected in them being consulted about or participating in policies directed towards their imagined needs. Recent audits of children’s social policy deficits reveal that there is still no national nutrition strategy in place to tackle obesity, still no definitive date on the long-anticipated children’s rights referendum and prevarication on the publication of a new national children’s strategy.

At the European Union (EU) level a period of relative policy stasis has followed the publication of *Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child* (2006). Eurostat reported that 20 per cent of children living in the EU in 2008 were at risk of poverty, yet the *Europe 2020 Strategy* launched by the European Commission in 2010 has been criticised by Eurochild and others as being far too focused on economic growth to the possible detriment of social policy concerns, particularly those affecting children. Moreover, it is interesting to observe the flurry of recent reports on the position of the family and commensurate family policy formulation across a number of European countries that appear to subsume the specificity of children and their particularistic policy provision and needs. Can children’s rights and their policy needs be best advanced within a family policy paradigm?

The policy-making and children strand of this conference sought to explore some of the above issues by examining where children are within the policy context and how and where this position could and should be developed in the future.

Emerging quality

An historical analysis of early childhood policy development in Ireland from a quality perspective

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In 1996 Ireland's early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector consisted of a relatively small number of community-run playgroups in community centres and even fewer privately run crèches in large urban areas. These services operated in a policy vacuum, with minimum standards only starting to be introduced, a very limited understanding of the concept of quality in an early childhood setting and exceptionally restricted access to training for childcare workers. Services received little or no funding and ran largely on a shoestring budget and with donated toys (Border County Childcare Network, 2001). By 2011 the landscape of Ireland's ECCE sector was very different; this was a result of an ECCE policy revolution in Ireland over the previous fifteen years. This paper attempts to chronicle this revolution from a quality perspective and examines the effects of these policies on the emerging quality of services.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Ireland's only child-related policy developments dealt with children in crisis and resulted in actions that involved social workers and social care professionals working with children who were experiencing difficult and unusual situations (Quin et al., 2005). For the early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector, there existed a true vacuum of policy. The few crèches that did exist were in the major cities of Dublin and Cork and to a lesser extent Galway and Limerick (Katherine Howard Foundation, 2005). More common was a service known as the 'community playgroup'. Parents in rural areas who recognised the importance of social skills development in early childhood would set up a playgroup in their local community centre so that families living in isolated areas could get together and the children could play together (Katherine Howard Foundation, 2005).

The first policy development of significance occurred in 1991 with the introduction of the Child Care Act, which, while it dealt mostly with children in crisis situations, did contain a small but important chapter on pre-school service regulations. These regulations were enacted in 1996 and began a process of change within the (then



termed) childcare sector; this process has dramatically shaped the ECCE sector we have today. The newly appointed inspection teams routinely discovered that the minimum standards set in the regulations were not being achieved and indeed were virtually unachievable for the average community pre-school service (Border County Childcare Network, 2001). Resources were needed to support childcare services to achieve their modest quality goals. This paper outlines the key developments in the pursuit of quality in the ECCE sector.

STRATEGIC GOALS

The first serious investment in the ECCE sector came in 1999 with the National Childcare Strategy (Government of Ireland, 1999), a programme of development funded by a European Union (EU) initiative, the Irish Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP). The programme was launched in 1999 and preceded twelve years of rapid policy development resulting in a vastly different ECCE landscape by 2011. The three focus areas of the EOCP were co-ordination, quantity and quality. To advance these areas, the programme established a county childcare committee in each county and city council area of Ireland, thirty-two in all. Each committee implemented actions relating to the three strategic focus areas for the ECCE services in that county.

As the most complex of objectives (Irish Preschool and Playschool Association, 2003), quality became, and remains, the major discussion point. With the pre-school regulations setting down only minimum standards, a consensus of willing partners inevitably emerged to embrace the growing need for a quality movement in Ireland.

The leading parties in this interesting process have been the county childcare committees, the national voluntary childcare organisations, the pre-school inspection teams and the training and educational institutions and agencies (EOCP, 2004). National voluntary childcare organisations (NVCOs) active within the sector lobbied the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform for funding to develop quality initiatives. The EOCP released funding to the NVCOs and to county childcare committees for quality initiatives, with the result that services, which had been struggling to meet the basic minimum standards set down in the pre-school regulations, were now embarking on ambitious quality development programmes. Three NVCOs emerged as leaders in the quality movement: the Irish Preschool and Playgroups Association, the National Children's Nurseries Association and the Border Counties Childcare Network. Each of these bodies has released quality enhancement programmes, specific to the needs of its targeted support audience.

Training also became a key focus, with EU policies coming out strongly in favour of childcare workers having accredited ECCE qualifications. The main Irish training bodies, FÁS and the VECs (vocational education committees), were represented on each county childcare committee and thus began the process of rolling out a one-year training programme on childcare accredited by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) at Level 5. The emphasis on attaining this qualification was massive and the accepted culture of untrained childcare workers changed rapidly to one that expected personnel to have attained or be at least in the process of attaining this qualification by the stated end of the EOCP in 2006.

The main aim of county childcare committees (CCCs) was to co-ordinate the advancement of quality childcare provision. To enable this to happen, each CCC



developed a childcare strategic plan (up to 2006) based on a shared vision and analysis of the needs within the county. Funding from the EOCP enabled the CCCs to employ additional staff and to implement the actions contained in their strategic plans. Chairs of the CCCs became members of the county development boards, which are the unified statutory structure within counties; this enabled the CCCs to ensure that childcare was positioned as a key issue in forward planning for individual counties (EOCP, 2004).

The year 2006 was the milestone within the consciousness of the ECCE sector as it was the end date of the EOCP. As 2006 approached, anxiety about the future of the sector became elevated and public discussion centred on the potential to build on the EOCP with an enhanced focus on quality. While the demand for a follow-on programme grew, so too did the demand for an increased focus on quality within the policy of the sector. The quality movement used the European Commission's 1996 childcare quality targets to garner support for a new quality-based policy.

READY TO LEARN

The White Paper on ECCE, entitled *Ready to Learn* (Department of Education and Science, 1999), was the first policy to deal with the issue of quality in Ireland's ECCE sector. It recognised that quality in the ECCE experience is of vital importance to the well-being of citizens and hence of society. It grew out of recommendations in a National Forum on Early Childhood Education report, which had called for a White Paper to put ECCE 'on a new footing' in Ireland (Coolahan, 1998).

The White Paper called for the establishment of an Early Years Development Unit (EYDU) to carry out its recommendations. An EYDU was not then established. However, an important action arising from the White Paper was the establishment of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE). CECDE was officially launched in October 2002. It was tasked with devising a quality framework for ECCE, developing initiatives for children who experience educational disadvantage and for children with special needs, and preparing the groundwork for the proposed EYDU.

In 2001 Ireland asked the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to carry out a review of access, quality and co-ordination of Irish ECCE services. The subsequent report examined the directions of ECCE policy in Ireland from both a quality and an economic perspective and valuably included recommendations not only on future directions for quality but also on 'financing new measures' (OECD, 2004b). This report was highly influential in the design of the post-2006 programme for ECCE in Ireland, known as the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) (Office of the Minister for Children, 2006). The OECD report also made recommendations on the establishment of a central political and policy home for ECCE, which led to the establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC) in 2006. The OMC designed and managed the NCIP. This position was further strengthened in 2011 with the establishment of a full ministerial position, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.

The development of the EYDU, which had been called for in the 1999 White Paper and planned for by CECDE, materialised as the Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU). The EYEPU was established in 2006 within the Department of Education and co-located with the OMC. Its responsibility is to oversee the development of policies and provision for early years education within an overall strategic policy framework developed with the



OMC. These arrangements are designed to address the issues of fragmentation of policy development and service delivery in the sector and respond directly to related recommendations in the 1999 White Paper and the OECD review of early childhood education in Ireland (OECD, 2006). The EYEPU has effectively replaced CECDE, which was wound up in November 2008. However, CECDE's prolific output of quality-based research and policy has not yet been matched by the EYEPU.

Meanwhile, the National Childcare Co-ordinating Committee had been established in 2002 by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR) to provide a forum linking government departments, state agencies, the social partners and the childcare sector that would oversee the development of childcare in Ireland, including the delivery of the EOCP and other government initiatives to support the sector (Government of Ireland, 1999). This group's major contribution was the development of the *Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development of the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (DJELR, 2002). This document examined the professionalisation of the ECCE workforce, with a special emphasis on existing workers in the field. It is guiding the ongoing process of accrediting the prior learning of childcare workers seeking advancement on the early years degree programmes recently introduced in Ireland's higher educational institutions.

QUALITY RESEARCH

The quality movement has both prompted and been progressed by CECDE research. In 2004 CECDE research on quality development in an Irish context found that the key to ensuring quality development is a co-ordinated and integrated policy framework for ECCE. This has been put in place through the establishment of the OMC. CECDE research also found that the most significant indicator of quality in ECCE is the workforce. High levels of staff turnover and problems of retention were found to be common, largely as a result of unfavourable terms of employment linked to the issue of training and qualifications and the low status afforded to childcare. Perhaps, with the increase in degree education of ECCE professionals, this will become a policy focus. Such a policy focus was also called for in the National Economic and Social Forum (2005) report on ECCE policy and continues to be needed. The National Childcare Strategy, under which the EOCP operated, sets out clear recommendations relating to staffing and qualifications, which have not been implemented. The CECDE research findings on the importance of the ECCE workforce in determining quality have been upheld by international research (Melhuish, 2004).

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) produced a special consultative document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*, in 2004, and launched its early childhood curriculum framework, Aistear, in 2009. Aistear aims to provide all children with appropriately enriching, challenging and enjoyable learning opportunities from birth to six years. In addition, 2006 saw the launch of CECDE's Síolta programme, which is a national quality framework for early childhood education, and the updating of the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations.

The 2006 regulations expand the brief of the inspection team in the area of quality and child development. They also require 50 per cent of the childcare staff in a service to be qualified. However, the definition of 'qualified' remains a contentious issue and is



largely understood as being set at FETAC Level 5 as opposed to the EU-recommended degree-level award (European Commission, 1996).

THE ECCE SCHEME

Possibly one of the most influential policy changes in the early years sector was the introduction of the free pre-school year, known as the ECCE scheme. The initiative aims to give children access to a free pre-school year of appropriate programme-based activities in the year before they start primary school. It is strictly suited to children in the age bracket of 3 years and 3 months to 4 years and 6 months. The scheme commenced in January 2010, offering 90,000 places. While it has promoted the upskilling of all staff members by 2012, it has not pushed the boundaries past FETAC Level 5 training, which offers only the minimum childcare skills.

The ECCE scheme links eligibility to both compliance with the Síolta framework and the training of staff members within services. Síolta represents a hugely positive development in the progression of the quality agenda within the sector. Thus, its linkage to the ECCE scheme, together with the recognised qualifications of staff members, is highly commendable. In order to support this move, the government has launched the workforce development plan (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs [OMCYA], 2010), which requires that, after an initial period, all lead early years staff must have a qualification at Level 6 or higher. The plan aims to address issues such as access and participation. Unqualified staff were asked to commit to becoming qualified within the first two years of the ECCE scheme in order to be eligible for participation in the scheme. A workforce that incorporates a practitioner with a third-level degree is eligible for a higher rate of capitation in the ECCE scheme.

SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS

Before the National Childcare Strategy there was limited debate about quality ECCE in Ireland. However, since then, we have seen:

- ◆ The commitment of EOCP funding in the National Childcare Strategy 2000–2006.
- ◆ Further funding under the National Childcare Investment Programme 2006–2010.
- ◆ The free pre-school year (ECCE scheme) and its linkages to staff training and Síolta.
- ◆ €85 million in EOCP funding specifically for quality initiatives, mainly to support the work of the county childcare committees and the national voluntary childcare organisations.
- ◆ CECDE's work on quality, including a countrywide consultation on quality issues (CECDE, 2003), a national review of quality in ECCE (CECDE, 2004a), an international review of quality (CECDE, 2004b), an international conference held in Dublin on 'Questions of Quality' in September 2004 and another conference on quality in November 2007.
- ◆ Síolta, a national quality framework for early childhood education, and its co-ordinated roll-out through the county childcare committees (CECDE, 2006).
- ◆ Aistear, a national early childhood curriculum framework for children up to the age of six years (NCCA, 2009).



- ◆ Degree courses in ECCE offered at eleven third-level institutions throughout Ireland; all experiencing healthy intake levels.
- ◆ A full ministerial position for children and youth affairs.

Taken together, these developments represent significant progress in relation to Ireland's standing in the field of quality in ECCE. The National Childcare Strategy also acknowledged that high quality is crucial to the future development of ECCE. Under the EOCP, quality issues were greatly supported through the work of the national voluntary childcare organisations and the county childcare committees and through a number of innovative projects. Supports to networks of providers ensured that they addressed issues of quality collectively with a view to informed practice. As a result, there has been an increase in the number of publications on quality by the voluntary childcare providers (CECDE, 2004c).

WHAT NEXT?

It would seem that while Ireland has experienced a massive phase of development in the ECCE area, there is still much work to be done to bring it up to standard from the quality perspective.

The National Childcare Strategy 2006–2010 identified the need to develop the skills and qualifications profile of the workforce in the ECCE sector. In June 2009 the OMCYA presented a discussion paper on developing the workforce in the ECCE sector. The paper's focus was on how to supply the existing and potential Irish childcare workforce with a variety of applicable and creative means of further training and education. This led to the publication of the workforce development plan for the ECCE sector, which aims to develop the skills and qualifications profile of childcare practitioners in Ireland (OMCYA, 2010). One channel of obtaining formal qualifications is the recognition of prior learning (RPL), which is now available in many institutes; the national guidelines on RPL state: 'equal value should be given to all forms of learning regardless of source, how it is achieved or when in life it is achieved' (National Framework for Qualifications, 2006). RPL makes it possible for an individual to build on learning achieved and be formally rewarded for it, and these rewards can be formed into accredited educational awards (OMCYA, 2009). Attaining an ECCE degree is further encouraged by eleven higher education institutes across Ireland offering a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) degree in ECCE.

An examination of the outlines of the many reports and initiatives on ECCE that have been introduced since the mid-1990s reveals that a rich base of understandings, ideas, recommendations, research findings and recordings of good international practice is available to Irish policy-makers. It is also clear from the development of *Síolta*, *Aistear* and the ECCE scheme that policy-makers are availing of this resource and developing meaningful quality-based policies. The research and consultative base for the development of these policies has been both deep and wide and the sector is well served with committed and informed advocates in both the county childcare committees and the national voluntary childcare organisations.

However, the rationale for further action is well established, particularly in relation to progressing the definition of a 'qualified' practitioner from the basic award at FETAC



Level 5 to degrees at Levels 7 or 8 in line with European standards and recommendations (European Commission, 1996).

A comprehensive, co-ordinated and sustained policy implementation approach is needed to build on the progress that has been made and to establish an enhanced system for the education and care of all Irish children in the vital, formative years of development from birth to six years of age.

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Ready for school?

Curriculum and learning policy in Ireland as part of an evolving debate on school readiness.

A Steiner Waldorf perspective

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Traditionally, Irish children start school from four years of age. With the exception of Britain, this policy is an anomaly within Europe. Who is right? What is the correct age of school readiness? The Steiner Waldorf educational philosophy supports the argument that children are only really ready for formalised learning after six years of age. The reasons for this viewpoint are laid down within this paper. Contemporary Irish educational policy in the form of the curriculum framework, Aistear, is also examined here as a measure of the movement towards the European model of later formal school readiness – a welcome policy development from a Steiner Waldorf perspective.

STARTING SCHOOL

The average school entry age in Europe and Scandinavia is six years. In Britain and Ireland, it is four years. This anomaly triggers a lot of debate on what is the best age to start school and what impact school readiness can have on a child's later educational and holistic development. The Steiner Waldorf educational philosophy very clearly supports age six as an ideal school readiness age. The reasons for this relate to the child's learning methodologies prior to this age and also to the structure of the school system and curriculum and its inappropriateness for the needs of children younger than six.

The origins of the anomalistic early start can be found in the work of educational theorists such as Carl Bereiter, Siegfried Engelmann and E.D. Hirsch, who introduced early academic programmes based on behaviourist learning theories (Elkind, 1987). These theories led to the development of an entire industry producing books and other media to teach academic subjects at home, even down to the infant stage of life. This



development has had an unfortunate effect on early childhood education around the globe. By assuming that learning follows the same principles at all age levels, and that the sooner a child masters critical thinking skills the better, a theory of early learning evolves which ignores children's developing abilities and denies any special quality to childhood, where trustworthy impulses should be allowed to develop and run their course (Hirsch, 1996). Steiner educators articulate a compelling argument against this belief that education is a race, and provide a child-centred alternative to formal instruction for children less than six years of age.

The Irish policy position on this debate is somewhat opaque. The 1999 primary school curriculum is contradictory on its stance towards an appropriate educational approach for children aged four and five. Children in Ireland can attend primary school from the age of four, or three in 'disadvantaged' areas (Department of Education and Science [DES], 2005). Compulsory attendance is from six to sixteen years of age. On the one hand, infants' classes are places where free play is permitted and even emphasised, and little formal learning is brought. On the other, learning outcomes of an academic nature are defined, and their achievement is advocated and determined through standards-based assessment.

Though not mandatory, the majority of four- and five-year-olds have traditionally been enrolled in infant classes in primary schools (Coolahan, 1981). Projections are for significant growth in early years education over the coming decades. The primary school curriculum recognises the 'informality of the learning experience' in the infant classes, yet calls for learning outcomes that can only arise from the formal teaching of basic literacy and numeracy skills (DES, 1999). Anecdotally, it is said that infant teachers are often pressured by parents, school principals and the teachers of classes above them to introduce formal learning, even when it goes against their own judgement of how best to work with young children (Angus, 2011).

Former British Minister of State for Schools and Learners Vernon Coaker said a starting age of six for formal education would be too late, and completely counter-productive (Curtis, 2007); yet the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander, 2009) found that children should not start formal learning until they are six and the kind of play-based learning featured in nurseries and reception classes should go on until then. It found no evidence that an early introduction to formal learning has any benefit, but there are suggestions it can do some harm. In fact, there is a body of evidence to support the argument that an early introduction of didactic curricula may increase anxiety and impact negatively on both self-esteem and longer-term motivation to learn (Elkind, 1987; Elley, 1994; Alexander, 2009). Finland, which consistently ranks at the top of all Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries for educational attainment, and has among the highest per capita number of PhDs in Europe, is unique among European countries in allowing formal schooling to start at age seven (Bruton, 2007).

Steiner kindergarten teachers specialise in non-academic education. Working out of an anthroposophical view of the developing human being, they do not consider attempts to begin teaching children literacy, mathematics and logic-based scientific knowledge before their seventh year to have pedagogical integrity. The word 'curriculum' stems from the Latin word for racecourse, and the first seven years may be looked at as training for the course ahead, rather than an actual joining in the race. This approach is also upheld by conventional research into early educational learning



(National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009a), where it is understood that early scientific and mathematical development is achieved through the experience of texture, shape, volume and weight of real living materials in the natural environment during outdoor play.

In the first years of life, children go through a long period in which they learn through playing and by experience, and also absorb information from external memory, the vast mass of externally prepared and stored information that is accumulated through, for instance, storytelling (Davidmann, 2006). This is predominantly informal learning. If school is defined as a place primarily devoted to formal instruction, then it is a clear contention of Steiner pedagogy that school must only begin after the child has turned six, sometime during the seventh year of life as this is when formal instruction is naturally absorbed by the child without stifling his or her natural impulses to simply experience. Any programme where abstracting of experience is carried out before that is too early. The soundness of this viewpoint was recently confirmed by the Cambridge Primary Review, the most extensive review into primary education in England in forty years, which concurs with the Steiner approach on a later start to schooling. The authors wrote, 'We are convinced that a later start to formal learning allows children to experience the joy of learning without unhealthy stress or the risk of early burn-out' (Alexander, 2009).

AISTEAR AND THE 1999 PRIMARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the body responsible for creating the primary school curriculum, has developed an early childhood curriculum framework called Aistear (NCCA, 2009a). Representatives of many early childhood interest groups, including the Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association, were involved in the consultative process for this document, which perhaps had some bearing on the fact that the framework's philosophy, vision and aims are even more closely aligned with those of Steiner education than are the ones set forth in the primary school curriculum.

The NCCA notes that early childhood refers to the period from birth to six years, while primary education caters for the period from six to twelve years; although in reality most five-year-olds and about half of the country's four-year-olds attend primary school. To meet this reality, the 1999 curriculum lays out the educational approach to be taken with children aged between four and twelve. Obviously, there is an overlap of two years, the time during which children are in infant classes in mainstream school settings, or kindergarten in Steiner terminology. The Department of Education has something of a quandary with infant education, in that the approach needed to educate children of this age properly is so fundamentally different from later primary years, and Aistear appears to be a valid attempt to address this matter. But it is not yet clear whether Aistear is meant to replace the 1999 curriculum as regards this age group.

In an audit of the similarities and differences between the two, Aistear is characterised as a modifying initiative rather than a successor to the infant sections of the primary school curriculum, and they are 'seen as complementing each other' (NCCA, 2009b). The authors seem to say something entirely different, though, when later in the same document they describe them as 'two curriculum approaches' and in the conclusion they state: 'a critical question remains to be answered concerning the status of Aistear vis-à-vis the Curriculum' (NCCA, 2009b).



One respondent to an Irish National Teachers' Organisation Education Committee survey of teachers' views on implementation of the curriculum spoke of her frustration with the state's unclear expectations on caring for young children. Referring to required child–adult ratios, she said, 'This week in play school it can be 1:10 and next week, let's face it, in primary school it can be 30:1 and they still have the same needs' (Nic Craith and Fay, 2007).

If Aistear and the 1999 primary school curriculum are to exist side by side for some time to come, then the similarities are superfluous, but the differences are crucial, as they will need to be engaged with and rectified. There are six key distinctions between Aistear and the 1999 curriculum:

- 1 Aistear uses a practice-oriented approach, whereas the 1999 curriculum uses a more theory-oriented approach.
- 2 When presenting the content of children's learning, although both prioritise knowledge, skills and attitudes, Aistear makes explicit reference to developing children's dispositions as well.
- 3 Aistear emphasises holistic and integrated learning, whereas the 1999 curriculum presents the content of children's learning through divided curriculum areas and suggests theme-based units of work combining elements from various subjects. As part of its more analytical approach, the 1999 curriculum calls for specific time allotments for the various subject areas; Aistear does not deem this necessary or beneficial.
- 4 Aistear takes significant steps to de-emphasise literacy and numeracy expectations, which are a significant component of the 1999 curriculum.
- 5 The 1999 curriculum gives limited attention to learning through play, whereas Aistear endorses the centrality of play and activity in children's early learning.
- 6 Although the aims articulated by each are similar, the 1999 curriculum places importance on laying foundations for the 'next' stage of learning, whereas Aistear 'celebrate(s) early childhood ... as a time of being rather than becoming' (DES, 1999; NCCA, 2009a). Therefore, while there is nothing wrong with having an awareness of next steps, and the audit of the two (NCCA, 2009b) is at pains to point out that Aistear, too, emphasises the importance of laying foundations, the problem arises when 'laying foundations' is interpreted to mean bringing academic abstractions into the educational life of the young child. The 1999 curriculum suggests that interpretation; Aistear does not.

These six distinctions show Aistear to be the more in line with both general European pedagogy and Steiner philosophy on early learning.

Because its priorities are less detailed and more descriptive in nature, Aistear appears to leave greater room for interpretation and consequently allows more freedom of approach. An example of this can be found within Aistear's theme of exploring and thinking, where it states, 'In partnership with the adult, children will use letters, words, sentences, numbers, signs, pictures, colour, and shapes to give and record information, to describe and to make sense of their own and others' experiences' (NCCA, 2009a: A3, LG5). There remains a question of interpretation. If by 'use letters, words, sentences' the authors intend that children be instructed in literacy, this goal would be counter to the Steiner ethos of delaying print symbol systems until after the age of six. Gardner (1991)



supports the philosophical underpinning here by stating that it is no accident that in most societies children do not begin statutory schooling until the age of six or seven, since it is only at that stage that they can usefully deal with symbol systems such as print. Therefore, within the flexibility of the Aistear approach, the use of letters, words and sentences could be limited to oral rather than written representation, then there is no conflict within the learning approaches. Thus evidencing the flexibility, applicability and genius of the Aistear approach. It then would be possible to adopt this aim in a Steiner setting, while still working in such a way as to curtail the advancement of academisation into the early years experience.

The NCCA is engaged in a review, informed by Aistear, of the infant level of the primary school curriculum, starting with the language area. So there is reason to hope that the more child-centred and developmentally appropriate perspectives voiced in Aistear will influence a new way of looking at early childhood education in Ireland, including the time up to First Class. It heralds a more enlightened approach to early childhood education, one that respects the integrity of childhood. Equally importantly, it heralds a change of direction in Irish educational policy development that demonstrates a greater leaning towards less formalised early learning and a veiled recognition that formal learning is much more effective for children after six years of age.

RAISING THE MINIMUM SCHOOL AGE

Although Aistear is a positive move, it does not diminish the argument for raising the minimum school age from where it currently resides at age four to be more in line with the standard European evidence-based practice of formal classroom-style education starting at age six. Ireland's practice of sending four-year-olds into the primary school system is based on post-colonial cultural memory combined with flawed early behavioural theories centred on the premise that all ages of people follow the same learning process: a premise that we now know to be untrue (Hirsch, 1996).

Before the age of six, children learn in an integrated manner through experiential play (Alexander, 2009). Play is their educational vehicle; through quality play experiences they learn real educational goals in relation to pre-maths, pre-science and pre-literacy. Giving them time to develop these pre-stages greatly enriches the learning stages that come after the age of six (Almon, 2003). Introducing formal structures to early learning in non-integrated and non-play-based models is not just unproductive, it can also do harm (Alexander, 2009; Elkind, 1981 and 1987; Elley, 1994).

Raising the minimum age to the current compulsory age of six would require a strong policy commitment to underpin what amounts to a cultural change. However, taking this step could be hugely beneficial to both the early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector and the primary school sector. The resulting expansion of the ECCE sector would have to be accompanied by already much-needed training and education changes for practitioners as well as the consolidation of their sectoral identity, something that is evidently an issue for that sector (Moloney, 2010). In the primary school sector, it could solve problems caused by the vast difference in infant educational needs and the educational needs of older primary school children. Integrating their needs into the school environment must be a big challenge for the primary sector. The mismatch in the status of educators on both sides of this divide is perhaps the biggest stumbling block to achieving an integrated system where children under six are educated



in fully play-based environments and children over six are educated in classroom-based environments. If this is not possible in the Ireland of today, then at the very least we require clarity on the meaningful implementation of Aistear within primary schools.

CONCLUSION

Aistear is a high-quality curriculum closely aligned to the Steiner ethos of education. Its flexibility is its strength, but its application requires educators who are both trained in and committed to the integrated experiential play-based learning that children under six need. Aistear is vastly different from the 1999 primary school curriculum. If Ireland, as a nation, chooses the formalised, classroom-based, high child–adult ratio structures of its primary school sector for its four- and five-year-olds, then the very least it should do is formally adopt Aistear, train teachers in it fully and use it to replace the 1999 curriculum rather than have the two attempt to co-exist when there are such evident compatibility issues.

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Quality: the next policy frontier in Ireland and the EU?

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This paper explores the significance of the 2011 European Commission Communication on early childhood education and care (ECEC) both at European Union level and in the Irish policy context. It discusses the new emphasis on the quality of provision and asks whether the conditions are right for quality to become a major focus of policy. ECEC policies – both in Ireland and at EU level – have in the past been driven by a labour market agenda that largely sidelined quality as a concern. With the shift in policy discourse around ECEC over the last decade, and the new opportunities created by the free pre-school year to lever policy change, there are indications that quality may now become a more prominent policy concern; although a number of factors may prevent this. The paper concludes by identifying policy opportunities from an advocacy perspective.

EUROPE – FROM QUANTITY TO QUALITY

Policy responsibility for early childhood education and care (ECEC) lies with each member state of the European Union (EU); there is no policy competence at EU level. However, the European Commission is using its leadership position to encourage member states to invest in the early years and to develop services that are universal, affordable and of high quality.

Importantly, the European Commission is pushing for a wider policy agenda in this area than it did a decade ago. In 2002 the EU published the Barcelona targets, which were solely quantitative (the proportion of young children with places in childcare facilities) and were justified as a means to ‘remove disincentives to female labour force participation’ (European Council, 2002). In 2011 the Commission published a new Communication on ECEC. Very different in tone from the Barcelona targets, the 2011 Communication looks beyond the supply of childcare places to focus on two principles that the Commission argues should be central to member states’ policies on ECEC: quality and access. Aspects of quality addressed include: curriculum, professionalisation of the workforce, and governance (including interagency co-operation, communication between pre-schools and primary schools, and quality assurance mechanisms). Under the heading of access, it calls for ECEC services to be universal and inclusive.



The Communication was followed by a statement from the Council of Ministers, which invited member states to: evaluate ECEC services in terms of their availability, affordability and quality; adopt measures to enhance access and reinforce quality; and invest in early care and education (Council of the European Union, 2011). The Council called for EU structural funds to be used to support ECEC. It also called for member states, supported by the Commission, to co-operate on ECEC policy issues through the Open Method of Coordination in Education and Training. The open method of coordination involves member states working together to identify shared objectives and indicators, evaluate each other's performance and share learning on good practice. It creates a real opportunity for policy development to be enhanced across Europe, even in areas – such as education – where there is no policy competence at EU level.

Discussion of quality in European documents on ECEC is not new. From 1986 to 1996 the Commission funded the European Commission (EC) Childcare Network, which culminated in the publication of proposals containing forty quality targets for services for young children (EC Childcare Network, 1996). What is new, however, is the political context, with greater recognition of the need for quality and wider interest in measures to support young children's development. While the forty quality targets attracted much interest within the sector, they have gone largely unheeded at a policy level for fifteen years. Now there may be scope for renewed policy interest.

A central factor in this may be the changing location of ECEC policy among EU institutions (Children in Scotland, 2010). The EC Childcare Network was funded in 1986 through a Community programme on equal opportunities for women and men, while the targets set at the Barcelona summit in 2002 were driven by the Employment Directorate. In contrast, the 2011 Communication arose from the Education and Culture Directorate, with ECEC now viewed primarily not as a gender equality or labour market measure, but as a setting for early education. It will be through the Open Method of Coordination in Education and Training that European policy co-operation on ECEC will take place in the years ahead.

This institutional shift reflects a wider change in political and public discourse (backed by a growing body of scientific research) on the importance of ECEC – above all of high-quality ECEC – for child development (Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and Training, 2009). ECEC is still not widely seen as an issue of children's rights – the 2011 Communication, for example, makes no reference to children's rights – and much of the justification given for focusing on quality is instrumental, with child development promoted as a means of achieving other ends such as economic growth. Nevertheless, there is now a clear recognition at EU level of the benefits of ECEC for children, with educational investment in children's early years seen as a way of enhancing children's life-chances. This shift is central to the new interest in quality. For ECEC to facilitate labour market participation, its availability and affordability matter, but not its quality. For ECEC to support child development, quality is critical.

IRELAND – A PARALLEL SHIFT IN DISCOURSE

In several respects, policy development in Ireland has paralleled that at EU level: with a predominant focus on childcare as a tool of labour market policy, and a recent shift in the focus of policy towards quality concerns, heralded by a wider shift in the discourse around ECEC, with increasing public and political recognition of its benefits for children.



The years after 1996 saw rapid ECEC policy development in Ireland, with a series of policy and funding initiatives resulting in increased infrastructure (funded through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme and the National Childcare Investment Programme), a regulatory framework (with the 1996 and 2006 Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations) and new governance mechanisms (through the county childcare committees and the National Childcare Co-ordinating Committee). However, policy development was largely driven by concern for women's labour market participation (with a gender equality agenda coinciding with an economic growth agenda) and for social inclusion (with much government support focused on disadvantaged communities).

While quality has long been a concern of many organisations within the sector (for example, the voluntary childcare organisations, as well as research and training institutions) and the object of a limited amount of state funding (with the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education funded to develop *Síolta*, the national quality framework), it has not until recently been the focus of government policy. The lion's share of public funds has gone to capital investment (to increase the supply of places) and to subsidies for demand, especially in disadvantaged communities (for example, through the Community Childcare Subvention scheme).

