The Birth of Literacy

‘The value of oral language competency develop in children in the early years’.

Lord Mayor Oisín Quinn and Dublin City Council’s Community & Social Development and Dublin City Libraries.
Dublin City Lord Mayor Oisín Quinn,

Foreword

Language acquisition is one of children’s many innate skills. In the first 3 years of life children absorb more language than they will do at any other time in their lives. It is important to expose them to as many opportunities of language development as we can. Children’s experiences of playing and talking reinforces skills and creates the building blocks required for effective communication and future literacy. As language is an integral part of a child’s independence it allows them the ability to develop socially. Children’s education begins before attending preschool/school, some of the most important learning for this group is in the home and the community.

Government policy documents, including e.g. Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education; Aistear, The National Curriculum Framework; The Workforce development Plan; Ready Steady Play! A National Play Plan, and the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy are each aimed at improving outcomes for children. Sometimes the terminology of language can be daunting e.g. syntax; phonology; vocabulary; semantics; linguistics; comprehension; articulation. While they all have their place in supporting children’s language development we should not over-think what we want to do! As Lord Mayor I hosted this event to provoke a discussion about tackling early years literacy problems. Following our 2013 seminar and a subsequent round table event, my office working with Dublin City Council’s, Community & Social development department & Dublin City Libraries produced this report in order to support this important stage for the early years Oral Language development through raising awareness of the important building blocks which includes;

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<th>Talking to &amp; with children</th>
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<td>Reading regularly, using picture, word or story books</td>
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<td>Play!</td>
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<td>Singing e.g. nursery rhymes</td>
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<td>Asking questions</td>
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<td>Stop, listen &amp; repeat words</td>
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Furthermore as Lord Mayor I am committed to ensuring that Dublin City Council plays its' part in supporting these building blocks through Community & Social Development and the Library services. I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who participated in the seminar and the round table event. I urge everyone reading this report to look at what you/ your organization can do to continue to raise awareness of the building blocks to Oral Language development and put in place supports where possible.

Oisin Quinn
Lord Mayor of Dublin
2014
Introduction/Background

The national strategy for fostering literacy and numeracy from early childhood to adulthood is set out in the publication ‘Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life’ published by the Department of Education and Skills in 2010. It recognises that oral language development is a precursor to achieving literacy. Literacy develops from birth as humans strive to express feelings, exchange thoughts and connect with others through gestures, sounds and language. From infancy, children use sound, gesture and body language to communicate their needs and feelings. In the first two years, before children are talking a great deal, they are listening and learning about what language is and what language does … At about six months, babies begin to ‘tune in’ to the sounds of the family language. The sounds they make will become more and more like the sounds they hear in the talk around them. This early learning is the beginning of a child’s awareness of sound of people in their environment (parents, care givers, adults and siblings) who support this by talking, singing songs, jingles and rhymes as they change, wash, feed and play with the baby.

There is a body of research on the association between children’s language development and their social and academic success in school (Bishop, 1997; Goodyer, 2000; Hay, Elias, Fielding-Barnsley, Homel, & Frieberg, 2007; Senechal, 2006). In terms of this association the evidence is that lower socio economic status (SES) communities have a greater prevalence of children with early literacy difficulties (Boetsch, Green, & Pennington, 1996; Snow & Powell, 2008) such that low SES is a risk factor in terms of children's initial reading development. Associated with this is a growing belief that appropriate early language and learning experiences can act as a protective factor that has a positive influence upon the cognitive and social development of young children to help alleviate low educational achievement (Cashmore, 2001; Elias, Hay, Homel, & Frieberg, 2006; Hawkins & Catalono, 1992; Paul, 2007).

To support national policy in November 2013 the Lord Mayor of Dublin Oisín Quinn hosted a seminar on the value of oral language competency development in children in the early years, and the role that communities and families play in supporting and encouraging communication. Experts across a number of sectors presented on key themes providing valuable insights into the influences that early years language development and other experiences have on life long learning.
Seminar

The Birth of Literacy, a half day seminar hosted by the Lord Mayor, Oisin Quinn and Dublin City Council’s Community and Social Development and Libraries, took place in the Mansion House on the 6th November 2013. Early childhood studies and neuroscience indicate the extent to which children’s early experiences affect health, behaviour and developmental outcomes while Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework identifies the theme of Communicating as being about children sharing their experiences, thoughts, ideas, and feelings with others with growing confidence and competence in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes. Talking to, playing with and reading to under 3’s as often as possible supports their becoming confident and competent communicators in so many ways and for numerous different purposes.

