National Early Years Research Day Proceedings

Early
Childhood
Ireland

Message from Early Childhood Ireland

I'm delighted to welcome you to Volume 2 of Early Childhood Ireland's National Early Years Research Day Proceedings, containing selected papers delivered at an Online Research Symposium, over three evenings in October 2020.

2020 was an extraordinary year for Ireland's early learning and care and school-age childcare sector. Indeed, it was an extraordinary year to be a global citizen. Much is written and discussed about the resilience and resolve of our sector in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the enforced closure of services, followed by challenging reopenings. Children's experiences of participation in settings and educators' education and care practices were altered by a series of public health measures - the grouping of children and staff into 'pods'; stricter infection control; physical distancing between parents and staff for drop-off and collection of children, with limited parental entry to settings; and an increased public and policy emphasis on outdoor play provision.

The theme of our 2020 research event, New Realities in Research in Early Learning and Care – First 5, was set before COVID-19 and aimed to focus on how Ireland's first national strategy for babies and young children would and should frame the Irish research agenda on early childhood. COVID-19 hit and suddenly we were in a very different reality.

Even during these incredibly stressful and uncertain times, providers, early years educators and researchers continued to navigate professional development and learning pathways, researching aspects of professional practice for improvement, investigating the impact of public policy on early childhood education and care practices, and exploring children's experiences in settings. They continued to value and participate in professional learning events like Early Childhood Ireland's research day, to exchange knowledge and engage in professional dialogue.

The 2020 presenters had submitted abstracts to Early Childhood Ireland's Scientific Committee in late 2019 for an in-person research day planned to take place in the Croke Park Conference Centre in April 2020. Our organisation pivoted from an in-person one-day event to a fully online research event, spread over three evenings. We cannot thank enough all of those who submitted abstracts, the fifteen paper presenters, the keynote speaker, Dr Nuala Connolly, from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Professor Anne Looney, Dublin City University, who launched Volume One of our research proceedings publication, and panel discussants: Marlene McCormack, Dublin City

University; Dr Leah O'Toole, Maynooth University; Dr Anna Visser, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, who persevered with us as Early Childhood Ireland learned how best to deliver a meaningful event in an online world. We also would like to thank the 500+ attendees. Those of you who would like to catch up on the three evenings can view the recordings at www.earlychildhoodireland.ie.

Finally, I would like to thank all the authors with papers in this issue for their generosity and collaboration. Early Childhood Ireland shares and values their curiosity and drive for continuous professional learning. Thanks also to colleagues in all Early Childhood Ireland teams, without whom the research event and this publication would not happen, but particularly to Kathleen Tuite, the co-editor of this volume and co-organiser of the research symposium.

Liz Kerrins,
Co-editor,
Director of Research

Foreword

**Dr. Nuala Connolly,
Early Years Research Specialist,
Department of Children, Equality, Disability,
Integration and Youth**

I very much welcome the opportunity to write this foreword for the second volume of Early Childhood Ireland's National Early Years Research Day Proceedings publication.

Early Childhood Ireland has played an important role in continuing to keep the early learning and care community connected throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. During this challenging time, this year's virtual research symposium by Early Childhood Ireland has been an important forum for the early learning and care sector to share their research and learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic has compelled all of us to reimagine how we design research, how we engage with communities and stakeholders, and how we disseminate our findings. Early Childhood Ireland has embraced a digital transition by taking their annual research conference online. This year's virtual platform provided an opportunity for students, staff, researchers, academics, and policymakers to engage, discuss and contribute to the early learning and care community in sharing key learning from research and practice.

Despite the enormous challenges of conducting research through a public health emergency, the response from contributors, along with the quality of the research presented, is inspiring and commendable. This publication captures a range of academic and reflective papers from contributors.

Volume 2 of Early Childhood Ireland's National Early Years Research Day Proceedings continues to explore the collective progress of the sector in achieving the vision of First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028 (Government of Ireland, 2018). Research and evidence will remain essential as we continue to implement an ambitious programme of policy reform in the years ahead.

The research collected in this publication reflects the importance of access to high-quality, affordable, accessible and inclusive early learning and childcare for children and families, as well as supporting the broader social and economic policy objectives.

Also reflected is the key role of the early learning and childcare workforce, recognised as one of the most important drivers of quality in early learning and childcare settings. In this context, I welcome also the research on childminders, and the emphasis on the value of reflective practice to support the cycle of ongoing learning.

I also welcome the children's rights perspective represented in the papers in this publication. This perspective is also central to the development and implementation of national policy.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the research on transitions presented in this publication. The moves into and through early learning and care and on to primary education are a major transition in young children's lives. We know that smooth transitions can ensure a positive experience for children at all stages. This important phase in young children's lives is also supported by a number of actions in First 5 as an increasingly effective early childhood system is developed.

As we continue to collectively live with COVID-19, these papers highlight how the early learning and care workforce and the early learning and care sector as a whole have critically adapted to the 'new norm', striving to provide experiences for children that remain a source of joy and fulfilment.

As Early Years Research Specialist with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, I have read this publication with great enthusiasm. As research lead for the programme of research flowing from First 5, I am thrilled to see the passion for research among the early learning and care community and sector, which serves to highlight the commitment and dedication to learn from experience, and to advance the knowledge-base.

My warmest congratulations to the contributors and to Early Childhood Ireland in overcoming the challenges of the past year to deliver an important and timely contribution to the research landscape.

Dr. Nuala Connolly,
Early Years Research Specialist,
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An exploration of school-readiness perspectives of early years professionals, teachers, and parents in the Northwest of Ireland

by Fiona Boyle, Sheila Garrity, Lynda Smyth

Fiona Boyle: Fiona Boyle is a recent graduate from NUI Galway's MA in Early Childhood Studies and Practice. Working directly with preschool children, Fiona has become passionate about supporting children's transitions to primary school. She used this research to better understand how transitions can be improved for all involved.

Sheila Garrity: Dr Sheila Garrity is passionate about supporting Early Childhood Educators to achieve their personal and professional goals through lifelong study. As Academic Director (MA & BA Early Childhood Studies, NUI Galway) Sheila encourages students to disseminate their research, share their knowledge through conference presentations and publications, such as this.

Lynda Smyth: Lynda Smyth is presently involved in developing and teaching on a range of educational programmes for ECEC. Lynda's research interests include critical pedagogy, race, and reconceptualisation of early childhood education. Lynda has worked in several roles in the early years sector, including practitioner, manager, and mentor.

Abstract

School-readiness has been a pervasive term in the discourse of transitions within Irish Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) policy, though this is shifting. Previously, the language used within policies and frameworks have suggested ECEC as a time of preparing children for school. More recently, *First 5* (Ireland, 2019) has shifted the focus towards promoting positive transitions through ready schools, collaboration between educators, and instilling positive dispositions in children. For this reason, a small-scale master's research study was undertaken to explore school-readiness perspectives held by early years professionals, primary school teachers, and parents. Data collected through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires identified that participants focused on social and emotional qualities of school-readiness. Although children are key actors within transitions, their voices are missing due to the project's time constraints. As school-readiness also includes schools' readiness for children (O'Kane, 2016), this research noted evidence of 'ready schools', where teachers incorporate ready classroom practices, and adapt to meet children's needs. However, while *First 5* (Ireland, 2019) encourages collaboration between educators in ECEC and primary schools, inconsistent practices were identified in this project.

Introduction

Early childhood transitions have been the focus of policy developments (DES, 1999; DCYA, 2014; NCCA, 2019) and empirical research, both in Ireland and internationally (Dockett and Perry 2009; Ring *et al*, 2016; O'Kane, 2016). *First 5 - A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families (First 5)* (Ireland, 2019) states that positive transitions 'help to form good attitudes towards school which support strong school engagement and lead to long-term benefits' (p. 98). This article reports on a research project, undertaken as part of a master's degree at NUI Galway, investigating the perspectives and experiences of key actors – parents, early years practitioners (EYPs), and primary school teachers (PSTs) – related to school-readiness and early childhood transitions. While *Let's Get Ready* (DECDIY, 2020)

provides resources to parents and educators, the campaign was launched after this research, and is not referenced throughout this piece. This article presents relevant policy and research as a background to the study, before outlining the research methodology. Selected research findings are then presented, with a discussion of key literature woven throughout.

Background

Discussions of early years transitions typically include the concept of 'school-readiness' (Dockett and Perry, 2009), though the terms are not interchangeable. Transitions are 'the process of moving from one situation to another and taking time to adjust' (NCCA, 2019, p.1) whereas school-readiness considers:

> children's readiness for school, families', and communities' readiness for school, and also includes the school's readiness for children, stressing the bidirectionality between the child and the school (O'Kane 2016, p. 8).

First 5 (Ireland, 2019) and O'Kane (2016) note the importance of 'ready schools' that adapt learning structures to meet children's needs. However, an analysis of previous Irish policy documents reveals a pervasive discourse promoting Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) as responsible for school-readiness.

Ready to Learn (DES, 1999) suggested supporting children's educational achievement through high-quality ECEC, setting a pattern of viewing early years as sites for school preparation. An imperative in introducing the universal, funded ECCE Scheme was that 'pre-primary education is a key determinant of student performance at all levels of education' (WCCC, 2009). Similarly, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* noted ECEC as important for ensuring children are ready for school (DCYA, 2014). This discourse essentialises the purpose of ECEC as a preparatory space.

Such a perspective impacts how EYPs, parents, and PSTs view 'school-readiness'. PSTs' beliefs affect how they implement features of 'ready schools' (Ring *et al,* 2016), while EYPs' and parents' beliefs impact how they prepare children for school (Lara-Cinisomo *et al,* 2008). Understanding these stakeholders' school-readiness views is crucial due to their influence on children's transitions, and their essential role in promoting positive transitions. Therefore, this was the focus of the study reported through this article.

Insight into primary schools' use of *Aistear: the national curriculum framework* (NCCA, 2009) is also indicative of educators' school-readiness perspectives. In ECEC, *Aistear* (ibid.) guides EYPs on providing learning experiences that support children's development by prioritising children's views, connections, and hands-on experiences. Learning experiences are developed under themes of well-being, communicating, identity and belonging, and exploring and thinking. While *Aistear* focuses on holistic learning, the primary school curriculum (GOI, 1999) is broken into seven subject areas. Although both documents emphasise hands-on learning, Ring *et al* (2016) identified that more formal practices often occur in primary schools. Daly and Grant (2019) note that some children struggle with transitioning from play-based to formal approaches. This reiterates the importance of identifying school-readiness perspectives and current transition practices.

Methodology

This research sought to explore participants' perspectives of the qualities and skills they deemed important for starting school and to discuss preparations for the school transition. It hoped to explore potential concerns and examine participants' views on the ECCE Scheme's impact on children's transitions.

A convergent mixed-method design (Schram, 2014) under a pragmatic research paradigm (ibid.) included semi-structured interviews with educators plus open-ended questionnaires and follow-on interviews with parents. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling, based on the criterion that they are key actors in this transition. Ethical approval was granted by NUI Galway, ensuring the study was undertaken with integrity. In line with GDPR, informed consent preceded all interviews and questionnaires. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article, safeguarding the confidentiality of participants. Thematic analysis of data, based on the views of eighty-five participants resulted in eight overarching themes. This article focuses on three primary themes.

This was a focused study, engaging participants in the North-West of Ireland, to examine a topic of national policy importance. Due to the small-scale, including the voice of the central actor – the transitioning child – was not feasible, though it is recognised this inclusion would have added to the story being told herein. While these findings are not meant to be generalisable, they reveal important understandings based on lived experiences, adding to the domestic literature on early childhood transitions.

Perspectives of readiness

Although children can be enrolled in primary school at four years old, most start school by six years of age (Citizens Information, 2019). With over 100,000 children availing of the ECCE scheme each year (DCEDIY, 2019), the scheme's age requirements have impacted school starting ages. Several parents noted that completing two preschool years was a determinant factor in sending their child to school. However, they identified that additional child-related factors played a role in this decision.

First 5 (Ireland, 2019) suggests 'certain dispositions, skills and knowledge... help ease transitions' (p. 98). Although particular traits can help positive transitions, Graue (1992) outlines that different attributes will be valued and expected within different communities. Therefore, notwithstanding *First 5's* position, the school-readiness views of a community will determine the value placed on these qualities. This research revealed participants' school-readiness perspectives, categorising these as non-cognitive, cognitive, and physical skills.

