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# Questions of Quality

Proceedings of a Conference on  
Defining, Assessing and Supporting Quality  
in Early Childhood Care and Education

Dublin Castle, September 23rd-25th 2004

Edited by Heino Schonfeld, Sharon O'Brien and Thomas Walsh



## Table of Contents

	Page No.
<b>Foreword</b>	
<i>Heino Schonfeld</i> .....	6
<b>Minister's Address</b>	
<i>Sile de Valera, Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science</i> .....	8
<b>Keynote Addresses</b>	
<hr/>	
<b>Structure and Stability of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale</b>	
<i>Richard Clifford</i> .....	12
<b>Questions of Quality: The Contribution of Research Evidence to Definitions of Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care Practice</b>	
<i>Tricia David</i> .....	22
<b>Quality, Autonomy and the Profession</b>	
<i>Mathias Urban</i> .....	30
<b>Defining Quality</b>	
<hr/>	
<b>Rethinking the Computer Culture with Early Learners.</b>	
<i>Nina Bolgan</i> .....	48
<b>Quality: Control or Autonomy?</b>	
<i>Philomena Donnelly</i> .....	55
<b>A Critical Examination of the use of Fairy Tale Literature with Pre-Primary Children in Developmentally Appropriate Early Childhood Education and Care Programs.</b>	
<i>Ruth Doran</i> .....	62
<b>Reflections on a National Review of Policy, Research and Practice in Ireland.</b>	
<i>Maresa Duignan</i> .....	70
<b>Young Children's Observations about Number and Conventional Numeric Symbols.</b>	
<i>Elizabeth Dunphy</i> .....	80
<b>A Conceptual Framework of Young Children's Development and Learning in Ireland: The Implications for Quality in Early Years Care and Education.</b>	
<i>Jacqueline Fallon</i> .....	94

<b>A Study of Spontaneous Drawings of Young Children; Implications for the Quality of the Learning Environment.</b>	
<i>Mary Gallagher</i> .....	102
<b>The National Children's Nurseries Association Centre of Excellence Programme: A Tool for Defining and Assessing Quality in the Irish Childcare System.</b>	
<i>Ashling Hooper</i> .....	112
<b>Children Playing in Nature.</b>	
<i>Karen Marie Eid Kaarby</i> .....	121
<b>Defining, Assessing and Supporting Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education: The High/Scope Ireland Model.</b>	
<i>Imelda Madigan</i> .....	129
<b>Policy, Legislation and Practice for Children with Special Needs in Ireland.</b>	
<i>Mary Meaney</i> .....	136
<b>Promoting Diversity and Equality in Early Childhood Care, Education and Training - The 'éist' Project</b>	
<i>Colette Murray</i> .....	145
<b>Promoting Diversity and Equality in Early Childhood Care, Education and Training - Men in Childcare</b>	
<i>Jan Peeters</i> .....	152
<b>Quality; A Global Issue? An International Review of Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education 1990–2004.</b>	
<i>Thomas Walsh</i> .....	162
<b>Assessing Quality</b>	
<hr/>	
<b>Improvement through Self-Evaluation in Preschool Education.</b>	
<i>Fiona Crawford</i> .....	178
<b>A Critique of ECERS as a Measure of Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care.</b>	
<i>Francis Douglas</i> .....	183
<b>Universal Early Education for 4-6 Year Olds in Ireland: The Experience of the Irish Primary Teacher.</b>	
<i>Angela Griffin, Anne Fay and Deirbhile Nic Craith</i> .....	196

<b>Listening and Learning: Empowering Children in Early Childhood Services.</b> <i>Michelle Hart</i> .....	205
<b>Observation Methodology in Preschool Programme Evaluation: The Early Start Experience.</b> <i>Mary Lewis and Peter Archer</i> .....	214
<b>Assessing Teachers' Performance in Pre-Primary and Primary Schools in Estonia.</b> <i>Ivär Mannamaa</i> .....	225
<b>Quality and Regulation in Early Childhood Care and Education: A Study of the Impact of the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations (1996) on the Quality of Early Childhood Services in Ireland.</b> <i>Mary O'Kane</i> .....	231
<b>The Relationship Between Preverbal Behaviours and Language Development: Investigating Symbolic Play and Language Development in Children with Down Syndrome.</b> <i>Ciara O'Toole</i> .....	241
<b>Development of Standards and Measurement Tools for Quality Assurance Systems in Australian Children's Services.</b> <i>Denise Taylor</i> .....	254
<b>Involving Children in their own Learning: Report of an Action Research Project on Formative Assessment.</b> <i>Brian Yeats</i> .....	266
<b>Defining, Assessing and Supporting the Quality of Education and Care for Babies and Toddlers in Centre based Childcare.</b> <i>Pam Winter (Presented by Gerry Mulhearn)</i> .....	274
<b>Supporting Quality</b>	
<b>Evaluating 'Better Beginnings': A Family Literacy Program in Australia.</b> <i>Caroline Barratt-Pugh, Mary Rohl and Jessica Elderfield</i> .....	292
<b>Supporting Play - Supporting Quality.</b> <i>Carmel Brennan</i> .....	302
<b>Integrated Therapeutic Group Work with Young Children in a Family Support Setting.</b> <i>Mary Daly, Kerri Smith and Emma Jane Nulty</i> .....	312

<b>Interdisciplinary Team Assessment: CRC Style.</b> <i>Rachel Glennane, Trish Morrison, Jean Oswell and Aoife Timothy</i> . . . . .	320
<b>Music and Play: Diverse Aspects of 4-6 Year-Olds Self-Initiated Musical Play.</b> <i>Claudia Gluschkankof</i> . . . . .	328
<b>“You and Me and the Two of Us!” A Framework for Increasing Social Competence in Children in Nursery Schools and Some Examples of How to Support Children Developing Social Competence through Dramatic Play.</b> <i>Sidsel Hauge and Kari Lamer</i> . . . . .	335
<b>Supporting Quality through Targeted Research on Special Needs and Disadvantage.</b> <i>Annette McDonnell</i> . . . . .	343
<b>Supporting Quality through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) 2000 – 2006.</b> <i>Pauline Moreau</i> . . . . .	352
<b>Building a System of Professional Development through the use of Teacher Standards as a means of Supporting Quality Teaching Practices.</b> <i>Stephanie Olmore, Lenka Franova, Václav Šneberger and Tatjana Vonta</i> . . . . .	358
<b>Reconceptualising Community Playgroups in Ireland.</b> <i>Noelle Spring, Mary Daly, Tina Byrne and Jean Whyte</i> . . . . .	373
<b>Quality and Teacher Turnover Related to a Childcare Workforce Development Initiative.</b> <i>Kathy Thornburg and Peggy Pearl</i> . . . . .	385
<b>Building Blocks to Best Practice - Introducing an “Integrated Holistic Model” of Early Intervention with Children and Families.</b> <i>Maria Walls and Mary O’Connor</i> . . . . .	393
<b>Concluding Observations and Notes on Contributors</b>	
<b>Questions on Quality: Some Concluding Observations</b> <i>Nóirín Hayes</i> . . . . .	410
<b>Notes on Contributors</b> . . . . .	414

## Foreword

These *Proceedings* are a comprehensive record of contributions to the Conference *Questions on Quality* held in Dublin Castle from the 23<sup>rd</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> September 2004, organised by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE).

The CECDE was launched in October 2002 as an initiative of the Irish Department of Education and Science. The Centre's aim is to develop and co-ordinate early childhood education in pursuance of the objectives of the Government's White Paper *Ready to Learn* and its primary objective is to develop a National Quality Framework for early childhood care and education in the Republic of Ireland.

The White Paper, *Ready to Learn* emphasised "the link between quality of provision in early childhood education and the nature and extent of benefits to children." (p. 49) Furthermore, it raised some fundamental difficulties around the definition of quality in this context:

*"Qualitative aspects of early childhood educational provision are difficult to define. Interpretations of quality vary and are linked to individual perspectives and circumstances. What might be seen by some as a quality service may be seen by others as poor quality."* (p.50)

Throughout the past decade, the development of early childhood care and education has clearly been seen as a "sunrise" issue in Ireland with high levels of policy activity and public debate. Much of this debate has focused on the quality of provision, and the work of the CECDE has continued within this context. By the autumn of 2004, the time of the conference, much of the Centre's baseline and contributory work had been completed and the drafting of the National Quality Framework was beginning.

Therefore, the conference happened at a most important time and contributed to the work of the CECDE to a great extent. Many of the questions, which occupied the minds of the CECDE staff at that time, were, if not always answered, raised and thoroughly examined. The three interwoven aspects of any quality system, defining, assessing and supporting, were addressed from a number of different perspectives and presented in often powerful detail.

Significantly, the Minister of State for Education and Science, Síle de Valera, opened the conference and also chose to launch the *OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland* at the conference. John Bennett, on behalf of the OECD, addressed the conference on this most important report.

The contributions from three very inspiring keynote speakers, Tricia David, Mathias Urban and Richard Clifford set the tone for a highly interactive and engaging conference. Keynote speakers and workshop presenters brought their own unique backgrounds and perspectives but also highlighted the commonalities across international and professional communities.

The editorial work on these *Proceedings* has been a pleasure, as it gave us the opportunity to relive the excitement and enthusiasm of the event and allowed us to renew our friendship with many of the international and Irish contributors. My co-editors and I have taken great care during the editorial process to protect the essential content of all papers. However, in some instances, papers had to be abridged or reformatted, and in others, additional content or references were sought from the authors.

While any misspellings and punctuation mistakes are always ours, the editors cannot accept responsibility for errors in fact and referencing, or for points of opinion in any of the papers.

I would like to thank my colleagues and co-editors Sharon O'Brien and Thomas Walsh who made the task of editing the *Proceedings* seem so easy; the Board and staff of the CECDE for their unwavering support, in particular Claire Brennan and Peadar Cassidy; the Department of Education and Science for their generous hosting of the conference; and Conference Partners for their invaluable professional assistance in organising the event.

Most of all, I would like to thank all contributors, from Ireland and abroad, for making the 2004 Conference *Questions of Quality* such a successful and memorable event.

Heino Schonfeld  
Director  
Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education



## Address of Minister of State at the Department of Education and Science

**Síle de Valera**

Good morning everyone,

I am delighted to be with you this morning to open your conference, which is dealing with an issue of enormous importance to Irish society. It is clear from the conference programme that Heino Schonfeld and his team have spared no effort to bring together the right mix of expertise to facilitate and stimulate a meaningful, and indeed lively, debate.

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education plays a very important role in co-ordinating and developing early childhood care and education in Ireland. It is a testament to the Centre's pro-active stance that an international conference of this magnitude can be successfully organised only two years after the Centre itself was launched. I understand that the response to the call for conference papers was overwhelming which is a good indicator of the extent to which this issue is now to the forefront of people's thinking. It is clear that the conference is taking place at just the right time and I want to congratulate the Centre and all involved with the organisation of the conference for their dedication and commitment.

I am also delighted to take the opportunity afforded by your conference to formally launch the *OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland*. This is a profoundly important review carried out with all the excellence and professionalism we have come to associate with the work of the OECD. Everyone here knows that the issue of early childhood education and care is of fundamental importance to the future well being of all our people. The early childhood period is widely recognised as a key source of health, well being, socialisation and, crucially, the foundation for the lifelong learning that underpins all other aspects of life. As Minister with specific responsibility for addressing Educational Disadvantage, for Youth Affairs and for Adult Education (as well as much else), I am acutely aware that the skills and knowledge of our people will be the primary sustainable resource available to Ireland's society and economy in the years ahead.

In 2002, my Department invited the OECD Directorate for Education to conduct a review of early childhood policies and services in Ireland. The OECD's dedication over many years to high quality research leading to collective discussion and analysis of policy has earned it an extraordinarily high level of public trust and respect. As many of you will

know, the organisation has played an important and very positive role as a catalyst for change in the Irish education system for a long number of years.

To facilitate the review we first commissioned a background report designed to provide the OECD with an overview, in the Irish context, of major issues and concerns, existing early childhood education and care policies and provision, as well as available quantitative and evaluation data. The author of the background report was Carmel Corrigan, and I want to express my thanks to her and to the members of the editorial group, as well as the many other contributors who did such a splendid job. Carmel has requested that her own deep appreciation of the work done by all the contributors to the background report be expressed on her behalf also, and I am very glad to do so. The background report is intended to be read in conjunction with the main OECD report itself and for this reason both are published in one volume.

The OECD Review team was led by John Bennett of the OECD Directorate for Education, with Pamela Oberheumer from Germany, Anke Vedder from the Netherlands and Colette Kelleher from the U.K. It was agreed that their report should focus on three key areas of access, quality, and co-ordination and should:

- Place the issues around early childhood provision firmly within the Irish context;
- Review early care and educational policies and practices as they currently meet the needs of Irish children and their families;
- Consider ongoing developments with a critical eye for sustainability; and
- Make recommendations that would make success more likely, and indicate areas for future effort and emphasis.

The team met with many government departments, agencies and other stakeholders dealing with early childhood issues, and made site visits covering a range of services for young people from four months to six years of age. The review team brought a wealth of international expertise to bear on the issues involved, as we knew they would, and has produced a host of very valuable recommendations across the three focus areas of access, quality and co-ordination. I think when you read their report you will agree that they succeeded splendidly in carrying out the task set for them.

The recommendations represent an important milestone in the ongoing formulation of public policy in relation to early childhood education and care in this country, and will form an ideal basis for further discussion and progress. As the report itself makes clear, the team's recommendations are offered, not as hard and fast conclusions, but in the spirit of professional dialogue for the consideration of policy makers and specialists. I believe, and feel sure you will agree, that public policy development cannot be

compartmentalised if it is to be successful in achieving its aims - education, health, housing, training and employment are intersecting processes affecting the lives of everyone. In this sense, early childhood education and care is a classic horizontal policy issue.

The review team's report represents an expert outside perspective and is hugely important to our ongoing examination of such a complex issue. The policy implications of the team's recommendations are currently under active consideration within my Department and are also under examination by the Government's High Level Group on childcare and early education, which is comprised of senior representatives from a number of government departments and agencies. Copies of the report are available here today and will also be sent to all the stakeholders next week. It will also be placed on the Department's website.

Obviously many individuals and organisations will want to comment on the report and I would urge you to send any comments you may have into the relevant government department dealing with your particular sector. This will ensure that as many views as possible are fed into the examination of the overall policy implications.

Once again the OECD has served this country well and may I extend a heartfelt thanks on behalf of the Department of Education and Science and the Government to John Bennett and the other members of the review team. You have given all involved in the early childhood field in Ireland much to think about over the coming months.

May I also wish you well for your conference and I look forward very much to reading the conference outcomes, which, of course, will also contribute to the ongoing examination of this issue.

# Keynote Addresses



## Structure and Stability of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale<sup>1</sup>

Richard Clifford

### Introduction

To be useful to the field, a measure of environmental quality must address meaningful aspects of quality as well as be technically sound. While much has been written about the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and its companion scales, here I look at the instrument from its conceptual base and as it performs in various settings and studies. I first look briefly at the degree to which the Scale addresses meaningful aspects of quality and then go on to look at some of the properties of the Scale as it is used in early childhood programs.

A delicate balance is required of assessment instruments related to the stability of the measurement properties of the instrument. This balance is particularly important when assessing learning environments for young children. In this paper, I will examine the stability of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale in both its original (ECERS) and revised (ECERS-R) versions. Very simply put, to be valid and reliable, as well as useful to the field, an environmental assessment instrument must measure constructs that are relatively stable and do not change from minute to minute over the course of the day or week. However, the instrument must also be sensitive enough to be able to detect improvements or declines in environmental quality within a reasonable time period. Designing instruments that meet these general requirements and demonstrating such properties are not so simple.

The original ECERS (Harms and Clifford, 1980) was designed to provide guidance to practitioners to help them examine classroom environments in order to make improvements in the provisions for young children. To meet the demand of this kind of task, the instrument first had to be both theoretically and practically grounded. The scale had to have a strong and transparent theoretical structure. Conceptually, the items are organized into seven subscales that guide the observer to practically meaningful areas of interest in early childhood classrooms. These include 1) Personal Care Routines, 2) Furnishings and Display for Children, 3) Language-Reasoning Experiences, 4) Fine and Gross Motor Activities, 5) Creative Activities, 6) Social Development, and 7) Adult Needs in the ECERS. The ECERS-R consists of the following; 1) Space and Furnishings, 2) Personal Care Routines, 3) Language-Reasoning, 4) Activities, 5) Interaction, 6) Program Structure and 7) Parents and Staff.

Numerous studies have documented that the Scale can be used reliably by properly trained observers using this conceptual framework. While this organization is quite helpful in a practical sense, it is not empirically based. Various researchers have found an empirical structure using factor analytic techniques that is different from that represented by the seven subscales and also provides guidance in understanding learning environments for young children. These researchers have found the items of the Scales can be grouped into between two and five factors.

In this paper, I will examine data from a variety of studies using the ECERS and ECERS-R to document the internal structure and to see the degree to which it is consistent across various studies and countries. I will also detail the extent to which the instrument achieves this balance between stability and sensitivity in real world applications. Since the Scales are used internationally, I will examine the extent to which the constructs can be measured both within and across countries. I will also look at the stability of the Scales across time when using the same version of the instrument, as well as across the two versions of the Scale.

This paper addresses two specific questions about the measure:

- Is global quality as measured by the ECERS and ECERS-R (the Scales) relatively stable or is it time and situation specific?
- With the major revision of the Scale in 1998, are the original constructs of the Scale maintained? Are there systematic differences in the level of quality measured by the two versions?

While I will report on findings from several different countries, I will first focus the specific analyses for this paper on new data collected in the United States and Germany. I try to generalize from specific aspects of the samples to reach some more general conclusions on the elements of quality of early childhood care and education settings – at least as measured by the Scales.

### **Stability of Quality as Measured by the ECERS and ECERS-R**

One can consider two kinds of stability: stability at the classroom level and at the individual child level. The ECERS and ECERS-R are designed to measure the environmental provisions made available to children in the class, but are not designed to assess for individual children the extent to which they actually make use of the various provisions. It is reasonable to expect that a child may need and receive different opportunities from day-to-day and week-to-week as the school year progresses, even though the overall availability of provisions in the classroom remains largely unchanged. In fact, it has been demonstrated many times that typical classrooms have children functioning at quite

different levels at any given point in time (see, for example, West *et al.*, 2000) and thus provisions should be made for this broad array of needs within the classroom. Thus, the global quality as measured by the Scales may be stable over time, at least to a moderate extent.

On the other hand, the needs of any individual child would be expected to change as the child develops and thus the child's actual experience with the environment may change substantially while the overall environment remains stable. To get a full picture of the impact of the environment, one would need both measures of global classroom quality as well as child specific measures of experiences with the environment. Somewhat surprisingly, a recent study found that the individual level of activities in pre-kindergarten (pre-k) classes was remarkably stable when summed across four target children in each class (Howes *et al.*, under review). Further analyses of that data may reveal individual differences. Our analyses for this paper will focus on global classroom quality.

Sometimes it is said that you cannot even measure global quality because it is always very much dependent on a given situation and is changing from moment to moment (Moss and Pence, 1994). Therefore, any single measurement will – with high probability – lead to an incomplete or even misleading assessment. However, this assertion is rarely accompanied by empirical evidence. I purport that it is wrong – at least at the level of global quality of settings as measured by the Scales. As demonstrated by the results of studies in the US and other countries, it can be seen that at the global level, quality can be measured meaningfully with confidence (Whitebook *et al.*, 1989; Peisner-Feinberg *et al.*, 2001; Zill *et al.*, 2003; Clifford *et al.*, in press). As stated above, the goal of any measure of this type is that the measure is stable enough to result in reliable estimates of classroom quality, yet capable of measuring meaningful change that occurs in classrooms over some extended period of time. I attempt to document this for the ECERS and ECERS-R.

The US data used in the following examination are from the six state study of pre-k programs conducted by the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCELD). These data were collected during the 2001-02 school year in six US states – New York, Georgia, Kentucky, Ohio, Illinois and California. The observers completing the ratings were independent of the programs and were trained to reliability ( $K \geq .60$ ). The settings were pre-k programs operated as part of a state pre-k initiative in each of the states, and included programs in schools and Head Start programs, as well as in non-profit and proprietary child care centers. A total of 238 classrooms (approximately 40 per state) that contained 4-year-old children (some had 3-year-olds as well) were assessed in the fall of 2001 and again in the spring of 2002. There were no systematic efforts to modify the quality of the environments in these settings during this school year. A total of 227 of

these classrooms had useable data on the ECERS-R for both the fall and spring (Clifford *et al.*, in press).

The German data are pooled from different studies conducted between 2000 and 2002 in the city of Bremen and the states of Berlin, Brandenburg, Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saxony, Saxony-Anhaltiniona and Thuringia. In all studies, independent observers were trained to an observer agreement of equal or greater than 85% within one scale point. A total of 311 classrooms from these various samples had useable data on the German version of the ECERS-R called the Kindergarten-Skala Revised, here after referred to as the KES-R (Tietze, *et al.*, 1997; 2001). As with the US study, no systematic efforts to improve the environmental provisions were made in sites where we compare ratings at different points in time.

In the NCDL study, the means and standard deviations of the ECERS-R scores were 3.81 (S.D. 0.82) in the fall and 3.79 (S.D. 0.80) in the spring of the pre-k year (R. Addy, personal communication, May 25, 2004). The mean time between observations was approximately five months. The Pearson product moment correlation between individual classroom scores at these two points in time was .69 (M. Burchinal, personal communication, September 4, 2003). Because the Scales reflect a value for child-centered learning environments more often associated with early childhood programs than school environments, one might expect the quality ratings of these classrooms to change as pre-k teachers readied their children for the somewhat more formal schooling that begins at age five in US kindergartens. However, the ECERS-R scores remained remarkably stable over a relatively long period of time during the pre-k year. The NCDL study found that the ECERS-R could be meaningfully characterized as having two factors referred to as (1) Teaching and Interactions and (2) Provisions for Learning. In addition to the overall ECERS-R score being stable, the mean scores for the two factors also remained stable over the five months. Teaching and Interactions had mean scores of 4.43 (S.D. 1.29) and 4.44 (S.D. 1.22) in the fall 2001 and spring 2002 respectively with a fall-spring correlation of .60 (R. Addy, personal communication, May 25, 2004). Provisions for Learning had scores of 3.79 (S.D. 0.96) and 3.79 (S.D. 0.88), with a correlation of .72 over this time period (R. Addy, personal communication, May 25, 2004). Thus, these results point to a high stability of global quality as measured by the ECERS-R over time.

In the German sample, quality was assessed with the KES-R at two measurement points ranging from one to ten weeks apart (Tietze *et al.*, 2001). During this time, there was no intervention. Included were ten classes where the same observers applied the KES-R at the two measurement points and ten classes where different observers applied the KES-R. When the same observers were used, exact agreement of the quality assessment was reached on 73% of the items. Agreement was within one scale point on 92% of the items.



Where different observers were used, exact agreement was reached on 65% of the items and agreement within one scale point on 92% of the items. When the correlation of the KES-R total between the two points of time was calculated, the Spearman rank order correlation was .92 using the same observers and .88 using different observers. These results point to both a high test-retest-reliability and a high stability of quality across time. It may be argued that the two measurement points are only one to ten weeks apart. However, we also found the same result with the previous German version of the ECERS, the KES, when the two measurement points were eight to ten months apart (Tietze, *et al.*, 1997).

Looking at the results across studies, we find indications that the assessment of the global quality of an early childhood care and education setting as measured by the ECERS-R is stable over moderately long periods of time during a given school year where the teacher is stable in the classroom. We do not find wide variations in these provisions during this time period. On the contrary, we find indication that the quality is highly stable over time. This finding does not address whether changes can occur with intervention, simply that left to the normal progress of the program the ECERS and ECERS-R scores remain stable.

Several other studies have used the ECERS and ECERS-R to document change in environments over time. Bryant and her colleagues in North Carolina conducted a statewide evaluation of the NC Smart Start early childhood initiative over a ten year period of time (Bryant *et al.*, 2003). One of the goals of Smart Start was to raise the quality of child care across the state (Bryant *et al.*, 2003). To document changes in child care quality, the study team selected a sample of 184 centers in 18 counties which entered the program in 1994. They subsequently assessed the quality of centers in these counties multiple times between 1994 and 2002. They were able to document significant and meaningful improvement over this extended period of time using the original ECERS.

In a separate study, Whitebook and her colleagues conducted an extended study examining efforts to support child care programs in northern California working toward accreditation with the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Three levels of intervention were used with the sample of programs to help them become eligible to be accredited. They used both the original ECERS and the ECERS-R at various points in time during the project. They were able to show clear improvements in ECERS scores with dose effects dependent on the level of intervention (Whitebook *et al.*, 1997; Sakai *et al.*, 2003).

In a German study, preschool teachers were trained over a period of two years. Before and at the end of the training, the classrooms of these teachers were assessed using the ECERS-R (Erning, 2003). During this time, an increase of the ECERS-R total scores could be

observed which amounted on average to about one scale point. The NC Department of Human Resources conducted a study of the impact of training of child care teachers who were enrolled in site based college classes. They used the original ECERS to document change in the classrooms of the teachers in the classes offered by four separate institutions of higher education. They were able to document improvement in the ECERS scores, but only when there was a period of at least 90 days between pre and post assessments with intervention occurring during these times. These aforementioned studies verify the ability of the ECERS and ECERS-R to detect change in environmental conditions over a moderate to long intervention.

In summary, the assessment of global quality as measured by the Scales seems not to be affected by the specific situation on the day of the assessment. Rather, this quality seems to be relatively stable over time. At the same time, the ratings are sensitive enough to detect changes that occur as the result of improvements.

#### Differences in the Mean Quality Levels between ECERS and ECERS-R

In the transition from ECERS to ECERS-R, not only items have been modified and added, but the rating scales themselves have been methodologically changed. In the original version of the ECERS, the rater had more freedom in assigning a value compared to the strict indicator system used in the ECERS-R. When comparing quality ratings done with ECERS and ECERS-R it is important to know if differences are due to real quality differences or to the differences in applying the rating scales. So far, researchers have found mixed results (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Comparison of ECERS and ECERS-R Totals**

	ECERS			ECERS-R			Difference in means
	No. of items	Mean	SD	No. of items	Mean	SD	
<b>US</b>							
a. same sample, different observers: n=68 classroom (ration)	37	4.91	0.7	43	4.87	0.8	.004
<b>Germany</b>							
a. different samples, for KES n=103 classrooms, for KES-R n=180 classrooms (Tietze et al., 2001)	29	4.51	0.7	39	4.06	0.8	0.45
b. same sample, n=159 classroom, same rater for KES and KES-R	29	4.77	0.8	39	4.19	0.6	0.58

In a study conducted in the US in 68 classrooms (Sakai *et al.*, 2003), two trained raters independently observed the same classroom at the same measurement point, one with the ECERS and the other with the ECERS-R. For the ECERS, a mean of 4.91 was found. The mean for the ECERS-R was 4.87 and, thus, almost identical. The standard deviations are also comparable. According to this study, the mean is not affected by the changes in the scales.

A different result was found in Germany. In a first study, means and standard deviations of 103 classrooms measured with the ECERS and 180 different classrooms measured with the ECERS-R were compared. The ECERS total mean was about half a scale point higher than the ECERS-R total mean, whereas the standard deviations were about the same. This mean difference might be due to the more strict indicator system in the ECERS-R or to a different quality level in the two samples. In a second study of 159 classrooms, the same observers used ECERS and ECERS-R at the same measurement point. While using the same observers might lead to biased ratings, again the ECERS total mean was about half a scale point higher than the ECERS-R mean, whereas the variance was not affected.

Results from these three studies do not provide a conclusive answer as to whether or not quality ratings obtained with the ECERS and the ECERS-R are comparable. Whereas in the US, no mean differences between ECERS and ECERS-R mean scores are found, the more strict rating modus of the ECERS-R seems to systematically decrease the quality assessment by about half a scale point in Germany. This has to be taken into account when comparing quality ratings done with ECERS and with ECERS-R. Interestingly – this is not included in Table 1 – there are some indications that in Germany, the decrease seems to be different for the factors Teaching and Interaction and Space and Materials. In the first German study, the decrease for Space and Materials amounts to 0.8 scale point, whereas the quality rises for one tenth of a scale point for Teaching and Interaction. Thus, it seems to be that more easily observable aspects of the Space and Material dimension are more affected by the transition to the ECERS-R than aspects related to teacher-child interactions. However, this result was found only in Germany.

### Summary

This paper has discussed some questions that are of high importance for the use of the ECERS and the ECERS-R in theoretical and research perspectives, as well as in regard to practical improvements. An effective instrument for measuring the global quality of an early childhood setting has to be stable over time as well as sensitive to introduced changes. That is, the overall quality rating should not be affected by the specific situation on the given day of assessment when no specific reasons to expect changes have occurred, such as a substantial change of the teachers, the program or quality improvement measures. This does not mean that individual children do not experience

changes in the stimulation they experience according to their changing needs (like improving capacities with age). However, it is hypothesized that such changes on the environments experienced at the individual level can occur or can be embedded in rather stable overall quality at the setting level. To get a full picture of the impact of the environment, one would need both measures of the global classroom quality as well as child specific measures of experience with the environment, such as the Emerging Academics Snapshot (Ritchie *et al.*, 2001), which is used to assess children's experiences in the classroom (i.e., their engagement with activities and interactions with adults). The ECERS and the ECERS-R are related to the global classroom quality. I have shown that at this level both requirements of a good measurement instrument are fulfilled. Quality as measured by the ECERS and the ECERS-R is highly stable across moderate time intervals up to a year. At the same time, studies show that the Scales are also sensitive to changes occurring after quality improvement measures have been implemented.

Quality of an early childhood setting is not conceived as an undifferentiated construct. Rather, we assume that different areas or dimensions of quality exist. In designing the ECERS and the ECERS-R, a structure of seven subscales was assumed. While both the original and the revised instruments are divided into these subscales, these subscales were developed for ease of use and specifically designed for practitioners and, thus, may not represent empirically separate dimensions of the environment. In fact, there has been some debate as to whether the global environmental quality can be broken down into more discrete factors using the ECERS or similar instruments. For a good quality measure we expect a meaningful empirical factor structure which is not affected by the transition from the ECERS to the ECERS-R and which is not related to the characteristics of a given sample but is rather independent of specific samples and – at least to some degree – of the given situations of different countries.

One change in the transition from the ECERS to the ECERS-R is the use of a more strict indicator system supporting the ratings. Even when in the original version of the ECERS, descriptions were given for the ratings of 1, 3, 5 and 7, the rater had more freedom in assigning a value compared to the indicator system used in the ECERS-R. The question is whether or not this change leads to a decrease in the mean quality level assessed, i.e., if differences between ratings with the ECERS and the ECERS-R are due to real quality differences or to the differences in applying the rating scales. For this question, we find mixed results. The ECERS-R ratings may lead to a systematic decrease of the assessed quality level by about half a scale point. However, this was only found in German samples, whereas in the US the means seem not to be affected by the different methodological features of the rating scales.

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**Note:**

- 1 This paper is based on a joint paper produced by Richard Clifford and Hans-Guenther Rossbach, University of Bamberg, Germany: Clifford, R. and Rossbach, H. (in press). Structure and Stability of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, (in) Cryer, D. (Ed.). *A World of Improvement: Promoting Quality Early Childhood Programs for All Children*.

## Questions of Quality: The Contribution of Research Evidence to Definitions of Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care Practice

Tricia David

### Introduction

I am very pleased to be here today in Dublin Castle and I am especially conscious of the expertise present, not just in this room, but in the whole of Ireland. In preparing for this presentation, I took a look at the OMEP Ireland Conference Proceedings (Horgan and Douglas, 2002). There were some extremely exciting papers, many of which make similar points to those I would like to make today.

I have also been looking at some other Irish documents and research, and it is wonderful that Ireland is focusing on birth to 6 as a whole in the development of a framework and not dividing it into birth to three and three to six. In one of the CECDE projects, "*Talking about Quality*" (CECDE, 2003), it is great to note the importance placed on play and diversity and also to see that people in general regard the concept of quality as complex and multi-faceted.

The recently published OECD report has made some important recommendations and what is crucial is that these points are debated within Ireland (OECD, 2004). When *Starting Strong*, a review of Early Childhood Education and Care in several different countries came out in England, it raised the question as to whether perhaps the Swedish model was the one that other countries should aspire to. On the other hand, my colleagues in Sweden felt that there was much still to be done and continued to improve on their own understanding of Quality.

Similarly, great work is being done in Reggio Emilia in Italy, where children are regarded as strong and capable individuals, but despite the success of this model in Italy, you cannot simply take its message and transplant it to other countries – there are cultural issues to consider and you need to debate how things will work. This is the exciting thing about the Question of Quality - time and place change our definitions of what it means. We need to keep reviewing these issues and redefining them through more and more research and this is the main thrust of my presentation here today.

Defining quality can be a difficult and culture-laden task and many colleagues have contributed to the debate about the importance of community involvement in defining quality (eg. Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999). So the focus of today's paper is on how research can contribute to the definition and application of quality for all children. I would like to explore the messages from three different research reviews and examine issues arising

from their cultural origins, as well as their implications. I have personally been involved in two of these projects, *Birth to Three Matters* (David *et al.*, 2003) and the *British Educational Research Association Special Early Years Interest Group Review* (BERA – SIG, 2003). I would also like to take a look at a third review carried out in the United States by Sharon Lynn Kagan (Kagan, 2004).

### **Birth to Three Matters**

So firstly, I'd like to discuss the *Birth to Three Matters* literature review (David *et al.*, 2003). This review was carried out as part of a project commissioned by the DfES in London to develop guidelines for early childhood educators working with children from birth to three in England. The project was directed by Professor Lesley Abbott at Manchester Metropolitan University who asked me to head up the team responsible for the review of research literature which underpinned the Framework. As part of the review, we spoke to people all over the world, searched all kinds of databases, listened to focus groups, not just about the content of the framework but also about how it should be produced. Our overall objective was to make it relevant and meaningful, to make it exciting and useful, while still retaining the academic basis. One of the ways we managed this was by using stories of real children, observations of the wonderful and brilliant things that young children say and do.

In the presentation of the material, we made a decision to move from the traditional domains of cognitive development, emotional development etc. to four different interwoven aspects, those of:

- A Strong Child;
- A Skilful Communicator;
- A Competent Learner; and
- A Healthy Child.

And each of these aspects was subdivided into four components. These were derived from Professor Abbott's collaborative research with practitioners concerning their expectations of the Framework, so in writing the review, we naturally wanted our presentation of the research to follow the same structure.

After reviewing over 500 publications, the conclusions were much as one might have anticipated and indeed, may seem obvious and simple. Young children come into the world seemingly 'programmed' to be curious, to learn, to be social and to communicate and that they learn best when they have opportunities to observe and interact through play and to talk with those who love them (adults and children). So research is now backing up what we in the field already knew about the absolute importance of these interactions.



Having drawn these conclusions relatively easily from the review, the really difficult part is ensuring that we can, as a society, achieve these conditions for every child. The research we accessed was mainly Western research, that is, from post-industrial societies and this begs the question as to what extent it was culturally blind or biased. Furthermore, the research was almost all in English and again, we had to question whether that was simply one particular subjective view of quality, and if so, whether this was acceptable. Indeed, are there universal children's needs? And is there some panacea in terms of quality education that can be applied to all societies? These are interesting questions.

In the *Birth to Three Matters* project, we thought long and hard about the need to expose the influences of assumptions, expectations and values in research. These aspects need to be clarified when research is used to underpin policy and practice, particularly when developing guidelines for practice. We need more information from societies with different histories and traditions, to widen our thinking and to challenge our accepted ideas.

#### **The *British Educational Research Association Early Years Special Interest Group***

The second literature review I was involved in was the *British Educational Research Association Early Years Special Interest Group's* review of research on pedagogy, curriculum and adult roles, which focused particularly on British research covering the age group from three to seven years of age (BERA – SIG, 2003).

As with *Birth to Three Matters*, we wanted the review to be useful both to the academic community and also to practitioners. It was decided to produce an academic review first, followed by a small user review, which was subsequently launched at Westminster along with other BERA user reviews. It was exciting that the Special Interest Group brought together such a large number of contributors, who worked in three subgroups - each focusing on either pedagogy, curriculum or adult roles. The birth to three age group was only touched upon, since the Group felt a wider age range would result in too much information. The main focus was on children aged from three to eight, in group and nursery early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, and Key Stage 1 in schools.

The key messages from this review were, again, familiar to us. Young children learn best when they have opportunities to play and talk with familiar adults and children, where they are able to make choices, where the adults share the thinking and where adults are sensitive to children's leads (see for example Gopnik *et al.*, 1999; Hirsch-Pasek and Michnik Golinkoff, 2003; Karmiloff and Karmiloff-Smith, 2001).

One of the key pieces of research we used on the role of the adult was from the *Effective Provision of Preschool Education* (EPPE) project by Iram Siraj Blatchford and Kathy Sylva (Sylva *et al.*, 2004), looking at the ways in which adults can get involved in children's play without taking over. To do this effectively requires an awareness of the theoretical aspects of play, thus avoiding a rigid or very formal experience for children. Adults need to be able to blend in with the fluid and ambiguous nature of play (Sutton-Smith, 1999) in order to make learning meaningful to children, while still being conscious of planning and outcomes. Some very worrying feedback from the English Key Stage 1 sector and the year R, which is part of the Foundation Stage (age 3 to 5), is that in some cases, children are becoming bored with the amount of formal 'work' they are expected to do. This is a disturbing development in relation to definitions of quality. If those definitions of quality are very rigid in terms of expected outcomes, then this is what will happen unless staff understand how to embed these in a less formal practice. Clearly there are implications for staff training here.

Play of course, does not easily lend itself to predicted or prescribed outcomes. While the paucity of British research about learning through play leads to the conclusion that play is not yet proven as **the** most effective way to teach young children, it is still evident that many early childhood educators need more training about how to teach through play. In addition, many lack confidence in this approach, particularly when faced with regulation through inspections. This means that in many settings young children are being inappropriately taught through overly formal methods – and this at a time when analysts from other fields are suggesting that life and work in the future will demand a 'play ethic' (Kane, 2004).

Our research evidence, collated for the BERA review, led us to identify certain gaps that exist within the assessment process, such as measuring children's spiritual development. Some things are simply not easy to measure. How, for example, do you measure love or joy? A further debate within the BERA SIG (2003) related to what rigorous research actually means. There was some discussion over whether the only kind of research that was seen as rigorous and respected by government was quantitative. How do we have qualitative measures that reflect the holistic experience of practice? And how do we engage children as participants in the feedback process? These are issues which need to be debated when we talk about quality.

### **Kagan's Review of US Research on Quality**

Earlier this year, at a conference in Northern Italy, I had the pleasure of listening to a presentation by Sharon Lynn Kagan (2004) who had conducted a very interesting review of the research literature in the US to see what it could tell us about quality in ECEC. Much

of her conclusions were very relevant, as they were themes that were already being discussed in the United Kingdom.

She noticed that past measures of quality had tended to focus on issues such as staff turnover, salaries and conditions, and peer mentoring. These are clearly important matters. If staff turnover is particularly high, children do not have time to develop and maintain meaningful relationships with staff. Also, staff salaries and conditions in the ECEC sector have traditionally been very poor, and so it is necessary to examine this. Peer mentoring among staff has been regarded as a further quality indicator, that is, how staff help one another as a team and how they discuss the children among themselves, and so on. While these are important measures, more recent work in the field has come to view the whole issue of quality as more complex than this and current measures have tended to explore more structural variables such as funding, regulation, governance and standards.

Kagan's (2004) review, however, identified several omissions in measuring quality in America, elements that our own research also uncovered, such as children's emotional and social development. Sometimes, there can be such an emphasis on academic outcomes that teachers are perhaps not necessarily sharing information on these other aspects of children's development. Moreover, they may have unrealistic expectations of children and of what is meaningful to them, particularly teachers who may not have much experience in the early years. But emotional and social development are fundamental to cognitive development.

In the US, Kagan (2004) found that there were significant differences in expectations of standards in ECEC settings and in those applied to schools. Why is this? Should these be so different or should they be brought together?

In England, there are currently plans to develop out-of-hours care in schools. This is a very welcome development, especially for parents, but recent research has shown that children do not particularly want to spend extra time in schools because they associate school with work. This should lead us to take a look at our schools and ask why they are places that children don't want to be? Should we not want them to be vibrant, stimulating places? Should there not be spaces for relaxation in schools? We have to turn things on their head and start asking ourselves different questions.

Kagan (2004) also signalled the changing expectations of children in certain societies and the changing views of what needs to be measured. In the US for example (and this is also the case in the UK), there is an increased emphasis on early numeracy and literacy, and its importance to the workforce. The underlying rationale was that children should

become skilled in these areas very early so as to be ready for the workforce. And while I am not suggesting a neglect of literacy and numeracy, there has to be careful consideration of **how** this is effected. Formal teaching is not necessarily the most effective preparation for the workforce or most meaningful to young children.

The other point that Kagan (2004) made is one that I touched on earlier, the issue of integration at policy level. Every law and policy in society and everything that you do in a country will impinge on your children, so you have to think about your policies and how they all fit together. What is needed is a kind of ecology of human development. Quality in ECEC, and how it is measured, is contingent on policies, and not only those policies specifically concerned with ECEC. There is a knock-on effect with every policy decision.

### **Implications and the Influence of Culture**

So, what are the implications and the influences of culture in all this? Well, I think that what we've got to ask ourselves in the first instance is: what do we value about early childhood? Do we appreciate the brilliance and competence of young children? What do we value in our communities? Historically, French policies were much more focused on children and families than in the UK and the US. The child was placed at the centre and regarded as a citizen from birth, and policy decisions were more family centred. In the UK, if you were a mother who wanted to go to work, it was considered your own business and there were few support systems. While the UK has moved on from that, it illustrates cultural differences and how they can influence policy.

Another crucial question we need to ask is: what do we value about early childhood educators? What kind of salaries, conditions and training and continuing professional development do they have? Are they highly educated? Because if we do not think it important for them to be highly educated (see, for example, MacNaughton, 2003), then what are we saying about the children? If we regard children as brilliant, capable, strong and clever, then we must show that the people who work with them are also brilliant, capable, strong and clever. We need to acknowledge the importance of professional development, but also deal with the dilemma of the perceived loss that accompanies that professionalisation. Some very recent research suggests that there is a **perception** that as educators become more professional and more highly educated, they lose the enthusiasm and 'personal touch' that less highly qualified educators have. We need to question why this perception is the case; why do some people think we would be sacrificing one for the other?

For an excellent illustration of cultural influences and assumptions, it is very much worth reading Mikki Rosenthal's (2003) article for the European Early Childhood Education Research Journal. Rosenthal's piece was based on her study of children's place in society,

how certain societies want their children to be individuals and other societies want them to be part of a community, and how they are educated in different ways based on these cultural biases. This came across strongly in our own research (David *et al.*, 2000) and I feel that somehow we need to incorporate both of these approaches - to help our children to be strong and individual in certain situations, yet interdependent in others. Furthermore, educators need to be aware of the 'ecological niches' individual children occupy, as well as being able to mediate children's learning where there is a 'cultural gap' between the home (or an earlier ECEC setting) and the current setting.

Finally, looking at regulation and measurement and the imposition of standards, we need to examine not just what is measured, but what is not measured. How can we have some qualitative measures?

And who decides on the standards set up to measure or define quality? Who are the stakeholders and the experts? Where are the voices of children in all of this? Where does the research to inform these standards come from and what part does it play? Should such standards be regarded as the bare minimum, or should they work along a continuum of quality, challenging for excellence? Should they be open or prescriptive?

Working on the two reviews, and listening to Sharon Lynn Kagan, simply confirmed my beliefs in how children learn best. What it also did was make me very aware of the task ahead of us in ensuring that ever better services are available for all children. But more than that, the research made me even more respectful of children themselves and of their abilities.

Thank you!

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## Quality, Autonomy and the Profession

Mathias Urban

### Introduction

There is a 'wind of change' evident in early childhood education and care in so much of Europe today. Wouldn't it be great if we all could join forces to make it a change for the better? This paper shares with you some experiences gained mainly from our research on professional and curriculum development, and from the 'National Quality Initiative' in Germany. I want to start with a look at the terminology of quality that we all use so frequently. I shall then present some aspects of our work in the 'National Quality Initiative.' As a third step, I want to look at the crossroads of pedagogical cultures that we are now facing in modern societies. Finally, this leads to questions of professional challenges - and I shall conclude with a look ahead to the new horizons of quality development.

### Notions of Quality

In most modern societies, questions of quality of publicly funded services for children have been an issue of professional and political debate since the early 1990s. Several strands have emerged in the discourse, attempting to determine the way we look at early childhood institutions and how we value them from different perspectives. It does make a difference whether we choose a political, pedagogical or even an economic approach to describe the tasks of early childhood education and care. There might even be more complexity: If we choose a pedagogical perspective - probably most of us would do so - we still need to explain whether our focus is on children or practitioners, on learning or teaching or even on the assessment itself.

Any of these possible approaches comes with an underlying assumption of 'quality', although it is not always clear what hides behind this term. If we follow the logic of ISO 9000 for instance, 'quality' is just "*the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service...*" (ISO 9004-2:9)<sup>1</sup>

If we agree that there are at least some differences between different 'quality' institutions (prison camps and pre-schools for instance), we need a more detailed description of what we mean when we talk about quality. In the following paper, I will argue that the reason for the emerging debate on the 'quality' of early childhood education and care is closely linked to the development of an early years' profession. With the increasing division of labour in all modern societies, education of and care for young children has turned into a profession itself. The responsibility for bringing up children has increasingly been extended from the family domain to public institutions in most modern

societies. And whenever a common social practice - any social practice - is professionalized, the professionals need to legitimate what they do and prove that they do it better than before. And so, in common speech, 'quality' turns out to be a synonym for 'good' or even 'best' practice.

But how can we tell what might be 'good', 'better' or more or less adequate, regarding our provisions, services and institutions for young children and their families? Looking back at the discourse on 'quality' in the last decades, we can identify three main strands:

- Relying on scientific expertise;
- Recognising multiple perspectives;
- Recontextualising "quality."

Each of these leads to a distinct practice of defining, assessing and supporting quality.

### **Relying on Scientific Expertise**

The definition of adequate conditions and practice is regarded as a task for educational science. This is closely related to the development of 'standards' and to attempts to rate or even 'measure' quality. In many countries of the world - including Germany - this approach has been linked to the application of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) (Harms *et al.*, 1998). For the first time, it seemed, it was possible to 'frame' the woolly debate and to provide reliable data, gained from a clear perspective on the early years' institution. The temptation of producing data, of getting a handle on what is really going on in social practice, can easily veil the difference between 'rating' and 'measuring.' As 'rating' can only be done from a distinct subjective perspective, it is necessarily tied to a specific set of values, expectations and images that frame the perception of the one who does the rating. To 'measure', on the other hand, implies a much more objective description of facts and findings that are unaffected by personal influences - which of course can never be the case in a complex social context like education and care. Whenever research findings are presented as being the truth or an image of reality, we should be very clear in asking whose truth and whose reality we are talking about.

The widespread confusion between the concepts of 'rating' and 'measuring' leads to another pitfall - 'measuring' approaches regularly require scientific expertise, which is usually not ascribed to early years' practitioners. We must be aware there is a danger of solidifying hierarchies in the field, as practitioners remain objects of research. As a result, the 'quality-experts' are clearly distinguished from the pedagogues.



### Recognizing Multiple Perspectives

A second main strand in the discourse relates to quality as a relativistic construct, which depends on a variety of perspectives. This regularly includes users and practitioners, sometimes representatives of the local community or service-providers. In most cases, parents are taken as “users” of the services. Children’s views have scarcely been recognised. In the US, Lilian Katz has been first to introduce a multi-perspective view on quality in early years’ settings. From a democratic point of view, this approach emphasizes the necessity of dialogue and negotiation between partners with equal rights. This is the focus of an early publication edited by Moss and Pence (1994) who present ‘new approaches to defining quality.’ In Germany, a multi-perspective approach to defining and developing quality was introduced by our research-group in the mid-1990s. The concept of ‘dialogic quality development’ (Kronberger Kreis, 1998) has since been very influential for the further progression of the ‘quality-debate’ in Germany. It was – among others - one of the impulses for the launch of the ‘National Quality Initiative.’ I will report on this endeavour later.

The recognition of different groups of ‘stakeholders’, who are likely to have very different views on what is good or adequate in an early childhood setting, has practical consequences for how we define quality criteria, as well as for the decisions we make to alter, develop and improve the services. As a matter of fact, complexity will increase. What answers will we get to our questions of quality, when we ask 3 year old Kevin? What if we ask Maneesha, who came from Afghanistan with her daughter after she had been forced to give up her work as a paediatrician in a Kabul Hospital and now makes a living in Berlin, sweeping the floors of a McDonald’s restaurant? Talking to staff members might bring up a different view on what is important, than talking to the head teacher of the local primary school. What, if the centre is funded by the local authority? What kind of efficiency might then be regarded as ‘excellent’?

So we might concede, that multi-perspective approaches to defining ‘quality’ can get us closer to life’s reality, which usually doesn’t come well arranged and sorted, presenting a clear set of problems, waiting to be handled step by step. Professionals in social and educational practice are not technicians: “*We are not solving problems, we are managing messes!*” (Schön, 1984)

There are some pitfalls to the multi-perspective approach of defining and developing quality. The first is that of hyper-complexity, which can serve to create a sort of chaos. If we cannot rely on a shared framework that helps to structure and orient our perceptions, our comprehension and the resulting action, the likelihood is that quality can become an arbitrary matter. There can be no development without reference and values. Conversely, the wish to reduce complexity is another pitfall of the multi-perspective approach. With

various stakeholders, pursuing various interests, there is a temptation to streamline in order to eradicate confusion.

The recognition of various stakeholders has also emphasized economic and technologic rationalization in the field. Along with the rise of 'quality management' procedures (such as Total Quality Management (TQM) or procedures linked to ISO 9000), parents have transmuted into 'customers' and the rules of the market have begun to determine the development of services - at least in my country in the 1990s.

### **Re-contextualizing Quality**

While both of the approaches mentioned above turned out to be more and more inadequate for the description, as well as for the development of a highly complex arena like an early childhood setting, some authors (Woodhead, 1996; Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999; OECD, 2001) have fundamentally questioned the relevance of a decontextualized terminology of quality at all. From their point of view, concepts of quality are then "... *deeply influenced by underlying assumptions about childhood and education*" (OECD, 2001:63) in a certain social context. An early childhood setting, then, might no longer be seen as "...*customer-orientated service...*" but as "... *a forum in civil society where children and adults meet and participate together in projects of cultural, social, political and economic significance, and as such to be a community institution of social solidarity bearing cultural and symbolic significance.*" (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999:7)

### **Summary**

Let me try to summarize the thoughts of this introduction. What are early childhood institutions all about? At first sight, we might say, it's all about buildings and playgrounds, chairs and tables, toys and toilets, play dough, books, paper, crayons and so on. Things that we can touch, label and calculate. If we step back to a meta-level of description, we would talk about organizational aspects like group-size and staff-ratio, but also about qualifications, programs, funding and outcomes. But then there are people, children and adults, boys and girls, women (and a few men), laypersons and professionals, who are involved in all kinds of relevant action. These constantly gather and re-arrange in different groups, relating to one another in a specific place and time (or context) which we call a setting. They are pursuing various interests and are continuously forming patterns, which tend to be chaotic, as they cannot be predicted.

Early childhood institutions are fields of social and cultural interaction. They are manifest social co-constructions. 'Quality' then becomes a question of attitudes and values. It also becomes a question of power-relations and of social justice:

- Which questions do we allow to be raised, which ones do we ignore?
- Whose perspectives do we take into account, whose do we exclude?
- What kind of knowledge and whose expertise and experience do we acknowledge as being relevant?

These are the core-questions of quality!

### **The German Experience (1): Public Discourses and the 'National Quality Initiative'**

I come to my second point and would like to share with you some experiences from the German discourse on early childhood education and some insights from the first attempt ever to develop quality-criteria and assessment and evaluation procedures for the whole system of early education in Germany – the 'National Quality Initiative.' In Germany, as in most European countries, there is a long tradition of institutional education and care for young children. Unlike some other countries, there is long tradition of integrating 'care' and 'education' in the centres as well. Moreover, Friedrich Froebel's 19th century concept of the early childhood institution as a *Kindergarten* was clearly distinguished from the idea of early schooling. The *Kindergarten* was meant to be a social institution, committed to the rights and needs of young children and to the development of a democratic society. More than that, it was meant to be a learning space for children and professionals at the same time.<sup>2</sup> Although early childhood institutions are socially constructed, as authors such as Canella (1997) and Dahlberg *et al.* (1999) have been pointing out, the crucial question has scarcely been an issue in the public debate:

- What do we, be it as citizens, as policy makers, as parents, and last, but not least, as professionals, think early childhood institutions are for?

Today, we can agree that the lack of public interest and debate is one major obstacle for an established professionalism in our early years' sector. To pursue an approach like 'Talking about Quality' – and to widen it to the involvement of a broader public – is essential for the sustainable success of any quality initiative. In January 2000, the Federal government launched the 'National Quality Initiative', a nation-wide project consortium, which – for the first time – was to develop quality indicators in a joint research venture across the system. The 'National Quality Initiative' is funded by the Federal Minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, state ("Länder") Ministries and by municipal and non-governmental service providers. It comprises five individual research projects:

- Projects I + II: quality indicators for work with children aged 0 – 3 / 3 – 6;
- Project III: school-aged children;
- Project IV: quality indicators to a situation-based approach to pedagogy;
- Project V: quality indicators for service providers.

My colleagues and I were involved in *Project IV*, which was to develop quality indicators and evaluation procedures for centres pursuing a contextually appropriate approach to pedagogy, which we refer to as 'Situationsansatz.' Each of the five individual projects was dedicated to developing quality indicators and evaluation procedures for a specific aspect of the system of early childhood and out of school services. I shall speak mainly about *Project IV*, because it is closely related to the issues of shared concepts we are discussing during this conference.

Unlike most of the projects, our work in project IV of the 'National Quality Initiative' did not relate to a specific age group, but to a conceptual framework. This supposed that any attempt to negotiate the appropriateness of the practice in any early childhood setting required a shared reference frame between the participants. This includes the researchers' duty to unfold and explain their own assumptions and values. The so-called 'Situationsansatz' is a pedagogical framework broadly accepted for pedagogical work in German early childhood centres. It aims to foster children's autonomy, solidarity and competencies in real-life situations. It has its roots in the work of Paolo Freire and the curriculum theory of Shaul B. Robinsohn. It relates strongly to the concept of 'generative themes.' So, in more common terms, 'Situationsansatz' can be understood as a "contextually appropriate approach" to early childhood education and care.

There were three guiding questions for the study:

- What are the core quality indicators of the situation-based approach? Can they be formulated and substantiated in partnership with experienced practitioners, with parents and other "experts"?
- How can the pedagogical work in early childhood centres be evaluated so as to show that the day-to-day activities reflect the chosen criteria?
- Which evaluation procedures are helpful not only for description of the *status quo* but also for further development?

The study involved seventeen centres all over Germany, with 220 practitioners, and, in addition, parents, management, consultants and other experts. With another eighteen centres taking part in the external evaluation, we had a total of thirty-five centres participating in the study. The first step identified sixteen conceptual principles in a one-year process of seminars and workshops. Those principles were agreed to be the framework that would orient the work of the practitioners in the centres. There were twenty to twenty-five distinct criteria to each of the sixteen conceptual principles.

### **Evaluation Strategy: The Child Care Centre is a Learning Organisation**

Obviously, any attempt to evaluate the realisation of these principles must go far beyond answering questions like “yes, we do” or “no, we don’t.” The more important questions focus on the meaning of pedagogical action in a specific context. They strive to understand *why* practitioners do what they do and *what for*. In consequence, there will be a broad variety of possibilities as to *how* the principles are transferred into the every-day-practice of a particular centre, with its specific social milieu, with a wide range of diverse children and families and under different working conditions. As a second step, we developed a set of methods and procedures for internal evaluation which focuses on the process of transferring guiding principles into distinct practice. The internal evaluation process consists of the following steps which were inspired by the concept of “Empowerment Evaluation” as first published by Fetterman *et al.* (1996):

- Structured *self-assessment* of every staff member in a centre;
- *synopsis* of the individual ratings to detect congruencies and differences within a team;
- structured *group discussion* to come to a conjoint rating;
- setting goals for change;
- taking action.

Each step is clearly documented and can so be relied on for further reflection.

The next step introduces an external perspective on the work in the centre. According to the sixteen principles, an external evaluator collects data by observing practitioners, interviewing parents, discussing specific issues with the whole team and referring to all kinds of documentation in the centre. After a two to three day visit in the centre, the evaluator documents his/her experiences in a written report, which is then handed out to the participants. The report is structured according to the sixteen principles of the conceptual framework. After a couple of weeks of reading and reflection, the participants come together again to discuss the different perspectives. Plans for taking action are developed and responsibilities are determined. Parents are invited to participate in this discussion. It is obvious that in this dialogic procedure, the report of the evaluator does not mark the end of the evaluation process. In fact, it serves as a data-based external perspective, but none of the other participants need necessarily agree with the views of the evaluator. Differences are valued as a source for setting goals and fostering change.

Do evaluations work? Do they really support the autonomy of practitioners and – most important – can they initiate development and change? To catch at least a glimpse of the answers to these questions, we had our own project evaluated. The information on the impact of the evaluation process was gathered through a questionnaire and additional

interviews. All of the teams questioned stated that the evaluation process had initiated a continuous process of development in their pedagogical work. They concentrated on individual priorities. 80% of the heads of the centres and 75% of the staff members stated that the next steps for quality development had been concretely agreed. Altogether the practitioners valued the process as an effective way to further quality development.

As a conclusion, I want to highlight the value of *making differences*. The concept of framing the complexity of educational practice rather than comparing it to objectivistic standards allows the introduction of an external perspective into the evaluation setting. Following this approach, the focus of evaluation is clearly defined, and so are the roles of the participants. An external evaluator will explicitly get involved in the process of valuing and *meaning-making* in the specific context of an early childhood setting. There is no possibility for her or him to maintain what some still call a *professional distance*. The researcher becomes part of the evaluation system. His *findings* cannot pretend to be the only truth or even more objective than other interpretations. Dialogic evaluation raises questions, but does not predict the 'right' answers. Thus, it offers a possibility to make differences and to develop contextually appropriate practice.

To preserve the process and the development from being arbitrary, we find that a shared framework of values and orientations is essential. Within this framework, which is valid for both the practitioners and the researchers, a whole range of appropriate answers to the need of a specific community can be invented. They can not be standardized, as the concept of *standards* implies the idea of possible perfection, once you meet the standard. But – following Donald Winnicott (1964) – there is a real chance for them to be “*good enough*”.

### **The German Experience (2): Pedagogical Cultures between Reggio and PISA**

The 'National Quality Initiative' is mainly a result of concerns regarding quality that have been raised since the early 1990s in Germany. It was a decade when our publicly funded services for children and families were under enormous pressure due to budget deficits and cuts in the municipalities, which, in Germany are responsible for the funding of the early years' sector. Germany's low score in recent international student assessments like PISA has started a lively public debate about the efficiency of the early education system.<sup>3</sup> The socio-economic pressure on the whole education system is increasing. (Arbeitsstab Forum Bildung, 2002). Public interest is growing! Along with the awakening interest in early education, which is communicated to a broader public through periodicals like *Der Spiegel* or *Die Zeit*, comes a growing curiosity about what is going on in Swedish pre-schools, French 'Écoles Maternelles' and English 'Early Excellence Centres.' One striking realization for both the profession and the public was the existence of national pedagogical frameworks or national curricula in many countries; for example, Sweden,

Norway, New Zealand and the UK. Early Childhood Education and Care being a matter of interest on a national policy level, as *res publica*, that was quite different from the German reality - at least from the perspective of a West German dominated education system!

More than that, hidden behind the legislation, lie different notions of early childhood and of early childhood institutions - or different *pedagogical cultures*, which obviously have an impact on what is going on in the centres. In West Germany, child rearing and education have long been regarded as exclusively a private matter, that is, a matter for families and mainly mothers. In contrast, care and education for young children have been a central State issue in the socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR), where the female workforce was important for economy building. This ideology did not allow any differences in the access to the labour market for men and women. This is one reason for the extended provision of day care centres in East Germany. In addition, the specific perspective on the task of public education was: if you attempt to introduce every citizen to the reality of the socialist society, *you got to get 'em young!* The *Kindergarten* in the former GDR has been part of an integrative education system since the 1960s. A formal, in many ways regulative and controlling, curriculum had to be applied in any centre in the country. Areas of learning, learning goals and outcomes and didactic approaches were precisely defined. Early childhood practitioners were well trained to the same level as school teachers - and they were able to develop a professional *habitus* as experts for the development of young children.

It is obvious: whenever *curriculum* is meant as a *canon* or catalogue of fixed learning goals and *learning* is reduced to the transference of predefined experiences, the relation between adults (practitioners) and children can only be seen as a one way street. And this is exactly what happened in the centres. Adults naturally defined themselves as the active part. Children were the objects of their endeavours; they were to be taught, to be developed, and to be educated. I am not going to delve deeper into the East German experience here. But we all should be aware that there are crossroads ahead in the development of the early years' sector in almost every European country. Talking about *pedagogical cultures* in the context of a quality conference means to talk about the possible focus of professional practice. What we are facing now in Germany is a growing attention to 'early learning' which sometimes is misunderstood as being something different from 'care' or 'well-being' or the individual child's right to develop his/her whole personality.

There are lots of opportunities, of course: the importance of high quality provision as an issue in the public debate, for instance, and the political acknowledgement of economic advantages through investment in education. We must decide now: what kind of

pedagogical culture do we want to develop? Do we narrow our focus and reduce quality to the efficiency of early learning and teaching environments, instead of building civil institutions? Do we settle for achieving learning goals instead of widening the horizons of children? Shall we focus on children's rights or on the needs of primary-school preparation? These are core issues that will shape the profile and further development of the profession. Pedagogical cultures in Germany today are moving back and forth between these crucial questions. There certainly is a danger that, again, we might narrow our focus to only one aspect of the whole system, instead of opening our perception for integrative developments. While we are somewhat losing sight of Reggio, we are getting closer to PISA.

### **Ireland is Catching Up: Professional Challenges under Conditions of Change**

The Irish economy is flourishing like it never has before. And along with the 'Celtic Tiger', there are other countries in Europe, like Portugal or Spain, that are going through a phase of prosperity. The Baltic countries in the east and Malta in the far south, for example are catching up too. Due to economic developments, Ireland is attracting more and more migrants from all over the world and the Irish, who have long built their self-conception around being emigrants themselves, must now cope with a complete new situation. But regarding the whole range of social and cultural changes we must consider (to alter the quote of an American president) "it's not the economy, stupid!" At least, not just the economy. Gunilla Dahlberg (1999; 2002) argues that the economic, social or technological changes we are facing today are much more than just the reflection of the shift from an industrial to an information-based society. There is, she writes:

*"a growing scepticism about modernity [...] and growing disillusionment with its inability to comprehend and accommodate human diversity, complexity and contingency..."* (Dahlberg, 1999:22)

More than that, many of the basic assumptions that have been shaping our perception of the world are becoming more and more questionable. We can no longer rely on continuous and linear progress. The certainty of an absolute truth, which can be discovered by applying objective scientific methods, has vanished, too. Instead, uncertainty and contingency in every aspect of life is becoming a common experience.

We insist, that there is no way to develop high quality early childhood education that is not closely linked to the social and cultural context of growing up. But then new questions arise about the presuppositions for our pedagogical theory and practice: How can we organize the relationship between children and adults, which we refer to as education, under conditions of constant change and uncertainty? Looking at the changes in our own lives, do we really know today, what to teach children, so they will be able to cope with



future challenges? We clearly don't. What we do know is that our experiences and our knowledge as adults can no longer be projected in a linear way or serve as a blueprint for our children's future. Margaret Mead, the American ethnologist, first introduced the concept of a 'prefigurative culture' where it will be the child, not the parent or grandparent, who represents what is to come (Mead, 1978:83).

As a result, of course, we are facing a radical change in pedagogical relations. It brings with it, as some may complain, the complete loss of what we thought was natural authority. Instead of leading children into a future, that is, by and large, already known to adults, we now "*all are equally immigrants into the new era*", to quote Margaret Mead again (1978:70). Can we link the discourse of cultural transformation to an extended view of professional development in early childhood education and care? Obviously, there is a shift in the role of the adult. But in what way would that influence our concept of 'profession'?

In prefigurative cultures any 'top-down-concept' of teaching, aiming to fill up children's minds with knowledge, becomes obsolete. Many of us will agree that learning is much more about 'making experiences', which is an activity of the learner. We do know today, that these experiences are more likely to be sustainable when they are gained and reflected upon in shared activities between children and adults (Sylva *et al.*, 2004). So, even when we look at children as 'immigrants' and as explorers of a new land, they still need to be accompanied.

What might be helpful for practitioners to take with them on such a journey? Remember, there are no maps and it is certainly not going to be a guided tour. First of all, it is still not bad to have a good deal of experience and even knowledge of one's own. Even in times of post-modern contingency, we do know a lot about children's learning and development. Professional preparation and initial practitioner education for any person working with young children and their families must reach for the highest standards. Along with knowledge and own experience comes the awareness that knowledge cannot simply be applied. So a second basic requirement would be the ability to constantly generate 'actionable knowledge', as Chris Argyris (1996) has called it, and to constantly reflect upon your actions in a specific context. We have been looking at pedagogical situations as being less predictable and more complex than ever. From this point of view, systematically dealing with uncertainty is the greatest and most challenging professional task. The more we regard education as co-construction or as interaction between partners with equal rights, the more important it is to have confidence (and self-confidence) as part of the professional equipment.

Confidence is needed at the political level of the education system, too. Acting professionally, in the way we are discussing it now, can neither be prescribed nor controlled with technical approaches. But of course it can be facilitated, fostered and developed. To quote Margaret Mead (1987:87) again:

*“Now, with our greater understanding of the process, we must cultivate the most flexible and complex part of the system – the behaviour of adults. We must, in fact, teach ourselves how to alter adult behaviour so that we can give up postfigurative upbringing, with its tolerated cofigurative components, and discover prefigurative ways of teaching and learning that will keep the future open. We must create new models for adults who can teach their children not what to learn, but how to learn, not what they should be committed to but the value of commitment.”*

### **Frameworks and Horizons: The (Bermuda) Quality Triangle**

What are the loose ends, and is there a chance to tie them together? When we started to raise the issue of quality systematically in Germany some fifteen years ago, developments in early childhood education and care seemed to be determined by a number of perturbing factors.

Neither professional ambition nor the purpose of the early years’ sector in the society was clear. We had not been debating what early childhood institutions should be for. As a consequence, there was no adequate political framework, either for the development of the services, or for professional development. Unclear and diverse responsibilities at every level of the system had led to a complete failure to ensure adequate investment in the services, in the qualification of practitioners and even in research.

These factors shaped what I have elsewhere called the ‘Bermuda-Triangle of Quality’ and the whole project of early education and care for every child was at risk of getting lost in rough sea. In the following years, external factors helped to raise public debate, which then facilitated the development of a ‘National Quality Initiative.’ Today, the ongoing process of European integration and worldwide competition opens the door for investment in the system. It has, on the other hand, narrowed the focus of the public debate to questions of early learning.

We know now that high quality in early childhood can only be achieved by looking at all levels of the system together, that is, practice; management and leadership; curriculum; legislation *and* professional development. This gives us the possibility of re-constructing the triangle.

There are (of course) three corners to the triangle: to start with, the complexity of an early childhood education and care system in a modern society can only be developed within an open framework; a framework which sets values and overall goals that describes the purpose of early childhood institutions in a social and cultural context. Its main aim is to orient public and professional discourse. A second corner would be confidence in professional autonomy. While the general questions of early years' institutions can be discussed and reflected upon at a national, or even an international level, the answers still have to be developed in the context of the local community. Last of all, to bridge the gap between the open and general framework and the concrete practice in every centre, it is important to develop an idea of evaluation for the system, not to increase control, but to systematically organize interest and mutual support. You have already taken important steps towards the construction of an Irish 'Quality-Triangle.' I want to encourage you to carry on in partnership on this way.

When I left my office at the University of Halle, a colleague, who is a frequent visitor to Sligo, told me never to end a lecture without a story. So I found this one for you and of course it is about open frameworks and professional autonomy:

A bumblebee goes to see a wise man, asking for advice as to how she could survive the coming long cold winter. The wise man thinks for a long time, then he advises the bumblebee to transmute into a cricket. This way she could easily survive close to a warm oven. The bumblebee then asks what she must do to become a cricket. 'Well', said the wise man, 'I gave you the big idea. You have to work out the details by yourself.'

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### Notes

- 1 I assume you remember the photos in the media showing an Australian prison camp for illegal immigrants from Afghanistan. People can be seen, climbing the fence, trying to get over it or at least trying to get a glance of the world behind the barbed wire. Nothing special in times where refugees are a common global phenomenon - until we zoom a little bit closer. Then we can learn that they are "proud to be an ISO 9001:2000 Quality Certified Centre"! With this arbitrary approach, any institution or service can be connected to the terminology of 'quality'.
- 2 Needless to say, this was one of the reasons the Prussian government banned Froebel's Kindergarten after the failure of the 1848 revolution and forced many well trained educators into emigration.
- 3 To understand why this is, it is important to look at another major obstacle for professional development: although the Kindergarten is a true European invention (Froebel / Montessori / Oberlin / Owen), there is a rather underdeveloped tradition of cross-national exchange and discourse among German practitioners and researchers in the field. By and large, until the mid 1990s, the development of the early years' institutions in Germany has been uncoupled from international discourses and developments.



# Defining Quality





## Rethinking the Computer Culture with Early Learners

Nina Bølgan

### Introduction

The importance of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as part of childhood environments has so far been largely ignored both in *Barnehagen* and in early childhood education/pre-school teacher education in Norway. The Norwegian word *Barnehagen* is used to describe the range of different types of provision for children from birth to six years of age, such as day nurseries, kindergartens and pre-schools. They all have an educational agenda.

This paper will focus on how ICT has become part of daily life activities in some Norwegian *Barnehager*. Early Learners are surrounded by ICT in their everyday experiences. ICT is often regarded as a synonym for desktop computers and activities and interactive computer games. However, when I talk about ICT, I usually refer to a wide-ranging definition of what is meant by ICT. In this paper, I will refer to digital tools working together with the computer such as the digital camera, printer, scanner and CD-burner, and to creative and playful activities. I will present children who investigate and develop ideas, fantasy and understanding.

### National Strategies on ICT in *Barnehagen*

There is, at present, international interest in Scandinavian practices and policies in the *Barnehage* field. Some people look at the Scandinavian countries as forerunners of what contemporary practice could be, and what socio-economically strong institutions are able to construct (Rhedding-Jones 2004). Still, while public debate centres on how ICT is creating a new environment in which children are growing up and developing, the *Barnehage* sector has scarcely begun to discuss the issue. The Norwegian Framework Curriculum for the *Barnehage* (1995) draws attention to the importance of technical aids in everyday life. Still, technical areas have traditionally been given little attention by the *Barnehage*. The *Barnehage* does support a growing understanding of computer work if the *Barnehage* has a computer. But few have one. Since ICT is defined by its technical dimension, this can explain why staff members are sceptical towards computers in the *Barnehage*.

The Ministry of Children and Family Affairs is responsible for policies, regulations, professionalism and granting in the *Barnehage* field. For the last three years, the Ministry has carried out a program for quality improvement in the *Barnehage*. The notion of quality is difficult. What is quality? Who has the power to define quality? Can we trust research? According to Stephen and Plowman (2002), there is a scarcity of good quality

research findings on using ICT in educational settings for pre-school children, and claims rely more on assertions than on empirical studies.

The discourse involved in the Norwegian quality debates show that people have different views of quality, the challenges mount up and the Norwegian *Barnehage* will change in time (Søbstad 2004). In my opinion, *quality* raises more questions than answers. It is reasonable to ask if quality is mostly a rhetorical notion. There is a contrast between the notion of quality and the fact that *Barnehagen* achieve better quality with more children in each group, less staff members and less money. Even if the Norwegian government focus on quality, the discussion of quality does not seem to be linked to everyday practices of what to do with “minority children” (Rhedding-Jones 2004), or in my opinion ICT, both of which are challenges Norwegian *Barnehager* have to face. Today the government does not seem to look at ICT as a learning tool for early learners.

### **National Strategies on ICT and Early Childhood Education**

To become a pre-school teacher, one has to enter the Degree Programme in Early Childhood Education. Entry to the programme is normally gained on the basis of upper secondary education. It is normally a full-time course lasting 3 years. Students are offered an introductory course in the basic understanding of ICT in such a way that they can manage a computer and the Web. They are expected to become familiar with the most common user programs. Until Autumn 2003, there was no instruction on how to use computers with children; nor did it include procedures for creative and multimedia programs.

However, a new Curriculum for Early Childhood Education (Utdannings-og Forskningsdepartementet, 2003) plans to instruct students in how to use ICT both together with children in the *Barnehage* and as an administrative tool. From now on, the various subjects will include ICT as a tool for “*organisation, communication, play and learning*”, and the coursework will be organised in such a way that the students use ICT with “*groups of children and in administration of the Barnehage*”. This should come into effect within the next two years. Apart from these provisions, there are no national standards for the knowledge and skills on ICT for Pre-school teachers. Moreover, the educators in early childhood education have little experience in how to use the computer with children and how to use it as an administrative tool in the *Barnehage*.

### **Projects on ICT**

#### **Research into the use of ICT with Early Learners in Norway is only just beginning.**

In 2000, I wanted to find out about the use of computers in *Barnehagen*. I made contact with thirty of them through the Internet. Since they all had e-mail addresses, I assumed there had to be at least one computer in the *Barnehage*. I was right. However, none of

them made use of the computer with children nor did they intend to do so. “*That’s not for us*”, they answered. This was very disappointing for me.

Shortly after, I was invited to collaborate with university colleges in Spain, the Netherlands and Denmark in the European Development Project “MediaGuide,” which received funds from the European Union’s Leonardo Programme. This project focused on the educational opportunities afforded by computers and other digital tools, and how adults could interact with and help children and young people to use technology to produce and create, not only to consume. In Norway there was one problem. Almost none of the *Barnehager* involved had their own computer. This made it difficult to work together with the children at their place of work. However, by the end of the project, there was a group of Pre-school teachers who were competent, interested and eager to work digitally together with children, but without computers.

Then I became the Project Manager of IBM’s *KidSmart Early Learning Programme* in Norway. This programme focuses on giving children who do not have access to a computer at home the opportunity to acquaint themselves with computers at an early age. Fifty computers were donated in 2003. *Barnehager* that enrolled children from minority linguistic backgrounds and where average family incomes were low could apply. They had to present an ICT-project and develop plans for computer training for staff members. Local steering committees were set up and were to have an overall responsibility for the project at local level. The owners of the *Barnehager* had to give their active support to the project locally.

#### **What have Children and Staff done so Far?**

Even if the Norwegian experiences are limited, I believe we have some exemplary practice on how to work with the computer and other digital tools in a creative and playful way. This kind of use of the computer is very different from using pedagogical and interactive computer games. Computer games can easily be something the children use, but it does not have to be of any interest of the staff members. From my point of view, a creative and playful usage of digital tools will support quality in early learning settings, in particular because staff members have to play an active part.

Due to the lack of national strategies on ICT, the members of the KidSmart project had to define their quality approach to the digital world. The digital camera has been the most successful investment so far and has served as a door-opener for many staff members with regard to the computer. It has opened up new opportunities for documentation that can reflect the changes in children’s abilities and interests.

The children use digital cameras and take pictures. The oldest children are able to connect the camera to the computer. The pictures can be shown on screen and printed out straight away. They decide which pictures they want to work on or print out. They laminate the pictures so they can be used again and again for different purposes.

Simultaneously, the children are involved in documentation. They collect pictures, text and sounds. They investigate the different activities that are going on, their own thoughts and interests, and progress and development. Children and staff share these experiences with each other in the *Barnehage* and communicate experiences to parents.

Working with pictures, text and sound stimulates the children's language. Many children are not competent Norwegian speakers. The computer gives these children the opportunity to succeed in an arena where language skills are not the most important, and where the children exploit the visual possibilities of the computer. The oldest children can make their own jig-saw puzzles and memory-plays and become producers.

When these children sit in front of the computer at an early age, what will happen with regard to their social experience? A social space is created in front of the computer and children experience new social possibilities. Only on rare occasions are children alone at the computer.

### **Collaboration with Parents**

Parents responded positively and supported the project when they understood that staff members did not focus on computer games but used the digital equipment for other purposes. In the afternoon, staff members put today's pictures in a PowerPoint, they roll the computer out of the cupboard and the parents can take a look at what has been going on that day. The pictures facilitate communication between parents and staff members. Staff members take care of the children's work/play products. Parents take part in the experiences of their children when the staff members put pictures, text and sound on a CD, or make a small newspaper for those who do not have a computer at home. In particular, parents with a non-Norwegian cultural background told the staff members that they learned a lot about what goes on in a Norwegian *Barnehage*.

### **Staff Training is Essential**

There is general agreement among all the participants in these projects that training of staff members is essential. According to Dahlberg *et al.* (1999), quality can be understood as the meaning or value a phenomenon has to those who are involved. Initial practitioner training and ongoing professional development is therefore a vital and urgent requirement for a sensible implementation of ICT in early learning settings. In the KidSmart-project, each *Barnehage* started by carrying out a survey of its staff members'

ICT skills. Then they developed training plans to ensure that staff members had basic computer knowledge and skills. The training was based on the use of internal resources. The novice learned from the more experienced colleagues or even from a child. In this way, it was easier to understand what was happening, repeat it under supervision and gradually learn to manage alone and together with the children. And it was cheap. However, staff members now need to develop more varied and advanced learning skills and they need to take part in reflective processes if they are to use ICT to a greater potential and secure some kind of quality in this work.

The government has so far shown no interest in ICT. In the Norwegian context, we have to look to the staff members, to the parents and to the children and see how they cooperate to develop digital understanding, knowledge and skill. We have to be attentive to their experiences and feelings about quality and computer work. And their voices will hopefully be heard.