Focusing on the importance of oral language competency development in children in the early years, and the role that communities and families play in supporting and encouraging communication, the seminar, which was chaired by Mark Ffrench Mullen, Dublin City Libraries, featured a number of presentations from experts in this field, who presented on various themes and highlighted the practical issues around oral language development.

Seminar speakers:

1. David Coleman, Clinical Psychologist, Broadcaster and Author: ‘The importance of language and communication’.

2. Dr Martine Smith, Assoc. Prof Speech Language Pathology Trinity College Dublin: ‘The specific aspects of oral language that emerge in the preschool years’.


5. Marie Louise Fitzpatrick, Award Winning Author and Illustrator: ‘Using books to support language and communication development’.

The presentations were followed by brief Q&A opportunities, where practitioners highlighted issues of importance to them.

An exhibition featuring a number of supports available included contributions from:

- Dublin City Childcare Committee
- Dublin City Public Libraries
- National Adult Learning Agency
- Dublin City Council Play Development
Speaker Presentations Summary

**David Coleman, Clinical Psychologist**

When we are communicating with children 55% of meaning is communicated via a non-verbal process; 38% paraverbally (tone, facial, gestures, rate of words etc) and 7% meaning is conveyed by the actual words that are used. Therefore in an ideal world, one should focus on the impact of non-verbal expression to help children understand words. The importance of listening to children and paying attention to them was highlighted too. Reacting non-verbally and reacting authentically to them was stressed. The importance of the use of repetition, and observational commentary and summarising what they say allows children to learn more about words and behaviours and so is a vital part of supporting children’s language development. It is important to ‘help them to tell us in words rather than showing by behaviours’.

**Dr Martine Smith Assoc. Prof Speech Language Pathology, Trinity College Dublin**

Across the preschool years, children are learning many things about language. All of this knowledge is relevant to learning to read and write. Becoming a reader-writer involves learning what reading is, learning that black marks on a page represent sounds in a consistent, rule-governed way; that words are composed of sounds as well as meanings and that the purpose of reading is to understand the meanings intended by the writer. Many of the activities parents and preschools routinely engage in have been shown to be important in helping children to become reader-writers. Shared storybook reading fosters children’s understanding of what reading is about. They learn that print is different to the pictures on a page; they learn the structure of stories; they encounter new vocabulary and can access new experiences. With repeated opportunities they are able to discuss the context of stories, to ask questions and act out roles within a story and so build their spoken language skills. They can begin to take on the identity of a ‘reader’, even if sometimes the book is upside down. By learning nursery rhymes, playing with rhyme, working out that words start with the same sounds children learn to think about language in a new way – as something that exists outside of the immediate communication context and that can be examined from many different perspectives. Learning to read and write requires a whole new understanding of what constitutes a ‘word’. Speech is not presented as segmented units with equal spacing, but in order to get to grips with reading and writing, children need to learn to segment continuous speech sequences into increasingly small units – words, syllables and sounds. Supporting the emergence of reading and writing across the preschool years does not involve radical changes and innovations. The key lies in systematically incorporating what we already know is important – developing spoken language skills, making books available, encouraging shared storybook reading, introducing children to sounds, sound play and letters – into everyday routines.
Recommendations to support the ‘birth of literacy’

1. Shared storybook reading
2. Creating environments that offer a rich and diverse set of reading materials
3. Encouraging children to choose
4. Encouraging multiple re-readings
5. Listening
6. Using pause, open questions, speculation and comments to encourage conversation about books
7. Providing props for re-enactment
8. Encouraging children’s attention to sounds as well as meanings
9. Sound play
10. Rhyming
11. Sorting
12. Building children’s knowledge of the alphabet
13. Making letters part of their natural environment and landscape

“Even before grade school, we must become universally committed to developing [their] appreciation of and familiarity with text. We hug them, we give them treats and good things to eat; we try to teach them to be clean and polite, good natured and thoughtful, and fair. We do these things because it is the best way we know to set them off on happy, healthy lives. We must do as much with reading. In our society, their lives depend on it.” (Adams, 1990 p91)

Gordon Sturrock, Play Expert (UK)

Before language (spoken) there is a universal language of play. From the earliest days as children the play drive is what helps us learn key skills. Play creates an adaptive repertoire of responses. In play the child builds layer upon layer of awareness, play enables new ways of using existing skills in new situations and new skills gained in play change the child’s experience of the world.