Non-cognitive skills refer to behaviours, emotional regulation, social skills, and attention (Jones *et al,* 2015). Lara-Cinsomo *et al* (2008) noted that EYPs prioritise social skills and confidence. PSTs also value social skills, emphasising independence, and concentration (O'Kane & Hayes 2007; Ring *et al* 2016; Daly & Grant 2019). This research revealed similar findings, as educators' school-readiness views primarily surrounded social and emotional skills. Isabelle and Fionnuala (PSTs) explained that being able to "*interact with other children*" and share was expected to a certain extent. Barbara (EYP) stated "*social skills would be a big one*", while Donna (EYP) noted "*being able to emotionally cope with being told no*" is important.

Independence was also frequently referenced by educators. PSTs prioritised hanging up coats and managing zippers, while the ability to open and close lunchboxes was also referenced. Similarly, practicing these independence skills was emphasised by EYPs. Some PSTs mentioned concentration, following instruction, and the ability "*to sit and listen for at least 10-15 minutes*" (Grainne-PST). This non-cognitive skill focus mirrors findings in the literature (O'Kane & Hayes, 2007; Ring *et al,* 2016; Daly & Grant, 2019).

Parents also considered social skills, such as "*navigate[ing] larger social situations*", a key feature of readiness (See Table 1). Dispositions such as eagerness to start school and independence are valued by parents. Similarly, literature identified an emphasis on 'fitting in', confidence,

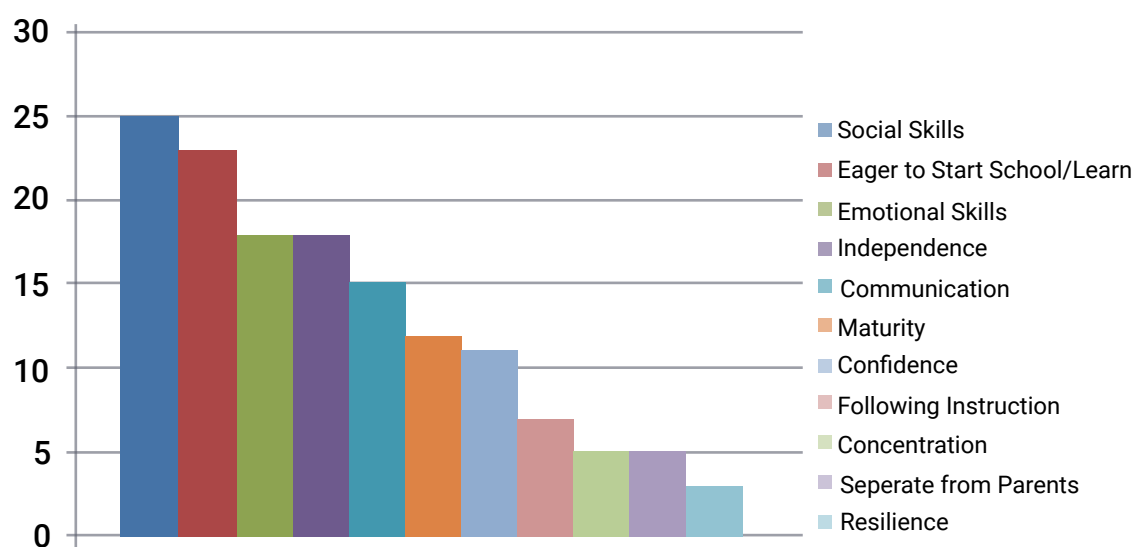independence, and eagerness to attend school, among parents (Dockett & Perry 2004; Ring *et al*. 2016).

Table 1: Non-cognitive Traits Highlighted in Parent Questionnaires

Cognitive abilities involve 'achievement-oriented tasks, such as problem solving, and academic abilities' (Jones *et al*, 2015, p. 2283). Contradicting previous research (Ring *et al*, 2016) that pre-academic skills are privileged in ECEC, this study found consensus among educators that "*academics wouldn't be of much importance*" (Donna-EYP). Many EYPs explained that school-readiness is not about 'academics' because "*in school, they go back to the very beginning*" (Kate-EYP). Similarly, PSTs school-readiness views did not prioritise this knowledge. Fionnuala (PST) said to "*park all of the academics*". Grainne (PST) reiterated this view, saying letters are "*my end of the world*".

There was a common belief that some parents "*place an awful lot of value on the academics*" (Ann-EYP) and "*are more steered toward the academic side*" of readiness (Barbara-EYP). Niamh (PST) commented that parents believe their children are ready for school because they know "*their sounds and... how to write their name*". Ring *et al* (2016) noted similar findings with 66% of parents believing children need to know letters, numbers, and writing before starting school.

Despite educators' suspicions, and previous research, only 23% of parents in this study identified "academics" as part of school-readiness (See Table 2).
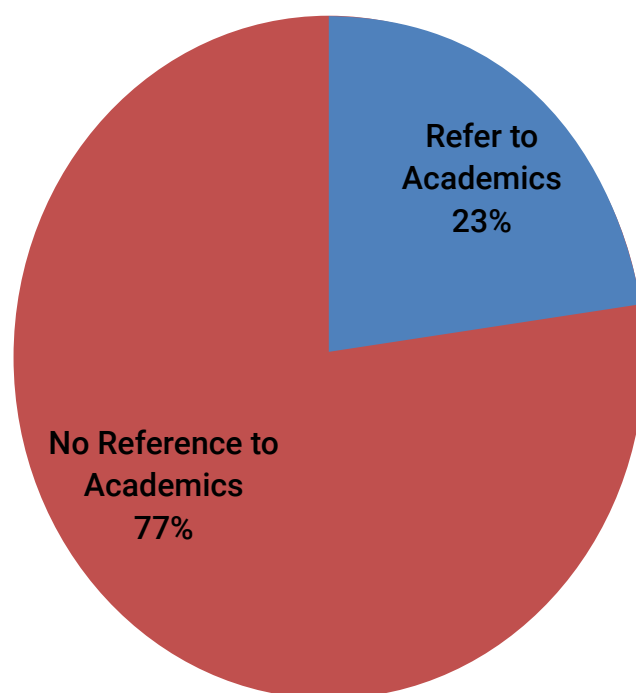
Table 2: Views of Academics as School Readiness in Parent Questionnaires

Physical skills featured in Niklas *et al* (2018) survey of EYPs and PSTs and revealed that barely 25% consider physical development important for school-readiness. This contrasts Smith and Glass's (2019) position that 'physical well-being sets the foundation for all other school-readiness domains' (p.5). In this research, only two PSTs noted physical skills within their school-readiness beliefs, with Isabelle (PST) noting "*decent balance and co-ordination*" are beneficial for starting school. Grainne (PST) advocated for more focus on children's physical development before school entry, sharing how she prioritises gross motor skills within school-readiness: "*if they can't control their gross motor skills... how am I supposed to get them to hold a pencil and follow a tiny little shape*?"

Ready Schools

According to *First 5* (Ireland, 2019) and O'Kane (2016), "ready schools" are crucial for positive transitions. Ready schools 'adapt their structure and learning environments to consider the individual differences and needs of children' (Sayers, 2012, in Ireland, 2019, p.98). *Mó Scéal* (NCCA, 2019) identifies features of ready schools, including ready teachers and transition practices.

In response to her concerns, Grainne (PST) focused on physical readiness. Both Joan and Isabelle (PSTs) spoke of additional resources needed to support children acquiring English as an additional language. Joan suggested responsibility fell to teachers to be prepared. Additionally, one parent interviewed shared how a PST accommodated her child's learning style by teaching phonics through jumping jacks. These examples highlight how some PSTs have adapted their teaching practices to meet children's individual needs, coinciding with *First 5'*s (Ireland, 2019) recommendations.

Ready teachers and their transition practices were also identified throughout data collection. Parents highlighted preferred teacher dispositions of kindness, welcoming, and understanding. This mirrors Ring *et al*'s (2016) findings that parents prefer teachers who are not strict, understand children's abilities, and create a nurturing environment. Transition practices carried out by PSTs included putting children's "*names on their tables*" (Isabelle), and their "*pictures on the wall so they know this is their classroom*" (Grainne). Additionally, Joan

uses visual timetables, and Grainne uses a "*colour-coded scheme*" to visually guide children throughout the day. These examples reflect *Mó Scéal's* recommendations in providing welcoming classrooms, including visual aids, and allowing children to own their environment (NCCA 2019).

Educator Collaboration

First 5 (Ireland, 2019) states that professional connections between EYPs and PSTs are required for positive transitions. This facilitates 'a greater understanding of the curriculum and pedagogy in the different settings' (NCCA, 2018, p.7). This research identified a rural/urban divide regarding the degree of collaboration between educational settings.

Rural-based educators experience stronger connections, as there is typically a clear path from preschool to the local primary school. The daily collection of school-aged children and the necessary exchange of information supports regular interactions and informal communication among educators; particularly closer to the end of term as Barbara (EYP) and Grainne (PST) highlighted.

In contrast, urban-based participants identified collaboration was lacking due to the number of educational settings in the area. Kate (EYP) identified six primary schools as follow-on settings, while Fionnuala's (PST) students come from "*all over the place*". Both noted this hinders their engagement with professionals from other settings. Ring et al (2018) found proximity enhanced engagement. Urban PSTs (Hannah, Isabelle, Fionnuala) communicated with EYPs only when a 'concern' arose, such as a special educational need, reflecting similar findings by Ring *et al* (2016).

Confidentiality presents an additional barrier. Niamh (PST) highlighted that EYPs "*can't really say* [children] *are or they aren't ready for school*". O'Kane (2016, citing Cork City Partnership Ltd., 2012) noted assumptions related to parents' perceptions influences the content of shared information.

Transfer documents (such as Mó Scéal or All About Me (AAM) books (SCCC 2015)) were created to facilitate collaboration (NCCA, 2019; O'Kane & Murphy, 2016), as transferring information about children's learning can open relationships between settings (Daly & Grant, 2019). However, O'Kane and Murphy (2016) note inconsistent collaboration between educators, highlighting the need for greater policy and practice guidance. This research revealed that the opinions on and use of transfer documents varied. AAM books, developed by SCCC, were the primary transfer document referenced in data collection. Some parents praised these books, saying it's "*good for the teacher to get to know the kids*" (Cliona), while PSTs question the tools' authenticity, due to possible "*assistance*" with their completion. Additionally, most participating EYPs stopped using AAM books because "*they weren't very child-led*" (Barbara). Therefore, while AAM was designed to help with collaboration, participating educators in this study do not favour them.

Transfer documents also provide opportunities for curriculum continuity; 'similar activities, programme structure and content between preschool and infant classes' (Ring et al, 2016, p. 8). According to *First 5* (Ireland, 2019), continuity can help facilitate positive transitions. Similarly, Daly and Grant (2019, p. 84) identify that curriculum alignment 'is critical to children's learning and development'. However, participating PSTs do not place emphasis on AAM books' contents, nor use them to build on children's previous experiences. Isabelle (PST) highlighted that "*a lot of the things that would be in* [AAM books] ... *you'd be doing again at junior level anyway*". Additionally, while AAM is "*somewhat helpful... it wouldn't be, I suppose, the*

basis of your teaching" (Isabelle-PST). This suggests that while an overlap between learning in ECCE/primary school can exist, PSTs do not appear to privilege children's previous learning outlined in AAM books.

Recommendation

Findings illustrate that transfer documents, like AAM books, do not work in practice. EYPs dislike the adult-led books, while teachers admit that the documents do not influence their practice. While Mó Scéal (NCCA 2019) documents follow a different format, their use in practice was not evident throughout data collection. An alternative process to transfer information is through PST visits to preschools. Allowing PSTs time to visit the incoming children in their preschools provides opportunities for engagement between educators. PSTs can observe the children's interactions, review learning stories, and identify the children's interests and strengths. EYPs can also answer specific questions based on PSTs observations. Additionally, these visits give the children another opportunity to meet their new teacher.

Conclusion

This research illustrates that participants value similar school-readiness qualities, prioritising children's social and emotional readiness, rather than academic preparation. Moreover, schools appear to demonstrate adaptability in how they present their curriculum to children, adjusting to children's individual needs. However, while these findings indicate an evolving discourse from *ready child* to *ready schools*, there are elements of the transition process that need improvement. Although *First 5* (Ireland, 2019) promotes collaboration across settings to enhance positive transitions, findings reveal collaboration tends not to occur; neither in-person nor through transfer documents. Therefore, vital communication between educators is missing from the transition process.

Whereas collaborative supports and resources have been developed, as, outlined in *First 5* (GOI, 2019), *Mó Scéal* (NCCA, 2019) and *Let's Get Ready* (DCEDIY, 2020), there is currently no national training on supporting transitions. Until training which outlines consistent and cohesive practices exists, there will continue to be a gap in children's transition experiences, as this research reveals. These supports and training should address the challenges educators face regarding transition communication, while also being considerate of the specific barriers facing those in urban communities. This research offers unique, and often confirmatory insight into transition practices and views. Findings recommend particular aspects that need to be considered at both a macro and micro-level in order to promote positive transitions for all children.

