

National Early Years Research Day Proceedings



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**Early
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Acknowledgments:

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Message from Early Childhood Ireland



I'm delighted to welcome you to Volume 3 of Early Childhood Ireland's National Early Years Research Day Proceedings, which includes selected papers from the Early Childhood Ireland Research Symposium 2021, which took place online on Friday 23, and Saturday, 24 April. The theme Researching Early Learning and Care in a Time of Uncertainty framed the event.

For context, let me bring you back to April 2021 from the relatively safe distance of September 2022. The globe remained in the throes of the intense COVID-19 experience. Irish early years and school-age care settings had just emerged from a series of full and partial closures, in early March. Providers and educators had to be agile and alert in a fast-changing operating environment. Vital, bespoke government supports enabled the provision of care and education to children in keeping with public health guidance. The impact of COVID-19 continued to drive staff shortages and sporadic child attendance. Children missed out on the social and developmental benefits that consistent, high-quality early years and school-age care settings provide.

By April 2021, early years researchers had limited opportunity to conduct in-person or in-setting investigations. Our partners in the generation of new ideas and research evidence – third-level institutions – awaited their plan for a safe return to campus. Students of early childhood education and care engaged primarily in online learning. Many early years educators were busy undertaking continuous professional development online as part of government support to providers.

For all these reasons, delivering an online early years research event over two days seemed like a challenge and a risk. We wondered if there was there still an appetite to share research online one year into the pandemic? Was there a sufficient mass of recent research out there? Was the sector 'Zoomed out'? Could we create an energising online experience for Early Childhood Ireland's members and the wider sector?

So, we were reassured when, following a peer review process with our external scientific committee, thirty papers were selected for presentation at the symposium. A unique feature of Early Childhood Ireland's past research days had been the dynamic cross-over of the diverse populations in the Irish early years and school-age care sector: Members and non-members, providers and early years educators, students, researcher-educators, experienced researchers, and academics, and those working in national quality support and assurance roles. The 2021 symposium was no exception.

Research and data can provide a level of visibility to those often forgotten during emergencies like the pandemic. When there is evidence that child rights and needs are not being addressed, it makes turning a blind eye harder and it can support effective advocacy. Two outstanding keynote speakers led the way in providing that evidence: Zorica Trikic, International Step by Step Association (ISSA) presented on, *"Lifting Up Voices that Matter During the COVID-19 Crisis - The Early Childhood Workforce"*; and Dr Suzanne Egan, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, on: *"Missing Early Care and Education: The Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Young Children"*.

Early Childhood Ireland partnered with an external agency to deliver a virtual platform with discussion forums, live calls and instant messaging between participants, networking 'rooms' where participants independently organised by group and individually, in addition to access to live

and recorded keynotes and parallel sessions. The event was about sharing research evidence, but it was about so much more. It also supported making and sustaining professional relationships with and within our early years community during a very stressful period. Together, we were able to create an online space for professional learning and dialogue through research, connecting a range of diverse attendees united by our common concern for children in early years and school age care settings.

Listening to presenters and participants at the 2021 research symposium reminded me that so many of the people in our sector, whatever their role or stage of career development, live and breathe the research evidence that making connections matters for our individual and collective well-being and is central to good teaching and learning. The desire to directly link up and engage positively, even when constrained by a hopefully never-to-be-repeated global pandemic, was my personal takeaway from our 2021 symposium.

Volume 3 of Early Childhood Ireland's research day proceedings is a more tangible output. It contains eight papers from committed, diverse professionals who are united in wanting to generate new research to understand young children's lives better and to advance evidence about early years and school-age care services and the systems in which they operate, so that children have only high-quality experiences. Thanks to the authors for ongoing engagement with the editors on a series of draft papers. We recognise that it was an additional commitment.

I would like to acknowledge all who participated and presented at the Early Childhood Ireland online research symposium 2021. Thanks to our Scientific Committee for peer reviewing abstracts for the symposium and the draft papers submitted by presenters.

Thank you also to colleagues in Early Childhood Ireland, without whom the research event and this publication could not happen. My gratitude in particular to Kathleen Tuite, the co-editor of this volume and co-organiser of the research symposium, and to our managing editor, Aoife Horgan. We have all travelled a distance together since April 2021. Early Childhood Ireland looks forward to continued engagement with our members and with the wider sector in gathering evidence through research, and in nurturing research capacity for children in early years and school-age childcare settings.

Liz Kerrins
Director of Research
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Foreword

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What a time to be an early childhood researcher in Ireland! As we cautiously emerge from two years global pandemic, squinting into the light of the new normal, we may be forgiven for thinking the early childhood 'sector' has changed beyond recognition. As has the world it is situated in. Young children's lives in Ireland, like in all countries, have been severely affected by Covid-19; they are, UNICEF states, 'the hidden victims of the pandemic'. While much of the debate about the impacts of Covid-19 on education systems in general has focused on how to 'catch-up' on 'lost learning' (a highly questionable concept), the effects on the youngest children are profound, and often overlooked. A child born in 2019 has, at the time of writing this foreword, spent two thirds of her or his life under pandemic conditions. She will grow up in a world where human-made climate catastrophe and war as once again normalised 'continuation of policy by other means' are no longer confined in some unspecified global south. They have reached Irish shores, raising urgent questions about the purpose of education, beginning with the education and care of the youngest children from birth. They require us to rethink early childhood education and care as ethical and political practices, the role of ECEC in reimagining peace, democracy, human and more-than-human justice and, most pressingly, as a precondition for survival. Global uncertainties merge with local ones, as early childhood educators confront inequalities and persistent injustices at every level of their practice. These include, to name just one glaring example, the effects of the lack of appropriate housing for an increasing number of young children—3,137 now officially homeless—and their families. This is, one must agree with an Uachtarán na hÉireann, a 'disaster', and our failure to meet 'the basic needs of people in a republic, be it about food and shelter and education'. That such 'failure' is not accidental but systemic is underscored, for instance, by the fact that, at the time of writing, two thirds of funding set aside for Irish councils to provide adequate accommodation for the Travelling community (and their young children) has not been drawn down. Not a lack of money; a lack of will.