A child discovers itself through play. “It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child … is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self”.

The ideal positioning for an adult is to support the child through the initial play cues, giving back a return to help the play on its way; moving children to their condition of creativity; containing the contract of creativity between child and adult and being ‘co-present ‘ as the child extends their boundaries. The play process is authentic if the adult is open and honest with children. Children need to be offered breadth and depth in the responses from adults around them if they are to make sense of their world.
Rita Treacy- Wordsworth Literacy Programme ©

When children do not master literacy (for whatever reason), they struggle in everything they do. First-hand experience of dyslexia inspired Rita Tracey to create The WordsWorth Literacy Programme © Her own experience of the problem included e.g. word finding difficulties, reading accuracy and comprehension problems, spelling and written expression difficulties. She created a digital version to make it more affordable, available and inclusive via the internet. It is now being used in some schools and also by parents to improve reading and spelling skills. It is a tool for children that are failing at school, and under-achieving, providing the opportunity to reach their true potential. It includes:

- A series of 104 video tutorials each enhanced with computer graphics.
- 330 interactive reading and spelling exercises.
- A phonemic approach.
- Unique rules for teaching the "mechanics" of reading and spelling.
- Strategies to enhance vocabulary repertoire and understanding.
- An intuitive approach with no special technical knowledge or training required.

Marie Louise Fitzpatrick, Author and illustrator

- Visual literacy contributes holistically and acts as a support to the sound, rhythm, cadence, rhyme and repetition of the words.
- Independent reading is made much easier by access to picture books. They offer the broadest definition of literacy where the picture is critical to a child’s understanding.
- All life themes are covered in picture books –she offered numerous examples demonstrating how illustrations depict and allow children to relate to various themes e.g Lemony Snickett, Jon Klassen, Leo Lionis, Mary Murphy.
- Chapter books can often thematically be ‘dumbed down’ to suit the child’s ability. But she pointed out that there is often more sophisticated handling of themes in picture books than in chapter books because the parental reader facilitates e.g Voices in the Park, where there are four different narratives communicated via art history, shadows, characterisation, colours and typeface among other techniques. Another very effective example was a picture book covering a wide range of emotions where all the illustrations centred around two words: Mama and Baby. She also referred to a picture book called The Arrival by Shaun Tan which had no words at all and where the child is facilitated to verbalise its reactions, and function at an imaginative level.
- Enabling a child have exposure to the visual experience of a picture book has a significant impact on ‘how the child makes connections, who this child will become and how the child will interact with the world around them’.... they write all the time supporting acquisition of language foundation for later reading.

Q&A’s with presenters are included in Appendix I
6th November Seminar Conclusions

Participants raised a number of questions and issues for further scrutiny.

| 1. How can we use the early years curriculum more effectively to enhance a child’s ability to communicate orally en route to literacy? |
| 2. Is the curriculum/Aistear ‘fit for purpose i.e. meeting the challenges of the digital age? |
| 3. In a country where 1 in 6 adults have literacy difficulties themselves how do we go about providing the resources to tackle this issue? How can parents be supported better to help their children? |
| 4. Is there any way of integrating what has been learned today into the classroom particularly where the multi-cultural dimension within the classroom situation has increased so dramatically in recent years? |
| 5. How can preschool providers be trained to manage? |
| 6. How can space be created within the day to facilitate the type of oral literacy described today? |
| 7. More visits of the Mobile Library to schools would be very beneficial. |
| 8. Parental involvement is critical in order to create a supportive home environment. |
| 9. The idea of dual language picture books was raised in order to address the issue of a multi-cultural society and school environment. |