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Early Years Practitioners' perspectives of the inter-related concepts of 'school readiness' and transition

by Kathy Carter, Dr Niamh Gallagher

Keywords: School Readiness ▮ Transition ▮ Constructions ▮
Socio-Ecological Theory ▮ Early Years Practitioner

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Abstract

Within the national context, there has been an increased focus and emphasis on the role of the early years practitioner (EYP) in preparing children and families for the transition to primary school and for school readiness.

The overarching aim of this research was to qualitatively explore EYPs' constructions of the concepts of 'school readiness' and 'transitions' and examine if, how, and in what manner these constructions shaped their work practices in preparing children and families for the transition to primary school.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a small sample of EYPs located in North-West Ireland. The narratives arising from the data generation process were then analysed thematically.

Key findings revealed that EYPs considered the onus of responsibility in preparing the child for primary school lay with them. A lack of pedagogical continuity, collaboration, and communication from schools and inconsistent practices regarding transfer documentation were identified as key concerns. Findings also revealed that social and emotional competencies were perceived to be the most significant aspects of a child's readiness for a successful transition to school.

Outcomes point to the need for all stakeholders involved in the process of supporting children's readiness for school, and to work collaboratively to ensure seamless transition experiences.

Introduction

Both internationally and nationally, there have been significant recent advancements in the conceptualisation of the inter-related concepts of school readiness and transitions.

Within the Irish context, there has been an increased focus and emphasis on the significance of the role of the EYP in preparing children and families for the transition to primary school and for the child's school readiness, and indeed on the need for EYPs and primary teachers (PTs) to work collaboratively in these endeavours (O'Kane 2016; O'Kane and Murphy, 2016; NCCA, 2018; DCYA, 2019).

A more contemporary understanding of the definition of school readiness, away from the traditional, developmental perspective has been posited, with a move to a more collaborative, inclusive, and holistic definition, focusing on the concepts of ready children, ready schools, and ready families (UNICEF, 2012, p.6). However, little is known in relation to EYPs' perspectives on these inter-related dimensions of school readiness or practitioners' views about their perceived relationship to the process of transitioning to primary school. Further research specifically exploring how EYPs construct school readiness and transitions and how such constructions shape both professional and interprofessional work practices of the EYP in the transition process will help in addressing these knowledge gaps.

Aim of Research

The overarching aim of this study was to qualitatively explore from a socio-ecological perspective, EYPs' constructions of the inter-related concepts of school readiness and transitions and to examine if and how these constructions shape EYPs' transition practices. More specifically, the study aimed to explore if EYPs' perspectives were informed by traditional developmental/maturations conceptualisations of school readiness or more contemporary, holistic, and inclusive definitions.

Specific objectives, framed in UNICEF's (2012) holistic conceptualisation of school readiness, explored EYPs' perspectives of the concepts of:
• 'Ready Child', that is, as it relates to school readiness and children's learning and development processes,
• 'Ready School', with particular focus on the school environment and the practices that facilitate effective seamless transitions,
• 'Ready Family', with reference to how the attitudes and involvement of parents influence and shape the child's lived experiences of transitioning.

Literature Review

Within the Irish context, school readiness and the transition to primary school was, until recently, a relatively under researched area (Hanniffy, 2017). However, within the past decade this has changed, with several major research studies emerging including a comprehensive review of the transition from preschool to primary school (O'Kane, 2016); an audit of transfer documentation in the transition process (O'Kane and Murphy, 2016); an evaluation of the NCCA's (2018) primary school transition initiative and an examination of the concepts of school readiness among parents and educators (Ring *et al.*, 2017).

One of the major recommendations from such studies was the need for greater alignment in curriculum and pedagogy across settings. Another proposal was for improved communication and collaboration between EYPs and PTs, particularly in relation to transfer documentation.

In line with these recommendations, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), introduced Mo Scéal (NCCA, 2019) - transition template reports for use by EYPs and furthermore, *First 5* (DCYA, 2019) advocates for the significance of the need to support both the child's and family's transition to primary school.

Theoretical framework & methodology

This exploratory study aligned with Stake's (1995) and Yin's (2009) approach to case study methodology and was conducted using qualitative research methods. The study was framed in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the tenets of social constructionism (Burr, 1995). Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory has relevance

for children as they make the transition from preschool to primary school as it views child development as a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment including family, school and broader cultural values, laws, and customs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

A sample of 12 EYPs was selected from a small geographical region in the North-West of Ireland, using purposive, non-probability techniques. The qualitative data were constructed using semi-structured interviews with EYPs. Interviews were conducted face to face, digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Both inductive and deductive approaches to data analysis occurred. Firstly, the principles and procedures of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis informed the initial coding and categorisation processes. In turn, categories generated were further analysed through the lens of UNICEF's (2012) themes of, ready child, ready schools, and ready families.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was granted by the Department of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, at the Institute of Technology, Sligo. In line with the Institute's Research Ethics and GDPR guidelines (2018), practices adhered to included that of voluntary participation, secure data storage (data were stored in a password protected digital file and deleted after a period of ten months), informed consent, participant anonymity, confidentiality and right to withdraw.

Main findings and discussion

Data were interpreted in the context of UNICEF's (2012) inter-connected themes of ready child, ready family, and ready school.

Theme 1 – Ready Children

Key findings here revealed that participants were unanimous in their interpretations and constructions of school readiness, identifying social and emotional competencies as being the most significant aspects of a child's readiness for transition. The following represents the view of most participants.

> *'I would look at how they regulate their emotion... I would be looking at their social and emotional development'* (PO6).

Their constructions, therefore, align with UNICEF's (2012) conceptualisation of the 'ready child' dimension of school readiness which resonates with much of the more recent literature in this field (Niklas *et al.,* 2018; McGettigan & Gray, 2012; Ring *et al.*, 2017).

When exploring how their understandings of school readiness influenced their practice, all EYPs referenced their use of Aistear (NCCA, 2009). They identified this as the most appropriate curricular framework to use when planning to prepare a child for school in relation to their cognitive, social, and emotional readiness.

While these constructions of readiness appear to influence EYPs' practice and the use of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) to guide same, further research is required to ascertain which specific activities, programmes and strategies are used to promote social and emotional competencies in preparation for the transition to school.

Theme 2 – Ready Schools

Participants were asked whether schools played a role in relation to preparing children for the transition to school and if so, what that role entailed.

Here, participants discussed topics such as the role of the school environment and of primary teachers' (PTs') practices for supporting effective transitions and readiness. Regarding PTs' preparation of the environment, participants were asked if they knew if Aistear was being implemented as a curricular framework within the junior infant classroom. In summary, many participants reported that, in their view, Aistear was used as a reward at the end of the day or week, as opposed to a framework that guided general educational practices.

> *'I've heard the parents from previous students talk about Aistear in Junior Infants as golden hour. It is a case of... Aistear turned on... Aistear turned off. Aistear is... almost treated like play'* (PO3).

> *'Yes, I do know they have it, but I just think it's called golden hour. I don't think it is like the main thing they do'* (PO6).

When questioned regarding the use of transfer documentation, all participants reported that they were aware of transition statements and reporting templates available for use by EYPs. Interestingly, some noted that they had made the decision not to complete them, whilst others iterated that they fully supported these practices and the importance of providing schools with information in relation to children's learning stories and school readiness. However, in the case of the latter, the general view was that the onus was on EYPs to initiate communication with primary schools, to offer transition statements, and discuss the importance of such statements in supporting children's transitions. While half of the participants agreed that children's transition statements were well-received by schools, not all were convinced they were read or used by PTs.

> *'I think that the schools are putting the onus on us as a service; and I've been that person that's got the phone call from the school saying, we have a child that's come from your service, and they are really unsettled... Well really?... If you read their statement, you would know they take time to settle'* (PO1).

Most participants felt that the onus of responsibility for facilitating the child's school readiness and successful transition lay largely with the EYP sector and not primary schools. Aside from conducting single open days and some schools sending home *'summer packs that included crayons, colouring sheets, activity sheets and scissors* etc.,' (PO3), participants were unable to identify any other practices that primary schools initiated. Accounts of collaborative practices and joint initiatives to support school readiness were minimal in contrast to the policy recommendations referred to earlier (NCCA, 2019; DCYA, 2019).

Several participants discussed how they contacted local schools to request a visit from respective junior infant teachers but that this practice never materialised and was viewed as a missed opportunity.

> *'We have never been successful in getting the principal or the infant teachers to come and visit us here. It's not practical for us here to take them to visit, no bus, financially and everything else'* (PO3).

While examining the relationship between settings and schools, it must be noted that there is currently no national policy specifically relating to the transition to primary school. As a result, the relationships and practices that occur between settings and schools are happening informally and at a local level. Practices are very much dependent on both teachers' priorities and the proximity of settings. This was clear in the data generated.

As with previous research conducted in the Irish context, findings here clearly demonstrate the need for greater collaboration and continuity between early years settings and primary schools to better facilitate school readiness and seamless transitions (O'Kane and Murphy, 2016; Ring *et al.*, 2017).

It is therefore recommended that a more co-ordinated approach to school readiness be implemented and that a national policy on transitioning be introduced, advocating for improved collaboration between early years' settings and schools. Also, to ensure improved pedagogical continuity, it is recommended that Aistear (NCCA, 2009) become a more prominent feature of the junior school curriculum, and both teachers and EYPs be offered appropriate support and training to ensure effective implementation of same.

Theme 3 – Ready Families
Participants were also asked about the significance of families in 'school readiness'. Here, the EYPs were of the general view that parents have a significant responsibility in preparing children for school.

EYPs felt that they played an important role in helping parents understand the different developmental stages of children and what is perceived to be important in readying children for the transition. EYPs also noted their remit in informing parents of the important role they can play in delivering on many of the objectives of Aistear's communication, identity and belonging, exploring, and thinking and wellbeing themes. Participants identified activities that they felt were important for parents to engage in with children to facilitate readiness for school. These included, for example, reading, cooking, singing, doing puzzles, building blocks, spending time together, and teaching the children how to share and take turns.

> *'Some parents don't realise that they need to be doing these things at home too, so it's good that we can encourage them and explain to them the importance of their involvement in getting the child ready for school'* (P08).

The consensus was that a child's readiness for school was deeply influenced by the attitudes and involvement of parents in the transition process and the preparation for same.

Workshops, open days, parent-teacher meetings and play dates were identified as essential to ensuring the involvement of parents.

> *'I know a lot of our parents come in and say, 'What should I be doing with my child every day?' Sometimes we talk about that in our open day, whenever the child is enrolling'* (P05).

In general, findings resonate with previous accounts (Niklas *et al.*, 2018; McGettigan & Gray, 2012; Ring *et al.*, 2017), that parental attitudes, as well as meaningful parental involvement are key in supporting the ready family dimension of school readiness. Findings here were encouraging as all EYPs reported that they were positively engaged with parental partnership and prioritised the fostering of strong and supportive relationships with parents. In summary, EYPs' practices were very much in line with their beliefs about the importance of working collaboratively with parents to support children's transitions.

The development of a series of information booklets on the features of holistic and inclusive interpretations of school readiness that can be shared with parents to support them in preparing their children for school may be useful here. Furthermore, it was recommended that EYPs be fully supported by Government to access training and financial supports to further develop their partnership practices with both parents and schools.

Conclusions

School readiness and transitions are interpreted by EYPs as complex and multi-faceted constructs, which in turn shape how they engage with their role in preparing children for the transition to primary school. This complexity requires that all stakeholders involved in the process of supporting children's readiness for school must work collaboratively to arrive at a shared and mutually agreed-upon definition of 'school readiness' before more effective child and family-centred practices can be developed in this regard.

Given the small scale and the limited sample size of the present study, results should be interpreted with caution. Whilst generalisability to other national or international early years contexts is not possible, nonetheless, the outcomes provide much food for reflection and discussion regarding the role of the EYP in the transition process, guidelines for best practice and avenues for further research and exploration.

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The Lost Art of Storytelling: To what extent do early years practitioners value storytelling as a medium for early literacy development

by Laura Maher

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the lost art of storytelling. This research study is based in the United Kingdom (UK) and focuses on the extent to which early years practitioners value storytelling as a medium for early literacy development. A qualitative multimethod research approach has been taken to gather first-hand information from forty early years practitioners based around their experiences, perspectives and understanding of storytelling. Through the process of thematic analysis, it has been found that the understanding of an emergent approach, the implementation of formal literacy instruction and a practitioner's confidence in the storytelling process have surfaced as key areas of concern. Research has found that each of these areas are linked to the level of professional development a practitioner holds and barriers such as time constraints, paper-work and practitioner confidence.