The one policy lever through which the state imposed some degree of quality control on all service providers – the pre-school regulations – was until 2006 concerned only with health and safety, and continues to be enforced by staff who do not receive training in wider quality issues. Crucially, until the introduction of the free pre-school year in 2010, there was no minimum qualification requirement for staff in ECEC settings.

The political discourse around ECEC has also shifted in Ireland. There is still little reference to children's rights in ECEC policy (Hayes and Bradley, 2009), but the justification given for ECEC policy is increasingly its contribution to child development, albeit as an instrument for increasing long-term economic growth. Most notably, the announcement of the free pre-school year, while undoubtedly driven in part by the need to reduce public expenditure (it replacing the much more costly Early Childcare Supplement), was justified on the grounds that it 'enhances the subsequent educational achievement of students and in turn increases the return for State investment in education generally' (Department of Finance, 2009). Furthermore, the specifics of the scheme have been designed on an educational model (universal provision, typically for three hours per day and thirty-eight weeks per year), not as a labour market support.

In a related development, ECEC policy in Ireland has also shifted its institutional location. Having previously been part of the Equality section of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, it moved to become central to the work of first the Office of the Minister for Children and now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, which includes the co-location of a number of civil servants from the Department of Education and Skills.

THE FREE PRE-SCHOOL YEAR AS A POLICY LEVER

The free pre-school year not only rests on a changed rationale for state involvement in ECEC provision – one that requires quality, as it is only quality ECEC provision that has beneficial effects for all children – it also creates a new policy lever by which the state can influence the quality of provision in nearly all centre-based ECEC settings.



The Irish government has been short of policy levers to influence directly the quality of provision (the main exception being the pre-school regulations, which, as noted above, have been limited in scope), a central reason for this being the reliance on market mechanisms and the absence of state provision of ECEC services, with a mix of private and community providers. With ECEC services characterised as a liberal model (National Women's Council of Ireland, 2005; O'Donoghue Hynes and Hayes, 2009) or a 'hybrid' system driven by pragmatism and economic imperatives (Adshead and Neylon, 2008), quality has largely been left to parental responsibility (with parents seen as best placed to make decisions on where to send their children) and to market mechanisms (through competition between service providers).

The main exception has been the Early Start programme, in which direct state funding has given the state a very different relationship with services, with qualification requirements and rates of pay that match those of primary school teachers and with inspections carried out by Department of Education and Skills (DES) inspectors. While quality within Early Start has been questioned (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2004), direct state funding does create policy options that differ from the arm's length governance that characterises most of Ireland's ECEC sector.

An extreme example of the liberal model was the Early Childcare Supplement, which operated from 2006 to 2009. Presented as childcare policy, the supplement simply transferred funds to parents of young children, with the state abdicating responsibility for what happened with the money. In spite of substantial public spending (€480 million per year at its peak, which is treble the expenditure on the free pre-school year), the supplement gave the state no leverage to influence service provision. While the supplement reduced the immediate political pressure on the government to address the high cost of childcare to parents, it was a policy that was at odds with the growing national and international interest in ECEC as a means to support children's development. It was abandoned in 2009 to make way for the free pre-school year.

The free pre-school year transformed the ECEC policy landscape, altering the way in which the Irish state engages with service providers. While the main aim of the scheme is to improve access through the provision of free places, with little scrutiny of the quality of services in the initial roll-out, the scheme has presented the state with a new policy lever that offers the potential for greater control of quality standards.

As a result of the free pre-school year the state now has direct funding contracts with 95 per cent of service providers, and is able to impose conditions through those contracts. It has begun in a small way: minimum qualification requirements are being phased in by September 2012 and adherence to the 'principles of Síolta' is required (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2010). The significance of these conditions is the potential they offer the state for tightening and extension over time. For example, the government has committed to increase the minimum qualification requirement 'for ECCE practitioners involved in the delivery of state funded ECCE programmes', stating that this process will be 'incremental' (DES, 2011: 29). There is also a condition in the contract that participating services must have 'a satisfactory level of compliance' with the pre-school regulations, which could become the basis for more rigorous enforcement of the regulations.



NEXT STEPS IN POLICY DEVELOPMENT

In discussing European and Irish developments together, it is not intended to suggest that the 2011 European Commission Communication will directly cause policy change in Ireland. It is, after all, just a set of recommendations. ECEC policy is determined at national level, and the EU can only influence Irish policy on ECEC through the force of the Commission's arguments, the sharing of policy learning between member states and the benchmarking processes that constitute the open method of coordination. However, the potential significance of these channels of European influence should not be ignored. The fact that there has been a parallel shift in policy discourse in Ireland and the EU, combined with the introduction of a policy lever that gives the Irish state new possibilities for influencing the quality of ECEC, creates a political opportunity for the Irish government to follow the European lead in making quality the next policy frontier. Three factors stand against this possibility, however:

- 1 The lack of public funds will limit the state's ability to subsidise the scale of training programme required to professionalise the workforce, which is a key requirement for quality provision in Ireland (Moloney, 2010). There is, though, scope for measures to raise quality standards at low cost to the state, such as through the regulatory framework and by steadily increasing the minimum qualification requirements linked to state funding.
- 2 Policy-making in Ireland has been characterised as a combination of expedience and pragmatism, seen most strikingly in the Early Childcare Supplement (Hayes and Bradley, 2009: 41). There remains a risk that the development of policies to promote quality will be ad hoc rather than strategic. This risk is compounded by the continuing lack of a national plan for ECEC that would provide a coherent framework to guide policy development (Start Strong, 2009a).
- 3 The limited scope of the free pre-school year as currently structured. Policy leverage may be limited by the scheme's focus on children aged three to five years and on centre-based services. There is a risk that the age limit will reinforce the care/education divide in ECEC in Ireland, with ECEC policy having an educational focus only for children aged three and over, while policy for those under three years of age focuses on care. While the free pre-school year has an educational focus, the main public scheme that supports younger children – the community childcare subvention scheme – has been adjusted to have an even stronger labour market focus (Start Strong, 2009b). If the opportunities created by the free pre-school year to lever change in services are limited to the delivery of the free pre-school year alone, then the scheme may even undermine the quality of provision for younger children through, for example, creating an incentive for services to put their more highly qualified staff with the older age group. The fact that childminders are at present almost entirely outside the scope of the free pre-school year also limits its policy leverage. Unless the free pre-school year (or other funding schemes) is reconstituted to bring in more childminders, the state will require other policy tools to impact on the quality of childminding, such as the introduction of a compulsory registration system.



CONCLUDING REMARKS

From an advocacy perspective, three main conclusions can be drawn from this paper:

- 1 There is a new political opportunity in Ireland to push for ECEC policy development in relation to quality. EU developments may be supportive of this process, for example through Irish engagement in the open method of coordination.
- 2 The free pre-school year in particular creates a policy lever for promoting quality, and there is scope for the development of additional ways to build on the scheme and gain further policy leverage from it.
- 3 To have quality services for all young children, there is a need for a stronger policy focus on children under three years of age and for an integrated view of care and education.

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Thematic strand: Quality practice in early childhood care and education policy

Early childhood care and education practice

The period from birth to six years is a significant and unique time in the life of a child. What children experience during these years sets a foundation for their entire lives. It is the time when their intellectual, emotional, physical and social development evolves rapidly. They learn to interact successfully with the world around them; they develop a measure of physical independence; they can establish relationships; they have a natural sense of curiosity; and they develop increasing confidence, self-esteem and self-control.

Such developmental achievements can be enhanced and supported through the provision of high-quality early childhood care and education programmes and services. High-quality programmes and services are those which nurture all aspects of children's development – physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive. To put this in context, the provision of quality childcare services that enhance a child's development may contribute to improved transition experiences, educational outcomes, health outcomes and social mobility for children; thus, improving their life opportunities and outcomes.

This thematic strand investigated the concept of quality in early childhood care and education services. It allowed both practitioners and researchers to present findings of their work, where existing or innovative changes in practice have enhanced the quality of early childhood care and education.

Implementing Aistear through a Síolta lens

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This paper examines how a continuous professional development programme supported fourteen community-based early childhood care and education (ECCE) centres in two disadvantaged areas in Ireland to implement Aistear (the curriculum framework) using Síolta (the quality framework). The action research approach taken in this study helped practitioners to develop the skills they needed to implement Aistear and to learn how to improve teaching and learning through the successful management of innovation and change. There was an emphasis on learning for practice. Findings of this research study indicate that the majority of the participants found the programme interesting, easy to understand and useful. Participants also mentioned that they had learned new ways of interacting with children, different ideas that could be implemented in their ECCE setting and that they themselves had a greater understanding of Aistear. Using the Síolta standards as prompts for reflective thinking, Aistear as the theory that they could compare with their practice and subsequently action planning to improve this practice helped participants to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in their settings. These findings have implications for national policy and all early years settings.

INTRODUCTION

Providing quality early childhood experiences is fundamental to the implementation of both the quality framework for early childhood education, Síolta (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2006), and the early childhood curriculum framework, Aistear (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009), which are perceived as important milestones in the quest for quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) services in Ireland. This paper examines how a continuous professional development (CPD) programme supported fourteen community-based ECCE centres in two disadvantaged areas in Ireland to improve teaching and learning using Síolta as the lens through which Aistear was viewed and implemented.

Five centres, as part of a Síolta network, requested the Early Learning Initiative (ELI) at the National College of Ireland, Dublin, to develop and deliver an in-service training and support programme, which would assist them to implement both Síolta and



Aistear within their individual settings. The other nine centres were already involved with the ELI's existing CPD programme, which was developed further to support the settings to implement Síolta and Aistear.

Síolta, which is the Irish word for 'seeds', consists of a series of themed questions that enable ECCE practitioners to reflect on their existing practice and then work on areas that need improvement. It is focused on process as opposed to product, with an emphasis on the ongoing journey of working towards quality practice (CECDE, 2006). Aistear, which means 'journey', is Ireland's curriculum framework for children from birth to six years. As well as describing early years learning and development, it outlines ideas and suggestions on how these might be nurtured (NCCA, 2009). Both Síolta and Aistear have a clear and specific purpose in promoting and enhancing quality provision on a national level and, as suggested by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2009), complement and support each other.

The chosen research methodology was action research, which is a powerful tool for change and improvement (Cohen et al., 2000). The process of identifying a problem, planning an intervention, implementing the intervention and evaluating the outcome (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006) allowed for ownership of both the process and change. Action research can be defined as an enquiry undertaken with rigour and understanding so as to constantly refine practice (Koshy, 2005). Unlike traditional research, it does not aim for the final answer (McNiff, 2010), but provides a structure that enables the continuous evaluation and improvement of the project, both formally and informally. In addition, action research is closely related to Síolta Standard 8: Planning and Evaluation (CECDE, 2006), which ECCE settings are expected to implement. Using action research helped the practitioners to develop the skills needed to implement Standard 8 and to learn how to improve teaching and learning through the successful management of innovation and change.

METHODOLOGY

Enriching and informing all aspects of practice within the setting requires cycles of observation, planning, action and evaluation, undertaken on a regular basis.

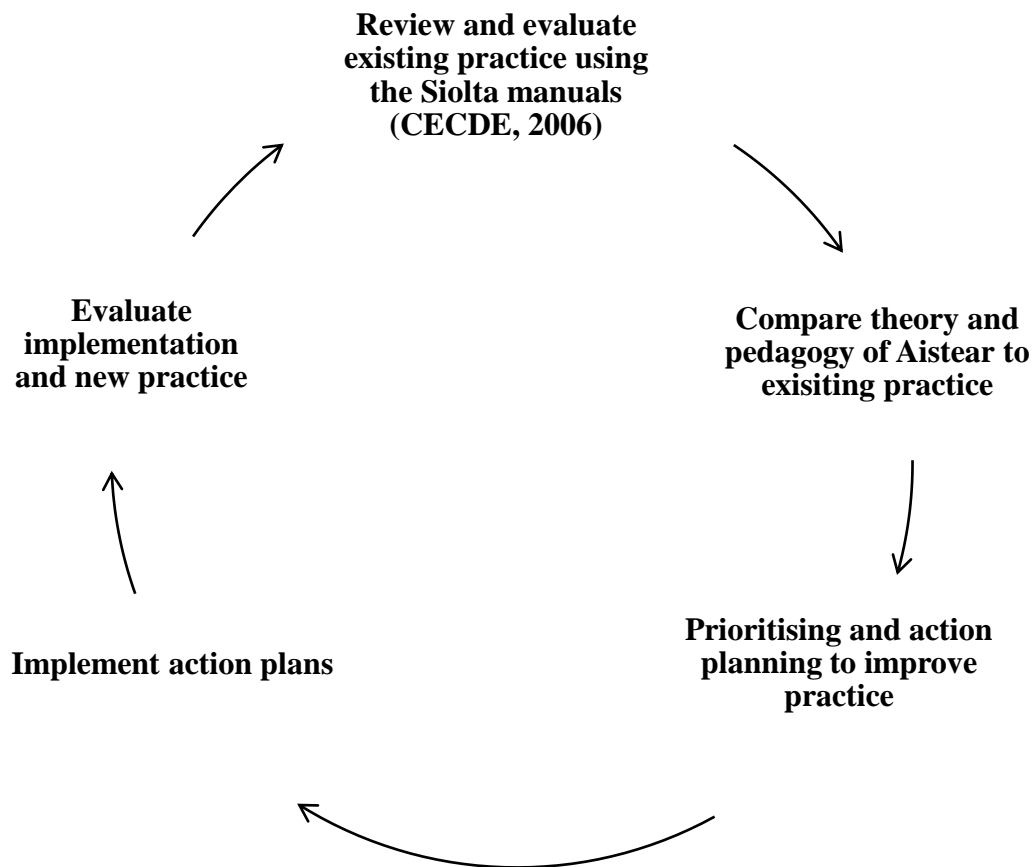
(Síolta Standard 8: Planning and Evaluation, CECDE, 2006)

According to Senge and Scharmer (2001: 240), action research begins by creating a learning community that works together to 'nurture and sustain a knowledge-creating system', based on valuing each other equally. It requires a disciplined approach to discovery and understanding, with a commitment by all participants to share what is learned. The process, which was conducted in termly cycles and incorporates Síolta Component 8.1 (CECDE, 2006), is outlined in Figure 1.

The first step in the process involved the facilitators conducting a review of existing practice, using the Síolta user manuals (CECDE, 2006), in each individual setting. During this on-site visit, ECCE staff identified the participants' existing good practice and the improvements and changes they needed to make if their setting was to adhere to the Síolta and Aistear frameworks. The visit was also an opportunity for staff to discuss and tease out specific issues in relation to their own setting. Using the findings of the reviews, the in-service training session was developed, which incorporated quality practice and pedagogy from Aistear.



Figure 1: Action research process



A ‘combined teaching structure’ (Alvestad and Rothle, 2007), i.e. mixed, flexible, dialectal teaching, was used. Each training session began with a small group discussion on key open-ended questions (Ellis and Kiely, 2000) taken from the ‘signposts for reflection’ of a particular Síolta standard (CECDE, 2006). Time for feedback and general discussion was followed by a presentation on both the theory and sample learning opportunities from Aistear. This format encouraged collective reflection and professional dialogue, which gave participants the opportunity to discuss and analyse both theory and lived experiences (Herr and Anderson, 2005). Participants were supported and encouraged to think about their existing practice and to take on the challenge of implementing new practices (Li, 2008). It also enabled participants to connect the pedagogy and theory of Aistear with the quality practice envisioned by Síolta.

Following each presentation, the action research process was highlighted and each ECCE setting was given the opportunity to prioritise areas for improvements and devise action plans that would be implemented following the training day. Participants were encouraged to be realistic and choose one or two priorities that were feasible to implement given their resources and workload. In addition, the priorities had to be relevant to the time frame (three months approximately) and the context of each setting and had to be rooted in children’s learning. These three guidelines were important if the settings wished to avoid the implementation dip (Fullan, 2005) and manage the pace of change. It also enabled participants to comply with Síolta Standard 8 and ensure that their setting had ‘established and documented review structures’ in place (CECDE, 2006).



The facilitators used follow-up visits to motivate and support ECCE staff in the implementation of their action plans. Over the course of a year, there were three training days, each covering different Síolta standards and elements of Aistear, and at least six on-site visits. The agenda for these were agreed at the managers' meetings, normally at the beginning of each year.

Continuous self-evaluation (Koshy, 2005) is a feature of action research. The CPD programme was evaluated on an ongoing basis using facilitators' observations, feedback from stakeholders and individual evaluation forms on training days. This formative evaluation shaped the development and implementation of the programme. Analyses of evaluation forms, action plans, facilitators' observations, minutes and reports have informed the findings of this paper.

FINDINGS

When the CPD programme began in May 2009, Aistear had not been published and the focus was on the implementation of Síolta. However, from the reviews of existing practice, it was obvious that there was very little change or improvement needed in the Síolta standards that focused on organisational and care issues.

Síolta Standard 7: Curriculum was the most challenging for participants for two reasons. First, while there were various available curricula, there were no national ECCE curriculum guidelines in place. Many of the settings were using a mix of often unrelated and conflicting curricula. Second, the main focus of the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations is on the health, safety and welfare of the child and on ensuring that the ECCE settings comply with legislation. As inspections are solely based on these regulations, the quality of learning within the settings was often neglected in favour of developing policies and doing repairs. This situation highlighted the need to incorporate Aistear into all aspects of the CPD programme and to ensure that as each Síolta standard was reviewed, the curriculum implications were discussed and addressed. Each training session also covered specific curriculum areas that settings were finding difficult to implement. Including Aistear provided an extra benchmark against which existing practice and pedagogy could be measured and added an important dimension to Síolta's overarching goal of improving the quality of the educational experience of young children.

Analysis of the 488 evaluation forms indicated that the majority of the participants (97 per cent; N=473) found the CPD programme interesting, easy to understand and useful to their future practice. These views were reflected in the feedback from managers and team leaders during on-site visits and other meetings. They felt that the support and training had helped improve practice in their settings.

The Síolta training has been invaluable to the crèche. The staff really participate in the sessions. Everyone takes something back to the crèche.

(End-of-year evaluation form 2011, ECCE manager)

Almost half of the participants who filled out evaluation forms (49 per cent; N=238) mentioned their learning as being the best thing about the programme. For some this was new or different (15 per cent; N=71) when compared with previous experiences. Some noted that they had developed a greater understanding of Síolta and Aistear (12



per cent; N=58) and had got ideas from Aistear that they could put into practice (28 per cent; N=138).

I got to learn new things that I can put into my practice while I am working with children. I got to learn and understand the curriculum a lot more.

(Evaluation form)

The *Síolta* user manual contains a series of questions that were designed to support the process of dialogue as well as self-reflection (CECDE, 2006). As a result, group work and the interactions between participants were central components of the programme. One-third of participants (33 per cent; N=160) mentioned the dialogue as being one of the best things about the programme. It gave them an opportunity to listen to others, share their ideas, existing practice and action plans as well as network with staff from other ECCE settings.

Being moved around the room and mixing with other teams helped us to network and see how the training was working in other organisations.

(Evaluation form)

This process helped participants to deepen their understanding of and gain a 'better insight' into how *Síolta* and Aistear could be implemented in practice.

For some participants, taking part in discussions with other ECCE practitioners was very difficult initially. Many were unfamiliar with the language and concepts being used and felt that they did not have the 'words' to express their opinions. Some found it a challenge to make explicit practices that had until then been implicit. Others needed to develop the confidence to speak about their practice in front of practitioners from other settings. Using Aistear gave participants a vocabulary or language through which they could express and discuss their practice with others.

Learning from other crèches and overcoming my fears and speaking out in front of everyone with my thoughts and making an input to the discussion ...

(Evaluation form)

For others, it provided a rare opportunity to reflect on and discuss their practice with colleagues from their own setting. Using *Síolta* and Aistear as the basis for the discussion and the standard against which practice in the setting could be measured ensured objectivity and allowed participants to be open with one another:

Being able to discuss what I wanted to introduce to our practice freely ...

(Evaluation form)

Despite the introduction of Aistear, *Síolta* Standard 7: Curriculum continued to be the most challenging standard for the participants. Most were unfamiliar with the concept of planning and assessing learning based on children's needs. Activities, while they were educational, were not linked to coherent, progressive curriculum and assessment practices. Difficulties with Aistear and *Síolta* Standard 7 led to problems with other standards. For example, Standard 3: Parents and Families was problematic because practitioners did not have the professional language to discuss children's learning with others; Standard 6: Play was challenging as participants did not have the skills to plan,



scaffold and assess meaningful learning opportunities through play. Using Aistear's guidelines for good practice (NCCA, 2009) provided a benchmark against which existing practice could be measured and discussed. This enabled each setting to develop action plans to improve curriculum practice.

The improvements are slowly creeping in and we will get to the standard of Síolta and Aistear. The learning has become more structured as staff realise how important it is for the child. They are now working towards the child's development and plan more to do things, particularly around the area of language and communication. There is a flow of thinking and people are coming up with ideas.

(Minutes of 2011 end-of-year ECCE managers' meeting)

DISCUSSION

Síolta supports the improvement of quality in all aspects of early childhood practice, while Aistear contains information that helps practitioners plan for and provide challenging and enjoyable learning experiences for all children (NCCA, 2009). Both Síolta and Aistear are new departures in ECCE in Ireland and implementing this degree of change is challenging for ECCE settings. As Aistear and Síolta complement and support each other, implementing one without the other is unrealistic and would add to the burden of change for the ECCE practitioners. Implemented together, as evidenced by this CPD programme, they provide a comprehensive framework for improving the quality of the learning experiences provided to young children in ECCE settings.

The format used in the CPD programme was critical to its success. Beginning with open-ended questions (Ellis and Kiely, 2000) based on Síolta's 'signposts for reflection' (CECDE, 2006) meant that participants were more open and receptive to the theory of Aistear. In addition, as their thoughts and practices were now explicit, participants could relate the type of pedagogy described in Aistear to their own practice. Using Síolta Standard 8: Planning and Evaluation to develop action plans to improve practice, in line with Aistear, enabled and supported practitioners to continue the work after the training day and implement the agreed changes in their own setting.

Incorporating group work, both before and after the presentation of theory, was central to the process of dialogue and self-reflection (CECDE, 2006). It provided a safe space, where existing practice and new thoughts and ideas could be discussed. It allowed all participants to participate in an equal and active way and ensured that all voices were heard (Alvestad and Rothle, 2007) and valued. The initial questions, which raised difficult issues for many, were particularly useful in initiating 'dynamic conversations' (Schön, 1983) and in helping to challenge the existing norms, rules, skills and values of the ECCE sector.

Reflective practice requires a level of sophistication with ample knowledge of children and pedagogy. As with Li's (2008) research, it became obvious very quickly that the participants' engagement in the programme was limited by their lack of knowledge and understanding of early childhood pedagogy and their inability to extend thinking beyond task-oriented practice. Thus, support in developing the participants' pedagogical knowledge in the learning and teaching domains by using Aistear as a benchmark against which practice could be measured was an important aspect of the programme.



Using Síolta Standard 8: Planning and Evaluation in conjunction with Aistear's guidelines for good practice in supporting learning and development through assessment reinforced and embedded the knowledge and skills required for planning and assessment. Familiar practices gradually took on educational meanings. Practitioners moved from being task-oriented to being learning-oriented. Rather than simply providing a mixed, unrelated, range of educational activities for children, practitioners began to assess children's learning and then plan activities based on the children's learning needs and interests. Assessment and planning for learning, while difficult at times to implement, became a way of life for most participants.

CONCLUSION

According to Kemmis (2009), action research aims at changing three things: practice or 'doings', understanding of practice or 'sayings' and the conditions of practice or 'relatings'. This is in line with the aims of this CPD programme, which was to improve the quality of practice in the ECCE setting using Síolta as the lens through which Aistear can be viewed.

With participants working together on training days and in their settings to achieve practical outcomes (Senge and Scharmer, 2001) through their action plans, practice, particularly around assessment and planning for learning, improved. By discussing and comparing their existing practice with models of good practice from Aistear, participants' understanding of pedagogy and practice developed and they began to acquire the professional 'language' of Síolta and Aistear. Participants' awareness and capabilities, both individually and collectively, were enhanced as each setting acquired the capability to deliver learning outcomes they truly cared about (Senge and Scharmer, 2001).

Through the creation of a learning community (Senge and Scharmer, 2001), relationships between participants, managers, parents and children improved as each centre sought to raise the quality of practice and the educational outcomes for the children in the setting. The action research and Síolta Standard 8: Planning and Evaluation processes were critical in ensuring that both Síolta and Aistear were implemented at the organisational level and at the individual level.

Using Síolta and Aistear to develop the CPD programme was very effective as both frameworks focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning in early years settings. By providing the questions for reviewing practice, Síolta became the lens through which participants could look at Aistear and examine their existing pedagogical practice. This in turn enabled the two frameworks to enhance and complement each other. While this programme was implemented in fourteen community childcare centres in two disadvantaged areas, the findings have implications for national policy and all early years settings.

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All different, all equal, all welcome

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There has been little research on equality and diversity in early childcare in County Donegal. This paper seeks to address this gap by increasing knowledge on early childhood care and education (ECCE) for black and minority ethnic groups in the county. It reports on a research study involving visits to twenty-one pre-school services and three primary schools, where a semi-structured interview was conducted with the manager or principal. The information collected from interviews was supported by data from questionnaires. In addition, parents of minority ethnic children took part in four separate focus groups. The focus group discussions involved parents from a variety of backgrounds throughout County Donegal and highlighted themes such as diverse religious beliefs, lack of communication and the need for applied policy in relation to equality and identity. The research findings clearly identify the need for a unified, countywide ECCE policy on equality and diversity. Implementation of guidelines for early childcare practitioners and organisations is also required. Failure to take such action will make it impossible to combat sectarianism and racism, promote equality and embrace diversity within such settings, and indeed in society as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

Irish society has been culturally diverse for a long time, Ireland having been home to minority ethnic/religious/cultural groups such as the Irish Traveller, Jewish and Protestant communities for many years. However, recent decades have seen a significant increase in the number of people from the so-called 'new communities'. A small but growing proportion of the population of County Donegal was born outside Ireland. The preliminary results of the 2011 census show a population increase in Donegal of 13,663 persons; 8,156 of this number are as a result of net migration (Central Statistics Office, 2011).



In response to the changes in population, the Donegal Peace Partnership, led by Donegal County Council, set in place a programme of measures to support integration and to build bridges between communities at a local level. This programme is supported by the European Union under Peace III. The vision of the Peace Partnership and Donegal County Council, as set out in the *Donegal Diversity Plan 2011–2013*, is:

Donegal, a county where racism and sectarianism no longer exist and where all feel equally valued and confident that they belong.

As part of the above programme, an intercultural drop-in and resource centre was set up in February 2010 in Letterkenny, where people could meet, get support and information, volunteer and take part in various countywide integration projects. The centre, Port na Fáilte, became a very successful and much frequented central point in Letterkenny, and soon an array of needs had been identified relating to minority groups in County Donegal; in particular, parents often expressed their concerns about early education facilities for their children.

These parents talked about the discrepancy between the values, culture and perspectives they applied at home, and those experienced by their children in early education settings in the county. They felt that their (and their children's) culture was not sufficiently reflected in the settings and that this lack made it difficult for the children to feel that they belonged. It also made it more difficult for the children from the majority culture to get used to and benefit from cultures that were new and often strange to them. Linguistic continuum was a concern for parents from non-English-speaking backgrounds. They stressed the emotional and social benefits of maintaining the first language in terms of communication and identity with family and cultural community. Some parents also reported social and economic barriers that kept them from accessing early education.

Similar stories were told by Irish-born minorities such as Travellers and people of minority or no faiths.

INCLUSIVE INTERVENTIONS

In response to the anecdotes and concerns voiced in Port na Fáilte, a number of interventions were made, including setting up an Easy Learning, Early Play programme in Letterkenny and in Donegal town. This initiative is a training programme for parents/carers and children aged three to five from different cultures. It uses creative arts and play in an intercultural context as a tool to further child development.

Together with the Respecting and Connecting Communities programme and the VEC, Port na Fáilte organised the 'We are making a children's book' project. A group of parents and children from different cultural backgrounds came together over four months and produced a children's book reflecting their various cultures and languages. This book was distributed and introduced to libraries and primary schools.

Weekly Malayalee language and culture classes for children from the southern Indian community were set up, as their parents were anxious to maintain their children's familiarity with their first language and culture. A similar project with children from Russian backgrounds is also being introduced. A 'Happy talk' project assists language development among children from non-English-speaking backgrounds.



In partnership with Educate Together Letterkenny, Port na Fáilte organised the 'Feels like home to me' project, where 150 cameras were distributed to children from different cultures (including Irish), who were asked to take photos over the summer holidays of what feels like home to them. The photos were printed and the children discussed them in terms of their homes, where they felt they belonged and so forth. The children then curated and launched an exhibition, which later toured through Donegal.

THE STUDY

Most importantly, Port na Fáilte launched a research study into the practice of intercultural education in early years education settings in Donegal.

Intercultural education is a cornerstone of a harmonious and inclusive intercultural society. In an intercultural educational setting, children learn to gain familiarity with the 'other', they enter a learning process, which will enable them to look at the world from different perspectives, to question their own point of view and empathise with others. Intercultural education promotes respect and appreciation for others and dismantles prejudice in order to facilitate harmonious co-existence. It acknowledges different ways of learning; it allows similarities to emerge and promotes a sense of belonging.

The research questions included: How do early education settings in Donegal acknowledge and cater for the needs of children and parents from a 'non-Irish, white, Catholic, settled' background? How is cultural diversity promoted and celebrated in Donegal? How is intercultural education practised in Donegal? Are parents from minority cultures satisfied that their and their children's cultures, languages and perspectives are reflected and respected in early education settings? Is cultural and social capital seen as a strength and made use of? How do all children benefit from cultural diversity?

Methodology

This study incorporated qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews and focus groups and quantitative research in the form of questionnaires.

Semi-structured interviews allowed the exploration of childcare professionals' attitudes, values and beliefs. For example, professionals were questioned about their knowledge of equality and diversity programmes, how they addressed the issues of equality and diversity, how they used resources and equipment within their pre-school and how they positively promoted different cultures. Focus groups provided knowledge of parents' experiences and perceptions of the barriers they, or other parents from minority ethnic groups, encountered within pre-school settings. The interviews and focus groups were conducted by the researcher while a colleague took notes, which allowed everyone to feel more at ease and promoted a natural flow of conversation.

Pre-school staff were asked to complete a brief questionnaire to reiterate the information obtained during the visits. A very small percentage of these were returned, and they have been taken into consideration and included in the final results.

The research involved twenty-one pre-schools and three primary schools in County Donegal. Each visit involved communication with both managers or principals and staff.

The data were compiled and analysed in three categories: policies, environment and practices. Within these categories, further subdivisions were made to reflect the extent to which equality, diversity and identity had been positively addressed.



FINDINGS

Within the majority of pre-schools, the available children's books did not reflect cultural diversity. In addition, much of the curriculum was inward looking and did not reflect the diverse minority ethnic population in Donegal, which includes Travellers and African, Middle-Eastern, European, Caribbean, Asian and other groups.

There was little promotion of positive values by teachers in relation to minority ethnic communities. Similarly, the majority of teachers seem to lack awareness of cultural diversity. There is little promotion of this area within the childcare courses; for example, an equality and diversity module is not mandatory within the Further Education and Training Awards Council childcare programme.

There was a lack of interpreting facilities for parents whose first language is not English and this lack has the potential to cause a number of problems for parents, staff and children alike. Moreover, parents are often unable to help their children with homework, which in turn has a negative effect on their children's academic skills. Most pre-schools did not have parent groups to resolve such problems and parents were unclear about how to find solutions for the problems they encountered.

Staff and management do not take into consideration the positive outcomes of the involvement of parents in relation to consultation on cultural themes, nor do they make use of the cultural capital of minority ethnic parents.

The focus groups highlighted a number of negative issues with regards to parents' experience, in particular in relation to religious beliefs. One parent told us that when their son was attending a Catholic primary school on Good Friday he was deprived by his teacher of his ham sandwiches, which had been prepared by his mother. The teacher took the ham from the boy's sandwiches and gave him back the bread and butter. The child is a Catholic, but his family do not practice certain Catholic traditions, and he was very confused and embarrassed by the teacher's actions. Another parent told how he took his two-year-old daughter to her pre-school one Ash Wednesday and was informed that everyone would be going to the local chapel to 'get their ashes'. When the child's father, an atheist, questioned this activity, he was told that it does not matter what religion a child is, 'they just go to the chapel with the others anyway'. As he did not want his child to take part in this religious ceremony, he had to take time off work and take the child home.