The seminar concluded with agreement that further work was required to bring recommendations re the implementation of Aistear and how services could work collaboratively to support the needs articulated throughout the day.
The Birth of Literacy: Oral Language Development, 0-3 years

ROUND TABLE THINK TANK

24th JANUARY 2014

Introduction

A subsequent seminar/round table discussions, took place on January 24th, 2014, the Lord Mayor invited a number of those within the sector and working in the community to share experiences and explore possibilities for further city-wide collaboration. The seminar’s format included a series of presentations, followed by general discussion and culminating in round table discussions where participants explored a number of key areas:

- How best to support oral language development, the kinds of supports that are needed;
- How various challenges can be identified;
- How parents and carers can be equipped with skills to encourage oral language development, and
- How service providers can work more collaboratively in this area.

Welcoming the group to the Mansion House, the Lord Mayor re-iterated his interest in the initiative and noted how early experiences are important in affecting health, behaviour and developmental outcomes. In light of the previous seminar’s conclusion which identified the need for recommendations on how multiple sources of support can collaborate to focus on the needs of Oral Language development in the early years, he thanked participants for their enthusiastic responses and stressed the value of their experience and expertise. A collaborative approach to enhance outcomes through common commitments was now advisable.

He reminded attendees that children’s development from 0-3 years is an important stage for engaging with them. Communicating positively with children impacts on their language concepts, skills and the development of oral language in the early years. Interaction in communities supports exploration and encourages attention to surroundings. Social interaction can enrich language acquisition, while improving communication and life skills becomes even more critical to achieve the desired outcomes.
Presentations:

**Dublin City Council, Community and Social Development, Máire Igoe**

Máire gave an overview of what the city has to offer, and how Dublin City Council could work more collaboratively interdepartmentally as well as with outside agencies in developing environments that impact positively on the lives of children and young people from the early years through to young adulthood.

**Dublin City Council, Libraries, Mark Ffrench Mullen**

Mark’s talk focused on the theme ‘What is the stars?’ He discussed Dublin City Library’s current approach to engaging with young children’ language development and said that the Libraries’ objective was to inspire partnership, collaboration, equality and accessibility for all service users in a variety of different ways.

**National Council for Curriculum Assessment - AISTEAR, Dr Mary Daly**

Mary addressed the needs of children to be active and competent communicators with particular reference to the work of the National Council for Curriculum Assessment, whose four pillars of;

1. **Well-being,**
2. **Identity and belonging,**
3. **Communication and exploring,** and
4. **Thinking**

are the fundamental building blocks for Aistear (the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework) and Síolta (the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education).
### Table 1 Priority Actions

1. Address information deficit through community information campaign.
2. Implementation of the soon to be published ‘Early Years Strategy’.
3. Support parents in learning strategies around developing children’s oral language. (How to play, chat with your child and read interactively, dialogically with your child).

### Table 2 Priority Actions

1. Initiate an awareness campaign for parents and communities on how to communicate. There is a lack of clarity about what oral language is. NB Development of language and support of language should be used in promotion.
2. A shared focus - a city-wide approach - must be adopted with understanding of exactly what that is. Conversations are required to happen at local level. All adopt this common focus rather than using different methodologies.
3. Share what is already happening, focusing on strengths and coming together. Can we create a campaigns ‘Word on the street, Get Dublin talking’.

### Table 3 Priority Actions

1. Use story sack – bookless stories and DIT initiatives - these look at skills for parents in an alternative way.
2. Build links – develop a model to integrate resources for parents.
3. Initiate a City champion for oral literacy. Drive continuity specifically for 0-3 years with more integration of services.
How can these recommendations be realised?

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<th>I.</th>
<th>Examine what current existing supports and resources are already in place and how they are used?</th>
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<td>II.</td>
<td>Reach parents through Health Services /TUSLA i.e. public health nurses who work in the community.</td>
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<td>III.</td>
<td>Gather evidence re oral language development and link it to poverty, child development and mental health</td>
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<td>IV.</td>
<td>Develop a key statement or promotional tagline i.e. ‘Word on the Street – Get Dublin Talking’. This has the possibility of being a do-able easily recognisable action to promote the key initiative.</td>
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<td>V.</td>
<td>A specified module on early language development is necessary to ensure that it is a core component of childcare training.</td>
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<td>VI.</td>
<td>Access ‘hard to reach’ parents via community employment schemes.</td>
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Appendices
Appendix 1 Discussion – Seminar 6th November 2014.
Participants raised a number of issues in response to the first 2 presentations:

What were the speaker’s views on teaching phonetically? Is letter recognition more effective than sound?