Introduction/Aim

Literacy is often seen as the process of learning to read and write. The part storytelling plays in this process is not always given the focus it should, in family life or in educational settings (Bruce et al, 2020). According to Kaderavek and Justice (2002) storytelling is one of the most researched methods for developing children's communication, language and literacy skills, yet research has shown it is not always seen as an activity of educational value (Myers, 1990). The aim of this study is to explore the extent to which early years practitioners in the United Kingdom value storytelling as a medium for early literacy development.

Literature review

Storytelling is our most natural form of communication (Nutbrown, 2011). It is an age-old way for children and adults to learn about themselves, share experiences, establish relationships and make sense of the world. Engaging in meaningful storytelling activities can encourage even the most reluctant reader and writer (Miller and Pennycuff, 2008). Furthermore, research has shown that the most effective way of developing literacy skills in children is through social interaction and collaboration with others (Nutbrown, 2012). This coincides with the work of Vygotsky (1978) and his concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). He believed that children's knowledge and language can be scaffolded with the support of a more knowledgeable other - adult or child.

Effective storytelling relies on both the teller and the listener as it correlates with the social aspect of language development. Bruner's (1960) social interactionist view states that children acquire language (their mother tongue) through the support of a network of people who are closest to the child, also known as the Language Acquisition Support System (LASS). The importance of hearing and reading stories as a socially created and interactive activity has been well-documented; many early years educators and researchers believe that children

make significant progress in all areas of their development through these meaningful and enjoyable experiences (Kaderavek and Justice, 2002; NCCA, 2009; French 2012).

Shared reading promotes phonological awareness, oral language and print awareness in children, three important elements of emergent literacy (Nutbrown and Clough, 2014). Clay (1991) believes that emergent literacy should be treated as a developmental continuum. It is a process in which the skills, knowledge and attitudes that are precursors to reading and writing are nurtured and supported from six months to school age (Palaiologou, 2016). However, there is a consistent pressure placed on practitioners to have their pre-school children able to read, recite and sound out the alphabet as well as write their own names before starting primary school (Brodrova, 2008; Cremlin, *et al*, 2016).

According to French (2012) although important for literacy development, practitioners do not need to be concerned with the teaching of phonics or formal writing in the early years but due to pressure, Whitehead (2007) notes how emergent literacy techniques such as shared reading, mark-making and nursery rhyme knowledge are being ignored in favour of a more formal approach.

Research has shown that documents such as Bold Beginnings (Office for Standards in Education, 2017) encourage practitioners to take on a more formal approach to literacy as a way of preparing children for entry into the National Curriculum. The formalisation of early years is an ongoing debate of developmentally appropriate practice and what 'school readiness' should actually look like (Palaiologou, 2016). According to Nutbrown (2012), the lack of practitioner knowledge and understanding surrounding literacy development can be a factor in the continuing implementation of formal teaching in an early years classroom. This can often lead to practitioners finding the storytelling process time consuming, hard to document and believe it holds little educational value against more formal teaching methods of literacy learning.

Methodology

The data for this small-scale qualitative research study was successfully collected with the help and participation of ten early years practitioners working in a nursery in Warwickshire, England. It is a sessional service for children aged between two and five years. Each staff member gave consent to filling in a questionnaire based around their knowledge, experience and opinion of storytelling and early literacy development. Three of those staff members gave their consent to be observed during their story telling session. This enabled the researcher to observe the interactions, relationships, and storytelling skills of each practitioner. To gain an alternative perspective on the school's approach to storytelling, the nursery school's lead practitioner was also interviewed.

Outside of the nursery setting, an online survey based around storytelling experience and knowledge was put forward to thirty individual early years practitioners currently working in the field of Early Education. These participants varied in qualification and experience, each based in a different early years setting.

This qualitative multimethod research study sought to understand and portray the participant's experiences, perspectives and understanding of storytelling as an effective medium for early literacy development (Cohen *et al*, 2018). According to Dewey (1933, p.9) *'we do not learn from experience; we learn from reflecting on experience'.* This study has taken on an interpretivist action research methodology due to the reflective nature of the topic. The actions, intentions and reflective experiences of each early years practitioner has been the

main focus of data collection. In addition to this, the use of Kemmis and McTaggart's (2000) action research cycle has allowed the researcher to effectively plan, observe and reflect on the methods used for data collection as well as continuously revise the studies ethical protocol.

Cohen, et al (2018) believe an important aspect of qualitative research is being able to understand a certain situation or element of practice through the eyes of the research participant. Through the use of qualitative methods such as questionnaires, surveys, interviews and observations, first-hand information was gathered from practitioners currently working in the field of early education. This has been invaluable for gaining multiple perspectives and interpretations on the topic of storytelling as well insight and understanding into their individual practice (Robert-Holmes, 2014).

By comparing a variety of different experiences, opinions, qualifications, values and beliefs it has increased this study's validity through the process of triangulation (Cohen, *et al*, 2018). Furthermore, each participant was given a detailed explanation of the data collection process to ensure transparency; thus, contributing to the reliability of the research study.

Ethical considerations

According to Cavan, (1977, p. 180) ethics is *'a matter of principled sensitivity to the rights of others'.* The ethical considerations for this study have not been looked upon as a one-time event. They have been treated as a continuous process, regularly reflected upon to preserve the rights, dignity and confidentiality of each participant (Cohen, et al, 2018). This correlates with the work of Schonfeld (2015) and how he believed that reflecting on every aspect of your pedagogy, practice and ethical conduct is the only way to develop skills in self-awareness, analysis and evaluation, critical for the research process. Although this study was guided by the British Educational Research Associations (BERA, 2011) ethical code of conduct as well as the European Early Childhood Education Research Associations (EECERA, 2014) code of ethical conduct, it must be acknowledged that there is no code of practice that can resolve every problem (Cohen, et al, 2018). It is important for the researcher to be guided by their own personal code of ethics as well as using these documents as a guide.

A written letter was sent to the head teacher at the nursery school outlining the research aims and methods. Staff were given a copy of this information sheet which detailed the purpose of the research study and a consent form to participate in questionnaires, observation and interviews. It was important that the practitioner's right not to participate was clearly stated as well as their right to withdraw from the research process at any given time. Participants were also continually made aware of their right to privacy, confidentiality and anonymity during the data collection process (BERA, 2011). The same method was used for the practitioners who gave their consent to filling in an online survey on their experience of storytelling and early literacy. Nutbrown and Clough (2007) point out how the ethical implications and demands of internet research do not differ from face-to-face interactions. A researcher's ethical considerations will always be the starting point for procuring a value base which ensures that all data is collected with moral integrity. This is central to a researcher's methodology (Nutbrown and Clough, 2007).

Main findings and implications for practice and policy

Thematic coding was the method of analysis chosen for this research study due to its flexible nature (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic coding allowed the researcher to identify and interpret patterns, group together repeated information and consider major themes which presented themselves in the data collected (Robert-Holmes, 2014). Four key themes emerged through this process: emergent literacy, the impact formal teaching has on implementing

an emergent approach, training and qualifications, and the barriers to using storytelling as a medium for early literacy development.

The concept of emergent literacy has become a focus for early years researchers and policy makers. They outline the importance of implementing an emergent approach which supports and nurtures the precursors to reading and writing, such as phonological awareness, oral language and print awareness; three important elements of storytelling (NCCA, 2009; DfE, 2017; Palaiolgou, 2016). However, the data collected for this research has shown how even though practitioners were aware of the term emergent literacy and knew what it was on paper, their transfer of theory to practice was lacking. Each of the ten staff members rated storytelling/shared reading as one of the most important aspects of literacy development for children, yet they all mentioned only reading to their children once a day as a group, on average.

The practitioners' often encouraged children to be active participants in their own learning through the independent use of books and mark marking materials. However, the opportunity for children to engage in shared reading with staff and interact in hands-on experiences using mark making materials with support from the practitioner was not always present in the classroom environment. This, according to the interviewed nursery lead, was mainly due to time constraints and paperwork demands. Observations of the practitioners' storytelling sessions revealed that the children are given a short 20-minute adult led session. This allowed the practitioners' enough time to slowly read through the story, ask the children questions and challenge their problem-solving skills. It did not however allow the children to tell a related story, ask questions or engage in conversation outside of the topic. One of the practitioners frequently reminded the children that they did not have enough time and that they could tell their stories afterwards. Through informal conversation, this practitioner mentioned how the time constraints of this activity limited her interactions with the children. Additionally, she also stated that her confidence in her ability to make her storytelling sessions more meaningful have improved through literacy workshops she attended over the past year.

Interestingly, from the data collected, the practitioners who held a degree in early childhood education believed in an emergent approach to literacy learning while the practitioners who held a lower qualification believed in the importance of offering the child a mix of formal and informal teaching. Although designed to support practitioners, documents such as *The Early Years Foundation Stage* (DfE, 2017), *Letters and Sounds* (PNS, 2006) and *Bold Beginnings* (OFSTED, 2017) are completely open to interpretation. The successful understanding of curriculum is completely dependent on teacher knowledge, practice and interactions (Nutbrown, 2012) which can, unfortunately, lead to a disparity in the literacy learning opportunities afforded to children in an early years setting.

According to the participants, one of the main barriers in using storytelling as a medium for early literacy development was confidence. 43% of the online survey participants believed that a lack of confidence in their ability to implement high quality storytelling experiences, was the main reason they avoided the activity. One practitioner said they did not enjoy storytelling and therefore implemented it as little as possible. It is important to mention given the previous information about training and qualifications that this practitioner held an NVQ Level 2 in Early Childhood Education. According to French (2012) without the knowledge, experience and understanding of why it is important to be a good storyteller, this seemingly enjoyable and easy process can induce a lot of fear and dread in some practitioners.

Conclusion

It is evident from the data collected that the understanding of an emergent approach to literacy learning, the teaching of formal reading and writing in an early years' environment and the concerns surrounding the practitioner's ability to effectively tell a story are inextricably linked to the level of qualification a practitioner holds.

Although Bruce *et al* (2020) state it is essential for an early years setting to have an experienced and educated team to fully understand the value of storytelling as a medium for early literacy development in children, barriers such as time constraints and paperwork demands are still a major issue for most early years practitioners. Research has shown how these barriers have impacted greatly on the practitioner's ability to participate in shared reading (French, 2012). Even when time was allocated to an adult-led storytelling session, opportunities for further learning, conversation and gaining knowledge of children's interests had been lost. A practitioner's ability to transfer theory to practice is an essential part of implementing high quality learning experiences for children. According to the data collected, the majority of practitioners knew on paper what it was to carry out an emergent approach. However, through observation, the transfer of this knowledge into practice was not always present. Furthermore, a practitioner's confidence in their storytelling skills came to the forefront as a challenge when participating in shared or group reading. While some practitioners did not feel comfortable changing their voices, creating suspense through dramatic pause or deviating away from the text, others simply did not have the time to give to the creative process.

Research for this small-scale study has shown it is only when practitioners are equipped with the knowledge and understanding of why shared reading is a powerful tool for literacy development, will we see storytelling being utilised as an activity of educational value.

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"I like playing with pretend light-up unicorns": The rights-based and democratic practice found in home-based childcare settings

by Michelle Lehane

Keywords: Rights-based | Democratic | Individualised play experiences

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Abstract
This small-scale research study was conducted in urban childminding settings in the southwest of Ireland. While childminding is the preferred childcare option for parents in Ireland (CSO, 2017), most childminders are not registered and therefore not regulated or quality assured (DCYA, 2019a) and little is known about the play experiences of children in these settings.

This study aimed to answer the research question, 'what are the play experiences of children in home-based childcare settings', as part of an MA postgraduate degree with NUI Galway. The objectives involved understanding the perspectives and play experiences of children and childminders, how these are supported, and the identification of factors that support childminders' play provision. A qualitative multi-method study was undertaken with the informed consent of parents and five childminders, and the informed assent of eleven children in their care.

The research findings indicated that the individual preferences of children, pretend light-up unicorns, climbing trees, soccer in a nearby green area, ex the family dog, pirate ships, dolls, cycling with bikes from home, hurling, board games and Lego, were supported by childminders and parents. This formed the basis of the rights-based democratic practice provided by childminders and enjoyed by children.

Introduction
There are an estimated 35,000 childminders in Ireland, but less than 100 are registered (O'Regan, Halpenny& Hayes, 2019) and little is known about the play experiences of children in these settings. The research question for this study is, 'what are the play experiences of children in home-based childcare settings?'. The aim was to create new knowledge on the play experiences of children within these childcare settings. The objectives of the research were:
- to explore the perspectives of children and childminders on the play experiences of children;
- to understand how childminders provide appropriate play opportunities and support the play preferences of children; and
- to identify the factors or supports needed in facilitating the play experiences of children.