Quality can, however, not only be looked at in a local context. The development of a systematic training programme for staff members in the *Barnehage* should be a national responsibility, as it is for teachers in primary and secondary schools. During the last two years, 18,000 teachers have completed an extensive supplementary training programme on pedagogical use of ICT. An initiative was presented to the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs on this issue. The Ministry was asked to support a pilot project on a similar training programme for staff in *Barnehagen*. The programme for teachers would be modified and aimed specially at staff in *Barnehagen*. Two or three participants from a *Barnehage* would form a group, become members of an online community and would receive supervision. The programme would provide staff with appropriate knowledge and skills and include pedagogical arguments regarding the use of ICT with early learners. Then, staff members who have completed the programme would deliver training to colleagues in their own *Barnehage* and in their local area.

The Ministry, however, has rejected this offer. For the time being, the Ministry are working on a revision of the Framework Plan. They do not want to support such a project before they have considered how a new Framework Plan can become a tool for the development and assurance of quality. A committee has been appointed, and has also to consider the possibilities represented by ICT in the *Barnehage*. The committee will deliver their recommendations at the end of February 2005.

In my opinion, the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs are on the defensive in this case. If Norway is not to fall behind in the ICT-field, hopefully the Ministry in a year or two will grant money for a more established programme for staff all over Norway. And hopefully, such a programme can also become part of the future education of pre-school teachers.

## Conclusion

In the future, the ability to use a computer with children will probably be an integrated part of every occupational group working with children in one way or another. We need new competency and we need to overcome myths and prejudice in this field. It is important to look into the experiences of institutions that really work with the computer in a qualified way.

In *The Theater Curtain*, a book about how children worked to make a new curtain for the old baroque theatre in Reggio Emilia in Italy, Vea Vecchi (2002:74) writes:

*"Without going into the role that the digital revolution will have in the formation of today's youth, we feel that in this current phase where digital technologies are being introduced into scholastic education, we need to reflect more deeply on the processes that a traditional education enables and facilitates and on those that are supported and nurtured by the digital world. Only in this way can we investigate an area that is still new for education: the connections created by interweaving traditional and digital strategies."*

Yes, staff members in *Barnehaven* and educators in early childhood education need to reflect more deeply on the processes that a traditional education enables and on those that are supported and nurtured by the digital world. ICT as part of children's daily life activities challenges staff members to rethink the content and quality of childhood today. The pedagogy concerning the use of ICT in early learning settings must be further developed. It is important to ensure that public policy encourages and supports the use of ICT in early learning settings in Norway.

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## Quality: Control Or Autonomy?

### Philomena Donnelly

Quality is an issue that has become central in early childhood education and a conference dedicated to discussing the concept and related concepts is very welcome. It is very welcome because in talking about quality and what it means, one has to reflect on the purpose and philosophies underpinning the education system in which early childhood education is taking place. The defining of quality and the implementation of quality standards can become an authoritarian top-down approach or a democratic approach to education and children involving all the participant voices. I want to differentiate between the physical conditions of early years setting and the teaching and learning that takes place within them.

This paper concentrates on teaching and learning and I wish to raise a number of matters related to defining and implementing quality in early childhood settings namely, language, teaching and learning and professional autonomy.

#### Language

Edward Said (1993:387), the literary critic, commented:

*“Rarely before in human history has there been so massive an intervention of force and ideas from one culture to another as there is today from America to the rest of the world.”*

One place where this is notable is in the use of language. TV programmes such as Friends, The Simpsons, Scrubs, Sex in the City etc. are somewhat responsible. More significant for today’s conference is the language of the market place that is profit motivated, results and product orientated and ruthless. It is a world of the survival of the fittest. Money and power are the driving forces. That this is the language of Irish business is not my particular concern today but the effect that such an ethos and language could have on education.

One of the hallmarks of a profit driven world is the demand for bigger, better, best. This can be found in the language of McDonalds, the burger outlets, where you can buy a big-mac, that is a large burger, or indeed you can buy a large big-mac, which is an even bigger burger, and you don’t have to stop there, you can buy a super, large big-mac, which of course is even bigger than the large big-mac. One would be tempted to speak on the need for good grammar in general society but I’ll resist this temptation to dwell



on a number of phrases that have become part of the language of early childhood education and which I feel we should discard for educational reasons.

Two in particular are '*Centres of Excellence*' and '*best practice*'. In some documents dealing with early years, these phrases are happily used. What does 'best practice' mean? Working as an early years educator is a practice. I will later speak of the professionalism involved in this, but for teaching, in whatever capacity, to remain a practice, it has to be defined as a living thing. Taking an example from another profession, say medicine: A surgeon in the Mater hospital may have performed heart surgery on a patient yesterday which turned out to be a successful procedure, meaning that the patient did not die and can continue to live well for many years to come. The operation was a success. The same surgeon may perform the same operation on a similar patient tomorrow and for all kinds of different possibilities, the operation may not be a success. The patient may die or have limited life expectancy. I am ruling out neglect of any sort. As a professional, self-reflective practitioner, the surgeon will want to examine and talk through with his colleagues involved the two procedures to see what they can learn. To an assessment process that judges on results, the surgeon was 'excellent' yesterday and a 'failure' today. My argument is that any practice is subject to a particular time and place and other factors may impinge to change the outcome of the process.

To use superlative language when assessing or defining quality in education is inappropriate, and I think, could put pressure on practitioners to feel a sense of continual failure. Before I began lecturing in St. Patrick's College, I taught young children in primary schools for many years. Often I had a class for a two-year period. Never in all my years teaching did I leave a class and feel, '*yes, I did an excellent job,*' implying that each child had reached his/her potential in all of the areas of the curriculum and in the non-curriculum areas. There was always something more I wanted to do with the whole class or with particular children within a class. I know that many teachers identify with this. But I equally know that the nature of teaching and learning means that such words as 'excellent' and 'best' are transcendent. Superlatives imply a finished conversation, an end rather than a continuing dialogue. I believe that my very last day of teaching, be it a general lecture, a tutorial or whatever, will be my best day of teaching because it will be the end result of all of my teaching life. I will have accomplished the most knowledge and experience, shared it with colleagues, read, researched and published, and will have arrived at the total of my professional life.

Is there some mythical standard of excellence that can be reached through acquiring certain technical skills? To promote such a concept is to de-humanise teaching, and more worryingly, to de-humanise children. Language matters and the language we use to describe our work with children indicates our understanding of childhood. There is also

the implication that there is a pre-determined standard that can be judged, tested and reached. It keeps things simple and neat, and therein rests the danger.

In the introduction to *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Postmodern Perspectives* (2003) the authors, Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss and Alan Pence raise this matter when they comment on such questions as: How do we measure quality? What are the most cost effective programmes? What standards do we need? How can we best achieve desirable outcomes?

*“The common feature of such questions is their technical and managerial nature. They seek techniques that will ensure standardization, predictability and control. They aspire to methods that can reduce the world to a set of objective statements of fact, independent of statements of value and the need to make judgements.....they are not questioning questions, which ask about value, acknowledge the probability of multiple perspectives and meanings, diversity and uncertainty, and which open up for democratic participation, dialogue and further questioning. In short, they express a desire for a clean and orderly world, devoid of messiness and complexity.”* (Dahlberg et al., 2003:2)

So, I am recommending that in defining quality in early childhood education in Ireland, we reject the language of the market place, and while demanding high standards, define them within the language of education. The avoidance of superlatives would be helpful in this process.

### **Learning and Teaching**

Teaching and learning are complex processes. There is no one theory explaining all the complexities of the development of the human mind and there is a need for a diversity of approaches in teaching. For good practice to be enacted in early years settings, it is vital that an articulation of what is understood by learning and development is defined and that such discussions are not fudged. I say this because it is one of my few criticisms of the Irish Primary School Curriculum (1999). In the recent published *Framework for Early Learning* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2004), both Piaget and Vygotsky are referred to. However, at the beginning of the consultative document “developmentally appropriate” is defined as:

*“Activities are developmentally appropriate when they reflect a child’s particular age and stage of development.”* (NCCA, 2004:3)

This would appear to be a direct acceptance of a Piagetian understanding of children. If it is, it should be acknowledged as such and personally, I don't accept Piaget's understanding of age-related development. Erica Burman, in *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*, argues that it is precisely because Piaget's influence on developmental psychology has been so profound in structuring the form of the discipline that the Piagetian undertones are largely invisible (Burman, 2000:151). For quality to be enacted, it has to be based on what is understood as teaching and learning and will directly effect what is assessed, how it is assessed and by whom. There is not time to go into the details of these arguments now, but to give an example of how this fits into my argument of rejecting superlative language and acknowledging the diversity of learning, here is a quotation from Robert Fisher on the complexity of acquiring a concept:

*"Learning a concept is not an 'all or nothing' process, it is the building up of successive approximations, of finer distinctions, of a widening network of related ideas, of coming closer to the common understandings of a culture and to the knowledge structure of experts."* (Fisher, 1995:60)

Furthermore he stresses:

*"We are always in a state of incomplete knowledge, of coming to know, of building on our partial understandings. Throughout life, we are (or should be) constantly developing our conceptual understanding of the world."* (Fisher, 1995:61)

Just as Fisher claims forming a concept is an on-going process, so too does he comment that it is an integral part of a cultural understanding. Early childhood education can have many universal features, but equally it has many that are local and specific. The educationalists in Reggio Emilia in Italy often stress that their system is not a blue print to be transplanted worldwide but the principles involved can be utilised by other communities in keeping with their own environment and culture. This emphasis on the local also has implications for defining quality. Woodhead is strong in arguing such a case:

*"I challenge the global distribution of any single framework of quality. Such a framework might inevitably lead to a world of uniformity, a standardised recipe for the quality of childhood."* (Woodhead, 1996:17)

How does one move beyond the general definitions? Certainly one approach is to encourage practitioners to define their own quality within the context of a general definition. This leaves a space for the professional autonomy of the early years educator. She or he may well discuss these and certainly inform both parents/ guardians and children as to what these are, why they are and how they can participate in them. This brings me to the matter of professionalism.

### Professionalism and Critical Thinking

There are guidelines as to what professionalism is and what questions can be asked to establish it as such:

- Is the area complex and is its complexity known and understood?
- Do the claimants to professional recognition operate at a critical decision-making level and have they the expertise/ skill to do so?
- Is the knowledge and expertise necessary for the day-to-day job?
- Is the area one where a unique, definite and essential social service is required?

Educating children in the early years complies with all of these questions and sometimes it can be difficult to define the complexity of human relationships that take place in an early years setting. Eisner comments on this:

*"The realities of the classroom... will always present more to the perceptive teacher than propositional language can ever hope to capture. The uniqueness of an individual child, the emotional tone of something said in love or anger, the sense of engagement when a class is attentive will always elude the language of propositions."* (Eisner, 1984:51-52)

Critical theorists such as Rex Gibson (1986) and Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren (1989) warn of the dangers of de-skilling teachers and attempts at 'teacher-proofing' curricula that reduces teachers to technicians. With constant demand for quality assurance and accountability, combined with the pressure of school league tables and litigation against schools, the reduction of teaching to a skills-based function is a very immediate threat. At present in Ireland there is an-going debate whether or not to publish school league tables based on examination results. No final decision has been made but the danger inherent in the demands for publication is that education becomes classified as a commodity, using the language and the values of the market place. Gibson (1986:7) attributes this outlook on education to the *"obsession with calculation and measurement: the drive to classify, to label, to assess and number all that is human."* Giroux and McLaren offer an alternative that they call emancipatory authority and which gives teaching its dialectical meaning. Within such a construct, there is an emphasis on children finding their own voices and to construct meaning out of their own narratives, based on their family experiences and their neighbourhood lives:

*"A critical pedagogy in this case addresses, affirms and critically analyses the experiences, histories, and categories of meaning that shape the immediate reality of student's lives, but it does not limit itself to these categories."* (Giroux and McLaren, 1989:146)

This is not meant to imply an isolationist position. We have a great deal to learn from practices in many and varied parts of the world in terms of quality provision for our children, and in interacting with other systems, we can critically reflect on our own. An example of this is a visit I made to Finland last semester as part of an Erasmus programme. I went to the university of Savonlinna and visited a number of early years settings with one of the lecturers. On one such visit I was talking to the teacher of a class of four-to-five year old children. I was asking her about daily routines, and despite her very good English, at one point communication broke down. She was explaining to me that when the children came back in from playing she would be doing a lesson on touching. I explained that we too do this with our children, thinking of programmes like Stay Safe. However, after some minutes of confusion, I realised the Finnish teacher's lesson involved teaching the children how to touch each other, how to hug, how to gently rub the back of a finger along someone else cheek, to make a circular motion on each other's back etc. This activity was taught through engagement of the children with each other, with their teacher and the nursery nurses present. I realised how my own understanding of touching, a very basic and instinctive way of communicating, had become warped when applied to a professional setting. I think this reflects outside influences in Irish society. I wondered to myself what would happen if I suggested to our B.Ed students in St. Patrick's college that on their next Teaching Practice they should do a class on touching. What has happened to us as a society that in our genuine desire to protect our own and other children, we have allowed some good educational practice to be detached from basic healthy communication? This is just one small example of some of the issues we need to reflect upon as educators before we allow litigation and market place language determine what we teach, how we teach it and how it is assessed. Critical reflection is now more than ever a necessary part of being an early childhood educator.

### **Autonomy or Control?**

This is the question I set out with and to which I would say yes to both. There is a need for public accountability to a democratically elected government. We elect governments and pay tax that we expect the government of the day to re-distribute. We may well argue not enough goes to education and to early childhood education. However as Readings (1996:131) so accurately puts it we should "*refuse to equate accountability with accounting.*" There needs to be general principles laid out at a national level for the education of young children. These can be informed by both national and international practice and research and consultation with interested bodies and experts in the field. A government needs to assure its citizens that there is quality and standards in the provision of early childhood education and care. The interpretation of general principles in the sense of 'meaning making' in early years settings should be within the remit of the practitioners and the children in their care. This way, there is a recognition that there can be many meanings or understandings as opposed to an attempt to reduce what is going on to fit preconceived categorical criteria.

In summary, quality in early years depends on the values of the society of which it is part. How do we view the future? If we wish to see values that recognise the dignity of each person and the diversity within our society and to encourage participation by educators and children in their own lives and the lives of their communities, then the language and definition of quality needs to reflect this. So the control that supports quality needs to be flexible and supportive of the autonomy of practitioners and experts. I would therefore recommend:

- Note with caution the language we use and recommend the disuse of superlative when talking of teaching and learning;
- Discuss further what we mean by teaching and learning;
- Ensure there are central broad principles on ECCE;
- The implementation is left within the autonomy of the professionals involved.

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## A Critical Examination of the Use of Fairy Tale Literature with Pre-Primary Children in Developmentally Appropriate Early Childhood Education and Care Programs

Ruth Doran

What are fairy tales? Folk tales are stories orally passed down from generation to generation that are modified as they are told to remain current in their contextual frame. Folk tales are categorized as *pour quoi* tales, tall tales, or fairy tales. *Pour quoi* tales are stories that answer “why” or have a moral, such as fables. Tall tales are characterized by legends, and communicate historical facts or admirable traits of idealized figures. Fairy tales contain the grouping of stories that frequently feature fairy godmothers or contain other emphases on magical elements (Temple, *et al.*, 2002). Folk tales and fables were not originally written for children; they were intended to reflect philosophical thought. More often than not, early tales depicted adult customs, beliefs, and habits of a particular time. (Morgan, 1999). Oral tales were told by adults for adults. The purpose of the oral folk tale was to foster a sense of belonging and hope that miracles were possible for a better world (Zipes, 1979). They were closely connected to the customs, beliefs and rituals of tribes and communities. Oral folk tales were interactive. The audience could participate and even modify the tales to fit the needs of the community. Thus, it is rather remarkable that over the years they have become staples in the lives of young children. Actually, fairy tales became staples in children’s literature only since the nineteenth century. In the United States, “chapmen” (peddlers) traveled from town to town selling sundries and “chapbooks” (fairy tales) that were made popular by the young readers at the time. Fairy tales had their beginning in children’s literature then, as a marketing tool for cheap vendors (Cashdan, 1999).

Although fairy and folk tales have been part of civilization since recorded history, curiously, they haven’t always been a staple in the lives of children. It wasn’t until Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published the second edition of their *Children’s and Household Tales* in 1812-15 that fairy tales were written down specifically for a child audience (Zipes, 1979).

Since about 1800, the role of fairy tales in education has consistently drawn attention and animated discussion. Opponents of the use of fairy tale literature in early childhood programs cite intense imagery, fearful responses to common situations, and the reduction of imagination by the substitution of imitative play over imaginative play. (Wolffheim, 1953; Mitchell, 1982; Levin, 2003). To opponents, the substitution of realia literature promotes rich discourse and normative play and the development of imagination. Advocates, on the other hand, cite the development of the id, the resolutions of complex

archetypal elements of development, and the provision of models of resolution of the triumph of good over evil. Advocates also espouse the role fairy tale literature plays in the transmission of cultural components within the construction of ethnic identity. (Bettelheim, 1976; Cashdon, 1999; Temple *et al.*, 2002).

It is important to consider child development as a contextual frame for the consideration of the use of fairy tale literature in pre-primary curriculum. Jean Piaget's theory of developmental stages provides the theoretical underpinnings for many approaches to early childhood education and care around the world. Piaget's theory of cognition includes the notion that a child passes through in an invariant manner that is also transformative, meaning that the quality of later intellectual behavior depends on the quality of the experiences that preceded it. Preschool children are typically engaged in the preoperational period of human development (typically age two through seven) (Good and Brophy, 1995).

The term "preoperational" is used precisely because children have not yet reached the point of engaging in logical or operational thought. In this stage, children are egocentric, meaning that they have not learned to consider things from another's perspective, rendering objectivity impossible. Young children also attribute life to inanimate objects, believing that they have a mind of their own (animism). Piaget noted that children engaged in the preoperational stage do not think abstractly, objectively, or in a logical sequence. As explained by Piaget, these developmental hallmarks of the preoperational stage preclude young children from the strategies necessary to properly distinguish fantasy from reality, as developmentally, their ability to process information is structurally limited. Instead, reality consists of whatever is felt, seen, or heard, at any given moment (Piaget, 1963).

These unrealistic perceptions of the young child give rise to irrational fears of abandonment; of attacks by monsters hiding in closets or under beds; of being alone in the dark; and/or of witches, ghosts, dragons, and other creatures of fantasy. Since fantasy literature (such as fairy tales) cannot be distinguished as make-believe material and is often interpreted literally by the child, new fears may be created by reading stories to him or her about monsters, evil witches, trolls, giants, and other scary characters (Whittin, 1994). This authentication by trusted adults (via storytelling) adds credibility and power to the ethereal and undefined fears of the young child. To attempt to explain to very young children that their fears are illogical and unfounded can be a futile exercise as the child is governed by what is perceived (Mitchell, 1982).



Several aspects of young children's capacities to learn are important to consider when planning activities and choosing literature. Preschool children engage in the following processes: analysis (breaking down material into component parts to understand the structure, seeing similarities and differences); synthesis (putting parts together to form a new whole, rearranging, reorganizing); and evaluation (judging the value of tangible materials based on definite criteria) (Edwards and Springate, 1993).

Young children also need to express ideas through different, expressive avenues and symbolic media. Communication with the world is accomplished with a combination of methods. Children need and seek to increase competence and integration across formats including words, gestures, drawings, paintings, sculpture, construction, music, dramatic play, movement and dance (Bredenkamp and Copple, 1997).

In this context then, what is the effect of a preschool curriculum infused with fairy tale literature on the holistic development of preschool-aged children? What fairy tales do provide (as a genre) are rich imaginative resources. However, as delineated above, pre-primary children in early childhood settings need activities which provide rich sensory resources so that their natural strengths of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation may be exercised. Do fairy tales answer these mandates? Or does the powerful imaginative modeling provided by fairy tales promote imitative play, with the corresponding reduction of personal generation of ideas and sensory support that increases school readiness measurements?

Many researchers have confirmed Piaget's notion that young children cannot distinguish fantasy from reality (Elkind, 1978), yet parents and educators alike continue to choose fantasy-type literature as appropriate for very young children. Curiously, one of the reasons preschool children enjoy fairy tales is their very inability to think abstractly. From age three to five they are magical thinkers, believing that thinking something causes it to be so. This is supported directly by Piaget's research. Liberal leaps over logical progression are the norm in preschool-aged children's processing of information (Brierly, 1994).

Elkind (1987) specifically identified the benefits of fairy tales to the developing child who has advanced to the concrete operational stage (generally, ages 7-12), insofar as they provide opportunities to stimulate the child's developing quantitative faculty (the incremental increases foundational to many fairy tales, i.e., the degrees of sizes of bowls, chairs, and beds found in *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* or the incremental degrees of strength in materials and effort to blow the houses down in *The Three Little Pigs*). Using this example, the physical gross and fine motor developmental activities found in the typical preschool setting (blocks and manipulative play), provide the experiences in

seriation necessary to support the cognitive development needed to accommodate the positive benefits of fairy tales, once a child has developmentally advanced into the concrete operational stage.

Bettelheim (1976:15) directly states that “...*the age when fairy tales begin to exercise their beneficial impact... is around the age of four or five.*” Needham (2003) advocates a much later age to begin to explore the death themes inherent in fairy tales, “*The empirical evidence on age supports a notion that children achieve a complete understanding of death only after the age of nine.*” Bettelheim scoffs at the idea of resisting the telling of fairy tales to young children, yet he directly addresses the issue that fairy tales and the gifts they bring belong to children who have developed past the pre-primary experience.

Research indicates that gender plays a role in the selection of literature as well. Collins-Standley *et al.* (1996) published a study in which they showed two- to four-year-old students book covers depicting fairy tale characters in scary, violent, or romantic situations. They then asked the children which book cover they would choose and prefer to “read”. Boys overwhelmingly preferred the violent book cover, while girls slightly preferred the romantic book cover. The strength of the girls’ preference increased as they aged, whereas the boys’ preference remained strong from age two to five. The contributing factors to this study are very difficult to isolate: how much of the choice was constructed as a result of the life-long promptings by the media and popular culture? What factors do genetics and/or parental expectations play? This study provides evidence that, even for two year olds, literature, and specifically the particular genre of literature, plays a role in the development of young children as no other medium can.

Bettelheim (1976) provides copious reasons why children aged eight and above benefit from fairy tales. They provide a venue for children to grapple with very big issues while defining the boundaries of the “id” in their psychoanalytic framework. To Bettelheim, in fairy tales, we are able to come to grips with universal problems (aging, death, sibling rivalry, narcissistic disappointments, oedipal dilemmas, self-worth, and moral obligations) in ways that are personally adapted and interpreted by each learner. Contained within most fairy tales are the omnipresent issues of good and evil, and the duality these issues represent stage the opportunity to elicit moral resolutions. Many children in modern society develop without extended families or being part of a well-integrated community. To Bettelheim, fairy tales help children to navigate through their anxieties and transform fears into a confident approach to life, as they learn resolutions through archetypical transmission of models through fairy tales. The fairy tale is suspended in time and place. It starts out with “once upon a time” and ends with the real beginning. “Once upon a time” and “in a place far away” mean that it happened once, somewhere, and it could

happen again, now or in the future (Zipes, 1979). This circular structure gives children a window into another world, outside of their reality, yet inside of themselves; *"In a fairy tale, internal processes are externalized and become comprehensible as represented by the figures of the story and its events"* (Bettelheim, 1976:25). Fairy tales can provide the beacon which illustrates a pathway toward the resolution of the normal anxieties encountered in the developing child. Happy endings, which are typical in fairy tales, provide a positive backdrop for overcoming a dangerous or adverse situation.

Although he finds value in the use of fairy tales with children, Zipes (1979) vehemently disagrees with Bettelheim and denounces his understanding of Freudian constructs. Further, Zipes (1979:162) charges that Bettelheim *"claims to know how children subconsciously view the tales and ...imposes this psychoanalytic mode of interpreting tales on adults."* An example used is the function of a "king" or "queen" in many of the children's stories. What does a monarch mean to a three year old, an eight year old, to a girl or boy of different races and class backgrounds and nationalities?

Bettelheim (1976) also shares the relevance of the transmission of one's cultural heritage contained within the unique nature of fairy tales. To Bettelheim, the fairy tale is an art form fully comprehensible to the child. Although some fairy tales fundamentally transcend both time and borders (for example, Cinderella is first found in 850AD China and is found in the cultural heritage of societies on all continents) (Sur La Leune, 2004), it is important to remember that frequently, cultural variations on basic fairy-tale themes reflect the values and identities of the societies they represent. For example, the Western fairy tales support principles of revenge and justice (by the destruction of evil, even vigilante justice is endorsed), and that one must pay for one's sins. Western fairy tales grapple with the "seven deadly sins" of greed, vanity, gluttony, lust, deceit, sloth, and envy, and typically a fairy tale theme constellates around one of these sins. This explains the emotional fervor of children to certain fairy tales: the issues s/he is grappling with are found in the tale (Cashdan, 1999). While lessons found in fairy tales form the essential force in our cultural heritage, they cannot be viewed as the therapeutic and developmental imperative for young children (Zipes, 1979).

Maria Montessori was also widely known to be an avid opponent of the use of fairy tales in the early childhood setting, preferring, instead, to guide children to realistic thinking and to the conscious examination of reality. Fairy tales are illogical for children, and the confusion of the tales are a burden on the imaginations of the pre-primary student (Woffheim, 1953). Another consideration is the representation of gender imbedded within the fairy tales. Are women portrayed as competent and self-reliant figures, or do we meet incompetent and flawed characters, or cruel and wicked witches, stepmothers, and queens? What about religious overlays? In how many fairy tales do the characters

die and return to life? The deconstruction of individual fairy tales is a copious work that will not be attempted here, but these questions are significant when we ask ourselves about the curricular choices we make on behalf of children entrusted to our care.

Strategies that work in early childhood settings include the promotion of imaginative and creative play (rather than imitative play). Talented teachers could remain diligent and aware that all children are exposed to some degree of fairy tales and fantasy stories, either in print or in the media in some form. By careful observation, a sensitive teacher can help to redirect imitative play scripted by fairy tales into other activities that challenge young learners to generate their own imaginative and creative alternatives (Levin, 2003).

Lastly, the marketing interests of corporate America has inflicted upon an international context a commodification of experience through the media and secondary retail markets of fairy-tale driven merchandising. It is important to be aware of the forces that play on our choices of literature and “family” entertainment and literature while selecting experiences for very young children. However, it is nearly impossible to control the conglomerates that promote fairy tales and mainly aim at profits made at the expense of the fantasy life of children and families. As Zipes (1979) points out, educators truly interested in aiding children in their development of critical and imaginative capacities must first seek to alter the social organization of culture and work that is presently preventing self-realization and causing the disintegration of the individual. Do fairy tales support imagination, or do they aid in supplanting imagination with the intrusion of powerful, archetypal imagery intended for an older audience? Further observation and discourse is warranted to determine the relative benefits, if any, for pre-primary aged children.

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## Reflections on a National Review of Policy, Research and Practice in Ireland

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### Introduction

The core function of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) is to produce a National Framework for Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education (NFQ/ECCE) in Ireland. Within the NFQ, three distinct elements can be identified. First of all, a set of standards will **define** what we understand by quality for children in the Irish context. Secondly, a system of **assessment** or inspection will be devised to ensure that quality is achieved and maintained. Last of all, an infrastructure will be devised and implemented to **support** all those working in the ECCE sector to accomplish the quality as prescribed in the standards.

Four key strands of research are involved in the devising of the NFQ:

- National consultation with stakeholders in ECCE regarding the development of the NFQ, drawing on the wealth of experience and expertise related to the promotion of quality in ECCE that exist in Ireland (CECDE, 2004);
- *Perspectives on Childhood* (CECDE, Forthcoming) reviews current research on child development and learning and distils implications for the NFQ;
- *Insights on Quality*, a review of national policy, practice and research, focusing on quality (CECDE, 2005a) distils best policy and practice nationally in relation to the development of the NFQ;
- *Making Connections*, an examination of the international context for quality through consideration of a range of selected countries (CECDE, 2005b), distils best policy and practice internationally in relation to the development of the NFQ.

This paper considers briefly some aspects of the National Review of policy, practice and research in relation to quality in ECCE. It considers three issues which have emerged as central to the assurance of quality in ECCE in Ireland:

1. Funding
2. Regulation
3. Training and qualifications.

This overview is prefaced by a brief consideration of the context for the development of quality in ECCE in Ireland.

### **Quality – A Recent Phenomenon?**

Our concept of quality in relation to ECCE - and indeed childhood in Ireland - is context-linked and time-specific. Over the decades, this concept has been defined and re-defined and our understanding of quality has evolved. It is evident from the National Review that while some ECCE services would have historically operated within certain standards and criteria, quality was not a term that appeared often in documentation. We see a gradual emergence of this term from the late 1980s and early 1990s, to the point today where we do not speak of services without using the term 'quality'.

Even the term, 'early childhood care and education' has only appeared in the lexicon of policy in recent years, (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform [DJELR], 2002) and its use in this context remains mainly rhetorical rather than practical. This is primarily due to the fact that childcare and early education were traditionally regarded as separate issues, with services delivered by the State falling into either one or the other category. This situation remains largely unchanged in 2004. State provision of early education is the responsibility of the Department of Education and Science (DES) and provision of childcare usually falls between the Department of Health and Children (DHC), the DJELR and the Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA). Indeed as is evident from the list below (see 1.3), a complex web of influence impacts on State provision.

### **Policy Developments in relation to Quality, 1990 to 2004**

Traditionally, there has been a dearth of activity pertaining to policy for ECCE in Ireland. While some positive developments in this regard were instigated following the economic boom of the 1960s and early 1970s, the recommendations of the few policy documents produced were largely ignored (Hayes, 2002). These developments were also hindered by the bleaker economic realities of the 1980s when budgetary contractions reduced social spending to a minimum.

Since the mid-1990s, there has been a plethora of policy documents, emanating from both statutory and non-statutory agencies, relating to ECCE. A broad range of government departments and agencies has assumed a multiplicity of roles and responsibilities for the administration of ECCE services. *The National Childcare Strategy* (DJELR, 1999), developed subsequent to Ireland's ratification of the *United Nation's (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN, 1989) in 1992, outlines the respective roles of eleven different departments in the management of policies relating to ECCE in Ireland in 1999<sup>1</sup>:

- Department of Health and Children;
- Department of Education and Science;
- Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform;



- Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and Islands;
- Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment;
- Department of Agriculture and Food;
- Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs;
- Department of the Environment;
- Department of Tourism, Sport and Recreation;
- Department of Finance;
- Department of An Taoiseach (DJELR, 1999:11).

In the early 1990s, many of the policy documents that referred to childcare did so in the context of promoting equal opportunities for women. Whilst a commitment to quality was expressed in many of these documents, there was no exploration of the practical implications of such commitment. Despite the fact that the necessary policy commitment to quality in ECCE exists in abundance, translation of this commitment into practical initiatives has not been so successful.

The involvement of so many different government departments in the ECCE sector highlights an important issue emerging from the National Review, i.e., the existence of multiple agendas for ECCE in Ireland at policy level. Policy documentation regarding the development of ECCE has been generated by a wide variety of interested parties at national, regional and local level and reveals a variety of perspectives on what constitutes quality. For example, accessibility, affordability, catering for special needs, continuity of care etc. have all been cited as elements of quality provision.

Often it appears that agendas for ECCE in Ireland are competing, or even conflicting. An example of this at national level is the tension between policy aimed at supporting economic development which views childcare as a means to afford parents equality of opportunity to participate in the labour force, and policy measures aimed at tackling educational disadvantage which recommend high levels of parental involvement in ECCE services. Whilst one should not mutually exclude the other, it is often the case that they do due to lack of coordination between agencies implementing such policy. Coordination of both policy and practice is a real and present challenge for the future development of ECCE in Ireland and practical implementation of the policy commitment to the "...*inextricably linked*..." (DES, 1999a:45) nature of care and education is a key ingredient in this process.

Despite the evidence of fragmentation emerging from the National Review, it was interesting to note that there was a high degree of consensus in policy, practice and research materials on the necessity of ensuring ECCE services are of the highest quality possible. This high level of commitment is an excellent platform upon which to build the

NFQ, which, it is anticipated, will provide a relevant context for the promotion of quality across the entire spectrum of ECCE services in Ireland.

### **Consideration of Key Themes**

Our international review of policy, research and practice in ECCE (CECDE, 2005b) identified a number of recurrent themes pertinent to consideration of developments related to quality in ECCE in all of the chosen countries. Three of these themes are now used to consider the situation in Ireland as revealed through a review of documentation generated by the National Review.

### **Funding**

Ireland can be characterised as a liberal welfare regime (CECDE, 2005a) in terms of the funding for social services such as ECCE. This means that there is a high degree of market driven development and limited State subsidisation of services. Parents are accorded full responsibility for ensuring the care and education of their children and are generally regarded as consumers of, rather than partners in, the development of service provision. With the exception of infant classes in primary schools, the State does not fully fund any universal early education services. This situation means that ECCE services are usually dependant upon a 'cocktail' of funding deriving from parental fees, community employment schemes and grant aid from a wide variety of sources, including health boards, the DES, the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) and a range of charitable organisations. The establishment of the EOCP in 2000, which is supported by a fund of €449 million, represented unprecedented investment in preschool services in Ireland. Special recognition is given within the EOCP to the need to support the development of quality childcare places. A special sub-measure, designed to promote quality in ECCE provision is supported by €35.7 million or 10.2 per cent of the total budget (National Development Plan Community Support Framework [NDP/CSF] Evaluation Unit, 2003).

The difficulty with the EOCP is that it is a time limited intervention programme which is due to expire in 2006. This characteristic applies to many financial supports for ECCE in Ireland and certainly contributes to a climate of uncertainty evident in many non-statutory policy documents. It was articulated repeatedly that only when the ECCE sector is on a secure financial footing could real progress towards quality provision be achieved.

### **Regulation**

The situation regarding statutory regulation of ECCE in Ireland mirrors to a large extent the funding picture. State provision under the auspices of the DES is subject to the school inspection system (DES, 1998), whilst the majority of other preschool services are regulated under the Pre-School Services Regulations (DoH, 1996) administered by the

DHC.<sup>2</sup> The most significant point to note in relation to regulation of preschool services in Ireland is its very recent introduction. Prior to 1997, the responsibility for ensuring quality practice was shouldered by a wide range of voluntary membership organisations through self-regulation systems. Perspectives on quality standards varied according to the philosophy and practice of these groups and, whilst there is evidence of common themes, there is a great degree of difference in their specific focus. This tradition has continued into the present day and, in fact, has been reinforced and enhanced by the availability of funding, through the EOCP, to the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCO)<sup>3</sup> to develop and support quality. The following have emerged as the main quality programmes developed as a result of this funding:

- Barnardos - *Assuring Quality: Manual for Assessment of Community Employment Projects Providing Early Childhood Services* (FÁS and Barnardos, 2001); also *Supporting Quality* (French, 2003);
- Border Counties Childcare Network (BCCN) - *Quality Assurance Programme* (BCCN, 2004);
- Childminding Ireland - *Quality Indicators in Family based Day-care* (Childminding Ireland, 2004);
- High/Scope Ireland - *High/Scope Accreditation Pack* (High/Scope, 2003);
- IPPA - the Early Childhood Organisation - *IPPA Quality Improvement Programme* (IPPA, 2002);
- National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA) - *Centre of Excellence Award* (NCNA, 2002);
- St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland (SNMSI) - *Certification Process for Montessori Schools* (SNMSI, 2003).

In the main, these initiatives can be characterised as quality assurance/accreditation rather than regulatory or inspection based processes. Whilst each has been developed with a particular focus e.g. family day care, sessional playgroups or centre based full day-care, there is a high degree of consistency across the entire range in terms of definitions of quality, assessment mechanisms and support infrastructure.

At this point in time, there are very few evaluative studies available to allow any assessment of the impact of either the national regulatory systems or the voluntary schemes on the quality of provision. Even the mid-term review of the EOCP (NDP/CSF Evaluation Unit, 2003) was unable to quantify the impact of the Quality Sub-measure funding programme. One small-scale study completed in 2003 as an M.Phil Thesis, on the impact of the Preschool Regulations did conclude that:

*"Findings suggest that the Regulations may be directly responsible for the fall in the maximum group figure. They may also be responsible for the slight reduction reported in average ratio size." (O'Kane, 2004:22)*

The availability of evaluative research would make an important and valuable contribution to the development of the NFQ and a key recommendation of the National Review is that this situation should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

### **Training and Qualifications**

The positive correlation between the level of education, training and qualifications of adults working with young children and the quality of service provision is an issue which has attracted much support in literature in Ireland and in other countries (Ball, 1994; Oberhuemer and Ulich, 1997; DJELR, 1999; DES, 1999a; DJELR, 2002). This presents a particular challenge for the ECCE sector in Ireland as, in the absence of statutory qualification requirements for ECCE practitioners outside the formal education system, a proliferation of courses, of varying length, content and, indeed, quality have flourished.

Education, training and professional development opportunities for those who work with children from birth to six years are as diverse and varied as the range of early years settings that exist in Ireland. Primary school teacher training has been to degree level since the mid 1970s, and, whilst it is argued that in-service training is inadequate (DES, 2002; INTO 2004), there is a standard level of in-service available to all qualified teachers. The situation for personnel working with children in settings other than primary school is not so straightforward or standardised. Degree and postgraduate level programmes in early childhood studies have only been available since the mid 1990s. The majority of education and training for ECCE personnel, therefore, is offered by education and training providers whose courses may be nationally or non-nationally accredited to sub-degree level, or which indeed may not have any recognised accreditation at all. A further challenge is that of establishing an accurate picture of the national qualifications profile of those working in ECCE services. Research carried out in 1999 and published in 2003 suggests that the general picture is one of low levels of qualifications, if any, amongst a wide range of pre-school services (ADM, 2003). This research is now somewhat dated and funding initiatives have stimulated increased uptake of opportunities to gain qualifications by ECCE personnel. Again, research in this regard would yield very beneficial data for the future development of quality provision.

Some attempt to establish cross-sectoral consensus on appropriate levels of training and qualifications for ECCE practitioners is in evidence. In 2002, the National Coordinating Childcare Committee published a *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development for Early Childhood Care and Education Practitioners in Ireland*

(DJELR, 2002). This document represented the culmination of a comprehensive and lengthy consultation process and outlined the core skills and knowledge appropriate to each occupational profile within the sector. In addition, it set out for the first time the agreed core values that should underpin quality practice of all personnel. The *Model Framework* recognises that achieving 'quality practice' places increasingly complex demands upon ECCE personnel. It also acknowledges that all professional practitioners involved in the development and delivery of education and care services for children in Ireland must be prepared to meet the challenges of the future.

### **Conclusions**

This paper has considered the findings of the National Review, *Insights on Quality* (CECDE, 2005b). It has given a brief insight into the national context for this development process and has considered the insights afforded on three issues; funding, regulation and training and qualifications. The Irish context is characterised primarily by diversity of provision, practice and perspectives on quality. Additionally, whilst policy rhetoric strongly supports holistic approaches to meeting the needs of young children and families, practice and provision remain largely divided between care and education. In our favour, Ireland is fortunate to have a strong and vibrant tradition of universal free early education for four and five year old children within the State school system. However, the situation for those children not participating in this system or children under four years of age is less than satisfactory.

It is difficult to comment with authority on the nature of quality in ECCE services in Ireland, as there simply is not enough reliable research evidence available. Our National Review has uncovered evidence of huge dynamism and commitment, both in policy and practical domains, to the pursuit of quality in ECCE. However, these activities continue to be uncoordinated and unrelated and this applies at national, regional and local levels. Review of these initiatives has demonstrated a substantial degree of correlation between the core themes and principles of quality. For example, concern for the environment, supporting positive relationships and the importance of appropriately trained adults repeatedly feature, amongst others. This bodes very well for the introduction of the NFQ/ECCE, which intends to develop and enhance existing good practice.

Ireland is poised at a unique crossroads in the evolution of ECCE services. Dedicated and visionary policy makers, researchers and practitioners have prepared excellent foundations for the creation of a national infrastructure to support the development of ECCE. We must now realise the potential of these foundations by constructing a framework, which will continue to support the journey towards quality in all its aspects in ECCE in Ireland. Only by engaging fully in this process can we hope to achieve our common goals of affording each child in Ireland the necessary opportunities to realise their full potential as active, valued citizens of the future.

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**Notes:**

- 1 Some titles of government departments have changed since the publication of the *National Childcare Strategy*, (1999).
- 2 There are notable exceptions to these national inspection systems which include childminders caring for less than three children in their own home and after or out of school services.
- 3 These organisations were identified and funded by the EOCP under the quality sub-measure to develop and support quality initiatives amongst their membership. They include Barnardos Ireland; Childminding Ireland; Children in Hospital Ireland; IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation; St. Nicholas Montessori Teachers Association; Forbairt Naíonraí Teo (formerly An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta Teo); Irish Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Association and the National Children’s Nurseries Association.



## Young Children's Observations about Number and Conventional Numeric Symbols

Elizabeth Dunphy

### Introduction

Number is all around us; it is part of the cultural world into which children are born. It is a symbolic system that is central to the ways in which people communicate with each other. It can convey both quantitative and non-quantitative information and it does so by the use of number words. The same number word can have a number of different functions, the meaning of which is only clarified by the context within which the word is being used. Young children, from the time they are born, strive to make sense of the world and part of that endeavour involves sorting out the different purposes for which number can be used.

In Fuson's (1988) seminal work on counting and the development of number concepts, she demonstrated that the period between two and eight years is marked by the establishment of an increasing number of relations between different kinds of number situations. During this period, children develop increasingly complex understandings about how the same number word can be applied across different situations. Understanding develops from context bound meanings (e.g. *two shoes*) to the use of the number word in a range of different situations including ordinal, measure, cardinal, counting, sequence, symbolic (numerical) and non-numerical situations. Fuson also concluded that children's knowledge and understandings of the different uses of number are highly dependent on their experiences and on their opportunities to learn about the use of number in different situations. Her diary entries related to situations in which her own young daughters heard/practised their early use of number words and clearly demonstrated the role of commonplace, routine activity in the development of children's understanding of the role of number. Sometimes mothers structure these routine activities to teach different uses of number (Saxe *et al.*, 1987). Indeed, the number word experiences that mothers provided for their young children have been shown to range over almost all the uses referred to above (Durkin *et al.*, 1986).

Young children see numbers all around them but there has been relatively little research attention given to exploring the ways in which these experiences and the interactions that occur within/about them enable young children to construct meanings related to the purpose of numerals. Research has shown that from at least four-years of age, young children construct meanings for written numerals in various contexts, but their explanations of the purpose of the numeral are generally vague and non-specific (Sinclair and Sinclair, 1984). Ewers-Rogers and Cowen (1996) found that young children rarely

noticed the absence of numerals on pictures of familiar objects (e.g. a bus) if they were not able to explain their purpose. These authors observed that children in their study rarely fabricated explanations of the purpose of numerals on everyday items, thus leading them to the conclusion that the children must have had interactions with people who pointed such numerals out to them and explained their purpose. They argue, I think convincingly, that it is highly unlikely that young children will stumble on such explanations by themselves.

While Fuson (1988) identified children's task during the early years as that of learning the number words themselves and the various situations in which these word are used, the question of how children do this is still relatively unexplored. This paper seeks to address some aspects of children's opportunities to construct understandings related to the role of number in everyday situations. In doing so, it considers the following questions:

- What kinds of social interactions appear, from children's accounts, to have contributed to their understandings of the purpose of numbers?
- When, why and to what extent do young children and adults appear to discuss the purposes of numbers?

Information provided by children themselves, about the nature of their number related experiences before formal schooling, provide us with glimpses into the events that are happening in individual families with respect to children's understanding of the role of number. Indeed, Young-Loveridge (1989) argued, based on her own research, that such familial events were much more important than other factors (e.g. socio-economic status) in determining children's development in relation to number. This paper seeks children's views of social practices that, from their perspectives, relate to number. It explores how children themselves see these experiences and how they relate them to the role of number.

It is based on the assumption that *"Numerical environments are ...constituted through the process of active participation and negotiation."* (Saxe et al., 1987:119) and cognitive development occurs in and is promoted by individuals' collaboration with others (Rogoff, 1998). Children's participation and active changes in their understanding and involvement in dynamic activities (including the interviews themselves) provide a central focus for the discussion of the findings.

## **The Study**

### **The Research Instruments**

The methodology used to ascertain children's experiences and views of number and numerically related learning was an *experience-based flexible and focused interview procedure* (Dunphy, 2004). The questioning sought to engage children and challenge them to think about their experiences in relation to number. Prior to the interview, I developed a number of questions of different character and content to guide the interview, but I found that in most cases, the discussion took on its own momentum once the child became engaged with the topic. In planning the questions, I reviewed those used in previous studies where children's views/perspectives of aspects of learning/mathematical learning were sought. For instance, in relation to the challenge of establishing rapport and getting children talking, Burton (2002) reported a study wherein children were invited to respond to statements that young children like them didn't know much about large numbers. She felt that such statements opened up discussion. This alerted me to the fact that I needed to give careful consideration to how I might open the discussions with the children.

### **The Sample**

A total of fourteen children, eight boys and six girls, were interviewed for the study. All of the children were just beginning their first term at primary school. Thirteen of the children were four years of age and one child was just gone five. The study was carried out with careful consideration to issues such as gaining access, establishing relationships with the participants, and ethics.

The interviews in the boys' school were carried out over the first two weeks of the new school year in September. The interviews in the girls' school were carried out during the third and fourth weeks. Each child was interviewed twice. On average the first interview lasted about twenty minutes and the second interview about thirty minutes. This paper analyses some of the data from the first interview (See Appendix 1 for details of the questions used). Interviews were fitted in around the events of the day, and particular care was taken that children were not interviewed at recess time, playtime or snack-time or during other activities than, in my experience, were particularly enjoyable for children during the early days at school. The children were interviewed in a room separate from the classroom.

This paper reports findings in relation to children's views of their number-related experiences. The views of children were sought by asking them about the purpose of numbers and about how people around them use numbers. Children were asked about the circumstances in which they had observed people use number or in which they had participated in number-related situations with other people. It differs from previous

studies in that data are derived from the children themselves in discussion about their experiences. Previous studies of young children's experiences related to number have relied on observational data about children's experiences and the interpersonal contexts in which number was encountered and used by children and adults together (Durkin *et al.*, 1986; Saxe *et al.*, 1987; Young-Loveridge 1989). In studies where children were also interviewed (e.g. Saxe *et al.*, 1987; Young-Loveridge 1989), they focused either on number-related tasks or on ascertaining children's reactions to artefacts or situations where number can play a central role (e.g. Sinclair and Sinclair, 1984; Ewers-Rogers and Cowen 1996).

### Findings and Analysis

Children discuss experiences that they perceive to be related to number.

The experiences that the children in the study associated with number are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1: Experiences that Children perceived to be Number-related**

Experiences that children in the study associated with number	
Bob	Singing the Crocodile and Alphabet songs, Using the calendar, Counting with Mam on a Journey, Play with siblings, Taking Medicine, Playing a game, Magnetic numbers.
Shay	Counting in French/Irish, Counting with his brother, A present of a box of chalk from his Grandparents, The clock on the oven, Magnetic numbers, Snakes and Ladders Game.
Terence	The new baby, Daddy at work, Magnetic numbers, Game of Penguin Chuckers.
Tom	Writing numbers at Playschool, Daddy's work, Listening to his brother saying numbers, Magnetic numbers.
Jamie	Numbers as labels on the doors of the houses of various people he knows.
Con	Dad explains relative value of coins, Reading the clock and moving the hands, Counting and stories related to counting, Measuring size/height of family members with parents, Magnetic numbers, Dice games.
Owen	Sesame Street, Writing numbers, Watching Mam using the calendar, Gardening with Dad, Watching the trains at the Train Station, Shopping.
Jerry	Counting with Dad on holidays, Playing with friends, Watching Dad working on the computer, Reading the clock with Mam, Grandad explains about the watch with no numbers, The ages of children in class, Games, Magnetic numbers (on fridge).
Maura	Counting at school and on the way home, With Mam at the 'Exercising Shop', Talking about the clock with Mam, Writing birthday invitations, A poster depicting the story of Beauty and The Beast, Naming the Letterland characters.
Sonia	Making Cards with Mam, Hide and Seek at school, Chalking with friends, Playing Hopscotch with Granny, Writing Numbers, Calendar, Shopping Lists, Talking to Mam about numbers in her address/phone book. Playing with friends at the Creche, Playing with her 'toy' computer, Describing numbers used on road signs.

Sile	Counting/Listening to family members counting, Playing Mams and Dads, Measuring with Dad, Using the calendar to mark birthdays, Reading numbers on packages in the shop, Writing numbers, Playing the game Snakes and Ladders.
Mary	Playing School with Grandad, Shopping with Daddy and sister, Discussing ages with her sister, The new kitchen presses, Playing Snakes and Ladders.
Kate	Playing with her sisters, Writing numbers, Describing the appearance of her trousers, Playing a board game.
Lara	Counting in Irish, Irish Dancing, Listening to a choir practising in the church, Writing numbers.

Some of the experiences, e.g. reading and talking about the clock and the calendar are ones that previous observational studies have found to be very common ones in families with young children (e.g. Young-Loveridge, 1989). These, along with counting were, for the majority of the young children in this study, transparently about number. Quite a few of the children identified the experience of writing numbers as a significant number-related activity. According to children's accounts, parents and other adults provided a variety of informal situations in which children could develop understandings of the range of uses of number. Young-Loveridge (1989) remarked on the fact that no child in her study used a computer, although some did play with calculators. Remarkably, I think, not even one child in my study mentioned an experience with calculators. The only mention of computers was by Tom who had observed his brother look at numbers on the computer, and his Dad and Mam look at money on screen. Neither did television-viewing feature in children's accounts of their experiences with number. The only exception to this was Owen's reference to the characters from the children's television show *Sesame Street*. He cited these as examples of people he knew who could count.

We can see that there are certain experiences/activities that are mentioned by a number of the children and so could be said to be common and salient experiences related to informal learning about number for the young children in this study. There are others that are not common in the sense that they are specifically related to particular events that feature in the lives of individual children. Both types of experience are directed to using/making sense of number through participation in everyday activity.

While experience related to clocks, calendars and writing of numbers featured in the accounts of a number of children, there were differences in the ways in which these experiences appeared to be encountered by different children. Consequently, there were also differences, for example, in the potential of their experience to enhance children's understanding of the role of numbers in respect of the practical, external relations of how numbers function to allow a relation between clock time and an external event. For example, for some four year-old children, there may be a relation between bedtime and 8 o'clock on the clock face.

**Some Observations Related to Children's Views of the Role of Numbers on the Calendar**

Consider the contrast between the following experiences related to the calendar, as told by two different children:

- Bob: Em...because...we have a calendar in the kitchen  
Liz: And are there numbers on that calendar?  
He nods  
And what do you use the calendar for? What's it for?  
Bob: To tell which time it is  
Liz: To tell which time it is...it tells you the date, doesn't it ...and the day.  
When did you look at the calendar...tell me about it  
Bob: Always  
Liz: You always look at it... and what does it tell you?  
Bob: Eh...I don't know

Bob's understanding is very global and relates the function of number here to be somehow related to the measurement of time. Sile, on the other hand, appears to have a more developed understanding and one that showed her participation in the particular activity of watching her Dad note dates on the calendar:

- Liz: Does he [her Dad] ever write down any numbers?  
Sile: Yes  
Liz: What does he write?  
Sile: I write down numbers as well...he doesn't...he writes down...em... the dates...  
Liz: Oh!  
Sile: The birthdays... on the calendar.

**Some Observations Related to Children's Views of the Role of Numbers on Clock Faces**

Children in the study generally had only a very global understanding of the role of numbers in this context. Also, we can see below how some children were struggling to grasp some of the puzzling dimensions of this process, notably for some, the fact that even when the numbers weren't there people acted as if they were! Also while some children were aware of the support and guidance that they receive from adults or peers, others either were unaware of this aspect of the experience or perhaps such guidance was not available.

Jerry focused his attention on the clock on the wall of the room where the interviews were held. He explained to me how he could read the clock and that he knew that it was eleven o'clock (It was 11.25). He talked about the numbers on the clock and counted to twelve. Then he remarked:

- Jerry: I know that...I know the one that...that... has no numbers...I know...I know... the ones that doesn't have any numbers...I know them...I know them watches too
- Liz: How do you know them?
- Jerry: Because...eh...see...eh...why...my...em... my Grandad told me it
- Liz: Your Grandad told you about it? He nodded.  
Has he got a watch with no numbers?
- Jerry: Yes...
- Liz: Has he? And he told you about it and he showed you how to use it?  
He nodded in agreement

Bob described his kitchen clock as one without numbers on it, but he explained that while he couldn't read it, his Mam could:

- Liz: How does she know if there's no numbers on it?
- Bob: Because...she just knows
- Liz: How does she know?
- Bob: Because they're fake numbers
- Liz: They're fake numbers...but you can't see them?
- Bob: And magic eye could see them...

### **Some Observations Related to Children's Views about the Role of Written Numerals**

Several children talked about writing numbers. While most focused on the act of writing itself, a number of them focused on the purposes for which they or others wrote numbers.

Maura talked about her participation in the experience in which she watched her Mam prepare invitations for her fifth birthday party:

- Liz: Did you ever see Mammy writing the numbers...any numbers?  
She nods in agreement  
What did she write them for?
- Maura: Em...for going to my birthday and my brother's birthday
- Liz: For sending to people...was it the invitations she wrote?  
She nods in agreement
- Liz: What did she write on them?
- Maura: Give it...give it to people
- Liz: She gave it to people...and what did she write on the invitation?
- Maura: Em...em... she said...somebody wouldn't really know between our houses and their houses... em...em... say...the people say how many days is...em...is there a birthday in ...and Maura's birthday ...in six or five days

- Liz: Okay...so she said on the invitation that it's Maura's birthday on...what date is your birthday?
- Maura: Em...six (8th of April)
- Liz: On the sixth is that it?
- Maura: Yes... and Jack's on the fifth
- Liz: Right, on the fifth...and tell me...when she writes the invitation does she put numbers on the invitation?
- Maura: Yes
- Liz: What number?
- Maura: M...my name
- Liz: And does she tell them when the party is on?
- Maura: Em...in eight minutes
- Liz: Right...and does she tell them what house to come to?
- Maura: To ours
- Liz: Yes...and what house is that? How will they know it's your house?
- Maura: Because... they're all my neighbours

While this account initially looked as if it was about number, and there are certainly a number of opportunities for using number in this type of context, it needs to be read in the context of the whole interview (Pramling, 1983). While Maura may well have derived some knowledge of the use of numbers in the context of writing birthday invitations, other parts of her interview transcript clearly indicated that she didn't always differentiate between the written symbols for numbers and letters.

With some children like Maura it was difficult to differentiate if their observations were about written symbols in general or about written numbers. Tom, on the other hand, has no difficulty differentiating between numbers and letters. This is obvious from his reaction when asked about the magnetic numbers:

- Liz: I want to show you all these shapes here...do you know about these shapes?  
He nods  
What are they?
- Tom: They're numbers.  
That's not a number there. He points to the plus sign that is in the set
- Liz: No that's not a number ...take that one out...you're absolutely right.  
What is that anyway?
- Tom: That's an X...a reading X

However, while Maura could draw on her experiences to show her awareness of number use in an appropriate context, Tom referred to their purpose only in the most vague terms, as something that could be read.



### Some Observations related to Children's Views of the Role of Number in Everyday Contexts

Sile conveyed her understanding of the use of numbers to convey very specific information on food packets. The conversation we were having was about shopping, and I asked her if she had seen any numbers in the shop:

Sile: I seen them once by the dates

Liz: The dates?

Sile: Yes

Liz: On what?

Sile: On...on their packages and...I hear the prices...and ...and I see...em...the numbers all around me...all around the place...on the packets on the dates

Liz: Do you...and what do the dates say?

Sile: Em...Sometimes...sometimes a zero or a one

Liz: And do you read all those dates?

Sile: Yes

Liz: And who helps you to read them?

Sile: Sometimes my Mam helps me and sometimes my Dad helps me.

Owen had referred to seeing numbers on the calendar that was on the wall nearby. I then questioned him about other instances of numbers in the environment:

Liz: Where else would you see numbers?

Owen: Everywhere

Liz: Where?

Owen: In your classroom

Liz: Yes

Owen: And near the trains

Liz: Near the trains

Owen: That was the real ones... they go very fast

Liz: Do they?

Owen: Yes they are

Liz: Is that down at the station in Hazelhatch

Owen: Yes

Liz: Are there numbers down there?

Owen: Yes

Liz: Where are they? Because I haven't been down to Hazelhatch.

Owen: They're there on the bridge

Liz: On the bridge?

Owen: On the bridge there's numbers...and the trains go very fast

Liz: I wonder what those numbers are for?

Owen: For to count the trains

Sile's participation in a measuring experience with her Dad and her sisters shows her understanding that it is not the numbers themselves, but their use in a particular context, that is the crux of the matter in relation to purpose:

- Liz: I wonder does Daddy ever use any numbers to do any work or anything?  
Sile: No...He uses his...em...measuring thing  
Liz: He uses his measure thing?  
Sile: Yes...em...for measuring things  
Liz: What does he measure?  
Sile: He measures ... eh...he measured Aileen's bedroom wall...she shares with Nina  
Liz: And he measured it...with the measuring tape? Or was it a stick, or a ruler?  
Sile: It was a measuring tape...and he brought it to the wall  
Liz: And what does that tell him?  
Sile: It tells him it's much bigger  
Liz: Does it...Right  
Sile: And he measures our sitting room and it tells him it's a bit big  
Liz: Does it?  
Sile: Em...and it's small

Rogoff (1998) has argued that children's participation in activity can differ depending on the nature of the activity and on the identity of their partner. From Sile's account of this experience we can conclude that, as a result of her participation in this experience, she learned quite a lot about the measure function of number. Her Dad was using numbers and she appeared to understand something of the role of number in this context. Jerry also recounted an experience that appears to be related to the measure function of number. However, we do not get the same sense that Jerry observed the purpose for which his Dad was using number. He, unlike Sile above, did not appear to understand the purpose of number in the context he describes:

- Liz: What does Dad use numbers for?  
Jerry: He works on his computer and he learns  
Liz: Does he? And does he put numbers on his computer?  
Jerry: Yes...all numbers come up  
Liz: All numbers come up on his computer? And does he know all of them?  
Jerry: Yes...but they're not ones or twos  
Liz: What are they?  
Jerry: But there's a lot...they're money... money...he looks at money  
Liz: On the computer?  
Jerry: Yes. A lot of money

### Discussion and Conclusion

The findings presented here demonstrate that children's experiences provide opportunities for them to learn that numerals in the environment serve a variety of purposes. However, I think it also shows that for some children, the possibility of learning about purpose from their experiences is greater than it is for others. Rogoff (1987:157) argued that *"...social interactions will benefit children's learning under some circumstances and not others."* She suggested that there were at least three influential factors that are relevant in determining the benefit to children of a particular interaction: the expertise of the partner in the domain; the issue of communication with the novice; and the task being conducive to shared thinking.

The issue of communication between novice and expert would appear to be one that is significant in relation to the data presented here. Tom reported that his Mam read papers with numbers on them in the car. *"She reads something important...but I don't know... She likes reading and...she always likes reading."* Furthermore, we get the impression that Tom, while observing her activity, is to a large extent excluded since he reports no communication between them about the activity. Likewise with Jerry above, who recounted his experience of watching his Dad on the computer. It is not possible to detect from these accounts whether or how the adults in these situations communicated, fostered or structured the children's attention. In contrast, some children's accounts give a vivid description of collaborative activity with adults in particular situations. I think that Sonia's comments regarding her phone number reveal a great deal about the extent of communication between herself and her Mam. In her words *"...but I know how to spell my phone number..."* and then *"My Mam used to tell me...she writes them down in her phone number so she remembers how to..."*. Likewise Sile experience whereby her Dad wrote the birthdays on the calendar suggests to me a good deal of effort on the part of the adult to communicate and structure the situation to enable understanding.

The idea that different children may arrange for learning in different ways is an important one to consider. Some children may seek out answers to their questions. Perhaps that was what Sonia above was doing in relation to her Mam's phonebook. Others may use adults to show them how to do something. Kate tells us that, in relation to numerals *"Well...when I want them...Mammy just writes them..."* Lara ensures active participation for herself in the situation when her Mam writes numbers: *"...and then I say 'Can I help you Mam' and then see...I do it with her."* In fact, a striking finding was the fact that five of the six girls referred in their accounts of their experiences, to the assistance in their learning that they received from their parent, usually their mother. Mary was the exception. She commented as follows when asked if her Mam used numbers: *"...I never ask her... I don't know...she's nosy too like my Daddy."* None of the boys spoke of seeking or being aware of this type of assistance. The exception was Jerry when he

described how his Grandad had explained about the watch face with no numbers on it. Interestingly, a number of the boys used the response "*I don't know*" when asked about the purpose of number in specific situations.

Pramling (2003:725) has suggested that quality in early childhood education today is very much related to communication and interaction. From such a perspective, children's narratives or stories in which they tell about the sense they are making of their experiences become central. One of the possibilities that I see is that children's stories related to their experiences may give us some glimpses of how children position themselves, and the adults with whom they share their lives, in relation to learning.

Rogoff (1998), in discussing learning opportunities, remarks that parents are often busy with their own activities and sometimes stressed. Consequently, she remarks, "*... they are not constantly focused on preparing each of their children for their future occupations or ensuring that their child is learning at each moment of the day.*" It is very likely this is the situation in the lives of the majority of parents and young children. Some children may be better than others at managing their learning in such circumstances. However, as a society, we do not leave the management of their learning entirely in the hands of children. In schools the task of teachers is to focus on the child's learning, and in doing so, they seek to establish communication with the novice. An understanding of the social-emotional context of individual children's learning is an essential aspect of establishing communication and it will enable teachers to tailor their teaching to respond accordingly.

The findings reported here suggest that as they enter school, children have had varying levels of opportunities to learn about the purposes of numbers. A quality learning environment in relation to learning about number in the early years at school is one in which children have many opportunities to communicate about their diverse experiences with number. This is essential in order that children have the opportunities to clarify these experiences and to extend them through discussion with other children. An essential aspect of the teacher's role is to discuss these experiences with children in a way that allows for children's further development in relation to understanding the purposes of number i.e. in order to develop numerical thinking. Lillian Katz (2003:21) advises that we pay close attention to "*... the quality of the day-to-day interactions we have with children so that those interactions are as rich, interesting, engaging, satisfying, and meaningful as we can make them.*" From such a perspective, the issue of teacher-child ratios is a crucial one. If teachers are to be able to work interactively with children, and indeed if young children are to attain the confidence to interact with their teachers in this way, then teacher-child ratios in early childhood classrooms in Irish primary schools need serious and immediate attention.

## Appendix 1

*Questions used to guide the Interview.*

### Ice Breaker

Tell me some things that are good about school? Tell me about your favourite thing?

### Establishing the Domain

I heard that some children starting school can count? Is that true? Can you count? Will you count for me?

### Question / variations used to establish children's understandings related to the purpose of numbers

Are numbers important for people? What people? How?

Are numbers important for you? Why do you say that?

What are numbers for? What do people use them for? Are numbers useful?

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# A Conceptual Framework of Young Children's Development and Learning in Ireland: The Implications for Quality in Early Years Care and Education

Jacqueline Fallon

## Introduction

The core function of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) is the development of the National Framework for Quality (NFQ) for early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Ireland. The CECDE has put in place four supporting pieces of research as a foundation for the NFQ. These are as follows:

- *Talking About Quality*, the report of a national consultation process with stakeholders in ECCE (CECDE, 2004);
- *Perspectives on Childhood* (CECDE, Forthcoming A) and its companion *Foundation Document* (CECDE, Forthcoming B), which articulate the CECDE viewpoint on the child's learning and development;
- *Insights on Quality, A National Review of Quality in ECCE in Ireland – Policy, Practice and Research, 1990-2004* (CECDE, 2005a);
- *Making Connections, A Review of International Policies, Practices and Research Relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education* (CECDE, 2005b).

Each of these four pillars extrapolates, from the research literature, the implications for defining, assessing and supporting quality in the Irish context. These implications will be instrumental in the development of the NFQ. This paper is concerned with the second of these pillars (2 above), and describes the evolution of the final document, *Perspectives on Childhood* from the initial research reviews, the *Foundation Document*, and the relationship between the two. It presents one sample theme drawn from the analysis of the initial research, and the implications for defining, supporting and assessing quality which followed from that analysis.

## Development Process

### Stage 1: Foundation Document

The CECDE *Programme of Work* (CECDE, 2001) and the CECDE *Research Strategy* (CECDE, 2003) both prioritised the development of a conceptual framework of how young children learn and develop in the Irish context. The primary research document, entitled the *Foundation Document*, comprises four distinct parts.

- The **Historical and Cultural Context of Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland** considers the socio-cultural, economic and educational conditions of children's lives

- from 1900 to 1990 and the attitudes to children and childhood throughout that period;
- **Current Perspectives on Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland** discusses the rapid changes in the socio-economic, policy and familial landscape since 1990 and how these changes have impacted on young children's lives;
  - The **Learning and Developing Child**<sup>2</sup> reviews relevant literature across the five domains of physical, social-emotional, cognitive, moral and spiritual development. For each domain, the implications of the overview for quality provision are outlined. Indicators for quality provision are extrapolated, and key characteristics of quality provision are suggested;
  - In **Facilitating Early Childhood Care and Education**, support structures to enable provision of quality environments for learning and development are described and indicators of quality environments are presented.

These four sections provide an extensive and in-depth review of the literature pertaining to all aspects of ECCE in Ireland, both past and present, and to each of the child's developmental domains. Each section includes implications for the development of the NFQ. The *Foundation Document* provides a sound theoretical and evidential basis for the formulation of national quality standards, and a common language for constructing quality in the Irish context. Indeed, *the Foundation Document* is crucial to ensure the integrity of the quality standards and to facilitate their broad acceptance among the ECCE sector in Ireland.

## Stage 2: Analysis

Once the *Foundation Document* was completed, a process of analysis was conducted in order to use its contents to define the CECDE perspective on the child's learning and development, and to identify the ways in which the Irish context has impacted on the experience of childhood here. The initial analysis was conducted on the core section of the *Foundation Document*, **The Learning and Developing Child**, which is a major review of the literature on child development between the ages of birth and six years. Seven themes were identified within which all learning and development - across the full age range and across all settings - can be conceptualised. These themes are:

- **Child-centred learning and development.** Learning must start from the child's own individual profile of strengths and needs, must acknowledge the child as an active participant in the process and ensure her<sup>2</sup> rights to quality provision;
- **Holistic learning and development.** All development is inter-connected and the child is much more than the sum of her developmental parts. Quality provision nurtures the whole child and, in particular, early intervention programmes must focus on the holistic well-being of the child as opposed to one facet of her development;



- **Environments for learning and development.** On the basis of child-centred and holistic provision, the child must have access to the entire range of environments, from the built to the natural, from indoors to outdoors and so on. Engaging in exploration of the environment, which should include an element of risk, must be part of the child's experience;
- **Relationships in learning and development.** The importance of secure early attachment relationships to the child's well-being cannot be overstated. Furthermore, secure, respectful and caring relationships with adults provide a crucial context for supporting learning;
- **Communication in learning and development.** Communication is embedded in the child's social development and is the basis for all the social relationships she will experience. By communicating with each other, the secure trusting relationships between parents and the child and significant adults and the child, which are so essential to healthy development and well-being, are developed and maintained;
- **Diversity in learning and development.** Each child is a unique personality with a particular configuration of interests, dispositions, race, culture, gender and so on. This individuality is the building block of diversity among children, and they are companion concepts in the child's experience;
- **Play for learning and development.** Play is the process and state of being in which the child will predominantly engage with her own holistic development. It is a source of fulfilment and joy for the child, a source of wonder to adults and a major contributor to the well-being of children.

Once the themes had been identified, both the historic and current perspectives on ECCE were revisited on the basis of those concepts outlined above. Of course, the subject matter differs considerably between the thematic analysis of child learning and development and the historic and current contextual material. Therefore the contextual material offers, by necessity, a broader interpretation of the thematic concepts. This delivers a unique perspective on the contexts in which childhood has been lived in Ireland.

### **Stage 3: Perspectives on Childhood**

The CECDE considered the *Foundation Document* closely because of the importance of articulating clearly our viewpoint on the extensive research evidence contained therein. *Perspectives on Childhood* encapsulates that point of view. Increased knowledge about childhood and child development and learning has much to contribute towards understanding the nature of quality in ECCE. Current knowledge about child development and learning is already well documented. However, distillation of this knowledge to consider current perceptions of what is best for children and the ensuing implications for developing quality standards in the Irish context is innovative. The *Foundation Document*

and *Perspectives on Childhood* complement each other, one presenting the research and the other giving the CECDE's analysis of, response to and perspective on the material. In that context, the development and learning of the young child is conceptualised as being child-centred and holistic in nature, being supported through the environment, relationships and communication, and realised through play in the context of the diverse needs of each child.

### **Implications for the National Framework for Quality**

Developing the NFQ is an ambitious project. The CECDE has sought to make the process as inclusive as possible through consultation and involvement with all stakeholders (CECDE, 2004). The national and international reviews of quality-related issues (CECDE, 2005 a; b) strive to ensure that current best practice, policy and research are represented. The best interests of the child are accorded high priority as evidenced by the lengthy and comprehensive process towards the CECDE conceptualisation of childhood described in part here (CECDE, Forthcoming A; B). From the earliest planning stages of these four pillars to the NFQ, a consistent method of ensuring compatibility across the very different areas of information had to be put in place. If all of the disparate findings of these four very different processes were to coalesce into a coherent whole in the NFQ, then they had to meet similar criteria. To this end, the structure of the NFQ was determined at an early stage. This structure will be as follows:

- Standards for defining quality;
- Mechanisms for assessing quality;
- Structures for supporting quality.

Each supporting document includes implications which will feed into these three features. As an example, this paper presents one of the themes outlined earlier, from *Perspectives on Childhood*, which is itself derived from the *Foundation Document* as described. The theme chosen is **Child Centred Learning and Development**. This describes the CECDE point of view on the meaning of child-centredness for ECCE provision. It is followed by the implications for the three categories mentioned above. One theme was chosen in order to give an insight into the process by which the CECDE has derived the implications in *Perspectives on Childhood*, as presenting the implications without the discussion would lack context and meaning.

### **Child Centred Learning and Development**

Taking a child centred approach to a child's development and learning requires that the adults supporting the child take that child's unique individuality as the starting point for learning, rather than focusing on a body of knowledge that must be absorbed by the child. The child is an active agent in her own learning and development. She has her own

interests, strengths, needs, learning dispositions, potential, cultural identity, gender, relationships, competencies, abilities and complexities. These elements help constitute her holistic personality, but that personality is, of course, much, much more than the sum of its parts. Childhood is a distinct and valuable time during which this unique individuality must be acknowledged and appreciated, supported, treasured and nurtured towards fulfilment and joy through the practices of the significant adults in her life. A recognition of the child's rights provides a context for this dynamic process. The State can contribute to this child-centred view by supporting its value with rights-based legislation and policy.

Significant adults need to acquire knowledge and understanding of the child's life through listening to the child, and hearing her. Recognising that the child has a distinct voice in our society, allied with the recognition of the child's active agency in life, brings an acknowledgement of the child's right to a sense of control over outcomes in her life at an age appropriate level. For young children especially, it is the significant adults in the environment who will ensure she becomes aware of her own sense of agency, self-reliance, independence and control. To this end, the activities and opportunities for play and discovery made available to the child through quality services and supports must foster the child's sense of purpose and give meaning to her engagement with the world. Crucially, the child must be allowed to exercise choice as a requisite part of active participation.

A child-centred approach based on knowledge and understanding of the child's life must recognise also that the circumstances in which a child lives her life are not always optimally conducive to her harmonious development. A child living in circumstances of disadvantage, experiencing marginalisation on racial, ethnic or cultural grounds, or having special needs arising from a disability has the same rights to quality experiences as her peers. It is the child's needs which must be the starting point where interventions are put in place to eliminate marginalisation. It is the child who must benefit directly from interventions, and all interventions involving children must primarily focus on child outcomes which follow from the child's needs. Too often, it is the child's life which is used as a site of intervention in meeting other agendas, such as releasing parents from childcare commitments to participate in the labour force. The child's well-being must be the primary concern, and the child's life must be respected. Perhaps that is the essence of a child-centred approach, that the child and childhood are afforded respect and dignity by the State, parents, significant adults and society.

Current research knowledge provides useful insights in the implementation of a child-centred approach which must be based on knowledge and understanding of the child and her life. Research on child development has traditionally been conducted over the five developmental domains of physical, cognitive, social-emotional, moral and spiritual

development. While this exploration or expression of understanding of the child's development and learning seeks to move away from such categorisation and to re-conceptualise learning and development, supporting research exists in this format. The CECDE would, however, reiterate the position that all learning and development is interrelated and interdependent.

From a physical point of view, the child needs balanced and healthy nutrition, but children living in poverty are most at risk of deficient diets. This finding is of particular concern in Ireland which has one of the highest rates of child poverty in the EU. In terms of preventative health care, the child's health and well-being is supported in the crucial developmental years by consistent, seamless, multi-disciplinary service provision in the context of knowledge of the child's individual needs and circumstances. Physical activity is a key and necessary element in a child's development and is strongly associated with parental modelling and facilities and attitudes in childcare centres, pre-schools, schools and other out-of-home settings. Although developmental pathways have been mapped, it must be recognised that children have individual developmental trajectories and abilities influenced, but not determined by, for example, gender and abilities.

As the young child grows and develops socially and emotionally, caregivers will need to recognise the web of elements which make up her individual profile. Emotional regulation, i.e. the ability to exercise control over one's emotions, internally and externally, in accomplishing one's goals, and the ability to recognise and label emotions in oneself and in others is a facet of the child's development. Other aspects which require knowledge gleaned from research include the child's coping skills, sense of autonomy, attachment relationships (particularly with parents), self-esteem, self-confidence, self-identity and pro-social behaviours. Currently, three major models of children's learning and cognitive development form the theoretical basis for practice – Piagetian constructivist theory, Vygotskian sociocultural interactive theory and information processing theory. Within this theoretical framework, research provides insights on the building blocks of active learning including curiosity, exploration and novelty seeking, mastery motivation and goal persistence, metacognition, problem solving and the inter-relationship between language and thinking. While there is relatively little research and theory on the moral development of the child, it is an emerging area and one in which there is noteworthy research interest here in Ireland. The existing body of knowledge can further our understanding of the child's growth and development through explorations of morality as emotion, as conformity to rule and authority, as conforming to one's own belief system and sense of self, and the ways in which the child's developing moral sense functions in overall development. In the same way that theories of moral development are in an early stage of development, so too is the case with research on the child's emerging spiritual life. Nonetheless, there are insights available into spirituality as a human capacity and an integral element of overall development.

## **Implications for Quality Standards**

### ***Defining quality:***

- Quality service provision is based on the child's individual profile of strengths and needs;
- The child is an active agent in her learning and development and is given the opportunity to exercise choice and autonomy;
- Caregivers and significant adults have an understanding and knowledge of current research and theory of child development;
- Caregivers and significant adults understand the circumstances of the child's life and have the expertise to understand and address the impact of these circumstances;
- The child has the right to quality service provision, which places her interests and well-being at the top of the agenda.

### ***Assessing quality:***

- The child's opinion must be sought and included, in an age appropriate way in the course of evaluation and assessment.

### ***Supporting quality:***

- The qualification and training of practitioners to ensure high levels of understanding of child development and high levels of professional expertise, is fundamental to providing quality child-centred services.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has described the development of one of the four pillars generated to support the CECDE's core function, the preparation of the NFQ. The NFQ will establish quality standards for ECCE provision in Ireland and the four pillars reflect the elements identified by the CECDE as necessary to successful outcomes for the process. These are - consultation with all stakeholders to ensure that the NFQ benefits from their expertise and experience; national and international reviews of quality related practice, policy and research; and a conceptualisation of child learning and development in the Irish context, both historically and currently. It is this last which has been introduced in this paper, and which will be made available in full in the near future. It is the hope of the CECDE that it will engender debate and discussion, vital ingredients for a vibrant ECCE sector in Ireland.

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**Notes:**

- 1 The CECDE wishes to acknowledge the contribution of Queen's University, Belfast and the researcher, Suzanne Clendenning who prepared this and the following section of the *Foundation Document*.
- 2 Feminine pronouns will be used throughout for ease of reading.

## A Study of Spontaneous Drawings of Young Children; Implications for The Quality of the Learning Environment

Mary Gallagher

### Introduction

Early childhood is a time of great capacity to learn that is motivated by innate processes (Gardner, 1993). There is evidence of universal patterns of development in the art of young children (Kellogg, 1969; 1979; Brittain, 1979; Cox, 1992). This paper describes a study that looks for patterns of development within the body of artworks of individual children. The study focuses on spontaneous artwork in order to profile self-motivated progress and uses a database as a research tool. Within the universal patterns, an orderly development takes place, with each child following a purposeful, cumulative and unique path. The establishment of certain cognitive processes fundamental to creativity is discussed. Means by which this self-motivated process can be supported within the learning environment are recommended.