The sound structure of language must be grasped on the journey to visual learning. Children need to know letter names. Jolyphonics is the system currently in use. Its core principles are based on sound, manipulating sound, and the ability to think about sound and sequences.

Challenges presented by electronic media V books, books V ipads?

Children are reading less. ‘Screens for children under three years a disaster’ Want their engagement with real world and interaction with people. Keep a media free world until they are able to make that decision for themselves. Children will be accepting of whatever environment is created for them.

Does television support language learning?

Children’s ability to develop language focuses on their ability to converse. The purpose of learning is to interact. I-media is regarded as a way of scaffolding to reading. When used appropriately, it can be used to explore, to converse, to interact as a conversation partner and as a tool.

Issue of multi-culturalism; An example cited of 40 different nationalities in one school. There is not enough support from government to cope with the situation. How can children be encouraged to develop their oral and aural skills? How can the curriculum be put into practice with numbers of opposing demands? How can teacher training be supported to manage in these instances?

- Shared storybooks where repeated sentences can be used as mantras are a good tool.
- Learning ‘sound forms’ converts to words that they understand at a later stage.
- Encourage children to read at home in their own languages. The importance of home support in all cases was advocated.
- Schools are encouraged to organise parent evenings to show support for language and literacy development.

Can the home shared-storytelling model be applied to the school environment? Is Aistear fulfilling this need?

The prevalence of screens in the home is a deterrent to parents speaking with their children. The emphasis on communication in Aistear is important – talking and telling stories provides a strong framework for supporting oral language and early literacy skills.

Families living in disadvantage (communities) do not have the basic building blocks in place.

- Harness the power of the family as early as possible and work collaboratively. Cultural change happens best from within the community.
- The Libraries are a wonderful facility for the whole community; they have space, events and offer time out. The North Dublin Story Time project was mentioned where the libraries provide support in the area of literacy development, and where parents are helped to develop approaches to apply within the home.
1. How can you explore and support oral language development 0-3/3-6 years in your area of work?

- Community services depend on CE staff which can present issues regarding low level of skills and experience.
- Sometimes the actions of ‘telling how’ can be inundated with documentation and low on contact time. Where does the documentation go and how effective is it to low paid, untrained and unskilled staff?
- An overarching strategy/statement is needed to address these issues.
- Training: Put speech and language on all sectors or early years.
- Speech therapists could/should have regular allocated times to work onsite in settings in order to provide service as well as mentoring and training staff on the ground. There is already a model of practice for this which can be looked at and tailored to suit contexts.
- Help parents build confidence and give them the skills to help
- Needing ID resources to lend –need assistance with resources in libraries
- Make parents children aware of holistic approach -community workers to spread word
- Teach and model play and encourage parents –non judgmental.
- Use and build on what we have
- Facilities are there but need to have programmes there
- Hard to reach groups that really need help.ID groups
- Help parents access free programmes
- Make places more inviting and less intimidating
- Trust in service providers –groups linking and build on
- Staff might not be confident n promoting programmes –need to support staff
- Staff training day to give a full understanding of programmes and facilities on offer in a gallery library
2. In your experience what are the specific supports required?

- Adults in children’s lives, parents – leaders and practitioners, using expertise
- Parent support
- Link between sections
- Spread word positively
- Talk and play
- Art /play is a language for children – know your role in messaging
- Communication across agency parks/gallery etc using resources that we have
- People need to share what’s happening
- We have a network here and documentation around good practise. Would be a good resource to everyone
- Practical example: Knowing where local resources/help are
- Adults have skills and techniques - books not enough
- Efficient integrated community services
- Early years too much documentation
- Skilled people and inspectors in early years
- Less bureaucracy and form filling
- Speech and Language therapists
- Storytime as a model
- Play in Libraries??
- Engage with difference to realise through play
- Mission statement in DCC plan re Literacy
- Literacy in other areas – sports/parks
- Storytelling sessions in community centres
- Storysack operating in Ballymun
- Book selection-staff advice
3. What are the challenges to be overcome?