Parents believe that racism and prejudice against Travellers and other minority ethnic communities is common in the education system. One parent was told by her local school principal that it is the school's policy to accept only two Travellers per year. A couple reported that as they left their young daughter to pre-school another child attending the pre-school pointed at her and exclaimed, 'Your daddy is black!' The child then turned to the childcare practitioner and said, 'I don't want to play with her; she's black.' The childcare practitioner laughed it off and made no attempt to address the incident.

During one of the research interviews at a pre-school, the manager was asked if there were any children from a minority ethnic background attending the pre-school. She looked around, pointed to a black child and said, 'Yes, [the child's name], he is black, he kind of stands out from the others, doesn't he?'

The view that Ireland is a homogeneous society, predominantly white, Irish, Catholic and settled, ignores the reality on the ground. Policy-makers need to be aware



of this and of the short-term and long-term consequences of segregation, racism, sectarianism and exclusion on children's overall well-being, including educational achievement, identity, self-confidence, not to mention the consequences for society as a whole.

However, all is not lost. The research visits included a number of pre-schools and one primary school that celebrate and promote cultural diversity. Some staff practised the Respecting Difference programme (Early Years, 2009) as well as emphasising culturally diverse practices within their everyday routines. Furthermore, there were some materials and resources available to promote cultural diversity in various ways that the children clearly enjoy. Such pre-school settings sometimes employ members of minority ethnic communities and benefit greatly from their input. Educate Together National School, for example, stood out through an excellent intercultural programme, extensive parent input and parents' integration activities.

This research found that, while there are increasing numbers of children from black and minority ethnic communities attending community-based ECCE settings, staff often lack the support in how to deal with and promote cultural diversity. Although there are no standard qualification requirements, the staff members have a wide variety of training backgrounds, from little or no qualifications to an ECCE degree. Similarly, while a small number of staff have been trained in the themes of equality and diversity, the attitudes of most of the staff included in the research did not meet appropriate levels of understanding in this area. In addition, only a few members of the black and minority ethnic communities are employed in the early childhood sector in County Donegal.

It can be difficult to access equipment and resources relating to diversity and culture, however, it seems that some childcare professionals make little effort to procure or use such materials within ECCE settings.

CONCLUSION

Although limited in size, this research does provide a snapshot of what is happening on the ground in relation to cultural diversity in early education in County Donegal. The results paint a rather bleak picture. However, there were positive elements, including the work of staff in Educate Together and work that was carried out in some pre-schools. Equally, projects under Peace III and the work of the Donegal County Childcare Committee in relation to identity and belonging are positive moves in the right direction. Nevertheless, a unified, countywide approach is needed to standardise the ECCE sector and implement appropriate equality and diversity guidelines.

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'How was your day?'

Supporting Travellers at primary level

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This paper outlines changes in practice that developed through providing homework support to Traveller children. A significant element of securing equality of access, participation, scholastic success, retention, attainment and, more importantly, an enjoyable and positive experience of school is the nurturing of quality relationships between teachers, Traveller pupils and Traveller parents. To improve Traveller attainment in schools the pupils first need to be able to remain in the educational setting; to achieve this, it is important that they have a positive experience, a 'secure base' (Bowlby, 1988) from which to develop and a 'facilitating environment' (Winnicott, 1976). This paper describes a homework support session offered over a period of two years to four Traveller families (sixteen children aged from four to ten years) in County Sligo. The paper argues for flexibility in approaches to learning and the need to equip young practitioners with the skills to engage in a meaningful way with families from cultures other than their own. The importance of developing practitioners' research skills is also highlighted, as is the need to implement recent welcome innovations in policy and to allocate appropriate resources to achieve their successful implementation.

INTRODUCTION

The 2006 census revealed that there were 22,435 Travellers living in Ireland (Central Statistics Office, 2007), however, Pavee Point (2005) estimates that figures may be as high as 30,000. Reasons for such a disparity include a nomadic population and some Travellers' decisions not to identify themselves due to a perception of discrimination. By far the highest proportion of Travellers are in the younger population and, with the birth rate among Travellers being much higher than it is for the settled population, this is likely to continue. The *State of the Nation's Children* (Office of the Minister for Children, 2010) found that 'almost half of the total Traveller population of Ireland are under 18 years of age and that approximately 6 out of every 10 Traveller children (58.9 per cent) live in families where the mother had either no formal education or primary education only'.

The *Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy*, in its core values and guiding principles, states (Department of Education and Science [DES], 2006:



10): 'It is imperative that an anti-bias and intercultural dimension form an integral part of and underpin all pre-service, induction and continuing professional development of teachers.'

The estimated financial resources expended on Traveller education above and beyond expenditure on mainstream education in 2004/5 amounted to €55.2 million (DES, 2006). Budget cuts implemented in autumn 2011 led to a number of supports being withdrawn, including the removal of all visiting teacher for Travellers posts (42 posts) and the withdrawal of resource teacher posts for Travellers at primary level. In its analysis of the impact of cuts in government spending on Traveller education, Barnardos suggested that they were 'a short-sighted saving that will cement intergenerational cycles of disadvantage in the Traveller community' (quoted in Baker, 2011).

ACCOMMODATION AND HEALTH

Travellers frequently speak of their frustration at the impact of poor accommodation on their children's education. When families are rehoused into suitable accommodation, the knock-on effect for the children is often a change of school. This may involve them being removed from a school in the town that has an extremely good reputation among the Traveller community for being flexible and understanding of their needs, to a smaller school outside of the town that has no experience of Travellers and much fewer resources. The larger schools are based in designated DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) areas, which entitles them to more resources, including the Home School Community Liaison scheme, the School Completion programme and literacy and numeracy initiatives. This issue highlights the difficulties in securing equality of access, participation, outcome and achievement. In Sligo, a number of primary schools that have significant numbers of Traveller children are not based in designated DEIS areas, including St Enda's National School and Scoil Ursula, Scoil Mhuire Gan Smál.

A useful starting point is to understand the issues as multilayered and multifaceted – in this respect we would be well served to use Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model of ecosystems as a lens through which to view the issue of Travellers' engagement with the education system. For example, it is impossible to remove the impact of poverty, poor health and inadequate accommodation from the picture of scholastic retention, academic achievement and parental engagement:

It is also clear that many of the models of good practice in terms of service provision are interdependent – for example improving Traveller education and healthcare is premised upon the provision of safe and secure halting sites.

(McVeigh et al., 2004: 48)

TRANSITIONS

It is now widely accepted in the domain of transitions research that a lack of cultural congruence contributes to children being at a higher risk of experiencing difficulties during the transition to school (Brooker, 2002; Kagan, 2003; O'Kane, 2007). Many practitioners and studies highlight the fact that the first transition can often 'pave the way' for how children will experience subsequent transitions. Furthermore, the difficulties encountered whilst negotiating both vertical (home to pre-school, pre-school



to primary school, etc.) and horizontal (classroom to resource class, classroom to speech and language support, etc.) transitions tend to occur more frequently for many Traveller children (due to mobility). Navigating through transitional stages can be complex at the best of times and may become seriously problematic if the degree of engagement between school and parent is compromised.

PRE-SCHOOL

Historically, Travellers' did not attend pre-school. Some pre-school settings in Sligo keep a designated number of places for Traveller children (Sligo Social Services, Northside, Lifestart). This has been an important factor in ensuring participation, as many families are late in enrolling children due to fears around sending children to pre-school, nomadism and lack of experience in negotiating appropriate mainstream childcare supports. Many Travellers have stated that they feel that the pre-school stage is too early for a child to be away from the family; the practice of keeping the youngest child at home for company would testify to this belief.

More recently there has been an increased uptake of Traveller places in pre-school. The fact that more Traveller women are gaining employment or availing of adult education is a factor. Also, in the past childcare was provided by older siblings, however, many young Travellers now stay in school longer. Other contributing factors include the provision of the free pre-school year for all children; the establishment of quality, sustained relationships that have been nurtured over a period of years with successive children from the same family attending a number of services in Sligo; and awareness raising from agencies in the area including Lifestart and the local Traveller support group.

Pre-School for Travellers: National Evaluation Report (DES, 2003) recommends that all pre-schools should actively work on policies and procedures to encourage equality. An awareness of the need for a cultural safety approach (Ball, 2008) on behalf of pre-schools, schools and practitioners is also important. The cultural safety approach ensures that research and engagement take place within an inclusive context, often described as 'nothing about us without us'.

DEVELOPING PRACTICE: LEARNING BY DOING

Between 2008 and 2011 I provided a homework support session for a number of Traveller families in County Sligo, based in a family resource centre. The purpose of the support was to encourage participation and engagement between Traveller parents and the school and to provide homework support for children of parents who struggle with literacy. The sessions were provided initially on a weekly basis to each Traveller family residing in the area. In the second year twice-weekly sessions were held. Each session lasted for between sixty and ninety minutes. There were sixteen participants, ranging in ages from four to ten, from four different families. The sessions were divided into family groups and took place in succession on the same day.

During the setting-up phase of these homework support groups I encountered a number of difficulties, including the lack of available space, and the age range and differing abilities of the children. In time, however, I came to see these difficulties as gifts that enabled me to transform my approach.



Learning space

The lack of space led me to start using the outdoors more frequently and to begin visiting sites of local interest to the children such as the castle and playground and a number of shops in the town.

On one afternoon we stopped to look at a particularly interesting window display in one of the shops, which had an attractive arrangement of traditional domestic and farming items that are rarely in use today, such as butter pats and bed-warming pans. We began talking about the items on display, attempting to identify them and wondering aloud how they were used. After a while, the owner came outside to greet us and explained that the building was an old shop that had belonged to her family. She told us how particular items of interest had been used in their shop. This led to an extremely interesting and lively discussion on the art of butter making, local customs, cures, history and geography. It was a rich opportunity for developing social skills, interacting with members of the older generation from the local community, developing language through conversation, being introduced to 'rare words' and probably a plethora of other skills of which I have yet to become fully aware. The discussion continued between us for many afternoons over the following months.

A further opportunity was provided by the serendipitous discovery of a local wagon builder who happened to be occupying a warehouse opposite the building we were using. The wagon builder, Bill, was also open to discussions and visits to view the latest developments in the building of the wagon. From our visits to Bill we were able to discuss construction, maths and science as well as horses, travelling and the world of work. Pink (2009: 49) acknowledges the value of remaining open to alternative approaches when she states that 'different methods take us into other people's worlds and ask them to reveal their experiences to us through different routes'.

The learning events described also provided points of interest for conversation, the occasion to talk about each particular child's interests and achievements, and an opportunity to raise developmental concerns with their parents. Such conversations were catalysts in engaging parents who had initially been reluctant to come forward as they struggled with literacy and remembered their own negative experiences in school; now, they were able to share their particular knowledge, areas of expertise, experience and observation.

The opportunities provided by these points of entry into teaching and conversation illustrate the benefits of allowing the work to 'flow': the more I relaxed into just 'being' with the children, rather than rushing the agenda of trying to finish homework and make them study, the better the quality of engagement and learning. Rogers (1969: 130) notes:

This whole train of experiencing, and the meanings that I have thus far discovered in it, seem to have launched me on a process which is both fascinating and at times a little frightening. It seems to mean letting my experiences carry me on, in a direction which appears to be forward, toward goals that I can but dimly define, as I try to understand at least the current meaning of that experience. The sensation is that of floating with a complex stream of experience, with the fascinating possibility of trying to comprehend its ever-changing complexity.



I started to see how active learning and planning around the interests of the children was essential for ensuring a positive and productive session. Obviously I did not always manage to sustain this 'flow' and at times the atmosphere became argumentative and I would once again be frustrated and resentful over our lack of resources. However, as my skills as a practitioner developed, I became more flexible in the lessons and was able to direct more energy into engaging and reflecting on the nature, impulses, conflicts and constrictions of the work.

Range of ages and abilities

As we adjusted to active learning, the range of ages and abilities with which I had been struggling ceased to be a problem and instead, much to my surprise, became an asset. In keeping with Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, whereby children who are slightly further advanced in terms of academic skills are able to support those just behind them, I began to experience and understand how our new way of working facilitated growth in the abilities and confidence of all participants in the group. The younger children gained support from the older children and the older children gained confidence in their abilities. I also gained confidence as a practitioner and was able to spend more time planning around the children's interests and scaffolding their learning. Furthermore, the children seemed to become confident that they would get their time with me and began to support and work with each other rather than jostling and competing for my attention.

Allowing younger siblings to join the children on occasion was another important factor in ensuring successful ongoing relationships and smoothing transitions.

Sceptical agencies

As the original obstacles cleared, I became aware of another one in attempting to explain to sceptical agencies that this learning experience was equally as valid and probably more sustainable than traditional approaches. Whilst active learning is a key component of Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009) and the primary school curriculum (DES, 1999), it is a goal yet to be reached by many teachers who face increasing class sizes, are under pressure to ensure progression and are used to the more traditional directive methods of teaching.

Statistics show that Traveller children are at higher risk of early school leaving and have lower rates of attainment, so what should we do when faced with children who are not interested in school? Is it appropriate to force them to attend homework sessions, to make them sit in a chair and argue with them for an hour? Or would it be better to engage their interest, guide and nurture it and at the same time develop a trusting and respectfully engaged dialogue with them and their families?

Eating arrangements

Another factor that was important in building respectful relationships was the importance of allowing children to eat when they wanted during this time and permitting them to prepare their own food in order to alleviate any anxieties about when they were allowed to eat and drink. This issue is a problem in the early years of primary school for children who struggle to finish eating their lunch within the allocated



time; it seems to be at the heart of many battles between teachers and children and possibly is a result of cultural differences in attitudes towards eating. Traveller eating styles differ in relation to types of food and ways of eating, particularly if the family lives in a trailer, where it is often affected by lack of space. This issue will be explored in future research.

Transitional objects

Being allowed to take something home with them (such as a particular book, pencil or small toy) was also important to the children – these items would always be returned the next time and somehow seemed key in developing a trusting relationship (the transitional object). I have written elsewhere about Travellers' testimonials of constantly being accused of stealing (Cavaliero, 2011) and, taking this issue into account, allowing children to take something away with them would seem to be important. Furthermore, they may be using the object to help them negotiate the transitions between school and home. Taking into account Bowlby's (1988) work on attachment, this is a useful method of developing ongoing relationships, particularly when the pupils involved do not have access to many literacy materials in their home environment.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Schools need to begin by inviting families in and asking them what they know and what they can teach the schools. The idea of democratising and applying a braided approach to education is a trend that Irish early years policy has drawn from experiences in New Zealand and adopted with the introduction of the quality framework, *Síolta* (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006), and curriculum framework, *Aistear*. The challenge is to continue to implement these policies at ground level and on into primary schools whilst also securing enough resources to ensure successful implementation.

The fact that many teachers and practitioners begin their working life without the vital skills necessary to work with families from different cultures sheds light on what kind of value is placed on family interaction with schools and educational establishments. The primary curriculum reflects the power structures and biases that are present within the education system and surrounding society. A genuine commitment to developing innovative, flexible and non-threatening approaches to working with families is required.

Many schools cite parents' lack of attendance at parent-teacher meetings as a serious problem. But how effective are these meetings? Typically, parents get twenty minutes once or twice a year with their child's class teacher. If the child has difficulties, parents can be presented with a litany of 'problems' during the meeting, which, in turn, can exacerbate an already precarious relationship caused by lack of engagement between the school and parents. Many Traveller parents speak about not feeling welcome in their child's school and of being unsure about how to negotiate access to particular supports within the education system (Cavaliero, 2011). Perhaps a rethink of the ways in which we engage is required.

Finally, the need for practitioner-researchers is essential if we are to address difficulties encountered in implementing policies.



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Parent Child Home Programme – Dublin

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The Parent Child Home Programme (PCHP), which is in its fifth year of home visiting, is one of the Early Learning Initiative (ELI) at the National College of Ireland's suite of programmes to address educational disadvantage in the Docklands area of Dublin. Originating in the United States, PCHP fosters positive educational verbal interactions between the parent and the child, which is a critical component of healthy and successful development. With over forty years of research demonstrating the effectiveness of PCHP, its principle aim is to ensure that children who go through the two years of the programme have all the skills needed to be successful when they reach school. As home visiting in Ireland generally does not enjoy a good reputation, the innovative approach taken by the ELI involved upskilling local people, who it was felt would make the programme more acceptable to the local community. PCHP has given the home visitors the skills needed to deliver the programme, improved educational outcomes for the participants and changed how the home visitors interact with their own children. The initial training of the home visitors and their ongoing training and supervision will be discussed in this paper.

A GOOD BEGINNING

The Early Learning Initiative (ELI) at the National College of Ireland (NCI) is a community-based educational initiative aimed at addressing educational disadvantage through the provision, from birth, of an integrated programme of activities, training and support for children, their parents and families, and educators from early years up to third level. Its programmes aim to build up the problem-solving skills of participants and promote the development of successful, high-achieving communities.

An initial survey conducted in Dublin's Docklands area in 2005 showed that while parents had high aspirations for their children, they were unclear about how to help their children achieve those goals (Dartington Social Research Unit, 2006). Parents are children's first and most important teachers and children whose parents are involved and stay involved in their education are more likely to succeed academically (Levenstein and Levenstein, 2008). Therefore, in response to the Dartington study, the ELI introduced the Parent Child Home Programme (PCHP) into the area, as one of a suite of programmes offered by the ELI to help parents become involved in their children's learning.



This paper outlines how local women were trained to become PCHP home visitors and how the NCI supports them in the delivery of the programme with weekly supervision sessions and ongoing (accredited and non-accredited) training.

HISTORY OF THE PARENT CHILD HOME PROGRAMME

Originating in the United States, PCHP is an innovative, home-based literacy and parenting programme that strengthens families and prepares children to succeed academically. It gives children all the language, pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills needed to be successful when they reach school, while at the same time modelling, for parents, the use of educational books and toys.

PCHP has a long history in the United States and operates in thirteen states – states as diverse as South Carolina and Seattle. It was started in the early 1960s by Phyllis Levenstein in New York. Levenstein was asked to see what could be done to address the high school dropout rate. She began her research by asking teachers in the high schools what the issues were, and they reported that the children were unable/unprepared for the work. She asked the same question in the middle schools and got the same answer. She made her way to the kindergarten teachers (reception class), who told her that from the beginning of the year they could tell the children who would succeed and those who would struggle. So Levenstein set out to find out what was going on in the homes of the strugglers, and to see if that could be changed. What she discovered in those homes was what we would now call a literacy-poor environment – nothing much in the way of books or toys and no one really engaging with the children.

Levenstein set up an experiment to see if she could change the outcomes for the siblings from the same (struggling) households. She had three groups: one group received home visits, with age-appropriate books and toys, and with the parent and child present and participating; another received the books and toys on a weekly basis but had no home visitor modelling how to use the materials; and the third group got nothing. The results of that experiment became the PCHP. The children in the families who participated in the programme with their home visitors went to school ready to learn. They had all the literacy and numeracy concepts in place to be successful in school (Levenstein, 1971). The number of PCHP children who graduated from high school was greater than the number of children who had not had the early involvement of their parents and/or the exposure to books and toys (Levenstein et al., 1983).

PCHP METHODOLOGY

The PCHP is designed to be delivered as follows:

- ◆ Children begin the programme between the ages of 18 months and 2 years.
- ◆ Families are visited twice a week; each visit lasts for 30 minutes.
- ◆ The programme is delivered over two school years.
- ◆ Home visitors model for parents ways to engage with the books and toys.
- ◆ A non-didactic approach is used.

Children as young as 18 months can start the programme and ideally they stay with it for two school years. In the beginning the child may not understand why the home visitor is



there, and the parent may also be apprehensive about the role they are expected to play. Over time and with patience the home visitor engages the child and encourages the parent. It is usually the mother who participates in the programme, but fathers and a number of grannies have also taken part.

The non-directive, modelling approach of PCHP is the key to parental involvement (Irish National Teachers' Organisation, 1997: 9). Encouraging a parent, as the child's first and best teacher, is a cornerstone of the PCHP model. Until a home visitor is sure that the parent is capable and comfortable reading (recent research indicates that 25 per cent of Irish people are functionally illiterate; see Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010: 19), they never ask a parent to read, but involve them in different ways – asking for their views, asking when they cannot understand the child, encouraging their opinions. Parents are never given homework or assignments to complete, but are encouraged to continue quality play and reading between visits using the books and toys they receive each week. Home visitors will enquire gently if the books or toys were enjoyed by the parent and child. This light touch is very important to the success of the programme as it is non-intimidating and empowers parents, allowing them to prepare their children for school success, and take pride in their commitment to, and impact on, their own child's education.

The curriculum for the PCHP is the books and toys given to the family. The programme starts with the most basic books, which can be read backwards, forwards or opened at any page and which allow for plenty of discussion. Home visitors are trained to follow the child's lead, label anything and everything on the page, and most importantly to ask open-ended questions. It takes a long time to get out of the habit of asking closed questions, but over time and with practise it happens. Learning to ask open-ended questions is helped by labelling items in books, giving language to emotions, as well as simply asking a child what he or she sees on a page. All these approaches foster positive interactions between parent and child. The essence of PCHP is modelling for parents how to use the books and toys to enhance their child's vocabulary.

INITIAL RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

The PCHP, as delivered in the United States, begins a programme with para-professionals, training them as home visitors and asking them to deliver the programme. Some home visitors are paid, others are volunteers. Over time PCHP participants can, and do, join the home visiting team. When PCHP came to Dublin in 2007, the ELI took a slightly different approach in order to achieve community buy-in for the programme.

As PCHP had never been delivered in Ireland, training had to be provided for everyone, regardless of their qualifications and experience, who wished to become a home visitor. It was imperative, if the integrity of the programme was to be maintained, that all home visitors were skilled in using PCHP's gentle, child-led, non-didactic approach to learning. In addition, it was reported anecdotally to the ELI that home visiting, with some notable exceptions, did not enjoy much success, especially in areas of disadvantage, and advice was given that the programme would have a better chance of being accepted by the local community if it was delivered by their own members. Therefore, in line with the ELI's ethos of empowering the local community, a decision was taken to train local people as home visitors. Of course, home visitors do not visit families they know personally, and criss-crossing the city is part of the approach taken.



A snowball sampling method was used (Cohen et al., 2000). Local crèches and primary schools that were already engaged in other ELI programmes were asked to approach parents who they thought might like to participate in the first training of home visitors. The criteria were that these parents had displayed a keen interest in their children's education and would serve as positive role models for others.

Twenty-four people attended the first home visitor training session and a similar number have attended subsequent training sessions. Any person who might be interested in becoming a home visitor is invited to attend the training course, and when the training is complete they then decide if they would like to apply for a home visiting position.

Training is carried out at the National College of Ireland over five mornings. The training starts with an introduction to the ELI, and its role in the community, and continues with an overview of the PCHP. Participants are asked to think about the games they played as children and what lessons were learned from them. Links with Aistear (the curriculum framework) and its themes of well-being and involvement, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking are made (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009). Participants are introduced to the books and toys used in the programme. They are given an explanation of early literacy and numeracy, highlighting the concepts that children have to master at this stage – the connection between the written and spoken word, and the concept of number. Home visitors are videotaped once during the programme year to ensure that the programme is being delivered in accordance with PCHP standards. Those taped visits are used during training to showcase what was done well and what still needed improvement. Child protection issues are also covered, with an emphasis on both legal and moral obligations. The discussion that follows each talk is an important gauge of what was learned and what was missed.

Explaining why the non-directive, modelling approach of PCHP is important and how the home visitors can use open-ended questions about the toys and books to engage the child's interest is emphasised. A practice session using open-ended questions gives both novice and experienced home visitors a reminder of just how difficult it is to get out of the habit of asking the 'What colour is this?' type of question.

Síolta, the quality framework (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006), and Aistear are interwoven into the home visitor training programme, so that participants understand the importance and relevance of both to their practice and are familiar with the vocabulary of other early childhood education practitioners.

Feedback from the participants has been very positive. Five training sessions for home visitors have been completed and all participants (N=108) found the training useful.

Comments from participants in the 2010 training programme included:

Huge amount of valuable information, great atmosphere. Meeting new people from the locality.

The best thing I learned today was how to tune into the children and ways of making things interesting for them.

(Home visitor training evaluation forms)



SUPERVISION

Five mornings of home visitor training cannot prepare home visitors for every circumstance they could encounter on a home visit. Ongoing support is provided at the weekly supervision meeting, which all home visitors are required to attend. While role-playing scenarios are part of the training, nothing can substitute for the real life events that can await any home visitor on any given day – a child in bad humour, a parent unable to attend, a baby demanding the parent's attention, arriving at a bad moment in family life, etc.

Supervision meetings start with all the home visitors reporting on their visits of the previous week. Problems that may have arisen, or questions asked of the home visitors, are discussed and solutions from the collective wisdom in the room are given. Once every home visitor has had a chance to report back on their visits, the books and toys for the next week are discussed to ensure that all home visitors are sure of the content of the books and the learning possibilities of the toys that will be used that week.

Supervision is an essential part of the ongoing training of the home visitors. By discussing all the events, good and bad, of the previous week's visits, home visitors learn from each other. The reflective nature of the supervision sessions ensures that home visitors get feedback from others who may have dealt with a similar problem. It is an important part of the programme and valued by the home visitors. As one home visitor reported:

We share it out, we share the experiences out ... we all help each other and if there's any problem at all we always solve them.

(Share et al., 2012)

Furthermore, each new cohort of home visitors has a more experienced team to help and guide them.

TRAINING

Each year home visitors are provided with additional opportunities for non-accredited training. For example, home visitors took part in the parents together community course, a parenting programme produced by the NCI and the Parents Plus charity in the Mater Hospital, and received training in the Hanen method (family-focused early language intervention) during the first two years of the programme. These helped embed the principles of good practice and assisted the home visitors to view their work through a wider lens. In response to a request from the home visiting staff, a talk on autism in general, and Asperger's Syndrome in particular, was given, followed by a question and answer session.

Home visitors deliver storytelling sessions at the beginning and end of each school year in the local crèches and primary schools. This further enhances their skills and is enjoyed by both staff and children in the settings. Following the first storytelling session, one manager commented that staff realised that reading to children was easy and that they were now doing more of it. The modelling by home visitors was a 'very powerful learning style' for these staff (ELI, 2009: 23). Training is provided prior to each session.

In addition, some home visitors have attended the facilitator training for toddler groups as well as the Sólta training for staff in local early years settings.



Initially many of the home visitors had no formal educational qualifications. While non-accredited courses have been extremely useful in raising their skills, educational qualifications were important if they wished to develop as professionals. In 2010 home visitors embarked on their first Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) Level 5 course – Family and Community Support. Although many found the course very stressful, all passed and, with one exception, all received merits or distinctions. One participant commented that she ‘will use the information in many ways’, another stated, ‘I enjoyed the course and I now know I am capable of doing more for myself’ (ELI, 2011: 24). The home visitors have moved on to their next course – on early childhood education and play – and are working towards a major award.

CONCLUSION

Now in its fifth year in the Docklands area, thirteen home visitors from the local community have trained to deliver PCHP. They visit over sixty families twice a week. The success of the programme has been documented by the Children’s Research Centre at Trinity College, Dublin (Share et al., 2012).

For those who become home visitors, there is a high level of job satisfaction with their new role:

I really enjoyed both the books and toys. I loved arriving to each house to see the children waiting for you with a big smile. I really enjoyed watching the confidence of the child, mother and father growing. I loved watching the children’s imagination developing, watching their new ideas. Very rewarding.

(End-of-year review with home visitor)

The home visitors have learned many skills while delivering PCHP: they understand the importance of reading to children, what a selection of good-quality children’s books looks like, how to choose books and toys in a developmentally appropriate sequence, and the importance of asking open-ended questions to extend and expand a child’s vocabulary. It has also changed how they interact with their own children.

PCHP is an integral part of the ELI. Ambassadors for education on the street in their distinctive blue uniforms, home visitors are an accessible point of contact and are often stopped to answer questions about the programme and/or about the ELI and NCI. During the course of the programme, parents are invited to events in the college – a Christmas party, an Easter egg hunt and an end-of-year event. When the families have completed the two years of the programme, they are invited to a graduation ceremony. These events are very popular with families and for some represent the first time they have come inside a third-level institution.

The ELI aims to create a community-wide excitement about education and help raise aspirations. The PCHP in the Docklands plays an important role in realising that aim.

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The Media Initiative for Children: using early years programmes to tackle sectarianism and racism

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The Media Initiative for Children (MIFC) is a Respecting Difference programme aimed at young children aged three to six years. It combines cartoon messages about diversity with an early years programme to promote positive attitudes to physical, social and cultural differences amongst young children, practitioners and parents. The programme was recently subjected to a randomised controlled trial (Connolly et al., 2010) across seventy-four settings in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, which is one of the largest trials of its kind ever carried out internationally. The final report provided robust evidence that the MIFC had a significant impact on young children's attitudes to difference and on their socio-emotional development.

THE CHANGING FACE OF NORTHERN IRELAND

Since the 1994 ceasefires the make-up of Northern Irish society has changed to such an extent that it is now considered to be a multiracial and multicultural society. Such a transformation brings with it many opportunities to experience other cultures and traditions, however, Early Years – the organisation for young children in Northern Ireland – recognises that attitudes to those who are different can vary greatly, both within and between communities, particularly between the two main traditions in Northern Ireland. By 1994 Early Years, or NIPPA as it was known then, had developed into an organisation that was well placed to make a significant contribution to the peace process that followed. Not only was the organisation already facilitating cross-community work between early childhood practitioners, but with a network of 1,000 member groups located across Northern Ireland in communities of all backgrounds, it also had significant potential to begin to implement a community change model.

Early Years has adopted a clear, non-sectarian and non-political approach in relation to its work and the shared spaces created. However, the peace process offered



the opportunity to move beyond this to promote a more explicitly anti-sectarian approach that involved overtly naming and challenging sectarianism and encouraging respect for diversity. It was evident that this would be no easy task given the physical and emotional scars that people carried with them from the previous twenty-five years of conflict. While early years groups were already doing a lot of work around respecting differences, this tended to be in relation to issues such as race and disability and there was definitely a reluctance, and in many cases a fear, of dealing with Northern Ireland's own 'ism,' i.e. the ever-present threat of sectarianism between the Protestant and the Catholic communities.

At a time when Early Years was working on developing a more explicit approach to dealing with the divisions between the unionist and the nationalist communities, an influential research report was published looking at the attitudes and awareness of children aged three to six years in Northern Ireland (Connolly et al., 2002). The report showed that even at the age of three, children were beginning to be affected by the divisions that existed and to internalise the cultural preferences and attitudes of their respective communities. Moreover, by the age of six, these attitudes were found to have become much more entrenched and negative.

THE MEDIA INITIATIVE FOR CHILDREN

The Media Initiative for Children (MIFC) Respecting Difference programme is a pre-school programme for three- to six-year-olds. It seeks to increase awareness of diversity and difference issues among young children, parents and early childhood practitioners and to promote more positive attitudes and behaviours towards those who are different. It combines the use of:

- ◆ Five one-minute cartoon messages shown on national television.
- ◆ An early years curriculum and a set of culturally and contextually appropriate resources for use in the pre-school classroom and in the home environment.
- ◆ A comprehensive training programme for pre-school teachers, parents and management committees.
- ◆ Ongoing support from early years specialists who act as external mentors and critical friends to practitioners.

The cartoons are set in a play park and feature characters with whom young children can easily identify. The messages in the cartoons seek to promote positive attitudes to physical, social, cultural and ethnic differences amongst young children, practitioners and parents. These messages are reinforced in early years settings through the use of resources and curricular activities that prompt young children to talk about their feelings and attitudes to differences. The messages also address bullying behaviours.

The MIFC aims to: increase awareness of difference in Northern Ireland among children, parents and teachers; help young children to understand what it feels like to be excluded and encourage them to be more willing to include children who are different; encourage young children to demonstrate respect and include others who are different, rather than ridiculing, fighting or rejecting them; make respecting difference a very real experience for young children and something that can be shared with their families. The training of practitioners to implement the programme is a vital component of this



initiative. Through training, diversity is translated into practice as practitioners and teachers are helped to maximise the potential of the MIFC resources.