### Background to the Study

Cizek, born in Vienna in 1865, noticed the special nature of the art of young children from his observations of spontaneous artwork, believing that *"Each child is a law unto himself, and should be allowed to develop his own technique."* (Tomlinson, 1944:18) Löwenfeld (1939; 1957) describes early childhood as a period preceding a stage that he describes as pre schematic. Kellogg (1969; 1979) analysed over half a million children's drawings collected over a period of twenty years, demonstrating that certain marks and symbols occur universally in the art of young children, and developed a classification system for these elements. Her findings suggested that children teach themselves to draw by a process which begins when the marks made by their own hands become a focus of interest. Although there is general agreement that a developmental process takes place through drawing, there has been diversity of opinion as to whether this is a process that is self-motivated or one that benefits from instruction. It is a contention of this paper that a child's work is informed by an innate sense of aesthetics that favours balanced forms rather than striving towards pictorial realism. Pictorial representation is culturally defined and is not valid as a single quality by which the line formations of child art can be appraised. Kellogg stated, *"the adult belief that child art has significance only insofar as it is pictorial art is a misconception that hinders the study of child development."* (Kellogg, 1969:100)

### Innate Learning Patterns, Universality and the Aesthetic Element

Young children have, in special measure, a quality of plasticity of thinking and fluidity of concepts. They observe and make generalisations and distinctions about the world around

them, and make connections across diverse scenarios. Gardner (1993) describes a tendency, defined as canalisation, to follow certain developmental paths. The striking commonalities in areas like music, the visual arts and mathematics are conveyed by Hofstadter (1979). In relation to mental processes concerned with pattern recognition in number, Hofstadter (1998:40) writes that insight was gained not so much from mathematical formulae, but through *“such universal but famously elusive essences as simplicity, consistency, symmetry, balance and elegance.”*

The work of Kellogg (1979) suggests that a strong factor in the art of young children is the recognition by the child of certain symbols or schemata that constituted a balanced, pleasing whole. In this sense, the art of the young children is informed by aesthetics. The favouring of balanced shapes is also in accordance with Gestalt theories of perception. The word gestalt means ‘form’ (Gardner, 1993:204), refers to a gestalt sensitivity, which is central in spatial intelligence and is a capacity to appreciate the whole, and to discern patterns even when some details may not be present. Both Arnheim (1954) and Kellogg (1979) refer to the work of Schafer-Simmern (1948), who stated that a primary visual order exists apart from rational thinking and that this is expressed in gestalt formations.

### **Introduction to the Study**

This investigation consists of three longitudinal studies of the spontaneous artwork of individual children, the aim of which is to map development. The artworks are a collection composed of three sets of drawings (Referred to as Collections A, B, and C) that constitute the majority of spontaneous drawings produced by three children of the author up to the age of four and a half years. Although the artworks were made by a variety of media including pencil, pen, crayon and paint, the term ‘drawing’ is used, as line is the predominant medium of children’s art. The drawings were made under conditions in which they were not influenced by adult intervention. Drawings were dated, and comments by the child at the time that the work was made were noted.

A database, ArtworksDB, was designed to organise identification and chronological data, to maintain a classification system, to enumerate the occurrence of elements or sets of elements by age, to identify the first occurrences of elements by age, and to identify elements favoured by the child at various age ranges. Images were scanned and stored within the database. The total number of artworks that form the basis of the study is 1,205. The number of descriptors of elements that could be identified is 154.

### **Design, Implementation and Evaluation**

Kellogg’s system for classification of elements within drawings was used, with additional classifications by the researcher. Elements in the drawings were recorded under the categories of Marks, Diagrams, and Schemata defined by Kellogg (1979) in such a way as to avoid pictorial connotations.



### **Explanation of Categories**

Marks: The twenty basic marks are elementary line formations such as dots; straight, roving or looped lines; spirals and circles. The Marks correspond to arm and hand movements, and are the building blocks of children's art.

Diagrams: Diagrams are made by combining or overlaying the basic Marks.

Schemata: The Schemata are gestalts that have their origins in the Diagrams, and include forms such as Mandalas, Suns and Humans. The Mandala is a formation of shapes, usually a cross and a circle, that are organised in concentric formation. The Sun is a circle with lines crossing the perimeter, and does not always depict the solar sun. Many drawings of Humans are based on the Mandala, thus preserving balance.

Expressed Subject Matter: This category recorded and classified subject matter expressed by the child.

Tables corresponding to these four categories were constructed within the database with relevant subcategories of descriptors. There is a hierarchical element implicit in the classification system. Within the universal pattern, marks are likely to be drawn before Diagrams. The Diagrams and Schemata appear first in implied or inherent form, frequently as a result of repeating basic Marks. Elements were classified at the highest rating, for example, if a Schema was made up of a number of Marks, it was classified as a Schema.

Sequences: It became evident that there were identifiable sequences of works within each collection. These Sequences were defined as a set or group of drawings that are distinguished by having certain characteristics in common and are usually, but not always, consecutive.

Personal Motifs: These were defined as graphical motifs that are devised by the child and are used repeatedly within his or her body of work.

### **Implementation and Evaluation**

The elements observed in each drawing were recorded in the database. Though the researcher has extensive experience as an art educator, there was a certain subjective element to these decisions, and procedures were implemented to maintain objectivity. An experienced pre-school teacher reviewed the rating process in order to maintain consistency, and alterations were made to achieve consensus. The use of the database provided quantitative data that underpinned the findings.

### **Analysis**

A Timeline based on the age of the child by month was constructed to map development. Queries of the database enumerated the occurrence of elements by age. Work was examined within seven age ranges.

### Summary of Findings

There is clear evidence that each child builds on his or her own work, in line with Kellogg's (1969) findings. Within the universal pattern, each child followed unique paths of exploration. The use of a database as a research tool enabled the revelation of the multi-layered nature of development. Table 1 reflects the trends identified. Beginning with the physical action of making basic marks, the child proceeded to repeat a number of these marks and to discover more marks. The twenty basic Marks were made by the age of twenty-four months in all three cases studied. The combining and overlaying of the basic marks formed Diagrams. Diagrams and Schemata occurred first in implied or inherent forms. More controlled drawing of diagrams increased between twenty-four and thirty-six months. Although a few implied Schemata occurred before the age of twenty-eight months, the main expansion in the number of new Schemata devised occur between the ages of twenty-eight and fifty-five months. There is a relative diminution in the number of basic marks towards the latter age range. Through a long process of self-motivated work, the child has developed her or his own visual repertoire. The devising of schemata is indicative of an ability to form concepts and to attribute meaning to symbols.

**Table 1: Records of Elements Present**

Collection A					
Months	Marks	Diagrams	Schemata	ESM <sup>†</sup>	Images <sup>*</sup>
1-12	3	0	0	0	1
13-24	103	36	0	0	36
25-30	72	23	13	5	38
31-36	76	73	29	9	85
37-42	47	18	14	1	27
43-48	86	60	39	11	80
49-54	136	82	56	29	116
Collection B					
Months	Marks	Diagrams	Schemata	ESM <sup>†</sup>	Images <sup>*</sup>
1-12	2	1	0	0	3
13-24	261	83	18	1	79
25-30	96	41	4	8	38
31-36	167	157	42	16	95
37-42	247	187	95	29	157
43-48	51	57	38	13	49
49-54	128	133	123	26	117
Collection C					
Months	Marks	Diagrams	Schemata	ESM <sup>†</sup>	Images <sup>*</sup>
1-12	0	0	0	0	0
13-24	152	36	21	2	46
25-30	111	29	11	7	35
31-36	52	15	1	0	19
37-42	61	22	9	11	23
43-48	55	38	1	3	35
49-54	84	152	75	43	125

†Expressed subject matter

\*Number of images in collection

The identification of Sequences and Personal Motifs is significant because they provide evidence of the child building on their own work. Figure 1 illustrates the pattern of occurrence of Sequences within Collection C. Such evidence includes periods of repetition, experimentation, consolidation or theme and variation. Some Sequences were continued over several months, with other work intervening.

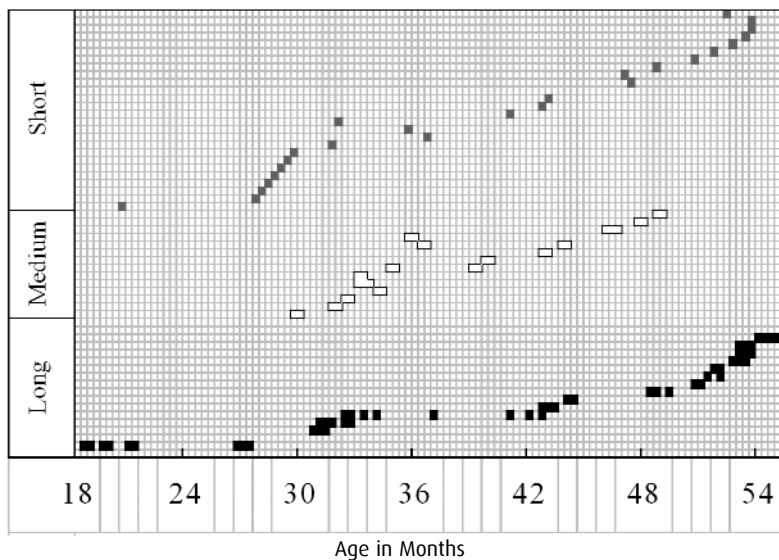
**Figure 1: Timeline Showing the Occurrence of Sequences of Drawings**

Collection C. Each bar represents a Sequence by age range

Long - six or more drawings

Medium - four to five drawings

Short - two to three drawings



Sequences occurred even at the earliest stages when the marks being made were of an abstract nature, suggesting that the child is visually comprehending his or her own marks and is purposefully repeating these marks. Figure 2 shows elements that were repeated within a Sequence at the age of thirty-four months, an instance of theme and variation. Other Sequences of drawings were in response to experiences that had a particular sensory-motor resonance.

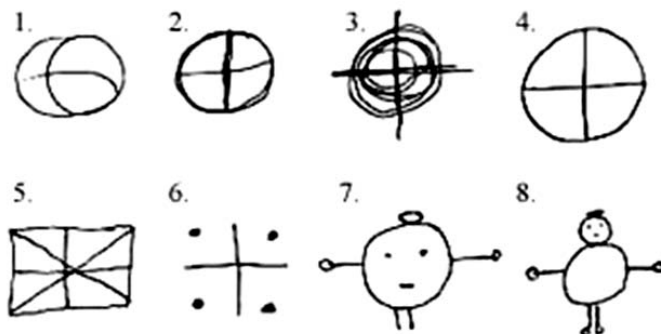
**Figure 2: Elements that were repeated with Variations in a Sequence of Drawings**  
Age 34 Months



Personal Motifs provide evidence of the involvement of memory, and of the unique nature of each child's evolving visual vocabulary. The occurrence of Expressed Subject Matter was low relative to the number of drawings made by each child, suggesting that talking about artworks is not of great importance from the child's point of view. The expression of subject matter correlates strongly with the first drawings of humans and animals. Subject matter expressed suggests that the child reflects his or her immediate environment and interests in drawing.

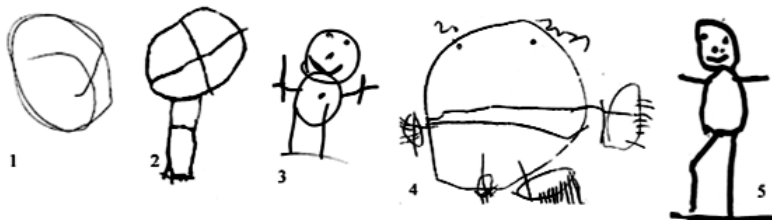
Another notable feature of development is the gradual establishment of a horizontal and vertical axis to drawings. This is seen in the development of the border, base or skyline, a Diagram that is drawn as a line close to, and parallel to the edge of the page. The establishment of the base line is indicative of an ability to comprehend a linear series of marks, as in word forms.

The Mandala has many manifestations in the art of children, both as an abstract balanced form and as a form that gives balance in other Schemata such as Humans. Figure 3 is a representation of how the Mandalas can evolve from an inherent or implied form that precedes those drawn later.

**Figure 3: Examples of Mandalas**

- 1 Inherent Mandala;
- 2 Multilined Mandala;
- 3 Mandaloid structure;
- 4 Mandala formed from circle and cross;
- 5 Mandala formed from rectangle and crosses;
- 6 Mandala with cross and implied edge;
- 7 Human with Mandaloid balance;
- 8 Human with torso and Mandaloid balance.

Figure 4 shows examples of Mandalas that are details from some of the artworks included in the study. It is common for early drawings of people to have Mandaloid balance, that is, that the figures fit into an implied circle and cross formation. Mandalas can also be formed from crosses and squares or rectangles, and can have an additional diagonal cross, making an eight-fold division.

**Figure 4: Examples Of Mandalas From Drawings Included in The Study**

- 1 Inherent Mandala;
- 2 Diagram including Mandala;
- 3 Human with torso and Mandaloid balance;
- 4 Human with Mandaloid balance;
- 5 Human with torso and Mandaloid balance.

## Discussion

Cognitive processes associated with the development of children through art include perception, re-perception, representation and concept formation. These processes are fundamental to creativity. There is a progression from the sensory stimulation of making and perceiving marks to the higher-level abilities to make abstractions and attribute meaning to symbols, from percept to concept.

Perception is the ability to build order from the amount of information constantly conveyed to us by our senses. Re-perception is an ability to look at something that is of interest and to perceive it in a new way. Hofstadter (1998:308) suggests, *“the ability to re-perceive, in short, is at the crux of creativity.”* Re-perception plays a significant role in pattern recognition.

Concept formation is concerned with the abstracting of the essential form of an object or idea. This ability is closely related to the ability to make analogies, that is, the ability to see likenesses across differing scenarios. The ability to make analogies is important in learning. In relation to children’s drawings, Kellogg writes:

*“That one can see the common denominators in form combinations for Humans and Animals is due to the mind’s flexibility in interpreting the visual data of communication through art.”* (Kellogg, 1979:106)

Hofstadter is of the opinion that autonomy is a necessary condition for the exercise of creativity, which he defines as follows:

*“Full-scale creativity consists in having a keen sense for what is interesting, following it recursively, applying it at the meta-level, and modifying it accordingly.”* (Hofstadter, 1998:313)

With the exception of the element of self-consciousness or awareness of the meta-level, the above definition comes very close to describing the processes in operation as the young child follows his or her own developmental path through art. The child will continue to follow pathways of interest, leading to more points of choice. The art of the young child is suffused with elements of simplicity, elegance and harmony that are common to many creative ideas. In the course of this development, certain cognitive processes that have a commonality with other fields of endeavour such as number, language acquisition, music, movement and pretend play are developed. It is suggested that these processes include:

- An ability to notice similarities;
- An ability to notice differences;
- Recognition of abstract relations;
- An appreciation of balance and symmetry;
- The ability to attribute meaning to symbols;
- The concept of theme and variation;
- The concept of horizontal and vertical axes;
- The capacity to wonder 'What if....?'

### **Implications for the Quality of the Learning Environment**

The individual child's development through art is a gradual, purposeful, cumulative and self-motivated process that is one aspect of the child's physical, cognitive, emotional and social development. In relation to age-appropriate support, Walsh states:

*"It is imperative that attempts are not made to rush or accelerate development in these years as this can impact negatively on development. The child needs appropriate stimulation in line with his/her stage of development to ensure innate developmental needs are met."* (Walsh, 2003:20)

It is a contention of this paper that the provision of an environment that allows the child autonomy over his or her artwork facilitates this development. This includes providing simple art materials, allowing the child to proceed at his or her own pace, being aware that there will be periods of repetition and experimentation, and allowing imaginative space. The quality of the interaction between adult and child is important. The demeanour of the young child when drawing is usually one of quiet engagement. The adult could do well to mirror this demeanour. Young children may not demonstrate interest in the finished artwork that they have produced. However, the careful handling and conservation of each piece of work by the adult signifies respect for the work that is more beneficial than effusive verbal praise. A distinction can be made between art activities in which the child has freedom over his or her creations, and craft activities where the final product is planned or made to a prearranged pattern. The latter should not substitute for the former.

Piaget (1929) recognised that the young child's way of knowing may not be correct by adult criteria, but is perfectly feasible in accordance with the child's perceptions of the world. It is hoped that the study described will help adults to gain an understanding of the wonderful process that is unfolding in the child's development through art, and support the idea of the equivalence of children's art among all art.

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## **The National Children's Nurseries Association Centre of Excellence Programme: A Tool for Defining and Assessing Quality in the Irish Childcare System**

**Ashling Hooper**

This paper will outline in detail the National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA) Centre of Excellence Programme. It will describe:

- How the Programme was developed;
- How the Programme defines and describes Quality;
- The process of the Centre of Excellence Programme;
- The outcomes of the external evaluation of the Programme;
- Some of the ethical considerations inherent in the Programme;
- The outcomes for the Irish childcare sector of the Centre of Excellence Programme.

### **History of the Centre of Excellence**

The NCNA was established in 1988 by a number of childcare providers based mainly in Dublin, who wished to network and support each other. During this time, a quality assurance system was also developed through which members could be awarded the higher status of being a registered member. With the introduction of Pre-School Regulations, this system was set aside to allow the sector to engage with the statutory regulations. In 1996, the NCNA received Department of Health and Children funding to employ a National Advisor, whose role was to support and advise members in relation to statutory requirements. In 2001, the NCNA secured funding under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme to develop services for members, including the employment of regional support staff.

It was clear that for many years, NCNA members had been striving to provide quality services for the children and families in their care. When the Pre-School Regulations were introduced in 1996, it became very clear that there were many childcare providers who were providing services in excess of the requirements of the Pre-school Regulations, but no method of acknowledging this existed.

The NCNA launched a project with 40 member services to pilot the Self-Assessment Manual, which had been developed in 2000 with funding received from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. The Self-Assessment Manual had been developed as a tool for members to evaluate their services. The evaluation of the pilot project indicated a desire from providers to have a more detailed assessment process available.

The outcomes of this pilot project and the awareness of the need to offer recognition to services providing quality, prompted discussions in NCNA about potential mechanisms to address these issues on behalf of the members of NCNA. Following consultation between NCNA staff and Executive Committee, a number of principles for any scheme were agreed:

- It would be voluntary;
- It would be non-competitive;
- It would involve self-assessment as the key methodology;
- It would be transparent;
- It should be clearly different from the Pre-School Inspection process;
- It should be a supportive process for anyone who wishes to participate;
- It should place great importance on relationships, activities and programmes in the childcare service, as opposed to the more physical, environmental issues, which are covered in Pre-school Regulations inspections.

### **Defining Quality**

Following this, NCNA staff began to research international literature on the assessment of early childhood settings. Their work was guided by a nine-member advisory committee of early childhood professionals from across the country. This research indicated that the model of self-evaluation had been shown to be successful internationally and it was agreed to maintain this as the key assessment model.

There then followed the task of agreeing the areas of the childcare service which the Centre of Excellence would seek to assess. A large amount of secondary research was conducted, including looking at the National Association Education of Young Children (NAEYC), Academy of early childhood programme of accreditation model in the USA, the ECERS (Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale), and the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) in Australia.

Some of the initial categories agreed were curriculum, food and nutrition, relationships with families, staff management issues, interactions in the nursery, environment, administration, and business management. NCNA staff then examined the headings further, agreed what sub-headings would be included in each section, combined certain sections, addressed issues such as overlapping subjects etc., and finally agreed on the following ten sections:

- Activities and Programmes for Children;
- Relationships in the Nursery;
- Partnership with Families;
- Health, Safety and Hygiene;

- Staff Conditions and Professional Development;
- Physical Environment;
- Food and Nutrition;
- Management and Administration;
- Implementation of Policies and Procedures;
- Evaluation and Review of Nursery.

Before work began on the document itself, a number of key decisions were taken, including the prioritisation of the sections, process issues in regard to timeframe, who and how a visit would be conducted, defining the process in a brochure for members and questions of administration. A key question at this time was for how long the award would be valid. It was agreed that the award would be valid for the year of the validation and the following year.

### **Defining the Parameters of Quality**

When devising the scoring mechanisms for the programme, a number of key points were noted:

- It was important that all questions would help providers and their staff look at, reflect on and record how well they felt they were performing;
- Different types of scoring mechanisms would be necessary for different sections;
- Many parameters overlapped two or three sections. It was agreed to repeat subjects where this happened in order to allow for further reflection on the subject;
- Yes/No scoring was important for key questions, and a rating system was more appropriate for 'value-added' type subjects.

This work concluded with a total of 501 parameters for assessment being agreed. It was also agreed that there were two sections where degrees of compliance could be claimed. These were Activities and Programmes for Children and Food and Nutrition. A 1-8 mark rating system was used for these sections, one being the lowest and eight being the highest. All other sections have a Yes/No marking system except the Food and Nutrition, which has a combination of both scoring systems. This final draft document became known as the Self-Evaluation Profile or SEP.

### **Testing and Training**

In March 2002, all NCNA members were invited to participate in the Centre of Excellence Programme. The project had its official launch at a reception at Dublin Castle Conference Centre on March 22, 2002 hosted by the Minister for Children, Mary Hanafin, T.D.

Seventy-eight services applied to participate in the project. The applicants received acknowledgment letters on May 15, 2002, with the Self-Evaluation Profile (SEP) materials sent approximately two weeks later.

NCNA's Regional Support Workers (RSWs) were available to visit childcare services throughout the self-evaluation process. Regional Meetings were also held to answer questions about the Programme.

Initial assessment training for NCNA staff began in May 2001. This training was conducted by two consultants from the NAEYC in the USA. Following this, in June 2002, the Advisory Team travelled to London for further training in assessing services. This training also involved testing the SEP with London-based childcare providers. The feedback from these tests, as well as feedback from participating services indicated the need to develop further explanatory documentation to accompany the SEP. 'Pink pages' were developed and were distributed to all participating services in July, approximately midway through the self-evaluation process. These 'pink pages' clarified certain criteria, and confirmed for participating services what constituted a score of five or a score of eight. Minimum standards for receiving the award were also clarified at this time. (These 'pink pages' were incorporated into the SEP the following year).

### **The Validation Process**

In the first year of the Programme, a total of thirty-seven centres (47% of the total applicants) completed the self-evaluation process and submitted the SEP for review. The NCNA staff reviewing those submissions determined that two services were ineligible to continue the process: One had missed the submission deadline; the other had submitted incomplete materials. Two other services withdrew from the process voluntarily after changes in management.

All validation visits were conducted over a six-month period beginning in September 2002 and ending February 2003. The validators selected the visit dates. Services received approximately ten business days' advance notice of the validation visits. The Advisory Team worked in two-person teams to conduct the validation visits. For consistency, the National Advisor conducted all validation visits bar two. In order to help prevent potential conflicts of interest, she excused herself from these services with which she had a close affiliation; RSWs did not validate services in areas where they played a support role.

Typically, the visits began with a tour of the building following arrival at 10:00 a.m. and ended at approximately 5:00 p.m. The profile was then completely reviewed and rated. Most visits lasted one day; there were only three two-day visits, necessitated by nursery size.

Members of each validation team divided their responsibilities; one validator conducted room observations while the other reviewed the service's documentation. Dialogue about the service went on throughout the validation visit. All services provided consent forms signed by parents allowing the validators to speak to their children.

The validation visit ended when observations of all areas of the service and review of the required documents were completed. An exception was the two cases where the validators encountered violations in Pre-School Services Regulations (e.g. if a centre was understaffed or "out of ratio" at the time of the visit). When violations were identified, the validators informed the manager of the infractions and left the centre.

The decision to award the Centre of Excellence was made by the two validators who visited each site. The primary criterion for the award was whether the service was consistently rated six or above (out of a possible eight points) on each relevant area, and scored appropriately in the yes/no sections.

All Centre of Excellence candidates were mailed notification about whether or not they would receive the award on February 27, 2003. Their own completed self-evaluation profiles were mailed separately, which were accompanied by the SEPs completed during the validation visit. Soon after, the RSWs visited each participating site to provide individualized feedback about the validators' findings.

Sixteen nurseries from seven counties were selected to receive the first-ever awards. This number represents 20.5% of all applicants for the project and 48.5% of all services that went through the validation process.

All participants in the Centre of Excellence project—along with other members of the NCNA and guests—were invited to a Centre of Excellence Award Ceremony at Dublin Castle on May 9, 2003. Colorful display posters prepared by the staff and children of each of the Centres of Excellence and introductions as each group received the award underscored the wide variety of services that had received the special award designation.

## **Evaluation and Review**

### **External Evaluation, Year 1**

The first evaluation of the project was launched concurrent with the award ceremony. Representatives of New Developments Consulting conducted three focus groups of at least one hour each on May 9 and 10, 2003. The three groups included more than a dozen individuals—owners, managers, or childcare staff—who had participated in the Centre of Excellence project. Focus group participants also had an opportunity to submit written comments following each group session. At the completion of the focus groups, the

principal investigator also met informally with the NCNA staff to share initial impressions and request their input. Two separate survey forms were drafted following the focus groups and these were sent to all seventy-eight services that initially applied for the SEP. Some of the results of this evaluation were used to inform changes and improvements in the Centre of Excellence process in 2003. These included:

- Services are notified of the result within 30 days of their visit;
- Half-hour sessions with written feedback on all sections in document are held at the end of the validation visit;
- An evaluation survey is given to the centre by the validators on conclusion of the visit, which they are asked to return to NCNA;
- The times spent in each room is recorded with at least one hour being spent in each room;
- Longer visits have been introduced, from 8.30am until 5.00pm, which provides an opportunity to meet parents and see children settling in;
- In services with over 100 children, three validators conduct the visit, with two validators spending their time observing rooms;
- The Policy and Procedure section was expanded and providers were given more detail of what was expected in each policy;
- Clarification was given about some ratings;
- NCNA members need and are provided with information on an ongoing basis about good practice. Centre of Excellence Bulletins have been developed and articles are written in the NCNA magazine and the NCNA Bulletin;
- The need for in-service training on certain issues was identified, e.g. diversity, and this is regularly offered through the NCNA Training Prospectus and Tailor Made Training.

### **Internal Evaluation, Year 2**

An internal review of the Centre of Excellence Programme was completed in Year Two by participating services. Following this review, three key changes were made which have since been incorporated into the SEP. These include

- 1 Two new parameters have been added to the section on Activities and Programmes for Children;
- 2 The rating scale has been changed from 1-8, to 1-4;
- 3 A Re-Application Document has been developed (see below).

### **Re-Application Document**

A Re-Application SEP was devised in 2004 for services whose Centre of Excellence Award would run out in 2004. There is no compulsion on services to re-apply, but many services have indicated their wish for a re-application process. Following consultation within the

NCNA, it was agreed that a new document would have to be devised. It was agreed that the standard to be reached by a service reapplying, which has already won the award, would have to be at the same standard as the applicants of that current year. Visits to service re-applying are non-notified. These services are given a ten-day window within which the validation visit will be conducted.

### **Supporting Quality - the Centre of Excellence Experience**

The RSW team support NCNA members on an ongoing basis, providing support on all aspects of running their childcare service. Specific support is available with regard to the Centre of Excellence as outlined below:

Support to make the decision to apply for the Award: RSW's are very familiar with the services in their area, and services which the RSW feels could achieve the award standard are encouraged to identify their strengths and identify steps to address any weaknesses which may exist. This prepares members for deciding to apply for the Award;

Encouraging members to use the Self-Evaluation Profile as a working tool: As the methodology used by the Centre of Excellence is self-evaluation, it is ideal for use by members as a tool to reflect on how well they are doing with their service and to help identify improvements which can be made.

Information: As detailed above, special bulletins on specific issues of good practice have been developed and articles are included on an ongoing basis in other NCNA publications.

Group meetings: Question and Answer meetings have been organised which are facilitated by RSW's. These meetings provide members considering applying for the Award with an opportunity to get clarification on issues of concern.

Advice from award recipients: Members who have already achieved the Award are now invited to attend these meetings and their advice and experience has proved to be invaluable for potential applicants.

Site visits before application: RSW's are invited by potential applicants to conduct an advisory site visit in advance of application. These visits may include advice on room layout, curriculum, menus, etc.

External support: NCNA have worked to ensure that the Pre-School Officers nationwide and all the County Childcare Committees are familiar with the Centre of Excellence Award. This has led to various Committees and Pre-School Officers encouraging providers to apply for the award, and giving whatever advice or support they may have available.

One-to-One Visits after Award Notification: RSW's conduct visits with all members who applied for the Award. This visit will involve an examination of the Validators SEP, and advice for the provider on changes that they could make in order to achieve the Award at another time if they have been unsuccessful, or to look at further improvements which can be made, in the case of successful applicants. This encouragement and support is vital for the continuation of a supportive relationship between the provider and the RSW.

### **Ethical Issues**

Ethical Issues arise when information such as that which is included in an SEP is shared. The key issues are those of confidentiality and trust. NCNA has considered these issues in some detail and a number of guiding points are now in place.

- The process of self-evaluation is based on the principle of trust, therefore the purpose of the Validation visit is to confirm the service provider's commitment to and understanding of excellence in childcare service delivery;
- The process is underpinned by the fact that NCNA is a membership based organisation and that services such as the Centre of Excellence are developed on behalf of and with the support of members;
- The names of applicant nurseries are confined to the Advisory Team;
- Applicant nurseries that are in the validation process are not discussed with their RSW;
- The Validation Team is made up of Advisory Staff from outside the area;
- Details of the Validation process are not discussed outside of the Advisory Team;
- RSW's must trust the decision of the Validation team about a service in their area;
- The results and feedback of the Validation visit are made known to the service provider and the RSW for the area;
- Only nurseries that receive the award are publicised.

Ethical Issues are organic in nature and it is assumed that further guiding points may have to be agreed in the future in order to ensure the transparency of the Centre of Excellence Award process.

### **Outcomes for the Sector**

The Centre of Excellence Award is an independent assessment tool for the childcare sector in Ireland. The independence of the Award is central to its success as it is not dependent on any external agencies or private companies for funding, which means that extraneous influence is not brought to bear.

The SEP provides a user-friendly tool that providers can use to monitor the quality of their service. Because it uses simple methods of assessment, it is transparent and can be easily understood by parents and the external community within which the childcare sector



operates. The SEP sets down standards for the sector which are informed by the experience of the NCNA and by our sister organisations in Ireland and abroad and which will serve to lift standards throughout the sector.

The SEP is a dynamic document and as such can be amended to reflect changes in the sector. New developments such as the new National Council for Curriculum and Assessment Framework document, or the revised Pre-school Regulations can therefore easily be incorporated into the SEP.

The Centre of Excellence Programme will identify key developmental issues for the sector, i.e. if all services applying for the Award show weaknesses in the same area, this points to significant gaps in the sector in general and therefore may highlight issues for public policy, for training, for legislative changes etc.

The Centre of Excellence Award provides an opportunity for the work of childcare staff to be recognised and gives these, often underpaid and undervalued staff, a real sense of pride and success.

The Award is a very tangible and quantifiable way for the government to assess the value of its investment in childcare, and therefore a way of targeting further improvements for the Sector.

Finally the Centre of Excellence Award is available to providers of childcare who are committed to providing quality childcare and to raising the standards of the sector in general. The more this commitment is recognised, the more valuable it will become to achieve an Award such as the Centre of Excellence. The more recognition given, the better-informed parents will be about finding quality childcare for their children. This in turn will give greater confidence to the sector, a sector that has been undervalued for years. This will lead to better childcare for children in Ireland today and into the future. Irish children deserve such aspiration and vision.

## Children Playing in Nature

Karen Marie Eid Kaarby

### Introduction

In this paper, I want to focus on *barnehager*, which when in the wild environment, are known as *Friluftsbarnhager*. Firstly, I will define the concept *Friluftsbarnhage*. Secondly I will discuss the observation of children's play out in wild environment and how nature influences children's play. Finally, I want to point out how nature influences the quality of children's play.

The Norwegian word *barnehage* describes different types of provision for children from one to six years of age, such as day nurseries, kindergartens and pre-schools. They all have an educational agenda.

The word *Friluftsliv* is more than simply outdoor activities or outdoor recreation. The main motivation is the experience of nature, and the philosophy is to take care of the environment.

### *Friluftsbarnhager* Outside in the Wild Environment

The Norwegian Ministry of the Environment currently focuses on *friluftsliv* as a recommended educational way of working in *barnehager* and schools (Parliament Report nr. 39, 2000-2001). The arguments for this way of working are related to both ecology and health. A child who learns to love the countryside will wish to preserve it. He or she will understand the importance of biological diversity. It is also assumed that these children will keep on using the outdoor environment for physical activities in their adult life. The *Framework Plan for Day-Care Institutions* (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 1996) formulates objectives such as "*developing positive attitudes and practical skills*" related to nature and outdoor activities. There is growing documentation stating that increased physical activity, and particularly outdoor physical activity, can prevent diseases related to modern lifestyles.

During the last ten years, a large number of *friluftsbarnhage* have been established in Scandinavia, particularly in Norway. In Norway, there is a loose National curriculum, a framework, stating objectives and aims for educational work in *barnehager*. *Friluftsbarnhager* must follow this national curriculum and the general principles of management of "barnehager". They do this through mainly outdoor activities all day, every day, year round. This motto from one *friluftsbarnhage* shows their philosophy: "*Everything you can do indoors, you can do outdoors, but not the other way around.*" According to their programs, two different areas seem to be common. The first is

developing knowledge about the environment and experience of nature. The second is to focus physical activity and motor development by using nature as an arena for play (Lysklett, 2003).

The researchers Borge *et al.* (2003) presented three ideas underpinning the *friluftsbarnhage*. Firstly, they see them as a part of the strong bonds between nature and Norwegians, and Norwegian's tradition of preferring outdoor leisure activities. They assume that parents want to give their children the opportunity to experience outdoor activities and to develop positive attitudes to outdoor and wild environment. The second idea is that of "a happy childhood." They say that the majority of parents believe that "happy children are children playing outdoor most of the day, irrespective of season and weather." (Borge *et al.*, 2003:606) The last point is the parents' option to choose this type of *barnhage* for their child because of the increased number of these *friluftsbarnhager*. Borge *et al.* (2003) estimate that about 5 per cent of all day-care children in Scandinavian countries experience such outdoor life in *friluftsbarnhager*.

Høyland (1999), supported by The Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, evaluated the quality of *friluftsbarnhager*, and her results show that wild environments and outdoor life are positive arenas for learning. *Friluftsbarnhager* represent more flexibility. There are more possibilities for physical activities, mastery experiences, knowledge about the natural environment and environmental consciousness in these institutions.

Fjørtoft (2001) in her doctorate thesis documents that children develop better physical skills when they are given opportunity for outdoor activities from an early age.

### **How does the Environment Influence Children's Play?**

According to a post-graduate thesis (Klepsvik 1995), staff in *Friluftsbarnhager* reported that children's play is more creative, and they play better in the wild environment compared to ordinary playgrounds. My main question is: How does the outdoor environment influence children's play?

Fjørtoft (2001:111) notes that "the central concept guiding children's examination of their environment is that of "affordance'." Gibson's (1979) concept of *affordance* was developed to describe how compositions and layout of surfaces constitute what they afford. The *affordances* of the environment are what the environment offers to the children. Heft (1988) elaborated the concept of *affordances* further and explained environmental features as functions for play. Children perceive the functions of the features in the environment, and they intuitively use them for physical challenges and play. They perceive what the environment affords them. Heft (1988) argued that the functional approach corresponds to the relationship of children to their environment. The

diversity of the outdoor environment gives the children a lot of possibilities. Different features like cliffs and rocks, slopes and heights, and a mixture of woodland with a high diversity in vegetation, all have a functional meaning for children. For example, a tree with branches suitable for climbing will be perceived as climbable. If some of the branches also are big enough to sit on, the tree can be perceived as both climbable and as a base for social play. The tree therefore affords opportunities both for climbing and playing. A key point made by Gibson (1979) is that *affordances* correspond with each individual; to the size of the body, strength, the skills, courage and fear.

### **My Research Project Observing Children Playing Outdoors**

My research project is based on a Qualitative approach (Sparkes 1992; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1992). During Autumn 2003, I visited two groups in two different *friluftsbarnhager* that spent most of the day outdoor in the forest. I stayed with them for twelve days from late August to December. I watched children play, wrote some notes and finished my log later on. I videotaped children's play when they were happy for me to do so. The tape was transcribed and analysed together with the log. First, I tried to observe the whole group because I wanted to get a general idea of how children behaved. Then I kept on observing different groups of children in their play and play at popular features.

Both *friluftsbarnhager* alternated different places, camps, out in wild environment. The only facility at the camp was the fire. Some camps were near the main *barnhage* building, while some were nearly an hour's walk or a short bus journey away. My observations have been discussed with and confirmed by the staff and my colleagues.

### **How did the Children Play?**

Each camp had different natural features, such as different woodland, a grassy field, a lot of cliffs and really big rocks. On coming to the camp, some children started to play immediately and some stayed with the staff at the camp. The latter group could find a knife and start whittling or help in building the bonfire. One of the staff always had to stay by the fire. One of the *Barnhager* also prepared a hot meal for the children by the fire every day at noon. The children who immediately started to play, were either focused on where to play and had made arrangements for play before they arrived at the camp, or they went around looking for facilities and playmates before starting real play.

### **Physical Activity Play**

Physical activity play was prominent most of the time. I saw a lot of activities which were repeated in the context of exercise play (Pellegrini and Smith, 1998). The activities could be:

- Climbing up very steep hillsides and sliding down again;
- Climbing up and jumping down from big rocks or small cliffs;

- Climbing in trees;
- Throwing javelins or cones;
- Shooting with bows and arrows;
- Rolling on the ground;
- Balancing on stones, fallen trees etc.;
- Whittling a stick.

I will argue that all these activities were based on what the environment afforded and the functional significance of the surroundings (Heft 1988). Children are aware of how steep a slope must be to be able to slide down, and they explore different ways of sliding down according to their fear and ability. When climbing, they find their own ways up, fitting their strength, height and skills to the task. They intuitively examine what nature affords them, and they stop climbing when it becomes too dangerous for them. All the elements listed above were also seen as a part of role-play.

### **Role-play**

The environment with its natural features constituted a scene for role-playing. They were a mother and children, a mouse or a cat family moving around looking for something to eat, running away from a threat or whatever the dramatic adviser (always one of the children) told them to do. On their trips, they sought the natural features that could give different challenges. They moved around through shrubs, crossing rock-strewn slopes, up and down hillsides while speeding up and down, often fleeing. The one in front perceived what the environment would *afford* her. Sometimes her movements were too complicated for some of those who followed, but they never mentioned or commented on the behaviour. The play had the elements of running effectively around and dealing with obstacles. I observed this kind of play in both institutions. In one, this play belonged to a group of girls, but sometimes boys were involved. In the other, both boys and girls participated almost all the time.

Some boys' play had a different content. They were pirates, workers on a spacecraft, car drivers, Robin Hood or Harry Potter. Their play was more vigorous and their movements more dynamic. Often they also carried sticks with them, and sometimes there was an element of fight, either verbal or physical. I never saw them participate in the mother and child play, and they seldom allowed girls to participate in their play. The advanced climbers found their spacecraft or their castle at the top of a tree suitable for climbing. Big branches afforded opportunities for sitting, balancing, swinging and rocking and all these elements were found in the play. Another element was the fight, and even a fight can take place in a tree, if the tree is suitable. I watched different kinds of fights in the trees. The fights were very much verbal and as soon as the intruder was a real danger, they surrendered, climbed down, or negotiated a solution.

In the role-play the elements of nature were used in different ways. The shrubs and trees were transformed into houses, cars, garages, spacecraft, castles and whatever. Implements such as switches for lights, door openings, rocket launchers, steering wheels etc. were always found and used by the children in their play. Stepping-stones, for example, function as an entrance for a house, stepping from stone to stone became an important element of a mother and child play. A windfall where the wind had blown down trees could be a scene for a role-play. Like staying in trees, staying at windfalls demanded balance and strength. The windfall gave opportunities for those who did not want to be quiet during a part of the role-play. If the tree or the windfall afforded it, some children were balancing, hanging, swinging or turning somersaults when the dramatic adviser told them to be in a car, in a plane or at school. They played their individual exercise play parallel, but within the role-play.

### **Go Exploring**

Another distinctive type of play was the number of expeditions that set out to discover something. In the autumn, spiders' webs were easy to find and they were attractive to some of the boys who challenged themselves to kiss the spiders' webs. Other exciting features were small caves, and stories were made up about who might have lived there. A dead mouse, a cocoon, a snail roused from its winter sleep in a warm hand, are all examples which were found and brought back to the camp to be shown to staff and discussed.

### **Traditional Play**

The last type of plays was chase and catch play, hide and seek and different singing games. Most of this play was started by children themselves, but once during the day, adults could start a game and very often the whole group participated. Different variants of chase and catch and hide and seek were popular, and sometimes the children started those games on their own. The ground, with its elements of vegetation and rocks made those games more challenging than if played on a flat ground, and emphasised the impact that the outdoors can have on children's play.

### **Conclusion**

I found that physical activity play was the prominent activity in these *friluftsbarnhager*. The children were more or less physically active all the time. The key elements of the exercise play (Pelligrini and Smith, 1998) were functions of different features in the environment, and the play had different characteristics according to the different surroundings. Where elements such as good climbing trees, windfalls, steep hillsides and dense bushes were available, these elements were included in nearly all the role play. Physical skills and body control seemed to determine the child's participation more than age (Kaarby, 2004).

### **Quality according to the Norwegian *Barnehage***

A program for Quality improvement in “barnehager” has just come to an end. The preliminary conclusions are of great interest from the point of view of *friluftsbarnhager*. The conclusions state that quality in the Norwegian *barnehager* first and foremost is characterized by:

- “A positive environment with a high level of well-being for the involved groups;
- Emphasizing play and variety of activities;
- Emphasizing outdoor activities and experience.” (Søbstad, 2004: 68)

These characteristics correspond with the main focus of the general framework plan for *barnehagen* which is on social interaction and play. Because quality is both relative and normative it is meaningful to talk about a special Norwegian Quality in *barnehager* (Søbstad, 2004).

### **How the Wild Environment Influences the Quality of Children’s Play**

Quality can be understood as the meaning or value a phenomenon has to those who are involved (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999; Søbstad, 2004). I have tried to describe how the wild environment influences children’s play and, from my point of view, gives value to play. I have tried to describe how nature was a dominant element in all kinds of play, and how children perceive functions of the environment and use them (Heft, 1988). Because of the seasons, the landscape has different characteristics and affords different functions during the year. These different features give various options and great diversity. The creativity children showed when transforming objects was conspicuous. While some will say that the environment simply serves the play, another way of looking at it is to ask how the environment created the play, how a feature invited just that particular kind of play.

Nearly a hundred children in six *barnehager* were asked what they preferred doing, and ninety-eight per cent answered running, jumping and climbing (Søbstad, 2004). All these activities are what children in *friluftsbarnhager* do all the time, as described earlier in this paper. The possibilities that nature gives for vigorous gross motor moments are of great value for children involved.

According to Pelligrini and Smith (1998), physical activity play has developmental functions in proportion to endurance and strength. From a health perspective, there is now a focus on children becoming more and more sedentary. The fact that children, when given the opportunity to play in outdoor surroundings, are physically active nearly all the time, shows that children enjoy being physically active. It seems like they are more engaged, involved and socially included in play outdoors (Klepsvik, 1995).

As I see it, another benefit for children is the many and various impressions which the wild environment gives. The four seasons and all sorts of weather make the same surroundings different each time. Being outdoors all through the year, children are much more aware of those shifts, and the different sense impressions they provide. The experience of nature is one of the basic qualities of *friluftsliv*. Practical experiences from different situations give children fundamental knowledge, and in the *barnehage* they have the opportunity to share the experience linguistically and to interact based on these shared experiences.

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## Defining, Assessing and Supporting Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education: The High/Scope Ireland Model

Imelda Madigan

### Introduction

“Quality” has become a buzz word in recent times. When we visit the shops we want quality merchandise. We judge the service industry by the quality of the service provided.

Those involved in early childhood care and education know that the word quality is without doubt on our agenda. It has become a local, national and indeed a global issue and rightly so. But what is quality? It could be defined as a very high standard, be that of product or service.

High/Scope Ireland works for quality. It was founded in 1999 as a non-profit making body. It continues the work today which began originally in Ypsilanti, Michigan in the U.S.A. It was here in the early sixties that it became clear that some children from low income families were in need of special educational services due to the various difficulties they were experiencing within the school system. The challenges encountered were:

- A high drop-out rate – 50%;
- A high rate of juvenile delinquency;
- Low test scores (Hohmann and Weikart, 2002).

As a result of these findings a preschool unit was planned and set-up in 1962, alongside an existing school known as Perry. This project, as it then became known, was called the Perry Preschool Project. It was under the auspices of David Weikart, the director of special services for the Ypsilanti public schools that this project was set-up. The goal was to prepare children from disadvantaged areas for future success in school. This preschool was designed to compare children’s progress in the Perry Preschool Programme with the progress of children with no preschool experience. It became a longitudinal study that has continued to track the progress of these children who are now in their forties (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1993).

### Some of the Results of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study

- Children are better prepared for school;
- Less need of special education;
- Better high school (secondary school) graduation rates;

- Fewer criminal arrests;
- Cost effective as a social investment (research has found that for every \$1 the taxpayer spent on the High/Scope programme the taxpayer also spent \$7.16 on the non-programme group) (Weikart, 2004).

David Weikart left special services in 1970 to set-up the High/Scope Research Foundation, which was, and still is, committed to the production and use of knowledge of education and human development that will increase the life chances of children throughout the world. Sadly, David Weikart died in December of 2003 – may he rest in peace. However, the work for quality care and education continues.

So to the question – how do we define quality? We need some specifics. Where is there a better place to start than with a mission statement. Gillian Pugh (1999) gave the following quote as one indicator of quality:... *“clearly defined aims and objectives and serious consideration of what we want for children as the starting point of how to achieve that.”*

Without doubt, all involved with early childhood care and education will need a much discussed and well thought-out mission statement, clearly stating what the goals for children are.

High/Scope bases its educational approach on four guiding principles:

- From birth through to adulthood, the individual develops awareness and understanding through active involvement with people, materials, events and ideas;
- Learning is most effective when the individual plans, carries out and reflects on intentional activities;
- A variety of developmentally appropriate learning experiences contributes to the individual’s intellectual, social, emotional and physical development;
- Consistent support and shared-control with children and respect for personal decision-making strengthens the individual’s confidence. (Epstein and Schweinhart, 1996)

Communities, programme co-ordinators, teachers and parents all have an important stake in improving or maintaining the quality of programmes they provide for young children.

The following are some elements that High/Scope research has identified as vital for a high quality programme:

- Low enrolment limits, with care-giving teams (sixteen to twenty children with two adults);

- A child development curriculum;
- Staff trained in early childhood development;
- Supervisory support and in-service training for the child development curriculum;
- Involvement of parents as partners with programme staff;
- Developmentally appropriate evaluation procedures;
- Sensitivity to the non-educational needs of children. (The Consortium for Longitudinal Studies, 1983).

Looking at the first element, High/Scope finds that working with any number of children under twenty promotes creativity, while providing an environment for group collaboration.

The second element identified by research – a child development curriculum – covers to some extent the remaining elements outlined. Let's look a little closer. *"In the High/Scope approach to early childhood care and education, adults and children share control. We recognise that the power to learn resides in the child, hence the focus on active learning practices. When we accept that learning comes from within, we achieve a critical balance in educating young children. The adults' role is to support and guide young children through their active learning experiences. I believe this is what makes our programme work so well."* (Hohmann and Weikart, 2002:3) It holds true that when a person is intrinsically motivated that is, involved in something they enjoy, are in control of, and are interested in, it is highly probable they will be successful in what they are doing and grow in competence and confidence.

The curriculum, which is based on Piaget's Constructivist Theory and the work of John Dewey, has the following goals:

- To develop children's ability to take the initiative and make decisions about what they are going to do and how;
- To develop children's self-discipline and their ability to identify certain goals and complete chosen tasks;
- To develop children's ability to work with other children and adults so that work done is a result of group planning, co-operative effort and shared leadership;
- To develop children's ability for self-expression so they can use language, pictures, movement and writing to share their experiences with others;
- To develop children's ability to apply their reasoning in a wide range of situations while using a variety of materials;
- To develop children's creativity, spirit of enquiry and openness to knowledge and other people's points of view. (Hohmann and Weikart, 2002)

The High/Scope curriculum promotes quality by having a learning environment with distinctive work areas. The home corner area, block area etc., have appropriate materials

which are accessible, and are stored and labelled so children can find, use and return them.

Through the High/Scope daily routine, which includes the unique sequence of plan-do-review for the pre-school child, and sequences like small group time, choice time and nap time for the infant and toddler, children can predict what comes next and choose to be involved in large or small group times (Post and Hohmann, 2000).

High/Scope key experiences gives us a clear idea of the thoughts and actions of children. These key experiences guide adults as they observe, support and plan activities which focus on children's strengths. High/Scope promotes the collaborative approach between child and adult. This is of paramount importance in creating a psychologically safe environment where adults can:

- Share control with children;
- Focus on their strengths;
- Support their play;
- Use a problem-solving approach to conflict.

Adults work in partnership throughout the day with the child and with the rest of the staff team. It is this teamwork that is vital for the assessment procedure. This is again another identified element of quality. The procedure involves staff observing and taking notes, discussing and analysing, with reference to the key experiences, the child's learning needs. These observations are used by the team to plan the next day's programme.

The benefits and advantages of the practice of taking notes on a daily basis are:

- It accurately shows change and development of a child over time;
- It is based on real performances rather than artificial testing situations;
- It provides essential daily information which is useful for planning;
- It is an ongoing record of each child's ability;
- It helps identify the 'invisible' child;
- It can be used by all staff;
- It is effective for parent/teacher meetings;
- It encourages adults and programmers to become more child oriented. (Hohmann and Weikart, 2002)

At intervals throughout the year, these observations are used to complete the Child Observation Record (COR). This is an assessment instrument, which facilitates practitioners' observation of a child over time.

Parental involvement is another essential element of quality promotion. High/Scope understands the fact that children in early years' settings are from diverse family backgrounds. Parental involvement is essential to develop an understanding of similarities and differences within these cultures. Then, these become an integral part of the learning environment. High/Scope acknowledges that staff need to continuously work toward becoming expert in their field – again another essential element of high quality programmes.

High/Scope promotes supervisory support, ongoing training and revisiting of the High/Scope curriculum. This keeps the curriculum alive. Continuous reflection is vital for practitioners assessing their current knowledge and skills and identifying further training needs. Other areas that High/Scope sees as vital for children are the areas of movement and music where the whole body is used to extend co-ordination and learning.

High/Scope has an external accreditation process where staff and managers using the High/Scope approach, use the Programme Quality Assessment (PQA) tool to assess all areas of the curriculum. This is done while each centre receives ongoing cluster group training supported by on-site development work.

### **Conclusion**

If you would like to further extend your knowledge and understanding of the High/Scope philosophy and the elements necessary for defining quality, assessing quality and assuring quality; a reference list is included at the end of this article. You can also visit the High/Scope website and browse through the research at [www.highscope.org](http://www.highscope.org). The findings show that the quality provided by the High/Scope curriculum facilitated children working to their full potential in the present day, as well as having long term benefits.

The final element High/Scope has identified as being necessary for a high quality programme is sensitivity to the non-educational needs of children. All involved in early childhood care and education continuously speak of the holistic development of human beings. We do this by being attentive to children. We attend to their physical well-being, to their bodies, whether they are hungry, in pain, too hot or too cold etc.

Adults also need to attend to the feelings of children, acknowledging and then addressing sadness, happiness, fear and anger. Adults need to be gentle and caring in this process. Intellectual development has always been high on the agenda and we need to feed and nurture this development, while remembering that it is only a part, and not all, of who the child is.

If we, who value quality in early childhood care and education, grow our own understanding of what it is to be gentle, caring, kind, a good listener, trustworthy, humble and supportive, will we not go a long way in our efforts to define and indeed achieve quality care?

Remember, there can be no care without education, and no education without care. Pay attention and flowers blossom.

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## Policy, Legislation and Practice for Children with Special Needs in Ireland

Mary Meaney

### Introduction

This paper will address issues of policy, legislation and practice in early childhood care and education for children with special educational needs. It will seek to indicate how the care strand and the education strand have, in practice, developed along separate lines and how legislation and official policy have influenced this separation.

The paper will also give a short overview of some of the provisions of the *Education for Persons with Special Education Needs Act*, which was signed into law in July 2004. It will outline how the Department of Health and Children (DHC) and the Department of Education and Science (DES) will be required to co-operate in the provision and planning of supports for the education of children with special needs.

### Scope of Paper

When we speak about the early childhood stage, we speak about children in the age range from zero to six years. Childcare and education for this age group takes place in the home, in childcare or pre-school services and in schools. This paper deals with the formal schooling stream where children aged four and over are eligible to enrol in national schools (DES, 1965:Rule 64 (1)) and with the pre-school/play school/childcare sector for children in the under six age group.

For the purposes of this paper, special educational needs is interpreted as a “*restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability or any other condition, which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition.*” (DES, 2004)

### Legislation for the Welfare and Education of Children

The enactment of the *Child Care Act* 1991 was the first comprehensive piece of legislation on children’s welfare since independence (Department of Health [DoH], 1991). The *Education Act* (1998) put the system of education, which had been in operation since 1831, on a statutory basis (DES, 1998). It sets out the relevant law for schools, while the *Child Care Act* 1991 outlines the provisions for preschools and childcare facilities. In each case, the legislation makes it clear that it deals exclusively with one or other sector. The *Education Act* includes within the definition of a school an establishment, which provides primary education to its students and which may also provide early childhood education.

It specifically excludes institutions or schools established under the Health Acts or the *Child Care Act, 1991* (DES, 1998:Section 2.1).

Pre-school services are subject to the provisions of the *Child Care Act 1991*. This Act gives a wide interpretation to pre-school service, defining it as “*any pre-school, play group, day nursery, crèche, day-care or other similar service which caters for preschool children, including those grant aided by health boards.*” (DoH, 1991:Section 49) The Act excludes national schools by means of the definition of a pre-school child. Pre-school child means a “*child who has not attained the age of six years and who is not attending a national school or a school providing an educational programme similar to a national school.*” (Dott, 1991, Section 49) These two pieces of legislation, by their definitions, recognised the de facto separation of the ‘care’ and ‘education’ strands of development which have emerged in practice.

### **Legislation, Regulations and Definitions of Quality**

Each piece of legislation incorporates statements about quality and service. The *Education Act (1998)* requires the Minister for Education and Science to ensure that there is made available to each person resident in the State, including a person with a disability or who has other special educational needs, “*support services and a level and quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and abilities of that person.*” (DES, 1998:Section 7.1) The *Child Care Act* assigns functions to the Minister for Health and Children to “*make regulations for the purpose of securing the health, safety and welfare and promoting the development of preschool children attending pre-school services.*” (DoH, 1991:Section 49). The very recent *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004)* aims for co-ordination and consistency across the two parent departments (health and education) in relation to support services for the education of persons with special educational needs. To achieve this end, it confers duties on the Minister for Health and Children and on the Minister for Education and Science.

The Child Care Regulations specify that every pre-school service provider is to “*ensure that every pre-school child attending the service has suitable means of expression and development through the use of books, toys, games and other play materials, having regard to his or her age and development.*” (DHC, 1998:8) There are no specific references to any form of special need. There are specific conditions about first aid and medical arrangements, a ban on the use of corporal punishment, keeping of a register, the state of the premises, heating and lighting arrangements and adult-child ratios. In several respects, the *Pre-school Regulations* and the *Rules for National Schools* have similar provisions, particularly so in terms of the physical environment. However, the adult-child ratio is an area of very significant difference. Children in the infant section in a national school may well be in a class of over twenty and could be in a class of over thirty. In view

of the policy of inclusive settings for education (DES, 2004:Section 2), children with special needs will find themselves in much larger groups in national schools than their peers in pre-school services. On the other hand, children in special schools are placed in small groups and the adult-child ratio is much lower than in schools.

The *Education Act* provides for inspection of schools, while the *Child Care Act* provides for the inspection of pre-school services. The *Education Act*, in addition to systems level inspection, makes explicit provision for an inspector to assess the implementation and effectiveness of any programmes of education devised in respect of individual students who have a disability or other special educational need. To date, the various inspection reports have not been available to the public.

### **Policies, Practices and Participation**

As education in Ireland is not compulsory for children until they reach six years of age (DES, 2000), the early childhood education provision in national schools is actually outside the scope of compulsory education. Departmental policy and parental practices indicate varying degrees of indifference to this provision. The *Rules for National Schools* are explicit about the entitlement of children to enrol in national schools after they have reached their fourth birthday. The curriculum for primary schools incorporates detailed guidelines for the infant sector and gives it equal treatment alongside the first to sixth class programmes (DES, 1999a).

Parental choices mean that, in practice, there is a high level of participation of four and five year olds in schools. Statistics from the DES show that there were 27,043 four and 55,465 five-year olds attending national schools during the 2002/2003 school year and 960 three-year olds attended various pre-schools funded by the Department, mainly the Early Start centres. The total figure of 83,428 pupils means that the DES is the largest funder of early childhood provision in the State (DES, Forthcoming).

The figures include over a thousand children with identified special educational needs in ordinary national schools and almost three hundred in special national schools. The breakdown is as follows: There were three three-year old children, 339 four-year olds and 834 five-year olds with special educational needs giving a total of 1,176. The special schools catered for six three-year olds, 99 four year olds and 182 five year olds enrolled for the 2002/3 school year, making a total 287 children (DES, Forthcoming).

The past number of years has seen a very significant increase in the enrolment of children in the range of pre-school services. This practice reflects, to some extent, the increasing participation of mothers in the workplace. One fifth of children in the zero to four age bracket whose mothers are engaged in home duties are enrolled in some form of paid

childcare (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform [DJELR], 1999:Table 2.2) as compared with three quarters of those who mothers are engaged in a full time job. Under the *Child Care Act* (1991), service providers must notify the DHC of their services. As of late 2003, there was a total of 4,202 services providing approximately 70,791 childcare places (Source: Child Care Policy Unit, DHC). This total is quite close to the number of four to six year olds in national schools. Information was sought from pre-school officers and from the DHC about the number of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The responses indicate that these figures are not available.

The two sectors, pre-school services and national schools, provide approximately 154,000 places for children. To put this figure in context, the entire population of under sixes in the State is 332,477 (Census 2002, Volume 2). This means that the majority of children in the early childhood age range (approximately 178,256) do not attend any type of formal provision. Therefore home/ family settings remain the largest providers of early childhood care, development and education.

In provision outside the home, a dual or parallel system has emerged in which the educational and care strands of development have become segregated. The Educational Research Centre (ERC) has highlighted the limitation of this situation:

*"It is perhaps unfortunate that child-care and educational programmes have grown independently of each other and that communication between the two traditions has been rather limited since, viewed from the child's point of view, it is unlikely that either type of programme on its own can fully meet the needs of the child."* (ERC, 1998:112)

The newly enacted provisions in the *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act* (2004) aim to reduce the degree of segregation and to achieve co-ordination between the DHC and DES in terms of the planning and provision of support services for the education of children with special educational needs. It will however, be at best, several years before all of the provisions of the Act are implemented.

### **Government Departments, Policies and Reports**

One of the practices in terms of special needs care, education and development is that many government departments have responsibility for a part of the service. At a minimum, three government departments are each involved with a particular perspective. The concept of 'special needs' is sometimes treated as an education issue, at other times it is considered with a medical or health focus and on yet other occasions is viewed as an equality matter. These three viewpoints are closely reflective of the divisions which in practice operate across the DES, DHC and DJELR.

In 1990, the *Report of the Review Group on Mental Handicap Services* was presented to the Minister for Health (DoH, 1990). Ten years ago, the *Report of the Special Education Review Committee* was published by the Department of Education (Department of Education [DoE], 1993). The report on the *Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities* was presented to the Minister for Equality and Law Reform in 1995 (Department of Equality and Law Reform, 1995). In 1998, the DES published *the Report on the National Forum on Early Childhood Education* (Coolahan, 1998). It was followed by the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999b). The DJELR published the National Childcare Strategy (DJELR, 1999) and three years later, produced the *Model Framework for Education Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (DJELR, 2002). This gives some indication of the fragmentation of responsibility for early childhood care, development and education throughout civil service departments.

### **The Influence of Litigation on Legislation, Policy and Practice**

In the early 1990s, a case was taken on behalf of a then eight year old boy, Paul O'Donoghue, which would have profound effects on special education provision in Ireland (Irish Reports, 1996:21). The case concerned the right to education of a young boy with severe disabilities and the alleged failure of the State to provide for his education. The State opposed the claim on the following grounds, among others:

- That the child, by reason of being profoundly mentally and physically disabled, was ineducable, and that all that could be done for him to make his life more tolerable was to attempt to train him in the basics of bodily function and movement;
- That, when the Constitution speaks of a guarantee of free primary education, what is referred to is the conventional type of primary education, scholastic in nature, and such education could not be of any benefit to the boy;
- That such training as could be given to the applicant could not be regarded as primary education within the meaning of that expression as used in Article 42 of the Constitution.

The claim was successful in the High Court and upheld in the Supreme Court, holding that there had been a failure to provide for the education of the child and that the State was liable via the DES.

### **Developments in Practice**

Within a year of the Supreme Court decision, the DoE introduced what it termed an 'automatic response' to special educational needs and issued the two circulars which set out eligibility criteria for additional teaching and special needs assistance supports (Irish Reports, 1996:21). These new developments triggered a massive rate of application for

services, and in turn, the provision of extra posts became a common feature in schools. The development also indicated the recognition by the DES that care needs to exist within the school setting. These became crucial in terms of the development of education services for students with disabilities. Unfortunately, the process was bedevilled by delays in the provision of supports in schools for children.

More recently, the Courts have shown a willingness to intervene to vindicate the child's right to education in cases where the child is below compulsory school age and is not a student. In July 2004, the High Court ordered the DES to provide twenty-nine hours of home tuition per week for a pre-school boy, and the payment of €300 per month for consultant supervision of the home programme, pending the full hearing of the case on November 9, 2004 (Irish Independent, July 8<sup>th</sup> 2004). Three days later, the DES sought and obtained a stay on the implementation of the order on the basis that the Minister's expert believed that more than twenty-three hours of home tuition would not be in the best interests of the child (Irish Times, July 24<sup>th</sup> 2004). The twenty-three hours of home tuition is to be provided in the interim.

The concept of a child who is a student and a child who is not a student is a central element in the *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004)*, which is discussed below.

#### **The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004)**

The *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (DES, 2004)* is the most recent development in education legislation. It will bring major developments in practice concerning special education. Three developments are particularly relevant: the establishment of the National Council for Special Education, the assignment of functions to the Minister for Health and Children and to Health Boards and thirdly, the establishment of an Appeals Board.

The Act acknowledges that persons with special educational needs have the same right to education as their peers without such needs. It aims to ensure that children with special educational needs will be enabled to leave school with the skills necessary to participate to the level of their ability in society, and to live independent lives. The Act is not confined to provisions for students and confers specific functions and duties to Health Boards in relation to "*a child who is not a student,*" that is a person less than eighteen years who is not attending a school or similar establishment.

Another of the major changes to current practices is the establishment of the National Council for Special Education. Much of the work currently administered by the DES will be transferred to this body. The Council also is assigned functions such as a duty to plan and

co-ordinate the provision of education and support services to children with special educational needs in consultation with schools, Health Boards and such other persons as the Council considers appropriate (DES, 2004:Section 20 (1)). The Council will maintain records of persons receiving special educational and support services and will also record the schools and other places where such services are provided. The Act envisages that there will be co-ordination and consistency of approach between Health Boards and the Council and provides for the role of liaison officers to support this envisaged co-operation. In the event of a dispute between the Council and Health Boards, the Act provides for the referral of disputes to the Appeals Board for determination. As well as providing for changes at executive level, the Act also provides for additional duties at ministerial level. It achieves this objective by amending section 7 of the *Education Act* (DES, 1998) to allow the Minister for Education and Science, in carrying out duties in respect of the provision, planning and co-ordination of support services and following consultation with the Minister for Health and Children, to request the assistance of a relevant Health Board. A Health Board is required to comply with such a request.

Another change in current practice is that the Act introduces an appeals procedure in relation to decisions about the education of persons with special educational needs and establishes an Appeals Board. Under the Act, several types of complaints can be brought to the Appeals Board and the Board will determine these within a specific time period. Parents, schools, Boards of Management, Health Boards and the Council can bring complaints to the board. In addition to the appeals mechanism, the Act also provides for mediation in certain cases.

### **Conclusion**

The Irish people, in 1937, adopted the Constitution of Ireland. It promised free primary education to future generations. Since the 1990s, the courts have found on numerous occasions that that promise was not fulfilled. It remains to be seen whether the *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act* (2004) will give practical effect to the right of children with special educational needs in the under six age group to an appropriate education and to support services. The current Child Care Regulations make no reference to children with special needs (DHC, 1998). They are being reviewed at present. It is to be hoped that the revision will address the important national issue of childcare provision for children with special needs.

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## Promoting Diversity and Equality in Early Childhood Care, Education and Training - The 'éist' Project

**Colette Murray**

The purpose of this workshop is to highlight the work which has been undertaken by the 'éist' project in relation to the need for, and development of, a diversity and equality training approach for the early childhood sector. The initial work has been completed but much needs to be done to disseminate and provided a truly egalitarian approach to early childhood work. The quotes below set the context for our discussion on promoting diversity and equality in early childhood care, education and training.

### **What the Papers Say:**

- *28<sup>th</sup> Aug 2004:* Deported parents leave 22 Irish children.
  - *29<sup>th</sup> Aug 2004:* Special Report: Traveller Suicides. Outlawed, stigmatised, antiquated depressed for many Travellers, the only outlet is suicide.
  - *7<sup>th</sup> Sept 2004:* Rise in racial assaults blamed on referendum.
  - *9<sup>th</sup> Sept 2004:* Lack of services in deprived area major cause of racism.
  - *10<sup>th</sup> Sept 2004:* We were beaten up for being Russian.
  - *14<sup>th</sup> Sept 2004:* President describes racism as 'a cancer'.
  - *15<sup>th</sup> Sept 2004:* Ulster minorities get protection as attacks feared.
  - *15<sup>th</sup> Sept 2004:* 50% of victims of persistent bullying feel suicidal.
- (The Irish Times, Sunday Tribune and Irish Independent Newspapers)

### **What Children Say:**

- *"You can't play Mummies and Daddies cos you don't have a Daddy": 4 year old girl.*
- *"Mummies don't drive": 3 year old boy to playmate.*
- *"Catholics are the same as masked men. They smash windows": 6 year old girl living in Northern Ireland.*
- *"A Protestant is a bad person because they want to kill all Catholics": 4 year old girl living in Northern Ireland*
- *"Look at those disgusting Travellers": 5 year old boy observing settled men sitting on wall drinking beer*
- *"I am going to make my eyes straight and blue": 4 year old Kim to her teacher when Sarah said she had ugly eyes.*
- *"You're brown so you're dirty": 3 year old in preschool to a black child.*

(Source: Connolly et al 2002; Ross, and Ryan, 1990; Wright, 1992)

**What Trainees in UK Say:**

(Notes: student teachers all white)

- "We only had one lad who is a Muslim so it doesn't really apply to us".
- "We do not have problems here because we have no black children".
- "I refuse to acknowledge that the child is black because I refuse to see colour as an issue; all people are exactly the same in my eyes and I treat them as such".
- "I know he's being picked on because he is black but he gives as good back, so it doesn't matter".

(Jones, 1999)

Every generation has the opportunity to choose or change which values and attitudes will be passed on to the next. In Ireland, early childhood carers and educators have a very important role to play in supporting all children in their developing sense of self. We must all continue to learn how to provide effective services to all children. In order to learn how to be effective, we must reflect fully on our own values and thinking and assess how they affect our own practice.

Diversity, when we adults are effective, can be a very positive, enriching source of vitality and growth. When we adults are not effective, diversity can be a source of conflict and hurt. Self-awareness is vital here and it includes recognising and understanding our intentions and expectations and being able to apply these insights within our own practice.

Children learn very early that not everyone is treated fairly and this affects how they view the reality of difference. We know that it is not the differences which cause problems, but how we react to the differences. Children learn from that reaction or response.

**Background to Pavee Point and the 'éist' project**

Travellers are a small indigenous minority who have been part of Irish society for centuries. They have a unique distinct value system with their own language, customs and traditions.

Pavee Point is a voluntary, non-governmental organisation committed to the attainment of human rights for Irish Travellers. The group is comprised of Travellers and members of the majority population working in partnership to address the needs of Travellers as a minority ethnic group experiencing exclusion and marginalisation.

The *Early Childhood Programme* is an integral part of work in Pavee Point in promoting the needs and rights of the Traveller child. Over the past six years Pavee Point has taken

a leadership role in promoting diversity awareness and training in the early childhood sector in Ireland. In line with the *United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989)*, Pavee Point seeks to ensure that the voices of Traveller children are heard, that their identity and culture are respected, that they are protected from discrimination, and that their right to intercultural education becomes a reality.

Pavee Point recognises that many issues faced by Traveller children are not exclusive to them and that the seeds of prejudice and attitudinal development are sown in early childhood.

Prejudice and racism are topics which elicit strong views in whatever forum they are raised. While many people feel strongly about racism and the harm it causes, there are also those who deny its existence, and even some who condone or justify it. A surprisingly common view is that very young children are unaware of and unaffected by racism and other forms of discrimination. A strong body of international evidence contradicts this view (Goodman, 1970; Milner, 1983; Ross and Ryan, 1990; Van Ausdale and Fagan, 2001). I believe that prejudice and racism are harmful, not just to those who are targeted by it, but also to those who practice it. Children are not immune to the effects of prejudice and discrimination. Indeed the foundations are laid in early childhood. Only recently in Ireland is there an emerging recognition that prejudice and racism are societal challenges that cannot be ignored.

Pavee Point is addressing these challenges and is seeking to enhance mainstream training by developing a 'diversity and equality' approach for the early childhood sector and by providing training to meet the needs of both *majority and minority children*. This approach addresses all discriminatory grounds laid out in the Equal Status Act (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform [DJELR], 2000b).

### **The 'éist' Project**

In 1998 Pavee Point hosted a conference entitled '*Education without Prejudice*', to initiate discussion on diversity and equality issues relevant to the early childhood sector. A lengthy consultation process with key early childhood representatives followed, which resulted in the '*éist*' (which in English means '*listen*') *Report* (2000) and *Project* (2001-2004).

The '*éist*' project, funded under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) (DJELR, 2004) sub-measure 3 (Quality Improvement Programme), grew out of the realisation that early childhood practitioners did not have access to appropriate diversity and equality training and were not being adequately resourced to deal with equality issues and areas such as racism and discrimination in the early childhood setting.

The project was funded for a three-year period and set out to raise awareness of the need for a comprehensive equality and diversity training approach relevant to the early childhood sector and to develop such a programme. This training approach has been successfully promoted, developed and tested across the sector at pre-service and in-service levels and in both urban and rural settings. Aware of the increasing and immediate need for training and the absence of diversity and equality trainers, 'Éist' worked closely with the County Childcare Committees (CCCs), developing *Awareness Raising Training Packs* and delivering training on their use for CCCs nationally. The project also developed a series of posters and sequence cards depicting Irish children from minority backgrounds; produced 4 Traveller jigsaws depicting the life of the Traveller and provided resource lists on diversity issues and equipment for early childhood practitioners.

'Éist' made submissions promoting the inclusion of diversity, equality and anti-racism issues at policy level. The project also worked on diversity and equality guidelines for practitioners in the early childhood sector through the advisory subgroup to the National Coordination Childcare Committee with the DJLER. Throughout the duration of the project, we also operated at an international level, working with the DECET network to develop a European diversity and equality training manual.

Following the pilot project evaluations, the project compiled a training manual '*Ar an mBealach*', which in English means, '*On the Way*'. The aim of '*Ar an mBealach*' is to support the mainstreaming of a high quality diversity and equality training programme for the early childhood sector. It provides a ten-day programme which reflects on attitudes, builds a sound knowledge base and provides opportunities to develop skills for implementation in practice.

The '*Ar an mBealach*' training programme addresses issues both for the practitioner and the child. It focuses on issues of inequality, racism and discrimination with particular reference to the Irish context. It looks at terminology associated with diversity and explores ways of handling difficult situations, along with the consequences of ignoring diversity. It takes a goal-oriented approach looking specifically at identity development, difference, critical thinking and how to engage with others in the face of prejudice or discrimination. The manual also presents research on children's attitudinal development and looks at policy implications.

The training programme was very well received and proved to be successful. Below are some of the comments the trainees made during the pilot evaluation:

- “The training was an eye opener”.
- “Helped me to reflect on my values and attitudes and uncomfortable feelings re diversity and equality.”
- “How under resourced I was in relation to diversity and equality I had no idea re diversity.”
- “Terminology-difficult to learn and need to be careful; the meaning of words I use without thinking”.
- “Not as familiar with legislation as I thought I was”.
- “Books that I had used in the past rarely reflected disability ... had not really looked at books as a way of reflecting diversity”.
- “The research on attitudinal development in young children was very interesting and real eye opener”.
- “Feel a bit clearer on my direction with all of this – I was aiming too high in my ideas for change within my setting and myself. I need to start small”.
- “More comfortable and confident in dealing with the scenarios presented to us”.
- “Having a plan set out on paper helps keep our actions very focused”.
- “This is process and will take time”.

### **The Future**

This phase of the project has come to an end with the development of ‘*Ar an mBealach*’. The challenge now is to source funding to train trainers to deliver and mainstream the programme at national level.

We are all aware that this work is not about a quick fix, nor is ‘*Ar an mBealach*’ a simple recipe book. Diversity and equality training requires investment and commitment. There is no doubt that diversity and equality issues are challenging and these take many forms. To begin with, it involves convincing people that this work was/is needed and is essential both at statutory and voluntary levels. A further challenge for reflective work of this nature is the seeking of funding in a society that is focused on numeric rather than ‘quality’ outcomes. The sector needs to commit to the long-term investment of time and resources for future gain. There is now an opportunity to embrace the challenges and work together to mainstream diversity and equality work, to bring about change in the training we provide and ultimately benefit all children attending our services.

### **The Next Step**

The Bernard van Leer Foundation is currently processing a proposal to support a preparatory phase for ‘*éist*’ to undertake the next stage of training. It will require working with the sector, in partnership with government, to further the mainstreaming of the work and in particular to access funding for the future.

*Equality issues should permeate the whole setting, policies procedure, practice, behaviours, and structure. But this cannot happen without careful planning and training. If we are concerned with the whole child, the whole curriculum and the need to provide a quality service to families and children –as all early years settings are– we cannot ignore equality. (Iram Siraj-Blatchford 1994)*

*The 'éist' project was funded by the DJELR as part of the EOCP 2000 -2006 under the National Development Plan. Funding was allocated under Sub-Measure 3 and administered through Area Development Management (ADM). The Bernard Van Leer Foundation further supplemented financial support for the project.*

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## Promoting Diversity and Equality in Early Childhood Care, Education and Training - Men in Childcare

Jan Peeters

I am very happy to be here in this beautiful Dublin Castle to present, together with my colleague Colette Murray, the work of the European DECET network. I will first discuss the mission and the goals of the DECET network and then present a concrete example of a diversity project that we did in Flanders to attract more men to jobs in childcare. This project is called: *Men in Childcare*.

Let's start with a short history of DECET. In the first half of the 1990s we noticed not only an increase in various European countries of so-called multi and/or intercultural projects, but also an attempt to study multi-cultural education in a European context.

In the second half of the 1990s, a meeting took place at the Bernard van Leer Foundation's (BvLF) headquarters, a philanthropic organisation that supports early childhood initiatives all over the world. This Expert Meeting (May 1996) brought together a group of Early Childhood Development trainers and practitioners from nine European countries and resulted in a practical guide for trainers and teachers, published in English, French and Spanish (*Anti-bias Training Approaches in the Early Years*).

In May 1998, the DECET Network got funding from the BvLF and started its activities.

As a European network, DECET brings together experts, trainers and researchers in the field of early childhood education. The network aims are to promote and study democratic childcare, and acknowledge the multiple (cultural and other) identities of children and families. We view early childhood provisions as meeting places where people can learn from each other across cultural and other borders, and therefore as public provisions that can effectively address prejudices and discrimination. In this sense, early childhood education makes a clear contribution to the construction of European citizenship.

### **Mission Statement**

The DECET Mission Statement is:

*All children and adults have the right to evolve and to develop in a context where there is equity and respect for diversity. Children, parents and educators have the right to good quality in early childhood education services, free from any form of – overt and covert, individual and structural – discrimination due to their race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status (with reference to Article 2, UN).*

## Goals

The European network DECET promotes equity and celebrates diversity in early childhood education services and in training. Steps towards accomplishing the aims stated in the mission statement include:

- 1 Networking with trainers, practitioners, researchers and policy makers throughout Europe;
- 2 Actively and critically promoting quality in early childhood education services, which includes equity, accessibility and respect for diversity:
  - For cooperation with parents, this means empowering them to fully participate in early childhood services and in their community as democratic citizens;
  - For working with educators, this means addressing stereotypical thinking and institutional discrimination;
  - For working with policy makers, this means working towards equal access and challenging discrimination and unequal power relations in early childhood education services.
- 3 Developing new knowledge and insights in this field;
- 4 Working in collaboration with other networks in and outside Europe.

In its action program 2001-2003, DECET has taken the following strategic actions:

- 1 Each partner will commit itself to taking appropriate actions to implement the mission and the goals of the network in their country;
- 2 A European curriculum for training of trainers on equity and respect for diversity in early childhood education services is developed and will be published in Autumn 2003;
- 3 A video documentary ("Lullaby for Hamza") on equity and respect for diversity in early childhood education services with examples of good practices in four countries has been produced;
- 4 Books, brochures, videos and training materials are disseminated throughout Europe.

## Future Projects of the Network

In its action program 2004-2006, DECET will take up the following priorities:

- 1 Enlarge the network with new partners;
- 2 Develop a trans-national training for trainers;
- 3 International exchange on methodologies with trainers as well as practitioners;
- 4 Evaluate, promote and disseminate research on diversity and equity.

The partners include:

**ACEPP (Association Collectifs Enfants Parents et Professionnels), Paris, France**

ACEPP is the national association of French “crèches parentales” (parental day care centres) and an innovator in the fields of parental participation and citizenship in diverse, multicultural and deprived areas of France.

**CAF, Glasgow, Scotland**

Childhood and Families: Research and Development Centre (CAF) is based within the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow in Scotland.

**ESSSE (École de Service Social du Sud Est), Lyon, France**

ESSSE is a training institute for “éducateurs jeunes enfants” (educators of young children). The college develops training modules for initial as well as on-the-job training regarding the place of families in society in general and in day care in particular, in a diverse and multicultural context.