Literature review
While in general, regulated home-based childcare does not represent a significant proportion of childcare provision within Europe, in France, regulated home-based provision is the main source of childcare for children under 3 years old (Eurydice, 2019). In Ireland, the

National Action Plan for Childminding (DCEDIY, 2021), plans to bring a mostly unregulated childminding sector, into mainstream childcare regulation and State support by 2028. This plan recognises and values quality childminding and suggests that consistency of carer and a low child-adult ratio can support positive outcomes for children.

Children in Ireland aged eight to twelve years old, have voted overwhelmingly for after-school care at home or in home-based childcare and a survey of parents showed that over 93% of parents were satisfied with their childminder (Working Group on Reforms and Supports for the Childminding Sector, 2018). Each home-based childcare setting is unique and so too is each family, allowing parents to choose a setting in line with their own home culture (Working Group on Reforms and Supports for the Childminding Sector, 2018). Home settings are seen "as the next best alternative to children being in their own homes" (Working Group on Reforms and Supports for the Childminding Sector, 2018, p.5).

O'Regan, Halpenny and Hayes (2019) found that childminders and parents ranked the relationship between the childminder and child as being the most important in terms of a high-quality childminding service. Sensitive and responsive relationships can facilitate the development of democratic practice where adults and children co-construct meanings together (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence 2006). A key Government principle is for early childhood to be valued and supported and the *First 5* (DCYA, 2019b, p.28) early years strategy specifies 'positive play-based early learning' as a key goal. Children have a right to play, to be involved in decision making about their play, and play is essential to children's health and wellbeing (Lester & Russell, 2010). Young children's learning and development is strongly associated with play (NCCA, 2009) and play is linked with wellbeing as it can be "a source of joy and fulfilment for the child" (CECDE 2006, p. 9).

However, Ang, Brooker and Stephen (2017) found that there is no agreed definition of 'quality' within the childminding sector and gaps in knowledge exist around the quality of provision in home-based childcare, and as a result, little is known about the play experiences of children in these settings.

The Socio-Cultural Influences on Children's Play

Socio-cultural theories of learning recognise how children's understandings and play experiences are influenced by the relationships they have with others. The socio-cultural process of learning and development was emphasised by Vygotsky (1978) and Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) highlights the importance of relationships and proximal processes involving the child's interactions with their immediate environment. It is the responsibility of adults to recognise the importance of play to children and to promote and protect the environment that supports it (Lester & Russell 2010).

Methodology

This small scale, participatory research involves a qualitative mixed method study of childminders and children in their care. The study included semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews with childminders. A registered childminder, a voluntary notified childminder and 3 unregistered childminders (minding a maximum of 3 children) consented to participate. No lists are available of unregistered childminders, which makes this group hard to reach.

Convenience sampling was used to recruit 11 children attending the participating childminders' homes and three unregistered childminders. A 'purposeful random sample' process (Quinn Patton, 2002, p. 240) was used to recruit the registered and voluntary notified

childminders, from Tusla, the Child and Family Agency's list of registered childminders and Clare County Childcare Committee's list of notified childminders.

The study was informed by the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss 2017) which seeks out the opinions of children and views young children as experts in their own lives, as skilful communicators, as rights holders and as meaning-makers. A social constructionist perspective was taken by the researcher where meanings and understandings originate in social interactions (Lock & Strong, 2010) and a relaxed playful atmosphere was maintained during data collection. The children were offered a choice in the data collection methods (Table 1) with 'story telling' and a 'conversation', also chosen by two settings.

Child Participants	Child-led tour (Audio-recorded Field notes)	Art Activity (Field notes and photographs of artwork)	Conversation (Audio-recorded and Field notes)
Setting 1 John- age 7 Jim- age 7 Mary- age 3	Researcher shown the playroom & toy press	Drawings and stickers	
Setting 2 Fiona- age 3 Tara- age 4 Emma- age 4	Researcher shown the sun room/ playroom & toys and bikes outdoors	Painting, stickers and drawing	
Setting 3 Luke- age 9			Conversation
Setting 4 Paddy- age 2yrs &10 months Eli- age 4 Darragh- age 4 Clara- age 5	Researcher shown playroom and hall Story-telling also chosen	Drawings and stickers	
Setting 5 No participating children			

Table 1. Participation in research activities

These activities allowed the children to express their play preferences, both verbally and non-verbally. Thematic analysis was used for identifying, analysing, and reporting themes within the data, based on the objectives of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethical Considerations
Informed consent was obtained from childminders and parents. On-going informed assent was sought from the children, and they were advised that they could stop at any time. The wellbeing of the children was a priority for the researcher and the childminders during the collection of data. All data is stored securely, no identifying data was used, and pseudonyms are used to protect the child's identity. Full ethical approval was granted from NUI Galway prior to starting the research. Ethical practice was seen as an ongoing process of questioning, acting, reflecting and making necessary changes to accommodate the wellbeing of the children (Greene & Hogan, 2005).

Main Findings
Key themes emerged from the data which included:
- Individual play choices of children
- Providing for risks involved in play

- The influence of democratic practice on the play experiences of children
- Support for childminders.

Individual play choices of children

The children and childminders indicated that a wide range of interests and play experiences were facilitated within the settings. While the individual preferences were supported, each activity involved playing with other children or with the childminders, and this facilitated sociocultural learning through play. Positive dispositions of responsiveness, curiosity, persistence, concentration and engaged activity (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) were noted during the research activities.

In **setting 1**, John and Jim "*only play football*" according to John but they did admit to playing board games and skipping. Mary liked playing with Rex [the dog], the childminder's Labrador, trucks and cars and a house that could be built. Childminder 1 spoke about how John and Jim, "*live in those trees*" near her house and how they play soccer with a large group of boys in the neighbourhood with, "*Rex chasing them up and down*".

In **setting 2**, Tara, Emma and Fiona enjoyed the dolls and "*pretend light-up unicorns*", that could talk. Emma talked about having her "*own unicorn at home that lights up*". The girls were 'valued, respected, empowered, cared for, and included' (NCCA, 2009, p.16) when their individual interests were included in the setting.

In **setting 3**, Luke played soccer in the garden and played with friends or played board games with the childminder and Luke claimed he would "*always win*".

In **setting 4**, Clara liked to play with armies and dolls. When asked what he liked to play with, Darragh said, "*I like everything*" and showed the researcher a tepee, or quiet space, where he liked to play. Eli played with cars and Paddy constructed a tower with Lego.

In **setting 5**, the childminder talked about playing ball with the baby and how he "*loves flinging it*".

Providing for risks involved in play

Settings 1, 2 and 4 encouraged or allowed play that involved risks while for setting 3 and 5 certain play was stopped.

Childminder 3 did not allow hurling while childminder 4 actively encouraged hurling; "*we are big GAA people.. so every child here has their own hurley*".

Figure 3: Imaginary Danger; setting 4

Scooters were discouraged by childminder 3, while childminder 2 provided scooters for the preschool girls.

The preschool girls in setting 2, had a *"friendly monster ... he's not real, he's only a toy",* and *"a pirate ship"* with *"cannonballs"* which made gun fire noises when Fiona pressed a button. Clara in setting 4, read "Goldilocks and the Three Bears", in a manner that highlighted the imaginary danger Goldilocks faced. Imaginary danger was a theme found in the artwork, storytelling and games that the children played.

While childminder 1 was concerned for the children's safety indoors, she understood that the children liked running, *"that would be crazy if Tusla came in and told me the kids couldn't run around everywhere downstairs".*

Childminder 1 believed that childminding was about being in a home setting and limiting the children's movement around the house meant that *"it's no longer a home setting"* for the children. This suggests that the childminder supported the children's playful interactions and engagement with their environment and facilitated the proximal processes of development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006).

Play and democratic practice

The play experiences offered in each home reflected the democratic practice of the childminders, where choices and opinions were facilitated and respected. All the childminders supported the child's right to play and to decide what they wanted to play with. Childminder 5 said, *"he just adores music which is brilliant, and we play a good bit of music".* This childminder believed, *"You work with the parent, and you work with the child and you do it their way".*

Childminder 4 recognised the value of facilitating the freedom of expression and decisions made by the child during play : *"..sometimes he has a difficult weekend,.. and you'll hear that in the play, so I think it's very important for kids to be allowed to play.. and free play is very important, and choice".*

Choices and creativity in artwork from setting 4:
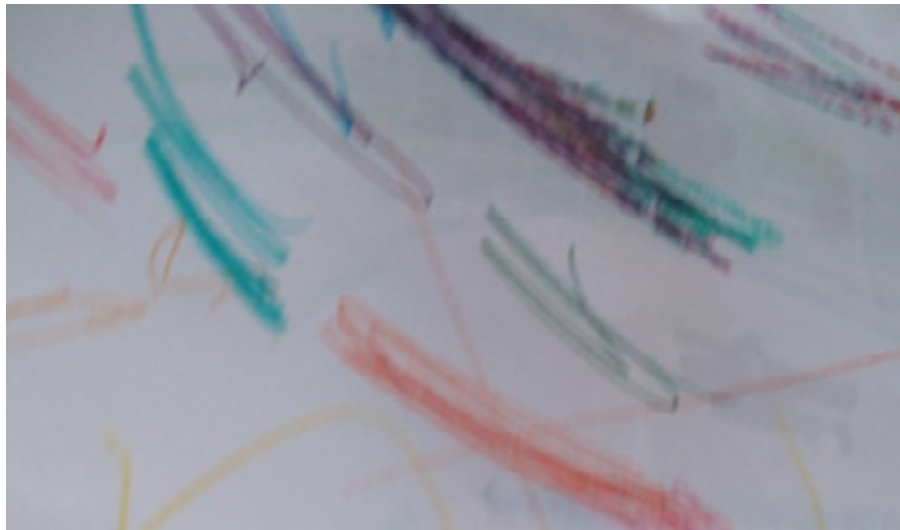
Figure 6: Colour choices in art

Childminder 2 incorporated each child's home culture into her own home environment: *"they have all brought their bikes from home".* This childminder's democratic practice supported the interests of the children, which blurred the boundaries between home and setting, for the benefit of the children.

Support for childminders

When asked about Government support for childminders, four of the five childminders equated the word 'support' with childminders not being able to do their job. Childminder 4 interpreted 'support', to be *"a suggestion that childminders needed support in their work",* which this childminder found *"quite insulting".* Childminder 4 stated, *"respect is what we need and what we deserve".*

Childminder 3 did not think she needed support: *"...I had reared my own children"* while Childminder 5 said, *"we have this training, we know what we are doing".*

Childminder 1 appeared suspicious of Government support, saying *"our homes are not going to be turned into creches"* and also *"it's a family home and it'll remain a family home".* The autonomy to make decisions about their family homes and consequently the play environments of children appears important to these childminders.

Limitations

This research study reflects the views of five childminding settings and therefore the views cannot be generalised for all childminders or children in their setting. The researcher had previously been a childminder and while two of the childminders were known to the researcher, each participant was asked the same questions. Questions to clarify the participant's answers were asked of all participants. Interviews were conducted in the childminder's home so each childminder could feel relaxed.

Conclusion

Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2006) argue in favour of democratic practice where adults and children co-construct meanings together. The authors suggest that the discourse of 'meaning making' can construct and deepen our understanding of the early childhood settings. The research findings indicated that the play experiences of children were individualised, rather than standardised, which formed the basis of the rights-based democratic practice provided by childminders and enjoyed by children. The findings demonstrate how home-based

childcare can be "the next best alternative to children being in their own homes" (Working Group on Reforms and Supports for the Childminding Sector, 2018, p.5), as evidenced by Rex, the family dog, being valued in setting 1 and bikes from home *and* "pretend light-up unicorns" being included into the childminder's family home in setting 2. It is recommended here that we think beyond standardisation of practice towards an individualised rights-based and democratic practice, where play, choice and provision are co-constructed between families.

It is further recommended that childminding in Ireland be protected and supported. Democratic practice demands that we listen to and include the concerns of childminders parents and children in any changes proposed in the regulation of childminders in Ireland. Childminder 1 said "*it's a family home and it'll remain a family home*". Any proposed changes must protect the rights of childminders to keep their family homes as family homes. It was the home environment, valued by parents and children, which supported the play experiences of children in this study and this home-from-home experience needs to be recognised, protected and supported.

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Professional Childminding in Ireland: ecocultural perspectives

by Dr Miriam O'Regan

Dr Miriam O'Regan: Originally qualified in secondary school teaching, Miriam O'Regan has worked in ECEC as both childminder advisor and community employment supervisor for childcare in Wicklow. Recently awarded her doctorate by Technological University Dublin for research into professional childminding in Ireland. Currently conducting postdoctoral research at the Centre for Psychology, Education and Emotional Intelligence, at TU Dublin.