Since its inception in 2004 the MIFC has gone from strength to strength. By 2011, 850 pre-school and early years settings had been trained in the MIFC and a report released by Early Years (Connolly et al., 2010) found robust evidence that the programme is successful in helping young children to be respectful of difference.

RANDOMISED CONTROLLED TRIAL

An interdisciplinary research team, comprising the Centre for Effective Education at Queen's University Belfast, the National Children's Bureau (NCB) Northern Ireland and Stranmillis University College, was commissioned by Early Years to undertake a rigorous and independent evaluation of the MIFC during the academic year 2008/9. The evaluation took the form of a cluster randomised controlled trial led by the Centre for Effective Education, and in-depth qualitative case studies undertaken by NCB and Stranmillis University College.

The purpose was to test whether the MIFC had a positive and measurable effect on a range of outcomes identified for the children, parents and practitioners participating in the programme. The trial was one of the largest of its type ever conducted internationally and involved seventy-four randomly selected pre-school settings in Northern Ireland (54) and in Counties Louth (10) and Roscommon (10) in the Republic of Ireland. A total of 1,181 children aged three or four years participated in the evaluation, together with 868 parents and 232 practitioners.

Pre-testing was undertaken in September and October 2008 and the post-tests were conducted in May and June 2009. At both time points, children were tested individually and asked to complete a series of standardised tasks in which they were shown a variety of pictures and photographs and had to identify and describe what they saw. Parents and practitioners were asked to complete questionnaires at both pre-test and post-test stages. These questionnaires consisted of a series of questions and statements that respondents were required to indicate their response to using a Likert scale.

FINDINGS

For the purposes of the evaluation, an outcome was defined as a real and discernible change in attitude and/or awareness that had occurred as a direct result of taking part in the MIFC. Clear evidence was found that the MIFC achieved positive effects regarding children's attitudes and awareness in relation to their socio-emotional development, cultural awareness and inclusive behaviour. Such effects were consistent across the whole sample of children and no differences were found between: boys and girls; Catholic and Protestant children; children from differing socio-economic backgrounds; and children in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

The programme was also found to achieve similar effects regardless of the rated quality of the setting and, on the whole, the settings that took part in the intervention were found to have delivered the programme with relatively high degrees of fidelity to the programme. No evidence was found that the minor variations in programme delivery



across settings that did exist had any significant impact on its effectiveness in improving outcomes among the children.

The evaluation found some potentially encouraging signs of positive change among both parents and practitioners in relation to increased awareness of the need to undertake diversity work with young children and also their confidence in their own ability to address such issues with children.

Main conclusions

Overall, the trial found robust evidence that the MIFC is an effective programme for improving outcomes in young children in relation to their socio-emotional development and awareness of, and attitudes towards, cultural differences. Moreover, these effects represent the 'added value' to pre-school settings that the programme can provide in enhancing socio-emotional learning and promoting understanding of, and respect for, differences compared with their usual methods and resources.

The programme was enthusiastically received by practitioners, parents and children and provided a range of examples of how it may be effectively and appropriately delivered in differing contexts. The evaluation also identified a number of core programme elements that acted as important drivers of successful implementation:

- ◆ A practical and relevant curriculum supported by a wide range of high-quality and culturally appropriate resources.
- ◆ The provision of high-quality training for practitioners, parents and management to achieve a common vision for the programme and the development of practical skills required to secure its effective delivery.
- ◆ Ongoing support of the early years specialists to ensure that the programme is delivered by skilled and confident practitioners in an effective and appropriate way.
- ◆ Strong and clear commitment to the programme and leadership from setting management to ensure that the programme is delivered with fidelity.

EVALUATION RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were made in the evaluation for the future development and roll-out of the MIFC.

Access to the programme

Given the strong evidence base that the randomised controlled trial provided, further investment would be warranted to ensure that the full programme is available for use by all pre-school settings across the island of Ireland and that settings are encouraged to use it as an effective means of improving young children's socio-emotional development and awareness of, and respect for, diversity and difference.

Given its proven effectiveness among children aged three and four, consideration should be given to developing and extending the programme so that there are developmentally appropriate versions for use in Sure Start venues¹, day nurseries and primary schools.

¹ Sure Start is a UK government initiative with the aim of 'giving children the best possible start in life' through childcare, early education, health and family support, with an emphasis on outreach and community development.



Curriculum and resources

With regard to encouraging children to be more inclusive of others in general, the report recommends considering how the existing activities and resources developed for the programme could be used to demonstrate and explicitly model inclusive behaviours for children in a range of naturally occurring situations, as well as providing more guidance for practitioners on how they can model such behaviours in their practice.

When practitioners are working on issues related to disability and race/ethnicity, it is critical that they draw upon all the available curricular resources and guidance contained in the programme service design manual, which supports practitioners to address all aspects of difference.

With regard to increasing further the effectiveness of the MIFC in relation to children's awareness of, and positive attitudes towards, cultural differences, it would be worth identifying a number of key cultural events and symbols and developing more focused activities and materials that seek explicitly to increase the children's awareness and knowledge of these. The choice of events and symbols should reflect a variety of cultures and should appeal to both boys and girls.

Practitioners/teachers

Practitioners should make extensive use of the guidance and resources provided to support the programme delivery and devote sufficient time to working on each of the five core messages to ensure that the programme is delivered effectively. It was recommended that all practitioners and setting managers attend the full four days of training.

Training and early years specialist support

Further support and encouragement should be provided to practitioners through the training and ongoing support of the early years specialists to implement all the media messages, particularly those messages dealing with ethnicity and sectarianism. Also, the programme training could be further developed to include more use of multimedia techniques and real-life examples.

The early years specialist model is a vital aspect of the programme in terms of the quality and quantity of support offered to practitioners and should be maintained.

In relation to initial teacher education, there is a need to ensure that all aspects of the curriculum are informed by knowledge and understanding of diversity issues. In addition, specific components of training are required that seek to provide teachers and practitioners with the knowledge and skills required to deal skilfully and effectively with issues of diversity in their classrooms and settings.

Working with parents

While the parent workshops are delivered by the early years specialists, practitioners are the agents through which these are organised and communicated to parents. It would be beneficial if the early years specialists had more direct contact with parents regarding these important elements of the programme, rather than relying on practitioners as the link.

Practitioners should also be encouraged and reminded of the importance of communicating with parents in terms of what their children are doing in the setting



regarding the programme, as well as what could be done at home to support programme delivery. Such communication should ensure that children are not receiving conflicting messages at home.

Although some resources are provided for parents, namely the home links material, a more comprehensive and tailored parent/family support package would be useful. For example, parents could also be given a DVD containing the media messages and a manual to help them explain the messages and to give them some simple activities to follow at home. The DVD could also provide some background information on the development of the programme; this may help to convince parents of the importance of doing diversity work with young children and may in turn encourage greater parental participation. (Early Years has since developed a range of resources for parents to use in the home, including story books on the five main messages, finger puppets of the six characters and a DVD of the cartoons.)

Policy and research

It is notable that, in relation to Northern Ireland, the need to address issues of diversity and to promote respect for difference in early childhood was not mentioned in the consultations for the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2010) or the early years strategy (Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2010). In contrast, recent policy developments in the Republic of Ireland have stressed the need for a focus on diversity and interculturalism. These include: *Síolta*, the quality framework for early childhood education (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006); diversity and equality guidelines for childcare providers (Office of the Minister for Children, 2006); *Aistear*, the early childhood curriculum framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009); and the intercultural education strategy (Department of Education and Skills, 2010).

Given the cumulative weight of evidence that now exists locally regarding how attitudes form at an early age, and in light of the strong evidence provided through this MIFC trial of the role that early childhood initiatives can have in bringing about real and measurable positive change, it is imperative that issues of diversity and difference form a key component of any early childhood strategy. It is also essential that such a strategy in turn represents a key element of any wider programme to promote community cohesion.

The evaluation of the MIFC is one of only a few studies (in relation to either early childhood programmes or community relations programmes more generally) that has attempted to undertake a rigorous assessment of the actual measurable effects of a diversity programme on the attitudes and awareness of children, parents and practitioners. There is a need for government not only to develop appropriate programmes to promote community cohesion but also to ensure that such programmes are based on the best available evidence and are subject to rigorous evaluation.

Finally, it should be recognised that this has been an innovative trial, not just in relation to its size and scope but also in the nature of the outcomes it focused on. As such, it required the development and use of a number of bespoke measures. In ensuring that the appropriate tools are available to continue to evaluate the effectiveness of programmes such as this one, further developmental research is required to refine existing measures and to develop new measures. Such measures



should also be capable of assessing the impact of aspects of the programme that were not covered in this evaluation.

WHAT NEXT FOR THE MIFC?

It is the vision of Early Years that the MIFC Respecting Difference programme will be available to all children aged three to six years on the island of Ireland. It is also hoped that the programme can be tailored to suit two-year-olds.

The initiative has also been delivered in some primary schools in Northern Ireland through funding received from the Department of Education and it is hoped that this can be consolidated and rolled up through primary classes in Northern Ireland and also in the Republic of Ireland.

Early Years is also in discussions with agencies and funding bodies in Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom, with a view to developing characters from other cultures as well as the accompanying messages. There has also been considerable interest in the MIFC from further afield and Early Years is in discussions with organisations in Serbia, Colombia and Turkey regarding its introduction in those countries.

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Toybox – outcomes of an early childhood development programme for Traveller children

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Toybox was established in 2003 in recognition of the inequalities in health, education and well-being that exist between Travellers and the rest of the population in Northern Ireland. Toybox is a rights-based service development model that aims to significantly reduce the social and education inequalities experienced by Traveller children across Northern Ireland. Its outreach play-based early intervention service is provided in partnership with children and parents. It works on enhancing the social, emotional, physical, language and cognitive development of Traveller children from birth to four years of age, as well as strengthening the capacity of parents to support their children's well-being and eagerness to learn, thereby empowering Traveller parents to become involved in the education process. Play sessions in the home challenge each child's ability, support their emerging interests and skills using the HighScope approach and provide a positive model for parents. This paper describes Toybox, which has been highlighted as a model of good practice by the Department of Education's Task Force on Traveller Education and by the European Anti-Poverty Network.

TRAVELLERS' LIVES

Travellers are a distinct ethnic group and one of the most marginalised and disadvantaged within Irish society. This paper highlights the variety and extent of needs among Traveller families in Ireland. It reaffirms the need to deliver an outreach service and a range of professional supports, working closely with families and in partnership with other agencies.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in Northern Ireland and the Department of Health and Children in the Republic of Ireland launched the results of the All Ireland Traveller Health Study in 2010. The study (School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Population Science, 2010) found that there were 40,129 Travellers living in Ireland: 36,224 (90.3 per cent) in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and 3,905 (9.7 per cent) in Northern Ireland (NI). Key highlights from the study include:

- ◆ The majority of Travellers (94.3 per cent, NI; 75.9 per cent, ROI) report that they live in family units of five or less.



- ◆ Difficulty in reading and filling out forms was reported by 35.3 per cent, NI, and 28.8 per cent, ROI, of Travellers.
- ◆ Almost two-thirds or 63.2 per cent of Traveller children under the age of fifteen have left school, compared with 13.3 per cent nationally.
- ◆ One-quarter of Traveller families consider where they live to be unhealthy or very unhealthy.
- ◆ Travellers are eight times more likely than the general population to live in crowded accommodation.
- ◆ Forty-six per cent, NI, and 42 per cent, ROI, of Travellers report that they often or very often feel discriminated against.
- ◆ Religion or faith is ranked as very important by 78.6 per cent, NI, and 83 per cent, ROI, of Travellers, with high ratings of importance also given to Traveller culture, identity and community membership.
- ◆ Nomadism was rated as very important by 39.3 per cent of NI Traveller families and 53.9 per cent of ROI Traveller families.
- ◆ The breastfeeding rates for Traveller children were 7.1 per cent, NI, and 5.6 per cent, ROI.
- ◆ Asthma was cited as the most common chronic condition, and chest infections as the most common acute condition, among Traveller children.
- ◆ In the previous twelve months, 47.6 per cent, NI, and 41 per cent, ROI, of Traveller children had visited a hospital accident and emergency department.
- ◆ Almost 44 per cent, NI, and 27 per cent, ROI, of Travellers reported that their children ate at least five portions of fruit and vegetables daily.
- ◆ Most Traveller mothers (80.3 per cent, NI; 74.6 per cent, ROI) rate their five-year-old's health as either excellent or very good. For nine-year-olds, the percentages were 89.3 per cent, NI, and 94.8 per cent, ROI.
- ◆ Nine out of ten children of both sexes had already started primary school by the age of five in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Further inequalities are demonstrated in the statistics:

- ◆ The rate of stillbirths amongst Travellers is more than twice that of the settled community.
- ◆ Infant mortality rates are 3.6 times higher than the national rate.
- ◆ Male Traveller life expectancy is, on average, 9.9 years less than it is for men in the settled community.
- ◆ Female Traveller life expectancy is, on average, 11.9 years less than it is for women in the settled community.
- ◆ Traveller mortality has fallen over the 1990s and 2000s but at a slower rate than mortality in the general population.
- ◆ Only 10 per cent of Travellers are over forty years of age.
- ◆ Only 1 per cent of Travellers are over sixty years, compared with 18 per cent across the population of Northern Ireland (CAWT, 2008).
- ◆ Approximately 48 per cent of all Travellers in Northern Ireland reside in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust area (NIHE, 2008).



THE TOYBOX INTERVENTION

Toybox is a rights-based service development model that aims to significantly reduce social and education inequalities experienced by the youngest Traveller children. It uses an outreach play-based early intervention service that is provided in partnership with children and parents. It works on enhancing the social, emotional, physical, language and cognitive development of Traveller children from birth to four years of age, as well as on strengthening the capacity of Traveller parents to support their children's well-being and eagerness to learn through home visits and empowering Traveller parents to become involved in the education process. Traveller children participate in this play-based model through weekly play sessions using developmentally appropriate resources.

The Toybox project was established in 2003 by Early Years and funded by the Executive Fund and Save the Children, originally for three years, recognising the inequalities in health, education and well-being that exist between Travellers and the rest of the population in Northern Ireland. The Department of Education Northern Ireland has endorsed the need to improve access to education and better outcomes for Traveller children by core funding Toybox since 2008.

Implementation of the Toybox project has been guided by delivery through:

- ◆ HighScope play activities.
- ◆ Inclusion of Travellers within the community.
- ◆ Working in partnership with families.

By March 2012, 274 children representing 197 families were enrolled with Toybox. Since January 2006, 919 children and 457 families had been involved in the project.

The HighScope approach

The project has a holistic approach to the development of the child and offers a broad range of HighScope-initiated play activities. The HighScope approach helps children gain an understanding of the world through interaction with people, materials and ideas. Learning is measured through children's actions and behaviours rather than their age. From birth, children are supported to be active learners during weekly home visits by a project worker trained in the HighScope approach.

HighScope is evidence-based and children develop abilities to problem solve, initiate their own tasks and demonstrate self-confidence and a positive self-image. They also develop good attitudes to, and relationships with, others. The HighScope Perry Preschool Study (Schweinhart et al., 2005), which examined the lives of 123 African-Americans who were born into poverty and were deemed to be at high risk of failing within the education system, found that the HighScope approach reduced inequalities: those individuals who received the HighScope learning approach at ages three and four had higher earnings and a better education and had committed less crime at age forty than those individuals who had not received it.

Toybox recognises HighScope as a quality learning programme that delivers positive outcomes to all young children. The programme can be transferred into the homes of Traveller families by project workers who are able to create a rich learning environment for the family to build on. It recognises the uniqueness of each child and develops his or her particular strengths, interests and needs.



The adult's role is to 'scaffold' the interests and ideas the child has brought forward through HighScope play. This play is meaningful to children as it is based on their experiences, they will solve problems and make decisions rather than the session being adult directed. This learning environment develops the skills and confidence of each child to deal with, and solve, future social, intellectual and physical problems. The voice and rights of each child are paramount and are captured by this active learning method.

Traveller parents

To support parents and encourage their involvement at home and in educational settings, Toybox establishes and develops good-quality relationships based on trust and respect. These elements underpin the quality of the relationship that is to develop and determine the level of parental engagement in a child's learning. The Early Childhood Forum (2009) 'believes that high-quality partnership working is paramount to ensuring better outcomes for young children'.

Research carried out by the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project found that the quality of a child's home learning environment has a greater bearing on his or her learning and development than parental education, income or occupation (Sylva et al., 2004). The report suggests that what parents do is more important than who parents are.

Through home-based play sessions, parents develop their ability to support their children's learning. Project staff support parents' learning by modelling quality play. The familiar home environment empowers the parent to learn naturally and confidently. Project staff point parents towards comprehensive and inclusive learning programmes, which increase their capacity to understand and support their learning needs. This relationship with parents ensures that there is collaborative and communicative growth.

Toybox uses a consistent approach with the participant families, who are consulted in the planning, delivery and evaluation of play sessions. Their input confirms that project staff are meeting genuine needs and that positive outcomes reflect growth and improvement in participants' lives. Toybox is shaped by parents' values and needs and they in return feel secure and confident to maintain their relationship with the project.

Parents are children's first and most enduring educators. When parents and practitioners work together in early years settings, the results have a positive impact on the child's development and learning. Therefore each setting should seek to develop an effective partnership with parents.

(Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2000, quoted in Nutbrown and Clough, 2006)

Parents' involvement is secured by project staff being trained in the programme to observe, interpret, evaluate and nurture the growth of children and parents within their roles.

By strengthening parents' skills, the Toybox project also empowers parents to represent themselves in community settings and on forums. For example, Travellers are representing themselves on the Department of Education's Task Force on Traveller Education, participating in community groups, taking up employment opportunities and completing learning courses. In partnership with families and agencies, Toybox provides a permanent bridge for all parties to share their knowledge and set out their expectations of each other. This facility has immensely improved communication



between groups and continues to address misconceptions people have about each other. The increased visibility of Travellers at events and settings within their local area is a result of Toybox supporting both Travellers and communities to communicate and engage effectively together.

Transitions

Today the majority of Travellers enrol their children in early years settings (i.e. the programme for two-year-olds, pre-school – voluntary/community/Traveller/statutory, and Primary 1) and the gap in enrolment between Travellers and the rest of the population is reducing. Toybox supports smooth transitions between settings and parents by creating a partnership between them. Settings are informed of Traveller culture by Toybox knowledge and experience of working with families. Cultural resources, for example books and puzzles, are shared so that settings have these resources to use with all the children. Parents receive support with filling in school forms and their questions regarding their children's education are answered by project staff. Project workers accompany children and parents into settings so that all involved feel supported to develop positive relationships. Toybox familiarises the children with pictures of, and information about, the settings and staff.

Partnership work

Toybox supports a range of statutory, voluntary and other agencies to engage in meaningful partnerships with families. Outreach work in the homes of Travellers gives Toybox staff an understanding of the needs of families and they are then able to guide them to appropriate services. Services are able to access Traveller families by visiting them alongside a project worker, which means that support can be offered to otherwise 'hard to reach' families.

The Toybox team leader and project development workers attend and represent Travellers on forums and various groups. They have voiced their thoughts and values in wider political contexts, for example the Task Force on Traveller Education. Policy, legislation and research studies relevant to Traveller children and families shape the project and structure its working relationships with other agencies, for example the All Ireland Traveller Health Study.

OUTCOMES ACHIEVED

An evaluation of Toybox by Dr Robbie McVeigh (2007) highlighted the success of the project in engaging Traveller families and supporting the development of children through play. The project was described as a 'catalyst' for developing positive relationships between Traveller families and statutory support services. One of the most influential aspects of the project has been the building up of confidence and relationships between workers and children.

Examples of the many positive experiences that Traveller children and parents have had in relation to early years education were captured on a DVD entitled *My Child*. On watching the DVD we hear the voices of mothers and fathers, and we see the learning that Traveller children are involved in in the home, in programmes for two-year-olds, at nursery schools and as they start primary school. It features parents, children, Toybox



project workers, schools and other agencies working together. Toybox continues to use this evidence to engage new families with the project and to educate and inform agencies of the capacity of Traveller parents to support their children's learning.

In 2008 the Northern Ireland Education Minister set up a task force to assist the Department of Education to develop an action plan on Traveller education. Toybox chaired the early years sub-group of the task force.

Successful visits

Toybox records successful and unsuccessful visits/play sessions (unsuccessful being where there is no access to the child for a variety of reasons such as sickness). Since 2006 Toybox play sessions have been 71 per cent successful. In 2010/11 there were 3,224 successful and 812 unsuccessful visits. This represented a 23.4 per cent decrease in unsuccessful visits.

Consultations with Traveller children and their parents have found that they are satisfied with the services that Toybox delivers. Such consultations also indicate areas where additional support may be needed and the project uses this feedback to deliver an effective service and to voice the needs of families to other agencies.

Enrolment in settings

Between January 2006 and January 2012, 155 children made the transition into pre-school and 98 into primary school. During the 2010/11 school year 24 children availed of the programme for two-year-olds (86 in total since September 2008). The number of Traveller parents who attended Sure Start services, classes or courses in June 2011 was 194 and a total of 479 parents had attended since September 2008.

Toybox considers it important to consult with settings about the impact its work has had on children and parents and to identify areas to develop further. The settings consulted highlight the positive work of Toybox in supporting them to provide the best educational opportunities for Traveller children. They comment on the increased skills of parents at supporting their children and liaising with professionals. They identify areas that families continue to need support with. They have embraced Traveller culture, requesting more information so that they can develop a greater awareness and respect for cultural differences.

LESSONS LEARNED

Understanding the issues faced by Travellers is key to the success of Toybox. Induction training ensures that project staff have the skills to address such issues and are able to react quickly, positively and confidently to meet the aims of the project. Unique relationships between project staff and Traveller families are established and remain central to the delivery of the project and the engagement of all families. Project staff are trained to deliver a robust HighScope programme.

Effective partnership between Traveller families and agencies is required to address issues and improve outcomes for families; this information needs to be shared with key people making strategic decisions.



FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Toybox is completing a pilot study to support the effective involvement of fathers in their children's learning. Toybox recognises that the role of Traveller families is changing and that many fathers desire to be involved in this process.

A recent mapping exercise has identified families in other geographical areas and Toybox is aiming to meet their needs.

A 'good practice' manual is being developed to capture the success of the project and inform others how to deliver a similar service.

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Conflicts between teaching creativity and teaching associated skills in pre-school through art

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The main pre-school services in Ireland – mainstream, Montessori, HighScope and Steiner Waldorf – all provide painting and drawing for children as part of their weekly, if not daily, timetable. Each pre-school's value system affects the provision of art through its environment, its style of facilitation and its objectives for the art exercise. Children's propensity to learn, understand and be creative depends on their capacity to explore and make connections between the various stimuli encountered. Children are given the opportunity to experiment in art time by altering these associations in a self-guided way and to clarify and correct these new ideas by repetition. Although other parallel developmental outcomes such as cognitive, technical and perceptual skills are inseparable from, and assist, children's creative and social development, when they are viewed as educational imperatives they can unintentionally stifle creativity by their presentation as fully resolved schemata to be learned rather than discovered and investigated. This paper reports on issues impacting children's creative development during art time and considers the practical implications of teaching methods that, by prioritising associated learning skills, negatively impact on creative learning.

INTRODUCTION

The research on which this paper is based set out to evaluate and, where possible, quantify the impact of pre-school art time on creative development and its supporting skills by an analysis of the methodologies of art education within four settings: mainstream, Steiner Waldorf, Montessori and HighScope pre-school services. The primary research involved observation of each of the four pre-school doctrines in practice, and the construction of art workshops within each pre-school system, in order to record art time in practice at the different settings. The observations were later analysed to appraise how creative development through art is directly affected by the child's environment and the style of facilitation.

The secondary research involved studying the ethos that underpins each pre-school system's provision of art: identifying their beliefs in art, comparing and critiquing how they view the adults' role as facilitators, and locating where they place the child in



the art experience. Studies by creative theorists and educationalists were also reviewed in order to gain a broader understanding of creative development.

By referring to the theories of the different schools and the secondary literature, it was possible to develop a picture of each pre-school's strengths and weaknesses. Analysis of these findings yielded a recommendation for the optimum type of environment and facilitation for encouraging children's creative development through art.

CREATIVITY AND PRE-SCHOOL METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

Broadly speaking, the pre-school systems that were observed followed through from theory to practice in terms of cognitive, social and technical skill development through the use of art materials. However, there was little active encouragement of the sensory aspect of learning in all the pre-schools, even though much is written about it in their theory.

Mainstream

In observation the facilitator principally used art time as an extension of theme development, which allowed the children to make connections in learning (Beaver et al., 1999). The practice employed constant group-oriented art experiences and the provision of social interaction through which the children shared a wide range of materials (Bruce and Meggitt, 2005). The scope for self-expression and exploration was limited to the use of the materials. Sensory exploration was emphasised in theory but was not frequently practised due to the focus on the correct usage of media in creating an end product, thus further reducing the opportunities to be inventive (Bruce and Meggitt, 2005). The facilitator's direction and the group aspect of most of the art activity limited the opportunities for the development of the child's imagination (Beaver et al., 2008). In some instances a self-initiated deviation in product construction by the child was supported by the facilitator, but imaginative, expressive and artistic development was not catered for. As a result, the children did not progress through opportunities to problem solve or develop new ideas.

The facilitation in practice was directive through instruction and progressed through hands-on guidance within the art experience. In theory the facilitator would step back from the direct art space to observe, but this did not occur in practice (Beaver et al., 2008). However, the directive element and the objective of the art exercise developed the children's concentration skills, thus bringing in a key theory learning outcome. Art materials were not necessarily visible or readily accessible for the children to directly access for the exploratory aspect of the theory. The facilitator praised each child's picture and encouraged the children to value their own and their peer's work by creating a vast display of their art.

Overall, the practice was seen to strongly emphasise the areas of technical skill and perceptual and cognitive development. What was lost in practice was the inventiveness and consistent development of new skills with art materials. The children's artistic and expressive development was greatly reduced by the lack of provision for self-expression, which limited any progression within the theory.



Steiner Waldorf

The environmental structure and the objective of the art exercise observed in practice faithfully reproduced the main thrust of Steiner Waldorf's theory. A large table was provided and laid out as individual workstations for the children, as detailed in the theory. The art materials were not necessarily visible or readily accessible to the children before the art experiences. The consistent provision of two colours of paint and a selection of crayons did develop the children's specific dexterity with them.

Drawing and painting were in place as part of the weekly routine, again fulfilling theoretical practice.

The main developmental goals within Steiner Waldorf's art theory – to support social, emotional and cognitive growth through indirect learning – were implemented in practice. This was achieved by providing an environment that offered the emotional freedom of self-expression through the child's page and the use of art materials. The social objective of the art exercise, in which peer dialogue is developed into group discussion, thus encouraging children to 'read' their pictures, was observed on each occasion. Perceptual and cognitive development were encouraged through the provision of space to reflect and make connections and the supporting facilitation.

Facilitation was led through theory with empathy, imitation, quiet example, singing and guiding the children to treat materials with reverence. Children were allowed to paint unconsciously without direct correction, thus letting them communicate with their fingers. Each child had enough individual space for the sensory movements of rapid smearing and daubing to the thoughtful poise of a paint brush before creating.

Whilst the re-creation of theory in practice was exemplary during observation, issues impacting on creativity were still apparent. Access to materials, their method of use and their variety, combined with the teaching of procedural steps, however subtly, were observed to limit the children's ability to self-initiate, explore, imagine and experiment. Space is similarly subtly controlled with the children's movements restricted during group art. A strong agenda for the development of cognitive, technical and perceptual skills is masked by its delivery.

Montessori

Montessori theory on the environment prescribes the provision of a prepared room with accessible art materials thereby allowing freedom and respect for the child to self-initiate and direct through activities. This key learning factor was supported from theory to practice by providing work spaces in a communal area, thus offering freedom for each child to choose his or her own activity and be aware of his or her social behaviour. The surrounding walls in the prepared environment, with low shelves and with all didactic materials easily accessible and labelled, provided further support for this objective. The structure of the art space and the objective of the art exercise supported the learning outcomes of: motor education through the prepared environment, training the hand to write through tracing, and learning colours to refine definitions and judgements.

In practice, tracing was more actively used by the children, whereas the prepared easel and other free art materials were not used at any stage during the pre-school observation. Clarification at interview confirmed that the children were in the habit of choosing work at the easel and other free art materials at other times but less so than the tracing activity. The children were led into the tracing activity and purposive value for



the activity was transferred in the process, whereas this cannot be said of work at the easel and choosing other free art materials.

Montessori theory does not prescribe that group art activities should be solely event- or theme-based with a product-oriented objective, however, this was what was largely observed in practice. It was noted that Montessori theory focuses more on individual development than co-operative or group aspects. The two exceptions to this were the use of colour boxes and the use of the artist folders. With regard to the colour box activity, the older children helped the younger children occasionally, but the children worked as individuals in all other aspects of the activity. The objective of the artist folder exercise was to interest children in how paintings are constructed, engage them in lively discussion about the paintings in general and help them to observe and define colours. This was followed through in practice.

Overall, the facilitation was as prescribed in the literature. The facilitator did step back to observe, in line with the theory, during group art. In practice, art in Montessori was not observed as being treated as a consequence in itself but was employed in the other objectives of Montessori theory such as pre-writing, pre-maths and technical skill development.

HighScope

In practice, free art time was placed as an option for the children in their 'plan-do' daily routine. The environment in the classroom supported the theory of providing an area rich with art materials to develop exploration of the children's senses through sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. The art area included a table with four chairs and an open unit in which all painting and drawing materials were labelled, thereby making the materials accessible and supporting a core HighScope curriculum principle. Art is one of the main curriculum areas, with drawing and painting as two of its important elements. Art was displayed on the walls of the observed room, with individual, group art or project work reflecting the theme or season of the month.

HighScope theory is based on the belief that art will help develop social, emotional, cognitive, perceptual, linguistic and physical skills and it supports art education for its own merit (Vogel, 2001; Epstein and Trimis, 2002; Hohmann and Weikart, 2002 and 2008). These developmental areas were supported in practice in both group and free art projects.

Facilitation through observation and empathy was put into practice during free art time, which offers the child inventive use of materials, creative space for thinking and opportunities for expression through art practice. The theory prescribes the best facilitation for the development of perception, memory and concept formation in order to support creativity. Free art time supports this by letting the child explore without an adult-designed product.

HighScope theory places great emphasis within group art on exploration and investigation and on the collaborative, co-operative, social and emotional aspects of development. The facilitator was observed supporting these objectives through thorough engagement with the children during theme development. The social and emotional learning outcomes were enhanced by giving the children full responsibility for the materials they shared in free art time and by tidying up, which required team work.

This pre-school system, in both theory and practice, seems to offer children the most reflective time for looking at their and others' art.



In practice there was some limitation of the expressive, explorative and imaginative elements of creative development, and of time given to children in self-directed creative activity. This was often due to the facilitator's responsibility in controlling a large group and meeting educational expectations by giving a product-based objective to the art exercise. Further factors that reduced the development of these elements were the access and use of materials to experiment and explore and the provision of space for self-expression. Even if art materials are accessible, this is not enough to promote their explorative use or their use for self-expression.

CONCLUSION

In practice the scope for individual expression in mainstream pre-schools' art sessions was observed to be limited to the use of the materials. This was a result of a strong product-based objective for the art exercise and a hands-on approach to facilitation that emphasised technical skill development. The focus on the end product was seen to adversely affect inventiveness (since the end product was pre-set) and self-expression by limiting the child's imagination and creativity. It was also noted that the facilitator did not step back from the direct art space, remaining very present at all times in the children's space.

The observation of the Montessori pre-school practice raised questions about freedom and choice within the art activity. When children are always free to select their own activities, they tend to choose some repeatedly and neglect others, with negative implications for their creative development. A facilitator leading an activity can transfer purposive value to that activity and this can influence a child's evaluation when comparing it with other activities that are not led by the facilitator. Thus, the facilitator must be careful not to bias the children in favour of activities that involve technical abilities and against more freely creative activities. In group activities, theme development should play an important role and not be limited by use only on occasions or seasonally.

Within the Steiner Waldorf and HighScope pre-schools the observed practice was largely in line with the theory. This does not mean that the practices of these pre-schools are above critique. As mentioned above, all of the pre-school systems observed follow through to a large extent from theory to practice in cognitive, perceptual and technical skill development through the use of art materials. The relationship that holds between the value a pre-school method has for these areas of development and the value it has for art and creativity is subtle. A pre-school theory can attribute great value to art and creativity, yet this can be lost in practice by too much emphasis on skill development. Creativity can thus be damaged by the use of art as a vehicle for other areas of development.