**ISTA (Institut für den Situationsansatz), Berlin, Germany**

ISTA is an institution for initial and continuous training as well as action research situated in the Internationalen Akademie gGmbH at the Free University Berlin (Freie Universität Berlin). It organizes training for trainers as well as pilot programmes in the field of day care and research projects on diversity, prejudices and equity.

**MUTANT, Utrecht, The Netherlands**

Mutant is a non-profit organization that provides training and advice on diversity and equity all through the Netherlands. It also sets up pilot projects and supervision with major day care providers.

**Pavee Point Travellers' Centre, Dublin, Ireland**

Pavee Point Travellers Centre is a non-governmental organisation where Travellers and members of the majority population work together in partnership. The aim of Pavee Point is to contribute to improvement of the quality of life and living circumstances of Irish Travellers, through working for social justice, solidarity, socio-economic development and human rights.

**Resource and Training Centre for Child Care (VBJK), Ghent, Belgium**

The Centre is associated with the Department of Social Welfare Studies at the University of Ghent. It has a resource centre that develops training materials and handbooks for early childhood education and school age childcare, including issues such as diversity and equity. It also initiates and leads pilot projects and action research in the field of child care on issues such as quality, diversity, gender and others.

### **Σχედία (Schedia), Athens, Greece**

This is the Centre of Artistic and Educational Training. "Schedia"-which in Greek means "Raft"- is a non-profit organization seeking to improve the living conditions of marginalized social groups nationally, through the application of a pedagogical approach that is based on the use of art as a means to promote respect for diversity.

### **'Men in Childcare': A Gender Diversity Project in Flanders**

Childcare in the Flemish Community of Belgium is, just as in many other countries, a highly gender-segregated profession. The number of men who worked with children under three in August 2002 was very small: of the 3,417 child care workers, there were only twelve men (0.35%). A relatively new sector, out of schools clubs (such as Initiatives for After-school Care) also scored badly as far as the number of male child-carers is concerned; out of the 904 school workers, there are thirty-five men (3.87%) (Pauels and Stevens, in Peeters, 2003a).

But within the community, the legislative context has recently become more favourable towards men in childcare. In early 2002, the Flemish government approved new regulations concerning quality, of which UN Article 12 is significant: "*Active attempts will be made to hire males as well as females and autochthonous as well as ethnic minorities as childcare workers and in staff functions.*" *Kind en Gezin* (Child and Family), the public agency responsible for childcare, had already changed the name of the profession from 'child carer' to 'day-care educator' in 2001. By doing this, the gender-neutral perspective has been expanded to include the educational aspect of the job. The Minister of Welfare and Equal Opportunity, whose sphere of responsibility includes childcare, has increased salaries in the day-care centres by approximately 30%. Within a few years, when the maximum effect has been achieved, the salaries in the childcare sector will be comparable to those in other sectors.

On the labour market there is, at the moment, a shortage of childcare workers, so that the umbrella organisations and the employment office are more easily convinced to participate in campaigns to attract more men to this profession. In September 2001 - within the framework of the European Social Fund (Objective 3) - a consortium of organisations submitted the project 'Men in Childcare'. The promoters are the Training and Resource Centre for Childcare, which is affiliated with the Department of Social Welfare Studies at the University of Ghent and the Emancipation Officer for the city of Ghent. Important partners from the childcare sector include the governmental organisation *Kind en Gezin* (Child and Family) and the umbrella organisations for the day-care centres. Two organisations which have the expertise at their disposal with regard to gender and equal opportunities were also involved. Very important also was the collaboration of the national employment office. They recruit approximately 150 people a year for a training course for school-age children.

### **A Campaign**

The project's first objective was to create a campaign on the theme 'Men and Childcare', inspired by similar campaigns in Denmark. It appears that it is important to create an image of the male childcare worker that is different from the typically feminine image that is associated with caring for children. That is why the Flemish poster campaign refers to professions that are attractive to men: manager, book-keeper, construction worker and treasurer. The posters were widely distributed among job seekers at the employment office. During the recruitment of students for the training course 'School Age Childcare', the posters were used throughout the entire region of Flanders. The campaign aim is also to attempt to stress the importance of male educators to parents.

The campaign began in early 2003 and concluded in November 2003 with an open conference in the Belfry of Ghent. Just about all forms of media picked up on the theme, putting it firmly on the agenda, and it was also discussed in a positive light in debating programmes and talk shows on television.

The poster campaign is part of a broader project on men and childcare that is being subsidized by the European Social Fund. In this vein, the recruitment of the candidates and the training courses for after-school childcare organised by the national employment office have been screened for gender neutrality. Moreover, a manual is being created for childcare initiatives in order to make their selection and recruitment policy more male-friendly. Since January 2003, in each issue of the childcare magazine KIDDO, an article was published about men in childcare and there were interviews with male childcare workers and articles that emphasised the need for male educators. Last but not least, a qualitative research project on Men in Childcare was carried out by the University of Ghent (Department of Social Welfare). All men employed in the childcare sector were invited to a meeting in May in order to participate in an exchange of ideas on the results of the research and on the role of men in the lives of young children.

### **Profile of the Male Day-Care Worker**

In order to gain insight into the profile of male childcare workers, the University of Ghent carried out thirty-four in-depth interviews with men who have been working in childcare in Flanders for a considerable time. We used the same questionnaire that Cameron *et al.* (1999) used for the study published in 'Men in the Nursery.' This makes it possible to compare the profile of English and Flemish men working in childcare.

What is striking about Flemish men who work in out-of-school care is that few of them, despite being deeply committed to working with children, had taken a training course in secondary or high school that had anything at all to do with children. After they had finished their education, they had first a series of widely varying jobs: barber, salesman, printer, gardener, truck driver, sailor, etc.

Most of the male after-school care workers are in their twenties and about half of them still live at home with their parents; only three of the men have their own families with children. The men who work with very young children (the male family day-care provider and the workers at day-care centres or nurseries) are a good deal older (generally in their thirties) and half of them have families with children.

### **Preliminary Training**

All of the childcare workers in after-school care have taken a short, two-month course within a re-training project. In spite of the fact that there was a predominance of women in these courses, they did not feel that the course was specifically geared towards women. Some of the activities taught, for example, could actually be described as wilder, more 'masculine' games. The co-workers of nurseries and one male family day-care provider received the Diploma in Childcare, but it is striking that four of those who took this training course had first worked in more technical professions. In this group of co-workers from day-care centres, there is no consensus on the question of whether or not the training course was gender neutral. Three members of the group were extremely annoyed because they felt that the course was oriented, in the extreme, towards women; the others had a more balanced view of the course.

### **Finding Work**

The men who work in out-of-school care were able to find work quickly, after their completion of the course, through the Initiative for Out-of-school Care, thanks to the arbitration of the VDAB (Flemish Department of Employment). It was somewhat more difficult for the men who wanted to start working with under threes in day-care centres or nurseries.

### **How Many Hours do they Work per Week?**

A large number of the interviewed men in out-of-school care work full time - seven of the twenty-two - while there are practically no fulltime positions available in this sector. Moreover, the number of men working in after-school care who combine this with training courses in continuing education is large: seven are already taking such a course and five intend to start soon. The remaining men take on odd jobs. Some of them work in sectors that have something to do with children; others work in completely different areas.

During the meeting, several of the men commented that more fulltime positions could be created for men in after-school care by involving them in the kindergarten during the day.

It is, in particular, those who work part-time who find the low salaries a problem. For the fifty per cent of the men who still live with their parents, this is less of a problem, although this group is afraid that the salary will not be sufficient when they have to

support themselves. Some of them feel that the part-time work is a problem, others find it an advantage because it gives them more time to do odd jobs, study or take care of their own children. Another problem for the part-timers is the scheduling of working hours that makes it difficult to combine with another part-time job.

In the care of under-threes, there are more full-time jobs available and it is, therefore, not surprising that all but one of the interviewed male family day-care provider and co-workers at day-care centres work full-time.

### **General Reactions to Interviewees Employment Choices**

From a British study (Cameron *et al.*, 1999), it appears that men who choose to work in day-care experience resistance from their family and friends. The interviewed men in Flanders who work in after-school care refute this. Most agreed that friends and families were initially surprised but supportive. One male family day-care provider says that the reactions have been neutral and one colleague has had negative reactions from his father.

### **Acceptance by Female Colleagues**

There are only three centres for out-of-school care in Flanders with more than 1 male childcare worker. The men who work in these centres find this a very positive experience. In contrast to what foreign studies have reported, the Flemish male childcare workers in out-of-school childcare claim that they have been warmly received by their female colleagues. The only thing that some of the men appear to miss is being able to chat with other men about typically 'masculine' subjects, such as football. As far as the day-care centres are concerned, three of the childcare workers claim that acceptance from their female colleagues has been difficult. The others are satisfied, but there has not been the enthusiastic acceptance in this group that has been seen among their colleagues in out-of-school care.

### **How do Parents React to Men in Day-care?**

From the in-depth interviews, it appears that the majority of the parents reacted enthusiastically to the recruitment of a male childcare worker. The others had some reservations at first but later also appeared to react positively. For parents from ethnic minorities, the arrival of a male childcare worker appears to be a bit stranger and they needed more time to get used to the man. During the workshop, we heard some statements that were less positive. Some of the men who worked with young children told us that the parents were distrustful, at first. In this vein, one mother doubted whether or not a certified male child-carer was able to take the temperature of her sick child. Another man who worked with children from ethnic minorities said that he had made a conscious decision to work with the oldest group (nine to twelve-years-old) because these parents thought it was very strange that a man would care for young children.

It is often said that recruiting male childcare workers would improve contact with fathers. This has not been confirmed by the interviews. In the out-of-school care sector, according to most of those interviewed, it is primarily the mothers who bring and fetch the children. The fact that there is also a man working in the centre hardly changes this at all. In none of the centres did the male colleagues set up activities that were specifically geared towards the fathers.

With one exception, the interviewed men had not come across any prejudices regarding sexual abuse, but twenty per cent of them said that they were certainly careful or reserved with the children. According to those interviewed, this difficult subject would be discussible if there were ever any problems but, for the moment in any case, it is not a topic within the team.

### **Is a Network Necessary?**

In answer to the question of whether or not a network for men in childcare is necessary, slightly less than half of the men said that this would be a positive development. As far as the other half is concerned, this is not really necessary; they fear that it would set them apart even more if they were to meet separately. Only six men in this group feel that a network of male childcare workers would be advisable for mentoring young male interns or newly-hired childcare workers.

### **Job Satisfaction and Dreams for the Future**

Of the twenty-four men questioned who work in out-of-school care, there were only four who said that the job did not meet their expectations; they admitted being on the lookout for another job. The other twenty were extremely enthusiastic about their job. In comparison to their previous jobs, they were very happy doing this work.

It is striking that most of the childcare workers who work in day-care centres are satisfied with their salaries. The salary increases – by approximately thirty per cent - that have been promised by the Flemish Minister of Welfare have brought the salaries of the childcare workers up to the level of other technical vocations. The male family day-care providers, on the other hand, are extremely dissatisfied; the new statute concerning care families is not sufficient to guarantee the men financial security.

### **The Campaign Increased the Number of Male Students from 6.5% to nearly 20%**

Recent figures from the VDAB (Flemish Employment Services and Vocational Training Agency) (Loomans, in Peeters 2003a) demonstrate that this campaign has certainly had an effect on the number of men starting a course in out-of-school childcare. Before the campaign started, there were eight men (6.45%) among the 124 students. Since February, this number has doubled (twenty-five men of the 183 students; 13.66%).



However, if we examine the figures more closely, we can ascertain that the effect of the campaign has only been felt since April. Before March, there was no effect at all: six (or 6.89%) of the eighty-seven students were men. Starting in April, however, we see a rise that is rather considerable: nineteen of the ninety-six students are men (19.79%), or nearly one in five. This result is fairly spectacular. In Denmark, for example, after years of campaigning to increase the number of men in training courses, the number of male students is lower than this: 17.5% (Jensen, 1998). At the end of 2003, eleven of those nineteen students had found a job in an out-of-school centre. Another five men have since found a job in this sector and in total the number of men working in the out-of-school centres has increased from thirty-five to fifty-one (an increase of 68%). In November 2003, 5.62% of all out-of-school workers are male (in July 2002 it was 3.87%). In contrast, in the day care centres (birth to three), we still see no increase in the number of male workers. There is also no effect in the students that take the 'Childcare course' in secondary schools. It seems to be very difficult to motivate male adolescents (who are developing their identity) to choose training that is, in their view, typically female.

### **What's next?**

Apart from Flanders, there are some inspiring 'men in childcare' models from other European countries, such as the Sheffield Children's Centre in the UK, Acidules et Croques, in Paris and '*Menn i barnehager*', in Norway. There have also been some media-led initiatives in the Netherlands. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of November, 2003, in the historic Belfry in Ghent and on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December in the Town hall of Edinburgh, an international double conference was held as an interim conclusion to our project. It brought together speakers from all over Europe to discuss men in childcare projects.

In the final phase of the Flanders project we published a handbook for managers in the day-care sector which was distributed to all day care facilities by the governmental organisation, Child and Family. A number of useful tips are provided in this brochure about how to develop a gender-friendly personnel policy.

The project has finished, but as a result of the conference new plans have been made by different partners from the 'Men in Childcare' project in Flanders. In November we will start a new project on paternal involvement in the city of Ghent, supported by the BvLF. The number of male childcare workers from ethnic minorities is still very limited and needs to increase and we will focus on ways to achieve this.

It is obvious, that as in most European countries, we still have a long way to go. We are aware that it will take a great deal of time to achieve a noticeable change in one of the most gender-imbalanced professions in the world. However, in Flanders, we have used this project to put the theme 'men and childcare' on the agenda and hope that, through

this project and the campaign, an impetus can be given to allow men to play an equal role in the raising of young children, as fathers and as professional care givers.

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For more information:

[www.vbjk.be](http://www.vbjk.be)

[www.meninchildcare.com](http://www.meninchildcare.com)

<http://www.kindengezin.be/KG/>

## Quality: A Global Issue? An International Review of Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education 1990–2004

Thomas Walsh

### Introduction

The core function of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) is to produce a National Framework for Quality (NFQ) for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Ireland. This comprises three distinct elements of defining, assessing and supporting quality provision in Ireland. To this end, a number of research projects have been conducted as pillars to support the NFQ, including:

- *Talking About Quality*, a national consultation with stakeholders (CECDE, 2004);
- *Perspectives on Childhood* reviews current research on child development and learning (CECDE, Forthcoming A);
- *Insights on Quality: A National Review of Quality in ECCE in Ireland - Policy, Practice and Research 1990-2004* (CECDE, 2005a);
- *Making Connections: A Review of International Policies, Practices and Research Relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education* (CECDE, 2005b).

This paper considers briefly two elements of the International Review, *Making Connections*,<sup>1</sup> in relation to quality in ECCE in six countries, namely; Norway, Sweden, Portugal, Germany, New Zealand and Northern Ireland. A thematic framework for examining the international context has been undertaken. The two themes addressed are:

**Regulations** - The association of regulations with high levels of quality in ECCE settings has been the subject of much research. Much of this research positively links regulations to high quality childcare (Philipsen *et al.*, 1997). Others caution against using structural indicators for the identification of process quality (Lamb, 1998). Mooney *et al.* (2003:5) suggest that "...external evaluation and conforming to standards may be a particularly strong approach..." in contexts where there is little public subsidy for childcare and where structural features are quite poor. Inspection services often ensure compliance with regulations, often combining this with advice and support (Mooney *et al.*, 2003).

**Staff Training and Qualifications** - Research has highlighted the link between professional education and high quality ECCE services (Ball, 1994; Blenkin *et al.*, 1996; Abbott and Pugh, 1998; Feeney and Freeman, 1999; OECD, 2001). As Oberhuemer and Ulich (1997:3) note:

*“Staffing is one of the key quality factors in centre based settings. Decisions made about staffing will be decisions made about the quality of the service.”*

In addition, Mitchell and Cubey (2003) identify three benefits to professional development:

- 1 The enhancement of pedagogy;
- 2 The improvement of children’s learning;
- 3 The building of linkages between ECCE settings and other institutions.

### **Quality in Context**

Concern for the quality in ECCE services has come to the fore internationally in recent times (Williams, 1994; OECD, 2001). Despite this attention, much remains to be learned about quality in relation to how it is defined, assessed and supported. As Moss and Pence (1994:172) state:

*“...quality in early childhood services is a constructed concept, subjective in nature and based on values, beliefs and interests, rather than on an objective and universal reality.”*

Due to this complexity and relativity, quality evades easy definition and identification. There is no one single definition of quality and universal standards have been rejected due to the composite nature of cultural values and constructions of childhood. Hence, the definition, assessment and support of quality require an ongoing process of development, incorporating our relative and evolutionary concepts of the term as they transform with cultural, economic and social changes.

### **Rationale for Cross-national Review**

A cross-national review of policy, practice and research was conducted in relation to six countries. The purpose of the review is to distil the general lessons learned in other jurisdictions and to use these in the development of the Nfq in Ireland. The value of such a comparison is manifold as, *inter-alia*, it:

- Provokes critical thinking and provides a clear focus;
- Questions assumptions, practices and discourses otherwise taken for granted;
- Reveals particular understandings of childhood and learning;
- Carries the potential for change;
- Can lead to policy developments and innovation;
- Provides information on international trends in policy (Moss, 2000).

The Esping-Andersen (1990) *Typology of Welfare States* was used as a model for the careful selection of countries, as it outlines the way in which different welfare regimes reflect and reproduce particular ways of thinking and acting in various countries. This typology delineates three different models of Welfare States:

- 1 **Nordic Welfare Regime/Social Democratic** – This model provides high levels of welfare protection against the exigencies of the market. In this case, social reproduction is largely taken over by the State with consequent high degrees of defamilialization<sup>2</sup> (Moss *et al.*, 2003). This leads to high levels of employment, and high levels of taxation. [Sample Countries - **Norway** and **Sweden**].
- 2 **Continental Europe/Conservative Welfare Regime** – This regime is also characterised by a high degree of welfare protection. However, in this instance, social reproduction is largely a matter for the family. Consequently, this entails a high wage/high-skill economy where there is a low level of female participation in the workforce (Engelen, 2003). [Sample Countries - **Portugal** and **Germany**].
- 3 **Anglo-Saxon/Liberal Welfare Regime** – There is a substantial amount of marketisation in this welfare regime. This leads to limited collective welfare protection and a prevalence of private arrangements for social reproduction. The Republic of Ireland could be characterised as fitting into this particular welfare regime. [Sample Countries - **New Zealand** and **Northern Ireland**].

A brief outline of the structure and provision of ECCE precedes the thematic review for each country in order to contextualise the thematic analysis.

### **Norway**

ECCE services are viewed as part of family policy in Norway (Alvestad and Samuelsson, 1999) and are considered an important aspect of enhancing child development in collaboration with the home (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2004). One of the primary aims of ECCE is to make it possible for parents to work and to contribute to equality for men and women (OECD, 1998a). The Ministry of Children and Family Affairs is responsible for policymaking and administration in ECCE, yet despite this national structure, the implementation and delivery of policy and services in preschool settings rests with Local Authorities. At present, Norway is moving towards universal provision of ECCE services (Statistics Norway, 2003).

### **Regulations**

The regulatory system in Norway is largely decentralised and has been devolved to local authorities and municipalities. However, the legislative framework for such regulations is

set at national level, i.e., the *Barnhager Act* (1995). Despite such national policy in Norway, considerable discretion is afforded to individual municipalities, local authorities and ECCE settings regarding all aspects, including structural features such as staff-child ratios, based on the context and the needs of the children attending (OECD, 1999b). In addition to the inspection of preschools by the local authority, inherent in the *Framework Plan*<sup>3</sup> for all ECCE settings is provision for self-evaluation through observation, self-reflection and documentation (OECD, 1999b).

### ***Staff Training and Qualifications***

Special emphasis is placed on the training and qualifications of ECCE staff in the achievement of quality in Norway (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2004). The head teacher and the preschool teacher must have tertiary level training, while there are no formal requirements for preschool assistants (OECD, 1998a). Kosiander and Reigstad (2002) assert that in Norway, approximately one-third of the ECCE workforce are trained pedagogues. Provision for professional development is also provided by the State in Norway.

### **Sweden**

The ECCE system in Sweden was decentralised in 1998 from the Ministry of Education and Science to the municipalities, following a long period of strict regulation and centralised control. Such regulation resulted in the achievement of high quality in settings and a societal expectation for quality services (Mooney *et al.*, 2003). The primary aims of ECCE services include supporting children's development and enabling parents to reconcile work and family life (OECD, 2001). Policymaking is still instituted nationally while such policies are implemented at a local level by the municipalities (OECD, 1999a; Kamerman, 2000). Sweden is moving towards universal provision in ECCE services at present (Skolverket, 2000).

### ***Regulations***

The ECCE system has been completely decentralised in Sweden since 1996 following a period of centralised and strict regulations (Lohmander, 2002). This led to a situation whereby quality services were achieved, and societal expectations of quality services remain high. Standards and regulations are implemented at local level by the municipalities, covering aspects such as group size, premises and qualifications of ECCE personnel (OECD, 1999a). The inspection system in Sweden has been replaced with a network of Advisors, who place a heavy emphasis on the support and development of services. The private sector in Sweden is small and is unregulated.

### ***Staff Training and Qualifications***

The State also insists on high levels of training and the provision of good working

conditions for ECCE personnel in Sweden (Cameron *et al.*, 2003). At present, Sweden is moving towards a common training framework for all working in ECCE settings, in the hope that:

*“...provision of a common training framework should facilitate the building of linkages across the different phases of lifelong learning.”* (OECD, 2001:99)

Professional development is provided by the municipalities in a wide variety of domains (Oberhuemer and Ulich, 1997).

### **Portugal**

Portugal displays a strong and ideological commitment to the family, but in practice, family and childcare policies occupy a low profile in national terms. Provision can be best described in terms of a rudimentary welfare State, compensated by traditional welfare guarantees stemming from strong families and informal support networks (Wall *et al.*, 2001). In Portugal, care and education are treated as two distinct systems, catered for by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour and Solidarity respectively (OECD, 2001). Preschool education is seen as catering for children aged 3-6, while ECCE provision for children aged birth to three is not high on the political agenda (Wall, 2000). Policy for ECCE services is defined, planned, coordinated, inspected and evaluated at national level, but also allows a great amount of decentralisation in terms of implementation (OECD, 2000a).

### ***Regulations***

Objectives for quality and responsibility for inspection and supervision are outlined by central government in Portugal. The Framework Law for Preschool Education controls the organisational, pedagogic and technical aspects of ECCE (OECD, 1998b). This includes the defining of rules for preschools, the provision of syllabi, guidelines and regulations in relation to training and qualifications (Vasconcelos, 1998). Inspection is the main vehicle of supervision, inherent in which are diagnostic and improvement procedures for quality.

### ***Staff Training and Qualifications***

All preschool teachers are trained and licensed, while a lower qualification is accepted in not-for-profit settings in Portugal (OECD, 2000a). Those who have qualified to degree level receive the same salary as teachers in primary schools. In addition, there are a wide variety of State-funded professional development courses available regionally in Portugal (Vasconcelos, 2002).

### **Germany**

The reunification of Germany in 1990 led to the integration of two separate systems of care and education. To date, there are no binding guidelines for the country and there is

a separation of care (ages birth to three) and education services (ages 3-6) (Pettinger, 1993). The primary aim is to support parents in rearing children and to develop responsible and socially competent children. Overall responsibility for ECCE services rests with central government as part of the social welfare portfolio (Griebel and Niesel, 1999). Each State is given the autonomy to implement State guidelines and legislation, thus affording a high degree of autonomy, resulting in a diversity of legislative and administrative structures.

### ***Regulations***

The regulation of ECCE services in Germany is at State level, where there is a strong focus by State authorities on structural features such as adult-child ratios, group size and the quality of premises (Kreyenfeld *et al.*, 2000). In 2000, a *National Quality Initiative* was introduced to design quality standards for ECCE settings, including aspects of assessing and supporting quality within the sector (Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, 2000). The private sector is unregulated in Germany as are family day care providers who care for four or less children (including their own).

### ***Staff Training and Qualifications***

There is a wide diversity in training courses available, but at present, there is no national framework or guidelines in relation to training and qualifications. There are a number of training courses and avenues for personnel to enter the ECCE sector, with some courses lasting up to three years (Oberhuemer and Ulich, 1997).

### ***New Zealand***

In New Zealand, the quality of ECCE services is a major concern. Policymaking is undertaken at a national level under the Ministry of Education (Everiss and Dalli, 2003). The provision of services is largely through the private and community sector (Meade and Podmore, 2002; Mitchell, 2002). Fears have been expressed in New Zealand that the market approach is not always the best way to regulate quality, for example, through parental choice (Smith and Farquar, 1994). The ECCE sector is strong and unified in New Zealand and in 2002 articulated its recommendations and plan for its development, *Pathways to the Future* (Ministry of Education, 2002).

### ***Regulations***

There is one set of national regulations in New Zealand for the whole sector outlining minimum standards for group size, adult-child ratios, curriculum, organisation and management (Everiss and Dalli, 2003). The Educational Review Office monitors quality through a process of external review and evaluation, fulfilling the dual role of accountability and educational improvement (Educational Review Office, 2002a). Until recently, these have been implemented at local level through the drafting of a Charter



between the individual setting and the government (Ministry of Education, 2003). This charter included the aims, philosophies, values, and characteristics of the setting (Farquhar, 1991). In recent times, the Charter system has been replaced by Desirable Objectives and Practices (DOPs), which are less stringent and less prescriptive on settings than the Charter system. In addition, the government funds the *Quality Journey* to develop quality improvement systems, while the New Zealand Childcare Organisation has also developed an accreditation system for the sector, the *Quality Register*.

### ***Staff Training and Qualifications***

There are limited training opportunities available in New Zealand and thus there are low levels of training within the sector. Recent initiatives have introduced the minimum qualification of a tertiary Diploma for working in an ECCE setting (Podmore *et al.*, 2000). Professional development courses are provided by the State. The low levels and opportunities for training in New Zealand has caused concerns about the sector's ability to implement the ambitious *Te Whāriki* curriculum in operation in ECCE settings there (Cullen, 1996; Education Review Office, 1998).

### **Northern Ireland**

ECCE in Northern Ireland is seen as a support to families and children, to promote the well being of the child, to support parents in work-life balance and the ability to avail of equal opportunities (Department of Health and Social Services, 1999). There is a split between the administration of the education and care of young children, treated respectively by the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Social Services (OECD, 2000b). At present, services for children aged three months to three years are largely private and voluntary in nature (Candappa *et al.*, 2003). The Preschool Expansion Programme is in the process of expanding services for all three year olds towards universal provision (Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2002), with compulsory education beginning when the child is four years of age.

### ***Regulations***

Responsibility for regulation in Northern Ireland is centralised within the Education and Training Inspectorate, which reports on all ECCE settings. There are minimum requirements in relation to structural issues. Following an informal and formal visit, a report is published on each individual setting. Settings then develop Action Plans to address issues raised in the report. In addition, there are a wide variety of accreditation programmes in operation in Northern Ireland and, at present, there is movement towards formulating a common accreditation scheme.

### ***Staff Training and Qualifications***

There are low levels of personnel trained in the ECCE sector in Northern Ireland. In

addition, there are different regulations for the care and education sector, reflecting the traditional divide in services there (Northern Area Partnership, 2002). In the formal education sector, teachers have a four-year degree while teachers working in the Preschool Expansion Programme are also required to be trained. Outside the formal school sector, there are no standardised qualification requirements at preschool level. However, there is a wide variety of courses available and at present, a *National Climbing Frame* for qualifications is being developed (Department of Health and Social Services, 1999).

### Conclusion

This paper has traced the context of quality in ECCE in six countries. It is evident that there is great diversity in the organisation and delivery of ECCE services in each jurisdiction. In relation to regulations, a number of models are presented, ranging from strict centralised control to complete deregulation of authority to local and regional structures. A number of non-regulatory quality improvement programmes are also in evidence in a number of countries to enhance the quality of provision. There is a multiplicity of requirements in relation to the training and qualifications of personnel working within ECCE settings, while many initiatives are underway to enhance the opportunities available for the attainment of education and training. A special emphasis is also placed on ongoing professional development for practitioners. There are many positive lessons to be learned from the review, but reassuringly, it reinforces much of our current policy and indicates that provision here is congruent with international models of best practice.

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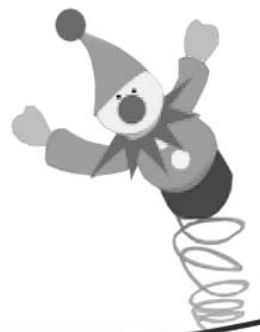
**Notes:**

- 1 The full text of the International Review is available at [www.cecde.ie](http://www.cecde.ie). The CECDE wishes to acknowledge the work of the Centre for Social and Educational Research, Dublin Institute of Technology, from whom the CECDE commissioned the literature review of the cross-national study.
- 2 Defamilialization is explained as the degree to which households' welfare and caring responsibilities are relaxed - either via welfare State provision or via market provision. (Esping-Andersen, 1999:51)
- 3 The *Framework Plan* is a national curriculum for all preschool settings in Norway.





# Assessing Quality



## Improvement through Self-Evaluation in Pre-School Education

Ffiona Crawford

### Introduction

The Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) provides a number of Government Departments with inspection services and information about the quality of education and training across Northern Ireland (NI). Pre-school education is funded by the Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI) within a mix of statutory nursery schools and classes, and voluntary and private playgroups and day nurseries. The staff in these various pre-school centres hold differing qualifications and have a range of experience within pre-school education. The quality of the provision in all types of pre-school centre is evaluated and reported upon by the Inspectorate.

The Inspectorate's main purpose, reflected in the Mission statement of '*Promoting Improvement*' (Education and Training Inspectorate, 2003a), is to promote the highest possible standards of learning and teaching throughout the education, youth and training sectors.

In recent years, the Inspectorate has reconsidered the efficiency and effectiveness of its inspection procedures. While inspection plays its part in helping to raise standards, the Inspectorate recognises that it is the practitioners themselves who have the greatest potential to bring about improvement in the children's achievements. Self-evaluation is a key process in raising standards of teaching and learning. Inspection methods are developing to give a higher priority to encouraging and supporting rigorous self-evaluation, not for its own sake, but to lead to better provision and outcomes. Such self-evaluation involves all the staff and is based on the use of clear evidence of improvement, or lack of progression, to influence what is done and what might be done more effectively in the future.

### Improvement through Self-Evaluation: Resources

The Inspectorate has produced a series of materials to help foster a culture of self-evaluation leading to self-improvement. Among these materials is the interactive DVD-ROM, '*Improvement Through Self-Evaluation*' (Education and Training Inspectorate, 2003b). A suite of eight DVDs was produced to support self-evaluation in all phases of education and in the different sectors of training, youth and community work. The DVD designed for the pre-school phase was distributed in September 2003 to all centres providing Government-funded pre-school education. This resource is complemented by the self-evaluation handbook, '*Together Towards Improvement - Pre-school Education*' (Education and Training Inspectorate, 2004) produced by the Inspectorate in April 2004.

Together, these materials provide support for all stages in the process of self-evaluation. They are designed to be accessible to pre-school practitioners whatever their prior experience of self-evaluation. The emphasis is on helping the staff within a pre-school centre to work together as a team and to be open and honest about their work. The materials aim to help the staff to recognise the aspects of their provision that are of a high quality, to identify where there are any shortcomings, and to plan for action that will bring about improvement.

The DVD-ROM presents a range of different approaches to pre-school education, as well as ideas from practitioners, with the aim of stimulating thought and discussion about the elements of effective pre-school provision. It has been developed to help practitioners to reflect on, and improve, the quality of the educational outcomes for young children. It is not intended to provide a 'blueprint' of good practice.

The menu of topics addressed within the DVD-ROM include ethos, relationships with parents, evaluating teaching and learning, assessment and planning, special educational needs, safety and child protection, leadership and teamwork, and centre development. For each topic there is an oral introduction, relevant text, video sequences and interactive questions. The video sequences are filmed in nursery schools and voluntary playgroups. The pre-school centres that participated serve a variety of urban and rural communities, and face different challenges in developing the quality of their provision. The interactive questions prompt viewers to reflect on their own provision and to identify ways of bringing about improvement. Background documents relevant to the topics can be accessed within the DVD-ROM, and text responses to the questions can be recorded and stored.

The Interactive DVD-ROM can only be viewed using a computer with DVD-ROM facilities. Many pre-school centres do not yet have access to this equipment. The Inspectorate has, therefore, produced for the pre-school sector, two versions of '*Improvement Through Self-Evaluation*' in addition to the DVD-ROM, a DVD video version is provided which can be viewed using a domestic DVD player and television. While the DVD video does not have interactive features, it contains the same video sequences and questions as the DVD-ROM. A booklet is provided to accompany the DVD video; this is designed to compensate for some of the information within the DVD-ROM that cannot be included on the video version.

### **Content and use**

The DVD-ROM is designed to be used flexibly, at a pace and in ways which suit the needs of individual pre-school centres. It is not intended to replace other guidance that staff are already using for self-evaluation. It allows viewers to select an aspect of provision, view

clips of relevant video footage, reflect upon the key elements of effective practice, and use the outcomes to monitor and evaluate their own work. The material may be used by individual members of staff; however, most benefit will be gained when the whole staff view the DVD and work together on the interactive tasks. It is not designed to be viewed all at one session but rather to be dipped into as and when staff are evaluating a particular aspect of their work.

The Introduction deals with the nature and purposes of pre-school education; this is a useful starting point for all centres. The section, *'The Purpose of Pre-school'*, prompts viewers to reflect on their beliefs and aims before considering other areas.

Practitioners using the DVD may find it useful to sequence their work as follows:

- Identify the centre's priority for improvement;
- Select the relevant section from the menu and view the video sequences and any written information;
- As a team, discuss their response to the material;
- Consider, and respond to, the interactive questions and/or to any other questions devised by the staff;
- Refer to the other documents within the DVD to inform their response;
- Identify a small number of areas for improvement to take forward;
- Complete an action plan and set a timescale for review of what improvement has been made.

The prime purpose of the DVD is to assist pre-school centres undertaking self-evaluation. It should also be of value following an inspection to help the staff to reflect on areas identified as needing improvement and to plan the appropriate action. The DVD can be of further use when staff are drawing up action plans and development plans, where it is important to have established the centre's priorities and to know what improvements need to be made. In addition, when centres are newly established, or staff appointed, working together to view the DVD can help to develop a shared understanding of appropriate pre-school practice and curricular provision.

### **Purpose and Aims**

The aim of the DVD is to encourage the development of self-evaluation within pre-school centres. The Inspectorate is clear that self-evaluation is primarily about promoting effectiveness by improving the quality of learning and teaching. It is also about recognising the staff's skills and expertise; increasing confidence and motivation; providing opportunities for personal development and leadership; promoting teamwork; and raising awareness among parents. Self-evaluation is not a form of performance review or a tool for staff appraisal.

The Inspectorate believes that, if self-evaluation is to bring about improvement, then it needs commitment from everyone involved in the life and work of the pre-school centre, including all the staff, the parents, and the management group or proprietor. All need to be willing to evaluate openly and honestly the pre-school centre's work and their part in it. The climate in which the self-evaluation is undertaken is therefore very important. There should be a culture that encourages the staff to be reflective, to accept praise and constructive criticism, and to make changes where necessary. It is recognised that not every pre-school centre is ready to undertake self-evaluation. In a newly established group or where there are recently appointed staff, confidence and a sense of team spirit may need to be developed before self-evaluation can be undertaken. Making appropriate use of the DVD may assist centres in establishing the climate necessary for effective self-evaluation.

The recognition of achievements and good practice should be the starting point and foundation for self-evaluation. The procedures used will normally involve collecting evidence to support the evaluation being made. Part of that evidence must include observations of what happens in the playrooms; how the staff work with the children and how the children respond. The video sequences in the DVD encourage the staff to make observations and the interactive questions prompt them to consider evidence as part of their responses.

### **Self-Evaluation and External Evaluation**

The Inspectorate believes that self-evaluation and external inspection should work hand in hand to bring about improvements in the provision made for the children and in the quality of learning. The process of inspection is enhanced greatly when the staff are willing to share and discuss with the inspector the areas they have identified for improvement through their self-evaluation and the action they have taken. Where this process has been recorded clearly, it can help the inspector to understand the progress that the staff have made in tackling any difficulties. Together, ways can be explored to bring about further improvement.

During every inspection, the team of inspectors looks at the quality of the centre's own monitoring and evaluation of its work and at what plans the leader has for future development. This aspect of inspection is becoming increasingly important. As pre-school staff develop their capabilities in self-evaluation, inspectors will consider how effectively centres carry out self-evaluation and the impact that the process is having on the quality of the provision. In some inspections, the focus may be on quality assuring the staff's self-evaluation process; the starting point for these inspections could be the centre's own self-evaluation report. In other inspections, the team will take into account the self-evaluation carried out as part of the leaders' development planning. Good leadership includes having

an understanding of the strengths of the educational and pastoral provision and of any areas that need improvement.

### **Conclusion**

For the Inspectorate, all inspection activity must be fit for purpose and adapt to the particular circumstances and stages of development of individual pre-school centres. It is important that inspection continues to promote self-evaluation leading to self-improvement; that it encourages and develops the highest possible standards in teaching and learning; and that it confirms in practitioners the motivation and capability to provide children with the best possible start to their education.

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## A Critique of ECERS as a Measure of Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care

Francis Douglas

### **Introduction: The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS)**

The ECERS was developed by Harms and Clifford in the United States in the early 1980s and has been used on an international scale by both researchers and practitioners (e.g. Whitebook *et al.*, 1989; Kontos, 1991; Bryant *et al.*, 1991; Dunn, 1993; Dineen, 2002). The ECERS has been described by its authors as offering “*a relatively short and efficient means of looking seriously at the quality of the (early years) environment*” and as covering “*the basic aspects of all early childhood facilities.*” (Harms and Clifford, 1980:p IV). It was designed for use in a variety of forms of group childcare in the United States, including day nurseries, playgroups, kindergartens and private nursery schools. Following training, it can be used by various people (including evaluative teams outside the childcare setting) as a basis for both evaluation and planning. It can also be used by childcare workers themselves to provide a more objective picture of how well their group is doing.

The scale is intended to provide an overall picture of the surroundings that have been created for the children and adults who share the setting. Environment is given a broad definition and encompasses the layout and use of space, provision of materials and experiences to enhance children’s development, organisation of the daily schedule, levels of supervision provided, and provision for the needs of adults (both workers and children’s parents).

The original scale has been revised to take account of criticisms made during the years since it was first developed. For example, Brophy and Statham (1994) criticise ECERS with respect to its lack of emphasis on play, parental involvement, ethnic, gender and other diversity; and interpersonal relationships. In the Revised ECERS (ECERS-R), the authors say that they have made a conscious effort to include areas not included in the original such as: health and safety practices, nature/science activities, math/number activities, use of T.V., video, and/or computer, interaction items including interactions among children, and several focusing on staff needs (Harms *et al.*, 1998:2).

In addition, indicators and examples were added to many items to make them more inclusive and culturally sensitive. Harms *et al.* (1998:2) say that “*In keeping with the suggestions of our focus groups on inclusion and cultural diversity, we did not develop separate items but rather incorporated indicators and examples throughout the scale.*”



In the ongoing revision, the infant-toddler alternate items were omitted and the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) was developed (Harms *et al.*, 1990). It should also be noted that apart from ITERS, ECERS-R is directly related to the School Age Care Environment Rating Scale (SACERS) (Harms *et al.*, 1996) and the Family Day Care Rating Scale (FDCERS) (Harms and Clifford, 1989). This means that findings on quality using the same basic system can range across settings from the toddler to the school age child. Nevertheless, ECERS-R can still be criticised with respect to many of the points raised by Brophy and Statham (1994), as even where revisions have been made, they would not be perceived by many practitioners as going far enough.

However, any attempt to provide an objective rating scale for measuring quality in such settings has to assume that there is an explicit and agreed model of what constitutes 'good' quality childcare. In the case of the original ECERS instrument, it was firstly validated against the views of American experts in the early childhood field. Seven 'nationally recognised experts' were asked to rate each item on the scale in terms of its importance to early childhood programmes. Seventy-eight per cent of their ratings indicated high importance while only one percent indicated low importance, confirming that in the view of this group, the ECERS was indeed measuring relevant aspects of early childhood settings (Harms and Clifford, 1980:38).

Secondly, the scale was tested by comparing its ability to distinguish between classrooms of varying quality as determined by trainers who had been working with staff in those classrooms. Ratings on the ECERS made by observers were compared with the ratings of the trainers familiar with classrooms. Expert observers using ECERS reached a closer agreement with the trainers than those with less experience. Harms and Clifford (1980:38) note that although the findings are "*clearly supportive of the validity of the scale*", they also indicate the "*lack of universally acceptable norms for early childhood environments*."

There is a strong argument to be made that there are in fact a number of different stakeholders who have a part to play in defining quality in early years provision (Moss and Pence, 1994) and these stakeholders may hold different views, but rating scales such as ECERS are generally validated by reference to the values of one particular group in one country. In the case of ECERS, most of the experts were drawn from the field of child development in North America. Even in the early days of its development, it is interesting to note that most American researchers who used ECERS as a global measure of the pre-school environment, generally supplemented it with other data, such as records of the number of verbal interactions between staff and selected children (Phillips, 1987) or a measure of staff sensitivity (Whitebook *et al.*, 1989). In a further example not using ECERS, Phillips *et al.* (2001) conducted a study of quality in child-care centres in the U.S.A.,

and found a relationship between the quality of care as defined by structural features, process indicators and compliance with state regulations. They suggest that all three should form the basis of any quality assessment procedure but it is interesting to note that their process variables cannot be assessed without considering the interpersonal relationships of those involved. Although ECERS attempts to measure interaction between participants, one is still entitled to ask, 'How well does it measure the *relationships* between the partners in the pre-school situation?'

It is important to remember that ECERS is a measure of the pre-school environment. It makes no claim to describe the experience of individual children within that environment, which would require time-consuming observation of target children. It is therefore possible for a pre-school environment to score highly on particular scales, for instance the provision of gross motor activities, and yet for individual children to engage in little or no such activity during the course of the day. This is particularly likely to be the case in playgroups and naíonraí where there is an emphasis on free play and on allowing children to choose how they spend their time.

Environments therefore create an important potential for good quality individual experiences, but they do not necessarily ensure it. ECERS offers a 'snapshot' of the pre-school environment at one particular point in time. It is important to be aware of some of the factors that may affect the scoring, such as when the visit takes place and which particular staff are observed over the years. For example, at the start of a new term, staff are often settling in new children and this involves a departure from normal procedures. In the same way, the preparations for Christmas involve a break in the usual routine and interactions of the centre. Further, some of the ECERS scales rate the understanding and use of expressive language (or the development of reasoning concepts), which some adults are much better at doing than others. Thus, there can be a significant difference between workers and between the same workers, which affects the overall score for the preschool centre concerned.

### **Definition of Quality**

We need to recognise that as Pugh (1992) says, the education and care of any child happens primarily through a set of *unique relationships*. One of the dangers when using quality frameworks such as ECERS is that they focus attention on the framework itself rather than on the quality of interaction with the child. Any approach to assessing quality must be preceded by working through what we believe matters, what we are trying to achieve and how we will reconcile competing or conflicting goals. We also need to recognise (although they may be useful) that in stating the needs of children in a list, we are making a statement about our own beliefs, our own value system. It is interesting to

note that an important idea flowing from much of the literature on quality in early childhood care and education (ECCE) is that a focus on values and beliefs prompts recognition of the existence of other groups (parents, other carers, staff, local communities), who also have a legitimate interest in quality. As Stewart and Walsh (1989:8) say, "*Who are the users of childcare? The child, the parents or society at large? Whose interests may be damaged by this service or the way we provide it?*" Nevertheless, from a study of the literature (Pugh, 1992), four common ideas emerge as important to a fuller understanding of quality which summarise what has been said so far:

- 1 "*The notion of quality is meaningless unless there is clarity about the values and beliefs that underpin a service;*"
- 2 "*In the provision of any service there may be a number of 'stakeholders' who could be considered as users and other groups who may have a key 'interest' in the way the service is provided;*"
- 3 "*Review of quality needs to entail more than a review of the individual service and must include the policy and organisational framework within which a service operates;*"
- 4 "*Assessing quality must go beyond the application of checklists and frameworks.*"

Finally, we must ask the question, 'Are we looking at the individual service or the whole system?' As Moss and Melhuish, (1991:18) say:

*"As a society we have yet to draw up the full policy agenda - which recognises the profundity and inter-connectedness of the issues facing us concerning childhood and the upbringing of children, the relationship between employment, parenthood and gender equity and the allocation of work and cost across the whole field of caring work."*

In order to define 'quality' in a sector or individual service provider in ECCE, an assessment must be made of the stated aims and philosophy of the service and how these are used to develop the service. How meaningful will the results be for parents, children and policy makers? Measures of quality flow from one's definition and if measures are to have both a research and a service support function, they must have *credibility* and *acceptability* with the service in which they are applied. To achieve this, an evaluative measure must state clearly its own values basis, and ensure it recognises and covers the objectives that are important to the service. In effect, assessment must be made of the stated aims and philosophy of the service and how these are (or are not) reflected in those that underscore the scale. It is not simply a case of going beyond what Phillips (1988) called the '*Iron Triangle*' (i.e. group size, staff-child ratio, staff qualifications) to look at issues of

*'Care-giving, Stability and Continuity', 'Structure of daily routines' and the 'Adequacy of physical facilities'* (Hayes *et al.*, 1990). It also means looking at ways in which individual services and service systems meet the needs of, and reflect the constituency of, the communities that they serve. An idea of how difficult this is to do on the ground in the Republic of Ireland can be seen from *"Some Aspects of Quality"* by Horgan and Douglas (2001).

Ball (1994:44) has said that poor pre-school education is almost as little use to children as none at all. He defines high-quality provision for early learning as:

- 1 *The integration of education and care;*
- 2 *Unified responsibility for provision;*
- 3 *Effective initial and ongoing training for early years 'Teacher Carers';*
- 4 *An appropriate curriculum encouraging active learning and purposeful play;*
- 5 *Play in an environment of 'high challenge - low threat';*
- 6 *Partnership between parents and teacher-carers;*
- 7 *Systematic planning, assessment and record keeping;*
- 8 *Continuity and consistency of 'educare;'*
- 9 *Appropriate adult-child ratios;*
- 10 *Satisfactory premises and equipment;*
- 11 *Regular monitoring and evaluation of performance with the aim of continuous improvement.*

The European Commission Childcare Network (1996) views quality from the same perspective. Their *"Quality Targets in Services for Young Children"* had the following to say about quality in ECCE:

- 1 *Quality is a relative concept, based on values and beliefs...*
- 2 *Defining quality should be seen as a dynamic and continuous process, involving regular review and never reaching a final, "objective" statement (European Commission Childcare Network, 1996:7).*

Thus ECERS can be part of this process but it can never be all of it.

### **Static and Dynamic Variables**

Williams (1995) makes the distinction between approaches to quality that are dynamic and those that are static. Dynamic approaches are concerned with a more developmental, incremental approach to quality improvement. They focus their attention on aspects of practice that can and should be subject to ongoing development and the processes by which this development might be brought about. Static approaches are more concerned

with putting into place mechanisms for achieving a fixed predetermined and defined standard of quality. They focus their attention on the systems and procedures which will ensure an organisation is able to achieve a defined standard; that is the capability to deliver, rather than exploring the actuality of whether these standards are achieved or not, e.g. the actual performance. The framework of ECERS, like all rating scales, concentrates on the latter and hence is biased in its interpretation of “quality”.

### **Structures Training and Curriculum**

In a competitive world, resources generally follow status, visibility and power and ECCE do badly on all these counts. Thus, in order to improve the standard of quality in ECCE, a substantial shifting of resources in favour of the early years is needed. Indeed, this has been recommended in the recent OECD report on Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland (OECD, 2004). However, despite the need for more resources, we still need to enhance the professional competence, confidence and assertiveness of early childhood educators. This aspiration must feed into all initial and in-service training, but can also be greatly facilitated through the development of approaches to quality improvement that celebrate and empower practitioners themselves. An example of the development by a university of supervised placement for ECCE that includes many of these points can be found in Cork (Ridgeway and Corbett, 2004).

An empowering approach such as this can only be accomplished by using a diversity of measures, some aspects of which might aspire to being general across all service provision such as those generally measured by ECERS, others being developed for more specific services.

Other contributors to the quality debate (e.g. European Commission Childcare Network, 1996) have identified that the process (of defining service objectives, of including the rights and expectations of interest groups) is important in its own right. Such a process allows the examination of individual services, and more broadly, community and societal provision, with the aim of ensuring that services are provided for all children, regardless of race, creed, gender, disability, parental income or geographical location.

It is worth noting that highly educated and trained people tend to create structures and a curriculum that benefits the child. Burchinal *et al.* (2002) studied the structural predictors of quality in child-care homes, and found that training was the characteristic that most consistently predicted observed overall quality. The findings from the Cost Quality and Child Outcomes Study (2001) in the U.S.A. found that the levels of teacher training and the amount of specialised training were directly related to the quality of early years provision. Although teacher education is considered by many to be part of the structure of quality, it is easy to see how through personal development and practice at interacting

with other people (both children and adults), that the structure overflows into process. Indeed, teacher training and education would have little purpose if it did not affect children and one of the chief methods used for this interplay between the child and the adult is the curriculum. If curriculum is defined as everything that impacts on the child while he or she attends the centre, then it includes all the quality process variables and has as its core '*unique relationships*'.

### **Developmental Approach to Quality**

Quality is "*a dynamic concept which varies from place to place*" (Pascal and Bertram, 1994). It is not therefore appropriate to lay down fixed, static, predetermined definitions of quality (Bertram and Pascal, 1995). If any organisation is to succeed consistently, and over time, it must put into place procedures and processes of quality evaluation and improvement which are a permanent and normal part of its ongoing professional activity:

*"To view quality as some kind of magic threshold over which a setting may cross, collecting a kite mark of quality on the way, and then settle back content would be, in our view, a grave mistake. Rather, quality should be viewed as something to be pursued by all providers and practitioners at every step in their career, in a positive, developmental and absolutely professional manner."* (op. cit)

Experience has shown that separating evaluation from improvement is fatally flawed.

### **Democratic Approach to Quality**

If you believe that assessing and improving quality is a subjective and value laden enterprise, it therefore follows that any process for achieving this must be democratic and involve all the players. It must facilitate and encourage the expression of the values, preferences and opinions of all those who play a part in the life of the setting (Moss and Pence, 1994). This means involving managers, practitioners, parents and children. In this sense, the whole process should be something which is 'done with' rather than 'done to' the participants.

Pfeffer and Coote (1991) critiqued the existing 'traditional scientific', 'managerial' and 'consumerist' approaches to quality which are generally utilised in the welfare services. They argue that each of these approaches fail because they do not acknowledge the important distinction between commerce and welfare. Alternatively, they propose a 'democratic' approach that recognises the central importance of providing equity in services and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity for expressing their needs and preferences. This approach acknowledges and celebrates the subjectivity of defining quality as an overpowering and strengthening process. It is a truly professional approach to quality, which is a long way from the blanket application of rating schedules such as

ECERS. Others who long ago suggested a partnership model of quality are Wolfendale (1984), Maxwell (1985) and Pugh (1985).

### **A Systematic and Rigorous Evaluative Framework**

From the literature, a variety of “quality domains” emerge. These dimensions, like those included in the ECERS, generally involve management procedures, policy, staffing, curriculum, physical environment, interpersonal relationships, ethos and home links. Working from an agreed evaluative framework is enormously helpful when adopting a ‘bottoms up’ approach. If each early childhood provider was to work to an individual evaluative framework, further fragmentation and disparity of quality within the system as a whole would follow.

In developing a rigorous evaluative framework three key points need to be emphasised:

- 1 *The model of the practitioner as researcher is central to the quality improvement process (c.f. Reflective Portfolios);*
- 2 *The framework needs to be flexible to cater for different providers but at the same time parents need to be assured that regardless of their choice of pre-school, core standards will be implemented;*
- 3 *All involved in ECCE in the Republic of Ireland must agree on the validity and applicability of the evaluative process. This requires good communication, time for everyone to familiarise themselves with the framework and opportunities for an open dialogue about it. This must be ongoing and could for example become a permanent feature of the work of the City and County Childcare Committees which have been established all over the country.*

### **Bottom Up Approach to Quality**

Most early years practitioners would like to provide a high quality experience for the children in their care. Practitioners do not generally have to be coerced as long as they feel that what is happening will help them practically to do a more effective job. In fact, the Irish experience so far has been that practitioners from all sectors actively seek opportunities to become more skilful educators. The biggest problem is the perceived lack of suitable courses, at suitable times, at suitable cost. The publication of the agreed *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (2002), was a big step in the direction of quality in ECCE. What is now needed is its implementation. The pool of enthusiasm and passion for improvement displayed by staff who work with young children is notable and those who are developing quality schemes can only benefit from this. **A developmental, democratic, bottom up approach to quality is thus entirely feasible in this country.**

### **Aiming for Empowerment**

Empowerment comes from adopting a model of ongoing professional activity which is directed at a constantly rolling cycle of evaluation and improvement. In this way, short, medium and long term goals can be planned for and worked at systematically, and at a pace which individual settings can manage. Those working in the sector must feel that they are in control and thus empowered.

### **Conclusion**

What has been said above should not be taken as a condemnation of ECERS or rating scales in general. On the contrary, ECERS and rating scales like it, have a number of benefits. As a scale, it provides a helpful method of categorising and highlighting many of the domains in the pre-school environment that have a bearing on quality. Indeed, the problem is not with ECERS as such, but rather with the fundamental paradigm presented by the search for a universal measure of quality with which to assess a diversity of values, philosophy and service provision in the child care/early childhood education sector.

The debate on quality early childhood provision has taken place in many parts of the world, e.g. the U.K., Europe, and further afield in New Zealand, Australia and in North America. The key thing to remember is that in any discussion of quality there are four factors to be considered:

- First and foremost, any attempt at defining 'quality' is inherently a values-based exercise;
- Secondly, any definition of 'quality' is to an extent transitory and arriving at what may be called '*quality indicators*' is a dynamic and continual process;
- Thirdly, a range of perspectives can be identified when looking at quality i.e.:
  - The views of the children;
  - The views of the parents;
  - The views of the ECCE staff;
  - The views of the funding agency.
- Fourthly, equal opportunities policies and practices (covering access to services, their content and management and employment practices and procedures within them) are central features of quality in child care services and this means looking at 'quality' at two levels; individual services and service systems. All children have the right to certain expectations of their social and economic environment. Parents should have the right not only to access services but also to choose between early childhood services.



Finally, with respect to rating scales, a number of questions need to be asked if they are to contribute to overall quality provision:

- Firstly, what are the values underscoring the scale?
- Secondly, do these values reflect and encapsulate the values and philosophy of the service being assessed?

In other words, if rating scales are to have *credibility* and *acceptability* with the service to which they are to be applied, they must state clearly the basis of their value base, so that those being assessed know and agree that they are important for their own development.

This notion of making underlying values explicit has far reaching implications. It means examining the scales not simply in terms of traditional tests (eg: inter-observer reliability, internal consistency, scale assessment by nationally recognised experts and comparison of expert opinions), but in addition, specifically addressing the question of the values that underscore the scale and making those values (both implicit and explicit) clear. It also means assessing the suitability of the scales for the particular service to be assessed. In effect, an assessment must be made of the stated aims and philosophy of the service and how these are (or are not) reflected in those that underscore the scales.

If we value the quality of education and care that our youngest citizens receive, we ignore this at our peril.

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## Universal Early Education for 4-6 Year Olds in Ireland: The Experience of the Irish Primary Teacher

Angela Griffin, Anne Fay and Deirbhile Nic Craith

### Introduction

Young children of pre-compulsory school age have traditionally attended primary schools since the foundation of the National School System in 1831. It was common for three year old children to attend infant classes in primary schools until the *Rules for National Schools* were changed in 1934, stating that a child must have reached the age of four before he or she could be enrolled in a national school. The majority of four and five year olds are enrolled in infant classes in primary schools, even though it is not compulsory to attend school until the age of six. Primary schools (including special schools) currently cater for 80,732 children under the age of six years, with the four to five year olds found in Junior Infants and the majority of five to six year olds in Senior Infants (Department of Education and Science [DES], 2002a). Some national schools in areas designated as disadvantaged cater for three year old children in 'Early Start' programmes, taught by primary school teachers, with the assistance of childcare workers.

### The Primary Teacher

The majority of primary teachers in Ireland are graduates with a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) degree. It is also possible for graduates of other disciplines to become a primary teacher, by taking an 18-month postgraduate diploma in Primary Teaching. Minimum standards in the Leaving Certificate Examination,<sup>1</sup> which include minimum standards in Irish, English and Mathematics, are required for entry to the Colleges of Education. In practice, because of the competition for places, the standard is much higher, and generally higher than the standard for entry to a University Arts Degree. The B.Ed. degree currently takes three years, though it has been recommended that the degree be extended to four years (DES, 2002b). The B.Ed. degree is specifically designed to meet the needs of the primary school teacher and is a professional qualification. In general, all B.Ed. students undertake a study of the general principles of pedagogy relative to the teaching of school pupils from the age of four to twelve, engage in teaching practice at the levels of early, middle and senior classes in both urban and rural settings and study philosophy of education, history of education, sociology of education and psychology of education.

### Early Primary Education

The primary school curriculum is considered appropriate to the developmental and learning needs of the young child. A commitment to life long learning is nurtured from the earliest years. The curriculum is based on the uniqueness of the child and on the individual needs of the child in the early stages of development. Primary teachers aim to

nurture in children the confidence, self-reliance, initiative, imagination, independence and sense of responsibility that will enable them to engage with the world of which they are a part and contribute towards shaping it. While respecting the individuality and universality of each individual child, teachers see individual integrity being largely realised in a context of community. The nurturing of relational capacities, together with the provision of opportunities for self-fulfilment, are equally important for an individual child's growth and development. Socialisation therefore, and occasions for dialogue, as well as opportunities for active exploration, discovery, and problem solving, are the foundations on which provision for early childhood education is constructed in primary schools.

The processes of exploration, activity, discovery, investigation, play and problem-solving can only take place within a particular curricular framework. The principles underlying the primary curriculum in Ireland are based on theories of child development and growth, including the theories of Piaget, Bruner and Vygotsky on how children think and learn (DES, 1999). Curriculum content is presented in seven curricular areas, some of which are further subdivided into subjects. These are as follows:

● Language	English and Irish
● Mathematics	
● Social, Environmental and Scientific Education	History, Geography, Nature Study and Science
● Arts Education	Visual Arts, Music and Drama
● Physical Education	
● Social, Personal and Health Education	
● Religion	

Infant teachers plan for learning experiences for their pupils through the various curriculum areas and the greatest degree of flexibility is utilized in selecting material best suited to the needs of each individual child. There is constant overlap between these areas which is used to reinforce and enrich the learning experience. Structured play has a role in all aspects of the curriculum. Developmental play leads to cognitive and emotional growth, stimulates linguistic growth, assists in the development of social skills, allows for the exploration of possibility and certainty and encourages creativity. Listening skills, which play such a significant role in learning, are developed through music, poetry, rhymes, stories, play and exchanging daily news – activities which also assist the development of language. Visual art activities, which are primarily aimed at the development of creativity and colour, form, line, pattern and texture awareness, also give rise to discussions on the environment or story, while the use of crayon, brush and scissors develop hand-eye co-ordination and motor skills. Pattern, shape and area are elements of environmental studies, mathematics, PE and visual arts. Language development is a

feature of all curriculum areas, while health and physical development are the primary objectives in the PE curriculum. Teachers find ample opportunity during physical education classes to use music, rhythm, poems and mathematical language. While this integration of subjects may seem obvious, it is most effective when the curriculum in each area is deliberately structured in a manner which ensures that the pupils benefit from all opportunities to reinforce learning. Infant classrooms, by their very nature, are structured environments.

All children are recognised as complex human beings with unique physical, social, emotional and intellectual needs and due allowances are made for individual differences (DES, 1999). The emphasis in the infant classes is on guidance. The child is seen as a key agent in his or her own learning situation. Children learn best when they direct their own learning and when they have connected experiences, which allow them to build a framework of understanding. All aspects of the child's development are catered for within the classroom scenario – in particular, the aesthetic, creative, cultural, emotional, intellectual, moral, physical, political, social and spiritual aspects of a child's growth. Each child is also regarded as having unique aptitudes and interests, and brings different backgrounds, interests, experiences, learning styles, needs, and capacities to learning environments. In order to address the complexity inherent in any teaching-learning situation, a variety of effective pedagogical approaches are employed. Children are generally grouped in accordance with their ability and readiness and their zones of proximal development. Whole class activities are regularly practised in areas such as Irish conversational activities, singing, music, drama, physical education and story telling. Children may be active in a physical sense or cognitively engaged through dialogue, listening, watching others, repeating, memorising or participating in a variety of other ways.

Teachers are very aware that the child's experience of learning in the infant classroom will have a major effect on his/her life long learning. They advise, guide and help their pupils along the road to discovery when they consider such assistance necessary, a process which has often been described as 'contingent teaching' or 'scaffolding'. The ideas of direct discovery, exploration, contrived encounters, instruction and communication lie at the core of infant education as practiced by teachers in primary schools in Ireland. The success of any programme of early childhood education will depend on the quality and expertise of the teacher, the development of curricular guidelines and the evolution of the appropriate classroom scenario that is conducive to how young children think and learn. This paper now focuses on two infant classroom contexts; one of a junior infant classroom in Dublin and the other of a multi-grade infant classroom in Co. Cork.

### **A Junior Infant Classroom – One Teacher’s Experience**

The following is an account of the experience of one teacher starting back to school in September with a new class of Junior Infants. The class described here is in a well-resourced school, in a middle class area, in Dublin. There are twenty-seven children in the class.

Anxiety and anticipation are some of the emotions that coming back to school in September brings – and not only for the children. Anxiety for the infant teacher centres around the new children, and how they will settle into their new environment. There is anticipation about the personalities involved. It is as if the teacher has been presented with a small library of thirty brand new books all waiting to be opened with the reverence that brand new books deserve! There is anticipation about how each new plot will develop, how the characters will develop, will it be a thriller, a horror story, a family saga or a romance, and of course, will there be a happy ending? No two classes are ever the same and new challenges constantly face the teacher. However, it is these challenges that keep many teachers teaching throughout their careers.

Infants come to school in September like sponges. They soak up the variety of experiences presented to them. Many junior infants in middle class areas will have had an opportunity to attend a private playschool for a year or two before they attend primary school, which goes some way in preparing them for their experience in primary school. The infant teacher in September needs to be very creative in organising exploration and discovery activities for the children whose concentration span is quite short at this time. Interaction patterns differ as children interact with the teacher, with each other or not at all. Groups are formed and reformed – rather like a bunch of small puppies as they tumble around.

The integration of children with special needs is one of the more recent challenges faced by many infant teachers. In this particular Junior Infant class, a child with Down’s syndrome had been enrolled for the first time. A special needs assistant had been allocated to support the child, and in addition, the child was entitled to resource teaching provision for five hours per week. A second child with special needs – from Romania – had also been enrolled, and she was entitled to resource teaching for two and a half hours per week. The first time a teacher experiences children with special needs in the classroom places extraordinary demands on the teacher in terms of meeting the needs of the children, but also in terms of working with a second adult in the classroom. This is a new experience for many primary teachers who are used to working in isolation from their colleagues.

As the year progressed, the children settled in. The child with Down’s syndrome developed a friendship with the special needs assistant and got used to leaving the



classroom for her intensive learning sessions with the special needs resource teacher. In addition, the teacher developed a positive working relationship with the special needs assistant and came to the realisation that having a supportive adult working in the classroom was of benefit to all the children in the class. Having an assistant in the classroom allowed the teacher to focus on teaching rather than on crowd control and facilitated increased observation and consultation with individual and groups of children.

The daily arrival of the resource teacher to collect the children with special needs also impacted on the classroom, as the junior infant children delighted in having an additional person with whom to share their stories and news. The resource teacher readily engaged in informal conversation with the pupils, further enhancing their learning opportunities. Similar learning opportunities were provided through visits from the occupational therapist, speech therapist and the visiting teacher.

The need to develop additional communication processes with parents became clear after a while, in that messages didn't always reach home. A newsletter was devised, consisting of information for parents on the work of the class, enabling parents to be more involved in their children's education. Infant teachers are in an ideal situation to ease parents into the life of the school, as they meet them informally on a daily basis. Opportunities to share observations, clear up misunderstandings and nip problems in the bud are provided through this daily contact. Parents are more likely to be supportive of the school when they know how their children are doing and when they are reassured that their children are in a happy and caring environment.

By the end of the school year, it is a pleasure to look back at the achievements of a challenging year. The twenty-seven personalities who arrived the previous September had become a cohesive group, many of whom would be together for years to come. And not only had the pupils learnt, the teacher had too. As professionals, teachers continue to learn. Life never remains static when one is dealing with young children.

All over Ireland, there are infant teachers in classrooms dealing with similar situations. They do not all have the same resources in terms of personnel and equipment. The children too are from a variety of different social backgrounds. But what the teachers do share is quality and expertise, an integrated curriculum which allows them to be professionally free to make decisions regarding each individual child, a commitment to infant education and a willingness to be flexible, to rise to new challenges and to be enthusiastic.

### **Infant Teaching in Multi-grade Classrooms – One Teacher’s Experience**

Infant teachers in multi-grade settings are presented with different challenges. The school described here is a two teacher school in Co. Cork. The infant teacher teaches twenty-four children, ages four to nine, in junior and senior infants, first and second class. She is also the principal teacher of the school, responsible for the overall administration, management and leadership of the school community. The school is situated in a disadvantaged area, and the majority of the children do not have an opportunity to attend play school before they start in primary school.

There are particular challenges when infant classes are taught in the same classroom as older pupils, particularly in relation to the organisation and management of play and activity based learning. Despite such challenges, young children benefit from the presence of older children in the classroom, as the older children often scaffold learning opportunities for the younger children. The opportunity for social interaction with older children helps the infants adjust more easily to school and class conventions. Pupils in multi-grade classrooms develop independence at an early age, as they need to cultivate habits of responsibility for their own learning. The atmosphere in the classroom and the whole school is familial.

The management of a multi-grade learning situation creates new challenges for teachers moving from a single grade to multi-grade situation for the first time. Teachers often feel guilty about the lack of time available to give attention to all the infant children in the classroom, although on the other hand, teachers welcome the opportunity to spend four years with the pupils, as they can plan for their progression. An additional feature of a four-grade classroom is that the children in second class need to be prepared for the sacraments of First Confession and First Communion, creating particular organisational and planning challenges during that period.

This particular class had a child who had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and had been allocated a special needs assistant and ten hours per week of resource teaching. While the pupils attended resource teaching, the special needs assistant remained in the classroom and was available to assist other children. Her presence greatly enhanced the lives of the infant pupils – she assisted in supervising and working on activities which were prepared and organised by the teacher. While she did not ‘teach,’ she interacted with the pupils and facilitated learning experiences as they explored, experienced and investigated with a variety of materials.

Many of the pupils came from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds and many of the parents found it difficult to help their children with literacy and numeracy, although they were willing to help in any way they could and were very supportive of the school. The

infants left the school an hour before the older pupils and so the parents were in daily contact with the classroom. Effective implementation of the infant curriculum needs positive parental intervention and daily contact with parents, as well as an annual formal meeting. In the first term, the parents were met after school on an individual basis, and also in a group, to discuss the curriculum and how they could best further their children's education. This communication helped teachers and parents to work together in partnership.

It is particularly challenging to provide appropriate learning experiences for infant pupils in multi-class settings and there are times when the lack of appropriate resources and the large number of children in the class can be frustrating. However, the support of a trained assistant is invaluable to the multi-grade infant teacher in that it can enhance the learning of the pupils by allowing for more play and activity based learning experiences. Small class sizes, adequate materials and resources are also necessary if the infant curriculum is to be experienced as it should by all pupils in multi-grade settings.

### **Conclusion**

The Irish State is to be commended for providing for universal early years education for all children of four and five years of age in the primary school system. Nevertheless, there are many issues that need to be addressed in order to ensure that the learning experience of four and five year old children in the primary school is of high quality and appropriate to their developmental needs at this age. The value of carefully structured, well-focused learning opportunities for young children provided by experienced and qualified professionals, is supported by a growing body of research evidence in the field of early childhood education. Qualified teachers, an abundance of appropriate materials and equipment, suitable classroom facilities and a child centred curriculum are prerequisites of high quality early years education.

As evidenced by the personal experiences outlined in this paper, there is a need for further investment in early years education in the primary school. With few exceptions, the number of pupils in infant classes is far too large. The average class size in primary schools is thirty pupils. Schools in the 'Breaking the Cycle' scheme – a scheme to help combat educational disadvantage – have a maximum of fifteen pupils (INTO, 2004) in the infant classes. It is government policy (DES, 2002) that all classes for pupils under nine years of age should have less than twenty pupils, but this has yet to be implemented. The particular needs of young children in disadvantaged areas and in multi-grade classes also need to be addressed with a maximum class size of fifteen pupils per class recommended in these circumstances.

However, in addition to the class teacher, there should be a qualified childcare worker assisting in all infant classrooms. The benefits provided by the special needs assistants, whose primary functions are to support children with special needs who are integrated in mainstream schools, have been invaluable to infant teachers. Primary teachers who have worked in Early Start, a special primary school initiative for three year old children in certain schools designated as disadvantaged, have also highly commended the support provided by qualified childcare workers.

It is unfortunate that not all schools have appropriate classroom facilities to implement the infant curriculum. Large classroom spaces, with access to water, areas for wet play, home corners and library areas, are required to implement a play and activity based curriculum. Equipment and materials, for both indoor and outdoor activities are required, and it is regrettable that not all schools are equally well provided for. It is inequitable that schools in more affluent areas will be better equipped as a result of parental efforts than schools in areas designated educationally disadvantaged. Adequate state funding – both initial and annual – is necessary to address this issue.

Primary schools are fortunate to have well-qualified, committed and dedicated teachers. All primary teachers study infant education as an integral part of their pre-service education. However, as teacher education is seen as a continuum, and a life-long process, additional opportunities for continuous professional development are required to enable primary teachers to increase their knowledge of how young children think and learn and to enhance their pedagogical skills in the area of early years learning.

The INTO also supports continuing research in the field of early learning in Ireland. Primary teachers have much to offer in this area, as evidenced by research carried out to date (INTO, 1995). There is also no reason why universal provision for three-year-old children could not be provided in primary schools, using the Early Start model as a basis for further development. Notwithstanding the fact that there are issues to be addressed – class size, materials and equipment, classroom and school facilities, professional development – teachers have demonstrated their commitment over the years to providing high quality early education to three, four and five year old children in Irish primary schools.

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**Notes**

- 1 Final examination sat by Second Level Students at age 17/18. Students sit an average of six subjects.

## Listening and Learning: Empowering Children in Early Childhood Services

Michelle Hart

*"Listening is important for the children who are being listened to, but also for the adults who are listening, whether at home or in an early years setting, at school, at local level or in national government."* (National Children's Bureau, 2004)

### Introduction

The aim of the consultation with children was to listen to children in all matters that concern them within early childhood settings. The need for a shift away from the welfare model of 'minding' children and a move towards empowering children is something that we should seek to create within our cultural climate, given the trend of the last century which has been described as '*the century of the child*.' (Moss and Pence, 1994)

Valuable insights can be gained into children's feelings and thinking through this process, as well as a truly unique and bottom-up approach to assessment for service providers. The context in which this consultation process was carried out was in the belief that children are active participants in their own learning and experts in their own lives.

### Why is it Important to Consult with Children?

Listening to children gives practitioners ideas of what children are feeling in their settings and with this comes the knowledge of what they may need from their early years experience. Consultation with children can be carried out for many reasons, it can be:

- Central to the learning process;
- Vital in relation to emotional development in very young children;
- Healthy for the development and retention of positive self-esteem;
- Important to view how society views early childhood and children;
- Important to establish continuity from the home;
- A fantastic way to evaluate your setting from the child's perspective.

It is important to listen to children within early childhood settings because it will help children to feel more valued as people who have to share time and space with others, given the lack of control they have over their own lives until they are older.

Really listening to children means taking their ideas, feelings and opinions to heart and acting on what you are learning from them in a continuous way. Practitioners face a challenge, to look upon children as experts on themselves and not that practitioners are

all-powerful and know best. Imagine the wonderful feeling given to children - I am respected and listened to, I am respectful and I listen to others. Would this not be a fantastic way to empower children, creating a democracy within any setting, evoking powerful feelings in the psyche of any child? How could this fail to raise the level of any child's self-esteem, creating an atmosphere of trust and negotiation within the spirit of enquiry?

According to Neaum and Tallack (2002:88) "*Self-esteem is established at a young age and research evidence shows that it remains stable throughout life, so it is vital that positive self-esteem is established when children are young.*" We respond to interactions and reactions through the emotions shown to us by others and in turn, we build an image from within. The emotional cues help us to shape our behaviour and help us to learn.

According to Elgin (1996) "*Emotions function cognitively, only when they embed beliefs*". If this is the case, parents demonstrate the emotional framework that children will later work from and in turn, lay the context in which we must work with the child. Shared negotiation within a framework for learning can be very liberating for children in early childhood settings.

Research is showing that our children are switching off from school at a very early age and one of the reasons may be the fact that school life is very much divorced from home life. How much negotiation do children get to live out in any one day? Negotiation would seem to be one way of making children feel more like they do at home; empowered, capable individuals who can take on many challenges if they are offered in the right context and in a way that is meaningful for them.

How many opportunities for learning are lost because we are not actively listening to what children want? Powerful learning can and does occur when children's interests are taken into account and they are exposed to real and valid daily choices within their environment; this is the core of real consultation.

Nutbrown (1996) suggests "*It appears that children who are given choices and genuine opportunities to take responsibility for their own actions are more likely to use the adult as a point of resource, rather than relying on them for approval, and to persevere in tackling difficulties rather than give up in the face of challenge.*" Enhancing children's learning in this way gives them a feeling of control over what they are doing and more choices of how they could do it.

Another way to augment children's learning is through the assessment process within a setting. Ackers (1994:74) suggests, "*Assessment is a process that must enhance children's lives, their learning and development.*"

Assessment of learning within the early years occurs at many levels in settings, through observations, curriculum planning, planning for individual children, a quality programme in conjunction with an early years advisor and perhaps some forms of reflective practice. I believe that this cycle of assessment is incomplete without children having their say. Under Article 12 of the U.N. Conventions on the Rights of the Child, "*Children have the right to express a view on all matters that concern them and to have that view taken seriously.*" We should make consultation with children part and parcel of the fabric of our everyday lives and make it an element of good practice within our settings. A truly unique and bottom up approach of assessment can be gained, given the right tools for listening. New insights will develop, new skills and knowledge will be formed and reformed, but more importantly, we may develop a shift in our attitude and thinking on how we as a society should view and work with children in the future. According to Clark and Moss (2001), a framework for listening such as this has the potential to be both used as an evaluative tool and to become embedded into early years practice.

### **How the Tool was Devised and Implemented**

Birmingham Early Years Partnership has produced a Quality Assurance Program, and contained within this is a section on consultation with children. We were very kindly permitted to use this. The consultation process was a non-compulsory part of the programme and the tool is made up of a set of interview questions that have broad headings, the tool having been compiled by a number of people on the quality panel for the programme. I also took into account the work the ISPCC had carried out in relation to consultation with children before I began this piece of work.

For some time, the Border Counties Childcare Network (BCCN) had wanted to carry out the process of consultation with children and it seemed timely, given my arrival there and how recently I had been working with young children at ground level, that I implemented this project. The consultation process was to be carried out with children aged nought-to-fourteen years of age and armed with one tool, I set about looking for other ideas to inspire me.

I decided that I would try to open out the set of interview questions for school age children, as many of the questions asked for the three-to-five year olds would be apt for this age group too; with some minor adaptations I was happy with the result. Langsted (1994:36) believes that "*interviewing children provides the opportunities about their own views and their daily lives which could not be required by any other method.*"

However, the nought-to-threes proved to be a very different matter. I looked for a tool for this age group, and to my surprise, I couldn't find one. I contacted High/Scope Ireland as I knew work was in progress with a model for this age group, but no tool for a consultation



process existed and no-one could give me any direction in which to look. What do early years specialists do when faced with a difficulty? Consult your theory, dig deep and develop your own tool, and that's exactly what I did.

I knew that Denmark had a long and distinguished history in this area, and it was to this country that I looked for ideas. I found my inspiration and decided for the nought-to-threes the best way forward would be to look at the early years setting physically, through a child's eyes. I set a series of questions to determine the information I wanted to gather, over the course of a day. The questions were based around emotional responses and reactions to people, places and objects. I had the youngest children in mind here, given their emergence of language acquisition, our understanding of this, and the role that emotion plays in children's overall development. I also had the notion that the younger the child, the more indirect the tool should be.

With all this in place, I had to sit down and work out practically how this was to be co-ordinated and rolled out. With seven groups already on the BCCN quality programme for three-to-five year olds, I decided that these groups were ideally placed and that I could carry out this process as part of the curriculum section of our quality programme. The National Children's Nurseries Association recommended two full day care centres in the region that had received their excellence award and two County Childcare Committees had also offered the names of two centres for school age children and I agreed to use these.

I believed the success of the project would rely heavily on the tools and how they were to be used and implemented and each age group had to be thought about individually. I looked at each question set out for each age group, beginning with the three-to-five year old age group. While trying not to have preconceived ideas, I knew from working with children that some questions would be answered more readily than others. I would need props to help capture and sustain their interest and to assist me in pulling out the information that I required.

One question outlined in the interview concerned me, and this was in relation to children thinking about their own learning and thinking, a higher order thinking skill known as metacognition. From my work as a practitioner and as an Early Years Specialist in Northern Ireland, I knew this level of thinking is difficult to capture and document within early years settings. I was not very optimistic that I could unearth this through interactions with the children unless I went about it in a way they would understand. I went back to children as experts in their own lives and as capable individuals at this stage because I believed if I offered this question in the right way, fruitful answers would surely come. Inspiration comes at odd moments and at three o'clock one morning I scrambled out of bed, with an

idea of using the learning environment to help me with my conundrum. I decided that if I took photographs of the children's play areas they may be able to tell me what learning might go on there. I believed that this would help those who are not good auditory learners, preferring visual learning and that these would aid their recall and help to create focus. I needed to be careful that no adult or child was engaged in play during these photographs, in case the children said only what they could see; I wanted them to project themselves into the question. I went on to use this tool for various other questions within the consultation around equal opportunities and it has proved very useful.