Abstract

With so little research into childminding in Ireland, the overarching aim of this doctoral research was to document childminders' praxis and pedagogy and explore childminders' pathways to professionalism on the eve of mandatory regulation of childminding in Ireland, 2017-2020.   Research was conducted within the theoretical framework of Ecocultural Theory (ECT), against the backdrop of historical and current policy on childminding and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Ireland, Europe, and the US over the last 30 years. A mixed method approach used the Ecocultural Family Interview for Childminders (EFICh), with participants' photographs, case study surveys, researcher field notes, and holistic ratings (Tonyan, 2017). Findings showed significant professionalisation among study participants, with practices reflecting high levels of professionalism, prioritising close relationships with children and families in a home-from-home environment over qualifications, while balancing those relationships with the rigour required to direct a business. Two cultural models were described: a Close Relationship model of praxis and a Real-Life Learning model of pedagogy. Furthermore, the study highlighted unique features of professionalisation, which necessitate a different approach to childminding regulation, education, and support. It is vital to develop a sustainable regulatory and support system, which honours this particular form of ECEC.

Introduction

Childminding is widespread in Europe and North America, and childminders provide the majority of childcare for children under the age of three years in countries such as France, Belgium and Ireland (Eurydice, 2019). However, despite its widespread use, childminding has been relatively under-researched in scope and in focus (Ang, Brooker and Stephen, 2016). Little research has focussed on childminding in Ireland (Daly, 2010) or in Europe (Urban *et al.*, 2011), as the European Commission report on Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education [CoRe] highlighted: "In short, it is a largely undervalued workforce, all too often considered as 'what women naturally do', that deserves particular attention with regard to its professionalism…" (Urban et al., 2011, p. 14).

The aims of the research were:
- To interrogate the concept of professionalism from the perspective of childminders, and
- To explore the praxis and pedagogy of Irish childminders in order to inform the development of new childminding regulations and supports.

Literature Review

Landmark studies on childminding have identified indicators of quality practice in

childminding settings (Mooney and Statham, 2003), such as regulation (Davis *et al.*, 2012) education (Vandenbroeck and Bauters, 2017), employment status (Letablier and Fagnani, 2009), and support systems (Brooker, 2016). Nonetheless, most childminding in Europe and the USA operates in the informal sector (Child in Mind, 2017). Moreover, researchers consider that few quality measures have effectively captured the potential strengths of childminding (Bromer, McCabe and Porter, 2013), and research documenting childminding praxis and pedagogy on the ground is very rare (Freeman, 2011).

Childminding is the only form of home-based childcare considered part of the Irish Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system. Childminders minding four or five unrelated preschool children are subject to the Early Years Regulations (2016)(DCYA, 2016) as are childminders minding seven to 12 school-age children under the new School Age Register (DCYA, 2018). In practice, however, childminding is not fully included in the national ECEC system. In January 2021, only 77 childminders out of an estimated 15,000 (DCEDIY, 2021) were registered with Tusla, the national agency responsible for the regulation and inspection of ECEC. Existing legislation exempts most paid non-relative childminders from regulation, although professional childminders care for an estimated 10% of children in Ireland from infancy to 12 years of age (CSO, 2017). Currently, exempt childminders may care for three or fewer unrelated preschool children (DCYA, 2016) or up to six children of any age (DCYA, 2018b).

From 2002-2012, the National Childminding Initiative developed a system of support, training, and development for childminders within and outside the regulatory framework; unfortunately, this has been largely suspended due to funding cuts since 2012. However, under the new Childminding Action Plan (DCEDIY, 2021) the Irish government plans to implement mandatory registration and regulation of all paid childminding.

Theoretical framework

This study documented the daily routines of childminders within the framework of Ecocultural Theory (ECT). According to ECT, in order to thrive, childminders, parents and children will make adaptations in their niche in ways that are meaningful to them in terms of their beliefs and values; congruent with the needs and characteristics of family members and service users; and sustainable for relatively long periods of time, given the constraints and opportunities of all the families involved (Tonyan, 2015). From an ecocultural perspective, childminding can be understood as a home-based ecological niche in which the childminder works together with children, their own family, children's families, and assistants to negotiate the project of raising children. Since the culture of early care is not an abstract concept, but becomes visible in everyday activities (Rogoff *et al.*, 2005), ECT uses the lens of the daily routine in the niche in order to describe cultural models specific to the setting.

Methodology

The EFICh research instrument has four main components: first, a semi-structured, conversational interview; second, childminder photographs of their practice used as prompts in the interview, and third, researcher field notes of observations of the home and interactions between the childminder and the children. In addition, a background survey gathered information about the family's economic circumstances, the childminder's self-reported levels of agency, their education level, and views on parenting in early childhood.

Two visits were made to each setting: an initial visit to explain the research, deliver the background survey, and conduct a brief observation; at the second visit an EFICh interview of approximately 1-1.5 hours was conducted. Subsequently, the researcher completed holistic

ratings for each childminder based on what childminders valued, enacted, and evaluated in relation to four thematic areas: 1. Cultural Models, 2. Sustainability of Daily Routines, 3. Service Needs and Use, and 4. Quality Improvement, Advocacy and Complexity. High, Medium, or Low ratings were justified by supporting vignettes drawn from the field notes, interview, or background survey.

The data were coded for analysis using Dedoose®, a web-based application for analyzing mixed method research with text, photos, and spreadsheet data (Salmona, Lieber and Kaczynski, 2019). This allowed for a qualitative analytic process of structured discovery, identifying patterns through close, iterative listening, reading, and observing of the sample data, guided by project-specific questions (Weisner, 2014).

Study participants
In total, 17 childminders participated in this research: two were registered with Tusla, and 15 were members of Childminding Ireland. All participants were female, and over 70% (n=12) held at least the national standard qualification for centre-based ECEC practitioners, a 400-hour post-secondary certificate. In addition, nearly 30% (n=5) held qualifications at degree level in other disciplines, in line with the national average of 27% for 25-64 year-olds in 2018 (OECD, 2019).

Ethical considerations
This research was approved by the Ethics Committee of TU Dublin in accordance with its policies and procedures. All participants were given complete and accurate information regarding the background, nature, purpose, and outputs of the research to allow for informed consent to participate or withdraw at any stage. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed regarding any information disclosed; participants' names used in this article are fictional. No observations of individual children were conducted, and photographs used as prompts during interviews were shared with parental consent; no photos were retained for use by the researcher afterward.

Limitations of study
Caution should be exercised in applying the findings to Irish childminders in general. This investigation is the work of a sole researcher, and the possibility of interpretation bias must be acknowledged. Since the research was conducted with a small, self-selecting sample of professionalised childminders, it may reflect primarily the views of childminders who were more confident about coming forward to participate.

Findings
Two distinct cultural models were documented among childminders, namely, a Close Relationship model of praxis and a Real-Life Learning model of pedagogy. In addition, distinctive features of childminder professionalism were identified, balancing business and close relationships within a professional code of practice. Finally, an ecocultural view of childminder professionalisation was outlined.

The Close Relationship model
The most prevalent cultural model identified in this study was a Close Relationship model, similar to that identified in California by Tonyan (2017), with all 17 respondents scoring a HIGH rating. In this cultural model, the childminder's primary goal is for each child to feel loved and special. The childminder prioritises showing love and affection to children, interacting through play and conversation, and building relationships through these

interactions. Childminders value the strong relationships with children who are or have been in their care. In particular, analysis highlighted a value for long term, enduring relationships, and conceptualizing all those involved as extended family (O'Regan, Halpenny and Hayes, 2020).

The Real-Life Learning model
Another key finding was a cultural model of pedagogy, named in participants' own words as "Real-Life Learning". Whereas most participants were rated Low on the School Readiness model identified by Tonyan (2017), the majority of respondents (16/17) were rated High on the Real-Life Learning model. In this cultural model, the primary goal is to explore learning opportunities presented by everyday experiences as they arise, reminiscent of Hayes' nurturing pedagogy (Hayes and Kernan, 2008) and the flexible, child-led, emergent curriculum of Reggio Emilia (Freeman, 2011). The childminder prioritises relationship-driven, child-led learning mediated through everyday experiences both in an enriched home environment and out in the community. The freedom of the low-stress, home-from-home environment for children was emphasised, as was the value of the mixed age groups, with siblings kept together, along with flexible, frequent outings in the community.

Ecocultural views of childminder professionalism and professionalisation
Narratives highlighted childminders' agency and intentionality (Doherty et al., 2006), in running their professional services, and in maintaining professional business relationships with parents in parallel with close, loving relationships. A common code of conduct among childminders was identified, which valued trustworthiness, reliability, and flexibility as principles of professional practice in relation to client families.

Ecocultural research has also highlighted a distinctive process of childminder professionalisation (See Figure 1).
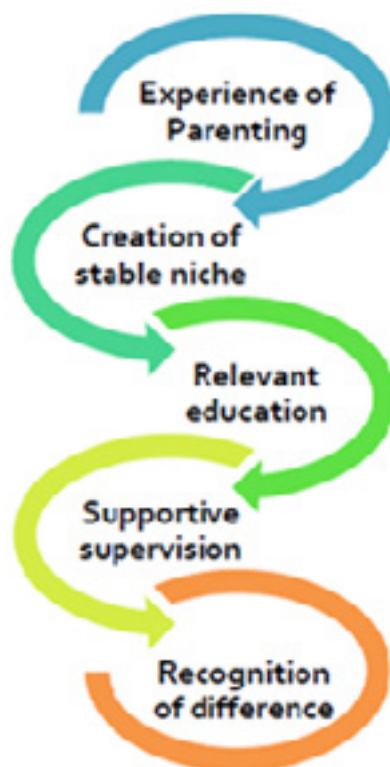

Figure 1: Professionalisation for childminders: An ecocultural view

The most common starting point for becoming a childminder was parenthood, not a career choice to train as an ECEC professional; in fact, most had pursued different careers previously. The main motivations for starting a childminding service were to care for their own children at home, and to earn an income to enable this. Thus, the primary goal was the creation of a stable family niche rooted in their values and beliefs, which would work within family resources and constraints, to meet the needs of their family members, as ECT proposes.

Secondly, participants, as adult learners, sought professional training which was relevant, 'just-in-time' education specific to childminding (Tonyan *et al.*, 2017, p. 39). Thirdly, given the professional love relationships with children and families, supportive supervision for lone childminders was considered preferable to, and a vital addition to, childminding inspections. Finally, childminders advocated for public recognition for the unique provision childminding offers children rather than pressure to conform to centre-based standards.

Conclusion

This fresh, ecocultural paradigm of professionalisation for childminders has shed light on the practice, pedagogy, and professional values of childminders in Ireland, a group that has been largely invisible in the research until now. Professionalised childminders in Ireland are open to increased inclusion in the national ECEC system, but such inclusion must be in the context of a tailored regulatory, education and support system, sensitive to the professional needs of childminders. In order to engage childminders, it is vital that any proposed regulatory system for childminding in Ireland honour its unique cultural models, its professionalism and process of professionalisation, so that 21st century childminding can thrive and continue to benefit the upcoming generation of young children and parents employed outside the home.

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Orientation Quality, Complexity and Social Media – Looking with a different lens

by Criona Blackburne

Dr. Criona Blackburne: Dr. Criona Blackburne has worked in education for over 20 years, initially as a secondary school teacher and in the early years sector for the last 5 years as an owner/manager, lecturer, student and as an early years specialist. She holds a BA, H. Dip in Ed., MA and EdD.

Abstract

Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has captured international interest as an instrument to respond to economic, political, and social objectives (UN, 2015). Consequently, policy focus internationally and in Ireland has moved from policy inactivity to hyperactivity, with a focus on the structures and processes of quality development (Urban, 2018). This paper presents findings from a doctoral thesis which sought to identify the implications of policies emerging from the Quality Agenda in Ireland on practice. Online research was utilised using a survey hosted by Survey Monkey and an online forum using a secret Facebook Group. An additional dimension included an interview with a key policymaker from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). Arising from the overarching findings, this paper argues that within Ireland's response to quality improvement, orientation quality, which focuses on the critical role that the wellbeing, values, and attitudes of the educator has on practice, has been overlooked and needs to be addressed to realise quality in early childhood, complexity needs to be embraced and utilising social media by government extended for more effective consultation (Blackburne, 2020).

