The role of the childcare manager in developing and sustaining a community based early years service

A Presentation by Gráinne Mulligan
Ireland has a long history of community childcare provision. The first community playgroup was established in Crumlin Social Services Centre in Dublin in 1970. The first day nursery ‘the Liberties Crèche’ opened in the Liberties area of Dublin in 1853. Whyte et al (2004) remarked that community childcare is highly dependent on the ‘goodwill and commitment of staff and their acceptance of the conditions in which they work’.

In the Pobal Annual Early Years Survey, 2014 of the 4349 services surveyed 1307 described themselves as Community Based.
The purpose of this research was to examine the challenges facing childcare managers in community based not for profit services.
The research poses the question:

Is the sustainability of early years services owned and managed by local communities too dependant on the goodwill of managers who take on large areas of responsibility for governance of the project with little by way of training or support?
The four key areas of research:

• The development of community childcare in Ireland.
• Identification of the duties of childcare manager and the responsibilities of the management committee.
• Recommendations made regarding the ongoing sustainability of community early years services.
• Training and ongoing support for the childcare manager.
Social Context

• Changing Social and economic structure.
• Increased participation by women in the workplace.
• There was a growing recognition of the value of play and socialisation opportunities for young children.
• Community playgroups were seen not only as a way of providing ECEC services at low cost through a community service model, but were also a means of family support built on a core values of good community support systems for the child and family.
Political Context.

Two significant developments which had an impact on the provision of community childcare in Ireland.

The *Pre-School Services Regulations, under part VII of the Childcare Act 1991*, published in 1996 by the Department of Health was the first piece of legislation covering ECEC in Ireland.

*The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP)* Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform, 1998 was seen as an intervention by the State to increase the supply of childcare services in both private and community services. IBEC/ICTU(2005).
Development of Community Childcare Services in relation to current childcare policy in Ireland.

• Many community childcare services were developed in the 1980s and 1990s as a result of funding initiatives whose aims were related to social inclusion and equality.

• Pilot Childcare Initiative 1994-95 was designed to support the voluntary and community sector.

• *Staffing, Quality and Childcare Provision, an Evaluation of the Community Support Childcare Initiative the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 1998-2000.*
Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme. (EOCP)

• In 2000 substantial funding was made available to community childcare providers under the National Development Plan 2000-2006 and the launch of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP).

• The EOCP seem to favour community services with the provision of 100% Capital grants and staffing grant assistance for a period of 3 years. *(Developing Childcare in Ireland, 2003)*

• Many small services formalised what was previously an informal arrangement through the formation of a management committee in order to secure much needed funding.
Training and Support for Childcare managers.

• While staff training was recommended in many reports relating to ECEC services it was mainly in the area of childcare. (*Quality Childcare from a Social Partnership Perspective*, 2005) (*Developing Childcare in Ireland*, 2003)

• Few reports made reference to specific training for childcare managers to enable them to cope with an increasing administrative workload

• ‘The commitment required managing services and dealing with legal issues regarding employment and services remain an ongoing concern’ *Valuing Community Playgroups* (*French*, 2004).
Identifying the needs of community childcare managers:

- A study of the Daily Demands on community childcare Services in County Fingal (2005) highlighted the demands on managers in community childcare services in areas of social and economic disadvantage.

- County Childcare Committees (CCCs) handbooks sought to define the role of both the childcare manager and the management committee. (Galway City and County Childcare Committee Staff handbook 2008) and (South Tipperary County Childcare Committee Handbook)
Definition for the role of manager in an ECCE setting

‘the key elements of good management include, demonstrating leadership, fostering clear communications between all the people involved in the service, creating positive relations with the wider community, maintaining financial stability and being sensitive and responsive to the needs of staff members’ French (2003) Supporting Quality: guidelines for best practice in early childhood services.
The research method used was Qualitative Research.

- Services were initially contacted by letter. Both English and Irish medium services (Naíonraí) were contacted.
- Face to Face interviews were arranged.
- Interviews were recorded, transcribed and documented.
- The findings were categorised under some reoccurring themes.
- The data was then coded and interpreted so that the findings could be documented.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Based Early Years Services A</th>
<th>Community Based Early Years Services B</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medium-Large services, (Manager + more than 3 Members of staff) a mixture of Irish Medium and English Medium services,</td>
<td>Small services (Manager + 1/2 other staff) a mixture of Irish Medium and English Medium services.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Naíonra Áine</strong>: Large Naíonra Based in Deis School also provides out of school care</td>
<td><strong>Karen’s playschool</strong>, operating in community facility, sessional care only.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Naíonra Ciara</strong>: Not attached to Gaelscoil, purpose built building in local community. Also provides out of school care.</td>
<td><strong>Naíonra Tír na nÓg</strong>, based in room provided by local Gaelscoil, sessional service.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Martina’s Crèche</strong> and community playgroup. Purpose built building in large inner city complex. The area is undergoing renovation and rejuvenation was one of the original projects in the evaluation carried out by ADM</td>
<td><strong>Michelle’s community playgroup</strong>, sessional service operating in community facility in Rural area. This service unlike other services in this group operates out of school service, i.e. it open during summer holidays and mid-term breaks.</td>
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<td><strong>Barbara’s Crèche</strong> and Community Playgroup. Based in a local authority house in a large housing estate. Also provides out of school care.</td>
<td><strong>Naíonra Doireann</strong>: Based in Local Gaelscoil. Sessional Service. No out of school care provided.</td>
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<td><strong>Naíonra Aoife</strong>: Based in Local Gaelscoil, sessional ECCE service, out of school care provided during term-time.</td>
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Findings:

- There was diversity between the management structures in smaller and larger services.
- The vulnerability of some smaller services in terms of long term sustainability
- Managers spending less time working directly with children although they are often the highest qualified staff.
- Dependency on Community Employment (CE) staff.
The challenges faced by childcare managers.

- Increased time being spent on non-childcare duties.
- Applying for and reporting on Grant Aid.
- Supervision of Community Employment (CE) staff.
- Relationships with management committees and issues of governance.
- Ongoing support and training opportunities.
Limitations to the research

• The size of the sample group.
• The diversity in the management approaches of the different community groups.
• Much of the data and research material available made reference to larger community services and failed to offer much research into the smaller community services and rural services.
• The research question was too general.
What contribution does the research make to the wider topic area?

• The research highlighted the vulnerability of smaller services in terms of long term sustainability.

• The implications of the increasing amount of time childcare managers are spending on non-childcare duties could mean that the caregivers to the most vulnerable children are not the more qualified staff members.
Recommendations.

• Sharing or amalgamation of Boards of Management.
• Training and education in all aspects of management.
• The deployment of staff in training schemes to administrative duties thus relieving pressure on the manager is recommended.
• Graduate internship.
References.