- Sense of belonging needs to be nurtured in communities and amongst people for whom English is not their first language
- There is an information deficit in disadvantaged communities eg around Aistear
- Parents need support – support in learning to play, talk and read with their children
- Economic and social poverty is a key challenge
- Understanding of what oral language is and resources there (what can we do about it?)
- Parents don’t always understand where their children should be, what level or standard they should be at
- Knowledge is power (need knowledge)
- How do you make parents aware how important oral language is?
- Parents’ expectations
- Staff not given positive or importance of this area
- Educate parents/staff and local community
- Gap in expectations – home and school
- Extends to all aspects of DCC’s services
- Issues of family mental health
- Make the expectation fit the family i.e. not middle class ideas parachuted in
4. How can we address these challenges more collaboratively?

- Awareness raising – we don’t know what is out there
- Parent forum, parent hubs? Use a bottom up approach. What do parents want?
- We need to set up a less confusing policy environment by establishing leadership and coordination
- We need to map resources and services to avoid duplication of services
- Funding agencies should look at how they are setting up organisations and initiatives that are already in existence. These groups end up competing with one another instead of sharing/collaborating
- We need to take a step back and look at how policy is organised centrally. 3 government depts. look after children’s learning: Health, Education and DCYA
- How do you engage local people in community?
- Clarity of focus-get message out more
- Shared objectives-whole local community needs to be involved- local service providers etc
- People being able to communicate issues
- Sense of community –listen and talk
- Give children a starting point –open up conversation
- Doing things together
- Give the child a sense of identity, Create an identity –an environment where people can open up
- Library link with key community to bring infant-friendly space in Libraries –consult with experts - Early Years spelling and language
- Play spaces-integrate with Libraries
- Story sacks
- Support oral language in stories without books
5. How best can we support parents and carers with the means to encourage oral language development?

- Block book loans from libraries to services and parents
- Practical solutions to access: toilet facilities during parent and toddler time in libraries
- Story Sack project in operation in Ballymun could be extended out to other childcare services throughout the city.
- The Family Community Literacy and the ‘Hannan’ Programme are other models that can be used.
- Identify a ‘city champion for oral language’
- Awareness
- Practicalities – how do I do that in creative ways?
- Use facilitative ideas
- Focus on non-printed form
- Picture books – the role that they play
- Chatter matters – importance of doing it sometimes – not consistently but must be done at times
- Message of importance of talk
- Understanding child development and parental role in it
- Parents are important in this and need to understand that can make a difference
- A lot of parents are very isolated. It is DCC’s responsibility to let these groups know what facilities it has.
- Toddler time
Appendix 4 - General discussion 24.01.2014

- Promote ‘continuous lifelong learning’ should be specified and training in oral language development should be included as a core component within training modules for those working with children and young people in particular early years.
- Promote general discussion as an alternative to books.
- Create awareness of diversity of families and living conditions and ensure that support is developed within this context. i.e. not having a dining table can prevent the simple everyday occurrence of mealtime conversations.
- Challenges to the digital world. The general consensus was that maintaining a balance is required as the cyber world can also have many uses. Strategies on developing skills regarding the use of digital media to support education for children are required.
- Aistear is only as good as the people who administer/use it. Therefore more urgency is needed for completion and implementation of national children’s strategy and/or new national policy framework for 0-3, children and young people.
- DCC can work to ensure promotion and awareness of all departments and supports that the council provides i.e.
  - Libraries examine, Play and the Office of Integration
  - Libraries examine or provide details of attendance of migrant children to libraries;
  - DCCC identify information and or/provide support for addressing regarding the number of junior infant school pupils that cannot speak English; provide information and promote and increase access to the free pre-school year (ECCE).
- Youngballymun provides support programmes that address inclusion and transition. The uptake of infant mental health service is also high in this area.
- Support is required for migrant families and new communities in providing information on recreational and play facilities for children and young people throughout Dublin city.
- Regarding ECCE: Ideally there is merit in the provision of two good quality pre-school years support (to be explored).
- Lots of strategies can be used in early year’s childhood setting to support oral language competency development i.e.