To get a full view of the consultation process, many viewpoints would be needed. What children said, felt, learned and reacted to would go towards helping build a better picture, with puppets, pictures and cameras at their disposal. Consultation in this way is known as the 'mosaic approach'. Here, you do not rely heavily on one method of consultation of extracting information from children but on many. In Italy this is regular practice and is known as using the 100 languages of children, the idea being that one form of communication alone will not give you the full picture you are seeking. This is a very reflective way of looking at consultation and one area from which I have accrued much learning.

The validity of the tools and research used could be called into question since there is no comparison against which to measure the findings. The same process on a different day could yield different results. However, this does not mean that children should not be asked. The fact that no two consultation processes would be the same adds to the uniqueness of this project and children will express their thoughts and feelings depending on the mood, environment and the interactions of a particular adult. I believe over time, if the same adult continually consulted with children, a balance would be achieved which would reflect a truer picture.

### **Findings from the Project**

#### **Nought-to-Threes:**

- Children were well settled into the settings;
- Routines followed were mostly the same everyday;
- Exploration forms much of the learning for the seven-month old and one-year old, with better control and co-ordination for the one-year old. Imagination is beginning for the one-year old, and a lot of time was spent moving and transporting objects. Manoeuvring their own bodies in and out of different spaces was also very important to both;
- Much time is spent in repetition and in fine-tuning skills to consolidate learning;
- Listening requires effective skills in the practitioner;
- Being listened to can help the child to become a skilful communicator;

- Children have clear ideas about what they want and don't want to do and will make this known through body language, facial expression and language;
- The learning environment was set up to suit overall development;
- Children were viewed as active learners in both settings observed;
- Adults provided a good support network and a good mix of autonomy and dependence was shown in both settings;
- Some of the children's bodily needs were intense and the response time varied over the course of the day;
- Children have some choice in their daily routine during the day e.g. meals, toys, interactions, activities and quiet time. The rhythm and flow was led mostly by the child;
- Much prior learning and development was apparent, a good deal of learning was seen over the course of the day;
- Forms of idiosyncratic speech were heard over the length of the day and built upon by the adult;
- Children communicated in a variety of ways; shouting, squealing, moving, crying and looking/watching for short and long periods of time;
- Appropriate behaviour was learned from the adults in the setting, by how they reacted to what the children were doing. Children mirrored the facial expressions of the adults many times over the day;
- Strategies for unwanted behaviour existed;
- The adult labelled the emotion they believed the child was feeling throughout the course of the day;
- Children were good at making their needs known by the cues and gestures they used;
- Children liked to engage with other children of different age groups and used varying strategies in order to do this;
- Each child tried out new things in the setting over the course of the day;
- There was plenty of choice in activities and in one group, this was quite structured over parts of the day;
- Records of the children's learning were available;
- Partnerships with parents seemed to be of a high quality;
- The tool used needs to be evaluated and revised.

**Three-to-Five Year Olds:**

- Children had a captive audience and that alone helped to sustain the interviews;
- Children had not been asked these questions before and this was very novel to them;
- Children had an idea of why they were attending pre-school;
- Some children could verbalise who could attend and who could not;
- They knew the play areas they liked and why, but some were unsure of what they didn't like;

- Metacognition is present in children at this stage and given the right tool, they can express this very well;
- Emotional language and expression could not be verbalised very well with the children I observed. Without an emotional vocabulary, how could I expect children to answer an objective question? I had not foreseen this and therefore additional thinking and props related to this will be added;
- Some children could talk about the changes they would make to the pre-school.
- Children found it difficult to identify areas they might need help in;
- Children could name the friends they liked to play with and who helped them to make friends;
- The role of the adult yielded many answers and good insight emerged on how children see adults within settings;
- Only some children could identify behaviour strategies in the settings;
- Some children had clear ideas around what boys and girls do in pre-school; some opinions that could be deemed sexist were heard;
- When looked into in more detail, it emerged that some specific toys were seen by the children to be for girls or boys only;
- Some children knew how and why information was passed on to their parents;
- The greatest challenge was to get practitioners to view children as experts on their own lives; some groups accrued more learning than others;
- The tool used needs to be evaluated and revised.

#### **Five-to-Fourteen Year Olds:**

- Children had very clear ideas why they attended after school and many gave their own opinion too;
- Children could explain who could attend after school and who could not;
- Children could verbalise their own metacognition, but did not go into any great detail;
- Children could talk and explain about areas/activities they didn't like;
- Friends were an extremely important aspect of their time in after school, more so than adults or activities;
- They were well aware of the activities available and many wanted more choice and say over what they were doing;
- Children had an excellent grasp of what the role of the adult was within the setting;
- Children gave detailed answers about the areas they would like to change;
- Children had an excellent knowledge of behaviour strategies and why they exist;
- Questions around emotions were difficult for the children to answer, particularly from nine years onwards;
- Answers around equal opportunities were based around the behaviour of boys and girls, rather than what they did or spent time doing;
- Children could identify areas that they needed special help in, particularly mathematics, phonetics and reading;

- Children believed that their parents were kept well-informed by the after school on many areas, but many did not talk to their parents at home about it and this was their choice;
- Most control within the settings was in the hands of adults;
- The tool used needs to be evaluated and revised.

It is beyond the remit of this paper to go into detail on the learning and the more complex findings of the project. However, a more detailed account is available from the BCCN website ([www.bccn.ie](http://www.bccn.ie)), as well as the tools used for each of the age groups.

### Conclusion

The project and the findings show that much learning can be gained for both children and practitioners due to this process. Children, even at a very young age, have subtle ways of communicating, if we take the time to really listen. I believe that this is only the beginning, and as more research is carried out and more theories developed, we will gain a better understanding of this subject. The tools used may have helped to shape the project, but have limitations attached too. The timeframe was a huge factor in relation to this project and like so many others, I would have liked more time.

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## **Observation Methodology in Preschool Programme Evaluation: The Early Start Experience**

**Mary Lewis and Peter Archer**

The ECERS-R, a classroom observation otherwise known as the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale, was used as part of the evaluation of Early Start, a preschool programme in disadvantaged areas in Irish cities. An evaluation report to the Department of Education and Science (Lewis and Archer, 2003) is concerned with what was learned about Early Start from the use of the ECERS-R. In addition to summarising that report, the present paper focuses on what can be learned about the ECERS-R from the experience of its use in the Early Start evaluation.

### **Early Start and its Evaluation**

As part of an integrated approach to problems of disadvantage in designated schools, Early Start was established in eight locations in the 1994/95 school year and in a further thirty-two locations in the following year, to provide for three-year old preschool children. Though broadly concerned with the development of the whole child, Early Start was primarily designed to promote language and cognitive development. It has a number of features that differentiate it from provision for the infant classes of primary schools, including a shorter school day and a class size that is limited to fifteen pupils. Also, each Early Start teacher is assisted by a full-time childcare worker and has the support of a Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) Co-ordinator. The role of the HSCL Co-ordinator is to promote parent involvement and integration of the school with other local agencies and individuals involved in dealing with disadvantage.

An evaluation of Early Start in the original group of eight participating schools was undertaken during its first four years of operation. Data on implementation obtained in questionnaires and achievement data were examined (Educational Research Centre, 1998; Kelly and Kellaghan, 1999). Baseline achievement data were obtained in tests administered to pupils who were attending junior infants and second class when Early Start was introduced. The test results were subsequently compared with those of the first two cohorts of pupils that included Early Start graduates when they reached junior infants and second class. Interviews with junior-infant teachers provided additional information on pupils' adaptation to school.

The evaluation yielded mixed results. Early Start participants, when they reached junior infants, were judged by their teachers to have higher levels of cognitive and social maturity, to be better adapted to classroom procedures, and to have higher levels of self-determination and independence than their peers who had not participated in Early Start.

In literacy and numeracy, however, the achievements of the first two cohorts of Early Start pupils in junior infants were not found to differ significantly from those of pupils who had not attended Early Start, although language performance of the second cohort was significantly better than that of the first cohort (Educational Research Centre, 1998). Similar results emerged from the tests of reading and mathematics involving second class pupils (Kelly and Kellaghan, 1999). Differences in the achievements of pupils who had attended Early Start and those who had not, were not found to be significant.

Though not inconsistent with the findings of evaluations of early childhood interventions in other countries, the results of the Early Start evaluation were regarded as disappointing. In a review of the findings (Kelly and Kellaghan, 1999), it was suggested that implementation problems may have contributed to the failure of Early Start to impact on achievement. A number of these were targeted in a series of measures introduced by the Department of Education and Science (DES) in the late 1990s. The measures included additional in-service support involving visits to classrooms, the preparation of a curriculum with specific objectives, an increased emphasis on adult/child interactions, and the development of assessment profiles. Further evaluation was conducted to investigate the extent to which change had occurred in these and other aspects of implementation that had been identified as problematic.

The report that followed concluded that a good deal of change had occurred in some, but not all, aspects of Early Start since completion of the previous evaluation (Lewis and Archer, 2002). However, since the report's findings were limited to questionnaire data and an analysis of documents (curricular guidelines, teacher notes), it was agreed that some further investigation of implementation would be required and it was decided to proceed with an observation study. The decision was supported by the considerable progress that had occurred in the development of observation instruments for evaluation of early childhood settings (Essa and Burnham, 2001). Several such instruments were published in the latter half of the 1980s and the 1990s (e.g., Bredekamp, 1986; Howes and Stewart, 1987; Arnett, 1989; Abbott-Shim and Sibley, 1992; File and Kontos, 1993; McCartney *et al.*, 1997). A search was undertaken to establish if one of these might be applied or adapted for use in the Early Start evaluation, thereby creating an opportunity to link developments in Irish preschool education with those in other countries.

### **The Instrument**

A revised version of the ECERS (Harms and Clifford, 1980), known as the ECERS-R, was identified in the review. According to Harms *et al.* (1998:1), who carried out the revisions, the ECERS-R is based on a "*...broad definition of environment, including those spatial, programmatic, and interpersonal features that directly affect the children and adults in an early childhood setting.*" These features are reflected in the scale, which



consists of seven subscales: space and furnishings, personal care routines, language-reasoning, activities, interaction, programme structure and parents and staff.

In the literature on childcare quality, the environmental rating scale approach is viewed as part of an increasingly sophisticated body of work that is designed to measure process quality as distinct from structural quality. While the latter is concerned with those elements of care which focus on describing the framework of a programme (e.g., teacher-child ratio, teacher qualifications), process elements of quality focus on the quality of interactions between caregiver and child and the quality of activities available for children. In their comprehensive review of the literature, Essa and Burnham (2001:73) conclude that it is the process variables which "*...seem to encompass the most important elements of a high quality program.*" The case for using an instrument such as the ECERS-R to examine the process quality aspects of Early Start was strengthened by the fact that much was already known about the structural aspects of the programme.

A number of specific characteristics of the ECERS-R also pointed towards the appropriateness of the scale for Early Start observation. First, the instrument has a strong educational focus and seemed conceptually congruent with the educational ethos of Early Start. Second, each scale item is supported by a set of indicators to assist scoring, as well as a series of questions, which seemed particularly useful in the case of non-observable behaviours, that might be put to teachers and childcare workers. Third, the instrument is designed to facilitate observation of classroom units rather than of individuals within classrooms. A fourth important characteristic of the ECERS-R is that it has been used in a variety of settings over a number of years. While most of this work was conducted in settings in the United States, the instrument has also been used and extended in a major longitudinal study of 141 preschool centres involving over 3,000 children in the UK (Sylva *et al.*, 2003). Finally, the ECERS-R can be administered within a period of hours, and was considered feasible from a resource point of view, since it seemed likely that it could be administered during one session.

Several modifications to the scale were applied before it was administered in Early Start centres. First, a number of items were deleted because of an apparent lack of fit with Early Start objectives. For example, items on play with sand, water, and blocks were excluded because the emphasis in the ECERS-R is largely on the availability of these resources rather than on their use as aids to learning as prescribed in the Early Start guidelines (In-Career Development Team, 1998). Next, the guidelines were inspected with a view to identifying omissions in the scale. An item on oral language development was added to reflect the complexity of the dialogue strategies promoted in Early Start and one on cognitive development was largely rewritten, also with reference to Early Start objectives. Finally, other items were amended (e.g., some indicators and questions were

altered, added or deleted) before the modified scale was submitted for review to a member of the Early Start Department of Education and Science team and to an experienced independent observer of Early Start centres.

In the scale that was used in Early Start centres, all seven of the ECERS-R subscales were retained but the number of scale items was reduced from forty-three to twenty-eight. Items were allocated to the subscales as follows: space and furnishings (eight items); personal care (three items); language-reasoning (three items); activities (four items); interaction (four items); programme structure (three items); and parents and staff (three items).

### **Fieldwork**

Twenty of the forty schools involved in Early Start were randomly selected for observation visits in May and June of 2002. School principals were informed of the proposed visit and consulted on the date of the visit. The request was declined in one case for reasons relating to staff turnover.

Observations were conducted independently by two individuals (one visited twelve schools and the other visited seven) who collaborated to ensure consistency in the interpretation of item indicators and in the application of scores. In addition to completing the observation schedule, the observers interviewed the Early Start teacher in all cases and in the majority of cases, depending on the nature of classroom activity and the time available, the childcare worker. Interaction was limited between the children and the observers but, otherwise, the observation was conducted in accordance with the recommendations issued by Harms *et al.* (1998:5). The average length of visits was approximately two-and-a-half hours.

Following the fieldwork, the items were scored using the score sheets developed for the ECERS-R. Each item was rated on a scale of one to seven (inadequate =1, minimal =3, good =5, and excellent =7) depending on the number of indicators ticked during observation. This meant that the maximum score that could be assigned to a centre is 196 (28 x 7). In some centres, however, no score could be assigned to an item on disability since no pupil with a disability was enrolled, and in these cases the maximum score is 189 (27 x 7).

### **Results**

#### Scale and Subscale Scores

Looking first at the overall score and the subscale scores, it may be noted that the maximum scale score that could be obtained across all centres is 3,724. However, the total number of score points allocated was 2,405, or just 64.58% of the maximum scale

score (Table 1). At subscale level, the highest score was achieved for items on interaction to which 84.58% of the maximum subscale score was allocated. The next highest scores related to language-reasoning (71.42%) and space and furnishings (68.42%), followed by activities (60.15%) and personal care routines (59.89%). The lowest scores were associated with the parents and staff subscale (49.87%) and the programme structure subscale (46.11%).

**Table 1: Maximum and Achieved Scores in Early Start Centres (N=19), by Subscale**

Subscale	Maximum Score	Achieved Score	Achieved Score as % of Maximum Score
Space and furnishings	1,064	728	68.42
Personal care routines	399	239	59.89
Language-reasoning	399	285	71.42
Activities	532	320	60.15
Interaction	532	450	84.58
Programme structure	399	184	46.11
Parents and staff	399	199	49.87
Total	3,724	2,405	64.58

#### Individual Item Scores

Though space constraints do not permit presentation of the data (see Lewis and Archer, 2003), an examination of scores at item level indicates variation in the distribution of item scores within subscales. In two of the subscales, scores are evenly distributed across items (relatively high scores on all items in the interaction subscale but only average scores on all items in the activities subscale). A bipolar distribution pattern, high scores on some items but not on others, is marked in the subscales on space and furnishings, personal care routines, and parents and staff, but less so in the language-reasoning subscale. Finally, the programme structure subscale has items with high, average, and low scores. It is worth noting that the item in this subscale on provision for children with disabilities could not be scored in as many as thirteen of the centres visited, because of the very limited enrolment in Early Start of children with identified disabilities. While the low participation of this group may reflect parental circumstances or choice as much as school policy, it is not consistent with the stated objectives of Early Start.

#### Individual Centre Scores

An examination of the mean scale scores of individual centres (calculated by summing the item scores for each subscale and dividing the total subscale score by the number of items scored) indicates differences between the centres with values ranging from 3.18 to 5.71 (Table 2). The total item score in the top-scoring centre is nearly twice that in the centre with the lowest score. Otherwise, the extent of variation may be illustrated in the finding

that eight centres achieved a mean scale score of at least 5, seven achieved a mean scale score between 4 and 5, while in the remaining four centres, the mean scale score is less than 4.

**Table 2: Item Scores and Mean Scale Scores, by Centre**

School	Total item Score	Mean Scale Score
1	160	5.71
2	157	5.60
3	154	5.50
4*	151	5.59
5*	148	5.48
6*	146	5.41
7*	142	5.26
8*	137	5.07
9	129	4.61
10*	124	4.59
11	121	4.32
12*	118	4.37
13*	115	4.25
14*	110	4.07
15*	108	4.00
16*	104	3.85
17*	100	3.57
18*	95	3.52
19*	86	3.18

\* Mean scale scores are calculated excluding the item on disability

The subscales on which centres differed most are programme structure which has mean subscale scores ranging from 1.50 to 7.00 and personal care routines which has mean subscale scores ranging from 2.00 to 7.00 (Table 3). Somewhat smaller differences between centres are evident on the subscales for language-reasoning, interaction, space and furnishing, and activities. Between-centre differences are smallest on the parents and staff subscale which has values ranging from 2.00 to 4.66.

**Table 3: Mean Scale Scores (Minimum and Maximum Values), by Subscale (N=19)**

Subscale	Minimum Value	Maximum Value
Space and furnishings	2.75	6.50
Personal care routines	2.00	7.00
Language-reasoning	3.00	7.00
Activities	2.50	6.00
Interaction	3.25	7.00
Programme structure	1.50	7.00
Parents and staff	2.00	4.66

### General Observations

In this section, the results of analysis of the observation schedule are discussed in light of some general observations of Early Start centres and interviews with staff.

The observation visits drew attention to the positive interaction between adults and children that featured in all of the centres visited. High standards of general supervision were maintained throughout, while only minor discipline problems were observed. Staff interacted gently with children, encouraging their efforts and achievements and supporting the development of interpersonal skills (e.g., turn taking and the promotion of fair play). Daily routines were enlivened with a mix of whole-group and small-group activities.

The physical environment of Early Start classrooms received a good deal of attention in the observation schedule and, confirming earlier evaluation findings (Educational Research Centre, 1998), it is clear that these aspects of provision are of a high standard. Rooms are spacious, bright and cheerful and there is an abundance of equipment and materials.

Analysis of the observation schedule results highlighted the focus in Early Start on language development. The visits to classrooms confirmed that provision of books and other language development materials for children (and parents) is excellent overall. Wall displays and room layout suggested that children were introduced to a wide range of topics including animals and nature, as well as domestic and work-related themes. Story telling is a major activity in Early Start and, in many classrooms, children were afforded some opportunity to make a contribution. Even so, there was relatively little one-to-one sustained interaction between children and adults as recommended in the Early Start dialogue strategies, and it would seem that more might be done to encourage individual children to complete full sentences and/or to express themselves more explicitly.

Observation of creative endeavours involving music, art, and socio-dramatic play proved somewhat difficult and yielded very little information about the standards achieved in these areas. It is not yet clear why this occurred. It may be because teachers and childcare workers were reluctant to engage in creative activities in the presence of observers, or that the children knew more than they were prepared to reveal, or simply that their teachers did not give them sufficient scope to demonstrate the extent of their knowledge during the visits. Some further investigation will be required before these questions can be addressed.

Cognitive development was supported by different kinds of table-top activity based on a variety of sorting materials (e.g., jigsaws, blocks, and beads) which children were encouraged to work with. The focus of adult-child interactions, however, tended to be on naming objects and some of their properties. There was little emphasis on number or on the attributes of materials other than size, shape, and colour and it would seem that the scope of Early Start was also not fully reflected in this domain.

Personal care routines (greeting/departing, meals/snacks, and safety code), an integral part of school experience, were not addressed to any extent in the Early Start guidelines, but were included in the observation schedule. In all of the centres visited, issues of safety (indoor and outdoor) were treated seriously and it seemed that every precaution was taken to avoid accidents and to promote awareness of potential hazards. In contrast, poor hygiene standards in relation to washing of hands before food handling were observed to an extent that seems surprising, given the separate toilet and washing facilities provided in nearly all of the units. Greeting and departing arrangements were orderly, friendly and positive. In a few centres, however, none of the parents entered the classroom when collecting their children, which seemed at odds with other efforts to involve parents including the fact that in ten of the centres visited, at least one parent or grandparent (mother or grandmother) was present for at least twenty minutes of activity. Teachers also pointed to the involvement of parents in school outings and in reading and play assignments at home, and to the contributions of the HSCL Co-ordinators in encouraging parent contact.

Teachers and childcare workers appeared to work well together. Responsibilities seemed clearly defined and, in general, the work seemed evenly divided. In some centres, a very positive air of teamwork was discernible; the staff acknowledged the supportive role of the school principal and reflected critically on their own progress.

Enrolment and attendance issues present an on-going challenge. A total of 267 children were enrolled in the centres visited. The maximum number that could have been enrolled, allowing for fifteen children per classroom, is 285. Most of the under-enrolment

is attributable to just two centres, however. In one of these, only ten children were enrolled and in the other only eight. Attendance problems are more widely experienced. During the visits, a total of 207 children were present: the numbers ranged from four to fourteen per classroom. Eleven or more children were present in thirteen classrooms but an additional three classrooms had just nine children, two others had only seven children, while in the remaining classroom there were just four children in attendance.

### **Conclusion**

Application of the ECERS-R supports the conclusion that Early Start is a high quality intervention with a strong emphasis on adult-child interaction. Further, the information obtained in the study confirms previous evaluation findings that a number of improvements (e.g., greater parental involvement, better working-relationships between teachers and childcare workers, and a shift to small-group learning contexts) had occurred in the implementation of Early Start (Lewis and Archer, 2002). There were no indications from the observation data to contradict teachers' earlier reports of progress in these aspects of Early Start.

While the ECERS-R did reveal differences between centres, the instrument was not as discriminating as anticipated. Performance was superior on some subscales (interaction, language-reasoning, and space and furnishings) than on others, by and large reflecting the priorities given to classroom resources and to the language component of the programme. On the subscales on which centres did less well (personal care routines, parents and staff, and programme structure), most of the under-performance can be explained by low scores in a few items. In drawing attention to the low rates of enrolment of children with disabilities, the ECERS-R proved useful as a means of highlighting the mismatch between practice and policy. However, the appropriateness of the ECERS-R to capture and record progress in some of the more creative aspects of the curriculum must be called into question and some other research method explored.

A further limitation of the ECERS-R is the absence of provision for information on several key aspects of Early Start including assessment profiling, the teacher-childcare worker relationship, and the rich complexity of home-school-community liaison that supports Early Start beyond the immediate environs of the classroom. Further extensions of the scale would be required to ensure that it adequately reflects these major objectives of Early Start, a resource decision that may not be warranted in view of the scale of the programme taking into account its duration and intensity, as well as the number of centres involved. In conclusion, the ECERS-R provided valuable insights on the implementation of Early Start and, importantly, confirmed the views of teachers reported in questionnaires. Its contribution to Early Start is probably best appreciated as part of an array of research strategies deployed in the evaluation.

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## Assessing Teachers' Performance in Pre-Primary and Primary Schools in Estonia

Ivār Mannamaa

### Introduction

The evaluation of teachers' performance is difficult and is one of the most unpopular aspects of educational reform and practice. In Estonia, while the Law of Education sets the rules of teacher accreditation, the national system does not seem to provide sufficient information for guidelines for the development of teachers' performance. By focusing on formal criteria, the data does not give much feedback either to teachers, schools or parents on what spheres need further development.

Though the development of learner-centred programs has been a widespread issue in Estonia, we haven't had much discussion on indicators or criteria for it. This presentation introduces the results of the criteria-based assessment for the pre- and primary school teachers, which was piloted in Estonia last spring. The *Step by Step Teachers'* standards were used as a framework. In spite of the remarkable history of pre-schools in Estonia, it was probably the very first attempt to describe quality indicators, evaluate teachers' performance and give them meaningful feedback. The purpose of the presentation is to review the very basic aspects of evaluation we had to deal with, while attempting to change the process of evaluation from a boring obligation to an effective means of development.

### Background

The system of professional evaluation is going through rapid change today in Estonia. Professions Chamber, a non-profit association, was established in 2001 with the task of developing the professional qualifications system and of according skill categories. The latter are developed by professional associations, e.g., as by Unions of Nurses or Welders. As a rule, though not obligatorily, all requirements are described by criteria based, measurable standards. As the teachers have not yet managed to establish a nationally accepted union, the Ministry of Education and Research (MOER) has taken the initiative of establishing professional standards for teachers.

Today the teachers' qualification system is regulated by the decree of MOER – system of teachers' attestation which describes 14 requirements for K-12 teachers. Each teacher must:

- 1 Have a higher qualification (BA degree) in Education;
- 2 Have worked successfully during the previous three years. This is assessed by means of a written report compiled by a staff member appointed to that position by the school administration;

- 3 Have passed 160 hours in-serving training (4 academic credits) during the previous three years;
- 4 Have acquired an MA degree in Education;
- 5 Have mentored young pedagogues;
- 6 Have participated in school improvement programs;
- 7 Have published a research paper in an educational journal;
- 8 Have completed at least 100 hours lecturing;
- 9 Have organised students events, competitions or exhibitions;
- 10 Have facilitated students in state-level competitions;
- 11 Have developed teaching materials;
- 12 Have presented at educational conferences;
- 13 Have participated in educational work-groups;
- 14 Have facilitated youth organisations.

Requirements eight to fourteen must be accomplished at County or National level. After attestation, one of four skill-categories – Junior Teacher, Teacher, Master Teacher or Teacher-Methodologist – could be appointed to the applicant. The first of these is available for almost everybody with a BA degree and the fourth is relatively rare, appointed exclusively by the State level committee. The teacher's base-salary has until now been in direct correlation with the appointed degree.

The role of the national attestation is formulated as “... to support teachers' professional development and career by assessing regularly efficiency of their work by internal and external evaluation.”<sup>11</sup> Despite this, the general opinion is that the system does not provide sufficient information to guide the development of teachers' performance. On several occasions, the teachers who have been awarded the highest degree are in fact not recognised as good teachers by their colleagues. It seems that by focusing on formal criteria, the evaluation does not give much feedback to teachers, schools or parents on what spheres need further development. In addition, many of the requirements are simply not applicable for pre-school teachers and so it is evident that the teachers' qualification system has to go through thorough changes.

The most important change, as we see it today, is the shift of focus from structural to procedural criteria, which could briefly be described as characteristics of a teacher's everyday work in the classroom. Several options were considered in order to meet this requirement, e.g., evaluation of classrooms (settings, schedules); assessment of students' results (teamwork skills, problem solving skills, etc.); or satisfaction scales (students, parents, school administrations). In the end, we chose the evaluation of teachers' performance, without knowing then that it seems to be one of the most unpopular aspects of educational reform and practice. As a lucky coincidence, the International Step

by Step Association (SBS) started developing its quality standards and gave us permission to pilot them in Estonian pre- and primary schools.

### **Methodology**

SBS framework standards were developed by an international executive committee and describe teacher's performance by six areas:

- Teacher-child interaction;
- Family participation;
- Planning and individualisation;
- Strategies for meaningful learning;
- Learning environment;
- Health and safety.<sup>2</sup>

These areas seem to represent almost the full range of practice and theory that are the primary target of the child-centred programs. Accordingly, most of the organisations implementing the SBS methodology found the standards to be applicable in their countries; the criteria about including disabled children were added to different standard areas.

### **The Need**

Quality assessment systems usually serve two major purposes:

- 1 To improve the efficiency of teaching and learning by: evaluating the efficiency of the teachers' pre-service training; recognizing outstanding teachers; providing a reliable professional career path for teachers; motivating teachers to carry out regular self-assessment; providing feedback for teachers on professional achievements etc.;
- 2 To provide external accountability: by comparison of different programs ('regular', Waldorf, Step by Step, Montessori etc.) and by evaluating the impact of external factors (social, geographical, etc.).

In our case, we identified two more sub-goals that could be reached by a qualifications system. Firstly, the qualifications system should be considered as a mutual responsibility; if society is 'not satisfied' with teachers' work but does not describe explicitly what it wants the teachers to do, then we cannot expect the quality of teachers' performance to improve. Therefore, the quality standards, introduced by different non-governmental organizations, should somehow force society to describe its expectations to teachers.

Secondly, on a program level, we need to assure the quality of the program. In order to respond to the occasional misuses of the trademark, we need a yardstick that clearly

differentiates the classrooms using 'our' program (SBS in this case) from those who use only some elements of it. In addition, an adequate measurement tool is needed which enables assessment of the expansion of the program. Evaluation of the efficiency of in-service training programs also belongs to this group.

### **Process**

In April 2004, we started the teacher evaluation as a pilot project (Incidentally, the grant applications we submitted earlier were all rejected with explanations that pre- and primary school education is not a priority or that evaluation of teachers is a private business and is not in the public interests).

One of the underlying principles of the qualifications' system is its focus on quality improvement rather than on creating ranking lists or sanctioning. The main local level obstacles we faced while achieving this goal could be described as follows:

- Teachers are not interested in any kind of extra work unless it is directly connected to certain benefits;
- School administrators are not interested in having external evaluators in their classrooms;
- Municipality officials are afraid of losing their job and control (also, NGO-reputation is not high in Estonia in general);
- Policy makers are afraid of any potential connections between the (state-independent) evaluation system and official approval and salary benefits.

These obstacles were complicated by the novelty of the standards-based evaluation. In spite of the remarkable history of pre-school and primary education in Estonia, it was probably the very first attempt to describe quality indicators, evaluate teachers' performance and give them meaningful feedback. Also, although the development of learner-centred programs has been a widespread issue, we haven't had much public discussion on indicators or criteria for it in Estonia.

It is generally accepted that meaningful learning takes place if the student feels secure. Since the evaluation process is key to professional development, it is clear that evaluation procedures must be safeguarded. Assessment is trustworthy and safe if the information is valid, if it provides accurate estimates and if it measures what it is intended to measure. Also, reliability, and in our pilot study the inter-rater reliability in particular, should be emphasised. In order to increase teachers' trust towards the evaluation results, it is crucial that the independent raters give the same scores to a given teachers performance (and portfolio).

Our sample of twenty-eight evaluators is not sufficient to provide data on statistical validity and the reliability of the scales. Still, in order to increase these measures in the pilot study, the following steps were taken:

- 1 Standard areas with descriptions of the criteria were sent two weeks beforehand to all teachers and principals. They were encouraged to ask questions and comment on both content and format of the standards;
- 2 Twelve potential observers were trained. From these, eight were selected to carry out the classrooms evaluations. All the observers worked in pairs. During first visits the chief-evaluator, serving also as a trustee of the teacher, attended the observations and facilitated follow-up discussions;
- 3 As a rule, the observers evaluated the work of the teachers whom they didn't know personally beforehand;
- 4 The final scores were only approved with the consensus of both observers.

### Results

During the pilot project, the performance of twenty-eight teachers from eighteen pre- and primary schools were evaluated; among them the urban/rural, experienced/beginners, pre/primary teachers were represented almost equally. Neither of our main threats – low inter-rater reliability and high context-dependence – came true. In none of the occasions, serious discussions or third-party intervention were needed. Also, the scale seems to work similarly well in different classrooms, independently of the economical, social or geographical differences.

Three main challenges, all somehow technical in their nature, were identified as follows:

- 1 Giving feedback and pointing out weaknesses (areas for further development) is much more difficult than we expected, especially in the case of experienced teachers;
- 2 The whole procedure needs much more time and resources than we were prepared for. Also, evaluators, all working as teachers themselves, face significant problems in assembling the schedule for observations;
- 3 The school principals, although very interested in the process, claim to have no administrative resources to recognize the high results of their teachers.

Four basic principles were found to be important in facilitating further development of process:

- 1 The evaluation should be absolutely voluntary on the part of the teacher. Approval of the school administration should be also asked in every case;
- 2 The result of the evaluation will be announced only to the teacher. The results will be

- available to other parties only with the permission of the teacher;
- 3 Expectations should be clear. The observable criteria and observation procedure shall be available to the teacher before he/she agrees to be evaluated;
  - 4 Meaningful feedback should be given. The results of the evaluation should be introduced to each teacher in both written and oral form and in a meaningful content.

Participant satisfaction among teachers and observers was extremely high. Most expressed the importance of standards-based evaluation as an *attention-director*. The impact of our initiative was considerable both vertically and horizontally. Interest in participating in further evaluations increased significantly, and on two occasions, parents asked us to carry out the evaluation of teachers. Also, both municipal and ministry level educational officials were highly interested in our results. A further outcome of our pilot project is that the general readiness to hand over the qualification assessment to non-governmental organisations has increased also in the eyes of the public.

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**Notes**

- 1 Decree of Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, 2, Published 27.12.2003.
- 2 See paper by Tatjana Vonta in this volume for more details.

## Quality and Regulation in Early Childhood Care and Education: A Study of the Impact of the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations (1996) on the Quality of Early Childhood Services in Ireland

Mary O’Kane

*“Child care quality depends on child care regulation as plants depend on water. An insufficient amount guarantees problems, but an excessive amount may also be problematic.” (Gormley, 1999)*

### Introduction

In 1996, the first legislative control over early education services in Ireland came into place in the form of the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations<sup>1</sup>. The main research hypothesis of this study was that the implementation of the Regulations would impact on the quality of early childhood services in Ireland, from the point of view of both structural and process variables.

Baseline data, gathered in 1994 and 1995 as part of the IEA Preprimary Project<sup>2</sup>, was used to investigate the changes in quality of provision before the implementation of the Regulations, and six years after their implementation in 2002. The methodology of the present study involved revisiting a sub-sample of the original IEA Preprimary Project national sample, undertaking structured observations, and administering questionnaires to teachers and supervisors. The study also sought to investigate the attitudes of both Pre-school Officers and Supervisors towards the Regulations.

A number of key issues emerged from the research. Most importantly, improvements were found in the quality of the pre-school provision in the present study as compared to that of the original study, although it is not clear the extent to which these improvements relate directly to the Regulations. Further details of the study can be found in O’Kane, M. (2004a; 2004b).

This paper looks particularly at the tension identified during the research in the relationship between regulation and quality provision. It also presents the views of the Supervisors and Pre-school Officers questioned in the study about the practicalities of working with the Regulations.

### What is Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECE)?

Irish and international research has consistently demonstrated the value of high quality ECE, both to individual children and to society as a whole. It can lead both to improved



performance throughout school years (Sylva and Wiltshire, 1993) and to later social benefits which persist through to adulthood (Kellaghan and Greany, 1993; Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997). These effects have been shown to be particularly strong in educationally disadvantaged children. Quality ECCE also benefits parents and the wider community and has an important role in combating stress and family exclusion, particularly within families experiencing poverty and disadvantage (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 1999).

Following on from such research, there has been a growing concern with translating these positive messages into practice. Vernon and Smith (1994:17) advise us that this trend of taking research findings in ECCE and putting them into practice has led to *"attempts to identify the constituents of quality and trying to ensure that services are assessed according to developed criteria."* However, there had always been difficulty in defining quality in the context of ECCE. What is quality? The term is often used with an assumption that stakeholders know what it means, and have a shared understanding of what it means. This is not necessarily true.

Horgan and Douglas (2001:119) remind us that individual circumstances and perspectives will influence any definition of quality. They advise that *"concepts of quality are reflective of the particular mixture of socio-historical and political perspectives within any given culture."* Moss and Penn (1996:8) support this view, telling us that *"quality is an essentially relative and dynamic concept...subject to different perspectives, understandings and meanings."* They suggest that quality can be found through the self-reflection of practitioners and services in ECCE, in partnership with the other stakeholders such as parents, children themselves, and the wider community.

Perhaps the aim should not be to reach one definition of quality in ECCE, but to understand that it means different things to different people. This may partly explain the difficulty in evaluating quality in practical terms, particularly when putting the Regulations into practice.

### **The Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 1996**

In 1996, the *Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations* were introduced under Part VII of the Child Care Act 1991. The Regulations cover the various types of pre-school provision catering for children under six years who are not attending school. The Regulations focus very much on the structural aspects of settings and do not regulate quality in terms of process variables. They cover areas such as: Development of Child; First-aid; Adult/child Ratios; Class Sizes; Premises and Facilities; Equipment and Materials; Food; Safety Measures; and Insurance (Department of Health, 1996). They have been criticised, particularly in terms of exclusions, and areas which they do not cover, such as staff

training. However, their development was seen as an exercise in compromise, and a first step in regulating the area.

### **The Relationship between Regulation and Quality**

During the literature review phase of this study, a tension in the relationship between regulation and quality was identified. On the one hand, there is the view that standards are synonymous with quality (Kelly, 1999; The National Research Council, 2001), while others are concerned that regulation can result in an emphasis on minimum standards (European Commission Network on Children, 1996; Hayes, 2002a). Although these are not directly opposing viewpoints and they share much common ground, it is important to note this ongoing debate surrounding the relationship between quality and regulation.

The National Research Council (2001) advise that the regulation of child care is critical. They state that there is a “*clear and unequivocal*” relationship between regulation and quality. This view is supported by a large body of research (Phillips *et al.*, 1992; Philipson *et al.*, 1997; Phillips *et al.*, 2001), which has found that US states with stricter child care regulations produce higher quality care, on average, than states with less stringent regulations. Tietze *et al.* (1996) reported similar findings in Europe.

Kelly (1999) suggested that the introduction of regulation in Ireland had led to certain difficulties. However he advised that “*the standards set out in the regulations represent a minimum acceptable threshold below which it would simply not be credible to go, if we are serious about safeguarding the health, safety and welfare of pre-school children.*” (Kelly, 1999:6)

This approach to adherence to regulations is not unique. Peter Baldock (2001), in his book *Regulating Early Years Services* advises that in the UK, there is a high degree of correlation between standards and quality. He suggests that a willingness to meet standards “*is evidence of a disposition to achieve a quality of care and education.*” (Baldock, 2001:55). There appears to be consensus that inspection and monitoring of the regulations has a positive effect on the experience of ECCE for young children, even if this results in the closure of some services which cannot meet the requirements.

Baldock warns, however, about the dangers of focusing too much on “*policing*” the system rather than undertaking inspections in a supportive manner. This view is supported by Dahlberg *et al.* (1999), who suggest that the emphasis on measuring quality has mistakenly focused on standardising and controlling the environment. Goodfellow (2001) also proposes that “*box-ticking*” no longer adequately addresses the dimensions of quality within the field of ECCE.

Other researchers have spoken of their fears that regulations will become standards which providers meet, but do not try to move beyond. Speaking of the US situation, Heidemann (Heidemann 1989, cited in Gormley, 1999) put forward her concerns that a regulatory floor for minimum standards in ECCE could become a ceiling, resulting in a stagnation in standards. Similar fears have been articulated with respect to developments in ECCE in Ireland. For example, Nóirín Hayes, speaking at the National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA) Annual Conference in 2002, stressed the need to debate the issue of quality, and the need to move beyond seeking quality of structural elements (Hayes, 2002b). She proposed that the search for quality should be a "*never ending journey*" with quality being constantly discussed, debated and created. With this in mind, it is important to note that quality initiatives have been set up by groups such as the IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation and the NCNA for their members. These look not only at the static variables of quality but also examine the dynamic variables such as the interpersonal relationships within the setting, and focus on an ongoing reflection on quality.

In summary, differences of opinion exist on the nature of the relationship between regulation and quality. Should regulation ensure that services are meeting an acceptable standard, or should it encourage providers to strive to raise standards? Siraj-Blatchford and Wong (1999) tell us that the objectivist approach, which defines quality as a collection of measurable characteristics, can be criticised because of a lack of cross-cultural validity. For example, they cite the Japanese *Yochien*, and the Reggio Emilia Programme as examples of high quality ECCE programmes which do not follow standards traditional in the UK, such as low adult-child ratios. However, they also advise that the relativist approach, which acknowledges the importance of multiple perspectives and the dynamic nature of quality, is limited by issues of practicality. It is difficult to establish standards of quality while also allowing for subjectivity and dynamism. These issues will continue to be debated. This debate is part of the process of continually working to achieve the best possible standards of care and education for young children.

### **Study Findings: Implementing the Regulations**

As part of this study, a small scale investigation was undertaken into the views of Pre-school Supervisors<sup>3</sup>, and Pre-school Officers<sup>1</sup> on the implementation of the Regulations. Questionnaires were completed by ten Supervisors and four Pre-school Officers. It is important to note that with such a small sample it is not possible to generalise, however the data provides evidence as to the views of these two individual groups.

### **Questions on the Inspection Process**

Both Pre-school Officers (all four) and Supervisors (eight out of 10) found the inspection process helpful in terms of achieving the standards set in the Regulations, in that it helped them to focus on the requirements of the Regulations and reminded them of minimum standards and quality recommendations.

The two Supervisors who stated that they had not found the process helpful both felt that the inspection was overly concerned with structural aspects of quality, without enough emphasis on the experience of the children in the setting. This was in direct conflict with the view expressed by the four Pre-school Officers that they spent most time at an inspection focusing on adult-child interactions, and programmes for child development. However, it was noted that the inspection process is in many ways confined by the Regulations. Most Pre-school Officers use a checklist to record their observations on an inspection visit, which is based on the structural elements covered by the Regulations. While they are making note of these 'fixed' aspects of a service, they are also observing and interpreting the general interactions and relationships. However, the structural elements that are regulated are the most obvious elements being examined. These would also be the elements that the Pre-school Officers are obliged to report on.

### **Standards Set by the Regulations**

When asked about areas which they found particularly difficult to comply with, Supervisors highlighted issues relating to the premises, for example, the availability of hot water and adequate toilet facilities. These areas are particularly difficult for settings on school premises, or on rented premises, to control. Pre-school Officers noted that compliance with adult-child ratios and space requirements were causing difficulties for some services.

Both groups were asked if there were any particular areas which the Regulations do not cover, that should be covered. Supervisors mentioned the areas of training and child development. The Pre-school Officers suggested that the Regulations could be improved on in many ways. A registration system was mentioned by all four Pre-school Officers as one very necessary improvement. This may reflect the view that a registration system – with avenues for de-registration – could be used to give more power to the inspection system. The Pre-school Officers also suggested that the Development of Child section of the Regulations needed to be further elaborated. The issue of staff training was highlighted by all four as an important area. It was felt that a specified level of training should be necessary for a given percentage of staff, as services with well-trained staff provided *“a consistently better quality of experience for the children”*.

### **The Role of the Pre-school Officer**

Pre-school Officers saw their role very much as that of assisting quality improvement, rather than just confirming that standards were being met. They believed in encouraging services to achieve standards necessary, and saw the legal route as the last option. However, they felt that they have to be firm when necessary. Three of the four specifically mentioned that they felt that services do appreciate that their role is to give advice as well as check on minimum standards.

However, only four of the Supervisors felt without reservation that the Preschool Officer role encompassed both confirming standards and quality improvement. Receiving no feedback on the day of inspection and inconsistencies in approach were highlighted by Supervisors as being an issue. It was also suggested that a greater number of Pre-school Officers should be trained in ECCE. These mirror concerns outlined by providers, organisations (O’Kane, 2004a) and in the *National Childcare Strategy* (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 1999).

The need for consistency is stressed by providers; in direct conflict with the need for a consistent approach however, in that each service has a different approach. The inspection process involves a flexible approach to the interpretation of the Regulations, while also ensuring that a fair and equitable service is provided. This very much requires professional skill and judgement on the part of the individual inspectors. Linking back to the area of training in ECCE, a high level of professional knowledge would enable the Pre-school Officers to maintain a flexible approach to the interpretation of the Regulations, while also ensuring that an equitable service is provided.

#### **Ranking of Areas Covered by the Regulations**

The Supervisors and Pre-school Officers were presented with a list of 27 areas covered by the Regulations, and asked to rank their “Top Five” areas in terms of importance for improving quality in ECCE. Although there was a spread of opinion, both groups focused on “Adult-child ratios”, “Development of child”, and “Premises and Facilities” as being of importance. Although both sample sizes are small, the level of agreement both within and between groups is noteworthy.

#### **Ranking of Areas Not Covered by the Regulations**

Both groups were then asked to rank a list of ten areas, not covered by the Regulations, which current literature on ECCE has suggested are important in terms of achieving quality in ECCE<sup>5</sup>. Both groups reported that it was very difficult to make distinctions between the ten areas, however there was some consensus within groups.

Supervisors highlighted “Well-Trained Staff” and “Good Staff Pay and Conditions”. The lowest scoring items when ranked by the Supervisors were: “Registration of all ECCE Services” and “Parental Feedback on Inspections”.

The Pre-school Officers highlighted “Registration of all ECCE Services” and “Well-Trained Staff”. These rankings confirm the focus on the areas of Registration and Training which were mentioned by all four in the previous question on aspects which should be included in the Regulations. The lowest average scores when ranked by the Pre-school Officers were “Good Staff Pay and Conditions” and “Self-regulation”.

When comparing rankings, it was noted that “Good Staff Pay and Conditions,” which was ranked highest with Supervisors, was ranked lowest with the Pre-school Officers. Also “Registration of Services,” which was ranked highest by Pre-school Officers, was ranked lowest with Supervisors. It was interesting to note that neither Supervisors nor Pre-school Officers ranked “Parental Feedback” highly. This highlights the tendency to overlook the parental perspective on the inspection process.

It was also noted that Supervisors ranked “Well-Trained Staff” as the most important non-Regulated area in terms of achieving quality, followed by “Good Staff Pay and Conditions”. The Supervisors would be particularly aware of the need for good pay and conditions to reward these trained staff, who they feel are of importance to ensure quality in their services. It is interesting to note that while the Pre-school Officers recognised the need for well-trained staff, they did not highlight the need for good pay and conditions to reflect this well-trained workforce.

### **General Comments**

The Pre-school Officers all mentioned that inspections on their own are not enough to improve the quality of services. This view appeared to be shared by Supervisors, many of whom felt that the inspection process should focus on more than structural aspects of quality. Members of both groups commented that financial assistance must be provided to assist the process of quality improvement.

Government policy in areas related to children was also mentioned as being important if the quality of ECCE is to be improved.

### **Discussion**

Definitions of quality and how it can be measured are clearly important issues within the study of ECCE. A review of current literature has identified a growing concern with the issue of quality, and an emerging argument that quality is not a fixed, objective standard. The literature also supports the idea that achieving quality is an ongoing process.

Research has linked regulatory standards with the maintenance of quality in terms of both structural and process variables. However, the danger of focusing too much on enforcing regulations rather than undertaking inspections in a supportive manner is also acknowledged. The tension between using regulations as minimum standards, and the need to continually strive for greater quality, was also outlined. Perhaps a more participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance could be developed in Ireland. Both staff and parents could be involved in the process of monitoring. The inspection process could also be further developed to ensure both monitoring of adherence to regulations and a supportive element to encourage services to reach higher quality levels.

The findings from the Supervisor and Pre-school Officer interviews provided an interesting insight into both groups' understanding of this relationship. They suggest that regulation and inspection are just one part of the process of quality improvement. Improved training, both pre-service and in-service, and better resources are others. The Pre-school Officers all mentioned that inspections on their own are not enough to improve quality of services, this view appeared to be shared by Supervisors. Both groups also mentioned that the financial assistance that has become available since implementation of the Regulations may have had a greater impact on quality than the Regulations themselves.

Finally, the Regulations are under review at national level at present. It has to be noted though, that the review is long overdue. The review group had expected to publish its recommendations during 2003. However, at the end of 2003, the report has not yet been finalised. Considering that the Regulations were seen as a first step in developing a quality ECCE service for Irish children, it is disappointing that the review has been delayed in this way. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the review committee, involving the people who will need to implement the legislation, and the people directly involved in providing ECCE, will produce balanced recommendations.

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#### Notes

- 1 Hereafter the Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations (1996) will be referred to as "the Regulations".
- 2 This was a large cross-national study which investigated the quality of care and education that children from various countries received at four years of age. It then reviewed the transition for these children into primary school education. High/Scope Educational Foundation was the international co-ordinating centre of the project.
- 3 The term "Supervisor" is used throughout this report for consistency, when referring to the Supervisor or Manager of any given settings, although it is acknowledged that in practice a variation of titles are used.
- 4 The term "Pre-school Officer" is used throughout this paper for consistency, when referring to the Pre-school Officers or Inspectors, although it is acknowledged that a variation of titles are used.
- 5 The list of ten areas, not covered by the Regulations, were: Well-trained staff; Good pay and conditions; Adequate financing of services; A national policy framework; A curricular framework; Equal access to affordable care; Registration of services; Parental feedback on inspections; Self-regulation; Adult-child interactions.

## **The Relationship between Preverbal Behaviours and Language Development: Investigating Symbolic Play and Language Development in Children with Down Syndrome**

**Ciara O'Toole**

### **Introduction**

It is well established that preverbal behaviours such as eye contact, turn taking and joint attention underpin the development of spoken language. Symbolic play has also been indicated to underlie language development and is frequently examined by speech and language therapists when assessing the overall development of young children. Play is likely to be the dominant medium for early childhood development and education, therefore, correlations between symbolic play and cognitive skills such as language have important contributions to make to the planning of intervention programmes and for predicting later competence in communication and social abilities (Cicchetti *et al.*, 1994). This study set out to explore whether symbolic play in a cross section of children with Down syndrome would produce similar correspondences to language as reported for normally developing children.

### **Language and Symbolic Play in Normally Developing Children**

Jean Piaget's (Piaget, 1962) observations of symbolic behaviours prompted a number of correlational and longitudinal studies, which have reported compelling links between symbolic play and language (Ungerer and Sigman, 1984; Ogura, 1991; Brown *et al.*, 2001). McCune (1995) observed parallel changes between the stages of language development and levels of pretend play in normally developing children aged between 8 and 24 months. Children who demonstrated specific symbolic play skills were more likely to show language milestones that were assumed to require the same underlying representational skills. For example, independent sequential/combinational play was significantly associated with the onset of word combinations. Although not taken to be causally related, the parallel developments in play and language were explained as deriving from a common underlying capacity for cognitive representation.

### **Language and Symbolic Play in Children with Down Syndrome**

Children with Down syndrome are particularly interesting as they are etiologically homogenous, detectable from birth and form the largest identifiable group of people with a learning disability. These children are often reported to progress through similar stages and sequences of language and play maturity as normally developing children, albeit at a slower pace with prolonged developmental transitions in each domain. It is argued that true connections and discontinuities between aspects of development are easier to

demonstrate in these children (Beeghly *et al.*, 1990; Cicchetti *et al.*, 1994). In addition, children with Down syndrome have exceptionally delayed expressive language development even in relation to their mental age. It would therefore be interesting to establish the relationship between this delay and other aspects of symbolic functioning.

A previous study by Beeghly *et al.* (1990) found remarkable parallels between symbolic play and expressive language in children with Down syndrome. For example, pre-linguistic children did not engage in symbolic play, while children who were beginning to combine simple symbolic schemes during play were also beginning to combine words. Other relevant studies include Shimada (1990), Fewell *et al.*, (1997) and Sigman and Ruskin (1999), who all reported significant correlations between symbolic play and the early stages of language development in children with Down syndrome.

A difficulty in comparing the results of previous studies lies in the varying understanding of the term 'symbolic play.' For example, a study by Cunningham *et al.* (1985) identified a significant relationship between expressive language scores from the Reynell Developmental Language Scales and pretend play scores from the Symbolic Play Test (SPT) (Lowe and Costello, 1988) in children with Down syndrome. Despite its name, Lewis *et al.* (2000) hold that the SPT actually assesses functional play, or appropriate play with toys that are physically similar to everyday objects. Functional play relates to conceptual knowledge of the purpose of everyday objects (e.g. that a biscuit is for eating). Conversely, symbolic play is defined as play in which one thing is substituted for another, something is attributed with a property that it does not have, or reference is made to something which is not present (Baron-Cohen, 1987). Symbolic play is held to reflect both symbolising ability and conceptual knowledge (e.g., that a block could be used to represent a biscuit and that a teddy could 'eat' this 'biscuit') and is considered to have closer links to language (Lewis *et al.*, 1992; Lewis *et al.* 2000).

One assessment that claims to measure true symbolic play is the Test of Pretend Play (ToPP), developed by Lewis and Boucher (1997). In a study of normally developing children between one and six years, Lewis *et al.* (2000) found that symbolic play scores from the ToPP were more strongly correlated with language scores than functional play scores from the SPT were. Once age was partialled out, symbolic play and language skills were significantly correlated with each other but were no longer related to functional play or non-verbal abilities. The ToPP was held to provide a reliable assessment of conceptual and symbolic skills that also underlie language. As yet, there are no published results using this test with children with Down syndrome.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants consisted of twenty-one children with Down syndrome (eleven girls and ten boys) ranging in age from thirty months (two years six months) to ninety-five months (seven years eleven months) (mean 61.7 months, SD 18.7). The children came from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds and were recruited through their contact with a service for individuals with learning disability based in the south of Ireland covering urban and rural areas.

### **Materials**

The following tests were administered:

- 1 The Nonverbal subtests from the British Ability Scales - second edition (BAS- II). (Elliott, *et al*, 1996);
- 2 Preschool Language Scale- third edition (PLS-3) (UK). (Zimmerman, *et al.*, 1997);
- 3 The Test of Pretend Play (Lewis and Boucher 1997).

The Test of Pretend Play (ToPP) was designed to measure various aspects of symbolic play such as object substitution and whether the child can sequence symbolic actions into meaningful scripted play. The items are organised into four sections, which are described and illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1: Examples of Targeted Symbolic Play produced by Children**(adapted from Lewis *et al.* 2000)

Section:	Materials	Type of Play	Example
i. Self with everyday object	Bowl and spoon	Reference to an absent object	Eats 'food'
II: Toy and non-representational object	Doll and top	One substitution	Doll drinks from a 'bottle'
	Doll, counter and box	Two substitutions	Doll puts 'letter' in 'letterbox'
	Doll, stick, tub and cloth	Three substitutions	Doll rows 'boat' on water (cloth) with oar (stick)
	Doll, reel, board, box, cotton wool	Four substitutions	Doll uses steering wheel (reel) of car (box) on road (board) with smoke (cotton wool)
III: Representational toy alone	Teddy	Reference to an absent object	Teddy eats 'ice cream'
	Teddy	Property attribution	Teddy rubs tummy as if sick
	Teddy	Substitution	Teddy is a 'monkey'
	Teddy	Script	Teddy gets out of 'bed', 'brushes teeth' and 'gets dressed'
IV: Self Alone	None	Substitution	Child is a 'rabbit'
	None	Reference to an absent object	Child reads a 'book'
	None	Property attribution	Child 'cries' to show s/he is 'sad'
	None	Script	Child goes in 'car' to 'school', 'plays with toys' and has a 'snack'

**Procedure**

Each child was tested individually over two thirty to forty minute periods in familiar clinic rooms. The children were initially assessed using the BAS-II and the PLS-3 (UK). Then the ToPP was presented and videotaped.

**The ToPP**

The nonverbal structured version was administered to all the children, in order to reduce the linguistic cues available. The test was preceded by a warm up session to familiarise the child with the test and to establish whether the child has the capacity to engage in symbolic play. Then the child's ability to play symbolically was assessed by eliciting original symbolic play using nonverbal means such as gestures or pointing, and short phrases such as "*Jessica do it*" or "*show me*" to encourage the child to produce his/her own play and/or modelling symbolic play for the child to copy.

## Results

Performances on the play tests were scored from the video recordings and were also analysed by a speech and language therapist unrelated to the project. The level of inter-observer agreement was high at 94%. The raw scores on the standardised tests were converted to age equivalents as directed in the test manuals. On the BAS-II, all but four children had an ability score that produced an unspecified nonverbal age equivalent of 'less than 2 years 6 months'. Therefore, the special nonverbal composite score (SNC, a standard score based on chronological age from two subtests, mean = 100; SD = 15) was used in the analysis and is recorded in a separate table alongside expressive and receptive language standard scores from the PLS-3 (UK) (mean= 100 SD = 15). Table 2 summarises the test performances. The children were divided into three age groups to examine the effects of age on task performance.

**Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Language and Play Age Equivalent Scores; Special Nonverbal Composite Scores, Expressive and Receptive Language Standard Scores for each Age Group (range of each score is given in brackets).**

(CA= Chronological age; ELA= Expressive Language Age Equivalent; RLA= Receptive Language Age Equivalent; TLA= Total Language Age Equivalent; A.E.= Age Equivalent; ELSS= Expressive Language Standard Score; RLSS= Receptive Language Standard Score)

**\*N= 5 for this group as two children were older than standardised sample norms**

Age Groups	CA (months)		ELA (months)		RLA (months)		TLA (months)		ToPP A.E. (months)		BAS-II (SNC)		ELSS		RLSS	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
2-3 yr olds (N= 6)	39 (32-47)	5.6	20.2 (14-30)	6.6	20.2 (15-30)	6	20.7 (15-31)	6.5	25.3 (17-35)	7.4	68 (61-75)	4.9	68.2 (60-77)	6.6	67.7 (60-76)	5.7
4-5 yr olds (N= 8)	61 (49-71)	8.5	25.4 (14-33)	6.1	25.75 (16-31)	5.1	27.5 (23-33)	3.5	32 (21-45)	8.3	61.9 (51-77)	9.9	50.6 (50-55)	1.8	50.6 (50-54)	1.4
6-7 yr olds (N=7)	82 (72-95)	7.9	32.6 (25-40)	5.3	31.6 (23-41)	5.6	32.6 (24-41)	5.3	37.6 (29-45)	6	57.9 (51-77)	9.1	50* (No variance)	1.8*	50* (No variance)	1.4*

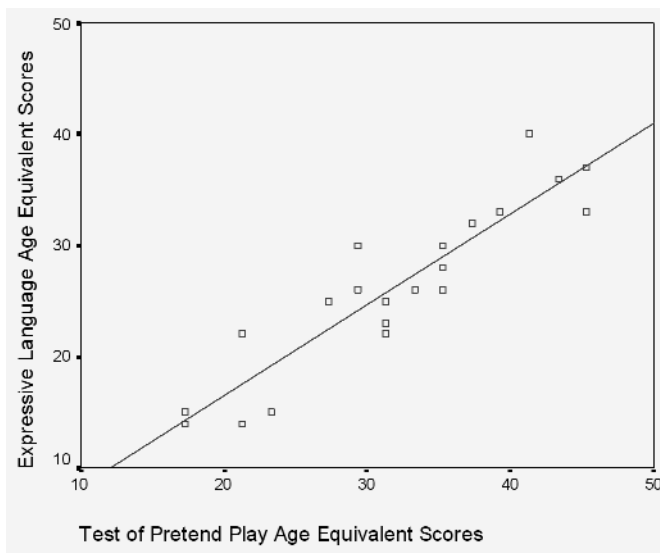
As expected in children with Down syndrome, symbolic play and language skills were significantly delayed in relation to their chronological age. Although age equivalent and raw scores on symbolic and language tests increased with age, the SNC and language *standard* scores tended to decrease, in line with previous findings of a decrease in age appropriate intellectual skills as children with Down syndrome get older (Wishart and Duffy 1990). Age equivalent on the ToPP was significantly higher than receptive and expressive language age equivalents ( $t(20) = 7.56$   $p < .001$ ;  $t(20) = 8.01$   $p < .001$  respectively). This demonstrates that a deficit in symbolising ability does not affect

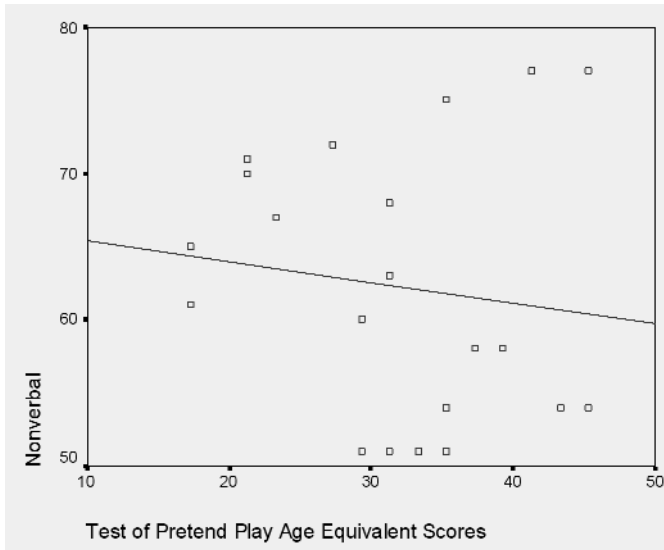
language and symbolic play equally in the group with Down syndrome. Nonverbal standard scores were significantly higher than expressive and receptive language standard scores, ( $t(18) = 3.2$   $p < .001$ ;  $t(18) = 9.96$   $p < .001$  respectively).

### **Symbolic Play, Language and Nonverbal Relations**

A Pearson's correlation matrix was completed for all the variables to measure associations between performances on the different tests. ToPP age equivalents were significantly correlated with expressive and receptive language age equivalents ( $r > .83$ ,  $p < .001$  in both cases). Nonverbal standard scores were significantly correlated with both language standard scores ( $r > .58$ ,  $p < 0.01$  in both cases), albeit less than language and symbolic correlations. However, nonverbal measures were not related to ToPP ( $r = -.19$   $p$  NS). Figure 1 and 2 provide graphic representations of the relationship between the tests.

**Figure 1: Scatterplot for Expressive Language and ToPP Age Equivalents**



**Figure 2: Scatterplot for Nonverbal Standard Scores and ToPP Age Equivalents**

In order to observe the association between each task independent of chronological age, partial correlations were carried out, controlling for the effects of age. As already outlined, the SNC and language standard scores were entered for correlation, but standard scores were not available for ToPP, so age equivalent were used for correlations involving this task.

**Table 3: Partial Correlation Coefficients of Age Equivalents Controlling for Chronological Age**

	RLA	ToPP (A.E.)
ELA	.791**	.797***
RLA	-	.603**
ToPP	-	-

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*  $p < .05$

**Table 4: Partial Correlation Coefficients of Standard Scores Controlling for Chronological Age**

(N=19)	ELSS	RLSS	ToPP A.E.
BAS-II (SNC)	.303	.269	.346

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*  $p < .05$



Partial correlations revealed that ToPP and language measures significantly correlated with each other. However, the associations are reduced. Non-verbal scores were no longer associated with language standard scores and remained unrelated to symbolic play. From these results, it appears that symbolic play is particularly related to language in children with Down syndrome and is independent of nonverbal functioning.

Further correlations were carried out for the three age groups to investigate whether the associations changed with age. Spearman's Rho correlations were used in this analysis due to the reduced number in each group.

**Table 5: Correlations between Age Equivalent for Different Age Groups**

		ELA	RLA	ToPP A.E.
<b>2-3 year olds</b> (N=6)	<b>C.A.</b>	.750	.882*	.485
	<b>ELA</b>	-	.956**	.897*
	<b>RLA</b>	-	-	.809*
	<b>ToPP A.E.</b>	-	-	-
<b>4-5 year olds</b> (N=8)	<b>C.A.</b>	.747*	.383	.578
	<b>ELA</b>	-	.749*	.914**
	<b>RLA</b>	-	-	.886**
	<b>ToPP A.E.</b>	-	-	-
<b>6-7 year olds</b> (N=7)	<b>C.A.</b>	.857*	.523	.714
	<b>ELA</b>	-	.631	.786*
	<b>RLA</b>	-	-	.324
	<b>ToPP A.E.</b>	-	-	-

\*\*p < 0.01 \* p < 0.05

**Table 6: Correlations between Standard Scores for Different Age Groups**

		CA	ELSS	RLSS	ToPP A.E.
<b>2-3 year olds</b> (N=6)	<b>BAS-II (SNC)</b>	.493	1***	.986***	.928**
<b>4-5 year olds</b> (N=8)	<b>BAS-II (SNC)</b>	-.307	.249	.047	-.012
<b>6-7 year olds</b>	<b>BAS-II (SNC)</b>	.051	(cannot be computed as one variable is constant)	(cannot be computed as one variable is constant)	-.154

\*\*p < 0.01 \* p < 0.05

Although there were small numbers in each age group, the results highlighted interesting patterns of associations. ToPP measures were significantly related to receptive and expressive language and nonverbal scores in the youngest group. In the middle group, language measures were significantly associated with performance on the ToPP only. In the oldest group, ToPP scores were significantly associated with expressive language only. This pattern highlights a gradual dissociation of language from other cognitive skills, but due to the small numbers involved, further investigation is warranted.

## Discussion

### The Relationship between Symbolic Play, Language and Nonverbal Measures

The results reveal that, as predicted, symbolic play and language development were significantly correlated, suggesting that they draw on representational capacities in a similar way. These findings are consistent with those of previous studies of children with Down syndrome (Cunningham *et al.*, 1985; Beeghly *et al.*, 1990; Fewell *et al.*, 1997; Sigman and Ruskin, 1999) as well as normally developing children (McCune, 1995; Lewis *et al.*, 2000). When the effects of age were partialled out, symbolic play remained significantly correlated with language but neither skill was related to nonverbal ability. Although previous studies have found associations between *general* cognitive and symbolic abilities (e.g. Beeghly *et al.*, 1990), the findings from this study suggest that these links are due to the conceptual and symbolic associations between symbolic and *verbal* cognitive skills only.

### Change over Age

The pattern of correlations observed changed over age and was linked to the developmental level of the children. In the 2-3 year olds, there were strong correlations between symbolic play, language and nonverbal measures. In 4-5 year olds, language was associated with symbolic play only. Weaker associations between symbolic and language measures were observed in the oldest group, which corresponded to a mean language age-equivalent of 32.6 months, the age at which abstract grammatical forms emerge in normally developing children (Bates *et al.*, 1987). The gradual dissociation of higher-level language skills from symbolic skills in children with Down syndrome was also reported by Beeghly *et al.* (1990) and in normally developing children by Lyytinen *et al.* (1999). It may be that early language acquisition is integrated with other areas of development, particularly symbolic play, rather than being an entirely separate ability. However, as the child gets older and language skills become more sophisticated, language starts to diverge from underlying representational skills.

### Performances across Tests

Although a strong relationship between symbolic play and language was observed, the children had significantly higher play than language scores, and thus, did not have an

equal degree of deficit in each domain. Beeghly *et al.* (1990), Shimada (1990) and Sigman and Ruskin (1999) also found that children with Down syndrome have advanced symbolic skills in play over language domains. Therefore, it is not symbolic functioning per se that impedes language acquisition in this population. Considering that the nonverbal and symbolic play scores of the children with Down syndrome were significantly higher than their language scores, the findings confirm that they have considerable difficulties with language. There is likely to be no single explanation for the language difficulties observed in children with Down syndrome. Aberrant joint attention and nonverbal requesting features have been linked to the expressive and receptive language difficulties in children with Down syndrome (Smith and von Tetzchner, 1986; Mundy *et al.*, 1995). Sigman and Ruskin (1999) maintain that auditory memory, motivation and environmental factors seem particularly linked to difficulties in language acquisition among children with Down syndrome and should be a primary focus of intervention.

### **Implications of the Current Study**

As there were small numbers involved in the study, as correlational analysis does not indicate causality and as all the children presented with Down syndrome, conclusions and generalisations from this study are tentative. However, some important implications in terms of assessment and intervention are indicated.

### **Assessment of Symbolic Play**

Valid and reliable prelinguistic assessments could lead to earlier identification of children with communication delays/disorders and to the provision of early intervention to support later language learning (McCathren *et al.*, 1996). The results highlight the validity of using the ToPP to provide an indication of the symbolic capacities that are related to a child's language skills. In addition, as this task does not require the ability to use language, it is suitable as a clinical tool for assessing a child's representational skills when language has not yet developed or is delayed.

As assessment of cognitive abilities plays a major role in the life of young children with learning difficulties, and as many decisions, particularly on educational placement, are based on the outcomes of these tests, play may be considered as a context for assessment. The natural, relaxed atmosphere of play as a context for assessment places fewer demands on the child and provides more chances to demonstrate competencies than in more traditional assessments contexts (Fewell *et al.*, 1997; Pellegrini, 2001).

### **Early Intervention**

Intervention through symbolic play is often argued to provide opportunities to practice and generalize newly acquired linguistic, cognitive and social skills that are child-, rather than adult-initiated. Building on their strengths in symbolic functioning, these skills could

generalise to other areas, including language, particularly in the early stages where symbolic play appears to develop alongside language. "Theoretically if both systems are dependent on an underlying general structure, stimulation of one system should lead to improvement of the other as a result of changes in the underlying structure." (McCune-Nicolich, 1981:795) In a family-centred approach to intervention, pretend play episodes involving parents and other family members can be encouraged to promote joint attention by providing an exchange in which the child is fully involved, emotionally and intellectually. This ensures that the speech and language heard and used appropriately matches the events that hold the child's immediate attention and the child may be more willing and able to attempt expressive communication (Mogford-Bevan 1994).

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Longitudinal studies are much more likely to throw light on the relationships between language and play than cross-sectional studies, as they offer the opportunity to examine structural and temporal factors that might contribute to the role that early impairments play in causing later deficits (Bishop 1997). Appropriately designed intervention studies to examine the effects of development in symbolic play on other areas of cognition, particularly language, would help clarify the importance of symbolic skills as an area of intervention.

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## Development of Standards and Measurement Tools for Quality Assurance Systems in Australian Children's Services

Denise Taylor

### Introduction

In this paper, I will provide you with an overview of the development of quality standards and measurement tools for Quality Assurance systems in Australian children's services.

Australia is the first country in the world to develop national child care Quality Assurance systems that are initiated, funded and supported by Government. These are the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) for long day care centres, Family Day Care Quality Assurance (FDCQA) for family day care schemes and Outside School Hours Care (OSHCQA) for outside school hours care services.

Long day care centres in Australia provide formal care for children from birth to five years of age. The centres operate for a minimum of eight hours each day. Some centres operate longer hours or provide for the needs of particular workers, e.g. shift workers. Family day care schemes in Australia provide care for children aged birth to twelve in a carer's home. A local administrative coordination unit recruits and resources carers, and organises the placement of children with carers. Outside school hours care services provide care for school age children before and after school and during school vacations. Care is provided on school premises or in local facilities. Where care is not provided on the premises of the school that the child attends, the outside school hours care service puts into operation procedures for dropping off and/or collecting children.

Changes in utilisation of, and attitudes towards, child care in Australia have been significant over the last twenty years. In the early 1980s "*...child care was widely viewed as a worthwhile way to amuse children for a few hours per week while introducing them to the routines they would encounter at school, where the real learning would begin.*" (National Childcare Accreditation Council [NCAC], 1993: Foreword)

A number of factors set the stage for a change of attitude towards child care and provided an impetus for the development of Quality Assurance systems for children's services:

**First** of all, there has been an increase in the understanding of the significance of the early years in a child's life. Recent research on brain development has shown that quality child care enhances children's development and plays an important role in reducing criminal activity and poor health in later life. It is now widely accepted that we learn more in the first five years of life than in any other five-year period.

The **second** important impetus for the development of the Quality Assurance systems is that the number of Australian children being cared for outside their homes has greatly increased with the growth in the number of families in which both parents are working or, in the case of sole parents, where the parent is working.

The **third** important impetus for the development of the Quality Assurance systems is that:

*The average amount of time an individual child spends in care has grown. A child can spend up to 12,500 hours in child care before starting school, (based on attendance of 50 hours per week for 5 years): that's only 500 hours less than the child will spend in lessons during the whole 13 years of schooling. (NCAC,1993: Foreword).*

The National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC) was established in 1993 to administer the QIAS for long day care. In July 2001 NCAC commenced the administration of FDCQA. The administration of OSHCQA commenced in July 2003.

The aim of Quality Assurance (QA) in children's services is to ensure that children in care have positive experiences that foster all aspects of their development. QA focuses on quality outcomes for children and relationships between staff, children and their families. This is done by measuring the factors that determine quality to gauge the standard of care and education that actually exists in a particular service. QA is designed to build on and complement state and territory licensing regulations (where they exist), which generally provide a minimum standard of operation for services. Regulations cover a range of factors including space, equipment, staff-child ratios and staff qualifications.

The QA systems define quality as positive outcomes for children's learning and development. A quality child care service:

- Has a clear philosophy and goals, agreed between the staff, carers, management and the families, which guide all activities at the service;
- Appreciates, respects and fosters the individuality and the interdependence of all children, including children from diverse backgrounds and children who have additional needs;
- Considers the appropriateness of all experiences and activities affecting the children in relation to their development;
- Encourages families to become involved in the service and fosters the relationship between staff, carers and families so that they can support one another in their complementary roles.



These determining aspects of quality are broken down into Quality Areas, Principles and Indicators of Practice covering four main areas:

- Interactions and communications between staff, carers, children and families;
- Programs for day-to-day experiences and activities for children;
- Nutrition, health, safety and child protection;
- Service management and staff development.

In Australia, families on low and middle incomes receive assistance with child care fees from the Australian Government. Child Care Benefit is paid directly to parents accessing care in services participating in the QA systems administered by NCAC. So, while participation in the QA systems is not compulsory for services, as many parents need to offset the cost of child care with government assistance, most services need to participate in the QA systems in order to remain viable. Currently 4,473 long day care centres, 320 family day care schemes and 2,656 outside school hours care services are registered with the NCAC.

### **Development of Quality Assurance Systems**

There are three essential elements of effective QA systems:

- Public standards that have face validity;
- Maximum reliability and validity of Accreditation Decisions;
- Processes that promote continuing quality improvement.

### **Face Validity**

It is essential that QA systems be based on a theoretically sound set of standards developed by a panel of experts. It is also essential that there is consultation with the relevant field or profession on these standards and that a level of agreement is reached on the appropriateness of the standards.

Once agreement is reached, a standards document needs to be developed that clearly specifies these standards. Each of the NCAC's QA systems were developed by a working party with expertise in service delivery in the relevant service type and involved wide consultation with the relevant child care field. The QA standards documents (QIAS *Source Book*, 2001; OSHCQA *Quality Practices Guide*, 2003; FDCQA *Quality Practices Guide, Second Edition*, 2004) outline the Quality Areas, Principles and Indicators of Quality child care (All available at [www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)).

### **Maximum Reliability and Validity**

In order to ensure that Accreditation Decisions are reliable and consistent, it is essential that measurement error is minimised. To achieve this, it is important that data on quality care provided by the service is collected from a variety of perspectives, and that a confirmatory factor analysis is undertaken to ensure that the components of quality or factors, as specified in the standards document, are a good fit. That is that the indicators of quality relate well to their respective Principles and the Principles relate well to their respective Quality Areas. It is also important to undertake appropriate data analysis to calculate weightings that reflect the extent to which each standard (or Principle) contributes to its particular Quality Area. These weightings are used to calculate a *Composite Quality Profile* for each service.

For example, in the QIAS, data is collected from six perspectives: centre, director, staff, families, Validation and Moderation. In June 2002, a confirmatory analysis was undertaken by the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER). The confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the data collected by the NCAC had an excellent fit with the construct of quality defined by the 10 QIAS Quality Areas and the thirty-five Principles underlying these Quality Areas. Indeed, this quality construct accounts for 99% of the variance and co-variance in the data. The results of the measurement analyses were used to develop database protocols in relation to the weighting of each Principle, thus minimising measurement error. These protocols enable NCAC to calculate a reliable *Composite Quality Profile* for each service receiving an Accreditation decision.

### **Continuing Quality Improvement**

It is essential that continuing quality improvement is a focus for all services participating in QA systems. In the QIAS, FDCQA and OSHCQA, the standards documents help services to engage in an on-going process of self-study and improvement of their practices. Services participating in the QA systems are required to submit a *Self-study Report* outlining current achievements against the QA standards and plans for continuing improvement in each Quality Area. All participating services have access to timely training and advice on relevant resources to assist quality improvement.

### **How the Quality Assurance Systems Work**

All of the QA systems operate on a five-step process. The steps are:

- Step 1: Registration;
- Step 2: Self-study and Continuing Improvement;
- Step 3: Validation;
- Step 4: Moderation;
- Step 5: Accreditation Decision.

**Step 1: Registration**

New services are required to register with the NCAC before their application for Child Care Benefit will be considered by the Australian Government. When a service changes ownership or management, the new owner must complete a change of registration. Registration and participation in QA is necessary if a service is to continue to offer Child Care Benefit to families attending the service.

**Step 2: Self-study and Continuing Improvement**

On a regular and cyclical basis, each service makes a self-assessment of the quality of its practice through consultation with all staff and families at their service. The service evaluates the quality of its practice for each of the Quality Areas and Principles against the standards outlined by the NCAC (refer to *QIAS Source Book*, 2001; *OSHCQA Quality Practices Guide*, 2003; *FDCQA Quality Practices Guide, Second Edition*, 2004) (All available at [www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)). From such ongoing self-assessment, the service develops and implements a continuing cycle of quality improvement plans.

The results of this self-assessment are summarised in a *Self-study Report*. In completing the *Self-study Report*, the service will provide a rating of its own performance against the QA Principles. The service will have the opportunity to document aspects of current practices and outline its *Continuing Improvement Plan*. Accredited services are required to submit a *Self-study Report* to the NCAC every two-and-a-half years. The Australian Government funds a range of agencies to assist services participating in the QA systems. This may be in relation to self-study and continuing improvement and the delivery of quality services. Services provided by these agencies include telephone information, visits to services, training courses, lending resources and bookshops.

**Step 3: Validation**

A peer Validator, selected and trained by the NCAC, visits the service to validate its quality practices. Wherever possible, NCAC uses the preferred specialist knowledge areas indicated by the service in its *Self-study Report* when allocating a Validator to visit the service. Such specialist knowledge areas include indigenous children, community based services and rural services.

The Validator observes the service's care practices, sights any necessary service documentation and completes a *Validation Report*. Validators also collect the *Validation Surveys* completed by the director/staff/carers and families/children during the weeks prior to the Validation Visit, and return them to the NCAC together with the *Validation Report*. Depending on the size of the service, the Validator will spend anywhere from one day in a small long day care service with up to and including twenty-nine licensed places in regular use, to five days in a family day care scheme with over 601 equivalent full time places.