Factors that limit children's creative development comprise anything that prevents their natural expression of their innate creativity. The placement of art and its evaluation within the curriculum can result in losing the specific need to nurture creativity, especially if the facilitation of art is no different from any other area of activity. The facilitation is specifically important for allowing children access to materials with which to create and explore associations, time for self-guided creative activity and time to revisit, hone and revisualise their work. Other aspects of the creative environment seen to measurably affect development include: space for movement, separation and



orientation to their peers; the level of training, qualification and experience of the facilitator; the facilitator's ability to judge the developmental readiness of the child; the facilitator's ability to assess and support the child's development without reservations, preconceptions, bias or prejudice; the class size and age range of the children; the objective of the art exercise; the level of choice given to the children; and even parental attitudes to the art activity.

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The Toybox project in Sligo Family Support Ltd

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Sligo Family Support Ltd has been developing relevant services to support parents since 1989. Its work includes family visitation, outreach and in-house services for over 420 families. However, Traveller families in the Sligo region have been slow to avail of these or any other services. In view of the importance of pre-school education, an initiative called the Toybox project, where a skilled worker visits Traveller families weekly with appropriate activities and toys, was introduced into the service. The uptake has been very positive and the benefits and difficulties resulting from this initiative, as noted during the first two years of the project, are discussed in this paper. The project is continuing, though with younger children to take account of an evaluation that found Traveller parents were tending to use the Toybox visits as a substitute for pre-school.

INTRODUCTION

Research, nationally, highlights the lack of attendance by Traveller children in pre-school services (Department of Education and Science [DES], 2003). In the Sligo area it has been found that there is a reluctance among Traveller families to access community pre-schools (Boland, 2009), however, funding for pre-schools specifically for Travellers has been withdrawn with a view to enhancing integration from an early age (Corbett, 2012). But what is the relevance of the non-attendance of Traveller children to such an environment? According to the DES (1999: 8):

Studies have shown that quality early education can have a significant impact on children's capacity to cope with the transition to formal schooling and to develop a capacity to learn.

One initiative to address this issue is the 'Toybox project', a pre-school programme specifically designed for the Traveller community. It originated in Northern Ireland and has been adapted for use with families based in Sligo. Its main objective is:

In partnership with children and parents, Toybox provides a rights-based outreach service for Traveller children aged 0–4 aimed at tackling inequalities in Traveller education.

(Early Years, 2012)



This paper examines how the Toybox project aims to highlight the importance of understanding and respecting the cultural needs of the Traveller community for all practitioners working in early years settings. It will also demonstrate the importance of pre-school education in ensuring that children get the best possible start in life.

Following an overview of the service provider, Sligo Family Support Ltd, the paper considers the cultural context of the Traveller community in the Sligo area before discussing the Toybox project – the planning, implementing and evaluation of the project and the lessons learned along the way.

BACKGROUND TO SERVICES

In 1989 Sr Dolores McTernan, at St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, carried out extensive research (unpublished) into developments in early childhood education. The following outcomes were evident:

- ◆ The early years in a child's life are the most important for holistic development.
- ◆ Any intervention in early childhood education must include working with parents.
- ◆ The earlier the intervention is made, the more successful it will be.

As a result of this research, a project was established and subsequently named Sligo Family Support Ltd. This organisation provides a variety of different support services to children and their families, some of which will be discussed below.

Lifestart

In 1994 the organisation became affiliated to the Lifestart Foundation to avail of a monthly developmental bulletin for parents called the Growing Child programme. This programme was adapted to ensure that the material was culturally appropriate to the parents in Sligo. In 2011 approximately 320 parents in the Sligo area took part in the Growing Child programme. Of these, thirty-two families were asylum seekers living in direct provision accommodation and fifteen families were from the Traveller community.

Family visitors call to families on a monthly basis to provide information, guidance and support on early childhood development. The service is offered on a universal basis and its philosophy is that parents are the primary educators of their children and that all families contain within them resources and strengths that can be nurtured.

In addition to the Growing Child programme, the Sligo Family Support/Lifestart family visitors deliver a pilot programme entitled 'At Home in School'. This programme is delivered to parents for six months prior to the child commencing primary school. It aims to ensure that parents are working with their children to make sure that they are as ready as possible to start in the formal education system.

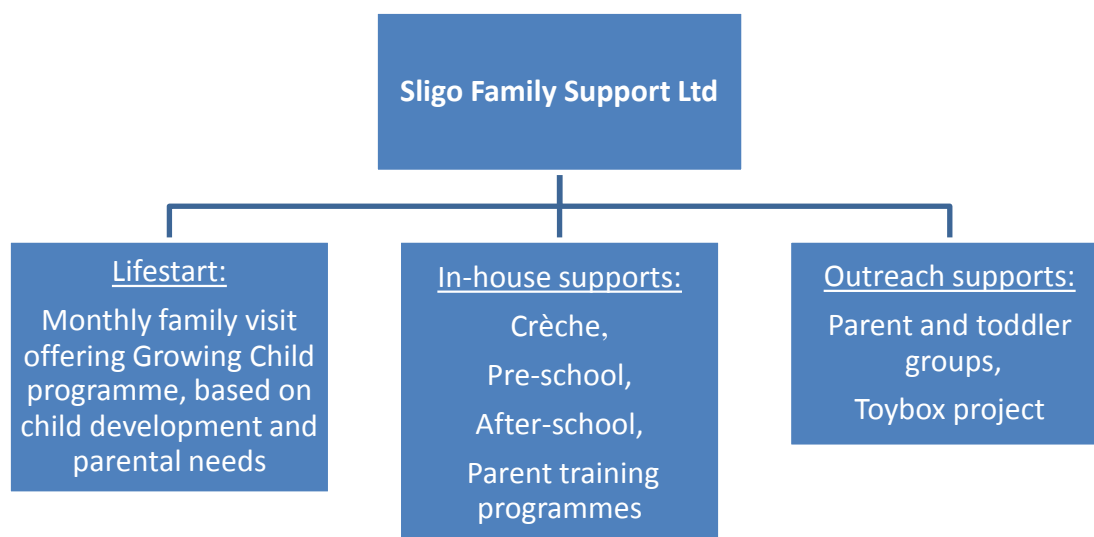
Childcare services

Services offered by Sligo Family Support Ltd include pre-school, sessional and after-school services and full daycare. These supports have grown steadily and by 2011 seventy children were receiving care and education on a weekly basis. The pre-school services primarily aim to ensure that children are socially and emotionally developed and, therefore, capable of a smooth transition into the structured environment of the



formal education system. The childcare workers are trained to embrace the many cultures that exist in Sligo, not least of which is the Traveller community. Despite attempts to encourage Traveller families to avail of these services, the uptake has been very limited.

Figure 1: Parental supports offered by Sligo Family Support Ltd



Outreach/parent and toddler groups

Parent and toddler groups have been facilitated at a variety of centres around Sligo town to encourage greater access and ease of attendance. The service is offered twice a week and has proved particularly beneficial to parents who are new to Sligo. Again, despite attempts to encourage Traveller families to attend, uptake has minimal.

Training

Sligo Family Support Ltd provides relevant training to both childcare practitioners and parents who use the services. Training for parents is based on self-identified needs. In 2010 and 2011 approximately sixty parents participated in paediatric first aid training. Other training for parents included basic cooking skills and personal development. No Traveller parents availed of these opportunities.

TRAVELLERS: CULTURAL CONTEXT IN SLIGO AREA

There are approximately thirty Traveller families living in Sligo town and its environs, many of whom live on halting sites. Research and anecdotal evidence have highlighted that Travellers often do not attend pre-school (DES, 2003) and this makes the transition to primary school a difficult process. Research carried out by the Sligo County Childcare Committee (2009) on its 'Readiness for School' project found that children who enter the formal education system at a disadvantage usually remain at a disadvantage throughout their national school years.



Traveller families have very little history of using pre-school services in the Sligo area. Many Traveller mothers stay at home with their children and the need for pre-school is not seen as significant. Lack of experience of pre-school services and overall poor educational experiences by Traveller children in the past have led to mistrust among the Traveller community of educational service providers (Boland, 2009). Lack of employment and previous discrimination within the educational system has led many Traveller families to undervalue the importance of obtaining a good standard of education.

Many Travellers feel they are protecting their children from misleading outside influences by keeping them at home for as long as possible (Boland, 2009). In the Sligo area, the segregated nature of halting sites can mean that mixing with non-Travellers is a major challenge. Travellers have even expressed fears of their children losing their identity when they are expected to attend school.

It has been observed that Traveller parents tend not to play with their children. There is no tradition of reading or using educational toys; more emphasis is placed on oral storytelling and playing with other children (Boland, 2009).

In an attempt to address these difficulties, the Toybox project was adopted as a short-term project, with the intention of withdrawing when the benefits became evident to the parents.

THE TOYBOX PROJECT

The Toybox project, which originated in Northern Ireland, 'aims to challenge disadvantage, exclusion and poor educational attainments experienced by Traveller children through supporting them in their early years' (McVeigh, 2007).

The project aims to combat the issue of poor attendance of Traveller children in pre-school by delivering play sessions to the child in his or her home and building links with local pre-school services. It seeks to include families in the play sessions by empowering parents to play positively with their children, while emphasising the importance of pre-school for the social, emotional and physical development of the child. Parents receive regular information on the benefits of integrating their children into pre-schools and about the overall benefits of pre-school services, which ensures that children are prepared for the structures and routine of the formal education system.

The *Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy* recognises the importance of pre-school education for Traveller children:

[I]nvestment in the provision of early-childhood education, aimed at the most vulnerable, can reduce or avoid the necessity for spending on remedial measures later in a child's educational life, when they may not be as effective and may involve greater costs.

(DES, 2006: 29)

The Toybox project in Sligo is a collaborative project, developed and managed by an advisory group, which has representatives from local organisations, with a particular interest in the promotion of pre-school education. This advisory group was established to examine the needs of the Traveller community in Sligo in terms of access to pre-school services, and to work with the families to address these needs.



It was not devised as a research project. The parents were directly offered the facility through links previously established. Sampling did not occur as all Traveller families with pre-school children were included. The remainder of this paper reports on the experience and the lessons that were learned.

Preparatory work

Prior to the establishment of the Toybox project, advisory group members visited the Traveller families to ascertain their needs. At this time the majority of the Traveller families wished to have a pre-school service on site. However, an on-site pre-school was not a possibility as the shift in government thinking towards integrated services meant that funding was no longer available for segregated services (Corbett, 2012).

In 2009, with funding received from the Dormant Accounts Fund – under the pre-school education initiative for Traveller children through the Department of Education, Sligo Family Support Ltd was able to employ two Traveller pre-school liaison workers, one of whom was a member of the Traveller community. Both these workers spent time working in the pre-schools of Sligo Family Support Ltd, Northside Community Centre and Sligo Social Services Council Ltd. During their time with these services the workers equipped themselves with information on policies and procedures and in particular on fees, waiting lists and operating times.

Generally, Traveller parents are unfamiliar with the structures of pre-school services and the system of registering children in advance. Traveller parents have in the past felt that they were being discriminated against when they were not accepted into pre-schools immediately on application. The fact that many pre-schools have waiting lists in place has been identified as a barrier to access for Traveller children since their parents do not tend to subscribe to waiting lists (Boland, 2009).

Delivery

In April 2009 delivery of the Toybox project commenced. Both liaison workers were allocated seven families each, whom they visited on a weekly basis for one hour. The workers brought a box of pre-school resources for the children to play with. During each visit the parent(s) were encouraged to play with their children and the worker explained the importance of learning through play at this age. It is paramount to the success of such a project that parents actively participate in the visit.

During the visit the worker discussed with the parent(s) the importance of children attending pre-school education. The worker highlighted the policies of the pre-school services in the area and the early childhood care and education (ECCE) scheme, which entitles children to a free year at a pre-school service. The worker also addressed any concerns the parent(s) may have had in regard to pre-school services and provided information as requested by the parent(s). In line with the Constitution, Sligo Family Support Ltd values parents' role as the primary educators of their children and, as such, recognises the important influence that parents have on their children.

While the responsibilities of Traveller parents is acknowledged, their capacity to engage in the process is determined by several factors, one of the most significant being their own educational and socio-economic background.

(DES, 1999: 22)



The aim of the worker and the project was to ensure that parents felt confident to send their children to pre-school or to the formal education system.

Concurrently, the advisory group equipped pre-school services with information, training and resources to enable them to embrace Traveller culture. Training was offered to service providers, to service users and to Traveller parents who might send their children to a pre-school service. Pre-school services received culturally appropriate books and resources to raise awareness of diversity.

Evaluations

An evaluation carried out at the end of 2009 was very positive about the impact of the Toybox project (Boland, 2009). It highlighted the barriers to pre-school education for Traveller families, which include discrimination, fees and lack of knowledge of the benefits. In addition, it gave recommendations for service providers, which the evaluator felt could encourage greater participation of Traveller families in pre-school. These include training, culturally appropriate resources and the use of a contact person from within the Traveller community to give the families advice and support; all of which were part of the Toybox project (Boland, 2009).

In 2009 the uptake of the Toybox service was almost 100 per cent and parents were anxious that their children received their weekly visit. As a result, Sligo Family Support Ltd provided funding to the project for the first half of 2010 and then the Health Service Executive (HSE) continued to fund it.

In 2010 a second evaluation of the project was completed (McGaughey, 2010). This evaluation, although extremely positive, did raise some concerns, one being that the segregated one-to-one methods of delivering the Toybox project were reinforcing the Traveller families' resistance to mainstream pre-school services. Comments from Traveller families included 'Toybox is as good as pre-school', and parents stated that they 'would just use Toybox instead' and Toybox is 'a lot handier' than sending their children to pre-school. These comments, although understood, contradicted what the project had originally set out to achieve.

Another cause for concern was highlighted when one parent and one grandparent who were interviewed indicated that they were scared to send their children to pre-school services. The evaluator stated that this fear is 'deeply embedded and will be difficult to overcome' (McGaughey, 2010: 11). This fear was widely acknowledged by the advisory group at the outset of the project. It seems to have accumulated over years of discrimination and perceived attempts to eradicate Traveller culture. It is hoped that the Traveller families will develop a trust in the services involved and feel confident and willing to send their children to the services. The pre-school liaison worker is creating a programme where parents and their children will access the centres together for group work sessions, which may help parents to better understand how the services operate.

Since the evaluation in 2010, greater emphasis has been placed on the need to have Traveller children integrate into the mainstream pre-school services. The liaison worker has been informing parents that children of pre-school age need interaction with their peers to develop their social and emotional skills, and that one hour per week of resources on a one-to-one basis with a project worker does not compensate for the work of pre-school services. The worker has also been ensuring that parents have all the necessary information regarding the ECCE scheme, as it is hoped that this will encourage a greater uptake of places in pre-school services by Traveller children.



The 2010 evaluation also highlighted the hugely beneficial elements of the Toybox project. Comments from Traveller parents included that the children: 'got more used to playing'; had 'improved concentration'; were 'learning better'; and 'were more ready for school/pre-school as a result' (McGaughey, 2010: 16).

The evaluation highlighted the role of the Toybox project in developing children's speech and language skills, which had previously been a difficulty among the Traveller community, as noted by HSE workers and teachers who advised the project (personal communications, unpublished). The project provides an avenue for the detection of speech and language difficulties and support is available for parents if necessary. In 2010 HSE speech and language specialists provided training to the liaison worker and to the family visitors employed to deliver the Lifestart/Growing Child and Toybox programmes. The efficacy of this training has yet to be assessed.

FUTURE OF TOYBOX

It is evident from the 2010 evaluation report that the Traveller families are using the Toybox project instead of accessing pre-school services; however, in the absence of a pre-school specifically for the Traveller community, and given the reluctance of families to access existing services, the Toybox project is going a long way to meeting the needs of Traveller children in their pre-school years. McGaughey (2010: 20) states:

[I]t is important that the Toybox Project is continued ... it is perhaps best viewed as a 'pre-pre-school' which prepares children for pre-school and encourages their parents to enrol children in pre-school, whilst ensuring that mainstream pre-school services are prepared to receive Traveller children.

The Toybox project was never intended to be a long-term project. It is anticipated in time that a trust will be established between Traveller families and the pre-school services and that Traveller families will access these services. This will inevitably make the Toybox project redundant. Although the project's advisory group and the management team of Sligo Family Support Ltd are dedicated to the Toybox project, they are striving to see the need for the service diminish – for it to become a victim of its success. In the immediate future the Toybox project will be delivered to younger Traveller children (under three years of age), with a view to encouraging those of pre-school age to access community pre-schools.

It is also hoped that Traveller families, through the relationships that have been established by the delivery of the Lifestart programme and the Toybox project, will access the other services offered by Sligo Family Support Ltd and take advantage of the many supports that are available to all parents and children in the community.

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A case for an inclusive early years pedagogy

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Inclusion is a desirable feature, if not a requirement, of early education. There are educational, social and political as well as rights issues at play in the debate. From a pedagogical perspective, inclusion has significant benefits for all children and not just those children seen as needing to be included. It is a scenario in which essential questions about the nature of the child as belonging to the human family and the role of education in creating a more democratic and equitable society are investigated. Inner differentiation and learner uniqueness combine with co-operative activity and a shared curriculum to create a meaningful learning experience for all children in an ordinary early learning environment. Continua of regular curricular approaches with differentiation of intensity and focus is required, as is conceptualising teaching within curriculum and knowledge assumptions.

INTRODUCTION

There are many demands made of the early years sector, ranging from language development, through socialisation and physical development, to school readiness. The emphasis is on the holistic development of the child and all that this entails and is firmly supported by both Síolta (the quality framework) and Aistear (the curriculum framework) at national level (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009). There is full recognition of the important and unique position of early education and its long-term benefits. Different approaches emphasise the importance, to varying degrees, of experience, relationships, confidence, etc.

There is, however, a consensus that the best way to prepare children for the adult world is to give them what they need as children (Bruce, 2005). It is this belief in the value of childhood per se and of the right of all children to experience it that informs the various approaches adopted.

A more recent and all-encompassing requirement of early years education is that it should offer an inclusive experience to all children. Síolta (the child's individuality, equality, respect for diversity) and Aistear (identity and belonging, equality and diversity) again address this in a proactive way. This is in keeping with the above conception of childhood, which, while a unique and distinct time in life, is inextricably linked with, within a broader social domain, and lays down the foundations for, all future living. If



one accepts the importance of real early years experience and believes in the long-term consequences of such experience (Hayes, 2010), certain obligations accompany adult interventions in the child's early years.

It is generally accepted that if we want a child to develop good language skills, we should provide a rich language environment, model language usage and provide experiences for the child to use language in a variety of ways. The same holds true of numeracy, gross and fine motor skills and the other cognitive and sensory functions we expect to be addressed by the early years sector. If exposure, intentional instruction and experience are considered necessary to address the above areas of cognitive development, it would appear logical that such approaches may be equally valid to attain other objectives such as attitudes, dispositions and values.

There is a global trend towards the creation of an educational system that is inclusive, as elucidated in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). This is part of a much wider social and political agenda where inclusion is seen as rights based and with a moral imperative to action. The value of working towards an inclusive system of tolerance, respect for diversity and equality for all is largely uncontested. The real controversy surrounds the way in which this may be achieved and the resistance from established interest groups. Mandatory school systems in many countries, including Ireland, have been influenced by this thinking at global and European Union levels and national legislation is transferring the ideals to specific systems (for example, the Education Act 1998, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004).

Inclusion has many different meanings, from being physically present in a place to having a sense of belonging to a particular group or class. Thomazet (2009) identifies three types of integration: physical, social and pedagogical. Schools may grapple with the concept of inclusion and often consider it problematic and imposed without adequate resources. This view of inclusion comes from a dominant culture where, for many generations, separate or segregated systems existed. The journey towards inclusion can be seen as a move from denial/exclusion via acceptance/segregation to understanding/integration and finally to knowledge/education for all or inclusion (Wolfensberger and Thomas, 1983).

Inclusion is often considered necessary only for the child with extra requirements or special educational needs (SEN) or for the child who is in some way perceived as being different. This is a very narrow and restrictive definition of inclusion and one that is creating difficulties despite the goodwill of educators. Inclusion, as the word implies, is for all children, not just those perceived as needing it, and it is always reciprocal (Dixon, 2005: 391).

In the literature one can identify two polarised models of the conceptualisation of children with SEN and this can be extended to include all children who are seen as different and needing inclusion, in the traditional sense of the term. One view, the individual model, sees the SEN as within the child, while the opposing view, the social model, considers the SEN as outside the child and therefore has rights implications. Current practice is influenced by the latter model, leading to a social constructionist approach that attributes causes to environmental factors (Allan, 1995). The limitations of this interpretation are becoming evident and a move towards a social creationist view, which sees the problems as located within the institutional practices of society, may be of greater benefit to the inclusion debate.



A PEDAGOGY OF INCLUSION

This paper proposes a pedagogy of inclusion not only as a solution to the daily requirements of all children's educational experiences but also as a means of addressing exclusion at a larger societal level. This is in keeping with the belief that early education has long-lasting benefits for both the individual and society, as has been documented by much research. An inclusive pedagogy is a positivist approach that enables educators to seek solutions for educating all children in as ordinary a way as possible. It also provides opportunities for children with 'ordinary difficulties', children at risk due to social background, often neglected in the traditional version of integration (Thomazet, 2009). It is a capacity-building process.

Why a pedagogy of inclusion? The opposite, a system that excludes some children, deprives children of equal opportunities or chances to meet, mix and learn with other children their age and to partake in a common curriculum; it is socially and educationally divisive. If one accepts the long-term benefits of early years experience, then such segregation or exclusion must be considered as having long-term undesirable consequences.

There is little conclusive evidence in international literature of the benefits, especially long term, of separate or segregated education. While evidence is equally inconclusive for inclusive education, there is the moral argument that cannot be ignored (Thomas and Vaughan, 2004). Education does not operate in isolation and as society deals with the history of segregation and attempts to secure a better future for all children, a unique opportunity exists in early education to forge an inclusive identity. A purely utilitarian vision of early education is arguably not best placed to inform the debate on inclusive pedagogy. A review of Irish literature suggests that there has been little systematic work done regarding outcomes for children with SEN (Rose et al., 2010).

A pedagogy of inclusion is one that ensures that all children have a meaningful learning experience on an ongoing basis. It offers a pathway to success, concerns all children, has no limits and adapts by creating meaning (Wolfensberger and Thomas, 1983). This is a constructivist approach to early education, where the child is an active agent, engaged with other children and adults in an inclusive environment. In this way, early years education is seen as a normal stage in life, to be experienced by all children. It is a process that leads the school to seek solutions for educating all children in as ordinary a way as possible (Thomazet, 2009).

A pedagogy of inclusion does not advocate different or specialised curricula for different children. It is based on the concept of universal design, making the curriculum accessible via flexible learning materials as part of the shared learning experience in the form of curriculum development from the bottom up (National Council for Special Education, 2010: 33). The curriculum is differentiated as required to suit different learning styles, competences and practices. It is a common sense approach to a complex reality and involves a mix of naturalistic instruction where learning is embedded in ongoing classroom activity and teacher-led instructional practices (Odom, 2000).

A growing consensus of thought maintains that, for inclusion to work, there is no great need for specialised curricula or departures from dominant curricular practices. What is needed is a greater emphasis on certain curricular areas, continua of common curriculum approaches, the curriculum version of continua of pedagogical strategies (Lewis and Norwich, 2005: 210). There is a need for more intense and focused or



intentional teaching. Alternatives to ability-based teaching exist, such as the possibilities proposed by the Reggio Emilia approach.

Aistear provides the early years sector in Ireland with a curriculum framework (NCCA, 2009). In an inclusive-pedagogy approach, this framework would be used to develop the content for all children. In mandatory schooling, separate curricula are often found in special schools, either by design as a result of the belief that children who learn differently need different content or as a knock-on effect of the exam orientation of the regular system. Aistear facilitates the generation of content and experience for all children, irrespective of learning style, difficulty, language, culture, etc. It is to be negotiated and mediated by educators at local level. The decision to make it a curriculum framework rather than a prescribed curriculum is aligned with the principles of inclusion and an increasing recognition of the value of first-hand meaningful learning experiences for the child.

What, if not curriculum, are the distinguishing features of an inclusive pedagogy? It is the perspective that largely determines the difference. It is not the child who is included, but the school/centre that is inclusive (Thomazet, 2009). The emphasis is different, whereby the child's uniqueness is acknowledged and respected. An inclusive pedagogy recognises inner differentiation. The child's uniqueness in the sense of his or her past experiences, interests and achievements are recognised as well as the existence of an individual learning profile. It means that all children will play, learn and work together at their respective developmental levels in co-operation with each other within a shared curriculum (Feuser, 1997).

Once this vision of the child is adopted and it is accepted that it is not the child but the system or setting that must change, the educator is in a good position to put strategies and methodologies into practice to support such a vision.

Social practice is influenced by our view of the person; by extension, educational practice is influenced by our view of the child. Our view of children who are different by virtue of their culture, religion, ethnicity, learning difficulty or disability influences our actions, either consciously or otherwise.

Society uses the labels of ethnicity, religion, social origin, disability and so forth to create categories that are recognised by symptoms. Feuser (1996: 11) sees this process operating at two levels: first, a phenomenological classifying process, and second, a level that characterises a social reality, the reality of labelling and segregating and the professional or scientific decision to create separate categories, as in special education.

For an inclusive pedagogy to be effective, one has to relinquish the mindset of seeing some children as different, thereby requiring a different curriculum. All children are different and the degree of difference is not the best measure to use in determining the content of a curriculum. All children, including those we consider as very different, share a common humanity and, by virtue of this, a right to a common shared curriculum (Feuser, 1996).

The dominant social system, the professional expert, by virtue of status in society, may decide who and how to categorise. A child's future may be determined by his or her status via an unsupported faith in a deterministic pattern of human development leading to educational reductionism. The experience of inclusive pedagogy is one of choice of subjects and is socially unrestrictive. The existence of a very heterogenic group of children learning together is as important as any therapy or specialised teaching (Feuser, 1996: 23). The voice of children as stakeholders must be heard.



The history of specialised or segregated education systems teaches that once a child enters a parallel system, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to exit. It is a self-perpetuating system that leads to dependency and a restrictive life experience. This is often based on an assessment made at a specific point in time. It denies a person the right to change and ignores unpredictable future developments. Stephen Hawking, the eminent cosmologist, when considering the segregation of young children, asks (Ferguson, 1991: 214), 'How should it be possible to feel as a member of the human race when separation starts in early childhood?'

Often what we consider as a learning difficulty or disability, for example in the case of a child with Down Syndrome, is the expression of 'a regular human development' considering the fact of his or her starting condition, characterised by a trisomy of chromosome 21 in this case, and environmental conditions such as social and family background (Feuser, 1996: 26).

CONCLUSION

The case for an inclusive pedagogy for early education is much more than a question of placement or physical location. A lot has been written on the values and benefits of inclusion and inclusive education, but Feuser (1996) quotes Sartre in stating that practice 'is the vulnerable point of ideology'. An inclusive pedagogy assumes a questioning of attitudes and values, a recognition of every child's rights and a commitment on the part of educators to work with all children. Its proof lies in our practice, in a paradigmatic shift and in a belief that early education as a normal part of human experience is valid for all without exception.

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Thematic strand: Professional identity within early childhood care and education practice

Early childhood care and education professional identity

Professional identity can be explained as one's professional self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences. In addition, professional roles are regarded as prestigious and provide the practitioner with autonomy and, often, a degree of privilege.

The traditional conceptualisation of professional identity in the early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector is demonstrated in the terming of practitioners as glorified babysitters or nannies, where their professional role and responsibility for children are primarily equated to playing and caring. Such an identity discourse has a negative effect on professionals working in this evolving sector, who may believe that their contribution is undervalued. Furthermore, it fails to convey to the outside world the importance of the sector to the lives of young children.

Literature, nationally and internationally, examining the professional identity of the ECCE professional is limited. However, this concept of professional identity has been discussed and debated extensively in other fields from three distinct perspectives:

- ◆ Professional identity formation.
- ◆ Characteristics of professional identity.
- ◆ Studies in which professional identity was (re)presented by professionals' stories.

This conceptual framework was utilised to structure the third strand of the conference. Papers and case studies were invited on the retrospective and prospective professional identity of ECCE professional practitioners. This thematic strand provided an ideal opportunity for key professionals and researchers in the field to discuss, debate and explore factors that inform such an identity, and the possible barriers and limitations for ECCE practitioners when endeavouring to establish themselves as professionals within this field. Consequently, knowledge gathered through this strand adds to the otherwise limited discourse surrounding professional identity within the ECCE sector.

Vision into practice: the valorisation of perspectives on professionalism in the ECCE sector in Ireland

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The early childhood care and education (ECCE) workforce in out of school settings in Ireland has attracted unprecedented attention from national policy-makers since 2000. In particular, the model framework for education, training and professional development in ECCE (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform [DJELR], 2002); the national quality framework for early childhood education, Síolta (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2006); and the early childhood curriculum framework, Aistear (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009) represent significant milestones in the valorisation of professionalism in practice in ECCE. This paper, drawn from doctoral research into the history of the ECCE workforce in Ireland, traces the development of perspectives on professionalism in ECCE from theoretical vision, as expressed in key policy documents, to the reality of lived experience, and discusses some of the future challenges for professionalisation of the ECCE workforce in Ireland.

INTRODUCTION

The early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector in Ireland has developed a growing understanding, both nationally and internationally, that the most critical variable impacting on children's early educational experience is the nature of their relationships with adult carers and educators (Oberhuemer and Ulich, 1997; Brannen and Moss, 2003; Sylva et al., 2004; Oberhuemer, 2005; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006; CECDE, 2006; NCCA, 2009; Peeters, 2008; Department of Education and Skills, 2010). In Ireland, a dynamic period of change and development, spanning almost two decades, has transformed the nature of ECCE service provision and awakened the professional consciousness of the diverse population of adults working with children in the ECCE sector.

ECCE services in Ireland are generally regarded as those making provision for the out-of-home care and education of children from birth to six years. This perception is reinforced by the fact that the compulsory age at which children must start primary education is six years. However, the use of the phrase 'early childhood care and



education' to describe such provision is a very recent phenomenon, dating, in policy terms, from the publication of *Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning: Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (DJELR, 2002). In addition, the terms 'childcare' and 'early childhood education' had been used in other policy documents (Government of Ireland, 1999; Department of Education and Science, 1999) generally to refer to the same range of services.

Based on extensive consultation, the report of the Expert Working Group on Childcare defines childcare as:

[D]ay-care facilities and services for pre-school children and school-going children out-of-school hours. It includes services offering care, education and socialisation opportunities for children to the benefit of children, parents, employers and the wider community. Thus, services such as pre-schools, naíonraí [Irish language pre-schools], day-care services, crèches, play groups, childminding and after-school groups are included, but schools (primary, secondary and special) and residential centres for children are excluded.

(Government of Ireland, 1999)

This definition widens the age range receiving services from six years to fourteen years by the inclusion of school-age childcare services and thereby significantly broadens the workforce involved in the delivery of such service provision. This paper, however, is concerned primarily with the workforce involved directly in the development and delivery of those out-of-home and out-of-school services for children from birth to six years that are subject to regulation under the Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No. 2) Regulations 2006 and the Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations 2006. This effectively excludes primary school teachers, classroom assistants and special needs assistants working in infant classes of primary schools, and individuals such as nannies, au pairs or relatives who provide care for young children in private homes.

PROFILE OF THE ECCE WORKFORCE

In 2008 the Department of Education and Science completed a national survey of the ECCE workforce in centre-based settings. Over 1,924 ECCE services responded to the survey and yielded a statistically valid response rate of 40 per cent.

A total of 8,357 practitioners were working in these services: 56 per cent were working full time, 35 per cent were employed part time and just under 10 per cent were drawn from Community Employment (CE) schemes. When extrapolated to the general population, this figure allows an estimate in excess of 20,000 for the total ECCE workforce in Ireland. Given that the national childcare census estimated the workforce to have just over 7,000 members in 1999, this suggests an enormous expansion in just over a decade (Department of Education and Science, 2009).