Introduction

There is global consensus that quality is critical not only for the wellbeing of children, but in responding to a myriad of social, political, and economic objectives (UN, 2015). Urban (2018, p.3) argues that 'access to high quality' ECEC is viewed internationally as 'one of the most effective policy tools' to 'impact both individual and collective wellbeing and educational achievement'. Governments internationally and in Ireland have thus exponentially increased investment in the structures, processes, and governance of early childhood to respond to three key drivers: access, affordability, and quality, with a recent focus on inclusion (Blackburne, 2020). Increasingly, the role of the educator is viewed in policy rhetoric as instrumental in delivering policy objectives and raising quality. This acceptance of the critical role the educator plays in the multiplicity of policy objectives has led to discourses on their capacity to fulfil policy expectations. These discourses shaping policy present many dichotomies, such as valuing the role of the educator, yet paying limited attention to educators pay, conditions, or career paths. Graduate qualifications and reflective practices are encouraged, yet regulations have reduced autonomy and agency (ECI, 2020). This paper drawing from a doctoral thesis, sought to identify the implications of policies emerging from the Irish Quality Agenda on practice settings (Blackburne, 2020). The Quality Agenda was announced on the 7th of June 2013 by the then Minister for Children, Francis Fitzgerald, who explained it would be a 'multi-annual', comprehensive 'multi-faceted agenda' with investment increasing annually to raise standards, through registration, robust inspections and mentoring amongst other measures (Merrion Street, 2013). The thesis was primarily from educators' perspectives, but also included an interview with a key policymaker in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). The findings point to the need to place a

stronger focus on orientation quality, embrace complexity and extend consultation through Social Media Forums.

Rationale

Progressively, it is recognised that the role of the educator is instrumental in delivering quality and realising the potential of childhood (European Commission, 2021). O'Donoghue Hynes (2012) notes, however, that the voice of the educator remains alienated from policy development, as including their perspective is politically challenging. Moss (1994, p.4) notes that 'the power of different stakeholders' determines their influence. In this context, educators' influence is limited, despite government's articulated ambition to include all stakeholders. This research aspired to seek methods that would facilitate greater connectivity between the government and educators so that those who hold the practical knowledge of how policy transfers into practice can contribute more effectively to policy development. As Giroux (2003, p.96) argues, 'the public sphere' needs to be open to multiple perspectives where true democracy can take place and human potential realised.

Theoretical Framework

Complexity Theory was the underpinning framework for this research, which appreciates that systems do not exist in isolation, but are influenced by the local, national, and international contexts in which they are situated (Morrison, 2002). Complexity theory views systems as complex, dynamic, ever-evolving, and unpredictable (Pinar, 2012), reflective of the ECEC landscape internationally and in Ireland, which has been sculpted by a diverse array of stakeholders with varying visions regarding the purpose and function of the ECEC sector (Walsh, 2016).

This research gathered data from 114 participants with diverse roles, qualifications, and experience in an online survey. 17 participated in an online forum and a policymaker shared the government's perspective on current and future policy objectives. Early Childhood online Facebook forums was the primary means of inviting educators to participate in the research. While the diversity of participants provided 'a genesis of opportunity to open policy to multiple and dynamic evaluations', it also created challenges in developing a frame of reference to support and make meaning from the complex backdrop of opinions emerging from multiple positions, experiences, and values within the sector' (Blackburne, 2020, p.11). Complexity Theory provided a framework to create order amongst this disorder (Stacey et al., 2000), as it provides 'coherence, consistency, comprehensiveness, simplicity, explanatory and generalizable potential, and fecundity' (Morrison, 2002, p.1). These factors had particular relevance to this research, which sought to examine the impact of macro-policy on micro-practice through relational fields and contexts. This research encompassed the lenses of a heterogeneous sector and a policymaker yet operated within the constraints of needing to develop a clear concise vision within the challenges posed by an ever-changing political landscape.

Reflecting on Quality

The concept of quality is complex, subjective, socially constructed, and dependent on perspectives (Moss, 2015). Bertram et al. (2016, p.81) proposed that clear links exist between identifiable 'quality features and later learning outcomes', a view which has driven ECEC policy internationally. Ireland's Quality Agenda announced in 2013 forwarded an 8-point plan to raise standards, which included focus on Ireland's National Frameworks Aistear and Síolta, registration, qualifications, inspections, and the establishment of a mentoring service (Oireachtas, 2013). Policies emerging from this agenda have been rapid and intense focusing on structural and process elements of quality, which included to mention a few,

the formation of Tusla with responsibility for ensuring regulatory compliance, Better Start mentoring service, the Department of Education Inspections, 2016 regulations, the Quality Regulatory Framework (2018), registration of settings and mandatory minimum qualifications.

Within this discourse on quality development Orientation Quality has generally been invisible with limited resources referencing it. Orientation Quality focusses on 'teachers' pedagogical beliefs… their educational values, epistemological beliefs, attitudes' (Anders, 2015, p.8), which fundamentally are critical to the implementation of quality practices and responsive to the complexity, dynamism and diversity characteristic of ECEC. Orientation Quality requires a deeper focus within policies aimed at raising quality, where the educator's values and attitudes play a fundamental part in the implementation of policy in ECEC settings (Wall et al. 2015). Urban (2018, p.4), argued that ECEC is fundamentally 'a local practice' and the success of 'quality enhancing measures' are dependent on 'democratic debate' inclusive of all stakeholders.

Methodology

The methodology emerged in response to the overarching aims and objectives of this research and used an iterative design.
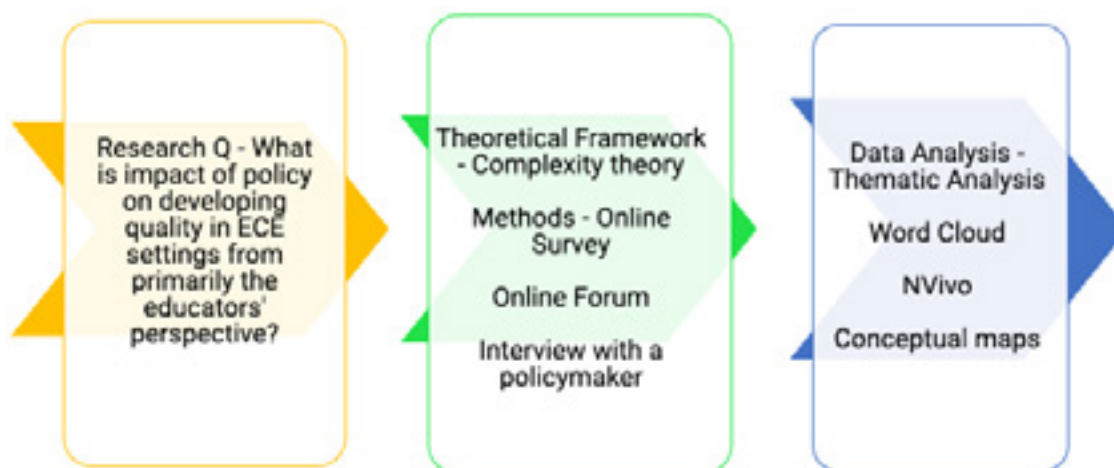

Figure 1: Research Design

The iterative design facilitated reflexivity throughout the research process and allowed data collection and analysis to occur simultaneously, allowing data inform the subsequent stages of the research process. As Figure 1 suggests, the research question was the key driver of the methodology and chosen methods, which were all situated within the overarching Complexity Theory Framework. The data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis, supported by the use of Word Cloud, NVivo and Conceptual Mapping.

The methodology had to respond to this transient policy context, divergent responses to policy initiatives and equally respond to the objectives of the research, which were framed by two key questions. The principal research question sought to explore educators' perspectives on how policy initiatives emerging since the announcement of the Quality Agenda in 2013 had been impacting on their practice and supporting them to raise standards. The second question arose from the overarching rationale, which was to bridge the gap between policy development where educators' influence was limited, and policy implementation where the educator was central. This led to the practical question 'How can ECEC educators' experience of policy at practice level be heard and influence the development of policy at design stage?

With the research focusing on the perceptions and experiences of educators and the policymaker, a qualitative-interpretive paradigm was the predominant approach.

Qualitative-interpretive research acknowledges that the research is inescapably connected to the researcher (Schwartz-Shea and Yannow, 2012). Acknowledging that the researcher is not neutral, a constant process of reflexivity was built into the methodology through the iterative research design. This design, as Srivastava and Hopwood (2009, p.77) argue, facilitated a 'process of continuous meaning-making' enabling 'progressive focusing' on future design through continual 'analysis processes' with each stage of the research design informing the next.

Phase 1 Data collection process - online survey
The online survey consisted of both quantitative and qualitative questions, disseminated through Survey Monkey which was shared on ECEC Facebook forums. The quantitative data facilitated participant profiling, overarching perspectives on the success of the Quality Agenda, specific policies and discourses influencing ECEC. The qualitative data enabled a deeper insight into how policy was impacting on practice and educators' perceptions on the factors required to raise quality.

Phase 2 – Online forum – Facebook Secret Group
The forum enabled deeper discussions among 17 participants on how policy impacted practice and garnered educators' responses to real-time policy developments garnered over the prolonged data collection period.

Phase 3 – Interview with a policymaker
The semi-structured interview with the policymaker occurred after data collection and analysis from the online methods was completed. This facilitated the opportunity to seek the policymaker's response to the findings and explore the intentions and rationale behind current and future-orientated policy.

Figure 2: Data collection process – iterative research design

Data analysis

Survey Monkey automatically organised the quantitative data into graphs. The qualitative data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis. The process of familiarisation and identifying initial codes was generated by Word Cloud. These were refined and verified using NVivo. Concept maps were subsequently utilised to create visualisations of the major themes and connections between them. This assisted the analysis and was used to present the findings.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations permeated all aspects of the research process, and all data was processed, stored, and discarded in line with GDPR (2018). Ethical approval was granted by the University of Sheffield.

Main findings and implications for practice and policy

The quantitative findings indicated satisfaction with the Quality Agenda, with 80 (71.43%) participants indicating quality had improved and 24 (21.43%) participants disagreeing. 8 (7.14%) had no opinion.
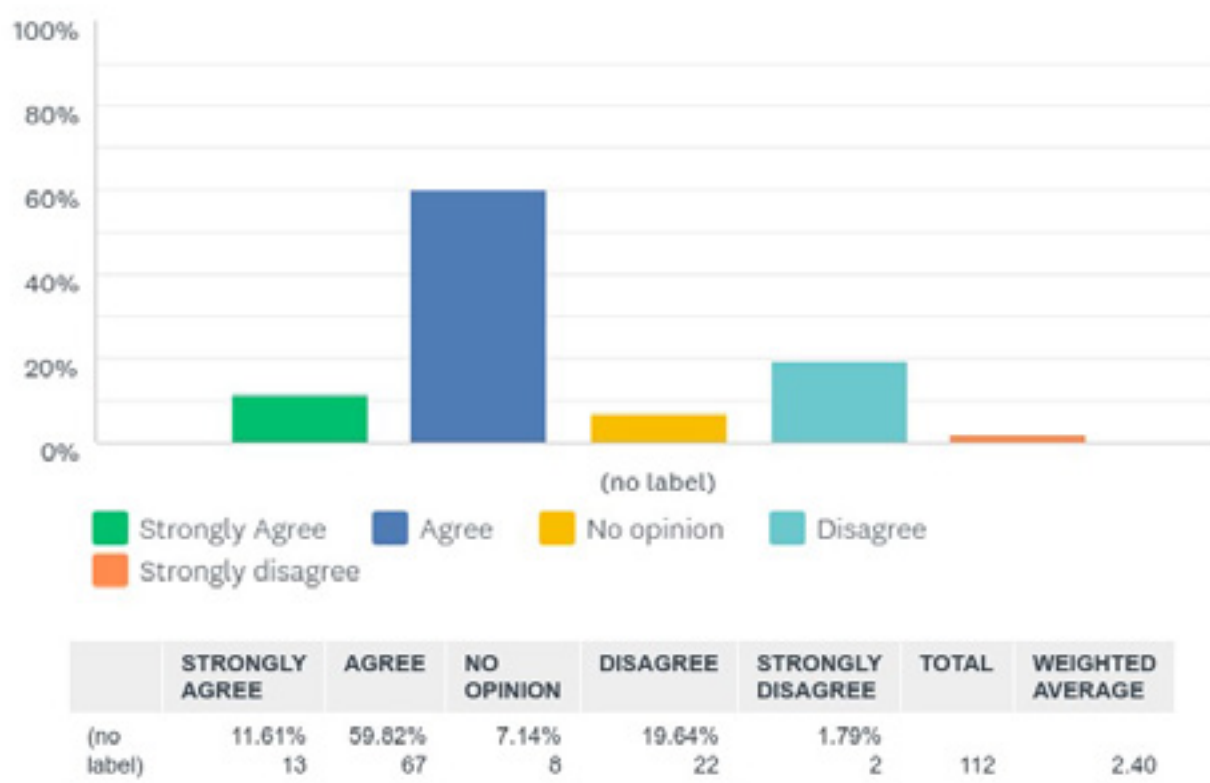

	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NO OPINION	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
(no label)	11.61% 13	59.82% 67	7.14% 8	19.64% 22	1.79% 2	112	2.40

Figure 3: Has the Quality Agenda improved quality in early childhood settings?