Following the Validation Visit, the service may complete a *Validation Evaluation Form* and return it to NCAC. This form allows the service to provide feedback to NCAC on the Validation Visit and to raise any concerns or issues for consideration by NCAC.

#### **Step 4: Moderation**

The process of Moderation helps to ensure that all services participating in the QA systems are treated consistently on a national basis. Moderators assess the quality of the service's practice, guided by information in the service's *Self-study Report*, the *Validation Surveys* and the *Validation Report*. Moderators also consider information from the service's *Validation Evaluation Form*, where available.

Moderators look at each service as a whole, identifying patterns of quality care within the service. A composite *Quality Profile* is compiled by NCAC from information in the service's *Self-study Report* and *Validation Surveys*, the *Validation Report* and the Moderation ratings. The *Profile* shows a composite of these various perspectives of service performance across the Quality Areas of the QA system, using protocols developed for the NCAC by the Australian Council of Educational Research. Moderators write a *Continuing Improvement Guide* for the service which focuses on quality improvement, based on the trends evident in the service's composite *Quality Profile*.

#### **Step 5: Accreditation Decision**

The Accreditation Decision is the final step in the QA system and is determined by the NCAC. To be accredited, a service must achieve a rating of Satisfactory or higher on all Quality Areas as detailed on the composite *Quality Profile*. Accredited services are required to prominently display their *Certificate of Accreditation* in the service. Services are also provided with a second certificate showing the service's composite *Quality Profile* and the names of service staff who participated in the QIAS process. This *Quality Profile Certificate* is for display at the discretion of the service.

An Accredited service is required to continue its self-study and continuing improvement cycle (see Step 2 above) until its next *Self-study Report* is due for submission. The Accreditation period is 2.5 years between submission of *Self-study Reports*. Services that do not meet the standard required for accreditation are required to submit another *Self-study Report* six months from the date of the NCAC Decision.

#### **Accreditation Decision Reviews**

Where a service is not satisfied with the Accreditation Decision made by the NCAC, they may apply to the Accreditation Decisions Review Committee for a review of that Decision. The Accreditation Decisions Review Committee (ADRC) is an independent body, appointed under Section 16 of the Child Care Act 1972, to review Accreditation Decisions made by

the NCAC following the receipt of a service's application to have an accreditation decision reviewed.

### **Achievements of the QA Systems – Measuring Success**

#### **Progress of Services Through the QA Systems**

QIAS – Total Registered Services on July 1<sup>st</sup> 2004: 4,473

FDCQA - Total Registered Services on July 1<sup>st</sup> 2004: 320

OSHCQA - Total Registered Services on July 1<sup>st</sup> 2004: 2,656

#### **Other Benefits of Implementing QA Systems**

The fact that Australia has funded and supported QA systems in children's services has brought a number of benefits to the early/middle childhood field:

- Community awareness of the work and worth of the childcare profession has been raised;
- Many resources are now much more accessible on a national basis due to interstate networking and sharing of ideas;
- There has been a national exchange of ideas relating to good practice. This means that a child care service on one side of the country can now benefit from the experience of a service on the other side of the country. In this way, much duplication of effort has been eliminated and good practice has been enhanced;
- Agencies outside the early childhood field are now targeting child care services and adapting their resources, kits, information and so on to the needs of children's services. This is particularly evident in the health and safety area where a number of resources are now produced targeting child care services, including the publications: *Caring for Children, Plan It, Staying Healthy in Child Care*;
- Corporate sponsorship has also been gained by child health educators for the development of national health, safety and nutrition information for service staff and families, directly related to the QIAS and FDCQA Quality Areas. This is being developed by the Centre for Community Child Health.

#### **Community Response**

Families and community members can use the NCAC hotline or website ([www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)) to obtain the names of accredited services in their area or to make inquiries or comments about the QA. The majority of community-related calls that the NCAC receives are from parents and these calls are steadily increasing. Most of the parents who contact NCAC are positive about QA and appreciate the information provided by the NCAC as a guide for choosing quality child care.

**Administration of the Quality Assurance Systems**

The NCAC is currently administering QA systems for 7,500 child care services, providing care to 763,000 children and representing more than 540,000 families across Australia. Although the QIAS, FDCQA and OSHCQA may appear straightforward, it is certainly a challenge to administer them.

The QA systems are based on peer review, where early childhood professionals working in child care are trained by NCAC to undertake a review of service practice. The NCAC continually trains Validators and Moderators and requires approximately 1,000 Validators and fifty Moderators across the country to undertake more than 2,600 Validation Visits and Moderation sessions each year.

**Validators**

Validators are qualified and experienced child care professionals with recent experience in a long day care, family day care or outside school hours care service. To become a Validator an applicant must, firstly, meet the selection criteria set by NCAC (available on the NCAC website, [www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)). Secondly, the applicant must undertake a five-day training program and thirdly, they must successfully attain the required standard of competency in an assessment at the conclusion of the training program.

Validators are required to undertake at least ten days of Validation Visits each year. They are provided with regular support and performance feedback by members of NCAC's Validator Program. To keep them up to date with changes or current issues, an NCAC *Validator Bulletin* is published regularly and Validators attend annual update training sessions. Working as a Validator for the NCAC is a commitment not only for the Validator, but also the Validator's child care service. It is difficult for Validators to be away from their own services, even when they are replaced by relief staff. They may also need to travel and be away from their own families. However, there are benefits such as professional development, particularly in the areas of observation and communication, and the development of a deep understanding of quality improvement and quality practices.

**Moderators**

Moderators are qualified professionals with considerable experience in the early or middle child care field. They have recent experience in long day care, family day care or outside school hours care service delivery and/or in delivery of pre- and post-service training or in research.

To become a Moderator, an applicant must firstly meet the selection criteria set by NCAC (available on the NCAC website, [www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)). Secondly, the applicant must

undertake a three-day training program and thirdly, they must successfully attain the required competency standards.

Moderators are required to undertake five, two-day Moderation Sessions each year. They are provided with regular support and performance feedback. To keep them up to date with changes or current issues an NCAC *Moderator Newsletter* is published regularly and annual refresher training is provided.

### **The Tyranny of Distance**

One difficulty we face in administering the QA systems is a uniquely Australian problem – vast distances and the distribution of the population across the continent.

To ensure there is no conflict of interest, the NCAC requires that the Validator and child care service have no prior connection. When scheduling a Validation Visit for a rural or isolated service, it may be that the nearest eligible Validator, who does not pose a conflict of interest, is located hundreds or even thousands of kilometres away. This is especially difficult in the Northern Territory where distance, combined with a small population, usually means flying in a Validator from a neighbouring State/Territory. Even within States the distances involved can be great – to send a Validator from Brisbane to a service in Bamaga (both located in Queensland) - is a 5,000 kilometre round-trip.

### **Future Directions**

The Australian Government is investigating the viability of extending QA to other forms of child care, including Indigenous and In-Home Care.

### **Conclusion**

As educators and advocates for children, I feel that we should be justly proud of the quality of care and education we provide for children and our efforts to improve quality. I am proud of the quality standards in Australian children's services. I would encourage you to continue to strive for continuous quality improvement – as quality improvement is a journey not a single destination.

### **Publications and Support for Services**

The NCAC produces a number of publications for child care services participating in the QA systems. These include:

**QIAS Handbook (Second eEdition 2001), FDCQA Handbook (Second Edition 2004) and OSHCQA Handbook (2003)** - contain background information on the specific QA systems, an overview of the steps involved in achieving accreditation and a summary of the Quality Areas and Principles. The *Handbooks* are targeted primarily at service management, staff,

carers and parents as well as students and others interested in quality child care. The *Handbooks* are also available on the NCAC website in a variety of community languages.

**QIAS Source Book (2001), OSHCQA Quality Practices Guide (2003) and FDCQA Quality Practices Guide (2001)** - the main documents or standards to be used by children's services progressing through the QA systems and targeted specifically at management, staff, carers and parents who are participating in their service's accreditation process. The *Quality Practices Guides* and *Source Book* detail the Quality Areas and Principles and give examples of indicative practices. Services are responsible for designing their own self-study process against the standards outlined in the *Quality Practices Guides or Source Book*. A service's quality of care is also validated against these standards.

**QIAS Self-study Report (2001), FDCQA Self-study Report (Second Edition 2004) and OSHCQA Self-study Report (2003)** - the working documents to be used by services to rate each Principle, record evidence of practice and plan for continued improvement across the Quality Areas. The *Self-study Report* will be completed by the management and staff and submitted to NCAC at the required time.

**FDCQA Workbook (2001) and OSHCQA Workbook (2003)** – optional publications intended to assist services to conduct self-study and develop improvement plans. The *Workbooks* are designed to be used by management, staff and carers. Supplementary documents to the *Workbooks* are also available on the NCAC website ([www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)).

NCAC support for services includes:

**QIAS Introductory Video (2001), FDCQA Introductory Video (2001) and OSHCQA Introductory Video (2003)** - designed to introduce the service to the relevant QA system. NCAC suggests that the service use the video to assist management, staff, carers and families to become familiar with the process and resources of QA.

NCAC has created an *Online Training Module* for each QA system, which is available on our website ([www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)). This package provides training on the processes of the QA systems and links to the QA documents available on the website. It is particularly useful to new management, staff and carers, students and interested family members.

NCAC's ***Choosing Quality Child Care*** brochure is a helpful resource for families seeking child care. It contains information on what to look for in a quality child care setting, questions to ask, the role of families in care, as well as information about NCAC and the QA systems. These brochures and posters are available to services free of charge.



**Putting Children First** - quarterly newsletter distributed to all services registered with NCAC, to peak child care bodies, tertiary institutions, State and Territory governments and other interested parties. It contains information on the QA systems and practical suggestions for achieving quality.

**NCAC website ([www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au))** - is a valuable tool for early and middle childhood professionals. It makes a wide range of resources easily accessible and provides current information about the QA systems. The site contains:

- All NCAC publications;
- A range of forms such as Registration, Change of Registration, and NCAC Book Order forms;
- Online Training Modules;
- Support documents for each step of the QA systems;
- Information on becoming a Validator or Moderator;
- Translations of the *Handbooks* into community languages;
- Easy access to NCAC's e-mail address [qualitycare@ncac.gov.au](mailto:qualitycare@ncac.gov.au);
- Links to relevant external web sites including training organisations and State/Territory Licensing authorities;
- An integrated search facility for children's services.

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## Involving Children in their Own Learning: Report of an Action Research Project on Formative Assessment

Brian Yeats

In the wake of Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam's 1998 publication, *'Inside the Black Box'*, much work has been done to develop more constructivist approaches to assessment in classrooms which strongly involve children in their learning. Traditionally, assessment procedures have been done *to* children, rather than done *with* them, and have typically done little to help children to open up their learning - instead they tend to rank them in ways which limit their potential from an early age. An action research project was carried out in Belfast, from February - April 2004, involving 13 teachers in 6 schools working with children aged from 4 to 18 years. Training sessions were provided by the author to acquaint the teachers with key research and practical strategies, borrowing principally from the work of Black and Wiliam (1998), and Shirley Clarke (1998; 2001; 2003). The teachers reported rapid shifts in behaviour and culture within their classrooms, and success in terms of learning gains, especially for lower achievers. Children appeared to be happier in their 'new' learning environment, more involved with the learning process, and more motivated, focussed and independent in action.

### Introduction

I would like to begin with a short story. There was a boy - we'll call him Jim. Jim began school one day, it came as a bit of a shock but he got used to it in time. It was a place where he did lots of interesting things, and perhaps just one or two things not *quite* so interesting. Jim got lots of encouragement, and lots of feedback from his teacher about his work. She would often say, *'Just do your best, Jim!'* His Mum would often say the same thing to him at home, *'Just do your best Jim, no-one can ask you to do anything more than that!'* But Jim remembered the time when he *had* done his *very* best, and it had turned out to be not quite good enough. *'Is this it?'* the teacher asked kindly, *'surely this isn't your best effort Jim?'* she said smiling. He agreed - what else would he do? If it *was* his best then it would have meant that *he* wasn't good enough, although he knew it to be true from that day, he *wasn't* quite good enough, and he eventually learnt to keep quiet about his work in case he came even closer to being found out. Jim went into hiding.

At other times the teacher would say, *'Come on Jim, you can do it - it's so easy!'* Now that was really scary! If it was so easy, then it was a big risk to even *try* - for what if he failed at the easy things? At first he preferred trying at the hard things - it wasn't so bad to fail at them, but in time he learnt that it was best just not to try very much at all. Over the same period that this happened, he realised that school was not always a nice place

to be – it made him feel small and useless for some of the time, especially when he got compared with the other children in the class. Jim dreaded those days.

Jim learnt how to keep his eyes pointing straight ahead whenever the teacher was asking questions in class, although he didn't often get asked to answer, and if he did, he just started his 'hard thinking look,' until the teacher went to someone else, or she answered the question herself with just a tiny frown. He couldn't think of the answers quickly enough anyway, there was so little time. Jim wasn't so good at remembering lots of facts, though he'd always been really good at working out problems. However, the questions were nearly always about facts, and you had to remember them *instantly* to have a chance of winning.

And then it all changed. Jim got a new teacher who didn't ask him to do his *best* all the time, this teacher just asked him to try to do things *better* – and that was much easier! Life was much simpler when he wasn't expected to be at the top of his game *all* the time. This teacher would usually show him, not just *what* to improve, but *how* to improve it too, and he even got time to carry out the improvements instead of just being expected to do them *some* time. Question times were different too, as the children were given longer to think of good answers, and sometimes they got to discuss them with each other before answering. More of the questions were on problems instead of just facts, so Jim found himself getting to answer some of them. School seemed like a different place, a place where he *belonged*.

Jim's story might evoke a memory or two among readers, either of personal experience or vicariously in their observations of others who have relived it. Most will simply be thankful for the teacher who made the difference for them. We may even recall the name and the face of the one who helped us start school with such confidence and joy, or the one who helped us 'turn the corner' at some later point. As Reineke (1998 1-2) tells us, "*Teaching touches the mind, but assessment touches the heart*", and we neglect the emotional consequences of the experiences of children such as Jim at our peril. Jim provides us with an object lesson in the benefits claimed for formative assessment, in improving the learning experience for children (and their teachers).

### **Key Research**

Black and William (1998) claim in conclusion to their seminal research analysis that where assessment is formative, significant gains in learning result, with greater engagement, self-confidence and a shift in role for both learner and teacher. They cite the increased emphasis on standards as the strategy used by several countries to bring about improvements in school effectiveness. However, if schools are to improve in response to a climate of 'raising standards', then it must happen in classrooms. That much is now a

well-honed convention of educational wisdom. The real issue is, has the focus on standards made a qualitative difference to learning in classrooms? Wiliam (2000) suggests that when improvement in any system is measured by reference to test outcomes, then that system is prone to the consequences of 'Goodhart's Law'. This law states that as soon as a test regime becomes a central tenet of policy, then its usefulness rapidly declines while its importance increases, as people at the sharp end of operations ignore the policy and focus their attention solely on the test instrument by which their own success is to be measured.

Weeden *et al.* (2002) have claimed that the most noticeable result of the 'raising standards' agenda, with increased emphasis on target-setting and summative assessment, is that teachers have simply honed their skills in preparing children for tests. Children have adapted themselves to a duller diet of education, but show little increased aptitude for using their increased knowledge and skills in other contexts, despite their improving test scores. The outcomes of the LEARN Project (Weeden and Winter, 1999), which was designed to determine children's self-concepts as learners and conducted with students from four to eighteen years, strongly support this conclusion. Black and Wiliam (1998) conclude that this is a result of educational strategy-makers not appreciating the bewildering complexity of life in classrooms, and the dangers of failing to help teachers to reconfigure their management of learning, rather than simply pressuring them into managing mere performance. In other words, children and their teachers deserve more than external inputs in the form of pressures and threats to raise their performance levels. They follow this diagnosis with the following prognosis: "*We focus on one aspect of teaching: formative assessment....this feature is at the heart of effective teaching*" and further, "*Indeed, (we) know of no other way of raising standards for which such a strong prima facie case can be made.*" (Black and Wiliam, 1998: 12) They constructed three questions:

- "*Is there evidence that improving formative assessment raises standards?*"
- "*Is there evidence that there is room for improvement?*"
- "*Is there evidence about how to improve formative assessment?*"

After analysing nine years worth of research literature, Black and Wiliam (1998) concluded that the answer to all three of the above questions was yes, though reminding us that it would be foolish to once again underestimate the complexity of both learning and classrooms, by identifying formative assessment as "*yet another 'magic bullet' for education.*" Their key conclusions were:

- Improving formative assessment raises achievement for all learners;
- Improving formative assessment helps low achievers more than other students, and so narrows the range of achievement in classrooms.

Black and Wiliam (1998) further identified a number of areas of classroom practice recommended for reflection and improvement by teachers:

- Feedback to children should offer guidance on how to improve work;
- Tests used by teachers often encourage rote and superficial learning;
- Questioning strategies are often unproductive and should be reviewed for effectiveness;
- (In primary schools) quantity and presentation of work are often emphasised over quality in relation to learning;
- Marks and grading are often over-emphasised;
- The practice of comparing children with their peers teaches lower achievers that they lack ability and ultimately that they are unable to learn;
- The collection of marks sometimes appears to have a higher priority than analysis of children's learning;
- Self-assessment is often a key element of successful innovation in formative assessment practice – this appears to be an inevitable link.

In the wake of the disturbance thrown up by Black and Wiliam (1998), the Assessment Reform Group (1999) and notably Clarke (1998; 2001; 2003) took up the recommendations and the challenge to provide direct practical support to teachers in managing formative assessment in their classrooms for the benefit of children and their learning. The above literature provided many practical strategies, well trialled in classrooms in a number of major projects such as the Gillingham Formative Assessment Project (North Gillingham EAZ (DFES)/Institute of Education, 2001). These strategies were to prove most valuable to our teachers, committing to greater formative assessment in the Belfast action research project.

### **Action Research Project**

This project came about as a result of a confluence of recent trends. Interest has, of course, been growing in the promise of formative assessment as schools have increasingly focussed their attention on learning, as well as their traditional focus on teaching. There has been a notable increase in the number of Northern Ireland schools seeking advice and support in finding out more about how children learn, and how best to support their learning. Formative assessment is an almost inevitable addition to the 'guest list' of issues that schools are addressing in the learning-centred trend. A number of visits by Shirley Clarke to Northern Ireland to present lectures and workshops on formative assessment has further stoked up considerable interest in schools. Meanwhile, the Curriculum Council for Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in Northern Ireland has put together proposals for a revised curriculum, in which formative assessment is to be a key part of school provision. Thus, a combination of interests led to the CCEA funding a

small pilot project with all five of Northern Ireland's Education and Library Boards between February and April 2004. Four of the boards chose to run the project with primary schools only, but I chose to work with a mixture of primary and post-primary schools in Belfast. Six schools were invited to participate by nominating two teachers each to receive professional development training and carry out action research in their classrooms. The schools included one infant school (4 to 7 years), two primary schools (4 to 11 years), two single-sex secondary schools (11 to 16 years) and one co-educational grammar school (11 to 18 years). The grammar school elected to fund a further delegate from its own budget and so we commenced the project with thirteen teachers.

The teachers received three days of professional development training at a board centre, spread over a period of six weeks. Each session ended with the teachers being given a sheet of tasks to try in the classroom. However, such tasks were not to be comprehensively completed. It was stressed that the teachers should exercise full discretion over what they attempted and the design of children's support materials, over and above whatever was provided to them on the course. To limit the stress of managing innovation, primary teachers were asked to try the strategies in one subject area only, with the advice that it should not be literacy or numeracy. Post-Primary teachers were advised to try the strategies with one selected teaching group. The training went through three phases:

- 1 Presentation, reading and discussion of key research papers mentioned above;
- 2 Classroom strategies to introduce or extend formative assessment practice;
- 3 Thorough evaluation of the outcomes.

The strategies were structured around four key areas:

- 1 The formulation, agreement and sharing with children of intended learning outcomes, together with the use of 'success criteria' to scaffold children's learning behaviour;
- 2 The development of teachers' questioning strategies;
- 3 The use of formative feedback to recognise strengths in children's work and to provide guidance on improving it;
- 4 The development of self- and peer-evaluation in classrooms.

### **Observations of the Participating Teachers**

All of the teachers were given a 'learning log' in which they entered notes of strategies attempted and amendments they made, as well as observations of their effectiveness in promoting learning behaviour in children. They were encouraged to bring photographs and video-records of elements of their practice, as well as any artefacts that they produced such as WALT Boards for publishing intended learning outcomes to the children.

Furthermore, the final day of training was largely given over to individual and group evaluation, providing much feedback to inform future training programmes. No use was made of pre - and post-testing to measure learning gains by children, rather evaluation was solely based on teachers' perceptions.

The perceptions of the participating teachers were quite striking, and were apparent long before the summary evaluation. A debrief session was held at the start of the second day of training and already most of the teachers were reporting gains, particularly in learning-focussed behaviour of the children, at all age levels. Some of the teachers, particularly those from post-primary phases, were initially sceptical about the potential of another 'initiative', but this scepticism was rapidly dispelled following initial trialling of strategies in the classroom.

With the exception of one teacher who felt that her practice was already well infused with formative assessment principles, there was much enthusiasm for the outcomes of strategies tried by the end of the pilot period, and a strong commitment to try out further strategies for which there had not been time. The formulation and publication of intended learning outcomes and accompanying success criteria was a focus for everyone's efforts, for which much impact was claimed. It was reported that children asked for learning outcomes when the teacher was a little slow in publishing them in most of the classrooms, and that the use of success criteria, in particular, enabled children to self-direct, promoting independence. Several of the teachers were impressed with this strategy as being one to reduce the heavy reliance that young children had on them during work. Some teachers experienced difficulty in constructing success criteria, but found that the children quickly became quite expert at it, especially in the primary classrooms.

Most of the teachers had tried some of the questioning strategies, such as providing extended (and carefully scaffolded) 'wait time', and promoting paired discussion with 'response partners', and these were felt to be very powerful, quickly increasing participation levels among the classes (both in numbers of children and depth of engagement). A few of the teachers had also tried some formative feedback strategies, including the 'two stars and a wish' approach, and the provision of response time in class for children to follow up on 'closing the gap' prompts. It was most interesting that one of the grammar school teachers canvassed her 'trial class' about the practice of providing comments without grades on their work, and was met with enthusiastic approval from sixty per cent of the children, comprising the lower and middle ability bands in the class. None of the teachers had got as far as focussing attention on self- or peer-evaluation by the end of the pilot, but all expressed a wish to do so.



There was much recognition that importing the strategies changed not only what was done in the classroom, but also changed its culture. Children appeared to perceive themselves as more powerful and influential, and there was a clear observation that while all children gained from the practice, lower achieving children appeared to benefit most of all, being more motivated, involved with the learning process, focussed on their improvements and increasingly independent of the teacher. Perhaps most interesting of all was that these changes occurred over a matter of a few weeks, rather than the months we would perhaps expect for such radical shifts.

The following quotes were typical from the individual evaluation sheets:

- *"Not as daunting as first thought – needed time to digest."*
- *"Pupils accommodated to change well, wish to extend them into self-assessment."*
- *"Pupils liked the use of the WALT/SC Board, and to know the Intended Learning Outcomes."*
- *"Learning felt very positive, very motivational for pupils."*
- *"There were problems for me with phrasing the success criteria – the children actually produced better criteria."*
- *"Great for low achievers in classrooms."*
- *"It makes you much more specific with planning."*
- *"The questioning technique worked well – 'Wait Time' and 'Tell your partner your answer'."*
- *"Feedback worked very well, much more specific and leading naturally to individual target setting."*
- *"Using the 'next day' tactic for responding to feedback was powerful."*
- *"In a very high performing grammar school class, there were no major comments about not providing grades!"*
- *"It was very important, and very powerful to reinforce the success criteria throughout the lesson."*
- *"Good boost to understanding."*
- *"Encourages transfer of learning across subjects/themes."*

### **Conclusion**

Much of value was learnt from the project. It gave valuable information about the relative effectiveness of the strategies employed, as well as feedback on modifications to the professional development programme timetable, emphasis on specific issues and the effectiveness of various resources which were provided to inform future training design. The findings of the participating teachers appeared to vindicate once again the propositions made by Black and Wiliam (1998) six years ago, although this was such a small scale study, without objective testing in any way, and as such, must be regarding

with caution. However, as a result of the apparent success, funding has already been secured for a larger scale project with 20 teachers from 10 schools to commence in Autumn 2004, and this is looked forward to with much anticipation!

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## **Defining, Assessing and Supporting the Quality of Education and Care for Babies and Toddlers in Centre Based Childcare**

**Pam Winter**  
**Presented by Gerry Mulhearn**

### **Introduction**

In South Australia, in 2001, a relationship-based curriculum framework was introduced, specifically for children aged birth to three years. The framework was part of a public education, statewide birth to Year 12 curriculum initiative, to enhance quality and improve the experiences and outcomes for children in centre-based childcare.

A doctoral research study (supported by an Australian Research Council grant, the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) and the University of South Australia) was undertaken to assess the effectiveness of the curriculum framework. This involved defining and measuring curriculum quality using four variables (educators' pedagogy, relationships with children, children's involvement and well-being). The Leuven Involvement Scale for Toddlers and three especially developed instruments were used to define and assess changes in the variables. The study provided strong evidence of the nexus between educators' relationships and pedagogy, and children's well-being and involvement.

As a result of the research study, DECS has introduced a number of strategies to provide ongoing support for the quality of care. The research instruments will be refined as self-assessment tools and guides for educators. The four variables of curriculum quality are being described and operationalised in user-friendly, self-paced resources for childcare educators and a childcare practitioner research project has been undertaken. The practitioner research project involved twelve selected childcare centres being supported to engage in a twelve-month project to examine their pedagogy and relationships with young children for sustainable pedagogical change, leading to enhanced well-being and involvement for young children.

### **Background to the Study**

In 2001, all childcare centres in South Australia were provided with a free copy of *The South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability Framework (SACSA)*, as part of a state wide single, cohesive birth to Year 12 curriculum initiative of the South Australian Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE), now DECS. DECS does not have the jurisdiction to mandate the use of the SACSA framework in the childcare sector as it does in preschools and schools. It has a legislative responsibility and concern for the operational standards of childcare and for the quality of early education and care. Hence,

DECS invested significant resources in the development and implementation of the framework in the childcare sector. As the research study for my doctoral degree, I undertook to evaluate the difference that the use of the framework made to the quality of young children's curriculum in some long day childcare centres. In evaluating the quality of curriculum in childcare, it is fundamental that the definition of curriculum that is being used is explicit. Curriculum in this study was defined as encompassing all of the interactions, routines and experiences in children's [care] environment (SACSA, birth to age three, 2001:15).

### **The SACSA Framework, Early Years Band, First Phase: Birth – Age Three**

The birth to age three phase of the SACSA framework focuses on the interactions, routines and experiences that young children have in their care environment and promotes a relationship-based approach. As children of this age grow rapidly and are dependent on adults to meet their physical and social needs more than at any other period, their curriculum will necessarily be more intimate and more family-oriented than at any other stage. Relationships are considered of primary importance. Primary care-giving practices and environments that are nurturing, where children can feel safe and secure and where they are encouraged to be curious, use their initiative and explore are promoted to provide children with experiences that foster development and learning.

### **Defining Quality**

Definitions of quality appearing in the literature over last thirty years or so have shifted in orientation. Earlier writings reflect a technical, objective view, reflecting the perspectives of the context in which the ideas were founded. The later writings present a more transformational view, reflecting newer contemporary understandings influenced by post-modernism. A contemporary definition of quality now describes quality as a socially constructed concept which may, therefore, well look different in different contexts (Woodhead, 1996). As a socially constructed concept, quality is rooted in the cultural values, beliefs, needs and interests of stakeholders and can be recognised by the translation into practice of a community's epistemological, ethical and aesthetic choices. Hence, there will be multiple definitions that will differ across and within communities (Pence and Moss, 1994:172-173). Consequently, quality is a slippery concept, and like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Each beholder views quality through their own lens, coloured by their own needs, insights and visions. And, as with any lens, there is no one prescription that can accommodate the view for all beholders. Theorists, philosophers, researchers, practitioners, families, children, policy makers, funding bodies and regulators all use different sets of lens. Hence, the definition of quality will be an on-going source of professional debate, with views ranging along a continuum from quality being a universal static standard that can be measured against objective criteria, to quality being a contextual construct of dynamic processes that can be evaluated against subjective values and goals.

However, numerous theorists, (see for example: MacNaughton, 2001; Moss, 2001; Pence, 2001) have with some consistency, variously identified a number of influences which contribute to understandings of quality, namely:

- Theories about how children grow, develop and learn;
- Visions and hopes for young children's lives;
- Ideas about the role our services should play in that vision;
- Beliefs about what young children should know;
- Understandings of current research, for example, brain research;
- Beliefs about children's needs and rights;
- Ideas about what is in children's best interests;
- Understandings about who should judge and pay for quality;
- Understandings about who should be responsible for monitoring quality.

Although consensus about the definition of quality has weakened as we enter the 21st century, consensus about the important impact 'quality' has on children's short and long-term development has strengthened (Greenough, 2001:17). Descriptions of a quality curriculum are now beginning to have a stronger focus on how children experience their time in care and on the establishment of reciprocal, intellectual and emotional relationships between educators and children and meaningful, equal partnerships between educators and parents. Goals are focused more on the kinds of understandings and dispositions that will position children to challenge social injustices and to shape the world to be a more sustainable and fairer place for all. Such goals include:

- Confident individual and group identities;
- A sense of trust;
- Skills in literacies, communication, critical thinking;
- Understandings and dispositions of interdependence;
- Creativity;
- Social responsibility;
- Flexibility and resilience.

(see for example: SACSA; OMEP, 1998).

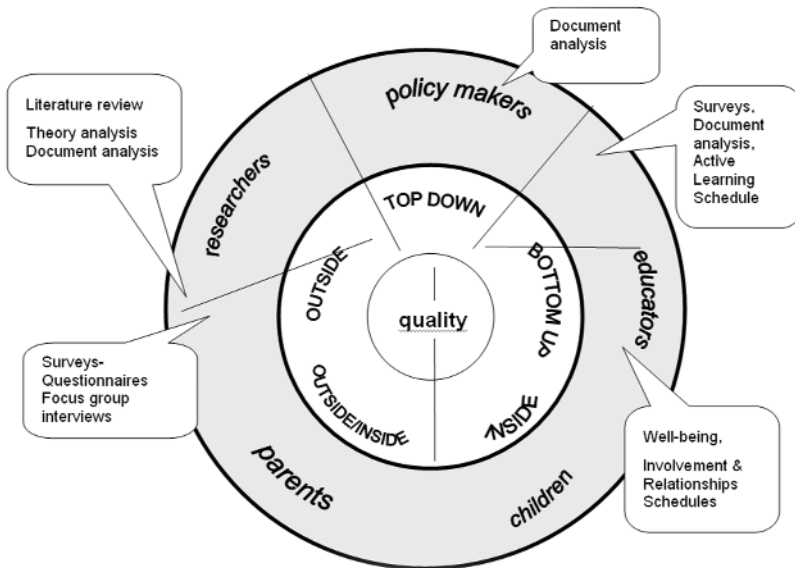
Without a universal definition of quality, researchers are left to construct their own. Definitions will be context-specific and, as such, are not true definitions but rather understandings of dimensions and perspectives related to cultural priorities and understandings, and community beliefs and expectations. Nevertheless, however troubling it is to reconcile the multiple perspectives on quality, we have a critical task to find ways to describe and assess 'quality' as a resource for all stakeholders because the quality of care matters to children's well being (Scarr *et al.*, 1994).

### Methodology of the Study

The study was undertaken in two stages. Time 1 data were collected before educators engaged with the SACS framework, and Time 2 data were collected some eight to ten months later, after educators had been using the framework. The research design was multifaceted with extensive gathering of data over a period of ten months. The methodology combined both quantitative and qualitative methods, providing both hard and soft complementary evidence of how childcare curriculum was experienced and perceived by children from birth to age three, their families and their educators.

Considering contemporary understandings about the definition of quality, data were gathered from five perspectives (children's, families', educators', policy makers' and researchers'), adapting Katz's (1993) multiple perspectives on quality (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 - Multiple Perspectives on Quality** (adapted from Katz, 1993)



### The Sample

A stratified representative sample of long day care centres in South Australia was used. The sample included ten centres from which sixty children (three children in Under twos' care and three children aged two and three in Over twos' care from each centre). Forty educators of the children in the sample (two qualified and two unqualified from each centre) were selected to participate. In addition, 110 volunteer parents and fifty-nine volunteer educators (caring for children birth to age three) from across the ten centres were surveyed.

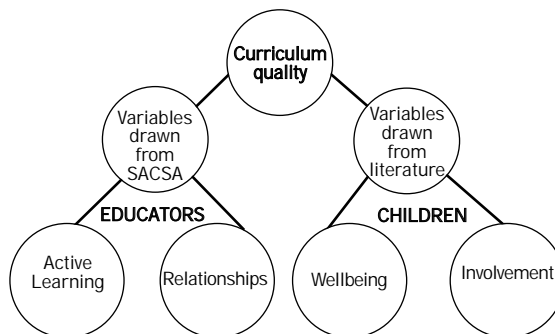
## Assessing Quality

### Variables of Curriculum Quality

For the research, four process variables of curriculum quality were used to assess the effectiveness of the SACSAs framework, rather than some of the more traditional measures such as the achievement of developmental norms. Instruments were developed to measure changes in three of the variables. An instrument was located that was used to measure the fourth variable, the Leuven Involvement Scale for Toddlers (LIS-T) (Laevers, 1997).

Beliefs that relationships are of prime importance to young children's learning and that the most supportive pedagogical environment is one which respects young children as active, competent learners and co-constructors of understandings, gave rise to the identification of the four variables (Figure 2). Two of the variables, **An Active Learning Environment** and **Relationships**, were drawn from the major foci of the first phase of SACSAs. These focused on educators' behaviours. The other two variables, **Involvement** and **Well-being**, which focused on children's behaviours, were identified from the literature. Involvement and well-being have been cited as two of the most important and reliable indicators of quality for educational settings and processes essential for children's learning. The two variables indicate how well the environment succeeds in meeting children's learning needs (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogers, 1983; Laevers, 1999; Pascal, 1999; Raspa *et al.*, 2001). A focus on process variables places the onus for the outcomes for children on the adults, making a judgement about the context rather than the child. It gives immediate feedback about the effect of educators' approach and the environment they establish, providing the opportunity to make immediate adjustments (Laevers, 1999). This is unlike assessing developmental outcomes, which are often long term and dependent upon a range of extraneous variables. Using developmental checklists, normed against an average, has the potential to distract from seeing the 'whole' child, the integration of learning and development and the development of enabling dispositions.

Figure 2: Variables of Curriculum Quality



### Some Findings

The findings of the study demonstrated that the use of the SACSA framework was correlated with some significant positive improvements in the quality of young children's relationships with their educators and their experiences in child care. Educators demonstrated changed understandings about the importance of participating in children's learning, increasing both their responsiveness to children and the supportiveness of their pedagogical interventions. A heightened awareness of the importance of working in meaningful partnerships with parents was also found. A strong connection was demonstrated between educators' pedagogy and the relationships they established with children, and children's well-being and their engagement in learning.

In each of the four variables of curriculum quality, significant improvements were found after the introduction of the SACSA framework, shifting the balance in childcare programs from a '*safe haven*' (Gallagher, 2000) towards a more developmentally enhancing experience for babies and toddlers. The analyses of the data, both qualitative and quantitative, showed that there were some significant changes in educators' beliefs and actions concurrent with the use of, and consistent with the intent of SACSA. Changes found between Time 1 and Time 2 included:

- Pedagogy was more consistent with SACSA with an increase in social constructivist approaches to teaching and learning and a reduction in behaviourist approaches;
- An increase in the frequency of documenting children's learning and development;
- A shift towards higher-level outcomes;
- An improved overall active learning environment;
- An increase in educators' responsive interactions with a complementary decrease in detached relationships;
- An increase in the use of Primary Care Groups;
- More positive episodes of interactions between educators and the children in their care, and a trend towards improved overall relationships;
- An overall improvement in children's involvement;
- An overall improvement in children's well-being with an increase in educators' positive interventions and a decrease in children's negative responses;
- Educators' self-assessment scores for the quality of their curriculum decreased.

### The Variables

The connectivity between the variables and their usefulness for evaluating curriculum quality was soundly established, as they explicitly exposed the nexus between educators' pedagogy and relationships, and children's involvement in their curriculum and their well-being.



- The study found that with the use of the framework, educators became more reflective;
- Primary caregiving practices improved educators' relationships with children and children's well-being;
- Smaller groups improved relationships between educators and children;
- More than four half-day sessions per week increased children's involvement and well-being at the centre.

Table 1 below shows the positive association found between Relationships and Active Learning, between Involvement and Relationships, and between Involvement and Well-being at Time 1.

**Table 1: Correlations (Spearman's rho) between Scales at Time 1 (N = 10)**

	Active Learning	Relationships	Involvement	Well-being
Active Learning	-			
Relationships	0.75*	-		
Involvement	0.37	0.75*	-	
Well-being	0.20	0.31	0.65*	-

\*  $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

At Time 2, a significant relationship between all four variables was found. Significant relationships were found between the scores on the Relationships, Involvement and Well-being Scales and between the Involvement and Well-being Scales as shown in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Correlations (Spearman's rho) between Scales at Time 2 (N=9)**

	Active Learning	Relationships	Involvement	Well-being
Active Learning	-			
Relationships	0.77*	-		
Involvement	0.82**	0.72*	-	
Well-being	0.75*	0.73*	0.87**	-

\*  $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

### What Compromises Quality?

The level of the participating educators' commitment to embracing a curriculum framework and working towards changes was high. Their engagement and new understandings provided them with both challenges and fulfilment, resulting in greater job satisfaction. However, the study demonstrated that a curriculum framework alone is

not enough to raise children's curriculum to a consistent, optimal quality level. Despite the improvements found, there remained a range of phenomena that hindered educators in firstly, practising what they believed, and more importantly, in providing a curriculum that was consistently in the best interests of children. The current working environment of childcare educators compromised their ability to consistently establish relationships and experiences that were always in the best interests of children.

The data suggested that some of the fundamental factors which were hindering educators implementing the best possible curriculum included:

- Educators' beliefs and pedagogical approaches grounded in personal ideology, training and experience (including the influence of a traditional, positivist heritage and level of/or no qualifications);
- A tension between childcare being a safe haven and a developmentally enriching experience;
- Some structural factors (including children's and educators' unpredictable and casual attendance patterns and large group sizes, making it difficult to maintain strong primary care-giving practices, and fair and meaningful joint attention experiences for all children);
- Power relationships (influenced by the industrial, professional and community status of childcare educators and a hegemonic dependence on child rearing theories leading to control and dependency);
- Inadequate professional development opportunities related to resourcing (the study found that the most effective professional development is a site-based, whole team, reflective model that enables educators to choose the pace and direction of their growth and move forward as a team);
- Educator's professional maturity and well-being (achieved through education and qualifications, public and industrial recognition, professional experience and support) were found to be compromised by their perceived status in the community and their financial remuneration.

### **Educators' Beliefs and Pedagogical Approach**

SACSA states that the role educators play in planning and implementing curriculum communicates their beliefs about childhood and children's learning, and their hopes for children (SACSA, Early Years Band:17).

In the two variables that focused on educators' behaviours (active learning pedagogy and relationships), it was found that often there was a considerable difference between what educators said they believed and what was actually done. The areas where at times, marked differences were found, included:

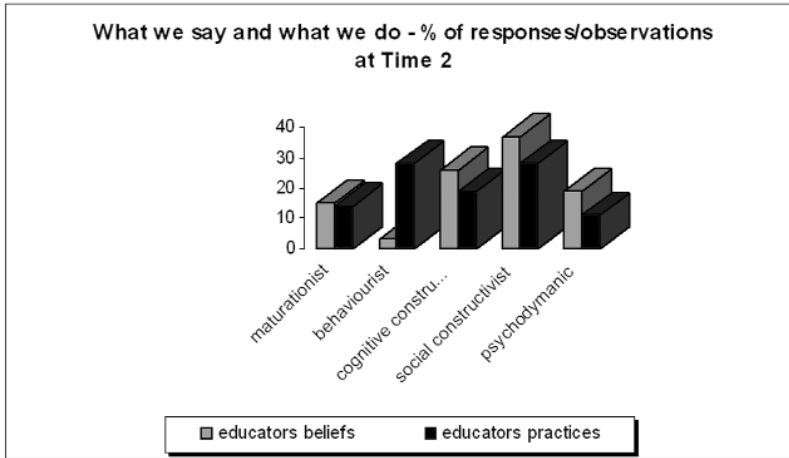
- Stated understandings about how children learn and educators' actual practices;
- Stated importance of responsive, meaningful relationships with children and the high number of detached interactions and records of 'no interactions';
- The stated importance of partnerships with parents, and the minimum input and knowledge of parents about their child's program;
- The importance of considering each child's unique background, experiences, interests and learning, and the universal approaches to providing for learning and development.

Figures 3 and 4 below show quite clearly that a considerable difference was found between what educators said about children's learning and what they actually did in practice, especially in their control over children (characterised by behaviourist approaches which were recorded to be 53% of the pedagogical interventions at Time 1 and 27% at Time 2).

**Figure 3**



Figure 4



The mismatch between educators stated beliefs and observed practices that was found in this study has been found by a number of other researchers (see for example: McMullen, 1998; Cassidy and Lawrence, 2000; Wilcox-Herzog, 2002). It is troubling because it has the potential to confuse children and compromise their learning and development. Educators' actions were frequently inconsistent with the ways they said they thought children learned best and with the aspirations they held for children (such as social conscience, sound self esteem and identity, a sense of agency and interdependence). Educators volunteered a number of factors that stopped them doing what they believed was best. These included the child-staff ratio, the time required for documentation and non care tasks, the group size and their working conditions/status.

As educators embraced the sociocultural understandings promoted in the SACSAs framework and adapted their teaching/learning programs to more closely align with those understandings, opportunities were created to establish togetherness and mutual understandings with young children through engaged participation in children's learning (Singer, 1996).

Table 3 below shows that across all centres, there was a significant improvement in scores on the Active Learning, Involvement and Well-being Learning Scales and a trend towards a significant improvement on the Relationships Scale after the introduction of SACSAs. In spite of the increase in the median scores on the Relationships Scale at Time 2, significant changes in this variable were not detected due to the great range in scores at both Time 1 and Time 2.

**Table 3: Active Learning, Relationships, Involvement and Well-being Scale scores at Time 1 and Time 2 (N = 9)**

	<b>Time 1 MEDIAN</b>	<b>RANGE</b>	<b>Time 2 MEDIAN</b>	<b>RANGE</b>	<b>z</b>	<b>p</b>
Active Learning	2.12	0.96	3.28	1.48	-2.52	0.01
Relationships	1.56	2.11	2.58	2.19	-1.72	0.07
Involvement	3.08	1.38	3.71	0.99	-2.43	0.01
Well-being	3.47	1.15	4.22	0.84	-2.43	0.01

### Relationships

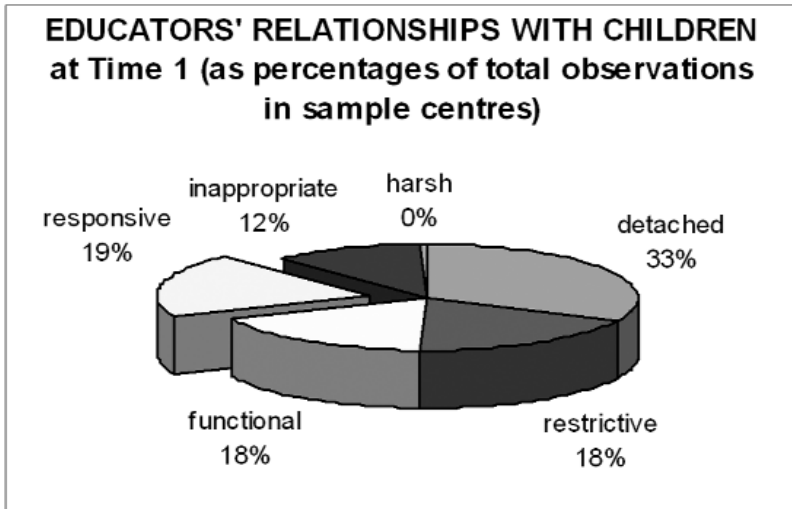
Centres in the study were found to provide a physically safe environment with educators who cared about the welfare of children. However, at times, it was found that the care of children's bodies, their physical health and safety took precedence over, and often at the expense of, intimate, responsive joint attention relationships, and intentional, relationship-building and developmentally enhancing learning opportunities.

In this study, educators were rarely found to spend sustained time with children, interacting to establish secure attachments and co-construct understandings. The majority of interactions were found to have some characteristics of control, with a perceived imbalance of power in the relationships between educators and children. At times, managerial issues dominated educator-child interactions, a finding noted by other researchers (see for example: Bruner, 1980; Tizard and Hughes, 1984; Leavitt, 1994; Singer, 1996). A limited number of 'real' conversations between educators and children were noted.

The contribution equality of power makes to the quality of a relationship is not a new notion (see for example: Rousseau, 1762). With the current mounting evidence regarding the importance of high quality emotional and intellectual relationships for present and future learning and fulfillment, it was of concern that inequality of power between educators and children was prevalent and remained unchallenged in the main. The understandings that some of the children were likely to have been constructing about themselves and their capacities to effect change or express and develop their interests in these relationships, were quite inconsistent with those promoted in SACSA.

As presented in Figure 5 below, the qualitative data generated at Time 1 from sixteen hours of observations in each centre showed that just under one-fifth of interactions were responsive, just under one-fifth were functional, just under one-fifth were restrictive and one-third were detached where educators either did not recognise or did not acknowledge children's bids.

Figure 5



Following the implementation of the SACSAs framework, the analyses of the Time 2 data showed that there was a trend towards a significant improvement in educators' relationships with children. As educators' practices reflected the more social constructivist approaches promoted in the SACSAs framework, their relationships with children became more responsive. It was found that when educators were using the SACSAs framework:

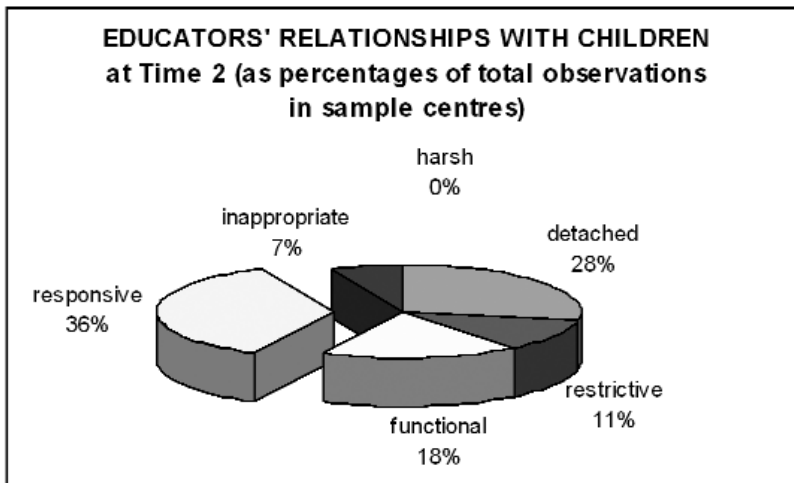
- There was an increased focus on relationships;
- The children's temperaments and individual needs were responded to more sensitively and appropriately;
- The children were more securely attached and explored their environment more freely;
- Educators spent more time with children;
- Occurrences of positive interactive episodes increased significantly;
- Routines (rather than educator-directed activities) were used more as learning experiences;
- There was greater job satisfaction for educators.

The Time 2 quantitative data, gathered using the instrument designed for the study, showed an improvement in the scores for each of the four dimensions of Relationships (responsiveness, positive interactions, quality verbal exchanges and appropriateness). The number of positive occurrences of interactive episodes was found to have increased significantly, while the number of missed opportunities for positive interactions decreased

significantly. The dimension of Quality Verbal Exchanges (defined by characteristics such as sustained joint attention, time to express and respond, building on initiated interactions, sharing social games, respecting home language) rated lowest at both Time 1 and Time 2. This was consistent with the small number of sustained interactions coded in the qualitative data.

The qualitative data showed that responsive relationships had increased to over one-third, and detached, restrictive and inappropriate had all decreased at Time 2 (Figure 6). The improvements were corroborated by the narratives of parents, directors and educators.

**Figure 6**



Generally, in this study, the processes of managing daily routines were seen as separate from learning experiences for children. A large proportion of children's days was dictated primarily by the schedules of physical care and safety tasks and routines, such as sleep, meals and nappy changes. The time between the tasks and routines was generally filled with individual play with selected toys. Many of the high number of *missed opportunities* for responsive, reciprocal interactions occurred because the management of children's physical tasks and routines took precedence over children's emotional and intellectual needs, rather than being integrated into the routines. The establishment and maintenance of high quality, reciprocal, meaningful relationships did not appear to be easy to achieve. Work conditions, wages and regulations (Radich, 2002:1), child and staff attendance patterns, child-staff ratios and understandings of the importance of secure relationships, constantly undermined the quality of relationships.

Young children can spend just 500 hours less in childcare prior to commencing school, than they do in their 13 years of lessons at school (NCAC, 2001). Educators can make up to 936 judgements in a six-hour day (Carr, 1998). The outcomes of these hours and judgements cannot be left to chance. The findings of the study are being used to inform the approach and content of the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services professional development program for childcare, with the intention of promoting the co-construction of understandings and practices that will improve the experiences and outcomes of children, families and educators using childcare.

A copy of the SACSAs framework can be downloaded from [www.sacsas.sa.edu.au](http://www.sacsas.sa.edu.au).

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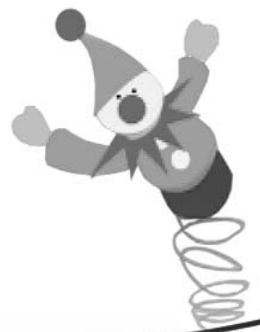
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# Supporting Quality



## Evaluating 'Better Beginnings' A Family Literacy Program in Western Australia

Caroline Barret-Pugh, Mary Rohl and Jessica Elderfield

### Introduction

*Better Beginnings* is part of the Western Australian Government's Early Years' Strategy. It is an early intervention family literacy program, designed to provide positive literacy influences for children in their first three years of life and builds on *Bookstart* (Wade and Moore, 1993; 1998) and related initiatives in the UK. The program, which is currently underway in six diverse communities across Western Australia, involves families, health professionals and local librarians. This paper focuses on an evaluation of the program that is being undertaken by Edith Cowan University. The aim of the research is to assess the impact of the program on early literacy practices and to identify processes that help or hinder its implementation. Some preliminary findings are presented.

Over the past few decades, there has been a good deal of optimism about the provision of experiences for young children that may help to produce positive outcomes for all. In educational terms, this has often meant some form of intervention with a focus on providing specific language and/or literacy experiences for preschool or early primary school children (for example Clay, 1985; Slavin *et al.*, 1992). These interventions have often been targeted at children who could be seen as 'at risk' of developing difficulties in acquiring early literacy skills and knowledge, such as those from particular home backgrounds. As Snow *et al.* (1998:57) have pointed out, "...children live in homes that support literacy development to differing degrees" and that "...optimal development occurs through interactions that are physically, emotionally, socially and cognitively suited to the changing needs of the infant through toddler years." Further, much research suggests that children's home environments have a crucial effect on early literacy learning and that they learn their family's and community's literacy practices and the value placed on literacy through the process of socialisation (Moll, 1994, Gee, 1996; Luke *et al.*, 1996). As such it seems that, ideally, language/literacy intervention should take place in the home and as early in the child's life as possible.

Research shows that book reading and other interactions around text (Wells, 1985; Bus and van Ijzendoorn, 1997), in addition to rhymes and language play (Bryant and Bradley, 1985) in the earliest years, have the potential to bring about improved language and literacy outcomes for children. Further, it has also been shown that assisting parents from low socio-economic backgrounds to understand the importance of particular literacy practices appears to lead to increased frequency of these practices (Jay and Rohl, in press, 2004). Thus, the *Better Beginnings* initiative, in which parents of new babies living in

areas with significant low-socio-economic populations are provided with various literacy-related resources, including a high quality children's book and information about reading to babies and library services, seems to have the potential to lead to positive literacy outcomes for children. This initiative is seen as particularly important from a family literacy perspective that highlights the power of parental "...*transfer of behaviour, beliefs, practices, expectations and potential to their progeny.*" (Gadsden, 2000:873)

### **The *Better Beginnings* Initiative**

The *Better Beginnings* initiative is related to the Western Australian Government's 'Early Years Strategy' that aims to improve the wellbeing of young children aged 0-8 years. This strategy focuses on supporting families, engaging communities in the planning and development of resources, providing coordinated and responsive client services and other support. The strategy is presently implemented in six communities that represent diverse geographical, social, cultural and economic contexts.

The *Better Beginnings* project builds on research in inner-city areas of the United Kingdom (Wade and Moore, 1993; 1998) and applies it to new and diverse contexts in Australia. *Better Beginnings* is an early intervention family literacy program that has been developed by Public Library Services, at the State Library of Western Australia. Its stated purpose is to provide positive language and literacy influences for children in their first three years of life. The program is the first of its kind in Australia and has recently been taken up by another Australian state. This paper reports on an evaluation of the pilot program that began in January 2004, with a view to extending the program state-wide.

The overall cognitive focus of *Better Beginnings* is for government agencies to work in partnership with families to support children's early literacy and learning. The key program elements include:

- A resource pack for parents of young babies, containing a quality children's book, a colourful growth measurement chart with nursery rhymes printed on it, information about the value of reading to children, some popular children's books and information about local library resources;
- Parent/child workshops, involving young children and their parents and featuring public library, health care and child development professionals;
- A 'toolkit' for health care professionals and community workers to provide information on the value of reading to young children and the resources and support available through the state-wide public library system;
- 'Tool boxes' that promote resources for children and their families that can be used in community centres, child care centres, play groups, and hospitals as well as in high traffic areas, such as shopping centres;

- Family reading centres in libraries that provide interactive early childhood learning spaces;
- A web site to promote family literacy.

### **Methodology**

A formative experimental design is being used to evaluate the pilot project. This methodology involves researchers combining qualitative and quantitative methods of investigation with interventions in learning situations and is well suited to exploratory investigations (Jacob, 1992; Oakley, 2003). The design allows researchers to examine not only learning outcomes, but also factors that contribute to or detract from the effectiveness of an intervention in achieving particular educational goals (Jimenez, 1997; Reinking and Watkins, 2000; Jay and Rohl, 2004, in press).

In this study, whilst very young children are the target population, the main participants are the parents of these children. The long-term aim of the project is to improve literacy outcomes for young children living in diverse communities that contain significant proportions of families of low socio-economic status, some of whom might be seen as being at risk of school failure. Snow *et al.* (1998) have identified low socio-economic status as a group risk factor for reading difficulties and, within the Australian context, there is evidence of a relationship between social class and literacy achievement, with students from lower socio-economic levels (in particular indigenous students), generally achieving lower levels of literacy (Lo Bianco and Freebody, 1997).

The quantitative data base consists of two surveys given to parents and completed with the guidance of health care workers and/or librarians where appropriate. Survey 1 was designed to collect information about demographics, library membership and use and attitudes towards early literacy. Survey 2 was designed to examine program processes, content and modifications, parent-child literacy practices, library use and participation in *Better Beginnings* library activities. In addition, focus group interviews with librarians and child health workers were designed to provide insights into the implementation of the project. A number of detailed interviews with the director of the project targeted her perceptions of *Better Beginnings* across several communities. Observations of library workshops and case studies of a small number of families in selected communities are being carried out in order to provide deeper insight into parent perceptions.

### **Preliminary Findings**

The findings in this paper are based on data from two of the six communities in which *Better Beginnings* is being implemented. Outback Mining Town is located 600 kilometres from the nearest major city, with a significant indigenous population. In this community, the program was implemented by the local librarians. The second community, Outer

Metropolitan Suburb, has a range of residential settings with a small indigenous population. In this community, the program was jointly implemented by child health nurses and the local librarian. The preliminary findings are based on the first survey and interviews with key personnel.

Survey 1 revealed that the majority of respondents spoke English as their main language and five per cent identified themselves as being of Indigenous descent. Approximately fifteen per cent of the parents had some tertiary education qualifications. Whilst ten per cent indicated that they had five or fewer books in their homes, the majority (75%) indicated that they had fifty or more books. However, the parents as a group did not visit the library on a regular basis, the great majority never visiting (43%) or only visiting once a month (39%).

In terms of knowledge and attitudes regarding reading to children, fifty-three per cent of respondents gave the title of at least one favourite children's book, the most popular being 'Dr Seuss' and 'Little Golden Books'. It has been noted that in the two communities, the procedures for distributing the *Better Beginnings* packs were somewhat different in that, in Outback Mining Town, the packs were distributed in the maternity hospital by librarians to mothers who had just delivered their babies, whereas in Outer Metropolitan Suburb, the packs were given out by health workers when the babies were at least six weeks old and many were somewhat older. Accordingly, some survey questions were phrased slightly differently for the two communities, in that mothers in Outback Mining Town, whose babies were only a few days old, were asked if they intended to enroll their babies as library members, borrow books for them, share books with them and sing songs and rhymes to them. In Outer Metropolitan Suburban, the mothers were asked if they actually did these things.

Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4 show that, whilst almost all the very new mothers in Outback Mining Town stated their intention to join their babies to the library, borrow and read books to them and sing songs and rhymes, the mothers of the older babies in Outer Metropolitan Suburb did not actually engage in all of these activities to the same extent. Nevertheless, more than half stated that they did share books with their babies and most that they shared rhymes and songs with them. Further, as Figure 5 shows, almost all of the mothers in both communities saw sharing books with their children as very important.



Figure 1 Borrow books for baby

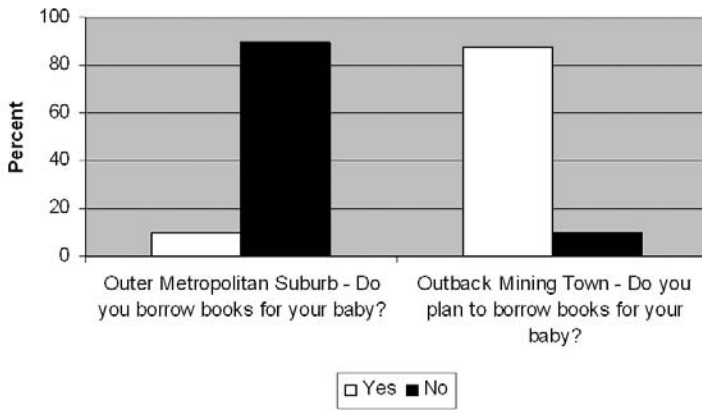


Figure 2 Join baby to library

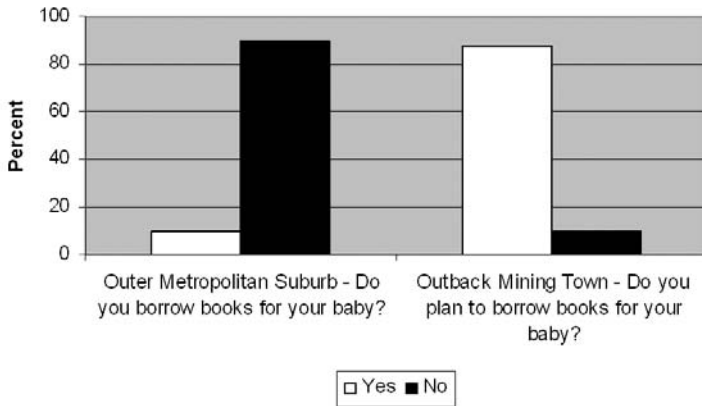
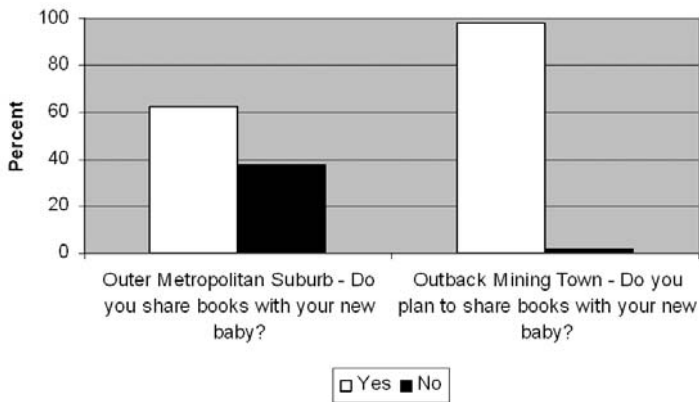
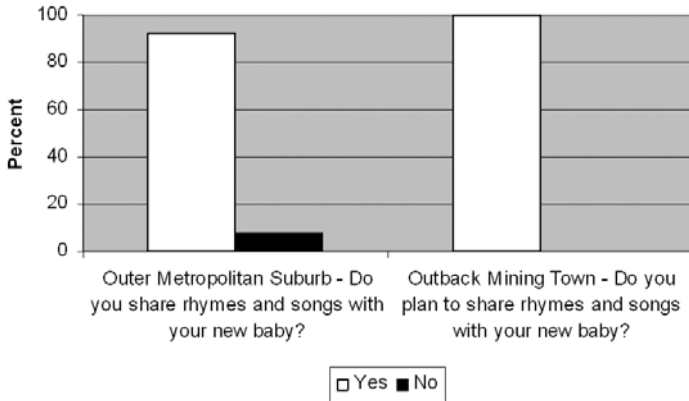


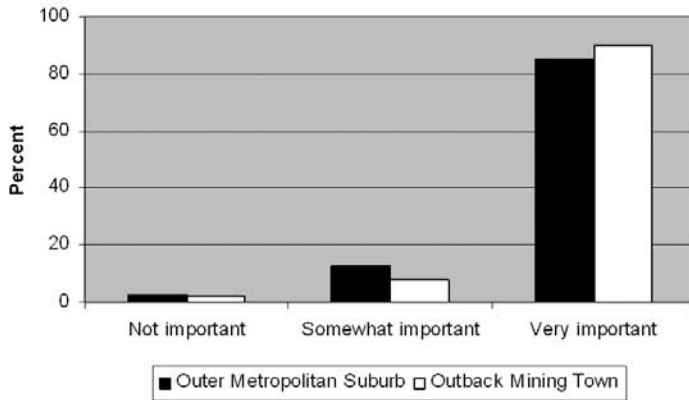
Figure 3 Share books with baby



**Figure 4 Share songs and rhymes with baby**



**Figure 5 Importance of sharing books with baby**



In terms of their reactions to the *Better Beginnings* pack, seventy per cent of mothers chose to make comments, two per cent giving constructive criticism about durability of materials, two per cent making neutral comments and ninety-six per cent giving positive comments that were classified into five categories.

**The Materials**

Materials were well received, with comments that included references to individual items in the pack as well as use of the pack:

*“Really good. Loved the book. It was Alissa’s first gift. The growth chart is on Blake’s (son’s) wall.”*

### **Babies' reactions**

Parents commented on their way in which their baby and other siblings responded to the materials:

*"Loved the book with the built in handle - baby loves looking at the babies in the book."*

### **Parental attitudes to early literacy**

Several comments gave some insight into parents' views of early literacy that ranged from surprise to positive endorsements of early literacy:

*"Flabbergasted at start - didn't think you could read to a baby - now reading regularly."*

*"It's something special for the child - gives a head start."*

*"A very good idea to encourage reading."*

### **Library services**

Many parents commented on the importance of the library:

*"Gave a start. Before I didn't have a library membership."*

*"Good to encourage people to come to the library."*

*"Good, nice. Handed on the library info to another family."*

*"Great whole idea especially for the rural areas to know about the library and other services around."*

### **Reflections on literacy**

Two parents commented on the way in which they had involved others:

*"Loved the book (had blonde boy and mirror on cover) but wondered if all the babies were boys - provoked a discussion among friends."*

*"Good. Like the fact it reinforces the role of parents in promoting literacy."*

Focus group discussions with child health care workers and librarians at Outer Metropolitan Suburb revealed a highly positive view of the *Better Beginnings* initiative. They felt that it:

- Complemented their work and increased understanding of early literacy;
- Focused on early contact with the library to promote life long membership and use, partly through baby story times at the library;
- Reinforced the importance of literacy in early childhood;

- Forged links between services and with the community;
- Involved the community in developing new initiatives.

Focus groups at Outback Mining Town also showed positive features. In collaboration with child health nurses and Indigenous child health workers, the librarian had developed various contextually appropriate activities, for example:

- Parent and baby story time in the library;
- Story time for babies and toddlers in the park for Indigenous parents who did not feel comfortable in the library environment;
- *Better Beginnings* activities through the community mothers' program run by the child health workers;
- Development of bilingual texts specifically for the community;
- Home visits by the librarian.

Thus the main facilitative features seem to be the commitment of and liaison between personnel from library and health professions.

Some concerns for both communities were related to the issue of families who did not respond to the *Better Beginnings* initiative, *"We're not reaching the families who need Better Beginnings the most."*

In relation to indigenous families, there were concerns about the lack of indigenous library staff. As the librarian put it, little progress would be made until *"...we've got an indigenous person working on the staff that can go out and do the home visits and can encourage Aboriginal (families) to come in and use the library."* She argued that many indigenous families either did not want a home visit from a non-indigenous person or were not at home when she visited them:

*"I've talked with... indigenous health workers who are having huge amounts of success... they said the thing to do is just to keep visiting because Aboriginal (families) are not as tied to time as we are and just pop in, pop in but the problem for us is that we don't have the time to pop in."*

Here she identified another important limiting factor for both communities, that of lack of allocated time for both health workers and librarians involved in the project.

### Conclusions

Our preliminary findings from the pilot project show some very positive responses to the *Better Beginnings* program in terms of parent response and inter-agency collaboration. Nevertheless, it will be important for the health and library staff involved to be allocated sufficient time to facilitate inclusion of a diverse range of families and to build on the mothers' intentions to provide their babies with book experiences, so that these intentions may be translated into practice.

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## Supporting Play - Supporting Quality

Carmel Brennan

### Background

IPPA, as an organisation representing its members, has always been committed both to the child's right to play and to play as the key learning medium of the child. Within the IPPA Quality Improvement Programme, we set out to develop an action research approach to improving the quality of practice in Irish early childhood services. We are particularly interested in the dynamic quality of the experiences and relationships of children and adults in services and we sought to document these experiences and relationships in a way that allowed us to reflect, share, critique and plan to improve them. To this end, IPPA Quality Development Officers began to make observations (with video) in services as children and adults went about their daily activities, particularly play. Evaluating these experiences was a challenge as we sought to identify children's needs and appropriate adult responses. Questions about how to improve the physical layout, the materials, the interactions, the supports, the teaching and learning strategies were difficult. IPPA staff came together to share analysis of the video and in the process to share some amazing insights. Crucially we changed the question from 'what are the needs, the deficits of these children for which we must compensate' to 'what are the competencies and interests demonstrated by these children and how can we extend them?'. Then the ideas flowed because in each and every episode we came to recognise the learning that these children had already achieved and the meaning making process in which they were already deeply engaged. We began to document competent agentive children as they demonstrated their skills in play.

We then embarked on ethnographic research with the aim to collect data to support the research question 'What are children doing and learning in play?' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004) presents the findings from both research approaches and the analysis is linked to post-modern theoretical concepts.

*'Power of Play: A Play Curriculum in Action'*, produced and published by IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation and funded by the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme and the Bernard Van Leer Foundation is a collection of stories, divided into 3 sections.

- 1 Stories derived from the observations and video footage collected by IPPA Quality Officers as part of the ethnographic research;
- 2 Stories documented by programme participants as part of the reflective, action research process;
- 3 Stories collected from children themselves as they reflect on and explain their play activities.

## Rationale

The work has been influenced by the (1) constructivist and socio-cultural view of learning, proposed by Piaget (1965a; 1962; 1965; 2001) and Vygotsky (1967; 1978) respectively (2) by the 'pedagogy of listening' underpinning the Reggio educational approach (Edwards *et al.*, 1993) and (3) the *Te Whariki* Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996) and the 'learning stories' (Carr, 2001) approach to documentation and assessment. It has been affirmed and complemented by the approach to curriculum adopted by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2004) in *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* and is contributing to the 'Quality' debate with which we are presently engaged. Play needs advocates. Research (Alexander *et al.*, 1995; Anning and Edwards, 1999; Ball, 1999) indicates that play in early childhood education is threatened by more formal, teacher directed curricula for children at a younger and younger age. Furthermore, earlier IPPA research, *'Child's Play'* (Carswell 2002) found a range of contradictions between the theory and practice of play in childcare services and recommended that the childcare provider must "...step back, withdraw and observe what the child is doing, how the child is learning..." in order to support play (Carswell 2002:23). Likewise, play researchers such as Nicolopoulou (1993), Sutton Smith (1997) and Gussin Paley (1997) insist that to understand and be true advocates for the full potential of play, we must study play in action in naturalistic settings. We undertook this task.

We intended to support two important shifts in perspective: (1) from a deficit view of the child working as an individual, embodied in stage development theory, to a view of the socially interactive complex child negotiating meaning in a cultural context and (2) to move beyond a focus on school promoted cognitive skills and the emphasis on literacy and numeracy to embrace learning as holistic and to recognise cognition as socio-affective (Fein 1985; Dunn 1987; Trevarthen, 1992). The *'Power of Play: A Play Curriculum in Action'* (IPPA, Brennan, 2004) demonstrates that when we change the observation lens, we get a different perspective. The process has created a 'community of learners' engaged in shared thinking and developing a new and exciting pedagogy. The book is about children and adults learning and teaching together and in keeping with a strengths based approach; it limelights the skills and competencies of both children and adults as they engage with this learning and teaching.

## Theoretical Context

### Constructivism and Socio-culturalism

*"How we conceptualise play depends on our understanding of learning and related cognitive concepts and on our interpretations of what is educationally and developmentally significant to children about play."* (Woods and Attfield, 1996:20) In early childhood, our understanding of development and learning has been deeply influenced by Piaget and Vygotsky.



Piaget (1954) identified three stages of play; practice play, symbolic play and play with rules to correspond to the sensori-motor, pre-operational and concrete operational stages of development of intelligence. He proposed that play progresses from the child's mental structure and individual processes to social play and negotiated meaning and symbolism. While Piaget (1962; 1965) recognises the social context of the child, he foregrounds the individual cognising child. In 'Ali, the Scientist' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:2), one could interpret that Ali first explores the concept of flow before communicating with his playmate. In 'You be the Fireman' (IPPA, Brennan 2004:4), the children first discover how to siphon water and then assimilate the new-found skill into a play script. In Piagetian mode, Hutt (1979) describes the first step as 'exploratory' play and the second as 'ludic' play and maintains that new learning happens in the first phase while 'ludic' play is about consolidation. Many of the stories, however, suggest; (1) that exploration is part of 'ludic' play, as in 'Des and the Bouncy Castle' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:56); (2) that children continue to develop schema through play as in 'Ali, the Enveloper' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:24) and; (3) share their knowledge in play as in many of the stories, for example, 'The Waterfall' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:54).

On the other hand, Vygotsky emphasised that rather than developing as individuals, children develop within a cultural matrix, interconnecting two key elements (1) a system of social relationships and interactions within a society and (2) the cultural conceptual and symbolic system. The child is enculturated into these systems through social interaction in activity, particularly with more capable community members, both peers and adults. Participation in cultural ways of interacting, of working together, of communicating and representing knowledge not only teach meaning but provide the tools for the on-going construction of meaning and function. In play, children both represent cultural experiences and ways of knowing and reconstruct meaning. The child inherits the cultural resources accumulated by that society, including a linguistic and symbolic system, cognitive frameworks, cultural artefacts and a bank of knowledge. These resources guide how children see and interpret experiences throughout their lives. Vygotsky's analysis of play is embedded in this sociocultural theory. What Piaget sees as individual constructions, Vygotsky sees as sociocultural constructions. "*What passes unnoticed by the child in real life becomes the rules of behaviour in play.*" (Vygotsky 1967:9). In play the child initiates imaginary situations and voluntarily submits to the rules of that situation. "*These rules derive their force from the child's enjoyment of, and commitment to the shared activity of the play world*" (Nicolopoulou, 1993:14). These are the generally agreed elements of any definition of play.

Clearly, in the story 'The Bold Girls' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:62) there are specific rules of behaviour for sisters, mothers and 'bold' girls, some of which the girls implicitly understand and some of which they must step outside the play frame to make explicit

and agree. By demanding agreement on the rules, play performs an important role in both reconstructing and reinforcing social expectations. Again, in the story 'The Day Everybody Scored' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:24) we observe children, not just playing football, but playing at being 'professional' footballers. Children demonstrate remarkable attention to the detail involved in the body manoeuvres and communication style and seem to share common experiences and interpretations that they bring to the play. The point of the exercise is not to score goals but to engage physically, socially and emotionally in the process of being footballers. Throughout this research, the image of the participating, cultural, constructing child framed our observations and was strongly reinforced by what we saw and heard. Hayes (2003:75) proposes that "*...this recognition of the active and social nature of learning is the key to refocusing attention on the relationship between play, care and learning.*"

### **Emotion and Cognition**

Trevarthen (1993:48) defines emotions as "*...intrinsically generated, central, regulatory states of the brain that unify awareness and co-ordinate the activity of a coherent, mentally-active subject.*" Emotion and cognition are inseparable. Humans, from the earliest age, need to give experiences emotional values that match the feelings of other people. Emotions are the key to intersubjectivity, and consequently, to cultural knowledge. We are born with a need to be part of a culture. Babies from the early days of life become involved in "*...protoconversational exchanges of expression with other people.*" (Trevarthen 1991:90) By six months a baby is eager to play with familiar playmates and "*...in the next few years play becomes richer in imagery and memory. It becomes the driving force of the child's mental work.*" (Trevarthen, 1991:93)

In recent times, research emphasises this social, emotional child. Fein (1985) suggests that play is motivated more by feelings than by reflections on reality, as implied in the exaggerated and fantastic worlds that children create in their play. She proposes that children are driven by such primary emotions as love, anger, joy and fear and the pretence frame of play provides the security and protection for their expression. It is permissible to express strong emotion when one is only pretending. Goncu (1999:22) proposes that "*...children's recognition of similarity in their affective needs creates a joint focus in their pretend play.*" They negotiate both differences deriving from their individual understanding and the joint pretend representation of affect. Corsaro's (1999:23) research shows that in play "*...children learn how to interact to achieve mutual understanding.*" Rayna's (2001:114) study of children's play concludes that "*...providing children with early opportunities for a meeting of minds with others, both adults and peers, favours the development of a sense of togetherness and a feeling of belonging to a community.*" This interest in 'togetherness' was found in abundance by De Haan and Singer (2001), Hannikainen (2001) and others. Dunn (1987:112) again identifies this interconnectedness

of emotions and cognition. Her study of interactions among siblings suggests that children use their intelligence on what matters most to them emotionally and these emotions arouse their "*vigilance and attentive powers.*"

Like Vygotsky, these researchers see play as having a socio-emotional motivation rather than a purely cognitive one. We see this in the 'The Fire brigade' story (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:34). Children engage with crisis situations, express fear, panic, relief and love. Gussin Paley (2004) tells us that children's playscripts and storytelling, like theatre and novels, often follow such universal themes as "*...someone is lost and finds a friend, is unloved and finds love, confronts life and death, is weak and then strong.*" This is the appeal of the story Owl Babies (Waddel, 1992) in the play scene 'Owls in the Wood' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:60). In 'the Interactive Child' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:6), we follow Nicole and her friends as they build their houses and become neighbours, clearly engaging with building 'togetherness'. In 'Tea with Diarmuid' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:18), Diarmuid radiates with pleasure in the ritual of making and sharing tea. In 'Eoin Supports his Team' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:66), Eoin demonstrates how identification with a local hurling team builds community bonding and encourages engagement with valued skills and knowledge. The strong emotional bond motivates Eoin to proactively ensure that his community is equally well represented in his Naíonra/playgroup. This kind of complex knowing can only happen through agentic participation in the activity of a community. Play engages in complex social activity and consequently is a key medium that allows children "*...to draw and reflect back upon the interrelated domains of emotional, intellectual and social life.*" (Nicolopoulou, 1993:13)

### **Play as Pedagogy**

In a society where children have little access to the working lives of adults, pretend play becomes all the more important. It is both a learning and teaching tool. It allows children to enter and experience spheres of adulthood that in real life they can only observe from a distance or on a television screen. In other societies, children, through a process of guided participation (Rogoff, 1990), are initiated into the trades and survival skills of adults from a very young age. We know that in Western industrialised societies children play more and adults encourage them and partake in play (Goncu, 1999). Perhaps this is the culture's way of compensating for children's exclusion from real life apprenticeship opportunities.

Rogoff (1990:39) draws parallels between the roles of young children and the roles of novices in apprenticeship. They both actively try to make sense of new situations and put themselves in a position to learn. The apprenticeship model often involves a group of novices who are a resource to one another in developing skill and understanding. They differ in levels of expertise and act, within the group, both as teachers and learners. In

play, children, sometimes supported by adults, do likewise. They imaginatively create a world based on their previous and combined experiences, which they can co-construct and direct. As children become more familiar with one another, we know that the play scenes are repeated and the play becomes more complex. With practice, children are quicker to move into role and become more knowledgeable and skilled in meeting the demands of the role.