The survey data also support the following conclusions regarding the profile of the workforce (Duignan, 2011):

- ◆ It is overwhelmingly female.
- ◆ It is generally lower paid and has poorer terms and conditions of employment than



other groups of professionals working with the same age group of children, such as infant teachers in primary schools, nurses or social workers.

- ◆ It is regarded as having low status by its own membership.
- ◆ Despite a significant increase in the numbers of staff with ECCE qualifications (predominantly at further education level, i.e. Levels 4 to 6 on the National Framework for Qualifications), a substantial proportion of the workforce is under-qualified or unqualified.
- ◆ There is very low membership of trade unions.
- ◆ A wide variety of employers and terms and conditions of employment exist.
- ◆ Professional identity is heterogeneous and influenced by diverse philosophies.

THE POLICY DISCOURSE ON PRACTICE IN ECCE

Since the mid-1990s a series of policy initiatives led by the Departments of Education and Science/Skills, of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and of Health and Children have resulted in the publication of national policy pertaining to practice in ECCE settings. The scope of the content of successive policy documents included statutory regulation of pre-school services, infrastructural and funding developments, promoting quality in practice and workforce development issues. In general, each initiative involved an opportunity for consultation with representatives from the diverse membership and interest groups considered to be stakeholders in the provision of ECCE. These included, for example, voluntary childcare organisations, parents' groups, disability organisations, employers' organisations, trade unions, and education and training providers.

Between 2000 and 2010 three seminal policy documents were produced, which not only involved consultation with the stakeholder groups in relation to the broad agenda for each publication but also gave stakeholders the opportunity to review and edit the detailed content of these documents. The policy documents in question were:

- ◆ *Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning: Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (DJELR, 2002) [hereafter, the model framework].
- ◆ *Síolta, the National Quality framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006; Department of Education and Skills, 2010).
- ◆ *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009).

Each of these publications addresses issues related to the scope and nature of practice in ECCE and each evolved through iterative consultation with the members of the workforce charged with translating the various contents into practice.

The model framework seeks to inform the development of education and training programmes in ECCE nationally and to provide clarity for those working in ECCE settings regarding the structure of the profession by articulating occupational role profiles and associated knowledge, skill and practical accountability.

Síolta is concerned with providing clarity and guidance in relation to the essential attributes of a high-quality, centre-based ECCE setting. It is designed to promote and support the continual improvement of quality in practice across all facets of ECCE service provision.



Aistear is more specifically focused on supporting children's learning and development from birth to six years. It does this by articulating clear aims and goals for children's learning, well-being and development and providing guidance for adults who are in a position to offer children challenging and enjoyable learning experiences and to help them develop as competent and confident learners.

A detailed review of these documents, separately and in parallel, gives an insight into the discourse of professionalism in practice in ECCE in Ireland. Content analysis highlights elements of consistency and dissonance in relation to professionalism in practice in each publication. The identification and persistence of these issues across each document and effectively, due to their publication dates, across time, yields a valid representation of the evolving professional consciousness of the ECCE sector.

PERSPECTIVES ON PROFESSIONALISM

Analysis of the three policy documents reveals the presence of persistent themes that provide insight into the agreed dimensions of professional practice in ECCE in Ireland. These include:

- ◆ Detailed commentary on issues such as the skills, knowledge, dispositions and values that an ECCE practitioner should be able to draw upon to support professional practice.
- ◆ Expressed commitment to specific pre-service education and training; to continuing professional development; and to critical reflection as an essential tool underpinning professional practice.
- ◆ Description of professional relationships characterised by democracy, partnership, mutual respect and warmth.

Practising professionally in ECCE is not presented as a solitary act; it clearly requires team effort, with all members of the team, including parents, children and other professionals, being given parity of esteem. Embracing diversity and affording equity are further key elements of professional practice. Openness, dialogue and reflexivity are identified as the critical practices that enable these principles to be realised in practice.

Analysis of the three seminal policy documents testifies to the fact that the ECCE workforce has used the opportunity of public consultation on national policy developments to express a clear, consensual vision of professional practice. This vision has remained remarkably constant, despite the different focus of each policy initiative and the level of detail each publication contains. The vision of professionalism involves the interconnected elements of specialist knowledge; ethical practice; democratic relationships; a children's rights-based approach; continuing professional development; and critical and reflective practice (Duignan, 2011).

The consensus-based core elements of professionalism in ECCE practice can also be characterised as having experienced a process of valorisation, whereby the abstract and theoretical vision underpinning practice has gradually become embedded in the concrete realities of everyday experiences, and in doing so has raised both the intrinsic value and extrinsic status of that practice (Andriessen, 2005).

This process can most easily be understood through the example of the adoption of occupational role profiles for the ECCE sector in Ireland as the basis for the



development of common standards for national awards in ECCE made by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (2011). These occupational profiles, which have their origin in the report of the Expert Working Group on Childcare (Government of Ireland, 1999), were reviewed and refined through iterative consultation processes with the ECCE workforce until their publication in the model framework, where they are described in terms of knowledge, skill and competence (DJELR, 2002). The broad-based content of the model framework was extended and developed by Síolta (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and ultimately incorporated into national award standards for education and training programmes in ECCE.

The cycle of valorisation was complete when these awards were specified as required qualifications for government-funded schemes in ECCE (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011). What began as aspiration became, informed by research and refined through dialogue and consultation, the accepted standard for qualification and recognition of the professional ECCE practitioner, intrinsically valued and extrinsically rewarded, in 2011.

Valorisation is a key feature of the professionalisation of a workforce. The term 'professionalisation' is used to refer to the quest by an occupation for recognition, identity and status (Dally, 2007) and it can be identified through the presence of a number of critical indicators such as the definition of a distinct set of required knowledge and skills; the requirement for specialist education and training; and a clear statement of ethical values or code of practice. The validation of the core knowledge, skills and competences proposed by ECCE practitioners in the model framework is a clear indicator that a process of professionalisation of the ECCE workforce is under way. However, this is just one dimension of the valorisation of perspectives on professionalism in practice in the ECCE sector in Ireland and there are others, such as the implementation of quality assurance and curriculum development processes associated with Síolta and Aistear, which will further scaffold the professionalisation processes.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

As professionalisation of the ECCE workforce progresses, aided by the valorisation of the vision of professionalism expressed by the workforce in national policy documents, there will be challenges and dilemmas. Resolution of these will lead to the ultimate formation of a coherent professional identity for the ECCE workforce, uniting, for the first time, the diverse population it currently contains. The heterogeneity of the present ECCE workforce is the outcome of decades of disregard by statutory authorities. As this era comes to a close and ECCE policy and practice moves to occupy a central position in national social policy, the historical autonomy experienced by the ECCE sector will be challenged by the increasing demands for accountability and integration in the mainstream of state-funded services for children. How the ECCE workforce will respond to this challenge remains to be seen.

The long history of autonomy that characterises the development of the ECCE sector in Ireland dictates that professionalisation processes in the ECCE workforce will be successful only if they can embrace the complexities of a community of practice that is proud of its diverse history and origins. Reductionist approaches to professionalisation that seek to impose narrow definitions of membership and technical specifications for professional practice will potentially result in the emergence of schisms in the workforce,



whereby those meeting externally imposed criteria for professionalisation move closer to other more established professions, for example primary teaching, abandoning their unique identity as ECCE practitioners in the process. However, if the strength of purpose that is evident in national policy discourse persists into the arena of practice, then the awakening professionalism of the ECCE sector in Ireland has the potential not only of self-transformation but also to bring a new energy and dynamism to policy, provision and practice in early childhood care and education in Ireland.

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Cultural and linguistic capital in early years education and care

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This paper discusses the concept of cultural and linguistic capital in relation to early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Ireland. Bourdieu describes cultural capital as a form of symbolic capital or non-economic asset. Linguistic capital is a subset of cultural capital and refers to linguistic competence and control of linguistic resources. At a time of great change in ECCE it is appropriate to consider the cultural references on which early childhood education in Ireland is premised. What is distinctly Irish about ECCE in Ireland? How do we develop an inclusive viewpoint that values the totality of Ireland's linguistic and historical heritage on the one hand, and that also welcomes relatively recent newcomers to Irish shores on the other? What store of early childhood language, lore and literature do we draw on? How locally connected are early years services in their own communities and districts? Putting the principles of Aistear, the national early years curriculum framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009) and Síolta, the national quality framework (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2006), into practice provides an opportunity to consider these questions anew. Drawing on relevant sources in related areas, the paper examines cultural beliefs, attitudes and practices that constitute ECCE in Ireland and suggests some areas for future discussion.

INTRODUCTION

This paper first discusses the concepts of culture and cultural and linguistic capital and then critically applies these concepts to early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Ireland. It takes a broad socio-cultural and ecological perspective on the subject in order to challenge a one-dimensional appreciation of the culture we wish to transmit to children in early years settings.

'Culture' is one of the most contested words in contemporary discourse (Grenfell and Kelly, 2001), but it can be defined as 'the way of life of its members, the collection of ideas and habits that they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation' (Mesthrie, 2009). It is more than 'high culture', the musical, literary and artistic achievements of a society, though it does include these. Children are socialised into their



culture within their family, peer group and nested circles of influence, as described by Bronfenbrenner (1979) in his ecological theory. The transmission of knowledge through culture was also of great interest to socio-cultural theorists such as Vygotsky (Smidt, 2009). Norms for appropriate behaviour and values by which to lead one's life are acquired and social roles ascribed. As Bourdieu says, there is no way out of the game of culture, there are no non-participating spectators (cited in Robbins, 2000: xi). Culture is enacted by everyone.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Language is an integral part of culture and embedded in a social and historical context. Fishman (1991) discusses the links between language and culture in detail and Baker (2011) provides a summary of Fishman's views on these links under three headings:

- ◆ *A language indexes its culture:* a language and its culture will have grown together over a long period of time and will be in harmony with each other. A language expresses the worldview of its culture through vocabulary, idioms, metaphors, etc., at both cognitive and emotional levels.
- ◆ *A language symbolises its culture:* a language symbolises the culture and people with which it is associated. Speaking English often symbolises modernity, affluence, youth culture and achievement. In other contexts, English may symbolise colonial subjugation. A language that is spoken by a minority of the population may symbolise low status.
- ◆ *Culture is partly created from its language:* culture is often enacted and transmitted orally. The songs, memories and traditions, folk tales and proverbs are stored and relayed in its language. It is difficult to translate accurately from one language to another because meaning, alliteration and wit are not transmutable. We can only hope for an approximation. This is particularly relevant in relation to children's lore, the songs, rhymes and stories of childhood.

Bourdieu describes cultural capital as a form of symbolic capital or non-economic asset that is possessed by different groups in society and is made visible in institutions such as education and early years centres (Robbins, 2008). Linguistic capital is a subset of this form of capital and refers to linguistic competence and control of linguistic resources. Cultural capital can exist in three forms (Moore, 2008; Robbins, 2000):

- ◆ *In an embodied state:* in the form of the durable dispositions or principles of consciousness in the individual and in physical features such as body language, lifestyle choices and language intonation.
- ◆ *In an objectified state:* materially present in the form of cultural goods, books, pictures, instruments, laboratories, etc.
- ◆ *In an institutionalised state:* a form of objectification that must be kept separate, for example in educational institutions or scholastic titles.

A third expression of capital is in the form of habitus. Habitus does not have a material existence in itself. Rather, it includes attitudes and dispositions, for example attitudes towards language. It can refer to the rules of language or to the rules of chess, but these



are only visible when they are put into practice. The formation of habitus takes place initially within the family, but for Bourdieu the most important agency is education and educational institutions in their physical and conceptual guises.

Forms of symbolic capital cannot be divorced from the person (they are embodied or cultured) and they can only be acquired over time. They incline people to act or behave in certain ways, which may be fairly homogenous for people from similar backgrounds (Vann, 1999). Examples include learning how to speak in particular contexts such as the family, the peer group or the school. These dispositions reflect the social conditions present during their acquisition. They affect the individual's linguistic practices and his or her anticipation of their symbolic value. Linguistic habitus is the product of experience and inculcation. McKinney and Norton (2010) argue that cultural capital has a differential exchange value in different social fields, for example in education or in business.

DISCUSSION

What can we take from the above discussion to lead us to examine early years practice? Early childhood experiences are long-lasting as children are socialised into their culture and the practices of that culture, which include languages, ways of behaving, attitudes and dispositions towards people, cultural artefacts and institutions. Language is intrinsically linked with culture. It is part of culture and contributes to culture through lived experiences and through literature, including children's oral and literary culture. It symbolises that culture through the status we afford that language or languages. Cultural and linguistic capital are forms of non-economic assets that can lead to rewards in lifestyle, education or employment. Attitudes and dispositions towards languages, cultures and many other fields (habitus) are acquired over time within the family and in education. The attitudes and dispositions towards languages and cultures that are transmitted during early childhood are therefore of great importance.

Role of oral language

It is difficult for insiders to describe their own culture but in general Irish people are well known for their love of talk and conversation, their enjoyment of a good turn of phrase and of storytelling (Kiberd, 1996). In the past oral language was regarded mainly as the pathway to literacy. By analysing recent documents that discuss language and literacy, we appear to be on the cusp of a change of emphasis. Aistear (the early childhood curriculum framework) discusses the role of oral language and recommends the provision of rich and varied opportunities for babies and young children to learn language from others; support for language development through a range of strategies including stories, games, songs, rhymes and language play; and practitioners modelling good language use (NCCA, 2009b: 34–40). Practitioners are also charged with providing a print-rich environment.

The national strategy for literacy and numeracy requires the early years community to improve the communication and oral language competence of young children (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2011: 17) and to provide parents with information about resources that they can use to support their children's oral language development (DES, 2011: 22). Furthermore, those involved in training and education courses are to ensure that their programmes contain units of both content and



pedagogical knowledge in literacy, including oral language and a focus on additional language learning (DES, 2011: 29). The strategy recognises that early intervention for children with language difficulties should take place in ECCE and Junior Infants settings, rather than at a later stage (DES, 2011: 49). This in turn means that early years practitioners need to be trained in recognising language problems.

Regulation 5 of the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006 outlines some concrete evidence of a language-rich environment and states that the inspection process will take note of the provision of oral language activities such as singing, music, rhymes, storytelling and conversation as well as the provision of books.

Each of the above policy documents strongly recognises the role of oral language in fostering child development for the present and also acknowledges the importance of oral language in laying the foundation for literacy development.

Languages in Ireland

Ireland has a long history of linguistic diversity and has two official languages: Irish and English. The Irish language and culture are part of the heritage of Ireland (NCCA, 2005: 12) and as such should be made real and available in appropriate ways to the children in Ireland. Children's lore is predominately oral, that is oral in content and dependent on oral transmission. With the language shift from Irish to English in Ireland since the nineteenth century, children's traditional lore continues in Gaeltacht communities, but a great body of oral culture was lost to generations of English-speaking children.

Children in early years settings have a right to the totality of their linguistic heritage. The intercultural guidelines for primary school teachers in Ireland state that psychologically, historically and linguistically an experience of both languages is the right of every child (NCCA, 2005: 23). This paper proposes that this is also true of every early years child and can be provided in a variety of ways.

Naíonraí (Irish language pre-schools) opt to deliver their services through Irish. Other services decide to offer part of their sessions through Irish, providing some routines such as roll call in circle time or making use of Irish songs, rhymes, words of praise, etc. In this way, children learn through first-hand experience that there are a number of ways of saying things: English is one way, Irish is another way, and both have a place in their lives and are valued. For some practitioners, there is a real challenge in accessing the Irish language; however, simple routines such as greetings, phrases for praising children, children's books and recorded songs and rhymes can open up the area for children and provide first steps in accessing the rich children's tradition in Irish (see www.naionrai.ie for resources).

Walter Ong (2002) describes recorded oral lore as secondary orality in an electronic age of telephones, radio, television and other recorded media. These items are part of our children's world and offer ways into oral culture that might not have been as accessible before. This means that it is not strictly necessary (though obviously an advantage) to be a fluent speaker of the second language in order to access it at some level.

Music, both vocal and instrumental, folk and more formal, is also culturally marked. Early years practitioners can draw on the wide range of musical traditions of Ireland, including instrumental and vocal music, in both Irish and English. They can also make use of collections of children's street rhymes and games (for example *Spraoi le Chéile*, published by Donegal County Childcare Committee). Children can learn about



musical traditions from other cultures and other times, such as classical music or world music. This is a far richer learning experience for the children in our care than remaining closely tied to CDs from a well-known chain shop of educational toys. Through experiencing a wide range of musical traditions, children can be facilitated in developing positive emotional and cognitive responses to the diversity of musical genres in our society (NCCA, 2005: 84).

Ireland has a rich tradition of folk wisdom and strong connections to place. Some of these links are changed by families moving away from their home areas, or to different parts of the country, but each local area has its own heritage and lore. Heritage and traditions have the power to stifle or to empower, depending on social contexts and personal views, but they have the potential to keep us grounded in the past while also moving forward. This is what Gibbons (1996) terms dynamic tradition and he holds that it can have a transformative effect. It raises the question of how connected early years services are to their local communities. How can early years settings draw on the local heritage and tradition of the area in which they are situated? The aim, as Kirby et al. (2008) state, is not to substitute a reified past for an uncertain present. In the early childhood education context we should strive to provide a space in which we can draw on the wider linguistic and cultural heritage of Ireland. This should not be an ethnocentric view but one that encompasses the heritage languages of newcomer children and families as well as Irish traditions and languages.

Home language maintenance for immigrant children

Many of the children of immigrant parents attending early years services are learning English as an additional language. This clearly implies that they are speakers of other languages. Research (Cummins, 2000; Baker, 2011) shows the importance of valuing and, where possible, providing support for the home languages of newcomer children. The experience in countries with longer histories of immigration than Ireland, such as the United States, shows that unless steps are put in place, immigrant children can lose their home languages to the dominant societal language at an early age (Bernhard and Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2010). This international research shows that parents often experience schools as unsupportive or oblivious to mother tongue retention and that their children's cultural and linguistic identity takes on a new and unfamiliar shape in a short period of time. Parents' capacity to explain the nuances of their home culture to their children often diminishes over time. Minority children's cultural capital (i.e. their understanding and knowledge of their own culture) is rarely considered as a valuable resource and the knowledge and experiences of families are ignored as vital funds of knowledge.

Early years training should include an awareness of the value and role of languages other than English in order to avoid the tendency of considering monolingualism as the default or normal position. Additional languages are more than mere add-ons to the status quo. Small-scale studies in Ireland (Mhic Mhathúna and Hill, 2007; Dillon, 2011) and larger studies abroad (Cummins, 2000) have shown that early childhood practitioners value diversity but find it hard to put supportive practices in place. The focus is often on surface-level inclusion through multicultural activities rather than on more deeply embedded practices that draw on and develop the knowledge of newcomer children. Due to the frequent presence of children from many language backgrounds in any one early years group, it must be recognised that specific language support is a challenge. However, strategies such as using/making dual language books, CDs and DVDs



of storytelling in diverse languages, involving parents in learning activities and employing bilingual staff on a temporary or permanent basis offer useful ways of enabling all children to benefit from the diverse cultural and linguistic resources within the group.

Culture and language in the early years curriculum

There are many ways of expressing culture in the curriculum. Te Whariki, the New Zealand curriculum, is premised on Maori values and traditions and highlights the values attached to family and place through an integrated curriculum using the symbol of a woven mat. The Welsh foundation phase for three- to seven-year-olds, the Curriculum Cymreig, highlights indigenous culture through providing a separate strand, Welsh language development, and also advocates integration with the other curricular strands. Pre-schools that operate through Welsh are not obliged to provide this strand but must follow the guidance for the educational programme of the language, literacy and communication skills area of development for first language speakers.

The Foundation Phase contributes to the Curriculum Cymreig by developing children's understanding of the cultural identity unique to Wales across all Areas of Learning through an integrated approach. Children should appreciate the different languages, images, objects, sounds and tastes that are integral in Wales today and gain a sense of belonging to Wales, and understand the Welsh heritage, literature and arts as well as the language.

(Welsh Assembly Government, 2008)

Aistear and Síolta frameworks

In Ireland, a different approach has been taken. Aistear (NCCA, 2009a) is the early childhood curriculum framework and Síolta (CECDE, 2006) is the national quality framework for early childhood education. They are broad frameworks, leaving wide scope for interpretation on individual practitioner and wider societal bases. Both Irish and English are mentioned in the 'communicating' strand of Aistear. Irish can be acquired as a first or second language. Emphasis is placed on the fact that not all children or their parents will have Irish or English as their first language.

The two frameworks follow a long tradition of naming new ventures in Irish. Edwards (2009) holds that naming is an important maker of identity and that names can be given by insiders or ascribed by outsiders. By choosing names in Irish for Aistear and Síolta, the symbolic nature of the Irish language is evoked. The two early childhood frameworks are marked as being Irish, but are open to influences from further afield.

The four main themes of Aistear and linked themes in Síolta, as outlined in the audit of similarities and differences between the two frameworks (NCCA, 2009b), will be examined in order to identify how culture and language may be developed through the framework statements.

The theme of Well-being is about children being confident, happy and healthy.

(Aistear, NCCA, 2009a)

Ensuring that each child's rights are met requires that she/he is enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her/his own development and learning.

(Síolta Standard 1: Rights of the Child, CECDE, 2006)



Both frameworks advocate for the well-being of children, physically, mentally, socially and emotionally. They propose that children should be given choice and opportunities to use their initiative. Research (Cummins, 2000; Baker, 2011) indicates that it is necessary for children's well-being that their cultural and linguistic background is acknowledged and valued. There is a grave danger of lowering self-image and self-esteem if their home language and culture are not respected or if they are denied opportunities to use their home language.

In agreement with the principles of the Aistear curriculum statement and the Síolta standard, all children in early years centres should also have the right to learn the Irish language as part of their heritage. This right should be included in official policy and guidance documents for early childhood care and education settings.

The theme of Identity and Belonging is about children developing a positive sense of who they are and feeling that they are respected as part of a family and community.

(Aistear, NCCA, 2009a)

Promoting positive identities and a strong sense of belonging requires clearly defined policies, procedures and practices that empower every child and adult to develop a confident self and group identity, and to have a positive understanding and regard for the identity and rights of others.

(Síolta Standard 14: Identity and Belonging, CECDE, 2006)

Both statements emphasise the concepts of individual and group identity and the need to actively promote respect for all cultures. The statements can be interpreted in many ways but they are open to the development of strong local and cultural connections and to the inclusion of the home languages and cultures of children from diverse cultures.

The theme of Communicating is about children sharing their experiences, thoughts, ideas and feelings with others with growing confidence and competence and in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes.

(Aistear, NCCA, 2009a)

Fostering constructive interactions (child/child, child/adult and adult/child) requires explicit policies, procedures and practice that emphasise the value of process and are based on mutual respect, equal partnership and sensitivity.

(Síolta Standard 5: Interactions, CECDE, 2006)

The above statements are concerned with language and other means of expression such as art, music, song and dance. They indicate that children should be facilitated in expressing their thoughts in all their languages, including their mother tongue and any additional languages they may be learning. The emphasis is on process rather than outcome and the role of the adult is in supporting children to extend their learning.

The theme of Exploring and Thinking is about children making sense of the things, places and people in their world by interacting with others, playing, investigating, questioning, and forming, testing and refining ideas.

(Aistear, NCCA, 2009a)



Encouraging each child's holistic development and learning requires the implementation of a verifiable, broad-based, documented and flexible curriculum or programme.

(Síolta Standard 7: Curriculum, CECDE, 2006)

Both statements advocate the active exploration of the environment through play, language and investigation in the context of a well-defined, broad-based curriculum. Children should be encouraged to understand that their experiences can be expressed in several ways and in many languages. Some of the learning opportunities to be provided by adults could include language-learning activities.

Taken together, the Aistear themes and Síolta standards support a strong focus on language and culture, valuing both the local or Irish culture and the contribution of knowledge to be made by children and adults from diverse cultures.

Regulation 5 of the 2006 pre-school regulations (Department of Health and Children, 2006) also notes the importance of cultural context. It states that the statutory inspection should take account of children who may have additional needs regarding cultural diversity and special needs. It also advises that the child's cultural context be taken into consideration in facilitating the holistic development of the child.

Strategy for the Irish language

Aistear, Síolta and Regulation 5 reflect government policies. The *20-year strategy for the Irish language 2010–2030* is another government policy document and reminds us that the key role of language in the expression and transmission of cultural heritage is recognised in the 2003 UN Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (Pobal, 2010: 5). The UN Convention states that language is not just the vehicle that contains the cultural heritage, it is the essence of oral traditions. The section of the Irish language strategy that covers pre-school and parental support states that it is intended that some level of pre-school Irish language education will be offered in all localities, whether through immersion language education or through an Irish language dimension in English-medium provision (Pobal, 2010: 13). Childcare and pre-school facilities will be facilitated to offer an Irish language dimension and create a language-friendly environment for children through, for example, the provision of supports such as Irish language DVDs geared for young children, and teaching nursery rhymes and games in Irish.

CONCLUSION

Irish early years education and care is undergoing unprecedented change and development. On the one hand, there is increased regulation regarding health, safety, child development and management. On the other, flexible frameworks offer opportunities to consider issues, to reflect on practice and to make informed decisions. With increasing numbers of third-level graduates entering the sector and the wealth of experience of existing practitioners, Irish early years education is in a good position to make a positive contribution to the lives of the children in its care. High-quality care demands ongoing debate of relevant issues and, above all, placing the rights and needs of children first. As Derman-Sparks and Fite (2007: 52) said:



We need to explore and understand the multiple parts of our own identity, who we are culturally and where we are advantaged and disadvantaged by our social institutions. We need to learn how to view social reality through the lens of multiple perspectives and to make a commitment to keep working until we have built care and education systems that truly deliver equal educational services to all children.

A cultural and linguistic critical awareness of our identity (Kirby et al., 2008: 206), coupled with a healthy respect for other traditions, will help us develop a shared sense of purpose that will enrich the lives of children and of those who care for them.

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How regulatory enforcement impacts upon professional identity within the ECCE sector

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Drawing upon Foucault's notions of power and resistance, and using a qualitative methodology, this paper examines early childhood care and education (ECCE) practitioner, city and county childcare committee and national voluntary childcare collaborative perspectives on the regulatory environment in Ireland. By bringing these various perspectives together, this paper enables us to 'see a fuller picture' (Duncan, 2004: 171) of the regulatory environment and its impact upon the affective domains (Forde et al., 2006) of professional identity, self-esteem, self-belief and professional self-confidence. The findings reveal the sense of frustration and helplessness experienced by ECCE practitioners in terms of regulatory enforcement. There is evidence that power is a 'repressive hypothesis' (Foucault, 1978: 82) that is unquestionably owned by the 'powerful' inspectors and imposed on the 'powerless' ECCE sector. In this regulatory context, professional identity within the ECCE sector is considerably compromised.

INTRODUCTION

Children cannot speak for themselves, parents represent them. But when parents lack the time and the expertise to represent children effectively, who will? The principal answer to that question, at least in childcare, has been government regulators (Gormley, 1995: 173). Endorsing this viewpoint, Sciarra et al. (2009: 96) describe the childcare regulations (Department of Health and Children [DHC], 2006) as a 'basic and necessary component of government's responsibility for protecting all children in all programmes from the risk of harm and for promoting conditions that are essential for children's healthy development and learning'. This description moves the purpose of regulation beyond mere 'risk control' to align it with the potential of early childhood care and education (ECCE) to support and enhance children's development and learning. However, Fenech et al. (2006: 6) found that regulation may in fact be a 'double-edged sword' contributing to the structural and process elements of quality on the one hand, while leading to 'excessive risk management' on the other.

Baldock (2001) warns of the dangers of policing the inspection process. Such an approach can lead to an adversarial relationship between ECCE providers and inspectors



(Moloney, 2011), thus impacting upon practitioners' self-esteem, self-belief and professional self-confidence, which are affective domains associated with professional identity (Forde et al., 2006).

INSPECTORATE QUALIFICATIONS

A large corpus of literature exists in relation to practitioner qualifications, but little is known about inspectorate qualifications and backgrounds. As Gormley (2000) notes, there is uncertainty whether inspectors should have previously worked as childcare providers or possess expertise in child health or have a background in law enforcement. At a minimum, inspectors should be adequately trained in childcare or a related field and have at least twenty-four hours' training annually so that they can remain abreast of relevant cases, procedures and child development research (Gormley, 2000). Wiggans et al. (2002: 141) adopt a firmer stance, stating that ideally, in addition to the factors outlined, inspectors should have 'a master's degree in either social work or early childhood development or education'.

Since the inception of the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 1996, inspectors in Ireland primarily come with a public health nursing background (Schonfeld, 2006; Moloney, 2011) and, thus, are 'relatively untrained in early childhood methodology' (Bennett, 2004: 8). This is problematic in the context of regulatory enforcement, resulting in questionable enforcement practices that undermine practitioner confidence and self-esteem (Moloney, 2011).

Research points to similar issues in the United Kingdom, where Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) has responsibility for inspections (Tickell, 2011a and 2011b). Among the issues identified are the lack of a unified approach to inspection and claims that some inspectors do not fully understand the nature of the settings they inspect. As a result, practitioner confidence in Ofsted's ability to make 'fair and balanced judgements' has been weakened (Tickell, 2011a). Indeed, Tickell (2011b: 47) identifies the need for Ofsted to deal with the inconsistencies identified and to 'instil greater trust and knowledge of [inspectorate] requirements' among practitioners. Fundamentally, Ofsted must review the 'training, capacity and capability of the current inspectorate', doing so would allow the setting of 'clear minimum requirements for all early years inspectors in terms of experience, skills and qualifications' (Tickell, 2011b: 48).

THE REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT IN IRELAND

Responsibility for implementing the childcare regulations in Ireland rests with the Health Service Executive (HSE). In addition to the structural aspects of ECCE, Article 5 on the health, welfare and development of the child calls upon teachers to be:

[P]ro-active in ensuring that appropriate action is taken to address each child's needs in cooperation with his/her parents and following consultation, where appropriate, with other relevant services.

(DHC, 2006: 36)

This requirement demands a considerable level of critical engagement and decision-making capacity from teachers, and calls for teachers and inspectors to have appropriate



academic qualifications and experience. In 1999 the Department of Education and Science proposed that ‘one inspector with expertise in both public health and education should carry out the inspection and provide a single report on all aspects of provision’ (Department of Education and Science, 1999: 120). Nevertheless, inspections continue to be undertaken primarily by public health nurses (PHNs) and environmental health officers (EHOs).

The Department of Education and Skills has acknowledged the critical role of ECCE practitioners in ‘ensuring positive experiences and outcomes for children’s learning, well-being and development’ (2011: 27). This politically astute commentary masks the fact that there is no mandatory training requirement for those working in the ECCE sector. Failure to address practitioner training sends the ‘wrong message regarding the need for qualified staff, and can have a chilling effect on efforts to improve quality’ (Lombardi, 2003: 14). In reality, if the regulatory system is to be effective, other aspects of the ECCE services infrastructure must also be in place, including equitable working conditions and adequate remuneration (Sciarra et al., 2009). However, the sector in Ireland, as elsewhere, is beset by weak professional status, poor training levels and abysmal rates of remuneration (Oberhuemer et al., 2010).

REGULATORY ENFORCEMENT

Dahlberg et al. (1999: 94) suggest that defining quality is an ‘inherently exclusive didactic process, undertaken by a particular group whose power and claims to legitimacy enable them to determine what is to be understood as true or false’. In Ireland, the HSE inspectors use their legitimacy as ‘authorised officers’ (DHC, 2006: 7) to determine what is true or false in terms of quality standards. Consequently, they act as ‘powerful agents’ who have the capacity ‘to realise their will over the will of powerless people’ (Mills, 2003: 34–5).

Power can be conceptualised as a possession that is held onto by those who have it (Mills, 2003). Foucault (1978: 82) contradicts this notion of power as ‘repressive hypothesis’, where it is constructed as being owned by the ‘powerful’ [inspectors] and imposed on the ‘powerless’ [ECCE practitioners]. Rather, he views power as something which ‘circulates’ or functions in the ‘form of a chain’, where it is ‘employed and exercised through a net like organisation’ (1980: 98). Thus, power is perceived as a ‘system of relations spread throughout society, rather than simply a set of relations between the oppressed and the oppressor’ (Mills, 2003: 35) – in this instance, the ECCE sector and the HSE. Moreover, individuals should not ‘be seen simply as the recipients of power, but as the “place” where power is enacted and the place where it is resisted’ (Mills, 2003: 35). In his analysis of disciplinary power, Foucault argues that power is exercised as a disciplinary technology, designed to observe, regulate and control individual behaviour, where subjects (practitioners) become “docile” bodies’ (1977: 138): obedient, transformed and useful. Similar concepts are found within Foucault’s work on governmentality (1991), where those who can govern do so with minimum economy in order to achieve desired outcomes. In a regulatory context, ECCE inspectors seek practitioner compliance to achieve minimum quality standards. In Ireland, Moloney (2011) argues, the HSE uses its statutory authority to enforce aspects of the childcare regulations that its inspectors themselves do not comprehend. This stance undermines professional autonomy, which is a fundamental tenet of professional identity.