Qualitative data

The data indicated that Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and Higher Capitation were viewed as the most effective policies. The education-focused inspections were welcomed, however Tusla inspections received mixed reactions. Participants perceived inspections and regulations as essential yet articulated that they disempowered educators' ability to build their practice on their qualifications, experience, logic, and values. Findings from the educators and policymaker concurred that qualifications, CPD and leadership were core factors requiring policy focus. Aistear, Síolta, and support systems such as Better Start, and the County Childcare Committees (CCC) were considered effective in supporting quality development.

Leadership was raised by the educators and policymaker as requiring further focus. The business, corporate model of leadership was highlighted by some as the predominant model of ECEC delivery. Some participants argued this was not contradictory to quality development. Yet other participants forwarded that childcare led by 'business-headed shrewd entrepreneurs' prioritised profit and implemented business structures which disempowered their voices, ultimately compromising quality development. Quality leadership was viewed as critical where 'dedication, passion, innovation, commitment…vocation' and training were attributes required regardless of whether the setting private or publicly operated. The findings aligned with Penn (2018, 2019) who advised against an over-reliance on a corporate model of childcare provision for what she argued is primarily a profession of care and education, rather than a business.

The most prolific finding was the educators articulated need to be respected as professionals. Participants expressed that they were not valued as professionals, evidenced by limited consultation opportunities, a sense of disempowerment in the face of inspection, a societal view that qualifications were a mere means to exit the sector, overwhelming expectations, inadequate funding, poor pay, and conditions with limited incentive to achieve graduate status or remain in the sector. Resolving the issue of pay was viewed by educators and the policymaker as complex with solutions such as a Sectoral Employment Order (SEO) dependent on increased funding. The new funding mechanism promised under First 5 was viewed as a possible means to resolve these critical issues.

Limitations

The findings of this research represent data collected in 2019, ECEC policy continues to evolve relentlessly and frequently unpredictably in response to crisis, mainly COVID-19 and towards an increased interest on improving conditions and focusing on educators' wellbeing, which could not have been captured (OECD, 2021; DCEDIY, 2021). The findings which highlighted the need to respect educators as professionals remains current. The predominant recommendation to focus on Orientation Quality provides enhanced opportunities to realise to the current policy focus on valuing educators.

Conclusions

As stated in the Programme for Government (PfG) (2020, p. 6), Ireland is at a 'defining moment' politically and in terms of the future of the ECEC sector. It is therefore imperative that future policy development is inclusive of the voices of all stakeholders, particularly ECEC Educators. The current and previous government have articulated a strong commitment to reform not only to promote quality and improved outcomes for children, but to make working in early childhood an attractive career option. The PfG articulated support for the establishment of a Joint Labour Committee and 'the drawing up of an Employment Regulation Order' … 'to determine minimum rates of pay' and improved 'terms and conditions of employment' (PfG, 2020, p.81). This may respond to the issue of remuneration, which was a key issue highlighted in this research. However, this alone will not resolve the barriers negating quality development which are more complex, directing policy to be viewed from a complexity theory perspective which appreciates that the factors impacting on education systems are 'almost limitless' in 'scale' and 'interconnectedness' (Mason, 2016, p.37). Biesta (2016, p.203) posits that complexity theory opens new possibilities and facilitates a broader understanding of the issues impacting on practice, facilitating a move away from 'what works' discourse, towards policy development perceived as a '(complex) social reality constituted by the conscious acts of reflexive agents'.

This requires consulting collaboratively with all stakeholders, which led this research to seek

appropriate methods and to consider the power of social media, particularly Facebook as a platform for connectivity between the government and educators. This research aligns with the findings of Bertot et al. (2012), who highlighted social media as an effective forum for open governance and to facilitate interaction and connectivity with citizens. Utilizing social media innovatively with forums supported cost effective research, not constrained by time or geographical location.

Participants articulated their views effectively in the survey and online forum particularly expressing their need to be respected as professionals, which included calling for more consultative and collaborative processes, where educators are respected as experts in their own right. The policymaker indicated that educators were valued, yet participants indicated that pay and conditions, inadequate consultative processes, and overwhelming expectations with limited incentive to remain in the sector were not indicative of a valued workforce.

The PfG (2020, p.112) advocates for increased focus on wellbeing and democracy, which aligns with this research's argument that Orientation Quality must receive the same focus as structural and process quality. Orientation quality argues that the values, attitudes, and wellbeing of educators' impact directly on the experiences of children in setting. Jeon et al. (2018, p.53) state that professional engagement...job satisfaction and work commitment' are elements of orientation quality that are frequently overlooked in evaluating quality. Orientation Quality highlights the need to respect educators as professionals which aligns with the PfG (2020) argument for the need to measure citizens' wellbeing in more than just economic terms. This research recommends reflection on the unintended consequences of policy development, where the predominant focus has been on economic discourse. In related terms, it raises questions as to whether the predominant corporate model of leadership, with its foundations in business, is appropriate in the realm of ECEC or conducive to quality improvement. Ultimately, quality enhancements need to be consultative, collaborative, and inclusive, particularly of educators, whose values, attitudes, and experiences are critical to policy reform.

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Reflective Paper

The living theory of Symbolic Violence

by Racheal Govan

Racheal Govan: Racheal Govan began working in the sector in 2012, working nationally and internationally. I own two childcare services called Footprints Early Years, both located in Dublin 8. Parental partnership has always been a passion of mine. In completing my Master's in Maynooth University I based my thesis on the development of parental partnerships within my services.

The Role of Values in Supporting Social Justice in Early Childhood

Introduction

As a researcher/ educator, it is paramount to regularly reflect on your core values. This reflection allows you to recognise what values you hold and to reflect on biases and challenge your old ways of thinking (Gladas, 2017).

For my masters' research, I based my thesis on the development of parental partnerships within my services. My research found that even an inclusive early childhood teacher can enact social injustice by not reflecting continuously on their practices and educational environment. The tool identified within my research to combat this was to utilise parental partnership to engender social justice within the context of my services based on my core values, which I identified through reflection. The two values that stood out for me were social justice and parental partnership. I felt that these values were invaluable as a tool to help me support social justice within the educational context of the setting. I felt that this would enable me to empower parents and guardians to support their children's lifelong journey through education.

Methodology

During my master's research, I engaged in self-study action research, where the researcher analyses the story of their own journey of self-reflection and research on chosen topics (Feldman, 2004). This methodology supports teachers to acknowledge their core values (Glenn *et al*, 2012). It is imperative to align one's values to identify your core values which help support the direction of the area in which you will research (Aspers, 2019).

I was exposed to two theorists that transformed my practice as an early childhood teacher, Pierre Bourdieu (1997) and Jennifer Moon (2004). Bourdieu (1997) coined the term "symbolic violence", meaning how societal norms afforded different socio-classes different opportunities in life. His theory suggests that if you were from an affluent background, you would be afforded more options for education and ending up in a higher paid job as that would be the expectation of your societal class. Whereas, if you were from a disadvantaged background, you would not have the same educational opportunity based on the societal expectation and would end up with a lower-paid income, unless you acted out of your "class system" and acted like someone from an "upper class". I had always valued equality; however, exposure to Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence' (1997), and considering my research findings within this theory, identified that symbolic violence is very much a lived reality for a lot of the families in my settings.

I also engaged with Moon's (2004) reflective model and identified the importance of feelings and emotions having true representation in self-study action research. Moon

(2004) influenced me more as a researcher than an early childhood teacher as her theory acknowledged the recognition of the emotion of the researcher. I used this model for this reflective piece. I believe this brings authenticity to the research conducted on yourself in your chosen area.

What prompted the research

It is the responsibility of the educator to place importance on continuously engaging with improving oneself, striving to always be an informed educator. Values adapt over time, and since starting in the childcare sector I have come to identify and truly value the key role the parent plays in their child's lifelong education and development.

After being exposed to Bourdieu (1997), I realised his theory about social justice associated with the class system and education was a lived experience and true reality for the children within my setting. Given that both my services are based in what is considered 'disadvantaged areas', I recall feeling such sadness as their teacher. I saw their strengths and abilities, and how amazing they and their family were, but when the symbolic violence of societal expectations was enacted, it lowered their expectations of how far they can go in education and life.

If these children's societal journey remains the same, somewhere between primary and secondary school most of the children will realise that the odds are against them, and they should conform with social expectations to "stay in their own lane".

I wanted to know if as an early childhood teacher, I could do anything to combat this symbolic violence for the children within my setting.

I recall feeling overwhelmed very early in the research process. Early on I had identified the stark finding that only 10% of third-level students are from disadvantaged backgrounds (Higher Education Authority, 2019). Yet, Ireland ranked third out of the twenty-seven EU countries in education (PISA, 2019). I remember reading this statistic on several occasions because of my disbelief that it was a lived reality in 2019 in a developed country. I wanted to expose the flaws of the class system and educational system to help these children.

Through engaging with Jenny Moon's model (2004) of reflection and reflective writing, my self-reflection delved into another level that I have not reached before. Moon's (2004) model identifies different levels of reflections, with the first considered 'descriptive writing', to the fourth level of the model that leads to self-questioning, and for the reflector to consider their level of involvement of emotion during their reflection (Moon, 2004). This level of reflection delivered me to deeper levels of comprehension. It supported me to identify how I could scaffold parents to support them to understand their role as their child's life-long primary and natural educator (Bunreacht na hEireann, 1937).

This reflective practice informed me of how I felt as a researcher/educator of the injustice that is still very prevalent in the education system that children are exposed to today.

Findings

The educational service I currently work in was the chosen research site and is based in a disadvantaged, inner-city locality. This service has been running for just over two years now and is based within a community centre. The three teachers who work there all have diverse backgrounds, from ethnicity to socio-economic background. Having staff from alternative socio backgrounds and ethnicities, I felt was very beneficial to my research. This gave me

a more holistic insight into early childhood teachers' perspectives within the context of my services. The dynamic of both staff and area was important for me to reflect upon as I questioned if the service was not based in an area that is considered disadvantaged, would my findings have been similar.

In the context of my setting, I identified that the parents' hopes were that their children 'behaved well', that they did not get in 'trouble'. The conversations did not often query their child's academic abilities, mainly focusing on behavioural concerns. The children I educate are the living statistic that only 10% of third-level students are from disadvantaged backgrounds (Higher Education Authority, 2019).

I recall engaging in a reflective journal during my research, reflecting on a time when I managed a large service in what would have been considered an 'affluent area'. I remember the daily dialogue with that cohort of children's parents. Daily questions on how their child's linguistic abilities were developing, are they recognizing numbers? Are you educating in more than one language in the rooms?

These findings also led me to question why parents in my settings were lowering their child's future expectation to wanting to be a good "mammy or daddy" when they grow up, but there was no reference to them becoming a scientist, a doctor, a judge, or an astronaut. When this was teased out with the parents it was because they were trying to protect their children from being disappointed later in life as people from their backgrounds would not end up in these kinds of posts.

This finding highlighted to me that the children's lives were a living example of Bourdieu's (1997) theory. Between the reflections in my journal of my past experiences and identifying the lived experiences of the children within my current context, it led me to believe that the expectation placed on children from more disadvantaged backgrounds was to conform, and for children from affluent backgrounds to perform. This led me to question, how can I make a difference in my practice to engender social justice within my early years' service, using parental partnership as the tool. We have now developed a more integrated parental approach to the children's education within our early years setting. I have done this by engaging in continuous reflective practice on an individual and collaborative level and engaging in sessions with parents and teachers throughout the year. This supported the parents in identifying the paramount role they play in the life-long support for their child. It also supported their confidence and awareness of how important they are to combating social injustice for the next generation. Their role is identified at the highest form of legislation which states that parents are the primary, natural educators to their children, and this role should be respected (Bunreacht na hEireann, 1937).

Conclusion

I felt ashamed to be a part of a society where it is the accepted 'norm' that societal bias and class systems are just accepted and not challenged. That they are accepted is the embodiment of Bourdieu's (1997) theory of "symbolic violence".

Engaging with this research afforded me the opportunity to identify within my contexts the 'whys', to give me the opportunity to develop strategies to implement within my practice.

Overall, although this research has really supported me as an early years teacher and as a director of two early years services to challenge current biases and adapt my practices. Social justice has become one of my core values. This is an area that requires continuous self-

reflection.

However, on a national level, I hope that more work is engaged to bridge the socio-educational gap and to strive for equality in all educational stages.

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