In 'Engineers at Work' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:20), the children enter the community of engineers involved in developing a water scheme. They shout instructions to one another, staying in role and at the same time guiding the participation of others. In 'Hairdressers' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:16), Mary scaffolds the play through the provision of trade tools and in her role as client in the play scene. Children take on these roles in all their complexity, combining knowledge, skills, attitudes and emotions. If planning is valued in that community, children practice planning. If literacy is important then children engage with literacy. If creativity or co-operation is valued in that pretence community, children learn these skills. The educator both provides opportunities and 'scaffolds' (Woods *et al.*, 1976) participation in the community of practice so that children become more expert (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Many of the stories in 'Power of Play' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004) demonstrate this pedagogy in action. Open-ended materials allow for the intricate construction of a motorway in 'Redesigning the M50' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:22). A wonderful set design allows children to explore one of life's big questions "*How does Santa get down the chimney?*" in Christmas Story (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:28). Eileen supports Seán through his problem solving but follows his initiative in 'The Road that Seán Built' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:36). He emerges with a sense of personal mastery and achievement. Zoe chats to Martin about his shopping in 'From A to B and Back Again' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:26). Each storyteller, like Teresa in 'The Teacher as Learner' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:45) is involved in an assessment process that is about identifying strengths and interests and co-formulating and sharing these assessments with significant people in the child's life. The observant adult promotes valued knowledge through the assessment process. In 'Building Togetherness' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:32), David plays an obvious lead role in designing the structure but the critical eye also identifies Seán's exceptional role in building inclusion and co-operation. These are contributions worthy of note and by sharing our observations, we recognise their value. Family and carers alike become involved in the assessment and planning process. Play themes and activities become the link between family, practitioner and community, bringing together the broader life and experience of the child into the meaning making web. 'Gone Fishing' (IPPA, Brennan, 2004:46) is a powerful reminder of that partnership.

In the early years, Gussin Paley (1997) tells us "...an intuitive programme called play, works so well that the children learn the language, mannerisms and meaning of all the people with whom they live." They learn to negotiate, to compromise, to develop a theory of mind (Leslie, 1987), to direct and choreograph within the complexity of the social activity. Play is an embedded, holistic way of learning. Add to this, the pleasure of play (Bruce, 1991), its capacity to totally involve the players (Laevers, 1994), to induce a sense of mastery (Reynolds and Jones, 1996) to allow a state of flow (Czicksentmihayli, 1989), its role in keeping humans and animals ecologically adaptive (Sutton Smith, 1997), and we have a strong case for play. It is the key to quality learning experiences in early childhood, with implications for each and every dimension of a childcare service. In particular, it frames a pedagogical style that primarily recognises the 'community of learners' and the central characteristics of the learner as 'reflection, agency and culture.' (Bruner, 1996) A play curriculum inherently recognises the inseparability of emotion and cognition, and consequently of care and education and values the bio-ecological context in which both are embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

### Going Forward

Data to date comprises a cross section of play episodes selected by IPPA staff and programme participants because they identified them as significant learning moments. The next phase of research will follow the development of play in a playgroup over a year. It is an enquiry into what children do in their play and why they do it and will explore the connections between play activities, relationships and meaning making as they develop in the 'home corner'. This study will be undertaken over a three year period as a PhD thesis, with the support of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE). I look forward to sharing the learning.

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## Integrated Therapeutic Group Work with Young Children in a Family Support Setting

Mary Daly, Kerri Smith and Emma Jane Nulty

Barnardos is a national voluntary childcare organisation. In the Eastern Region Coastal Area, Barnardos offers a range and continuum of family support services operating from three Family Centres. This paper focuses on just one aspect of service provision; namely, Therapeutic Group Work Programmes which are provided directly for young children in the context of support for the family. This paper outlines the underlying principles of the work; describes the practical process of how children and their families are referred and assessed; details the Programme and consequent Family Support work, and illustrates the core function of team work within the centres. Sample profiles of children and their families will be provided during the presentation.

### Underlying Principles

**Early Intervention:** Barnardos believes that early intervention and parental support in a child's life is imperative in order to break the cycle of disadvantage and social exclusion. As identified by Home-Start International (2002: 27) "*The early years set in motion a train of events that are the basis of later development. A significant body of research evidence links physical, social, emotional and intellectual development with what happens to children in the first 5 years.*"

**Matching Needs and Services:** Many of the families attending Barnardos services experience such high levels of social exclusion that it is impossible for them to engage in mainstream services with their young children. In order to ensure that effective services which match the needs of the families are planned, implemented and evaluated, a needs assessment exercise was conducted by the Dartington Social Research Institute (London) in 2002-2003 and criteria for selection of families was developed. (See Dartington - i, 2003).

**Promoting Protective Factors:** All children need to develop social skills and the ability to both communicate effectively and form positive relationships with their peers and significant others. Barnardos has adopted the High/Scope early childhood care and education curriculum in their Family Centres. The focus is to identify and promote protective factors for the individual child. The individual planned programme for each child strives to increase the child's resilience and self-esteem by providing intensive and supportive opportunities for growth and development. Emphasis is placed on a partnership model between the child, the family and other professionals, focusing on a solutions and strengths based approach. As identified by Cleaver *et al.*, (1999):

*“A detailed exploration of the impact of parental mental illness, problem drinking or drug use, or domestic violence on children’s health and development at different stages of life showed that the short and long-term consequences for children will depend on the combination of resilience and protective mechanisms.....Very young children are particularly vulnerable to the impact of inconsistent and ineffective parenting.”*

**Family Support:** All the evidence indicates that attachment is essential to the healthy development of the young child. As outlined in detail by the Department of Health (2000), secure attachments to significant adults help children to develop appropriate peer relationships, and develop the skills to cope well with problems as they arise. As identified by Home-Start International (2002:27):

*“Bronfenbrenner was among the first to recognise the importance of parents in any child-centred intervention. The impact of the mother’s relationship with the child, and the dynamics of the relationships within the family and the outside world are seen as crucial factors in satisfactory child development.”*

Barnardos work to support the development of the parent/child relationship as the primary relationship in the child’s life and provide opportunity for other successful attachments to significant adults such as the other parent, and where appropriate, extended family members and the Key Worker in Barnardos. Any services to the children work in the context of the family and seek to engage with the systems in place to effect greater impact on positive outcomes for children.

### **Referral of Families to the Centres**

The following are the routes through which children and their families can become engaged with Barnardos services. Referrals are received from the following identified sources:

- Adult and Child Psychiatric Services;
- Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council (DLRCC) Homeless Unit;
- East Coast Area Health Board (ECAHB) Child and Family Services (through Social Workers, Public Health Nurses, Speech and Language Therapists);
- ECAHB Drugs/Aids services (Addiction Treatment Centres, Doctors, Nurses, Counsellors);
- Foras Áiseanna Saothair Training and Employment Authority (FÁS);
- Judicial System, by order of the courts;
- Local schools and external early years services;
- Self-referral or via other Barnardos services.

Information is provided by the referrer on a standard Barnardos referral form which is receipted in writing to the referrer and the family. Each child's individual referral is then discussed at a team meeting. When three or more of the following criteria apply to a family, they are considered to be eligible for assessment.

***Criteria for the Selection of Service Users***

- Homelessness/living in temporary accommodation;
- Overcrowding/poor housing/moving home frequently;
- Parental learning disability;
- Parental psychiatric illness;
- Parental addiction;
- Domestic violence;
- Lone parent/isolation lacking family support;
- Parental history in the care system;
- Young parent less than twenty-one years;
- Poverty/low income;
- Poor parent/child relationship;
- The need for child protection;
- Child or siblings in voluntary care;
- Child living with non-biological parent;
- Child exhibiting challenging behaviour;
- Family involvement with the criminal justice system;
- Childhood developmental delay.

During the presentation of this paper two case studies, which highlight the level and multiplicity of need of the families involved and which demonstrate the application of these criteria, will be presented.

**Assessment**

Each parent and child is invited to attend a meeting with a Key Worker from the group programme and the Family Worker or Centre Manager. The purpose of this meeting is to make an assessment of the level of need presenting in the family and gain a broader picture of the family circumstances. The work of the Centre is outlined to parents with the expectation that parents will be involved in the programme and that the focus of the service is not crèche or childcare provision.

Following the assessment meeting, consultation may occur with the referral source or with other relevant personnel who may have been identified as important during the assessment meeting. Consent is always given for this communication and consent for interagency communication is compulsory when parents are attending the drug treatment clinic.

The Barnardos staff team meet again to consider the outcome and recommendations of the assessment process. At this meeting an individual planned response is agreed for the child in the context of his/her family and for what supports/process need to happen to engage the child in the group programme. It is possible that the child may be deemed not to be ready or able to participate in a group programme. In this instance, a further period of assessment may be planned, with the parent and child attending as required for one-to-one sessions with a Childcare Worker/Family Worker, to gain a better insight into the needs of the child. The group work referral is then reviewed in due course.

### **Therapeutic Group Programme**

There are two Therapeutic Group Programmes on offer within each Family Centre: an Early Years Programme catering for children in the one to three year age group and a Preschool Programme for the three to six year age group. Places are assigned depending on the developmental stage of the child and the level of need to be addressed. The need to have an Early Years group was identified as part of Barnardos ongoing review of services. This indicated that children arriving into the preschool group at three years had already established disruptive and difficult behaviour patterns and that the parent/child relationship was often fractured and in difficulty. Intervention at an earlier stage provides an opportunity to work with the parent and child prior to the establishment of such difficulties. The involvement of parents in this work through the provision of information and skill-based learning and support is vital. As children grow and develop, their need for independence and mobility places increased pressure on the ability of their parents to respond to their needs, which may place the relationship between parent and child at risk.

Each programme caters for a small group of children with Key Workers who each support a group of 5 children. There is a third member of staff allocated to the group to support the needs of individual children within the Group Programme, and also to enhance the quality of the overall service. This is an invaluable resource to the team working directly with the children, as it enables Key Workers to continue with the Group Programme at a time when an individual child may be unable to participate.

The day starts with the arrival of the children and their parents. Parents are encouraged to spend some time playing with their child and the Key Worker is available to discuss anything of concern or to role-model certain play or child management situations as appropriate. This daily point of contact with home, bringing the family into the children's space ensures that there is a visible link between home and the learning environment for the child. There is great opportunity for shared learning between the staff and the parents at this time and it means that when a family is in crisis, or needs more specific support, the Key Worker can ensure that the parent speaks to the Family Worker or Centre Manager

on the day. The programme is planned to meet both the individual and the group needs with the daily routine reflecting opportunities for specific one-to-one interventions which may include play therapy or speech and language therapy. The Group Programme offers an environment which is rich in play materials and provides socialisation opportunities for the children in a highly supportive session. There is a high emphasis on supporting the social and emotional development by the child therefore increasing their potential for learning outcomes in other areas of their development.

The Active Learning Model promoted through High/Scope, with children's participation in daily and weekly planning, is a structure which responds to the needs of these children for decision making opportunities, conflict resolution and a safe and predictable environment.

This sense of being in control of their environment, and of what can happen there, is a new experience for many children and particularly for children whose day-to-day family lives are often chaotic and unpredictable.

The provision of key experiences allows for children's individual needs to be met within the context of the group. Given the high level of need, the children must be allowed to work through painful and traumatic experiences in a safe and responsive environment with adults around them who are predictable and consistent. This working through of experiences can manifest in their behaviour which at times can become very disruptive and may require one-to-one shadowing for a period of time. On the other hand, it may manifest as deeply withdrawn and almost psychotic behaviour, which will require a different but equally one-to-one response.

Children's progress and experiences are monitored on a daily basis and a weekly record is placed on each child's file by the Key Worker. The children and family needs are discussed twice a week by the team at family focussed meetings, which occur immediately after the session with the children.

Formal communication with parents occurs twice a year via a planned review structure. In this forum, the positive outcomes for children are discussed and strengths are identified in the family. In addition to this, any areas of concern are identified and a plan is made to address these going forward.

### **Family Support**

The Group Programme, described above, operates in the context of a Family Centre where the emphasis is on supporting parents to parent more effectively and to make choices which will enhance their lives and their children's lives. The Centre works with parents on

a number of levels, depending on their needs and their ability to engage. Parents are offered daily informal contact as described above, through the Key Worker in the children's Group Programme. The Family Worker is available for weekly counselling sessions as part of a support package for the parent. The focus of this type of work is on the parenting role and family related matters. The Family Worker or Centre Manager engages with, or make referrals to, external supports/agencies as appropriate. In a number of cases, the Family Worker supervises the work of the family skills worker provided through the ECAHB, and supports the provision of a planned response across agencies.

Where it is not possible to arrange weekly parent support sessions, the Family Worker or Centre Manager liaises with parents informally at arrival and home times to ensure that responses can be made on an informal basis as they are required. Through our work we have found that parents need to know that support is available on demand, particularly where addiction is an issue. There is a strong emphasis within the team on working in a flexible and approachable way with parents, so that they feel that the door is always open to them and that any concerns in relation to the welfare of their child can be addressed immediately.

Another aspect of Family Support work offered as part of the Group Programme is parent/child work. This work brings together the parent and the child in a weekly play session which focuses on exploring positive play experiences with the parent and the child with the support of the Childcare Worker who works with the Group Programme. The facilities of Marte Meo intervention and Non-Directive Play Therapy are available within the skill base of the region.

Family support is also available through a group programme for parents. This offers a weekly group session to parents facilitated by Barnardos staff. The focus of this Group is to bring parents together to share experiences and provide opportunities for external supports to develop as friendships emerge. It is also a valuable forum to build on parents' capacity by providing personal development training and group parenting programmes. As part of the overall service to children and parents, a six-week programme is offered to parents, the focus being the approach used in the Therapeutic Group Programme with children. This is another strong link for parents with the day-to-day routine of their children in the Early Years and Preschool Groups.

Home visits are also an aspect of family support and are offered as part of assessment, or if required, as an outcome of family work or the child's planned programme. Family work is recorded on a session-by-session basis, or as an individual piece of work as required.

A central dynamic of the work with children and families is the interagency communication and networking which occurs from the point of referral onwards. This communication happens on both a formal and informal basis and both as direct advocacy on behalf of a child or family or as a point-of-referral to external service providers.

### **Team Work**

Barnardos staff work in a cohesive and focussed way to meet the needs of the children and families attending the service. The structure in place to support this model of work involves meetings of a formal and informal nature among key staff. Each staff member receives regular formal individual support and supervision from his/her line manager and annual staff appraisals are mandatory.

Centre staff meet twice monthly for family focussed meetings across the wider brief of the work in the Centre. Monthly information meetings are also essential with all staff receiving updates on Centre issues or organisational information.

Bi-weekly staff support and family focussed meetings occur to support the Therapeutic Group Programme. These meetings are attended by all staff working with the children and families concerned, including the Centre Manager. The staff working directly with the implementation of the children's Group Programme undertake programme planning on a daily and weekly basis. Service planning and formal review is also undertaken twice yearly as a formal group exercise. In addition, staff work in pairs, undertaking home visits and parent/child work. Regular staff training sessions are planned to support the quality of the service provision and external support networks are actively encouraged to update and inform practice. The teams also benefit from the expertise of an Endorsed High/Scope Trainer working with the children and families within the Family Centres.

### **Conclusion**

Children and their families attending Barnardos services exhibit a high degree of crisis. Barnardos believes that it is critical to link with these families at an early stage in the child's development and seek to equip both family and child with the necessary skills to engage in mainstream services appropriate to their needs, both in the present and into the future. In this regard, the Family Centre provides the Therapeutic Group Programme for the children with a high emphasis on family support. The objective is to work in a supportive way to identify the strengths within the family and provide opportunities for parents and children to develop appropriate skills which will in turn increase their capacity to engage with themselves, each other and the wider society. This is an innovative approach to family work. As stated by the Department of Health and Children (2001:3), *"Until recently family support has been a neglected aspect of family policy. In so many instances it has been overshadowed by interventions which have focussed predominantly on child protection."*

We believe these Barnardos services act as a protective force in the life of the family, providing a place to build on strengths and improve life chances for children through the mechanism of early intervention.

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## Interdisciplinary Team Assessment: CRC Style

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### **Introduction to the Central Remedial Clinic**

The Central Remedial Clinic (CRC) is a national non-residential centre that provides multidisciplinary services for children and adults with physical and multiple disabilities. Within the group of clients attending the clinic, there is a broad spectrum of levels of need and severity and this can determine the type of intervention they receive from the service. New clients to the Clinic are discussed at a referrals meeting with the Medical Director and the Managers of therapy and social work departments. Traditionally each department sees children individually for assessment. In some situations, if the referral information indicates the need for it, individual therapists working with a particular child arrange combining their assessments. In addition, some clients are scheduled for specific team intervention, for example, the Muscular Dystrophy Team and the Feeding Team.

### **Introduction to Team Assessment Clinic**

In 2002, a new team approach to assessment, the Team Assessment Clinic, was introduced. The Team Assessment Clinic (TAC) is specifically aimed at meeting the needs of infants under three years of age presenting with severe, multiple and complex needs, from the Eastern Regional Health Authority (ERHA). Currently fourteen per cent of total referrals from the ERHA are for the TAC. These children are identified as requiring intervention from all therapy departments, social work and Paediatrician. As part of the work of a subcommittee examining the area of consulting with clients about their programmes, a focus group of parents held in 2003 in the CRC identified a link between the level of disability and level of need for consultation. TAC is a response to the need for a structured approach to these children's needs, the need to work as an interdisciplinary team and to facilitate greater involvement of parents in the process.

The ideas within 'Interdisciplinary Team Model' and 'Person-Centred Planning' (PCP) have become guiding principles in our development of TAC. The assessment is conducted by a team of professionals who collaborate with each other and with the child's parents, in order to provide a holistic view of the child and to establish a coordinated plan of intervention. The system allows for flexibility so that children who do not require the whole team input can continue to attend individual departments. Parents are recognized as valuable members of this team who are encouraged to be actively involved in the assessment process, in decisions made about their child and in therapy programmes. In order to provide a broader perspective of the process of the TAC, the 'Interdisciplinary Team Model' and principles of 'PCP' will be addressed.

### **Interdisciplinary Team Model**

According to Case-Smith (2001):

*“in the interdisciplinary model of interaction, a team of professionals from several disciplines involved with the child collaborates with the family to develop and implement an intervention program. With this approach the child and family can receive coordinated services and are able to benefit from the expertise of professionals from several disciplines who are directly involved. To ensure the success of this approach, the team members must respect one another’s roles, develop efficient formal and informal communication patterns, and be flexible in response to family preferences. This requires a willingness to share expertise and knowledge and to assume accountability for intervention procedures.”*

In the USA, services for individuals with disabilities are governed by Federal Law, and regulations enacted during the 1970s specify that services for individuals with disabilities should be developed by an interdisciplinary team and provided through individualized goal-based plans for care (Jacobson, 1987). Standards for accreditation of facilities in the USA requires an interdisciplinary team and an individual goal plan.

The Education for Persons with Disabilities Bill 2003, due for enactment in Ireland in 2004, states that education services should be based on an individualized assessment of need and that parental involvement, and where possible involvement of the person with disabilities, should be a central element of the process. These members of the team have a power of veto on any provision within the Individual Education Plan (Education for Persons with Disabilities Bill, 2003).

A survey by a UK disability organisation found that many parents of a child with complex needs had feelings of being excluded from plans for their child and that this had a negative impact on them. For example, parents felt that professionals spoke to each other about their child but had left them out of the conversation. In contrast, the same survey found that parents who were involved in decision making appreciated having their input encouraged and that this contributed positively to their well being (Limbrick-Spencer, 2000).

### **Person-Centred Planning (PCP)**

Higgs (2003) states that *“...person centred planning is a process of life planning for individuals, based around the principles of inclusion and the social model of disability.”* PCP began about twenty years ago in North America, with John O’Brien being at the forefront of this revolution. The core of the PCP approach involves clients being central to planning their own futures, with therapists taking a facilitative role.

When PCP is carried out in its entirety, the client, and in some cases the family, take control of the process. They have an opportunity to voice their hopes, dreams, fears and vision of their own future within an informal but structured process, concluding with clear positive statements about the client's future. Responsibilities for meeting identified action plans are assigned and a date is set for review. This information is then used by the therapists to direct intervention, and help the client develop in the direction they have chosen.

Person-centred planning has been adopted as policy in the North American education system. In Ireland, the National Disability Authority (NDA) and the Department of Health and Children (DHC) are targeting the development of disability services, and have identified five major areas of service delivery:

- 1 Person-centred services;
- 2 Leadership and Governance;
- 3 Management staffing and training;
- 4 Information and communication services;
- 5 A safe environment.

In relation to person-centred services, the *National Standards for Disability Services* state that:

*"Each service user receives person centred services and supports designed to meet his or her goals, needs and stated preferences."*

Such a service will provide information about rights and entitlements, regular assessment of need, opportunities for social inclusion, advocacy, and develop and maintain independence.

Within the TAC process, we have endeavoured to include some of the PCP principles. Parents are encouraged to be active participants in both the actual assessment with their child, providing feedback regarding the child's abilities and difficulties in all areas of development. Parents are also active in guiding the process by providing the other team members with their own priorities and concerns. Part of the social worker's role is to encourage parents' active participation in the assessment, and when needed, to clarify information for the parent.

O'Brien (1998) identifies two key concepts in PCP: active listening and the use of insight questions. Therapists employ active listening, and as such, are focused on what is being said verbally (e.g., paralinguistic by voice, volume, pitch etc.) and nonverbally (e.g., facial

expression, gesture and posture etc.) (Burnard, 1995). The use of insight questions, for example, “*how do you feel about your child’s progress?*”, allows for greater understanding of a situation. According to O’Brien (1998), insight questions can be difficult to ask and difficult for the parent to answer, but through this process, team members, including the parents/caregivers, can develop a deeper connection and have greater awareness and understanding for identifying goals and devising action plans.

TAC is about bringing people together, each bringing their own knowledge, experiences and feelings. Professionals actively listen to parents/caregiver’s concerns, hopes and needs, while providing choice, whether it be the primary focus of therapy, appointment times or information shared. Goals are not discipline-specific but rather holistic, with emphasis on the child’s needs. This lends itself to a plan that meets the individual needs of the child, and a plan that everyone feels committed to.

### **TAC Process**

The Team Assessment Clinic is made up of the following: child, parent/guardian, physiotherapist, occupational therapist, speech and language therapist, social worker, paediatrician and the team appointment coordinator. The criteria used for identifying children involve specific characteristics, such as prematurity, brain haemorrhage, presence of seizures etc. If a child is identified for TAC, the referral letter is sent to the team appointment coordinator who then sends an appointment letter and a copy of a brochure to the child’s family.

Prior to attending TAC, each family will have had an appointment with their child’s paediatrician. Before their TAC appointment, the social worker, who already knows the family, meets with the parents and goes through with them who is involved in TAC, discusses their concerns and outlines what to expect on the day. It has been our experience that some parents have worries that they will be judged and one parent spoke of going “*before the panel.*” The social worker’s role is to help reassure parents and also make the other members of the team aware of parents’ anxieties.

### **On the Day of the Assessment**

The time allotted for the assessment is from nine to twelve-thirty. Prior to the arrival of the child and family, general preparation takes place followed by discussion amongst team members. This is a valuable time for team members as any concerns that may have been previously expressed to the Social Worker can be shared. The Social Worker will try to meet parents in reception, bring them to the meeting, and introduce them to the other team members.

The assessment with the child and parents generally requires one hour, followed by a short break for the family, while team members consult with each other and discuss their thoughts and impressions. The family and team members come together again and feedback is provided. Together the parents and professional decide upon joint action plans. Referrals to other departments such as the Psychology and the Seating and Mobility departments are discussed with the family. Upon completion of the assessment of the child and consultation with the parents, a report, and a home programme if indicated, is written. Feedback is provided to the child's paediatrician and future appointments are made by the team appointment coordinator. Follow up appointments are arranged according to the child's needs. For example, one child may receive immediate regular input from the therapists, while another may only require six monthly review. Flexibility from therapists is the key to the success of this approach.

### **An Assessment with a Difference**

As previously discussed, the TAC is based on principles of person-centred planning and the interdisciplinary team model. Parents are encouraged to be active participants in both the actual assessment with their child, and also in guiding the process by providing the other team members with their own priorities and concerns. The social worker encourages parents' participation in the meetings, and if necessary, takes on the role of asking questions to clarify matters. A common source of frustration and difficulty for parents is the need to deal with a multiplicity of professionals. A positive aspect of the TAC identified by parents at the CRC is seeing therapists together. This has meant fewer appointments, which reduces pressure and time required away from work or home.

A benefit of the overall approach adopted within the TAC process is that this approach contributes to the continuum of family support. Parents are made to feel listened to, that they have a contribution to make and are offered choices. When parents' views are valued, they feel they have more control over decisions about their child's health. TAC helps instil in parents a sense of control over the plans for their child. Sloper (1999) established that for parents of children with severe disabilities, having a sense of control is an important personal resource and that it is a helpful contributor to parental well-being.

Another effective aspect of the TAC is its basis on the interdisciplinary model of interaction. The assessment involves all therapists interacting with the child and parents/guardians at the same time, in the same room, each helping to facilitate skills being assessed. Interdisciplinary work facilitates the child being seen as a whole individual, whose needs and characteristics overlap and interface.

### **Case Example**

A case example will be used in order to illustrate the way in which TAC has adopted the interdisciplinary team model. Cian was born at 42 weeks with no complications at birth. At four to five months of age, Cian was diagnosed as having a metabolic disorder.

From the team assessment, it was identified that Cian had significant delay in all areas of fine motor development, gross motor development, communication (in both his understanding and expression) and play skills. Feeding skills were also identified as a concern. The recommendations made were: Cian to be seen for a block of joint occupational therapy, physiotherapy and speech and language therapy and that the social worker meet with Cian's parents to discuss entitlements and supports available. At the time of the team assessment, Cian had been referred to physiotherapy and had been referred to the dietician at the CRC by the consulting paediatrician. Cian consequently was assessed at the Feeding Clinic the following month.

The interdisciplinary model recognises that each professional has their own area of expertise and the specific skills sought in a programme will be different. However, this model also recognises that each professional will respect each other's roles while also having a deep understanding of each. The goals and the plans for Cian were integrated to keep the intervention child/family centred. The focus of intervention in joint therapy sessions, with the occupational therapist, physiotherapist and speech and language therapist, was to work toward the following goals through identified strategies with Cian's parents. The first goal identified was that Cian would be ready for therapy. The strategies used to achieve this included increasing Cian's level of alertness and tone through proprioceptive activities (e.g. in supported sitting on a ball or lying prone on a ball; gentle bouncing or rocking movements). The outcome of this intervention was that Cian was alert and worked for forty minutes.

The second goal identified was that Cian would achieve lip closure and sound making. The strategies used were increasing Cian's postural tone through handling and positioning and providing a physical prompt below his chin with facial stimulation. The outcome of intervention was that Cian achieved weak lip closure and kissing in turn-taking sequence consistently by the end of the session. Goal three was that Cian would demonstrate cause and effect through the use of the following strategies: Ensuring Cian was well supported (e.g. in corner seat, with table to support arms); activation of tape recorder; positioning of switch off Cian's midline to his right; provision of multisensory feedback (e.g. touch, praise, dance and movement) and labelling of single word level. The outcome was that Cian demonstrated cause and effect consistently during sessions when supported.

The final goal identified was that Cian would eye point to a named object held at midline, would reach, grasp and then maintain his grasp for ten seconds while maintaining his head at midline. The strategies included ensuring Cian was well supported (e.g. in corner seat, with table to support arms); toys were held at Cian's midline; drawing Cian's attention to the toys by shaking it; ensuring toys could be easily grasped by Cian (e.g. size, shape). The outcome for this final goal was that, with practice, Cian was successful in achieving the goal; head control needs continued intervention.

The success of this approach was based not solely on Cian's response but also on the remarks from Cian's parents. They have commented that instead of having so many separate therapy programs to work on throughout the day, this approach has simplified everything. "*It's practical and makes sense.*"

### **Summary**

The guiding principles of TAC as outlined in this paper are the Interdisciplinary Team Model and PCP. Parents have commented favourably on the opportunity to ask questions of all the therapists together, feeling it is of benefit "...to have all therapists to get their outlook." One mother stated that initially she was nervous and wanted to give the right answers, however, she left the assessment feeling that her opinion was valued and that she was the expert on her son. Another parent has commented that as well as the therapist asking her questions, that this was the first opportunity she had to ask questions with all the therapists together, at the same time, in the same room. Parents have indicated that the characteristics they find most helpful when dealing with staff were when professionals are approachable, open, honest when giving information and when they listen (Sloper and Turner, 1992). TAC has evolved vastly during the past two years in its interdisciplinary approach and emphasis on person-centred planning. Informal feedback from professionals, and as well as from parents, has been positive. However, it is planned to achieve objective feedback in the future. In addition, a process will be developed to further the involvement of parents in decisions made for their child. This will be a long term goal, yet one that will be essential to the future of TAC and its future success as a service of excellence for parents and their young children with severe and multiple needs.

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## Music and Play: Diverse Aspects of 4-6 Year Olds' Self-Initiated Musical Play

Claudia Gluschkof

### Background

Music is present in preschools and kindergartens, both in the spontaneous expressions of children and in adult-directed activities. The latter are very common and easy to identify, as they are clearly defined and delimited. Some examples are: singing in 'circle time', dancing to recorded music, or accompanying the singing of birthday songs by playing small percussion instruments. Spontaneous musical expressions are very common as well, but are less easily noticed and identified as a musical episode, as they occur in various places, are sometimes unexpected, and are usually connected to other activities. Some descriptions of episodes identified by the author as musical expressions may clarify this point:

N, a five-year-old boy, sings while swinging on the playground swing, a 1950s-era song heard at his grandmother's house. The first sentence is sung louder than the rest; some of the words are not clearly pronounced.

Y, a four-year-old boy, claps his hands, then slaps both his thighs, repeating this pattern several times, while the kindergarten teacher is reading a story aloud.

S, a four-year-old girl, is playing by herself with dolls. She describes what the doll does as she moves it. S holds the doll up, then down, repeating the movement and the phrase (in Hebrew): "*Hop upward, hop downward, and we start from the beginning.*" This phrase is chanted and recalls a song taught by the kindergarten teacher.

Diverse ways of music-making are present in the episodes described above: singing an adult-composed song, improvising a rhythmic phrase, chanting an altered version of a poem written for children. Movement is an integral part of each of the instances. These are examples of '*musicking*', a term coined by Small (1998:9) meaning

*"...to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composition), or by dancing."*

The episodes described may have been 'lost' upon the adult who is not aware of the musical qualities inherent in them, and who does not value the children's *musicking* as a type differing from adults', especially that of adult professional musicians or amateur performers. Furthermore, young children's musical episodes are a unique mode of expression that is qualitatively different from that of adults (Moorhead and Pond, 1942; McPherson, 1998; Glover, 2000; Stadler Elmer, 2000).

This research study investigates the self-initiated play of four- to six-year-old children in music areas set up by the kindergarten teacher for the explicit purpose of promoting free play with music materials (mainly small percussion instruments), parallel to the 'building block area' that aims to promote constructive play and the 'homemaking center' that encourages socio-dramatic play. Music areas of the type mentioned are not very common. Four kindergartens in Israel were chosen for the study, each exhibiting a different combination of demographic characteristics (Jewish urban middle-upper class; Jewish in a *moshav* residential and agricultural cooperative village; Arab urban private run by the Catholic church) and organizational principles (free-flow, semi-structured, fully-structured). An ethnographic methodology was employed. The video data was collected by the researcher, who was familiar to the children either as their music teacher or as a regular visitor. Weekly taping sessions were conducted throughout one school year, with observation records written to provide additional information.

From the analysis of the data, categories emerged that reflected the researcher's interpretation of the footage. These categories were reviewed and compared to prior studies. Through this dialogue between the study and the literature, themes developed that are proposed as a possible way of viewing the complex picture of the self-initiated musical play of young children, who experience it holistically. Three aspects characterise the self-initiated musical play in music areas especially designed for this purpose: the sensory-motor, the cultural, and the social.

### **The Sensory-Motor Aspect**

Music is sound, therefore it is perceived aurally. In the case of young children, this is not simply the case. Music making is a unified event, created and experienced through four sensory modalities: the aural, the tactile, the kinesthetic and the visual (Cohen, 1980; Young, 1995; Glover, 2000). Dramatic activity, the use of instruments, singing, and rhythmic movement are freely combined or alternated (Pillsbury Foundation Studies, 1978).

*"The deep-rooted connection between moving and 'sounding' is of prime importance as a source of young children's musical expression. These parallel modes of time-based activity seem to be intrinsically connected."* (Glover, 2000:42)

Therefore, the sensory-motor aspect includes the preferred music parameters, the idiosyncratic movements, and the relationships among them. This division is artificial and is made only for the sole purpose of analysing the young children's music-making.

The child's prime interest is in tone colour. The study reveals that in playing bar instruments, children do not seek particular pitches but rather the different timbres,

playing these in alternation or even simultaneously, sometimes combining the various timbres of different instruments (Pillsbury Foundation Studies, 1978; Swanwick & Tillman, 1986; Smithrin, 1994; Glover, 2000; Gluschankof, 2002; 2003). Cohen (1980:257) maintains that this attention paid to the sound is to the wholeness of it, "...*not separating it into its component parameters.*" The sound colour is mainly a factor of its timbre but includes the other parameters of intensity, accents, duration, and even pitch, especially if they are extreme (very loud/soft, very long/short, very high/low).

The interest in the timbre of the sound is related to the way children get acquainted with a percussion instrument. As with any new object, they explore its physical properties (e.g. size, shape, material, smell, etc.), the actions that can be performed with it (e.g. shake, pluck, strike, carry around, look through, etc.) and the consequences of the different actions (e.g. loud sounds, long sounds, light is reflected, etc.). Sometimes the interest resides in a particular physical property, and the action is a way of exploring this. Sometimes the focus moves from the sound itself to the action, and the sound is a byproduct of this interest. Sometimes the action develops into an instance of dramatic play.

### **The Cultural Aspect**

Music is organised sound, produced by human beings. Therefore, it has to be considered as a sound experience that belongs to a specific culture (Blacking, 1967). What is the culture to which the young child's *musicking* belongs? Is it a culture specific to children? Is it that of the kindergarten? Of the larger community?

The impact and influence of the culture of the adult community is clearly revealed in the playing of Q, a four-and-a-half-year-old girl attending an Arab kindergarten in Nazareth. She plays the *darabuka*, a Middle Eastern drum, the way it is played within the Arab culture: with two hands, holding it under her arm. The rhythm played (*massmoudi khabir*) is a conventional one familiar from popular music.

A specific culture develops within the kindergarten that results from the latter's cultural matrix: the beliefs, values and principles, especially regarding education, of the adult staff and those of the children and their families. The adult-initiated music activities are based on the educational and instructional context set up by the adults (Kalekin-Fishman, 1986; Bresler, 1998), while the self-initiated children's *musicking* belongs to a child-generated cultural subcontext, of the sort "...*which most often remain invisible to adults but are most! visible and salient to children.*" (Corsaro, in Graue and Walsh, 1998:12). This style of musical expression is called "childlore" by Campbell (1998). The choreography to '*Shir la-Shalom*' [Hebrew: A Song for Peace], a widely popular song composed by and for adults, as developed by three five-year-old girls at an urban Israeli kindergarten, is a clear

example of that specific style: the girls watched the choreography developed by their peers a year earlier, adopted its basic ideas, and continued developing it over a period of six weeks. Their movements relate variously to the meaning of the words, the structure of the music (e.g. the song's refrain), and sometimes to specific musical motifs.

Within a specific kindergarten's culture, each child expresses herself and some of them develop their own musical style. This style is unique to each child and is embedded in the kindergarten's culture, which is itself nested in that of the larger community. M, a 5-year-old girl in a Jewish non-urban kindergarten, used to spend long periods of time (no less than fifteen minutes, usually thirty minutes) playing in the music area. She would organize different instruments in a row, then develop different musical phrases by playing the instruments in a succession of varying sequences. The manner in which she played the various instruments (e.g. chime bars, agogo bells, bongos) did not resemble the manner in which they are played in their original culture, but did resemble the way these instruments are played by other children in that kindergarten. The musical phrases do not resemble any song or musical piece introduced by the kindergarten teacher. M is the only girl who spends long periods playing by herself, each time picking up from where she had left off the previous time.

### **The Social Aspect**

The social aspect can be seen in both the peer interaction of children and in the adult-child interaction. Among the forms, peer interaction, solitary playing, parallel playing and cooperative playing are found in the self-initiated play of children in the music area. Littleton (1991) found out that solitary playing is more common in the music area than at the 'homemaking center'. Parallel music playing is intriguing to the adults on the staff: children play side by side, sometimes rather loudly, in the noisy kindergarten environment. The noise and other sounds do not seem to distract them from, or interfere with, their own doings. It is possible that children make use of filters that allow them to screen out all external stimuli not related to their playing when such playing is generated by their own initiative and interest (Gluschankof, 2003). When there is cooperative play, instances of peer learning are more frequent and occur mainly through imitation (Smithrin, 1994). The model is usually the child who is perceived as the one with more original *musicking* ideas. This child may not be one who has original ideas in other fields or is a group leader. It is interesting to note that children identify and value originality and choose to imitate it. An original idea that is imitated may serve as a model even over several years (Gluschankof, 2003).

In all of the episodes of self-initiated music play described above, no adult is mentioned - but no episode would have occurred without the tacit acceptance of the adults. The design of the music area is done by the kindergarten teacher, and the time to play there

is set by the same adult. Q., one of the kindergarten teachers who had studied music formally, set up a music area. Initially, Q. felt that “*the children were just making noise*” there, and she was not able to value the free exploration of the instruments as a worthy activity. It did not sound like music to her. Q. was applying adult standards to the children’s *musicking*. Free play was accepted in other areas, but in the music area she felt that the children needed the guidance of an adult. This changed over time as a result of Q.’s professional development and reflective practice, and she came to see her role at the music area as “*being there for their sake and not for mine.*” She listened to the music of the children and showed her approval, sometimes just with a smile, sometimes by joining in their playing, and sometimes by writing down the words they dictated to her (Gluschankof, 2001).

Another kindergarten teacher, E. who likes music but never studied it formally, accepted the suggestion of the music teacher and set up a music area. E. was fascinated by the various ways the children played there, and especially by the original ideas displayed by some children who were not particularly original in the kindergarten’s other areas and activities. She would happen to hear a child playing something new, and say to him: “*Wow! That’s new and interesting! I’ve never heard that sound played in such an innovative way!*” She would then share these discoveries with the music teacher. It was E. who first listened to N. singing that old song in the swing.

All the teachers at the kindergartens in this study reported on self-initiated children’s *musicking*, not only within the music area, but in other areas as well. Was this a direct consequence of the self-initiated activity at the designated music area, or that self-initiated *musicking* had been present previously and the adults had not been able to recognize it before they came to value what was occurring in the music area? This is an issue that requires further research.

It is clear that the enabling of self-initiated play in the designated music area provides an opportunity for a quality learning experience that goes beyond what is possible in solely adult-directed music activities. Here the adult’s role is supportive, fostering the self-initiated play that achieves an enhanced quality in the educational experience.

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*"You and Me and the Two Of Us!"***A Framework for Increasing Social Competence in Children in Nursery Schools and Some Examples of How to Support Children Developing Social Competence through Dramatic Play****Sidsel Hauge And Kari Lamer****Introduction**

Norwegian – and Nordic - day-care institutions (Pedagogical institutions for children 1 – 6 years), differ from other European and American institutions in one very important way: the Norwegian children spend a lot more time in informal relationships with both children and adults, participating in dramatic play and a variety of activities in the playground. There are some formal lessons in Norwegian day-care institutions, but compared with England, Belgium and other European countries, they are fewer and do not last long. As a consequence, Norwegian day-care institutions, in addition to specific topics, attach great importance to play, care and social interaction. Increasing social competence in children is one of the two main goals for the pedagogical practice in the Norwegian curriculum for day-care institutions.

To help the day-care institutions to fulfill this goal, Lamer (1997a; 1997b; 1997c) has developed a framework program called *"You, Me and The Two of Us! A Framework Program for Increasing Social Competence in Children in Day-Care Institutions."* The program is based on international studies regarding social competence as a defined field of research, analyses of Norwegian day-care tradition as a context for children's development of social competence and newer developmental theory, in addition to a close analysis of some selected international competence programs in the field. Today sixty per cent of the day-care institutions in Norway are using this program.

**Learning and Development**

The framework program is also based upon an explicit view of the children's development and learning. Children's development is looked as a continual process in the interaction between the child and the environment. Thus ordinary life becomes important. To guide the children's learning, one has to pay attention to the complete situation the child will experience. Every experience through daily situations contributes to their learning and development, and it is the quality of these experiences that decides the direction of the learning. Consequently a basic assumption in the framework program is that children learn in informal as well as formal situations, or in unstructured as well as structured situations. The relational perspective is central in the program.



This relates to an extended view of learning, and it is a contradiction to the view that pedagogical activities primarily are connected to structuring and conveying a certain portion of knowledge during a fixed time span.

### **What is Social Competence?**

Based on the theoretical analyses mentioned earlier, the concept of social competence in "*You, Me and The Two of Us*", is operationalised in five areas, where each of these areas contains the same type of social skills:

- *Empathy and role-taking* – sensitivity for other peoples' feelings and understanding the perspectives and thoughts of others;
- *Pro-social development* – positive social attitudes and actions as helping other people, cheering up and sharing with others;
- *Self-control* – to delay your own needs and wishes in situations that include taking turn, making common decisions and compromises, and to handle conflicts in acceptable ways;
- *Self-assertion* – how to assert yourself and your own meanings in an acceptable way, how to handle group pressure and how to become included in ongoing play and conversations, and;
- *Play, pleasure and humour* – to differentiate between play and other activities, to interpret the different signals in playing, to be able to get "carried away" and feel happiness, joy, relaxation and have fun.

These five areas are further operationalised in more concrete themes in the framework program, but they are still not as concrete as they need to be to be used in the concrete pedagogical practice in the day-care institutions. A key point in the program, and a consequence of the explicit developmental view, is the assumption that the staff has to observe, evaluate and work with the children's social competence in their own contexts. In other words, they have to connect, on their own, these themes in the program to the actual every-day life in their own day-care institutions.

### **Further Development of the Program through Three Phases of Intervention**

The implementation and further development of the framework program has taken place in three different phases over a period from 1992-1997. Action research is used as a means of approach in direct cooperation with forty different day-care institutions. The analyses of the intervention processes showed the need for a strategy of influencing the whole organisation and, in addition, the values and practices of the staff involved. Norwegian early childhood education has been heavily influenced by psychological theories, especially theories of psychological development. This has led to a diffuse adult role, often influenced by non-reflected and tacit knowledge. Traditions, routines and

“usual ways of acting” easily dominate the pedagogical practice. Up to two-thirds of the staff in Norwegian day-care institutions are without any formal education for working with children.

Among a lot of changes made as a response to the experiences in the intervention processes, a step-by-step progression for the development of the personnel’s own competence, was developed as an important and integrated part of the program. Greater theoretical insight and knowledge, together with learning by active participation where reflection is a key issue, became emphasized to a greater degree. The study of the two last phases of implementation, have shown results both in the target group (the children) and in the intermediate group (the personnel).

### **“You, Me and the Two of Us” – Three Books and Three Pamphlets**

In 1997, three books were published describing the framework program; *The Theory Book*, the *Handbook* and the *Children’s Book* (Lamer, 1997a; 1997b; 1997c). The Handbook describes the framework for the practical-pedagogical work to increase the children’s social competence, and as a consequence of the explicit view of learning and the experiences of the implementation processes, the Handbook comprises three pamphlets; the *Theme Pamphlet*, *Here-and-now Pamphlet* and the *Basis Pamphlet*.

*The Theme Pamphlet* contains suggestions for carrying out learning situations which are planned and structured in advance, so-called theme gatherings. Theme gatherings are based on the children’s book “*You and me and Truls og Trine*” which is about Truls and Trine and the other children in their day-care institutions. These theme gatherings are used to create a common platform for norms and values which will influence the social environment, and focus is placed on skills that are central in acquiring social competence.

*The Here-and-now Pamphlet* is aimed at making the staff aware and supports those parts of their natural daily interaction which is essential for children’s social development. The pamphlet contains suggestions for methods which the staff can use to promote each child’s or group of children’s social competence, in daily here-and-now situations. Methods which are more generally aimed at encouraging a good social environment are also described in the pamphlet.

*The Basis Pamphlet* aims specially to inform staff about newer pedagogical perspectives and concepts and theories about small children’s socio-cognitive development and learning.

A step-by-step use of these three pamphlets is aimed at giving the personnel an easy start and enough time to develop and change their own practices. From 1997, the

intervention processes have been based on self-help and education through group work and training, guided by these books.

#### **The Fourth Phase of Intervention**

The experiences from the day-care institutions using the books now point to new phenomena of interest: it looks like most day-care institutions succeed quite well in working with the program the first year. According to the step-by-step progression, the personnel are going through the learning set-ups with the children, and they are starting to study the philosophy and methods of the program. But after the first year, when they are meant to follow the positive socialisation practice from the structured part of the program in the unstructured here-and-now-situations, many of the pedagogical leaders find it difficult to succeed. This points to the need for further development and refining of the intervention processes in the framework program.

A meaningful intervention requires knowledge of potential mediating influences, subgroup effects, changing processes and perhaps the most important to our present considerations, a theory of the micro-processes by which change can occur. The main mechanisms for change are already incorporated into the guidelines and procedures of the integrated step-by-step progression in the intervention processes. But there is still a need for describing in an even more detailed way the micro-processes needed in the transaction from the new theoretical knowledge to practice, and from the structured part of the program to a flexible use in context. Operationalising these micro-processes of intervention-generated changes is the main subject of the new and ongoing study. This will represent the fourth phase of the intervention and further development of the framework program. The study is based on a sample of seven day-care institutions following the framework program *"You, Me and the Two of Us."*

#### **The Importance of Dramatic Play**

Earlier in this paper, social competence was operationalised into five areas, where the fifth area is named *"play, pleasure and humour."* As play also has an important place in the Norwegian Curriculum for day-care institutions, we want to present the micro processes needed for developing children's social competence through play.

To participate in dramatic play requires high social competence. At the same time, dramatic play is an important arena for developing social competence. All the five areas in social competence already mentioned are present in this kind of play.

#### **The Need for a Reflecting Adult**

Adults tend to think that children will create dramatic play when, and if, they are allowed to be together over a period of time. They tend to remember their own childhood and

recall how they might have participated in playing with groups of friends. But the childhood of modern children differs from the childhood of their parents, or the childhood adults seem to remember, in several ways:

- 1 The children we talk about in day-care institutions are usually a lot younger than the children the adults remember as playing together;
- 2 A large part of their time during the day is spent in organized groups, which are not of their own choosing;
- 3 The children in the group come from different families, with different histories and traditions, with different experiences and values. In other words, the children don't necessarily have a set of common experiences to build upon to create their dramatic play;
- 4 Modern families often move during the children's pre-school years, making it even more difficult for the young children in the group to form a common basis for play;
- 5 The young children's immature language makes it very difficult to overcome the challenge of different experiences and histories.

This means that adult care-givers in day-care and pre-school institutions have an important part to play in facilitating children's opportunities to create their dramatic play.

#### **The Need for an Active Adult**

First of all, the adult must help the children to create a common ground upon which to construct their play. This may be done in different ways; by telling fairytales, reading stories, giving the children shared experiences by taking them on visits to shops, fire-stations, museums etc. The experiences must often be repeated more than once, and they must be put into words. They must talk with the children about their experiences. This gives a foundation to develop empathy and role taking, but also to develop playing skills.

The next step will be to help the children to recreate their experiences in dramatic play. At first, the adults must often be the "director" of the play. They must put the story to be played into words, help the children choose their different roles, and to support them playing out the story.

The adults should further assist the children in creating space for playing both literally in arranging a place to play, but also metaphorically in helping create the story in their minds.

Young children are easily distracted in play, so the adult must help them holding on to the fiction by comments like: *"What happened then? What did he/she say/ do? Etc..."* The adult must also help the children repeat the play, often several times, with the adult standing by to guide them, again and again.

Another role for the adult is to help the children try alternating the roles. Children can take their turns as “director” of the play, choosing who plays which part and deciding which changes in the story is acceptable (promoting empathy, role taking and pro-social development). In the beginning it might be wise to stick fairly close to the original story, but as the children become familiar with the story, they may enjoy creating their own version.

The adult must be capable of varying between different ways of participating in children’s play, and see when to choose which role. Three common roles are:

- 1 Actively participating in the play;
- 2 Participating, but taking a fairly distant role;
- 3 Not participating, but being close by and being able to give support in different ways when needed.

Finally, an important role for the adult is to help children who are not originally participating in the play to be accepted into the ongoing play. To be able to do this, the adult must understand what the children are playing. Only then can they help the new child being included into the play.

Two premises are necessary for the new child to understand:

- 1 Firstly, they must have a sense of what the play is about or know the story being acted out (empathy and role taking);
- 2 Secondly, they must be able to ask to participate in an acceptable way (self-assertion, self-control).

Children who want to participate, but don’t know how to invite themselves into the play, need help. Sitting on the care-giver’s lap, they might receive help to form an idea about what story is being played (empathy, role taking). The care-giver can also help them get an idea about what kind of role they might take, what roles are available, what roles might advance the play, or will at least not disrupt the story (self-assertion, self-control, playing skills). When the adult and the child together have found a possible role for the child, negotiation about entrance to the play might be necessary (empathy and role taking, self-assertion, self-control, playing skills).

The care-givers’ role in this negotiation is not to dictate the result, but to help all parties to articulate their wishes and ideas (self-assertion), to listen to each others’ proposals (empathy), and to help them make compromises by suggesting different ways of solving their differences (self-control, pro-social behaviour). The children may agree to play the

story in different ways, choosing one way first, then the other. They may combine different ideas, but they may also decide that new players must accept the original play if they want to participate.

The adults' role here is to make sure that all the participants are given an opportunity to present their wishes and ideas, that none of them walk away with a feeling of being excluded or overlooked. They may not have their wishes fulfilled, but they must feel that they have been seen (self-assertion, self-control).

Also the adult may help children to become aware of the humour occurring during the play, as funny faces, strange dressing, comic happenings etc., and to comment upon the pleasure of playing together.

### **How the Staff may Support Each Other**

Care-givers have to engage in cooperative learning in order to develop their competence in when, and how, to intervene. They often start observing each other, or presenting their experiences in different situations for discussion.

In these discussions, they must strive to describe their experiences as detailed as possible. The other adults can give their interpretations of what occurred between the children and adult, what was the purpose of the adult's interference and what they think the children learned in this situation. Did they learn what the adult intended them to learn? How can they know this? Would the other adults have intervened in the same way to reach the same intent, or would they set other goals for their interventions?

There is never only one solution to what the care-giver could or should do in these situations. This depends upon who participates in the situation, what priority of learning is in focus and the care-giver's competence and personal feelings. Children are different, and so are the care-givers, but the main goal must be the same: to help children develop their social competence and make sure that all children feel that they belong to a community where people care about each other.

We can never create an environment where children never feel excluded in some situations. We can never ensure that they never are disappointed or feel sad. What we can do is to ensure that their feelings are seen and accepted, that new opportunities open up when others are closed, and we can help them meet such situations in ways that help them develop positive coping strategies and social skills which they can use for future situations.

Adults support each other in these tasks by helping each other in finding new ways to interact with children. They may do this by reading theories about social competence and by questioning each other's understanding and actions and by voicing their approval when they see a colleague doing something good. They must be able to analyse and wonder together, to take different perspectives, and see this as an enrichment of their own understanding, not as a threat to their own competence. Only then will they be able to support the children in developing their competence. Adult care-givers must themselves develop their social competence to be able to support children in developing theirs.

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## Supporting Quality through Targeted Research on Special Needs and Disadvantage

**Annette McDonnell**

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was launched by the Minister for Education and Science in October 2002. Its objectives are:

- To develop a National Framework for Quality in early childhood care and education (NFQ/ECCE);
- To develop targeted interventions on a pilot basis for children who are educationally disadvantaged and children with special needs;
- To prepare the groundwork for the establishment of an Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA) as envisaged by the White Paper; and
- To provide advice to the Minister for Education and Science on all issues relating to early childhood care and education (CECDE, 2001).

To address this second objective, four targeted projects were developed by the CECDE and the Department of Education and Science (DES). While the projects address primarily the second objective of the CECDE, they will also inform the other two objectives, in particular the development of the NFQ/ECCE. Initially a public invitation to tender was advertised but the outcome of this process was quite disappointing and reflected a less than optimal capacity for research in this sector. By this we mean that while there are skilled people and groups of people in Ireland capable of carrying out this research, many of these people are already working to their full capacity and could not spend the time or resources to tender or to consider carrying out the project. So by providing funding for these projects and other research programmes, we hope to support the sector in increasing its capacity for research. Two projects were awarded from this process and the CECDE then began a second restricted tendering process, where selected organisations were approached and asked to consider applying for the two remaining projects. This has resulted in one of the outstanding projects being filled but one project still remains unassigned.

Targeted interventions have proven in the literature to be advantageous for vulnerable groups, such as children with special needs or those experiencing disadvantage (Riordan, 2001). The importance of providing additional support for families at risk has also been emphasised in the Report of the Commission on the Family (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 1998).



The projects will have the following characteristics:

- They will have a strong, rigorous research focus producing evidence based, meaningful outcomes;
- They will provide early interventions (in the 2-4 age group), which are known to be more effective than waiting until children reach school age;
- They will acknowledge the importance of high quality interactions in providing optimal cognitive and social outcomes for young children;
- They will acknowledge the importance of listening to children and their families;
- They will be multidisciplinary where appropriate;
- They will be rigorously evaluated.

The first project, *In Search of Quality: Multiple Perspectives* will look at different measures and perspectives of quality from different stakeholders in ECCE in Ireland. Although there is an abundance of literature available internationally demonstrating that quality in ECCE is subjective, complex and context dependent (Moss and Pence, 1994), little of this is specific to the Irish context and may lack cultural sensitivity. Research of this nature carried out in Ireland will provide a meaningful insight into the key aspects of quality in ECCE settings in Ireland.

It is envisaged that this research will provide a wide range of perspectives on quality. In addition to gathering the perspectives of parents and staff, the viewpoint of young children will also be accessed. The project will produce and validate instruments to measure quality in the Irish context and the outcomes of this research will inform and contribute to the development of the NFQ/ECCE currently being developed by the CECEDE.

The objectives of the project are:

- To develop a better understanding of quality in early childhood care and education in Ireland;
- To investigate the nature of quality in a variety of different settings where early learning takes place;
- To gain an insight into multiple perspectives on the meaning of quality including parents, staff and children's views;
- To examine both observable quality and perceived quality in ECCE settings;
- To devise methodologies for examining quality in the Irish context.

The Centre for Social and Educational Research (CSER) in the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) has been awarded this project. The underlying assumption for CSER's approach is that a universal definition of quality may be a misleading premise. Rather, it is more

useful to consider quality as a relative concept, dependent on the particular cultural values present in a particular society at a particular time. When considering quality one must therefore consider the different aims of ECCE settings. These include promoting children's development, providing a safe, nurturing environment for children as well as meeting the needs of their parents for quality affordable care.

The project aims to gather data relating to each of these objectives from a wide variety of stakeholders in order to develop a broad view of quality. It is hoped that this will identify a number of common qualities or objectives applicable to all services and establish the interdependence between them. Data on both observable and perceived quality will be gathered from a variety of settings, including both sessional and full day services for children from birth to six years. Observable quality will be measured by using the Revised Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R) (Harms and Clifford, 1990; Harms *et al.*, 1998). As this scale measures quality in the environment only and does not necessarily ensure quality interactions and experiences, measurements will also be taken using the IEA Pre-primary Project observation schedules developed by the CSER (Hayes *et al.*, 1997). These measure adult time management, adult behaviour and child activity to give an overview of the quality of the interactions in the child's environment. Perceived quality will be measured by use of both semi-structured interviews and focus groups of the stakeholders. These will include parents, staff and children, as well as policy makers and other key personnel.

The anticipated outcomes of the project are that:

- Empirical data on the observed and perceived essence of quality in a variety of ECCE settings in Ireland will be gathered and documented;
- Methodologies that can be used to access young children's views in ECCE will be developed;
- Valid and reliable information about what constitutes quality in ECCE settings that can be used to inform the development of the NFQ/ECCE will be gathered;
- The emergence of a common or shared language on quality in the Irish context will be facilitated;
- Relationships with the ECCE sector will be enhanced.

The second project, *Early Intervention for Children with Special Needs in Diverse Settings* will look at the provision of individualized intervention programmes for children with special needs. Many studies have shown that early intervention for children in special needs is effective (Guralnick, 1997). This study will try to isolate the factors that contribute to quality over a diverse range of settings and ensure optimal outcomes for children and their families in any of these settings. The approach taken will provide

children with individualized programmes to reflect the diversity of children's backgrounds and conditions of disability. It will look at diverse settings to isolate which children derive the optimal outcome from each setting. The current literature suggests that children with different levels of disability derive maximum benefits from different settings, but that the quality of the programme implemented has a greater effect than the nature of the setting (Cole *et al.*, 1991; Odom, 2000). In view of this, the project will offer quality intervention to three-year old children with special needs in three different settings, examining their progress in key areas of development in response to high quality teaching programmes. It will also look at how the programme and setting combinations prepare the children for their transition to the next level of education. As well as determining aspects of programme quality, the project will also examine common features of the settings, which make a positive contribution to child development.

The objectives of the project are:

- To establish the impact of the individual interventions on key areas of the children's development through the assessment and recording of children's progress on an on-going basis;
- To identify and to describe the pedagogic practices that contribute to children's development in each setting;
- To identify the strengths and weaknesses of the individual settings in terms of their capacity to meet children's present learning needs;
- To identify the strengths and weaknesses of the individual settings in terms of their capacity to support children's transition to future appropriate settings;
- To identify the factors within the individual settings which contribute to quality intervention for children with disabilities, where quality is defined in terms of ability to meet children's learning needs in an appropriate setting.

The Mid-Western Health Board was awarded this project, which will be implemented through the North Tipperary Early Intervention Centre (NTEI). It will be informed by the principles of the *National Children's Strategy* (Department of Health and Children, 2000) namely to be child-centred, family-orientated, equitable, inclusive, action orientated and integrated. The NTEI are committed to family-centred practice, which respects the family unit, takes account of family circumstance and priorities, while empowering its members to be key components of the quality intervention. This approach involves the use of multidisciplinary teams working through Individual Learning Plans (ILP) for each child designed to meet their individual needs. The project will use Transdisciplinary Play based Assessment (TDPA) and intervention, using a model which views play as being vitally important to child development. TDPA aims to support holistic development of the child and to use play as a way to engage children and increase the quality of their experiences and interactions with family and service providers.

Both quantitative and qualitative data will be gathered from eighteen children in three different settings. The children's progress throughout the study will be measured using the Carolina Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers with Special Needs (CCITSN) (Johnson-Martin *et al.*, 2004). This system closely complements the TDPA and the ILP processes. The curriculum provides functional activities, suggestions and specific adaptations to address sensory/motor issues and stresses the importance of family involvement throughout the assessment-intervention process. The CCITSN allows for the continual collection of data on the children's progress, and over longer periods of time, generates a developmental chart for each child of their progress through the curriculum.

This quantitative data will be complemented by qualitative information collected using a cultural phenomenological approach to investigate how Irish children, families and educators understand high quality intervention. Discourse analysis of interviews will be used to explore their perceptions and experiences through the identification of lexical fields, key words and phrases. The interviews will produce data to gauge the effectiveness of the interventions, programmes and transition plans for each of the different settings. This examination will produce a rich body of qualitative data to give a keen insight into the socio-cultural perceptions and implications of high quality intervention for children with special needs in the Irish context.

The anticipated outcomes of the project are that:

- Documented evidence about what constitutes quality provision for young children with special needs will be produced;
- Empirical data of the effectiveness of interventions in different settings for children with special needs will be gathered;
- Guidance for the Department of Education and Science in terms of the issues of policy and practice which are relevant to children with special needs will be collated;
- A specialised group of highly trained staff working in the area of special needs will be developed.

These findings will identify models of best practice for professionals working in the area of special needs in Ireland. The approach taken will ensure that these models will holistically integrate assessment, intervention planning, programme implementation and reassessment in response to a child's individual goals. They will also inform the nature of professional development needed for practitioners in this area.

The third project, ***An In-career Development Programme for Teachers and Management in Pre-schools for Travellers*** will encourage the development of professional practice and skills for those working in Traveller preschools. It will contain a built in evaluative aspect to allow dynamic on-going training and career development.

It is widely agreed that quality early education for children experiencing disadvantage is vitally important. Traveller children are among the most disadvantaged in Ireland and the recent *National Evaluation Report on Pre-schools for Travellers* (DES, 2003) has made many recommendations aimed at enhancing the quality of their educational experiences and improving their educational position within Irish society.

The Report recommends that:

*"...the provision of in-career development courses for teachers in the Traveller pre-schools should continue and should be made more comprehensive.... [and that] ...the content of in-career development courses should be determined by the In-Career Development Unit of the Department of Education and Science in consultation with the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE,) the Further Education Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the teachers and management committees of the pre-schools."* (DES, 2003:83)

In line with the report's recommendations, this project will develop pre-service courses leading to a recognised minimum qualification for pre-school teachers. They will be in line with best practice in ECCE including studies of child development and psychology, language acquisition and therapy, age appropriate curricula and learning activities, as well as curriculum and pupil assessment. Specialist options will include Traveller culture and intercultural education and completion of these options should be regarded as a desirable characteristic in those seeking employment in pre-schools for Travellers.

The content of the programmes will be guided by the recommendations of the evaluation as well as by a training needs analysis with teachers and assistants in pre-schools for Travellers and consultation with relevant groups and agencies. These will include the Traveller Education Co-ordinator in the DES, parents of Traveller children, the In-Career Development Unit of the DES, the CECDE and FETAC. The training course will be accredited by FETAC and will be implemented over the course of a school year (10 months). It will be delivered in a series of 10 modules. Each module will be equivalent to one day per month and will be made available to all teachers and assistants. Two general aims of this provision are to allow practitioners to acquire and continuously develop their knowledge and skills in ECCE and to enable existing practitioners to obtain accredited pre-school teacher qualifications over time.

Similarly and simultaneously, a training programme for Traveller preschool management committees will be developed. This will be based on recommendations from the National Evaluation Report (DES, 2003), a training needs analysis and consultation with relevant groups and agencies, including leading management organisations such as the Irish

Business and Employers Federation (IBEC), the Institute for Public Administration (IPA), the Traveller Education Co-ordinator in the DES, the In-Career Development Unit of the DES, the CECDE and other organisations with experience in training and supporting people who manage schools (e.g. National Parents Council, Catholic Primary School Management Association).

This project was assigned through restricted tender and will be carried out by an Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO)/Barnardos partnership. These organisations are currently working on their combined tender.

The anticipated outcomes of this project are that:

- Increased staff expertise for those working in Traveller pre-schools will be developed;
- Enhanced practice and pedagogy in Traveller pre-schools will be encouraged;
- More effective management committee structures and processes (production of guidelines for the effective functioning of management committees) will be facilitated;
- Greater consistency in the management of Traveller pre-schools will be encouraged;
- Strengthened relationship with the ECCE sector will be developed;
- An accredited training package tailored to meet the needs of staff working with young children who are disadvantaged will be developed.

The final project, the **Early Start Integration Project** will research the Early Start programme with a view to further developing some key aspects. These will include in-service training, community involvement and the role of staff as researchers. The Early Start programme has been operating since 1994 in designated disadvantaged schools and has been evaluated twice.

An initial evaluation of the project focused on the original eight centres, commenced with the project itself. This evaluation found that in:

*“...an assessment of cognitive language, and motor behaviours, no differences were found between the performance of the first two cohorts of Early Start pupils when they reached Junior Infants class and the performance of Junior Infant pupils who had not experienced Early Start.”* (Educational Research Centre, 1998:109)

However, as the children were not tested on entry to Early Start, and were given places having been identified as the most in need, it is not certain if this indicates that they had in fact caught up with children whose needs were not as acute, or if the programme had not met with all its objectives. Positive outcomes included the Junior Infant teachers'

assessments of children's ability to adapt to the junior infant curriculum, and parents' positive attitudes to Early Start." (Educational Research Centre, 1998)

This project has been designed to make changes to the delivery of the Early Start programme, in particular to its structural elements. These include the length of session and exposure to the programme, age of child, in-service training, parental involvement and wider links with the community. This project therefore will look at creating models of best practice in these areas for use in all Early Start centres and the wider ECCE sector.

The objectives of the project are:

- To expose the children to the Early Start programme for longer periods than heretofore;
- To ensure that an ongoing in-service training programme, based on an on-site support model from appropriately qualified staff is implemented;
- To determine effective structures and procedures through which the school as a whole, and Early Start in particular, can integrate with community initiatives in ECCE;
- To develop, in consultation with parents, attractive, mutual and effective models of parental involvement, both in the classroom and elsewhere;
- To document all developments, to engage the staff in active research, to establish ongoing evaluation structures and procedures, and to produce an overall evaluation of all objectives.

The anticipated outcomes of the project are:

- Effective models of in-service training for staff working with children who are disadvantaged will be developed;
- Empirical data on the effectiveness of the intervention for children experiencing disadvantage will be generated;
- Successful models of sustainable, increased, flexible parental involvement in areas of disadvantage will be developed;
- Useful, widely applicable solutions to establish Early Start as part of the community response to the needs of children experiencing disadvantage will be made available.

While these projects primarily focus on children who experience disadvantage or who have special needs, it is important to point out that each project will generate universally applicable knowledge. We hope that the evidence and learning gained from the projects will benefit the development of quality ECCE for all children in Ireland. We also hope that funding such projects will lead to an increase in the capacity of this sector to carry out research.

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## Supporting Quality through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) 2000 – 2006

**Pauline Moreau**

Before focusing on the steps which are currently being taken to support quality through the Irish Government's Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP), it is useful to set the context for State intervention in developing childcare in Ireland.

The structured development of childcare is recently new as an element of Irish social policy, emerging as a key issue only in the 1990s. Indeed, early childhood care and education was available in a very piecemeal manner in the latter half of the twentieth century. Privately run pre-school playgroups were organised very locally from the 1960s onwards while, in the same period, the health boards funded day nurseries to support families who may have required childcare to alleviate domestic problems and severe disadvantage.

In the 1980s, increasing numbers of women chose to remain in the workplace as they started their families and the demand for childcare rose. Frequently, this was provided through their own family support network. In addition, increasing numbers turned to childminders, as there were relatively few crèches or day nurseries available to them.

An increasing awareness of the importance of early education supports to assist children in overcoming disadvantage led to the creation of a special early education programme, known as Early Start, in a number of schools located in severely disadvantaged areas. However, early education for the under four-year-old population is still not universally provided. Apart from the Early Start Programme, the Government also made funding available to assist a small number of projects in the community in the mid 1990s. Further steps were taken in 1997 when European Union support facilitated a €13 million investment, again with a focus on disadvantage.

This was followed with a much more ambitious programme, the €449 million Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (2000–2006). Why did such a shift towards support take place? The 1990s represented a major change in Ireland and Irish life. Sustained economic growth resulted from the social partnership approach to industrial wage bargaining. Moderate wage increases were linked to agreements in relation to taxation and social conditions. The growing economy required an expanded labour force, while the labour force could no longer rely on family supports to deliver the childcare needed to enable parents to remain in employment.

In 1997, the Partnership 2000 Agreement agreed to the establishment of an Expert Working Group which was asked to look at the need to develop childcare in Ireland. The Expert Working Group was chaired by the Equality Division of Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR). It reported in 1999 and its findings were to shape the EOCP and all that is now taking place in the development of childcare in Ireland. In terms of “quality”, the Expert Working Group allied itself with the aspirations of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It stressed the importance of care, education and play in the development of the child, and strongly supported equality of access to childcare, irrespective of family circumstance. Issues such as diversity were stressed, as was the partnership between the parents and the childcare provider.

The Expert Working Group recommended the provision of capital grant assistance to help establish childcare services, staffing grant supports to support services in disadvantaged areas, tax relief to support the sector and the provision of funding for local initiatives. These recommendations have been implemented through a range of measures, principally through the National Development Plan (NDP) (2000–2006) and through budget concessions, with both personal and business implications which were implemented through annual budget provisions.

At this point, it is worth noting that responsibility for childcare development in Ireland is still somewhat fragmented. The development of childcare to support parents in employment, training and education and the delivery of the EOCP rests with the DJELR, while the Department of Health and Children has responsibility for Child Protection and Childcare Regulation. The Department of Education and Science (DES) has responsibility for facilitating the provision of education in Ireland, which includes early education. In relation to early education, the DES places an emphasis on disadvantaged and special needs children. On the quality side, and under the aegis of the DES, the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) has been established to develop quality standards while responsibility for curriculum development lies with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

The activity of all the Government Departments and most of the Agencies is discussed regularly at the National Childcare Co-ordinating Committee, an inclusive Committee chaired by the DJELR. This brings together the key stakeholders in Irish childcare to identify barriers to services and to address other key issues such as the advancement of new services (such as school age childcare) and new approaches (such as a framework for childcare training and a set of guidelines on equality and diversity).

Turning back to the key funding mechanism for the development of childcare in Ireland, the EOCP was established as an element of the NDP (2000–2006) in order to improve the

quality of childcare in Ireland; to increase the supply of childcare places by 50 per cent (or about 28,000 additional, centre based places to enable parents to remain in or return to employment, education and training; and finally to introduce a more co-ordinated approach to the delivery of childcare. The Programme has a total budget of €449.3 million over its seven year span, and, of this, just over €180 million comes from the European Union.

The EOCP has three key elements:

- The provision of capital grant assistance to community based not for profit groups and, in a more limited way, to private childcare providers to support the creation of new and enhanced childcare facilities;
- The provision of grant assistance towards the staffing costs of community-based groups which are located in areas of significant disadvantage, and finally;
- The provision of supports for quality enhancement. The funding stream set aside for each of these elements is €155 million; €195 million and €83 million respectively, while about €18 million will be required over the seven years of the Programme to meet the elaborate administrative arrangements necessitated in delivering an EU Programme of this magnitude.

The €83 million being invested in quality enhancement supports a number of initiatives. The first of these was the creation and now the ongoing support of the City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs), which receive core funding of about €7 million per annum. The National Voluntary Childcare Organisations were central to the development of a quality focus among their members and continue to play a key role in promoting the quality message. Taken together, they now receive funding of about €2.5 million per year from the EOCP to support this work. As I mentioned earlier, childminders continue to play a key role in the provision of childcare in Ireland. They frequently work in isolation and it has long been regarded as essential to engage with them. As we will see later, here, the local approach was favoured and nearly €3 million a year is being channelled through the CCCs to support quality initiatives for childminders. A number of other innovative projects have also received short term funding under the EOCP.

The creation and subsequent success of the CCCs are one of the major achievements of the EOCP. The thirty-three Committees are located in every city and county and they help to keep childcare prominently positioned in all discussions on local development through the involvement of the chairpersons of the County Development Boards. The CCCs also show evidence of the commitment of a large number of volunteers who give freely of their time for these Committees. The Committees were set up in 2000 and were asked to draw up a five-year strategic plan to develop childcare within their area. The specific tasks which were foreseen for them were:

- To foster an increase in the supply of childcare places to meet local need;
- To develop local networks of providers;
- To deliver locally focussed initiatives; and;
- To establish links with other relevant local structures.

Each Committee draws up an annual action plan to deliver its strategy and its funding level is determined on an annual basis. The level of funding available is not enormous – frequently around €200,000 per Committee per year to meet staff costs and overheads and allow for a programme of actions. As a result, the Committees have to be creative in their work approaches.

So what do the CCCs actually do? I am going to focus on just two. Cork City Childcare Committee serves a major urban area, with quite significant areas of disadvantage. As the second largest city in Ireland, with a mix of services and industry as the providers of employment, the needs for childcare are very significant. The CCC Development Officer works closely with childcare providers, encouraging them to develop their services, to prepare insightful policy documents to guide their work and to generally expand the quality of their services. The Cork City Childcare Committee has arranged nine training workshops this year to supplement all the formal training available throughout the city. It has also set up a number of networks; some of which are geographically based and some of which focus on particular issues. One such network is focusing on an anti-bias curriculum while a very useful network for trainers has also been developed.

Westmeath CCC is located right in the centre of Ireland, and as a county, Westmeath would have an urban rural mix with a couple of large towns and a number of urban and rural regeneration programmes. It has a fast expanding population and some of the Eastern extremities of the County are expanding rapidly with housing estates for commuters to the Greater Dublin area. Westmeath CCC is another very active Committee. Its role is growing fast within the community as witnessed by the numbers of public contacts which it receives. These grew from 1,000 in the first quarter of 2003 to over 3,000 in the third quarter. The Westmeath Committee is actively involved in the provision of training – having catered for 300 practitioners so far. One special project it has recently completed was the preparation of an excellent Guidelines document and Directory of Services for children with special needs. Like many of the CCCs, Westmeath has established excellent links with its health board and with other agencies which impact on childcare.

A key function of all of the CCCs in the past two years has been the delivery of the Childminders Initiative. As I mentioned earlier, childminders (or family day care as it sometimes known) is an important element of childcare in Ireland. At present, childminders are excluded from the requirement to notify to the health boards but they

may choose to notify voluntarily. A special initiative to support childminders was launched in 2003, when each CCC received a special funding allocation to enable them to put in place training, information and networking services for childminders. We built upon this work in 2004 with the introduction of the Quality Awareness Programme and a small capital grants scheme. Almost €3 million has been set aside for this purpose in 2004 and much the same level of funding will be provided for a further twelve month period. The Quality Awareness Programme was developed with the assistance of Childminding Ireland, the membership organisation for childminders. It comprises six lectures on a range of topics of interest to childminders. The small grants are tailored to enable childminders to buy educational toys or safety equipment to enhance the quality of their service. Uptake of the Quality Awareness Programme has been very encouraging with over 900 participating in training in the first six months in operation, part of which would have gone in set up times. By June, over 300 grants had been approved. The role of the CCCs in stimulating interest in the Childminding Initiative has been very important and it enables those childminders who have taken part in the lectures to become aware of and network with other childminders in their area.

I also mentioned that the EOCP offers financial support to seven of the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCOs). These are membership based organisations which together are responsible for almost everything that has been achieved in terms of quality childcare in Ireland to date. The provision of EOCP funding has enabled the NVCOs to expand their roles with the development of Quality Assurance Programmes; the provision of training and information to both parents and member practitioners, through the preparation of top quality publications and through seminars and conferences. On training alone, the NVCOs provided accredited training to 740 practitioners in 2003 and a wide range of other training opportunities which were availed of by 4,995 practitioners.

To focus on one of the NVCOs, the National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA) represents 527 member facilities with an enrolment of 16,500 children. To become a member, a childcare facility must attain a quality standard. The NCNA offers a broad regional support network and has recently introduces a Centre of Excellence Programme which is validated to international standards. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that a number of community based childcare services located in very disadvantaged areas have achieved this award already.

Like the CCCs, the NVCOs have now been asked to adopt a Strategic Plan and Annual Action Plans for their EOCP funding. They are also being asked to co-ordinate and collaborate with other NVCOs and with the CCCs to maximise the synergies which can be achieved.

There are of course still very many challenges to be faced in advancing childcare in Ireland and in ensuring that a quality service is available to all parents who require childcare, be it centre-based or family day care. The Childcare Directorate actively participated in the study visit by the OECD experts and is now involved in the review of the recommendations of their excellent report which was launched yesterday. Extensive collaboration already takes place between Government Departments and I know this will continue in the coming months. The work of the CECDE and the NCCA will energise childcare providers over the coming years. There are still many issues and gaps in relation to training in childcare. The key to all of this is continuing collaboration at all levels.

On the broader picture of childcare provision, we have to continue to build on our achievements to date under the EOCP. We need to work together to enhance the standing of the childcare sector in Ireland. We need to continue to be aware of the needs of all our clients and stakeholders. We also need to be aware of the best interests of the client which are, from the child's perspective, top quality childcare and from the parent's perspective, top quality affordable childcare.

## **Building a System of Professional Development through the use of Teacher Standards as a means of Supporting Quality Teaching Practices**

**Stephanie Olmore, Lenka Franova,  
Václav Šneberger and Tatjana Vonta**

### **Introduction**

This panel presentation will offer a perspective on creating a system for supporting quality teaching through the use of teacher standards. The International Step by Step Association (ISSA) has designed a spectrum of services to support quality teaching through the implementation of standards for teachers. These internationally developed, child-centred standards provide a framework from which teachers can set concrete goals for quality improvement. Mentoring support is offered to teachers to facilitate successful implementation of standards in the classroom. Additionally, ISSA has developed a Teacher Certification process that recognizes teachers based on these standards. With the accession of ten new countries into the European Union in May 2004, it is important to identify standards for teacher quality that can ensure cross-national mobility in the field. Two Step by Step countries will share their experiences of utilizing developmentally appropriate teacher standards as an impetus for supporting and recognizing quality teaching. These presentations will explore outcomes from the individual to policy levels.

Specifically, Slovenia will present the results of a research study about implementing ISSA Teacher Standards as a tool for teachers' external evaluation and professional development. The study compared teacher performance as measured by the ISSA Teacher Standards and by the ECERS, an internationally accepted measure of classroom quality. A comprehensive intervention, including self-evaluation of teachers, development of a quality improvement plan and technical assistance on the standards was used to help teachers successfully improve the quality of their teaching. Results were measured through pre- and post-observations and changes were found to be statistically significant.

Over the past year, the ISSA has been working on completing a series of case studies for each of its member countries. The Czech case study will offer insight into the wider implications of creating a certification system on professional development for early care and education professionals as a whole. By training education professionals to recognize quality practice as measured by a set of standards and accurately report findings in a supportive manner to teachers, a new cadre of experts in the field is developed, having dramatic effects on the profession. This Case Study and the process for becoming a certifier and the professional implication of this process will be discussed. Excerpts of the "Role of A Certifier", Case Study from the Czech Republic follows the Slovenian paper.

## **Teacher Evaluation Using ISSA Standards: A Tool for Professional Development and Quality Improvement**

by Tatjana Vonta, EdD, Director, Developmental Research Center for Educational Initiatives, Slovenia

The ISSA Teacher Standards, developed by the International Step by Step Association (ISSA, 2002), provide a model for teacher certification in the Step by Step Program. We were interested in the question of whether the certification process, using the ISSA Teacher Standards, could also be an effective strategy for teacher evaluation and professional development. A study was implemented in Slovenia (Vonta, 2003) to address the following research questions:

- 1 How good are ISSA Standards as a measure of quality?
- 2 Does the quality of teaching improve for teachers who participate in the certification process?
- 3 What kinds of factors influence the results on ISSA Standard scores?
- 4 What are teachers' opinions about the certification model and process?
- 5 What are certifiers' opinions about the certification model and process?
- 6 Do these opinions change over the duration of the whole certification process?