In counterpoint, drawing upon Foucauldian notions of power, it is reasonable to assume that regulations can potentially empower the ECCE sector. For, when practitioners are acknowledged for achieving quality standards and complying with regulations, they should experience a sense of gratification and satisfaction, empowering them to continue to strive for greater levels of achievement and compliance. In this way, power is transferred to practitioners, where both they and inspectors become vehicles of power and, thus, reject power as a 'repressive hypothesis' (Foucault, 1978: 82).

THE STUDY

Using a qualitative methodology, this study explored the perspectives of ECCE practitioners as well as representatives from the city and county childcare committees (CCCs), the National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative (NVCC) and the HSE on the revised Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006. Forty-three individual interviews were conducted. The sampling frame used for participating ECCE practitioners consisted of HSE-notified listings of ECCE settings within a particular geographic location. Participants were representative of community-based and private provision as well as urban and rural locations. CCCs and the NVCC were contacted directly by the researcher and invited to participate. Prospective HSE participants were identified by the CCCs and, following telephone contact, four inspectors, working in various geographic locations, agreed to participate.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Using an iterative process, interview transcripts and field notes were read line by line, and preliminary codes were applied; this was followed by more focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). Codes were clustered so that links between codes could be established. By reviewing these tentative links, additional categories were identified. Data were continuously integrated and reduced leading to the development of provisional hypotheses.

FINDINGS

The research findings point to the inspectorate's uncompromising authoritarian attitude, which poses considerable challenges for the ECCE practitioners (N=25). The research indicates that a didactic approach to regulatory enforcement undermines practitioners' confidence, self-esteem and autonomy, which are central factors in professional identity formation (Forde et al., 2006).

Focus on health and safety

An overwhelming 89 per cent of participants (N=39) believed that there was an 'unhealthy obsession with health and safety' (Angela: NVCC interview) resulting in the sanitisation of the environment for children. Consequently, practitioners are 'afraid to let children climb, run, fall or get dirty or any of the normal things that children do when they're playing' (Nuala: CCC interview). In this respect, it was suggested that inspectors made 'ridiculous rules ... I was asked to remove a vase of flowers from a window ledge



[because it might pose] a risk to children' (Shona: community setting). Overall, 85 per cent of practitioners felt that the regulations had reduced their role primarily to one of supervision; ensuring that 'children are safe at all times while they're in our care' (Máire: private setting).

Acknowledging sectoral concerns, Nuala argued that the focus on health and safety was 'creating protected environments for children that are far removed from real life' (CCC interview). Likewise, others recounted examples where settings were required to 'cover the whole outdoor play area in multi-purpose matting'; to 'prove that paint used by children is non-toxic'; or 'to remove necklaces from the dressing-up box'.

Further alienating those working within the sector was a perception, held by 95 per cent of practitioners, that the HSE keeps 'moving the goal posts' (Justine: community setting). Her frustration was palpable:

In the last inspection that we had it was all routines and we should be doing what the routine says and now they're moving away from that and saying 'well we don't really want it to be routine-based we want it to be freer'. You don't know where you stand ... they change their mind and you're getting a little bit frustrated that you're doing what they said the last time and now they've changed it again.

(Justine: community setting)

A primary concern for practitioners was the need to 'keep the HSE happy'. This perspective was reflected through comments such as: 'we don't rock the boat'; 'I wouldn't draw them [HSE] on me'; and 'even if it's a recommendation ... do it ... they'll make you anyway'. Thus, practitioners unquestionably accept the power and legitimacy of the inspectorate even in circumstances where they feel that their practice is being undermined.

Inspectorate qualifications

The lack of appropriate inspectorate qualifications is contentious. In this respect 97 per cent of participants expressed concern about the absence of 'childcare personnel on the inspection team', which they assert leads to inconsistency in inspections.

Inconsistency is a problem; inspectors are simply learning and interpreting as they go along. They see something in your setting, a policy, a toy or whatever that they like, then they look for it in the next place and if they don't have it, they tell them they have to get it.

(Eimear: private setting)

Ruby (NVCC interview) claimed that because of their PHN background, inspectors were uncertain about the dynamic aspects of quality; they 'concentrate on the area that they know best ... measure the place to bits; probe it and measure it and test it and count whatever [they] can count'. Martina, a HSE inspector with a PHN background, confirmed this assertion: 'When the 1996 regulations were introduced, we got on fine – we were able to measure rooms ... I could do any part of it ... I became an expert, the same will happen with Article 5.'

In order to redress the imbalance of inspectorate knowledge and understanding of early childhood education, 90 per cent of participants recommended a strengthening of



the inspection teams. A dual inspection system was proposed, which would involve the 'static elements' such as health and safety and the environmental aspects remaining with the HSE while responsibility for the 'curriculum and the more dynamic aspects of quality' (Ruby: NVCC interview) would be transferred to the Department of Education and Skills. Irrespective of a desire to broaden the composition of the inspectorate, there was consensus that any additional personnel appointed to the inspectorate should have a 'qualification in the early years specifically' (Sophia: CCC interview).

HSE perspective

HSE participants were aware of criticisms relating to inspectorate qualifications. Magdalene (HSE interview) acknowledged that a PHN's understanding of child development was 'utterly different from group care' and took no account of how to 'support children's learning and development in a group situation'. Consequently, PHNs are 'looking at learning and development but they just don't get it'. Thus, Article 5 of the 2006 childcare regulations is a 'real challenge for the inspection teams'. However, irrespective of misgivings about inspectorate knowledge and skills, Magdalene was adamant that inspectors are 'actually functional authorised officers of the HSE, which has got the legal responsibility for looking at Article 5'. This type of uncompromising, authoritarian attitude poses particular challenges for ECCE practitioners.

Ultimate possession of power and authority

The single biggest issue for practitioners was the level of 'power that is given to the HSE over us' (Tara: private setting). Indeed, 90 per cent of practitioners believe that the HSE uses a 'heavy-handed approach' (Nicola: community setting). Conversely, against the backdrop of the skills deficit outlined, Magdalene (HSE interview) asserted that the inspectorate was not 'robust enough about challenging people's practice'. She further stated that 'we should be confident with our power'. All four HSE participants were unequivocal that 'the regulations are the law, are the law, are the law'. Ultimately, the regulations 'are binding, providers are legally obliged to comply' and, clearly pointing to their statutory power, the HSE's 'job is to make sure that [compliance] happens' (Magdalene: HSE interview).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research findings provide insight into an enormous sense of frustration and helplessness experienced by ECCE practitioners in terms of regulatory enforcement. Mirroring Tickell's (2011a and 2011b) research, this study's findings indicate practitioner concerns about inspectorate qualifications and inconsistencies across inspections. The participants also highlighted concerns with regard to the perceived power of the inspectorate, which practitioners believe is excessive.

There is little doubt that a PHN background limits the scope of an inspector's ability to assess certain aspects of the regulations; most notably, child development. The combination of PHNs/EHOs leaves the inspectorate lacking in 'curricular or pedagogical knowledge' (Bennett, 2004). As one participant commented, PHNs are 'looking at learning and development but they just don't get it'. Irrespective of this apparent skills deficit within the inspectorate, it yields its statutory power in an uncompromising and



didactic fashion. Thus, the regulations ‘are the law’ and the inspectorate should be ‘happy with [its] power’. The question, however, is not whether the inspectorate is happy with its power, but rather, whether it is deserving of its power in the context of its apparent inability to ‘make fair and balanced judgements’ (Tickell, 2011a: 74).

There is a direct correlation between inspectorate qualifications and an ‘unhealthy focus on health and safety’. As Ruby argues, the inspectors are uncertain about the dynamic aspects of quality, concentrating instead on what they know best: measuring, probing, testing. These research findings support the contention that regulation may lead to ‘excessive risk management’ (Fenech et al., 2006: 6). In fact, findings indicate that, because of regulation, ECCE environments have become sanitised and the practitioner’s role has been reduced to one of supervision. While the purpose of regulation is concerned with reducing the risk of harm to children, practitioners also have a responsibility to enhance children’s development and learning. Forde et al. (2006) refer to the relationship between professional autonomy and professional identity. This study suggests that as a direct result of regulatory enforcement, professional autonomy is being compromised.

Consistent with the notion of policing the inspection process and controlling the environment (Baldock, 2001), ECCE practitioners strive to ‘keep the HSE happy’. Regulatory compliance is linked to fear and practitioners do not want to ‘rock the boat’. They accept inspectorate dictates without question. This docile, compliant behaviour is far removed from professional competence and self-belief and may be linked to the sector’s weak professional status, poor training levels and appalling remuneration (Oberhuemer et al., 2010).

HSE inspectors use their power as ‘functional authorised officers of the HSE’ to determine what is true or false in terms of quality standards (Dahlberg et al., 1999). Within the regulatory environment, the inspectors act as ‘powerful agents’ who have the capacity ‘to realise their will over the will of powerless people’ (Mills, 2003: 34–5). The legitimacy of the HSE is evident in the way in which it overlooks its inability to adequately inspect Article 5 of the 2006 childcare regulations. Foucault (1980: 98) envisages power as something that ‘circulates’ or functions in the ‘form of a chain’, where it is ‘employed and exercised through a net like organisation’. Conversely, in this study, power is indeed a ‘repressive hypothesis’ (Foucault, 1978: 82) that is unquestionably owned and imposed by the powerful inspectors on the powerless ‘unprofessional’ ECCE sector. Practitioners, therefore, are simply the ‘recipients of power’ (Mills, 2003: 35). The didactic regulatory enforcement style ensures that practitioners become “‘docile” bodies’ (Foucault, 1977: 138): obedient, transformed and useful. In the context of professional identity, such an approach does little to further practitioners’ self-esteem, confidence, autonomy or professional identity.

It is imperative that the government does not let the inspectorate hide behind its legal status and that it ensures that it is fit for purpose (Moloney, 2011). The inconsistencies identified in this paper must be addressed as a matter of urgency. Although the inspectorate demands the highest standards of professional practice from those working within the ECCE sector, it does not appear to recognise its own ineptitude. One has to question inspectors’ aspirations to become experts in relation to Article 5. How will this be achieved? What professional training and upskilling will be undertaken by the inspection teams to ensure that they are indeed the ‘experts’? Such double standards must not be allowed to continue.



It is no surprise that participants in this study, rather than trusting the inspectorate felt thwarted by it. Fundamentally, practitioners' identity, self-confidence, self-esteem and feelings of worth are considerably undermined by the current inspection system. The government must review the training, capacity and capability of the inspectorate. It must also devise clearly defined minimum qualification requirements, levels of skill and experience for all ECCE inspectors. Finally, attention must be given to the relational aspects of the inspection process; these are central to practitioners' self-worth, which is a core aspect of professional identity.

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**‘An undervalued, under-appreciated profession,
long hours, hard work, poor pay’.**
A study of the professional identity of BA ECCE graduates

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Drawing upon a Bachelor of Arts (BA) ECCE graduate occupational profile survey, this paper explores the experiences of graduates with particular reference to the relationship between graduate qualifications and professional identity within the early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector. While findings are positive in terms of the numbers of graduates who successfully gained employment, there is an underlying belief that ECCE is an undervalued profession with low wages. Findings also indicate that graduates tend to diminish their professional role and identity by stating that they have ‘ended up working in a crèche’. Such sentiments are clearly associated with a sectoral perception that graduates are overqualified to work in the ECCE sector.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, professions and professional identities have been associated with academic qualifications, which confer ‘status and provide for a common means of identifying membership of a community of practice’ (Miller and Cable, 2010: 150; Moloney, 2010 and 2011a). However, for the Irish early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector, this is as yet an emerging concept (Moloney, 2011a).

Nationally and internationally, the construct of professional identity in ECCE is highly contested (Woodrow, 2007). Historically, ECCE was associated with altruism: ‘women who love and care for children’ (Carter and Doyle, 2006: 373). In Ireland, this stance is perpetuated by the polarity of the care and education sectors. Neuroscience (see, for example, Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007; Perry, 2002) claims that at birth the brain comprises multiple circuits that lay the blueprint for the development of vision, language, motor, social and emotional development, for



instance. However, while the newborn's mind is primed for learning, it needs to receive health-promoting care and appropriately stimulating experiences that are critical to neurological development (Perry, 2002).

Schweinhart (2004), for example, provides irrefutable evidence of the link between quality ECCE and positive developmental outcomes for young children. Despite such profound findings, ECCE is characterised by a mix of trained, semi-trained and unqualified practitioners (Bennett and Neuman, 2004; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001 and 2006). In contrast, primary school teachers are required to hold a Bachelor of Education degree.

While providing training for ECCE personnel, Rike et al. (2008) found that many childcare providers do not appear to be proud of their profession and may even be 'ashamed that they only work with young children': when asked what they did for a living, childcare providers answered 'I'm only a pre-school teacher' or 'I just work in a daycare centre' (2008: 22). In common with Moloney (2011a), these authors conclude that this negativity has been shaped by a perception that society does not really appreciate what ECCE practitioners do. Rike et al. (2008) suggest that in answer to the question 'What do you do?', ECCE personnel must answer, 'We grow brains.' Indeed, neuroscience supports a claim that those working within the ECCE field do 'grow brains'.

In the ECCE field, professional identity is contentious and problematic. Irrespective of a proliferation of policy developments in Ireland directed at improving the quality of provision and enhancing the professionalism of the sector, identity formation is compromised by multiple competing discourses (Moloney, 2010, 2011a and 2011b). Such discourses include a lack of understanding about the value of ECCE and its impact upon the developmental trajectory of the young child; the absence of a mandatory training requirement; and a continuing belief that 'anyone can mind a young child'.

Policy initiatives, such as the national quality framework, *Síolta* (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006); the early childhood curriculum framework, *Aistear* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009); the introduction of a universal free pre-school year; and ongoing work on the development of a workforce development plan, mean that the ECCE sector is undergoing unprecedented change. ECCE discourse, therefore, is increasingly concerned with professionalism and the need for pre-service academic qualifications.

Arguably, the extent to which there is a societal belief in neurological science determines how ECCE is understood, valued and perceived as a profession. In Ireland, policy directives and initiatives, including the practice frameworks *Aistear* and *Síolta*, uphold a belief that early childhood 'marks the beginning of children's lifelong learning journeys' (NCCA, 2009: 6). The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2009) identifies the knowledge, dispositions, skills and abilities required to implement *Aistear*. These initiatives, together with the *Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006*, demand a considerable level of critical engagement and decision-making capacity from practitioners, and call for appropriate academic qualifications and experience (Moloney, 2011b). Paradoxically, as the only statutory policy governing ECCE provision, the childcare regulations simply require that 'a sufficient number of suitable and competent adults are working directly with the children in the pre-school setting at all times' (Department of Health and Children, 2006: 37).

The construct of professional identity has been further blurred recently with the publication of the national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy among children



and young people (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2011). Developed on foot of growing concerns about children's literacy and numeracy skills, this strategy, as with *Síolta* and *Aistear*, acknowledges early childhood as a 'time of significant opportunity for learning' (DES, 2011: 10). While it acknowledges the absence of a degree-level training requirement for ECCE practitioners, the strategy simply commits to encouraging and supporting the upskilling of those working within the ECCE sector. Although it does mention an action to 'increase the minimum qualification requirements', the indicative target date is vague and non-specific: 'incremental over period of strategy' (DES, 2011: 29). Of concern also is the fact that the strategy does not indicate what the minimum qualification requirement will be. This is in stark contrast to the language used throughout the same document in relation to initial teacher education, which suggests setting higher standards for entry to Bachelor of Education courses and 'recruiting the best students' (DES, 2011: 30). In fact, the tables of actions relating to the primary school sector span four entire pages (34–7).

The underlying message is clear: teaching is a profession that depends on graduate-level pre-service training, whereas those working within ECCE do not require academic qualifications. This blasé approach to ECCE in Ireland is contrary to the situation that pertains in other countries. For example, all Danish pedagogues undertake three and a half years of training and graduate with a bachelor's degree (Jensen et al., 2010) and in New Zealand the benchmark qualification is a diploma of teaching or a bachelor's degree (early childhood education), both of which require three years of full-time study.

Further undermining the professional identity of the sector in Ireland are the abysmal remuneration levels. Early Childhood Ireland (2011) found that the 'average salary of a staff member in a service that is an Early Childhood Ireland member is €14,180'. On the other hand, the average annual salary for pedagogues in Denmark is Dkr282,000 (€37,884), or Dkr372,000 (€49,980) for managers (www.bupl.dk). In New Zealand, kindergarten teachers have pay parity with primary school teachers (ECE Taskforce NZ, 2010); in the most recent kindergarten teachers' collective agreement, a teacher with a bachelor's degree would earn NZ\$44,348 (€24,974) in his or her first year of practice (Ministry of Education, 2009).

Drawing upon a BA ECCE graduate occupational profile survey, this paper explores the experiences of graduates, with particular reference to the relationship between graduate qualifications and professional identity within the ECCE sector.

THE STUDY

In autumn 2010 a graduate occupational profile survey was distributed to all graduates (N=209) of the BA ECCE programme in Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick between 2007 and 2010. The data collection process was facilitated by the Quality Office in Mary Immaculate College in order to minimise potential bias, thus respondents were not replying directly to the ECCE lecturing team.

Eighty completed questionnaires were returned, giving an overall response rate of 38.3 per cent. The response rate was highest for the 2007 cohort (44 per cent) and lowest for the 2009 cohort (28.8 per cent). Of the eighteen questions asked, fourteen were concerned with statistical data – primarily on the number of graduates employed in the ECCE sector and remuneration levels. Questions 15 and 16 were open ended and



directed towards attitudinal data concerning graduate perceptions of working in the ECCE sector and the value of a BA ECCE; these qualitative questions were analysed using content discourse analysis.

FINDINGS

In terms of current employment status (see Figure 1), the majority of respondents (74 per cent; N=62) had gained employment either in Ireland (69 per cent; N=58) or overseas in Scotland, Australia, Canada or New Zealand (4 per cent; N=5). Only 8 per cent (N=7) of respondents were seeking employment.

Of those in employment, 92 per cent (N=57) were predominantly working directly with children aged from birth to six years within the ECCE sector. Respondents were employed in a variety of settings including national voluntary childcare organisations, childcare committees, other state agencies and as special needs assistants (predominantly working with children with autism) in primary schools or special needs settings.

Figure 1: Current employment status



In terms of further education, 22 per cent (N=18) of graduates had undertaken postgraduate studies in a range of areas such as: postgraduate diplomas in education or youth and community work, or master's degrees in applied behavioural analysis, education or applied social research. A further 24 per cent (N=19) reported engaging in a variety of courses related to their work in the ECCE field.

Although the majority of graduates were employed within the ECCE sector, the predominant discourse to emerge from the qualitative data findings was one of disappointment and frustration. This discourse was embedded within a multiplicity of conflicting challenges and issues within the sector, all of which impact upon professional identity: salaries, recognition, confidence and self-esteem. There was an overwhelming perception that 'ECCE is an undervalued, under-appreciated profession' (2009 graduate). This discourse of disappointment and frustration was consistent across each graduate cohort.



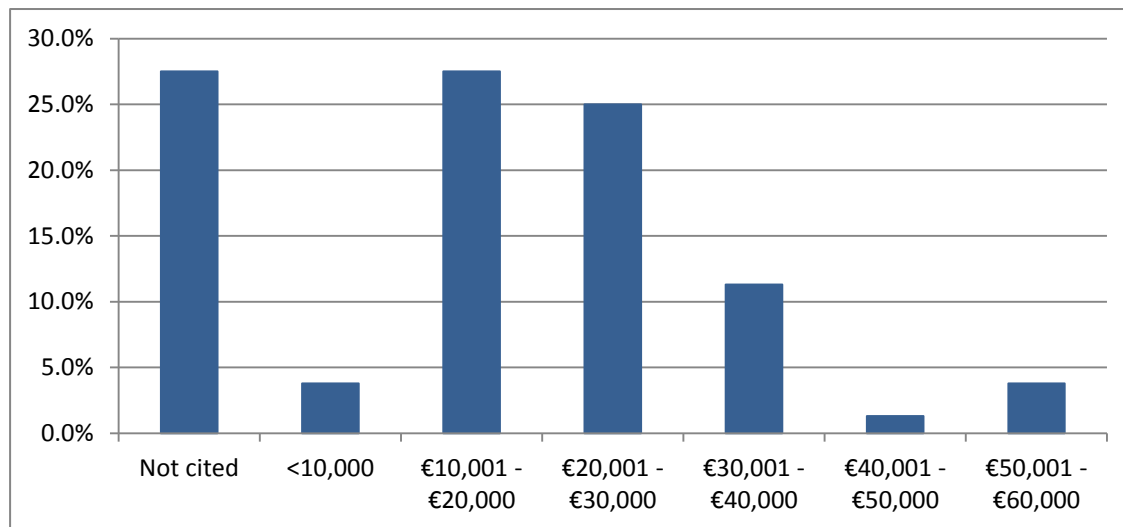
Salaries

From the quantitative analysis, it is evident that, though gainfully employed, the graduates' salaries tended to be low: just over 16 per cent (N=13) of respondents reported salaries upwards of €30,000 (see Figure 2). Of the 56 per cent (N=45) of respondents earning below €30,000, 76 per cent (N=34) reported working in excess of thirty hours per week. Of the 27 per cent (N=22) of respondents who did not complete this question, nine were in further full-time study and six were seeking employment.

As expected, there was a trend for the 2007 graduate cohort to report marginally higher salaries commensurate with further experience and/or further qualifications.

Based on the qualitative data, there was an overwhelming consensus that 'pay is very low' and that 'the four years of hard work is not reflected in the rate of pay'. These 2007 sentiments were reiterated by 2008 respondents: 'Even though I have a degree in ECCE, I didn't get paid according to my qualification. This is very disappointing' and 'I am so disheartened that people who had very little qualifications were getting very near the same pay as me'. Similarly, 2009 graduates wrote that 'there are many opportunities for part-time or low-paid work in the ECCE sector' and the 'salary is the same whether you've done Level 8 or nothing at all'.

Figure 2: Present annual salary level



The issue of remuneration is having a detrimental impact upon graduate perceptions of working within the sector and is undermining their confidence and self-esteem in relation to the value of their work. Findings suggest that graduates diminish their professional identity, reducing their role to that of simply 'settling' for a position: 'My chances of employment were greatly limited to just working in childcare settings' (2007 graduate). A 2008 graduate explained how they 'ended up in a crèche'. Indicative of the anomaly that exists in Ireland in relation to the need for an academic qualification, a 2009 graduate claimed that 'most graduates end up settling for jobs in crèches which do not require a degree'.

We contextualise these findings within the context of the discourse of 'recognition' for ECCE as a profession.



ECCE – an undervalued profession

As with the issue of salaries, respondents agreed that there was a lack of recognition for ECCE as a profession. There was a perception that this lack of recognition emanated from the macro level, i.e. the government and specifically the DES. Again, the consistency in responses across graduate cohorts was apparent:

Our government doesn't even value its importance ... our profession is seen as more childcare providers than educators in the most important time of a child's life. Sometimes I feel like and am treated as a glorified babysitter!

(2007 graduate)

[H]opefully, the government will soon realise how important ECCE is and give a pay rise.

(2008 graduate)

Graduates juxtaposed their position with that of teachers, expressing frustration with the lack of DES recognition for their qualification and a consequent perception that their work was less valuable than that of a primary school teacher.

I would really love if this course was recognised by the DES. It is very frustrating that I am more qualified than any primary school teacher to do the job [work with young children] ... but the DES doesn't recognise this qualification and want primary school teachers to do the job.

(2007 graduate)

[G]raduates from the ECCE course should receive a teacher number with the Department of Education, to validate the importance of trained early childhood teachers in Ireland ... The Department of Education don't recognise the B.A. ECCE as a sufficient qualification for teaching 3–6 year olds ...

(2008 graduate)

On a broader level, respondents repeatedly articulated a belief that the 'ECCE sector is an undervalued, under-appreciated profession, long hours, hard work, poor pay' (2007 graduate); 'it is an undervalued profession' (2008 graduate).

Reiterating this point and highlighting the anomalies within this field in Ireland, another respondent described attending for an interview for a position as childcare leader in a crèche after graduating:

A girl got the job that had two years' experience working in a crèche but she had no qualifications!! [It was] very disheartening!!

(2009 graduate)

There was evidence that graduates did not intend to remain in the ECCE sector. Of thirty-eight respondents who provided information in relation to further education, eight (20.5 per cent) were undertaking either a postgraduate diploma in primary school teaching or a Bachelor of Education degree to qualify as a primary school teacher. Clearly indicating their dissatisfaction with the ECCE sector, respondents explained:



I have applied for a Postgraduate in Primary School Teaching so I do not intend to work in the ECCE field.

(2010 graduate)

I'm hoping to do postgrad in primary teaching. At least I'll know what I'm qualified to do after that!

(2009 graduate)

This latter response indicates the level of frustration and dissatisfaction felt by graduates about the confusion over the value of their academic qualification within the sector.

Some respondents did report positive experiences in the ECCE sector and/or indicated that perhaps 'things are getting better'. This viewpoint was linked to the recently introduced free pre-school year (ECCE scheme), as a result of which 'settings now are keen to take on graduates ... where they will get a higher capitation for staff with a degree' (2010 graduate). Another respondent felt that the initiative had greatly influenced attitudes towards ECCE graduates within the sector:

I am respected as a professional in the workplace because of my B.A. ... ECCE settings have a very positive attitude towards our degree because of the financial benefits it has for them, because it allows them to qualify for the higher ECCE capitation funding.

(2010 graduate)

One respondent, who clearly recognised the relatively embryonic state of the concept of professional identity in the Irish context, advised fellow graduates to:

[B]e aware that this is the first step in a journey into a relatively young and previously unrecognised sector. We are laying the path for others to follow.

(2010 graduate)

DISCUSSION

At an initial glance, the research data suggests that the situation is positive as the vast majority of graduates are in employment or are pursuing postgraduate studies. However, a different picture lurks beneath the surface – one of frustration and disappointment concerning the professional identity and status of the ECCE practitioner.

Although *Síolta*, *Aistear* and the childcare regulations create core standards and principles by which a 'community of practice' (Miller and Cable, 2010) can be elucidated, they do little to further the quest for professional identity within ECCE. In the first instance, *Síolta* and *Aistear* have not been enacted by the government; thus their implementation is dependent upon the goodwill of the sector (Moloney, 2011b). Notwithstanding that respondents were trained to degree level and that many were pursuing further training and qualifications in the area, only 16 per cent reported salaries above €30,000 (below the national average industrial wage when the data was collected; Central Statistics Office, 2010). This finding is consistent with that of Early Childhood Ireland (2011), which reported an average salary of €14,180, and in stark contrast to salaries for teachers working in primary education. In this context, it is indeed a big ask of the sector to engage in ongoing professional development.



Despite the positive outlook and experience of some respondents, there was an overwhelming sense of frustration and disappointment at the lack of recognition of the importance of the early years and those who work with our youngest children. The 2006 childcare regulations fall short of what is required of national standards that support the emerging professional identity of the sector. The absence of a mandatory training requirement, coupled with the complex nature of ECCE and an increasing regulatory gaze, sends a mixed message to society, policy-makers, parents and ECCE personnel (Moloney, 2011a). It suggests that, as a society, Ireland has not moved beyond a traditional view of ECCE based on the notion that ‘anyone can mind children’ (Moloney, 2010). This attitude diminishes the critical importance of ECCE and serves to undermine the affective domains of professional identity and practitioners’ self-esteem, self-belief, confidence and job satisfaction (Forde et al., 2006).

Worryingly, these findings also support Rike et al.’s (2008) conclusion that ECCE staff may even be ashamed of their work within the sector. They indicate that graduates do not take pride in their profession; rather, they diminish their professional role and identity, stating that they have ‘ended up working in a crèche’. A significant proportion of graduates have either engaged or plan to engage in postgraduate qualifications to work in the primary school sector. Unlike Denmark and New Zealand, where academic qualifications are a priority within the ECCE sector, graduate sentiments in Ireland are clearly associated with a perception that graduates are ‘overqualified’ to work in the sector in Ireland. They further denigrate the critical importance of the early years on children’s learning trajectory. Moreover, this study supports previous research (Moloney, 2010) that highly qualified graduates are being lost to the ECCE sector in Ireland.

Negativity towards working in the ECCE sector has been shaped by society, where there is a lack of appreciation for the work undertaken (Moloney, 2011a; Rike et al., 2008). There is considerable merit in Rike et al.’s (2008) suggestion that in answer to the question ‘What do you do?’, ECCE teachers must answer, ‘We grow brains.’ Indeed, neuroscience would support the claim that those working within the ECCE field do in fact ‘grow brains’. Neuroscientific evidence leaves no doubt that we can ‘no longer count on an army of young women with limited education to take up low status, poorly paid work in the childcare sector’ (Littledyke, 2008: 45). The ECCE graduates who work with young children should therefore be recognised and valued as professionals who ‘grow brains’.

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Enhancing the professional identity of ECCE practitioners

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The limited literature on the professional identity of those working in the early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector tends to focus on the poor levels of remuneration, lack of recognition and high turnover of staff (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2006). This paper reports on preliminary research findings suggesting that this lack of positive regard may not be confined to frontline practitioners but may also be a feature of how ECCE researchers and their work are viewed in the academy. There appears to be a consistent thread underpinning the spectrum of ECCE practice and research, both in the field and within academic institutions, that considers ECCE as soft, uninteresting and less radical than other areas of childhood research. This begs the question as to whether the current status of ECCE professionals in Ireland not only reflects the lack of value placed on their professional skills but also indicates the low status of the lives and experiences of the young children with whom ECCE professionals work and research. Enhancement of the professional identity of those working in the ECCE sector may have to be part of a necessary shift in how young children are conceptualised and understood.

INTRODUCTION

Unlike the professional identity of others working in the broader field of childhood studies and education, scant attention has been paid to the professional identity of early childhood care and education (ECCE) practitioners. Instead, the work of ECCE professionals has traditionally been associated with low-status caretaking and childminding duties rather than being linked to any framework of professional roles and responsibilities (McGillivray, 2008). These perceptions have dominated in Ireland and in many English-speaking countries, such as the United Kingdom, despite consistent high-quality international research, particularly from the Nordic countries, which contradicts the traditional conceptualisations of professional identity associated with the ECCE sector (Fortunati, 2006; Kjørholt, 2005). Rather than simply providing a secondary caretaking and support role, early childhood carers and educators are positioned in the international literature as experts with rich and valuable knowledge about children and



the multitude of factors that impact on children's experiences of childhood (Rinaldi, 2005a). Furthermore, because of their immersion in ECCE forums, professionals are seen to be in a prime position to undertake meaningful, informed and ongoing research to inform academics, other professionals and policy-makers (Rinaldi, 2005b).

The perceived gap in the literature in relation to ECCE professional identity in English-speaking countries has been interpreted by many ECCE professionals as reflecting the low status accorded, both within and outside the ECCE sector, to their work. The potential negative effects on ECCE professionals that flow from this poor professional image have been highlighted (OECD, 2006; Moloney, 2010). Against this backdrop, this paper addresses the findings from a recent research project that suggest this state of affairs not only applies to ECCE practitioners but also to ECCE academics and researchers working in multidisciplinary environments in colleges and universities.

THE STUDY

Between 2006 and 2010 a doctoral study was undertaken with thirty leading children's researchers from five countries working in the field of childhood studies (Smith, 2011). Semi-structured elite interviews were undertaken with experienced and high-profile researchers from a range of disciplinary and professional practice backgrounds. The vast majority of participants had experience of early childhood research and several specifically identified themselves as early childhood professionals and researchers and had published widely in this field.