### **Research Design and Instruments**

A representative sample of twenty preschool teachers was drawn from all 123 preschool teachers implementing the Step by Step methodology in classrooms for children three- to six-years old during the 2002/2003 school year in Slovenia, based on the following characteristics:

- Years of job experience;
- Level of formal education;
- Average age of children in the classrooms;
- Amount of in-service training;
- Number of Step by Step classrooms in the preschool;
- In-service training of teacher assistants.

Two instruments were used to measure quality: the ISSA Teacher Standards Observation Form (ISSA, 2002) and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) with thirty-seven items (Harms and Clifford, 1980). We selected ECERS as a second instrument because ECERS has frequently been used for comparative studies on quality. Details of both instruments are included below.



**ISSA Teacher Standards****Standard 1: Individualization**

*Teachers use their knowledge of child development and their relationships with children and their families to appreciate the diversity of each class and to respond to each child's unique needs and potentials.*

**Standard 2: Learning Environment**

*Teachers promote a caring, stimulating, and inclusive classroom by organizing the environment in ways that best facilitate children taking learning risks, practicing democracy, and working both cooperatively and independently.*

**Standard 3: Family Participation**

*Teachers build partnerships with families to ensure optimum support for children's learning and developmental needs.*

**Standard 4: Teaching Strategies for Meaningful Learning**

*Teachers design and implement varied strategies to promote conceptual understanding and to encourage innovation, creativity, independent inquiry, social cooperation, and exploration within and across the disciplines.*

**Standard 5: Planning and Assessment**

*Teachers create plans based upon national standards, program goals and individual needs of children, and use a systematic approach for observing and assessing each child's progress.*

**Standard 6: Professional Development**

*Teachers regularly evaluate and strengthen the quality and effectiveness of their work and collaborate with colleagues to improve programs and practices for young children and their families.*

**ECERS (1980): 37 Items organized into 7 Subscales****Personal Care Routines**

1. Greeting/departing
2. Meals/snacks
3. Nap/rest
4. Diapering/ toileting
5. Personal grooming

***Furnishings/Display***

6. *Furnishings (routine)*
  7. *Furnishings (learning)*
  8. *Furnishings (relaxation)*
  9. *Room arrangement*
  10. *Child-related display*
- 

***Language/Reasoning***

11. *Understanding language*
  12. *Using language*
  13. *Reasoning*
  14. *Informal language*
- 

***Fine/Gross Motor***

15. *Fine motor*
  16. *Supervision (fine motor)*
  17. *Gross motor space*
  18. *Gross motor equipment*
  19. *Gross motor time*
  20. *Supervision (gross motor)*
- 

***Creative Activities***

21. *Art*
  22. *Music/movement*
  23. *Blocks*
  24. *Sand/water*
  25. *Dramatic play*
  26. *Schedule (creative)*
  27. *Supervision (creative)*
- 

***Social Development***

28. *Space (alone)*
  29. *Free play*
  30. *Group time*
  31. *Cultural awareness*
  32. *Tone*
  33. *Exceptional provisions*
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**Adults**

34. *Adult personal area*

35. *Adult opportunities*

36. *Adult meeting area*

37. *Parent provisions*

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The study proceeded in two phases: preparation and evaluation. In the preparation phase we trained certifiers in the use of the instruments, tested the certifiers on inter-rater reliability, and created instruments for assessing teachers' and certifiers' opinions. In addition, we held meetings with teachers to share information and materials about the certification process. Teachers completed a self-evaluation according to the standards and registered for certification. The activities in the evaluation phase of the research are listed in Table 1 (below).

**Quality Improvement Planning**

A key strategy for promoting professional development and quality improvement was the development and implementation of a Quality Improvement Plan. Based on findings from classroom observation, the teacher and Master Teacher Trainer (MTT) jointly developed a plan for improving the quality of teaching. Areas identified in the plan might include:

- Structure of the physical environment;
- Individualization;
- Involving children in the planning process;
- Transition between activities;
- Systematic observation and assessment of children's development and learning;
- Meaningful and process-oriented learning;
- Cooperative learning;
- Developing elements of critical thinking (anticipation, inference, asking questions, argumentation, planning, and assessing);
- Active parent participation in the learning process;
- Planning;
- Experience-based learning;
- Teamwork.

**Results**

1. *ISSA Standards are a valid tool for measuring teacher quality.*

In order to ascertain the validity of the ISSA Standards, we compared the results of the findings from the ISSA Standards with the ECERS findings. We found a high and statistically significant correlation between the results on the ISSA Standards and the ECERS at the beginning of the certification process (first observation) and at the end of the process

(second observation). After the first observation, the Pearsons' coefficient of correlation was 0.88; after the second observation it was 0.84. We also measured the regression between ISSA and ECERS results and found them to be statistically significant. These results confirm that ISSA Teachers Standards are a valid tool for measuring teacher quality.

*2. Teachers who participate in the certification process show improvement in the quality of their teaching.*

The results on the ISSA Standards after the second observation are statistically significantly higher than after the first observation on all standards (see Table 2). Moreover, the data indicate that teachers improved their quality no matter what kind of instrument was used to measure quality. These findings suggest that the activities entailed in the certification process — observation with follow-up discussion, identification of the teacher's strengths and weaknesses for each standard, and active participation of teachers in the creation of a quality improvement plan — provide an opportunity for teachers to reflect on and improve their practice.

*3. The amount of in-service training has a positive effect on ISSA Standards scores.*

We also examined the relationship between the results on ISSA Standards with such variables as the amount of in-service training, amount of formal education and number of years of teaching experience. As indicated in Table 3, we found that one variable—the amount of in-service training — was positively related to ISSA scores (Pearson's Coefficient of Correlation). However, we found no correlation between the level of teacher's formal education and ISSA scores. This result is surprising since we are aware from other research of the importance of a high level of teacher education for achieving quality. It may be that the content and teaching approaches in higher education, based on traditional educational methods, are too dissimilar from the knowledge and skills measured by the ISSA Standards to have a positive effect on ISSA scores. On the other hand, in-service training that was in tune with the content and methods of the new educational paradigm — provided mostly by the Step by Step Program — resulted in high correlations with scores on the ISSA Standards.

*4. Overall, teachers' opinions about the certification model and process were positive.*

Teachers who were involved in the certification process said, at the end, that they would recommend certification to their colleagues. They affirmed that quality improvement can be achieved because it is based on a plan that is clear, operational and proactive. They valued the certification process because it was goal oriented, promoted higher responsibility, and was better than self-evaluation because help was provided.

5. *The certifiers identified challenges as well as positive aspects about the certification process.*

The certifiers noted that aspects of the certification process were stressful and difficult, especially the process of engaging low ISSA-scoring teachers in reflective conversation and quality improvement planning. However, they had a high opinion of the ISSA observation form and their preparation for the certification process. Moreover, they viewed their experience as one that positively influenced their own professional development as well as that of the teachers.

6. *Opinions change, becoming more positive, over the duration of the certification process.*

At the beginning of the process, teachers thought that the certification process was good because of the opportunity to receive feedback on their teaching. At the end of the certification process, they felt it was good because it contributed to their professional and personal development and increased their satisfaction and motivation.

### **Conclusions**

Our research confirmed that ISSA Standards are a valid instrument for external evaluation of teachers and, at the same time, can be used as an effective tool for professional development when combined with constructive feedback, reflective conversation, and the active participation of teachers in creating a quality improvement plan. The certification process is, however, only one small piece in a larger system of professional development that seeks to change the culture of the school and the culture of teaching to improve children's (and adults') learning. This larger system includes training and workshops, exchange of ideas, and support from colleagues, principals, and Step by Step team members. Step by Step seeks to build capacity for coaching and mentoring teachers in reflective teaching to achieve better quality and to develop a "learning community" on both the school and network level.

**Table 1: Activities in Evaluation Phase**

<b>What</b>	<b>When</b>	<b>Who</b>
1. First observation with ECERS (37 items) and ISSA Standards	Beginning of November	2 Master Teacher Trainers receive training to become ISSA certifiers
2. Discussion with teachers after observation in the classroom	Beginning of November	2 Master Teacher Trainers
3. Quality report	Middle of November	2 Master Teacher Trainers create and write the report; 1 MTT communicates the findings in the report
4. Development of a Quality Improvement Plan (with teacher's active involvement)	Middle of November	Teacher coaching by 1 Master Teacher Trainer (the same MTT who communicated the findings from the Quality report)
5. Implementation of the Quality Improvement Plan	Middle of November through the end of March	Teachers
6. Second observation with ECERS (37 items) and ISSA Standards	End of March to beginning of April	2 Master Teacher Trainers
7. Discussion with teacher after the observation in the classroom	End of March to beginning of April	2 Master Teacher Trainers
8. Quality Report	End of March to beginning of April	2 Master Teacher Trainers writing the report; 1 MTT communicating the findings from the Quality Report
9. Quality Improvement Plan (with teacher's active involvement)	End of March to beginning of April	Teacher coaching by 1 Master Teacher Trainer (same MTT as communicated the findings from the Quality Report)

**Table 2: Differences in Scores Between First and Second Evaluation With ISSA Standards**

	Maximum	Average Scores in First Evaluation	Average Scores in Second Evaluation	Difference
STANDARD 1 Individualization	9	7.0	8.3	1.3*
STANDARD 2 Learning environment	9	6.4	7.9	1.6*
STANDARD 3 Partnership with families	18	13.5	16.1	2.6*
STANDARD 4 Strategies for meaningful learning	15	10.8	13.2	2.4*
STANDARD 5 Assessment and planning	21	15.0	18.2	3.2*
STANDARD 6 Professional development	12	10.2	11.4	1.2*
ISSA together**	72**	52.6**	63.5**	10.9*

\*Differences are statistically significant (Analysis of variance- Huynh-Feldt test).

\*\* Total scores without scores at Standard 6.

**Table 3: Correlation Between ISSA Scores and Some Independent Variables**

	First Evaluation N	CORRELATION OF SCORES WITH ISSA	Second Evaluation N**	CORRELATION OF SCORES WITH ISSA
DAYS ON TRAINING-SUM	N=20	0.58*	N=19	0.61*
AVERAGE AGE OF CHILDREN IN THE CLASSROOM	N=20	-0.25	N=19	-0.03
JOB EXPERIENCE OF TEACHER	N=20	0.33	N=19	0.11
NUMBER OF SBS CLASSROOMS IN PRESCHOOL	N=20	0.03	N=19	0.01

\*correlation coefficient is statistically significant

\*\* One teacher didn't participate in the second observation due to an extended leave of absence for health reasons.

## **The Role of a Certifier**

Presented by Václav Šneberger, Step by Step, Czech Republic

### **Main Questions**

- In what context is the role developing?
- What is the role of a certifier?
- How do the various people involved construct the role?
- How do the certifiers view the role and deal with it?
- What impact has it had on their lives?

### **List of Characters**

(All names were changed in order to keep confidentiality.)

Marie – a certifier and Step by Step (SbS) lecturer.

Zuzana – a certifier and a coordinator of certifiers.

Tereza – a SbS teacher who went through the certification process.

Jiri – a director of Eva's school.

Mrs. Novakova – a Ministry official.

Ivana – a Ministry official, former SbS coordinator and future certifier.

Dana – a certifier and a Ministry official.

Jane – a certifier and ISSA lecturer from the USA.

Martin – a certifier and ISSA lecturer.

Klara – SbS, NGO director.

All current active certifiers – six people (including Marie, Zuzana, Dana and Martin).

### **The Step by Step, NGO**

The certification practice is realized by the Step by Step Centre, in the Czech Republic (SbS CR), a non-profit organization that was established in 1994 as a centre for continuous development and implementation of the SbS Program, as well as other projects that focus on reform of the system of education and development of civil society. SbS CR provides training opportunities for professional enrichment to in-service and pre-service teachers, as well as faculties in universities and teacher training institutions. SbS CR has gained accreditation from the Ministry of Education for the further education of teachers and for the verification of the quality of educational programs in SbS pre-schools and primary schools.

To provide these services, SbS CR has developed a network of training centres. Most of the training centres are primary schools and kindergartens, which have been implementing the educational program SbS since 1994. They have practical experience with work in the classroom and with the further education of teachers and parents. The SbS CR instructor



base consists of 56 trainers, who conduct seminars, workshops and summer schools, whether at their own training centre in cooperation with Pedagogical Centres, individually or within the program of activities organized by Sbs CR.

### **Basic Political Conditions of the Czech Education System**

The education system in the Czech Republic continues to undergo many reforms started in the 1980s. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports is in charge of most state administration activities concerned with education and sets out the conditions for its development. It is the National Education Development Program of the Czech Republic, also called the 'White Book' (published in Autumn 2000), that constitutes a basic document of the Czech education system. The White Book analyses the contemporary situation and formulates a clear vision of Czech education on a mid-term scale. This vision follows the European Union documents and promotes child-centred education and democratic values. On the basis of the White Book, two basic compulsory provisions have been created: General Program for Preschool Education and General Educational Program for Primary Education. These provisions reflect the reform trends of the Czech education system and comply with the quality requirements common in the European Union. Delegates of the Sbs program team were invited to cooperate in preparation of these provisions. The Sbs CR was also one of the NGOs that designed and prepared education modules for public dissemination.

### **Quality Evaluation**

The Sbs certification practice brought a completely new way of combining the evaluation and support of teachers. In the Czech Republic, the only institution that currently pursues evaluation of teachers' work is the Czech School Inspection that uses criteria related to quantity of teaching results, rather than to the quality of the teaching process. It is a state institution devoted primarily to the control, not to the support of teachers.

### **Position of Teachers**

Besides the factors described above, there is another important issue influencing the certifiers' work and the way they are perceived. It is connected with the social atmosphere and common attitudes and stereotypes of our society. In Czech society, even in the area of education, being different or exceptional is still not well accepted nor much appreciated. It is probably associated with our long history of communism when values such as collectivity, uniformity and obedience to given norms were promoted. Even though Czech education has been undergoing a significant transformation, if you enter into the classrooms and staff-rooms of many schools, you can feel a strong trend to uniformity. Zuzana, the Sbs coordinator of the certifiers, recalls a Czech idiom expressing the underlying principle: *"It does not pay to leave the line."* Among teachers, it is not common to aspire to get some kind of certificate or to voluntarily ask for evaluation.

According to Zuzana *"...people often do not understand that applying for the certificate is not an issue of boasting or considering oneself superior to others, but means an important step in one's professional growth."*

### **Certifiers**

The main role of a certifier is to support a teacher in his/her professional growth. The certifier guides the teacher through the certification process, evaluates the current state of his/her work and suggests possible ways of improvement. In the Czech Republic, there are seven certifiers who have been working for one year. Our Case Study focuses on exploring their personal experience with the role and its meaning. The role of a certifier means a completely new phenomenon, not only within the network of schools which work with SbS CR, but also in the whole Czech education system. We explore the important context issues related to the role the certifiers play and might play in the system.

All of the certifiers are education specialists and experienced trainers. Five of them had already had some kind of previous experience with classroom observation. Three of them had been visiting classrooms, observing and providing feedback to teachers when working as the coordinators and mentors. Two others had been observing teachers during inspections they had been working on as members of school management. Five of the certifiers had, at some time in their lives, been SbS teachers at preschool or primary grades. The two others were involved in many SbS program activities as trainers.

According to the Certification Guide (Skardova & Sneberger 2003), a certifier is someone, who:

- *"received an international certificate of ISSA certifier (on the basis of passing an international training for certifiers and fulfilling the given criteria);*
- *cooperates with the applicant and goes with him/her through the certification process up to the acquisition of the certificate or the postponement of certification until the applicant is able to fulfill the criteria that correspond to the international standards;*
- *together with two other independent certifiers, recommends ISSA to give the certificate to the applicant."*

Writing a report on the state of quality and a plan for improving the quality is another phase of the certification process. Evaluative information in the reports needs to be based on observation and clearly explained. Enough appreciation and encouragement should be included. Great attention has to be devoted to improving quality and furthering professional growth. The reports are delivered to the teacher and then a phone call is

placed to arrange further steps. If the teacher wants further consultations or other systematic support, one of the certifiers becomes his/her personal mentor.

After six months from the first visit, a second observation and interview takes place. The data are analysed and another report is written. At this point, the certifiers decide whether to recommend ISSA give the teacher a certificate or not. If yes, the process is finished. If no, another observation follows after the next six months. So the whole process lasts at least six months and consists of at least two observation visits. Zuzana emphasizes that *"...the certification process does not mean any control or seeking mistakes. On the contrary, it is long-term support of the quality of the teacher's work."*

The most extensive material that resulted from the NGO preparation for certification was the "Certification Guide". It contains all the basic information needed for entering the certification process, such as an introduction of the ISSA and the Sbs CR, an explanation of the purpose of the Sbs standards and the certification process, a detailed description of the process and statement of requirements for giving a certificate, a step by step guide through the process and additional materials. These additional materials include application forms, requirements for the teacher's portfolio and the Sbs Program and Teacher Standards.

The certification process was presented for the first time at an annual meeting of the Sbs staff, and the directors and trainers from Sbs training centres that took place in the Eastern Bohemia town of Pardubice in January 2003. Approximately 30-40 people were present. During February 2003, eight first application forms together with, as Zuzana said, *"...incredibly heavy portfolios"* arrived to the Sbs office. The schools where the teachers are located were spread out all over the Czech Republic.

### **Current Certification Practice**

*"Up to now, 12 teachers have been involved in the certification process. The basic conditions of the certification procedure and the certifier's role have already stabilized"* Zuzana stated on April 26, 2004. All the certifiers, except one, conducted several field observations. The average number of years spent by teachers who are successful in certification in the Sbs program is eight, and the average number of seminars per year is three. *"If you take a look at the portfolios, you can see that every one of these teachers was attending at least 2 seminars a year (not necessarily Sbs seminars),"* Zuzana points out.

### **How Can a Certifier Benefit a Teacher?**

When exploring what is most important about how the certifiers benefit teachers, Marie comes to two main conclusions: providing immediate feedback within the interview

following the observation and providing the written feedback in the reports. *"We have repeatedly found out that the interview is a crucial moment."* The teacher might develop his/her own reflection of the morning's work. Then, he/she is interviewed about those parts of his/her work that relate to the standards and are difficult to observe (for example cooperation with family or professional growth) or about those parts that the certifiers have mixed opinions on. *"The teachers are often tense and waiting for our reactions. ... Besides the clarification of the aspects we cannot observe in the classroom, it has a certain psychological effect, the effect of calming the teacher."* Then, the teacher may really benefit from the reports, because *"...they include suggestions for improvement, i.e. concrete ideas, what and how to do in the classroom, how to extend the work, offer the children more ... we also recommend literature, sometimes also send some photocopied materials."*

According to Eva, what definitely is the greatest benefit certifiers can offer to a teacher is honest feedback. *"I appreciated that they spent the whole morning here to really see the children and also that they had time to talk with me after the observation and provided me with feedback."* Then she adds that she likes the time schedule, the fact that there were two observations, six months apart. *"I had time and opportunity to work on myself and to hear their opinion after six months. I was fully satisfied with that."*

The director says that from his point of view, the greatest benefit to the teacher lies in *"the certifiers' natural approach, in the lively contact, good observation and well-working reflection to the teacher."* He adds that nobody else can offer such a complex range of elements enabling the teacher to work systematically on his/her teaching. *"Of course when I come to the classroom I try to help, but still it is an inspection, which means control, and that is not a suitable role for such a help."*

### **Looking into the Future**

The future of the role of certifiers is closely connected with the future of the whole certification practice in the Czech Republic. This short history of the practice shows the certifiers are devoted to development of the practice and the number of certifications realized proves they succeed in their efforts. The Ministry plans to develop a similar kind of evaluation to that which is working within the SbS, but currently lacks the methodology and instruments. Because the Ministry *"would appreciate cooperation"* and would like to make use of the SbS certifiers' experience, an opportunity of extending current cooperation now exists.

This corresponds to what Jane, an ISSA lecturer, said at the February Prague training. She emphasized that the SbS standards comply with general political trends in the European education - *"EU wants child-centered education and the SbS standards are very close to*

*what experts consider developmentally appropriate ... but there is a lack of quality evaluation.*" She continued that the quality concept is a new approach to evaluation and it will take time until people understand and accept the change from previous practice. Only a high-quality program can achieve change for children, and only such a program seems to have the potential to survive in the highly competitive environment of Czech education. The certification process can be considered a powerful tool for supporting teachers in achieving and sustaining high quality work, and thus is also a crucial tool for the survival of the Sbs program.

### **Conclusion**

*"In the CR, there will be a working network of certifiers consisting of teachers ..., lecturers, master teacher trainers and parents, maybe even other professions ... that are interested in child-centred education ... Thus, the Sbs program methodology will be enriched to constantly edge towards the needs of children, families and communities."* A full copy of the Case Study can be obtained after November 2004 by contacting the ISSA office (info@issa.nl.)

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## Reconceptualising Community Playgroups in Ireland

**Noelle Spring, Mary Daly,  
Tina Byrne and Jean Whyte**

### **Introduction**

This paper describes a research project which was instigated by a number of organisations who came together to express concern about the future of sessional educational and care services for pre-school children and their families. The consortium is made up of the following organisations:

- The IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation;
- The Katharine Howard Foundation;
- Community Playgroups Together;
- Forbairt Naíonraí Teo;
- The National Children's Office;
- The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education;
- The Southern Health Board.

A number of other agencies are supportive of the objectives of the research, have assisted in the design of the project and have shared expertise with the executive group. These include:

- The Family Support Agency;
- The Dublin Institute of Technology;
- The Border Counties Childcare Network;
- Pavee Point;
- The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment;
- The Committee on Educational Disadvantage.

The Funding bodies that have agreed to fund this research, to date, include the Dublin City Childcare Committee, the Katharine Howard Foundation, the Irish Youth Foundation and the Foundation for Investing in Communities.

All these organisations share a common belief in the importance of early years' education for young children, particularly those from disadvantaged areas and sections of Irish society.

The principle underpinning the research is the belief in the value of good support systems to the pre-school child and his/her family within the community. The early years of a

child's development are of crucial importance and the environmental conditions experienced by children have a strong influence on later development. Research shows that high quality early education leads to lasting benefits which persist throughout adolescence and adulthood. High quality, active learning, early years programmes can provide significant life-time benefits for children, especially for children living in disadvantaged circumstances studies have shown how they can positively affect educational performance, adult economic status, criminal behaviour and family stability (Schweinhart *et al.*, 1993; O'Flaherty, 1995).

### **Community Playgroup**

A playgroup is a group of pre-school aged children (usually between 3 to 5 years), meeting regularly several mornings/afternoons a week to play together for two to three hours. The role of the early years' practitioners in this setting is to provide an environment rich in opportunity so that the children attending learn by being actively involved in their play. The practitioners answer questions, encourage discussion, scaffold and support children's learning.

In Ireland, there are two different types of playgroup, the privately run playgroup and the community playgroup. A private playgroup is run by an individual, often in an extension to the home. They provide a very worthwhile service and, in some areas, are the only playgroup available to young children and their families. On the other hand a community playgroup is organised and run by a committee of parents and community members. Active and responsible participation in the management and planning of such playgroups is required by the volunteers involved in these endeavours. Community playgroups are sometimes run in sports halls and community centres and are often established in socially disadvantaged areas. They are non-profit-making facilities and fees are lower than in private playgroups, so that all young children can access the service, regardless of means. Parents are very welcome in the group and are encouraged, particularly at the beginning of the first term, to stay until their children are settled. In the past, most playgroups had a rota of parents to help out every day. However, the parent rota in community playgroups is no longer very common as many mothers now work outside the home. In addition, the establishment of the FÁS Community Employment Scheme replaced the parent rota in many community playgroups.

The emphasis in a playgroup is on the total development of the child by providing him/her with an environment with ample opportunity for exploration and discovery. There is no formal teaching of academic skills. Instead, the holistic development of the child is aimed at through rich play experiences. Play is recognised as being a natural and universal medium for young children's thinking, learning and development. It is viewed as being equally essential to children's lives as good care, food, sunshine and protection,

since it strengthens their bodies, improves their minds and helps develop their personalities (Abbott, 1994). However, for play's value to be realised, certain conditions must be fulfilled. There must be sensitive, knowing and informed adults involved; play must be carefully organised and planned; and it must be seen as a high status activity, not just something that is done when the real 'work' is over. Children must be given time to develop their play and careful observation of children's activities must occur. The quality of provision, the value associated with play processes and the involvement of adults all impact on the quality of play (Monighan-Nourot *et al.*, 1987). Therefore, the quality of play within each community playgroup is of paramount importance, and everyone involved in the group must value play and must ensure that all children experience good quality play.

Ireland's first community playgroup was set up in the Crumlin Social Services Centre, Dublin in 1970 (Douglas, 1994). Since then, playgroups, both private and community, have been established all over Ireland as an awareness developed of the crucial importance of the pre-school years for children's development and learning. In 1969, the Irish Pre-school Playgroups Association (I.P.P.A.) was formed to support playgroups. Since then, the Irish Pre-school Playgroups Association has changed its name to IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation. Its brief now includes private and community daycare, private and community based playgroups, as well as individual members. However, most pre-school playgroups, including community playgroups, continue to be members of IPPA and the organisation provides support, advice, information and training for its members. Irish medium playgroups also exist and many of these are community based and receive support and funding through An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta Teoranta. Networks around the country also provide some support to community playgroups and some playgroup federations have also been established in Dublin through the Dublin City Council. Some community playgroups have come together to lobby support for themselves such as 'Community Playgroups Together' (CPT) in Dublin, which has just published a brochure, position paper and research document in order to highlight their role (CPT, 2003).

### **The Katharine Howard Foundation**

The Katharine Howard Foundation (KHF), one of the organisations commissioning the current research project, is an independent grant-making Foundation whose particular emphasis is on the support of community projects. The Foundation was started in 1979 by the late Katharine Howard from Gorey, Co. Wexford. The Foundation annually allocates grants mainly for projects related to children, young people, the elderly and disadvantaged throughout the island of Ireland. In relation to young children, since 1996, the KHF has set aside a particular portion of funds for Community Playgroups and Parent and Toddler Groups. This occurred due to a continuous rise in the number of these



particular groups looking for funding. Changes in legislation, such as the implementation of the Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations (1996), meant that these groups needed to implement many changes in order to adhere to legislation but had difficulties doing so due to the lack of funding. The KHF decided to assist these groups from that time on, as it acknowledges that the early years are a vital stage of life, while at the same time being very conscious of the supports needed to make the most of the opportunity that these early years provide. Therefore, they fund these invaluable community assets and in 2003, for example, the Foundation provided financial support to Community Playgroups and Parent and Toddler Groups in the region of €110,000.

As a result of providing financial support to Community Playgroups and Parent and Toddler Groups over the past nine years, the KHF has built up a knowledge and expertise around early childhood care and development in Ireland and was of the view that a more strategic approach to supporting community playgroups was needed. On the initiation of the KHF, discussions were held with the South Eastern Health Board (SEHB) and both organisations agreed to come together to implement a strategic project for community playgroups, the 'Community Playgroup Initiative' (CPI). The initiative formally began in 2001 and will run until the end of 2004.

The primary objective of the initiative is to assist small community playgroups to offer quality sessional childcare. A secondary objective is to highlight the value of community playgroups and to evaluate the impact of funding and support on the quality of service provided to children and their families. The challenge for the initiative is to assist these groups to remain an important provider of childcare and education as developments occur in the area, particularly the implementation of the *National Childcare Strategy* (1999).

The SEHB and the KHF, together with some assistance from the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme under Special Initiatives and two other foundations, including the St. Stephen's Green Trust, provide the finances for this project. An advisory group was established to assist in the setting up and ongoing work of CPI. The membership of the group was designed to be broad-ranging, including representatives from many groups and organisations. The Advisory group comprises representatives from the following organisations: Barnardos, Childcare Network Loch Garman, Clonmel Community Partnership, Dublin Institute of Technology, IPPA the Early Childhood Organisation, the Kilkenny Early Years Project, the KHF and the SEHB.

A formative evaluation of CPI is being undertaken by Geraldine French, Independent Early Years Consultant, in tandem with the initiative.

A final evaluation report on the CPI will be launched in early 2005 and will be made widely available. It is hoped that the evaluation will plot the course of the CPI, highlighting the lessons learnt and positively influencing future policy in the area.

The experience gained through involvement in grant aiding community playgroups and through CPI has encouraged the KHF to become actively involved in commissioning this research.

### **Aims of the Research Project**

The main aims of this research project on community playgroups are to:

- Identify the role of community playgroups in early childhood care and education, family support and social inclusion;
- Examine factors which assist or undermine their existence;
- Make recommendations for reconceptualising community playgroups in contemporary Ireland at practice and policy level.

### **The Children's Research Centre**

The Children's Research Centre (CRC) Trinity College, Dublin, whose staff are to carry out the research, was established as a joint initiative between the Department of Psychology and the Department of Social Studies in 1995. Staff in the Centre have experience and strengths in a range of research approaches, including qualitative and quantitative research, case studies, policy analysis and programme evaluation. Reflecting the multi-disciplinary nature of the Centre, staff are drawn from a range of professional backgrounds including social policy, education, social work, anthropology and psychology.

One of the key objectives of the Centre is to conduct policy relevant research on children, the family, the community and other contexts in which children and young people live their lives. The theme of educational disadvantage is one of the key policy areas which the Centre currently prioritises in its research. Projects in this area, include a study of educational progress and experiences of immigrant children in secondary school, a study of play in the schoolyard and on-going evaluations of the AIB Schoolmate Programme.

Much of the research that is carried out in the CRC employs methods which draw on the knowledge and views of the key stakeholders, such as children, parents and professionals who work with children. The views of children and young people represent a key part of this process. In conducting research projects, the CRC practise and promote the principles of cooperative enquiry, where the active participation of those involved with or affected by the issues being investigated is encouraged and supported. The guidelines for good practice were developed after discussions which led to a workshop with the Director of

the National Children's Bureau in October 2001, and have been extended through a review of the literature and consultations with relevant experts and professionals. In addition, the Centre is represented on a working group of the International Network of Children's Research Centres, which is aiming to produce general ethical guidelines for those working with children worldwide.

**The Research Project 'Reconceptualising Community Playgroups' will seek to:**

- 1 Review the literature and research nationally and internationally on community playgroups of note;
- 2 Carry out a scoping exercise on examples of best practice;
- 3 Map the existence and location of Community Playgroups throughout Ireland, drawing on existing databases;
- 4 Investigate structural elements of Playgroups including, but not limited to: management and support structures, opening hours, staffing levels, access issues, type of curriculum used, in-service training, funding fees, cost of premises;
- 5 Describe the Community Playgroup model/s in operation in Ireland, identifying the links between Community Playgroups and the wider community;
- 6 Investigate the impact of Community Playgroups in marginalized communities as an early intervention strategy to address educational disadvantage, including reference to the Traveller community.
- 7 Identify contributions that Community Playgroups make (and their potential to contribute) at micro and macro level, drawing from elements of best practice;
- 8 Identify the key success factors necessary for continued growth and development of Community Playgroups;
- 9 Make recommendations re:
  - Addressing the challenges facing Community Playgroups;
  - Avenues for growth and reconceptualising;
  - Improved practice for providers;
  - Development of supportive policy;
  - Further research.

**Plan of Investigation**

**Issues of Study Credibility**

The principles underlying the work undertaken by the CRC should provide a strong reassurance about the credibility of the study. The CRC places a strong emphasis on promoting child-centred research. This is a study asking a range of respondents, including children, parents, professionals and practitioners, for their expertise and opinions, as well as relying on data generated from on-site visits and observations. The data obtained from all of these sources should provide a very strong basis on which to claim credibility.

**Ethical Considerations**

The work of the CRC is child-centred and this focus on the lived experience of children is informed by the Centre's guidelines for good practice. These emphasise the duties and responsibilities of researchers to respect the rights and dignity of children, to obtain their voluntary informed consent to participate in the research, to safeguard their anonymity and confidentiality, and to be honest and open with them about the purposes of the research and the destination of the data. There is also a commitment to inclusiveness in terms of those invited to participate in any research project. We keep participants informed about the progress and outcomes of our projects using a range of methods and approaches.

**The Research Process**

There will be seven stages to the research and it will be overseen and supported by an Advisory Group. The membership of the group will be agreed by the commissioners of the research and will comprise the research team, representatives of the commissioners of the research, an external expert, service providers and parents. The function of the Advisory Group is to act as a sounding board for the research team, to advise on issues of concern, to provide contact information where feasible and to offer support where necessary.

**Stage One: Literature Review**

The literature review will examine both national and international literature on Community Playgroups, the way in which Community Playgroups have been conceptualised and the factors which underlie changes in their conceptualisation. It will yield information on how Community Playgroups are structured and managed in other countries. It will indicate ways in which contributions made at local and national level has been identified; it will source studies which have investigated the impact of Community Playgroups in marginalized communities and provide models of investigating this impact.

It will inform the researchers about factors which have been found to support the growth and development of Community Playgroups in Ireland and elsewhere, and it will provide examples of Best Practice in all aspects of Playgroup provision. Methodologies adopted in other studies will be examined with a view to informing the methodological approach of this study.

**Stage Two: Mapping the Existence and Location of Community Playgroups**

Drawing on existing databases, the current provision of Community Playgroups throughout the Republic of Ireland will be mapped. Depending on the information available in current databases, the new consolidated database might include:

- Name of Community Playgroup;
- Name of Parent Body;
- Address of Playgroup;
- Name and Contact Details for Committee Chair and Playgroup Leader;
- Number of Places Provided;
- Hours of Opening;
- Cost to Parents;
- Structural Arrangements.

### **Stage Three: Informing Key Stakeholders about the Research**

When the database has been completed, an information note will be sent to all those on the database informing them of the aims and methods of the research study and inviting their participation. It will be made clear to them that our preferred method of approach is collaborative and that their contribution to the research would be greatly appreciated, but that they are under no obligation to participate. They will be assured that the findings of the study will be made available to them through, perhaps, a report, workshops, and seminars.

### **Stage Four: Consultation with Stakeholders**

We envisage consultation by means of focus group discussions and/or individual interviews as a first stage in the process with stakeholders who have been identified as:

- 1 Parents – who have children in Playgroups and parents who do not have children in playgroups (12);
- 2 Children currently attending Playgroups and older children who attended Playgroups in the past (12);
- 3 Individuals involved in the provision of playgroups – playgroup leaders, management etc. (12);
- 4 Other sources of social support to be identified in consultation with the Advisory Group, such as local community development groups, pre-school services officers, public health nurses, home school liaison teachers, primary school principals and infant class teachers, representatives of the overseeing bodies (IPPA, Forbairt Naionraí Teo) and of Childminding Ireland (14-21).

Individuals from each of the above categories would be approached with an outline of the study and invited to give their consent to participating in it, again with an emphasis on the collaborative approach.

Focus group discussions would be conducted with groups of 4 – 6 individuals from each of the above categories, using a semi-structured interview schedule. Where it is not possible

to get a group together, individual interviews will be conducted in person, by phone or by email. The aim of the focus groups would be:

- To establish the relevance of issues identified in the literature search for this study;
- To determine issues specific to the Irish scene;
- To define criteria used to evaluate the quality of playgroup provision;
- To raise questions which should be investigated in subsequent stages of research through the case studies.

### **Stage Five: Case Studies**

Using the database as a guide, five Community Playgroups would be invited to participate as Case Studies so that there would be representation of Playgroups of different sizes, in different locations, under different management structures, operating different sessional arrangements, with different financial arrangements etc. A minimum of two session long visits would be scheduled with each of the Case Study Playgroups. Issues which have been highlighted through the literature review and initial consultation process would be investigated in-depth using the following methodologies:

- Observations/conversations with children as they play (perhaps taking and using photographs, audio recording, video recording);
- Focus on two individual children per Community Playgroup – selected so as to eventually have representation of the following categories: boys and girls, non-national groups, Travellers, children with special needs (e.g., physical and psychological, specific learning difficulties);
- Interviews with parents;
- Interviews with staff;
- Interviews with management committee;
- Interviews with teachers in local schools;
- Interviews with other professionals associated with the playgroups.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The key methods of primary data collection will be focus group discussions, observations and individual interviews.

The CRC strives to make data collection a process that is attractive to, and enjoyable for children. The Centre takes the view that children have different, rather than lesser, talents for communication. As such, adult researchers attempt to match children's talents through the use of tools and techniques that do not solely rely on conversational abilities. Examples of such tools include the use of photography and children's interpretations of their own drawings.

We envisage that focus group discussions and individual interviews will, where appropriate, make use of participatory techniques. Participatory strategies view the research participants as 'local experts' and are therefore flexible. This means that data collection tools can be modified and adapted according to what best suits the group. Participatory strategies do not assume literacy and facilitates the perspective of each individual to be represented within the group perspective.

#### **Stage Six: Data Input, Analysis and Write Up**

Data management and analysis will be carried out by staff in the CRC. The Report will be presented in draft form to the Commissioners and stakeholders for comment before the final version is completed.

#### **Stage Seven: Final Report**

The Final Report will be presented to the Consortium by April 30<sup>th</sup> 2005.

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## Quality and Teacher Turnover Related to a Childcare Workforce Development Initiative

Kathy Thornburg and Peggy Pearl

Research consistently identifies specialised training and education of teachers as one of the strongest predictors of child care quality, and subsequently more positive child outcomes (Howes *et al.*, 1992; Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Study Team, 1995; Kontos *et al.*, 1995; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1996; Vandell and Wolfe, 2000). Unfortunately, studies of the early childhood workforce in the United States reveal that the quality of early childhood programs is often compromised by low levels of teacher education and high staff turnover (Cummings, 1980; Whitebook *et al.*, 1989).

The reality is that child care employment offers low wages, few job benefits, and limited opportunities for professional advancement (Whitebook, 1999). In fact, the child care profession ranks among the nineteen lowest paid fields from the 700+ occupations surveyed by the Occupational Employment Statistics program in the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. These data also indicate that the median hourly wage for a preschool teacher is ten dollars and sixty-seven cents, and for a child care worker, is eight dollars and thirty-seven cents (Center for the Child Care Workforce, 2004).

Findings from two evaluations (North Carolina's Child Care WAGES Project and the Bay Area Child-Care Retention Incentive Evaluation) suggest that financial incentives can strengthen the child care workforce via reduced turnover and increased educational attainment. In particular, North Carolina reported annual turnover rates of sixteen percent for their WAGES participants, compared to thirty-one percent for the state as a whole. Moreover, eighteen percent of the incentive-receiving providers moved "up a level" on North Carolina's early childhood career ladder because of ongoing educational attainment (Child Care Services Association, n.d.). Likewise, evaluation data of the Bay Area incentive program indicate that the strongest predictor of participant retention was the amount of incentive received, particularly for those providers with a two- or four-year degree (Hamre *et al.*, 2003).

### **Missouri's Workforce Incentive Program (WIN)**

The privately and publicly funded WIN Initiative, one part of Missouri's early childhood career development system (Opportunities in a Professional Education Network, 2001), is a research-based project designed to increase workforce recruitment and retention through the provision of bi-annual incentive payments. The amount of the cash incentive is based on the individual's educational attainment and continued employment in a licensed early childhood setting. In addition to increasing workforce stability, WIN requires

early childhood professionals (teachers and administrators) who have low levels of education (high school diploma, Child Development Associate Credential (CDA) or nine college credit hours) to complete six hours of college credit annually. WIN is a pilot initiative located in seven non-metropolitan counties and one large metropolitan area.

To be eligible to participate in WIN, early childhood professionals who work in licensed centre- and home-based programs must work at least thirty hours per week and nine months per year. In addition, they must work with children from birth through eight years of age, remain in the same program, and make less than \$42,000 per year for twelve-month employment.

In each of the past three years, approximately 700 WIN participants received incentive payments in the three pilot areas. Of these, approximately 100 participants each year increased one level on the educational ladder by taking college credits.

### **WIN Evaluation Project**

As part of the WIN funding requirement, a team of researchers at the Center for Family Policy and Research (University of Missouri) conducted a longitudinal study to assess the effectiveness of the WIN project. In part, the study was designed to evaluate the impact of the WIN project on the early childhood workforce and on the quality of early childhood programs.

To address the overall research objectives, the evaluation included two tiers:

- Tier One focused on workforce development and included all of the participants who consented to participate in the study. Tier One consisted of WIN participants and a comparison group of early childhood professionals who were not participating in WIN;
- Tier Two focused on program quality and included a small group of Tier One evaluation participants. Early childhood professionals for both groups were recruited from state-licensed child care centres and home-based child care programs.

Two of the research study questions were:

- 1 Does WIN participation increase workforce stability (i.e., decrease staff turnover)?
- 2 Does WIN participation increase the quality of the classroom/family child care program?

### **Participants**

An examination of the Tier One participant demographics indicates the two groups of early childhood professionals differed by educational level and by geographical location.

More of the WIN participants had a college degree than the comparison sample. The majority of the WIN teachers and directors who had a college degree lived in the metropolitan area. For the comparison group, the majority of the teachers held a high school diploma in both the metro and non-metro regions. The average years of experience in early childhood programs was about nine years for both groups.

At the beginning of the study, the mean age of WIN participants was thirty-nine years (N=469); the comparison group mean age was thirty-seven years (N=349). Ninety-seven percent of the teachers and directors in both groups were women. The majority of the teachers and directors self-identified as White (sixty-seven percent of WIN and ninety-five percent of comparison teachers and administrators); the vast majority of the remaining participants reported being African American.

### **Measures**

To collect data on workforce development, participant demographic information was drawn from the Professional Achievement and Recognition System (PARS) enrolment form and updated every six months prior to payment. More extensive information was updated via follow-up telephone interviews conducted every four months for all evaluation participants.

To collect the program quality data, standardized instruments were used. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised (ECERS-R) (Harms *et al.*, 1998) was used to assess program quality in centre-based classrooms. The Family Daycare Rating Scale (FDCRS) (Harms *et al.*, 1989) was used in home-based programs. Trained data collectors conducted program observations. Inter-observer reliability data were gathered during training. The ECERS-R averaged eighty-six percent for exact agreement and ninety-five percent for agreement within one point. For the FDCRS, inter-observer reliability averaged ninety-five percent for exact agreement and ninety-seven percent for within one point. Reliability checks were conducted approximately every six months. In Autumn 2002, percent agreement for exact scores on the ECERS-R and FDCRS was eighty-eight and eighty-nine percent respectively, and for within one point, was ninety-six for both instruments. The next check was in early 2003 and the inter-observer reliability scores were approximately the same for the ECERS-R and slightly lower for the FDCRS.

### **Procedures**

The pilot counties were divided into two groups: WIN pilot counties and comparison counties. In the WIN pilot counties, every individual who completed the PARS enrolment form and who was subsequently selected to participate in WIN, was sent a consent form and a Workforce Questionnaire. WIN participants who returned signed consent forms and workforce questionnaires were considered to be in Tier One of the study.

In the comparison counties, early childhood professionals from a total of 108 centres and seventy homes agreed to participate in Tier One. University researchers contacted the early childhood professionals to inform them of the study and those who agreed to participate were sent Workforce Questionnaires. Follow-up phone calls and letters were sent to participants to encourage them to return the questionnaires. After several attempts, no further efforts were made to contact individuals who did not return their questionnaires.

WIN and comparison county participants in Tier One participated in five follow-up telephone interviews conducted approximately four months apart. The first follow-up call occurred about four months after the participant's initial Workforce Questionnaire was completed. Program quality observations were collected at three time points for the WIN pilot group and at two time points for the comparison group.

### Results and Discussion

*Question 1: Does WIN participation increase workforce stability (i.e., decrease staff turnover)?*

This research question was examined from several perspectives, including education level and geographic location. Averaging across the two-year study, the turnover rate was ten-and-a-half percent for teachers and directors participating in WIN and twenty-three percent for comparison group professionals. The turnover rates for both years were similar. We were also interested to find out if teachers with degrees (Associate's, Bachelor's, or Master's) left their programs at a different rate than non-degreed teachers and the possible effect WIN would have on teachers with different levels of education. Tables 1 and 2 show the data for each year. When taking an average of the two years, non-degreed teachers and directors in the comparison sites left their programs significantly more frequently (22.4%) than the teachers and directors in WIN (9.9%). Degreed participants showed the same significant trend: 11.3% for WIN participants and 22.6% for the comparison group. Therefore, these data support the fact that the workforce turnover rate will decrease with incentive-based programs for teachers and administrators, regardless of educational levels.

**Table 1: Program Turnover by Educational Level (Year One)**

	Non-degree <sup>***</sup>	Degree <sup>***</sup>
WIN	8.9%	10.9%
N=469 [46; 9.8%]	(24/268)	(22/201)
COMPARISON	20.9%	26.2%
N=339 [77; 22.7%]	(53/255)	(22/84)

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

There are missing data for comparison group: inactive=4, active=6

There are missing data for comparison group: inactive=4, active=6

**Table 2: Program Turnover by Educational Level (Year Two)**

	Non-degree***	Degree
WIN	11.1%	11.7%
N=414 [47; 11.4%]	(26/235)	(21/179)
COMPARISON	24.3%	18.3%
N=252 [57; 22.6%]	(44/181)	(13/71)

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

There are missing data for comparison group: active=5

Another comparison we wanted to consider was whether there might be a difference depending on location for those teachers and directors with degrees—metropolitan vs. non-metropolitan areas. For degreed professionals, those residing in non-metropolitan communities in the comparison sites left their programs more frequently (20.7%—average of two years) than those receiving WIN payments (12.9%—average of two years). Teachers and directors residing in metropolitan areas were significantly more likely to remain in their programs. There was a turnover rate of 9.9% for WIN participants and 24.8% for the comparison group. Tables 3 and 4 indicate the turnover rates for degreed teachers and directors by geographical area for years one and two separately.

**Table 3: Program Turnover by Region for Degreed Teachers and Directors (Year One)**

	Non-metro	Metro***
WIN	13.4%	8.7%
N=201 [22; 10.9%]	(13/97)	(9/104)
COMPARISON	22.4%	31.4%
N=84 [22; 26.9%]	(11/49)	(11/35)

$p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Table 4: Program Turnover by Region for Degreed Teachers and Directors (Year Two)**

	Non-metro	Metro
WIN	12.3%	11.2%
N=179 [21; 11.7%]	(10/81)	(11/98)
COMPARISON	18.4%	18.2%
N=71 [13; 18.3%]	(7/38)	(6/33)

$p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

The literature supports the notion that teachers with higher levels of education are more likely to provide high quality education for the children than those teachers with less education. It is the degreed teachers whom we need to keep in the profession.

*Question 2: Does WIN participation increase the quality of the classroom/family child care program?*

Early childhood program quality was assessed at three time points for the WIN pilot group and at two time points for the comparison group. Quality ratings were based on the ECERS-R and FDCRS, with scales ranging from one to seven points indicating varying levels of quality: 1.0=inadequate; 3.0=minimal; 5.0=good; 7.0=excellent.

For WIN sites (Table 5), there were time effects on child care environmental quality ratings in centre-based classrooms. Among centre-based programs in non-metropolitan areas, the quality scores significantly improved between time one and times two and three. The centre-based quality in the metropolitan areas decreased at time two observations and increased at time three observations. Even though there was a significant gain from time two to time three, the decrease in the quality score at time two was responsible for the significant finding. Although the programs did not improve over time (from time one to three) they did maintain an average quality score above the "good" level (an ECERS score of 5.0 or higher). Among centre-based programs in metropolitan areas, time one observations showed higher quality than centres in non-metropolitan areas. However, at time two and time three observations, centres in metropolitan areas had lower quality scores than non-metropolitan area programs. One should note, however, that at time three, the average for all centre-based WIN programs were in the good to excellent range of quality.

There were no significant differences for time effect for family child care homes in the WIN counties (ranging from 4.38 to 5.41) or for family child care homes in the comparison counties (ranging from 3.84 to 5.24).

**Table 5: Quality Changes by Region and Time in WIN Sites**

WIN	TIME 1	TIME 2	TIME 3	TIME EFFECT
<i>CENTER</i>				
Non-metro	4.67 (1.36)	5.64 (.85)	5.62 (1.04)	F=5.84**
Metro	5.55 (.66)	4.98 (.84)	5.45 (.58)	F=4.89**

Among programs that had an increase in program quality, a closer examination of teacher education levels was conducted to determine if there was a relation between high levels of education and higher program quality scores. In this analysis, a significant difference existed between the WIN and comparison groups. Sixty-six percent of degreed teachers in WIN significantly improved their quality scores, as compared to fifty percent in the comparison group.

Additional research that assesses the amount of incentive it takes to keep degreed professionals, specifically, in the early childhood profession is needed, since we know the majority of the literature shows a positive relationship between teacher education and program quality. And, of course, another important finding in the literature is the link between high quality programs and better child outcomes. The data presented in this study are encouraging—providing monetary incentives to early childhood professionals significantly decreased turnover and provides some evidence of its relationship to quality, although more research is needed in this area.

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## Building Blocks to Best Practice

### Introducing an “Integrated Holistic Model” of Early Intervention with Children and Families

Maria Walls and Mary O’Connor

#### Introducing the “Integrated Holistic Model”

##### Introduction

On the arrival of their newborn baby for whom they have so many hopes and dreams, some parents face the news, then or soon after, that their child has a disability. This usually raises many complex and perplexing questions for the future. This paper is concerned with the support services with which the families, who have a child with a disability, subsequently engage to support all family members to live full and active lives. This presentation weaves legislation, research, theory and practice in the provision of services to children and families, where the child has an identified disability.

The essential message of the paper is that the future of early intervention services is founded on core principles and this requires substantial paradigm shifts in the way in which early intervention services are provided in Ireland today. These core principles are substantiated in international literature and are now being supported by local research on the “Integrated Holistic Model” in its application in an Irish context. We enter this debate as experienced early intervention practitioners with a strong conviction that if services “get it right” in these early years, it can make a significant difference for the rest of people’s lives. We wanted to know how a family could cope with the different and sometimes contradictory goals that were being set from different disciplines.

We begin with reviewing the legislative context, in particular the health and education dimensions, for disability services. We then review the principles of Good Practice in Early Intervention Services through a brief overview of the “Integrated Holistic Model” and describe the changes in St Michael’s House Services in redeveloping their model of early intervention. We conclude with some comments on the training context. It is useful to focus on the objectives of early intervention for young children (birth to 6 years) with or at risk of developing disabilities. Early intervention aims to:

- Minimise the impairment effect of disability;
- Ensure people reach their potential;
- Support families.

As stated in the British Government guidelines consultation document for birth-to-three year olds (2002), early intervention is defined as supporting the child in all aspects of development, including:

- Health Care;
- Educational and therapeutic input;
- Supporting the family as needed to maximise emotional development;
- Providing support that respects cultural and religious views.

It is clear from the paper by Glennane *et al.* (2005) that there is high level of agreement on some of the core principles. Sloper (1999) and Carpenter (1998) identify the following common features of successful services:

- An holistic approach to assessing and meeting family need;
- An emphasis on the importance of collaborative relationships with professionals;
- A consistent, single point of contact;
- A flexible, individualised needs-led approach;
- A focus on parent perception of need;
- The empowerment of parents.

### **Research**

This paper incorporates the learning from two pieces of research conducted in Ireland by the two presenters in voluntary organisations providing services to children and adults; one to people with a physical disability, the other a learning disability. This research sets out to explore how to implement new models of early intervention services to children and families with a disability. Both methodologies employed qualitative methods with aspects of the action research paradigm, to directly influence the implementation of service provision.

### **The Disability Context**

This development in early intervention services within disability services is set within a wider context of change in the disability sector. There are currently a number of major developments in policy and legislation:

- The landmark document, *Strategy for Equality* (Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities, 1996), signalled the beginning of change and the requirement for partnership and consultation with people with disability;
- The establishment of the National Disability Authority in 2000;
- The Government Health Strategy, *Quality and Fairness* (Department of Health and Children [DHC], 2001), introduced the principle of person centred services and sought

- the development of standards in disability services;
- *The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act* was signed into life in July 2004;
  - The *Disability Bill* launched September 2004 presents the opportunity for the most radical changes to date - however it is still unclear as to the potential impact of this legislation;
  - The *Strategic Review of Disability Services* established in 2004 by the DHC following a commitment sanctioned in *Sustaining Progress 2003-2005*;
  - The Reform of the Health Services currently underway.

Consequently, disability awareness has moved from being a health issue to a matter of importance for all Government Departments, crossing education, employment, social welfare, housing, transport etc. The government has committed to a mainstreaming agenda.

*The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004)* impacts specifically by providing for Individual Education Plans for children with special education needs. It is possible to interpret the Act as including all birth to 6 year olds. The National Intellectual Disability Database Report (Barron and Mulvany, 2003) identifies 1,044 children in the birth to 4 age category and 1,878 in the 5 to 9 age group. *The Disability Bill (2004)* will provide for a health needs assessment. It is anticipated that these assessments and plans will be incorporated into one plan for each child. For many years, confusion has existed in the provision of services to young children with disability and their families, arising from the split responsibility between health and education. The question remains as to whether the aforementioned Bill and Act will resolve these issues.

### **The "Integrated Holistic Model"**

The "Integrated Holistic Model" describes the key building blocks of effective early intervention, based on best practice as reflected in international research.

Developing from the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979), a theme that will emerge within the conceptual framework is the "rings to change". These are eight interconnected rings containing the key elements of the model. The framework links what happens within the microcosm of the family who has a young child with a physical disability with the mesocosm of the organisation and the macrocosm of society at large.

The "Integrated Holistic Model" is founded on the following core values:

- Rights based perspective;
- Social model;
- Inclusive environments.

### **Rights Based Perspective**

The rights based perspective takes seriously the assertion that all persons are born equal with inalienable rights (Quinn, 2001:2). In the Irish context Baker (1998) quotes the Irish constitution: *"The Republic guarantees ... equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens.... cherishing all the citizens of the nation equally."* Yet rights of Irish children and adults with disabilities are weak (Quinn, 2001). However, Ireland has legal obligations in international law and policy.

### **Social Model**

A significant shift in thinking in the implementation of the Integrated Holistic Approach is the move from the medical to the social model of disability. Quinn (2001:3) states:

*"According to the social construct idea, people are not born different. Difference is not inherent in a human being. It is socially constructed."*

The change from a medical to a social model moves from individual responsibility to societal responsibility. Put simply, if I break my leg, it is not my leg which prevents me getting up a step, but the absence of a ramp to facilitate me. Oliver (1993:63) defines the medical definition of disability *"...as individual problem ..."* The medical model supported segregation; the social model focuses on inclusion. The World Health Organisation (WHO) recently revised the international classification of disability (ICIDH) to acknowledge inclusion in activity and participation as set out in Table 1 below.

**Table 1 - ICIDH**

<b>International Classification of Impairment Disability and Handicap</b>			
<b>Original ICIDH</b>			<b>Revised ICIDH2</b>
impairment	to		impairment
disability	to		activity
handicap	to		participation

### **Inclusive Environments**

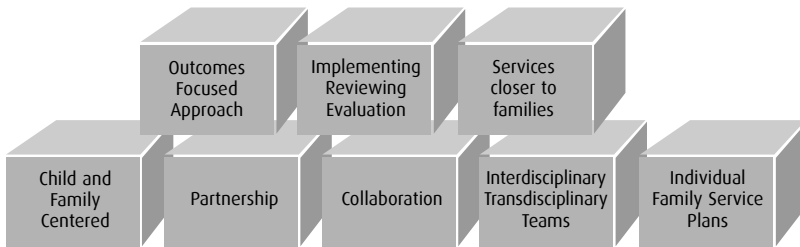
Inclusive settings are the least restrictive environments of choice, in its fullest sense. They include full access to buildings, support to participate in activities or welcoming and open attitudes.

Implementation of the “Integrated Holistic Model” challenges the provision of centre-based services. Inclusion reduces stigma and provides the opportunity for the community to act as a resource for the family to support child development.

### **Eight Building Blocks of the “Integrated Holistic Model”**

On embarking on an exploration of the eight main building blocks of the model, it is important to set out their reliance on the essential role of the two cornerstones of Child and Family Centred and the beneficial structure of the Individual Family Service Plan. See Figure 1.

**Figure 1 - Eight Building Blocks of the Integrated Holistic Model**



The key elements (building blocks) of the “Integrated Holistic Model” are:

- 1 Child and Family centred approach;
- 2 Partnership;
- 3 Collaboration;
- 4 Interdisciplinary/transdisciplinary approach;
- 5 Individual family service plans;
- 6 Bringing services closer to families;
- 7 Implementing, reviewing and evaluation;
- 8 Outcomes focused approach.

#### **1. Child and Family Centred Approach**

Since the 1970s, the importance of working with families as well as the child with disability, has been acknowledged. Rosin *et al.* (1996) defines Family Centred Care as a service delivery system with families as the focal point, serving as partners and decision-makers in the early intervention process. This requires an understanding of family systems. Begun (1996) defines this approach as transforming, by placing the family at the centre and viewing the service provider as a collaborator. Families are not just a collection of individuals but a complex system; it is not just about receiving information for assessment purposes and for parents to provide therapy, but rather the inclusion of the whole family in the process.

Brinker *et al.* (1994) argue that the simultaneous goals of early intervention are to facilitate the development of the infant with disabilities and to assist the parents in their adaptation to their child. Adaptation refers to a process of grieving that helps a family achieve a comfortable balance and to promote the growth and development of individual members and the system as a whole in adjusting to a member having a disability. Rainforth and York-Barr (1997) suggest that it is important for therapists to understand the implications of grieving. Beresford (1995) suggests:

*"...a good service would involve a holistic, interagency approach ...in which the needs of the child as opposed to the impairment are considered..."*

DePompei and Williams (1994) advocate the need to develop the capacity within the family throughout its life cycle.

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### **Evidence**

In the research within the physical disability organisation all stakeholders were asked how would they know that such services were present in Ireland and their replies suggested:

- Provision for siblings;
- Home visits;
- Involvement in all parts of assessment process in defining the issues, and devising solutions;
- Meeting parents together;
- Timing of visits;
- Video of intervention for father;
- Key worker.

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### **2. Partnership**

*"(Partnership) ....requires abdication of paternalistic approaches to helping relationships and adoption of empowerment, participatory involvement and competency enhancement approaches to help giving."* (Dunst *et al.*, 1994:211)

Rosin *et al.* (1996) propose that family centred early intervention creates the need to change how parents and service providers work together. Partnership involves a movement away from the expert model of professionals gathering information and making decisions about service provision. Dale (1996) proposes the adoption of the negotiating model whose premise is that parents and professionals have separate but potentially highly valuable contributions to make.

In organising programmes and consulting on the design of services with families, parents report that they feel more equal in these environments. For example if I attend my GP, I am unlikely to raise many questions about my service. However, if I were to attend a consultation on GP services, I may have strong suggestions to make. Consulting with parents needs to take place at an individual, family level and service level.

### 3. Collaboration

Jesien (1996:186) defines collaboration as:

*"...the sharing of power, information, and resources between at least two persons, programs or agencies to facilitate a mutually beneficial activity to further the achievement of a mutually beneficial goal."*

Crais (1993) suggests that the key issues in making collaboration successful are to focus on process versus outcome and the extent to which the service is family directed or professional directed. The essence of collaboration is choice, involving parity among participants, based on mutual goals, dependent on shared responsibility for participation and decision making, sharing resources and accountability for outcomes. Rainforth and York-Barr (1997) suggest that collaboration may be described as not directive, authoritarian or prescriptive.

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### Evidence

In the research all stakeholders were asked how would they know that such services were present in Ireland and their replies suggested:

- Asking parents about the level and nature of their involvement, and where the involvement should take place;
- Using a problem solving format;
- Committing resources to enable parent involvement in advisory programmes;
- Facilitating parent to parent contact;
- Using evaluation and parent satisfaction surveys;
- Consulting on the planning and development of services;
- Family directed service.

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### 4. Interdisciplinary / Transdisciplinary Teams

Tuchman (1996:120) states that:

*"The team is the mechanism which makes the heart of the intervention work. The team approach recognises that young children with disabilities typically have multifaceted needs that can be addressed more effectively by a team rather than by a single service provider."*



### **Models of Teaming**

Tuchman (1996) describes multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary teams. Teams develop by establishing a shared vision and philosophy, and learning how to work together effectively to make decisions, solve problems and carry out responsibilities.

#### **Multidisciplinary teams**

Multidisciplinary teams share common goals but work independently of one another. Each member represent his/her own discipline and uses discipline specific skills. Parents receive information related to a specific area of development and a plan is drawn up which relates to the particular discipline.

#### **Interdisciplinary teams**

Interdisciplinary teams share common goals and are committed to communicating with each other and with families with whom they work. There is planned interaction and formal arrangements for communication, for assessments, planning, and intervention. However, there is also increased parental involvement.

#### **Transdisciplinary teams**

Transdisciplinary teams share common goals and plan together using a systematic process for sharing roles and crossing disciplinary boundaries to maximise communication, interaction and co-operation among members. Decisions are made by consensus and family participation is crucial.

Tuchman (1996) identified this model as providing the best service to families as they integrate the principles of co-ordination and family centred service to a greater extent than do the others. The most common form of teaming in the Irish disability sector remains multi disciplinary teams, with some movement towards interdisciplinary working.

### **Integrated Therapy and Natural Environments**

Rainforth and York-Barr (1997) argue that transdisciplinary models are best placed to support natural environment work. Integrated Therapy emphasises the provision of services within contexts which are considered meaningful or functional for an individual. Discussion is needed in Ireland to develop natural environment work by using key people and environments in the person's life.

### **5. Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP)**

*"The guidelines, mandating an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) for each child and family, the identification of the parents' concerns, priorities, and resources (CPRs), and the focus on increased decision making by parents have prompted early*

*intervention professionals to discover new and creative ways to engage parents and other caregivers in the early intervention process.” (Crais and Wilson, 1996:125-126).*

The core focus of US IDEA legislation is on parental involvement and the mechanism for ensuring parent-professional collaboration in implementing the IFSP process. Rosin *et al.* (1996) portray the IFSP process as a promise to families, a way to build trusting relationships and a vehicle for empowerment. In the UK, a system of “statementing” or legally obliging educational needs is in use. The *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act* introduces the Individual Education Plan process in Ireland.

### **6. Bringing Services Closer to Families**

Services Closer to Families involves changes in the way services are provided. They build on the principle of inclusive communities. They involve the setting up of outreach services and increasing home and community visits.

### **7. Implementing, Reviewing, and Evaluation**

Bauman *et al.* (1997) state that inadequate levels of programme evaluation are evident. Within the past ten years, there has been a substantial increase in the move to service evaluation. Intellectual disability service providers in Ireland have made a significant commitment to a range of quality assurance models, some with external accreditation.

### **8. Outcomes Focused Approach**

The Outcomes Focused Approach requires a paradigm shift from looking at the services people receive to looking at what goals are achieved. The Council on Quality & Leadership, Personal Outcomes Measures (1995) model has specific outcomes for early intervention services.

### **Paradigm Shift**

The “Integrated Holistic Model” requires paradigm changes in practice. This change is summarised in the following table of the Paradigm Shift Summary. I propose that for a team to work successfully, they must aim to cross all elements of the paradigm.

**Table 2 - Paradigm Shift Summary**

<b>From</b>	<b>To</b>
Charity	➔ Rights
Paternal	➔ Empowering
Medical Model	➔ Social model
Disability focus	➔ Child and family centred
Expert	➔ Partnership
Prescriptive	➔ Collaborative consultation
Professional driven	➔ Consumer driven
Segregated	➔ Mainstream/Inclusive
Group	➔ Individual
Education/Therapy	➔ Whole life
Multidisciplinary	➔ Inter/transdisciplinary
Discipline focused	➔ Age group programme based
Standards	➔ Outcomes
Centre based Assess.	➔ Integrated real environment Assess.
Deficit	➔ Strengths based

**From Theory to Practice**

In considering the implementation of this model in Ireland, the following recommendations were made:

- Dedicated structure;
- Leadership and Co-ordination;
- Understanding Change;
- Teamwork and Time;
- Getting Parents involved;
- Move from uni-dimensional to multi-dimensional approach.

To make this complex change effective, it is essential to understand that the “Integrated Holistic Model” is a better way of providing services to children and families. The Model pulls together different threads that have existed in many services in Ireland, some of which are more developed in the U.S. It is presenting a more complete picture of the intervention which requires the marrying of Irish, and International practice. St Michael House Services show that this is possible, that a service has made significant steps to move into the model.

### **Moving from Child Centred to Child and Family Centred Services in Early Intervention St. Michaels’s House**

In St Michael’s House, the journey of change began for us at the end of the 1990s. A multidisciplinary team provided a range of services to young children with intellectual disability. We knew that there were gaps in the services due to resource deficits. We knew that some of the families who used our service were not always happy with us. We believed that this was because of resource deficits, but we also had an underlying feeling that there was something else going on. So we set out to discover what the staff and the families who used the service thought of the current services, and what they thought should be different. At the same time, we researched the literature for examples of models of service in Ireland and in other countries.

Through a two-year process of research and consultation, we arrived at the point where we understood that, in order to meet the needs of the children and families we serve, we had to make some radical changes to our model of service. It is fair to say that the change we faced was transformational. We will describe the theoretical basis of the change in the model of service and describe how our new model of service operates.

#### **Who is the User of the Service?**

Wasik (1990) conceptualises the user of services in the following way:

**Table 3**

<b>Older models</b>	<b>Newer models</b>
Child	Family
Individual	Family System
Encapsulated	Ecological
Handicapped	Universal

This shift from older models of service to newer models reflects our changing understanding of children, of families and of disability. Ecological theories of human development highlight the inadvisability of viewing children’s development in context that is divorced from the child’s family and wider environment. Our understanding of disability has shifted from a deficit-oriented model to a model that identifies the strengths and needs of all children. The family becomes the focus of intervention, not because the family is *per se* in need of help because they have a disabled child, but because families are where children grow and learn and because childhood disability may place additional strain on families.

### The Role of the Helper in Newer Services

Just as our view of the people who use the service changed, our view of ourselves as service providers also has to shift.

**Table 4 - The Role of the Helper**

Older models	Newer models
Expert	Collaborator
Problem solver	Facilitator
Decision maker	Negotiator

In older models of service the professionals were seen as having all the expertise and all the solutions to any difficulties that might face families. Professionals were considered to know what was best for children and for families. In newer models of service, families are seen as the experts in relation to their own child. Certainly, professionals have expertise in particular areas and that expertise, taken together with the family's knowledge of their own child, can be shared so that everyone can work collaboratively with families to support them to make decisions that are right for them. Newer models of working are essentially about empowering families. Families who have a child with a disability face many years of decision-making. Early intervention services that do not empower families create dependencies that inevitably cause difficulties for the family and child when those services change, as they surely will, as the child grows.

### Individual Planning

In newer models of early intervention services, supports are provided based on identified need for both child and family. Parents are more likely to identify "*playing with toys*" as a goal for their child than to identify that their child needs to be optimally positioned to use their hands, develop increased range of motion, acquire the concept of means-end and develop hand-eye co-ordination. Plans to support development need to centre on the realities of children's lives, not on developmental domains and deficit models.

Families may have needs arising from their child's disability. Assisting a family to retain or reinforce the family's connection to a natural support network of family or friends is a legitimate goal of early intervention.

### Using Outcomes

A framework such as Outcomes for Families with Young Children (The Council on Quality & Leadership, 1995) supports services to make the transition from old to new ways of working. Instead of focusing on inputs (number or type of staff, number of assessments carried out, number of treatment sessions) or processes (the way the work is organised), the service focuses on Outcomes.

Some Outcomes for families with young children are:

- Families are informed;
- Families choose child development goals;
- Families choose their goals;
- Families choose services and supports;
- Children attain developmental milestones.

Services organised to support Outcomes emphasise information giving, key-working and the co-ordination of services, services based on family identified need and collaborative/transdisciplinary work.

### **Key Working**

Sloper (1999), reviewing services in the United Kingdom, states that the absence of key workers causes provision that is "...*piecemeal and service- rather than needs-led.*" Families incur additional stress when they have to deal with multiple unconnected, or worse, contradictory interventions from different professionals. A keyworker or service co-ordinator, who knows the family well, assists the family to pull all the pieces of service provision together into a connected whole that fits with their individual family needs.

### **Transdisciplinary Work**

How professionals work together is a major factor affecting the co-ordination of services to families. In the past, multidisciplinary teams of specialists – doctors, social workers, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, teachers and psychologists all worked separately, causing the problems of fragmentation described above. With the advent of interdisciplinary teams, where information is shared, all team members can facilitate goals.

There is growing interest in transdisciplinary teams. In this type of team the roles of the team members are less differentiated. Members share skills with each other and one or two members work primarily with the family, calling on the more expert skills of their colleagues as required. The concept is particularly applicable to Early Intervention teams precisely because it is a powerful tool for dealing with fragmentation.

Guralnick (1997) whose book "*The Effectiveness of Early Intervention*" is the seminal work summarising the 'state of the art' of Early Intervention describes the hallmarks of effective Early Intervention services as follows. Effective services should:

- Centre on the needs of families;
- Be based in the community;

- Be able to thoroughly and efficiently integrate the contributions of multiple disciplines;
- Have the capacity to plan and co-ordinate supports and services from multiple disciplines.

This statement does not ignore the need for appropriate models of curriculum and service content. It takes for granted that effective services must have an effective content component (while acknowledging that we still face many challenges in developing our knowledge base about what really works in Early Intervention). Rather, it prompts us to understand that many of the challenges we face lie in the “how” not in the “what”.

### **Training for Professionals**

In Ireland there is no specific training for professionals to work with young children with disability and their families. Many courses (therapy professions, learning disability nursing, some childcare and education courses) contain short modules focused on the needs of children with disability in specific areas. However, there is a need for training for all professionals that clearly articulates models of early intervention and equips staff from a range of disciplines to work effectively with families with young children with a disability.

In terms of how professionals work together there is a need for training courses to encompass within them specific approaches to teamwork and to skill sharing transdisciplinary work. There is a need for the relevant undergraduate courses to focus on the importance of co-ordination and integration. Common training inputs are one way of achieving this. It might also be useful to look at establishing a post-graduate diploma type course that supports professionals from a variety of backgrounds to learn the additional skills they require to become skilled early interventionists.

We in St. Michaels’ House feel at this stage we have made significant progress, but the work is not without its challenges. Shonkoff and Meisels (1990) state:

*“The progressive and inevitable ambiguity of disciplinary boundaries represents one of the central challenges facing the field of early childhood intervention”*

This is as true in 2004 as it was in 1990.

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# Concluding Observations and Notes on Contributors



## Questions of Quality: Some Concluding Observations

Nóirín Hayes

### Introduction

It is a great pleasure to be here with you today to bring this stimulating and challenging conference to an end. The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was formed with the remit of developing a National Framework for Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education (NFQ/ECCE) to maintain, develop and support quality in diverse early education settings. To this end, it has brought together an energetic team; has reviewed, national and international 'quality' policy, practice and research; has drafted a thematic review of how young children develop and learn in Ireland to support the development of the NFQ/ECCE; has engaged in extensive consultation and has hosted this international conference.

The work is framed around the three issues of defining quality, assessing quality and supporting quality and the overall conference has been structured along these lines also. This is in recognition of the fact that the work of the Centre really only begins when the NFQ/ECCE is published. To have any impact on the lives of our young children and the quality of early education settings, it will need to be carefully implemented, supported and evaluated.

Given the task of bringing the conference to a close, I was fortunate to have advance access to the abstracts for all of the presentations, which allowed me to get a sense of the tone of contributions before the conference began. Attending the Keynote speeches has been a very pleasurable experience and has enriched my understanding of the enormity of the task ahead. Presenting you today with a synthesis is almost impossible!

In sitting down to pull my thoughts and experiences together, I found that the best way was to be guided by the three themes and prompted by words which, I believe, capture the essence of the complex dynamic that has been set up over the days of the conference. I also thought that the jig-saw icon used in the CECDE materials offered a useful context within which to blend and present these comments.

### Defining Quality

Defining quality is not easy, and yet, it is something that must be considered before any progress can be made in framing a national mechanism for supporting and assessing quality in early education. The complexity of the task has been richly illustrated in the research and academic literature. The importance of acknowledging different perspectives

when discussing definitions came through very clearly in the keynote presentations and also in the workshops. Central to this is the need to recognise and balance these multiple perspectives in any materials developed.

In much of the discussion, the importance of values was noted, as was the need to generate a debate in Ireland right now, on just what we want for our youngest children and what they are entitled to expect from us. There was a general sense that policy is moving on in the absence of this debate and that the NFQ/ECCE, among other reports and publications, will afford a useful opportunity to raise questions and seek action for the support and maintenance of high quality early education. The active and participating role of children in making quality happen was stressed and the need to assist policy makers and practitioners in considering quality from the perspective of the child was recognised as a challenge.

The discussions around the definition of quality provided opportunities to review research findings and to reflect on the key elements that contribute to quality. The importance of relationships in quality was mentioned, along with the difficulty in defining the exact role of the various elements in quality.

There is a general sense that there is far more to quality than checklist-like, measurable factors and the complexity of quality should not deter us in our task; rather the challenge of its complexity should guide us.

### **Assessing Quality**

Under this heading, the real questions centred around the where and what of assessment. Is it the settings one assesses or is it the practice? Where does assessing quality allow for considering policy? Is there a danger that quality may become a constraint to practice - tying people in their practice with unrealistic, but measurable, demands? This was the tone of many of the questions I heard over the last few days and they raised some interesting points of discussion. Generally, I sense that people see the value of assessment as more than simply in terms of regulations and control. There is a supportive and guiding role to assessment and, indeed, it can be considered a central element of pedagogy in early education.

While there was agreement that assessment had to be accompanied by standards and clear indicators, there was some concern that the term assessment might itself need careful explanation. In the current educational climate, it still conjures up notions of tests and examinations. However, we should not lose sight of the power of assessment as a guide to programme development and as a general diagnostic. The importance of sensitive assessment was also noted, particularly when applied to very young children

and in home-like settings. Once again, there must be a balance found between the need to strive for and assess quality on the one hand and the dynamic and fluid realities of practice on the other. In almost all discussions on this topic there was awareness of the value of listening and reflecting to the varied messages and messengers in the wider quality context.

### **Supporting Quality**

Following on from the concerns expressed about the danger of too rigid an approach to assessing quality, the issue of support for achieving quality presented many possibilities. The importance of supporting quality through considering children, their families and the local community was highlighted, and the need for cultural sensitivity was raised. For many people, the matching of quality at points of transition in the lives of children, warrants consideration. This related, for instance, to the group size requirements for four year olds in preschool settings when compared to the group size in classrooms - how best could these two educational environments learn from each other and move closer while maintaining quality.

It has been acknowledged that the quality of a service is very closely related to the expertise of the practitioner. In this regard, the whole area of professional preparation came up for discussion. While there was a recognition of the need to move towards increasing the number of well qualified staff in settings, there was some debate about how best to do this in a way that built on and supported the experiences of the more mature practitioner. There was also concern expressed about determining the professional requirements for different settings, with some arguing that the requirement for family day care practitioners would be different from those in centre based settings. No one disputed the need for professional preparation and continuing professional support, but there was a sense that the challenges should not be underestimated.

The uncertainty around funding in the whole area of early education was raised as a concern with respect to developing mechanisms to support quality. Annual grants needing renewal are not a firm basis on which to grow and develop a quality early education sector. In this regard, there is agreement that there is a need for improved understanding among the general public, parents and policy makers about the very valuable contribution to the economy and society, as well as to children and their families, made by high quality early educational services. In a number of discussions, the need for the sector to become 'political' was raised and suggestions as to how this might come about included fielding candidates in elections on the specific issue, or working to raise the awareness of politicians to the importance of the sector as a voting issue. While the topics of funding, policy and strategic planning came up in discussions on supporting quality early education, they were never far from the surface of discussion throughout the conference.

### **Quality - An Evolution**

Quality is not a final state out there to be achieved. Rather it is an evolving process; a responsive and local journey taken by all to meet the immediate needs of individual children and their families. There is no one-size-fits all to quality in early education, but this does not mean that we cannot know it when it is there - or more likely when it is absent! Quality is a 'to-ing' and 'fro-ing' dynamic, which is multi-level, interactive and, at times, messy. This nature of quality came across very clearly in both the keynote papers and individual papers. In some way, it makes the discussion about quality almost too complex to address - a kind of paralysing sense of awareness sets in. On the other hand, this very complexity concentrates the mind on the challenge presented, the need to articulate as clearly as possible the standards we want for our children, so that we can strive to achieve and support them.

There is a need for vision and leadership to drive the debate. A strong sense of advocacy informed by international and national research and good practice must inform discussion and debate at all levels. There needs to be partnership across the various parties from children through parents, practitioners, policymakers and academics to raise the level of awareness to the importance of early education and to the value-added of high quality. This needs passion, drive and energy and there is certainly a sense of that here today!

The pieces of the quality 'jig-saw' are coming together. We can contribute by joining in the debate, joining in the process and joining the pieces together towards achieving and maintaining quality early education across all settings and for all children in Ireland. This conference has been an important part of the jig-saw and I know that the lessons from the papers and the discussion will be taken on board by the team at the CECDE, and those of us involved with the development of the NFQ/ECCE. We are all part of an important enterprise with a lot at stake and the challenge is to leave here today energised by the task and ready to continue questioning quality.

Many thanks for your attention and for your thoughtful and considered contributions throughout the conference. Thank you.

## Notes on Contributors

**Heino Schonfeld** is Director of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.

**Sle de Valera** is Minister for State at the Department of Education and Science.

## Keynote Speakers

**Dr Richard Clifford** is Senior Scientist at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina and co-director of both the National Center for Early Development and Learning and the National Prekindergarten Center in the US.

**Tricia David** is Emeritus Professor at Canterbury Christ Church University College, England and has worked on research and consultancy projects with many organisations including the OECD and the British Council.

**Dr Mathius Urban** is from the Institute of Pedagogy at the Martin Luther University in Halle-Wittenberg, Germany. He has been involved in the development of quality programmes for many years and since 1999, has worked with the National Quality Initiative.

## Presenters

**Dr. Caroline Barret-Pugh, Associate Professor Mary Rohl and Jessica Elderfield** lecture at the Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences School of Education at Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia.

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