During the data analysis a consistent theme in relation to ECCE research was the importance of international work. Researchers felt compelled to visit countries providing very different models of ECCE so as to directly observe ECCE communities in action. Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Germany were specifically mentioned as countries whose ideas and ECCE practices had been influential. This was both in terms of the ways in which daycare institutions operated and in respect of how researchers had refocused the unit of analysis onto the child and childhood, as in the work of Qvortrup et al. (1994). High value was seen to have been placed on children's own understandings, experiences and meaning-making activities.

I went to Scandinavia because I quickly became aware that nothing had happened here apparently [laughter]. I saw for myself the way the day care institutions operate over there, the ones I got to know, and the ideas that had influenced those institutions and saw that there were very good researchers who were looking at the meanings that children brought to their situations and that their own understandings and experiences were very important.

(Smith, 2011: 150)

Experienced researchers working in countries such as Ireland and the UK were thus acutely aware of the very different models of ECCE provision in some other countries and the connection between approaches to ECCE and the role and practice of research. One participant described how observing international practice and approaches to early childhood research had an 'unsettling effect' as it highlighted how ECCE could be practised in a creative way that enhanced the well-being of all participants through its community-based approach.



During the interviews researchers were asked to both describe and reflect upon their research relationships and experiences with children and their personal positioning in the broader field of childhood research. It was during this stage of the interview that several participants described feeling isolated, marginalised and undervalued as early childhood researchers within disciplinary boundaries. Several participants referred to the mechanisms that they employed to support their work and welcomed multidisciplinary arenas and the opportunity to collaborate with other researchers interested in early childhood topics. One participant referred to the need for people who were willing to 'stand up' for early childhood issues and commented that even within the parameters of children's educational research the perception was that anything with an early childhood label 'is written off as soft and uninteresting' by most people in the educational field (Smith, 2011: 150).

These findings raise interesting questions, not least the possibility that the professional identity of those involved in ECCE is bound up not only with the low value accorded to their professional role but also with the status and value placed on those with whom they work. Clearly, more extensive research is needed to investigate these findings. However, capturing and emphasising these unanticipated data does seem important in order to highlight the low status accorded to ECCE professionals across the spectrum of early childhood practitioner and research arenas.

The preliminary findings from this research suggest that the examination of professional identity in the ECCE sector should be grounded in recognition of the political nature of ECCE and how it is viewed both within and without ECCE contexts (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). The implications of defining what is meant by a 'child', what constitutes 'education', 'care' and 'quality' and the purposes ECCE is seen to serve would seem to be fundamental to how ECCE is understood, practised and researched (Kjorholt, 2005).

CONTRASTING APPROACHES

Moss (2008) offers a helpful comparison of dichotomous approaches to ECCE. Most English-speaking countries (with notable exceptions such as New Zealand) continue to adopt what he terms a 'market standardization approach' to ECCE. This approach is characterised by a split system both in terms of the understanding of ECCE and in the way in which services are provided. The delivery of ECCE is grounded in a customer model of purchaser and provider, dictated by the principles of market economics and what is perceived to be healthy competition between providers. A primary task of ECCE professionals is to be engaged in the production and facilitation of predetermined, structured and predictable outcomes for children. Standardisation permits measurement, evaluation and quality control and is seen as integral to the maintenance of standards and best practice. Most importantly, as Moss (2008) argues, despite the rhetoric and purported acceptance of the inseparability of childcare and education, including amongst politicians and policy-makers, this is simply not the case in practice, where a clear demarcation between education and childcare continues to exist. Indeed, the strongest evidence of the divisive 'market standardization approach' to ECCE in countries such as Ireland is the split between private responsibility for childcare and public responsibility for education.

Particularly relevant to this paper, the dichotomy between childcare and education is not only philosophical and economic but is also reflected in the structural position and



status of ECCE professionals. An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report noted that other than a small number of qualified teachers, the position of the vast majority of ECCE professionals working in childcare services is characterised by 'low status, low rates of pay and high staff turnover' (OECD, 2006). In the context of the 'market standardization approach', ECCE practitioners can be seen as akin to technicians who are required to apply specified techniques and methods in a process of producing and meeting predetermined, standardised ends (Moss, 2008). The role of the researcher in the 'market standardization approach' can also be seen as one of a technician charged with examining, measuring, analysing and promoting the refinement of this production process in the pursuit of efficiency, effectiveness and quantifiable evidence of best practice.

In contrast to the 'market standardization approach', a system based on the principles of democratic participation constructs ECCE arenas as spaces of democratic engagement where children and adults come together to participate as citizens (Rinaldi, 2005a). Professionals join with children in discussing, exploring and making sense of their experiences and environments. Participation is seen as a dynamic process that requires energy, planning and commitment rooted in everyday life rather than in institutionalised policies and procedures (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010). In such a model, ECCE professionals become part of the process of producing and managing the social institutions in which they work (Fortunati, 2006). Rather than predetermined outcomes emanating from higher structures, communication and negotiation between adults and children enable 'innovative collective practices' and thus ensure quality as part of an ongoing process of sharing and exchanging ideas (Unger, 2005).

In terms of professional identity, a model based on democratic participation blends the education and childcare professional roles. Instead of a reliance or emphasis on techniques and methods, ECCE professionals become reflective facilitators and collaborators, as children engage in constructing and giving meaning to their environments and experiences in a participatory and receptive forum. In relation to research, an approach to ECCE rooted in the principles of democratic participation does not see research as a discrete activity solely associated with, or undertaken in, the academy or only by those with specialist knowledge. On the contrary, it is viewed first and foremost as an integral part of the ECCE professional's role and the continuous reflection–action–reflection cycle within which they practice. The primary role of researchers, therefore, is to provide feedback on the creation of appropriate spaces and the level of facilitation and participation in collective decision-making within the ECCE arena. An intrinsic element in this approach is that quality, rather than a set of static measures, is conceived of in fluid terms as something that must be continually pursued, given the emphasis on participation and democratic engagement between children and ECCE professionals. In such a forum, the rigid and unhelpful dichotomies between adult/child, care/education, ECCE professional/young child become untenable as people, whatever their age, engage in meaningful participation, interaction and negotiation.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper proposes that the low status accorded to ECCE professionals in practice contexts should not be considered in isolation. Instead, it could perhaps be seen as part of a continuum that underpins ECCE in Ireland and other countries where the 'market



standardization approach' is dominant. Preliminary research evidence suggests that researchers working in academia are also aware that their work, particularly in relation to early childcare topics, is not as highly regarded as research by their colleagues working with older children and teenagers.

To enhance the professional identity of those working across the ECCE spectrum, there needs to be a shift away from the existing top-down 'market standardization' model within which children are largely constructed as units of production to be processed and measured by ECCE practitioners in the pursuit of standardised outcomes. Instead, an approach that views ECCE as a space where adults and children participate, collaborate and negotiate with each other as full citizens may be an important element in giving ECCE professionals the recognition, respect and status that they deserve. In such a forum the status of ECCE professionals as skilled, reflexive practitioners, and the well-being of young children as participating citizens, become inextricably linked.

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Professional identity, threshold concepts and the ECCE practitioner

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The term 'early childhood care and education' (ECCE) suggests that care is at the heart of what ECCE practitioners do. We know, however, from other professions that the transformation from being a student to forming a professional identity can be a difficult journey to negotiate. In this paper we first consider 'threshold concepts', an educational theory said to explain these difficulties and how they can be overcome. Thereafter, we argue that ECCE could benefit from considering Clouder's (2005) thesis that the concept of care is a threshold concept underpinning practitioner formation in the health care professions; at the same time, we also believe that a more sophisticated approach is required than Clouder offers. Such an approach would revisit the learning that students gain from different modules on their ECCE degree programmes and more actively link it to learning from practice placements.

INTRODUCTION

I believe that the way to become a professional footballer, in fact the way to reach the elite in any chosen career, is to be passionate about what you do. You do not need to have your arm twisted to go to the training field and play in the freezing winter. You do not need to be scolded and cajoled into running the extra mile. But you do need to run the extra mile.

(Andy Hunt, former Newcastle United footballer, Escribber Football Sports Blog)

Working out what it means to be a professional in any line of work is a tricky task. Do we look for professional bodies to lay down the regulations, spelling out what is expected,



welcoming into the sorority those who make the grade? Or should our attention be elsewhere – perhaps reliving the messiness of our educational development, hoping our students reach the shores of professional knowledge and understanding following their own emotional and cognitive metamorphosis? This paper travels down the latter road, infused by the idea of ‘threshold concepts’ and the part they may play in helping us to reflect on whether there are essential components or experiences in early childhood care and education (ECCE) practitioner training. In other words, we are interested in identifying the essential elements that are crucial to moving from an undergraduate state to forming a professional ECCE identity.

THRESHOLD CONCEPTS

The Enhancing Teaching–Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses (ETL) research project, funded from 2001 to 2005 by the Economic and Social Research Council through the UK’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme, focused on ways to improve high-quality learning in undergraduate education. There were concerns not only about the learning experiences of students but also about the assessment parameters for quality in higher education. For example, there was a worry that the focus on quality in relation to intended learning outcomes of degree programmes failed to capture the holistic or the distinctive features of specific disciplines or professions, resulting in a restrictive curriculum content and assessment style (Entwistle, 2005: 4). From the ETL research project, the idea of a ‘threshold concept’ emerged (Cousin, 2010: 1).

Land et al. (2010: ix) suggest that threshold concepts are based on the premise ‘that there are certain concepts or certain learning experiences which resemble passing through a portal, from which a new perspective opens up, allowing things formerly not perceived to come into view’. Going through the portal enables students to experience new ways of understanding the essential elements of a discipline or a profession. Without this movement, students are unable to fully grasp the essential dynamics of a subject and, in the case of practitioner-related subjects, are unable to fully form their professional identities.

Features

Threshold concepts have a number of key features (Land et al., 2010: ix–x); Cousin (2006: 4). They are:

- ◆ *Transformative* – the ontological orientation of the individual shifts when he or she comes to understand the particular threshold concepts within a discipline.
- ◆ *Integrative* – in the sense ‘that it exposes the hidden interrelatedness of the phenomenon. Mastery of a threshold concept often allows the learner to make connections that were hitherto hidden from view’ (Cousin, 2006: 4).
- ◆ *Irreversible* – when the concept is understood it is unlikely to be forgotten, but the understanding of the concept may change later after extensive endeavours.
- ◆ *Troublesome* – threshold concepts are likely to be difficult to grasp, a form of ‘troublesome’ knowledge. According to Land et al. (2010: x), ‘Depending on discipline and context, knowledge might be troublesome because it is ritualised, inert, conceptually difficult, alien or tacit, because it requires adopting an



unfamiliar discourse, or perhaps because the learner remains “defended” and does not wish to change or let go of their customary way of seeing things.’

- ◆ *Bounded* – Meyer and Land (2003: 6) suggest that a threshold concept is likely to have boundaries in that ‘any conceptual space will have terminal frontiers, bordering with thresholds into new conceptual areas’. Interestingly, Land et al. (2010: x) neglect to mention this feature in their overview of threshold concepts.

Each discipline will have its own threshold concept(s): the relevance of disciplinary contexts is therefore also important. Meyer and Land (2006), for example, suggest that the idea of ‘opportunity cost’ in the field of economics is the threshold concept that students need to understand to transform their view of the subject.

Additionally, for professional disciplines, Land et al. (2010: x) argue that an ‘underlying game’ may be at play: student practitioners need to understand the ways of thinking and practising intrinsic to particular disciplines or professions. Therefore, it might make more sense to use terms such as ‘threshold practices’ or ‘threshold experiences’ to reflect students’ learning journeys in areas such as ECCE. However, whether it is a subject or a discipline, ‘insights gained by learners as they cross thresholds can be exhilarating but might also be unsettling, requiring an uncomfortable shift in identity, or, paradoxically, a sense of loss’ (Land et al., 2010: x).

THRESHOLD CONCEPTS AND CLOUDER (2005) – LESSONS FOR ECCE?

In an extended literature review, Burchmore et al. suggest that research on threshold concepts has advanced in a number of directions, ranging from studies focusing on definitions of threshold concepts to studies using the term as a lever to create ‘metaphors or meta-level frameworks for describing views of teaching and learning’ (2007: 21). Of concern to us in this paper is research that examined the challenges encountered by individuals in the transition from college to the professional workplace. In this regard, according to Burchmore et al., there have been various studies using a range of theoretical and methodological approaches, yet none, as far as we are aware, focused on the formation of the ECCE practitioner.

Of particular interest to us is a study undertaken by Clouder (2005), which examined the difficulties encountered by occupational therapy and physiotherapy students as they moved from being students at college to working in hospitals as student health care practitioners. In other words, Clouder’s study explores the early stages of forming a professional identity. One of the biggest challenges student health care practitioners encounter is trying to understand what it means to care for others. And since caring is a common feature of both health care and ECCE, we contend that Clouder’s study is relevant to the ECCE profession: it illuminates the challenges health care students experience in moulding an embodied, and not just a cognitive, understanding of what it means to ‘professionally’ care for others.

Clouder proposes the idea of ‘caring’ as a threshold concept for health care students. Her thesis is that while students may be taught about care, they need to experience the emotional effects of caring to fully understand what it means to be a health care practitioner. The cognitive element of college is not enough; students require practice placements to experience the effects of caring: ‘student health professionals



undergo a transformation in their sense of identity as they engage with caring discourses that underpin healthcare' (Clouder, 2005: 505).

One interpretation of Clouder's account is that a phenomenological transformation occurs, as if a reordering of the mind's consciousness materialises through self-reflection. She reveals that academic knowledge and placement experiences combine with personal insights, as students come in contact with patients, yielding the first understanding of what it means to be a professional carer. For example, she quotes the experience of the following student:

She wanted and needed to cry but how do you cry with a ventilator tube in your mouth and down your trachea and unable to talk? I have come closest yet to realizing what these patients are feeling just by looking at the emotion in her face. I kept strong but I could have cried. You tell yourself to be strong and not to get emotionally involved but as long as you're not an emotional wreck in front of the patient there's nothing wrong in addressing your own emotions. I certainly addressed mine today.

(Clouder, 2005: 512)

But this sort of synthesis and re-formation is not easy to undertake. Clouder links this struggle to Land's conceptualisation of a student crossing a portal to foster a deeper understanding, as if 'going through the caring threshold has something to do with being touched personally by events' (2005: 512).

A weakness with Clouder's study is that she does not sufficiently reflect on the relationship between what is learned at college and what is experienced on placement. While she argues that 'the catalyst for moving through the threshold is connection with the human aspect of care at a personal level' (Clouder, 2005: 515), we must be mindful that the affective domain has to be linked to the academic or technical province. Otherwise, why do health care – or for that matter ECCE – students need to go to college in the first place? Additionally, despite using Tronto's (1993) framework to understand the concept of caring – he specifies four phases of care: caring about, taking care of, care giving and care receiving – Clouder's study may have benefited from thinking more about the processes health care professionals need to go through to successfully navigate the portal, perhaps reflecting on how the learning acquired in different spaces gets reformatted to foster professional identity.

On this matter, Carey (1991) has identified three learning processes taking place to enrich students' comprehension of concepts: replacement, differentiation and coalescence. Özdemir and Clark (2007) explain these terms, noting that during replacement one understanding of the concept replaces another, as if a rewriting process takes place. A possible example of this from Clouder's study is the replacement of an abstract notion of care with an understanding augmented through direct experience. Differentiation occurs when students realise that different meanings of a concept can occur. Another possible example is when Clouder draws on Tronto's concept of caring framework to explain how students come to recognise different elements of care. Coalescence occurs when two or more original concepts fuse into a single concept.

Arguably, Clouder's study reflects change taking place in how care is conceptualised during the first and second processes. But what seems to be absent from her analysis is how the concept of care links to the range of other concepts that students come across during their education and training programmes. Specifically, while care



may be a threshold concept that students need to understand to start forming a professional identity, surely in the health care – and ECCE – professions, more attention must be paid to how care as a concept links to other concepts in the formation of professional identity.

A close reading of Clouder's account of students' reflections on their experiences suggests that students do struggle with this coalescence: we read about students' grappling with the medical model, with professional boundaries and with the burden of responsibility. So straightaway we can see the links to concepts in areas such as ethics, sociology and psychology – hence the importance of learning at college. Therefore, notwithstanding Clouder's identification of the concept of care as the threshold portal through which health care students need to pass, we would be wise to ensure that all recognise the rich, interlinked conceptual landscape on which this portal depends.

BENEFITS OF DEVELOPING A THRESHOLD CONCEPTS' PERSPECTIVE FOR ECCE

There are a number of reasons why thinking about threshold concepts in relation to ECCE may be useful.

First, identifying threshold concepts in ECCE may help educators and the profession to focus on what are the essential elements of practitioner training and may be an important source of evidence in renewing the curriculum. As the model framework for education, training and professional development in the sector noted:

In order to support the continued development of a sense of professional identity, it is important that all practitioners in the field acquire an agreed, appropriate level of training and education in the core skills and knowledge underpinning quality practice in ECCE.

(Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2002: 8)

Given the importance of an agreed or an appropriate level of training, it might be worthwhile to identify what ECCE students find difficult to understand or experience as they progress in their ECCE practitioner training.

Second, despite Ireland's poor economic condition, the government introduced a pre-school education scheme for children aged between three and four years in January 2010; it also wishes (Smyth, 2011) to create an additional pre-school year for children with special needs. The free pre-school year (ECCE scheme) is free to all parents as the state pays pre-school centres to provide the service. The level of payment received by a provider is dependent on the number of children using the service and the qualification levels of staff. Therefore, it appears that for the first time since the foundation of the state there is a commitment in Ireland to put ECCE on a more secure financial footing and to establish ECCE as a social right. If this is true, then it is equally as important to ensure that a well-trained ECCE workforce, operating to a consistent standard, exists to service the scheme. But for this to occur, educators must attend to specifying and addressing the essential challenges students encounter along their professional journey.

Third, the creation of a highly qualified ECCE workforce is linked to a number of factors, including a country's capacity to generate highly qualified graduates. In this regard, Ireland has been spectacularly successful. Primarily by directing funding at the



institutes of technology and a number of universities, the state has witnessed a rapid increase, since 2002, in the number of third-level ECCE degree providers, ECCE undergraduate students and ECCE degree holders (see Department of Education and Science, 2009: 22–5 for an outline of these changes). At the same time, what has been absent are evolving expectations over what are the essential elements needed to become an ECCE practitioner; threshold concepts can play a part in helping the educational sector to strive for consistency.

Fourth, ECCE is increasingly seen by the state as contributing to the development of a better-prepared workforce and a more socially adroit society. Put simply, the level of welfare enjoyed by each member of society will increase because of the benefits that materialise from ECCE. But for this to happen, ECCE practitioners need to establish a professional identity, and the theory of threshold concepts is a factor in enabling this to happen.

CONCLUSION

Trying to understand the particular challenges of how individuals transform from being students to becoming competent and confident practitioners may be a formidable task, yet it is an effort worth making. In this regard, threshold concepts have become increasingly popular: researchers and educationalists draw on their features to identify key ideas and experiences that students struggle to comprehend; if identified, these ideas and experiences are arguably the catalyst to forming a professional practitioner identity. However, when it comes to singling out threshold concepts in ECCE, our thinking should be systemic, actively exploring the interconnectedness between the academic and practice environments.

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An exploration into the involvement of men in ECCE settings in Ireland

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This paper begins with a brief discussion of the Men in Childcare Network, its background, activities and aims for the future. This discussion is followed by an examination of the positive effects of having more males present in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings in Ireland and the various reasons why more males do not consider a career in the sector. An illustration of the presence of males working throughout the ECCE sector in Ireland and the possible ways in which the number of male childcare workers can be increased is also presented. The paper seeks to encourage a stronger male presence in the childcare services in order to increase the overall number of mixed-gender environments in the early years sector.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with men's involvement in childcare settings in Ireland. It begins with a brief discussion of the Men in Childcare Network before turning to consider why the number of male employees in the childcare sector in Ireland is drastically low (Kildare County Childcare Committee, 2006). A search for background information on this topic quickly reveals that the study of men in childcare in Ireland is an area that needs to be examined in greater detail. This paper compares the situation in Ireland with that in other European countries in order to explore the reasons behind the severe lack of males employed within early years educational settings.

MEN IN CHILDCARE NETWORK

The seed for the Men in Childcare Network was initially sown by the Kilkenny County Childcare Committee in 2004. A discussion on the issue of diversity in childcare had highlighted the gender imbalance in the childcare workforce in Ireland, where:

- ◆ A large percentage of children have little contact with men and some children do not have positive male role models present in their lives.
- ◆ There is the lowest representation of male workers in Europe (less than 1 per cent of the childcare workforce).



- ◆ Although children in childcare are growing up in a society that is focusing more than ever on equality issues, many of them are left in a situation where they have no contact with men between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m.

Following inquiries, it was discovered that there were very few men employed as childcare workers. Therefore, with the support of Kilkenny County Childcare Committee, the first official Men in Childcare meeting was hosted in October 2004.

The initial meeting was attended by five men, who discussed the situation and agreed the following aims:

- ◆ To work towards an increased representation of men in the early years sector in Ireland, with particular emphasis on the benefits to children.
- ◆ To inform and support men who may be interested in a career in the childcare sector and to enable male workers in childcare, including childminders, to support each other in an effort to address the issue of retention.
- ◆ To contribute to an increased valuation of the role men have as carers for children in Irish society.

Sixteen county childcare committees agreed to provide funding to support the development of the network. Other funding was secured from FÁS.

Since 2006 Waterford County Childcare Committee has provided limited administration and human resource support to the committee of men developing the network.

Conferences were organised, an action plan was developed, networking opportunities were created and the network has grown from strength to strength. Amongst its achievements are:

- ◆ Establishing telephone, email and facebook contacts for the provision of information.
- ◆ Publishing two flyers to encourage and support men into early childhood care and education (ECCE).
- ◆ Producing a DVD entitled *Face of Men in Irish Childcare*, which is available for free.
- ◆ Devising a networking strategy and piloting it around the country.
- ◆ Providing support directly to men interested in or already working in the sector through networking, information sharing, one-to-one support, etc.
- ◆ Supporting students to research the subject, from Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) Level 5 to Master's degree level.
- ◆ Participating in international conferences and availing of networking opportunities.
- ◆ Contributing to the ECCE debate through submissions to the workforce development plan, taking part in Start Strong consultations, attending conferences and seminars and providing information stands.

The Men in Childcare Network is always looking at how best to support men involved in childcare in meaningful and practical ways. It seeks to inform the childcare sector and broader society of the benefits and unique qualities men have to offer the childcare profession.



REASONS BEHIND THE LACK OF MALES IN CHILDCARE

Female-dominated environment

It is no surprise that one of the main reasons why there are not many males entering the childcare sector is because it is a predominantly female area in terms of workers and overall involvement. Many researchers are of the opinion that childcare settings are often used as substitutes for the role of mothering (Cameron et al., 1999). Green (2005: 4) illustrates how 'men were being put off attending nurseries with their children because they were female environments'. One discussion of the recruitment of males into the childcare area in New Zealand observes how 'society has moved on, men are more actively engaged in caring for their children; yet the early childhood workforce seems stuck in the 1970s family model' (Farquhar et al., 2006: 3). Rolfe (2006) describes how the British childcare sector also has many problems when it comes to the recruitment of males and attributes this to the sector's over-reliance on young, white females. In Britain, men account for 2 to 3 per cent of the childcare and early years workforce. This situation can have a strong influence on men considering a career in the area.

Low pay

Another major reason for the lack of male employment in childcare is the low level of pay associated with the sector. Farquhar (1997) discusses how the older the child being cared for and taught, the higher the pay and social status. The low wages, low social status and career structure within the early childhood field are contributing factors to the fact that 'many men would never even consider early childhood teaching as an occupation' (Farquhar, 1997: 3). Barnard et al. (2000) note that some men claim that the salaries in the childcare services are not enough to support their families and have the standard of living that they require. Rolfe (2006) states that low pay is a major contributing factor to the low levels of male employment in the British childcare sector, where a 2003 survey carried out by the Daycare Trust found that almost half of more than 2,000 adults interviewed felt that better pay and conditions would encourage more men to work in the childcare services (cited in Rolfe, 2006).

Stereotypical views

When a male is present in a childcare setting, he can often experience stereotypical views of what activities and attitudes he should bring to that setting. This type of stereotypical behaviour may deter men from entering the area of childcare as a profession. Also, studies have shown that the influence of such stereotypical behaviour can filter down from the adults to the children. D'Arcy (1990) explains how the play area in a pre-school can often reinforce gender stereotypes in terms of the types of toys that are available and which children should use which toys (cited in Nutbrown, 2006). It is explained how the play area is often female-dominated and that the girls are pleased to act out stories and situations, whereas the boys seem unhappy with the girls' style of play. The boys have often been observed changing roles to become animals, introducing elements of aggression, noise and disruption to the situation (Nutbrown, 2006).

The National Childcare Strategy highlights the importance of childcare practitioners becoming familiar with gender roles and their influence on a child's behaviour. It states:



[C]hildren learn to recognize and understand about gender difference in the pre-school years, including what is expected of boys and girls. It also influences how they think, feel, behave, communicate, dress, play, choose activities, choose playmates, use physical space and negotiate social relationships.

(Office of the Minister for Children, 2006: 37)

When children experience such stereotyping from an early age, it often has a detrimental effect on what they consider to be the activities and roles of men and women in later years. These childhood experiences can contribute towards gender bias and a belief in later years that childcare is women's work.

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF INCREASED EMPLOYMENT OF MEN IN CHILDCARE

There are many positive aspects to having more male educators present in the pre-school system, including benefits for both the workforce and the children who experience that presence.

Men as positive role models

Young children can greatly benefit from having a male role model present in their lives. Although there is a belief that fathers today have more involvement in the upbringing of their children than their fathers did, O'Sullivan (2004) notes that the public sector still seems to be dominated by the mid-twentieth-century notion that men go out to work while women look after the children. It is also mentioned that specific research carried out on the topic by the Equal Opportunities Commission shows that 'men in dual-earner families with children under the age of five now take on about a third of the childcare' (O'Sullivan, 2004: 180).

More than a decade ago a British Green Paper on 'meeting the childcare challenge' stated that 'working with children is seen as a predominantly female occupation. Yet male carers have much to offer including acting as positive role models for boys – especially from families where the father is absent' (Department for Education and Employment, 1998: 24). Irish data show that the number of women living in single-parent families in Ireland increased by 42.6 per cent from 93,800 in 2000 to 137,100 in 2010 (Central Statistics Office, 2010). A 2006 census carried out by the Combat Poverty Agency estimated that there are approximately 190,000 lone-parent families in Ireland, with 86 per cent of those families headed by single mothers. An English study carried out by the Children's Workforce Development Council found that 66 per cent of single mothers said that they would like a man to be involved in their child's development (BBC, 2009). These figures show that thousands of children may not have access to a male role model either at home or at the childcare setting they attend.

Mixed-gender environment

Having more males present in the childcare workforce creates a more mixed environment in the pre-school and having a balanced team of men and women can benefit the child greatly (Rolfe, 2006). A mixed-gender environment brings with it more opportunity for the children to experience what are known as the more masculine forms of care along with the more feminine aspects. Peeters (2004: 155) describes how the Flemish government approved new regulations that state: 'active attempts will be made



to hire males as well as females and autochthonous as well as ethnic minorities as childcare workers'. Furthermore, Rolfe (2006) notes that a mixed-gender workforce would challenge the perceptions of childcare as 'women's work'.

POLICY, PROVISION AND PROMOTION OF MEN IN CHILDCARE IN IRELAND AND IN DENMARK

Denmark is often seen as the benchmark when it comes to childcare policy and provision and Ireland often strives to implement schemes that are already in place there, particularly concerning equality in the childcare area (Crowley, 2006). When looking at the issue of male involvement in childcare it is appropriate, therefore, to compare Ireland with Denmark and to examine how male involvement is promoted in each country. Such an examination will highlight the measures that Ireland should take in order to increase the number of men working in childcare.

A comparison of the involvement of men in the childcare area establishes the clear differences between the two countries. Statistics from Denmark illustrate that 8 per cent of the childcare workforce is male (Wohlgemuth, 2003). In contrast, Ireland has been found to have the lowest representation of male childcare workers in Europe (McDonagh, 2008). The percentage of males working in childcare in Ireland is less than 1 per cent of the workforce (Kildare County Childcare Committee, 2006). One of the main explanations for this gap is that in Denmark there are schemes in place that have successfully promoted the involvement of men in childcare (Children in Scotland, 2009). These initiatives will be discussed below.

The Vilborg College project

In 1995 the Vilborg College project was set up to 'attract males to this professional field and to provide a kind of counterweight to the growing feminisation of the profession' (Wohlgemuth, 2003: 4). To achieve this aim the project had to first identify the reasons why males do not tend to enter the childcare profession. The main finding of this research was that the area of childcare was completely dominated by female staff, which deterred men from choosing the area as a profession. Another key finding was that more males failed to participate in the profession because it was seen as being a low-status and low-pay profession.

The Vilborg College project was met with hostility and resentment from female students in the college, who felt that it was 'provocative, degrading of their own abilities and qualifications' (Wohlgemuth, 2003: 4). However, a prime example of this project's success can be seen when examining the results found within Kolding College in regards to the enticement and introduction of males into various childcare programmes.

Kolding College

One positive outcome of the Vilborg College project was that it opened the door for other innovations and schemes designed to attract more men into the area of childcare. For example, the Danish Ministry of Education supported the designing of a new specialised line of the curriculum within the early years courses in colleges across Denmark. The new specialised line includes the regular curriculum that is being taught in the colleges but places increased emphasis on sport and nature. The sole purpose of



these specialised courses is to attract more males into the field of childcare. 'These specialised lines target the entire field of care which includes young children, older children, the elderly and the disabled' (Wohlgemuth, 2003: 2).

An example of a college that decided to introduce this new curriculum is Kolding College. In 2000 it introduced the idea of childcare to its prospective students with the main focus being on the increased inclusion of sport and nature within the curriculum. This new approach had an immediate impact and received very positive feedback. So much so that 'for the first time in 35 years, the students that enrolled in 2001 were characterised by men' (Wohlgemuth, 2003: 9). One class had an equal balance of 50 per cent males and 50 per cent females. A survey of the male students asked about their reasons for choosing to enter the course and found that they assumed there would be more men in class due to the fact that there was more sport in the curriculum. Following the introduction of the specialised curriculum in 2000, 'the overall percentage of men in the entire college ... increased from 15% to just over 24%' (Wohlgemuth, 2003: 9). This is just one example of Denmark's many successes in terms of attracting more males into the childcare area.

WHAT CAN IRELAND DO TO IMPROVE?

So far Ireland has failed to significantly increase male involvement in the childcare workforce. It is clear what needs to be done to improve the situation. Steps must be taken to counteract the belief that childcare is 'women's work' (Rolfe, 2006: 103). The Danish experience illustrates the positive effect of broadening the curriculum to incorporate outdoor activities such as sport and nature (Wohlgemuth, 2003: 9). Implementing such changes in the pre-school curriculum in Ireland, and highlighting this to Leaving Certificate students who aim to attend college, may increase the number of male applicants for childcare courses and, thus, eventually increase the proportion of men working in the childcare sector.

To address this imbalance in Ireland, the following actions are recommended;

Recommendation 1

Develop a nationwide awareness of the positive benefits that men can bring to childcare services through their increased involvement in the profession. This goal can be achieved by making presentations on the subject at seminars and conferences across the country. As awareness of the positives of male involvement in childcare spreads across Ireland's childcare services, the sector will become more hospitable to any men who choose childcare as a profession.

Recommendation 2

Promote the positives of the childcare profession to potential male employees across the country. This work is currently being carried out by various childcare committees along with the Men in Childcare Network. The next step, which has not yet been fully developed, is to engage and converse with second-level students, especially boys, at Transition Year and Leaving Certificate level with the purpose of promoting childcare and the benefits of entering the profession.



Recommendation 3

Develop a specific course or module aimed at enticing more men to enter the childcare profession. Such men may be experiencing unemployment or feeling that it is time for a career change. A course specifically aimed at males will reassure those men who participate in it that their involvement in the childcare profession is encouraged and supported.

CONCLUSION

Where men are involved in childcare, their managers, female co-workers and, most importantly, the children they care for state how much they value that involvement. In expressing such opinions they give a concrete standing to the argument that increased male involvement would be a positive step in the progression of childcare services in Ireland. The most essential argument for involving more males in the childcare services is that they can ensure that an increased number of Irish children experience a positive male role model in their life.

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