Early childhood educators working in such a societal environment face their own systemic challenges as policies designed to shape their working conditions keep evolving fast. They include, among others, the beginning implementation of a new workforce development plan ('nurturing care') and a change of funding arrangements ('core funding'). While these policies are necessary and overdue first steps towards the aspiration, voiced in First5, to create an 'effective' early childhood system for Ireland, poor communication perpetuates the impression of many that policies continue to be imposed on 'the sector' instead of being developed through meaningful participation.

Against this backdrop it is reassuring to see a thriving research culture evolving in the Irish early childhood space. A fast growing body of work, undertaken as academic (e.g. PhD) and professional/practitioner research brings into focus the experiences of children, educators and families in Irish early childhood education care settings, and contributes to an increasing visibility of Irish early childhood research in both national and international contexts. The papers compiled in this volume of the Early Childhood Ireland Research Day Proceedings do just that: they are inquiries into and with the constituting agents, actors, and actants of the Irish early childhood education and care context: the constructs and imaginaries of the child, of education, of knowledge production and transfer, and of professional practice.

Using Sen's 'capability approach' as a starting point, Criona Blackburne and Meera Oke turn to the agency of early childhood educators as central to the project of education. In doing so,

they question the rhetoric of child-centredness in our field and argue for reclaiming freedom, orientation, and intentionality (my interpretation) of educators. Child-centredness, I would add, is specific to western, minority world education. It is a political concept insofar as it provides the justification for the decontextualised and individualised variety of education that underpins neo-liberal ideology. It is reflected, too, in the replacement of 'education' with 'early learning' in the ELC nomenclature imposed on the Irish early childhood profession.

Evelyn Egan investigates the involvement of early childhood educators in creating the (visual arts) curriculum that orients their practice. They identify persistent systemic contradictions that prevent inquiry-based learning in professional preparation and continuous professional development, and a general 'disconnect between rhetoric and practice'.

Sandra O'Neill, Cora Gillic, and Julie Winget-Power, identifying a similar disconnect between policy ambition and professional support in STEM education, propose and discuss a 'community of practice' in this area, as a way for educators to take ownership of their professional learning. Georgina Wilson turns to the youngest children in ECEC; she investigates the importance of tactile sensory play (TSP) for children under three years of age. Combining an action research design with Clark's mosaic approach and Laevers' engagement scales, her study identifies several 'themes' that characterise children's explorations of sensory materials in an early childhood setting.

Miriam O'Regan and Mary Tynan moved into the paraprofessional space of childminding: a major building block of the Irish ECEC system that has only recently come into the regulatory space. Their study is a secondary analysis of data from two Childminding Ireland surveys on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on childminders. 'Resilience' is a central term emerging from their analysis.

Two 'reflective papers' add additional dimensions to the picture as they explore and consider the 'lived experience' of educators (Maeve Dempsey and Lindsay Malone) and parents (Margaret Bermingham) in their interconnected, inseparable relationships with children in ECEC and home.

The papers presented at the ECI Research Day, and documented in these proceedings, show a rich and multifaceted landscape of praxis-related research in the Irish ECEC landscape. I would like to congratulate Early Childhood Ireland for providing a platform for this research to flourish and to be celebrated. Congratulations, too, to all authors in this volume. Without your work none of this would be possible. It is a hopeful picture, as far as I am concerned: a manifestation of the commitment, the potential, and the professionalism of those working and researching in Irish ECEC. Reading the papers in preparation for writing this foreword made me reflect on the tasks that lie ahead for Irish early childhood research. In good old dialectical manner I would like offer a preliminary analysis of what I think is missing from the picture. First, I believe we, collectively, will have to move more assertively from 'letting hundred flowers blossom' towards integrated knowledge co-construction: engage in transdisciplinary theorising of (as yet) fragmented research. Second, we (again, collectively) will have to become more courageous in questioning 'the rules of the game': we must—and can—liberate ourselves and early childhood research from the historical colonisation of the field by other disciplines. Most importantly from the dominance of a narrow reading of developmental(ist) psychology, but also uncritical economics, and naïve interpretations of 'neuroscience'. This, I suggest, are not merely academic questions. If we, as early childhood researchers, aspire for our research to contribute to more just and equitable early childhood education and care for all children, we will have to question the (academic, professional, political, cultural, economic...) conditions that got us where we are. We might want to start the questioning with ourselves.

Enjoy!

Mathias Urban

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Exploring perspectives of young second generation Polish migrant children in Ireland – ethical and methodological challenges.

By Alicja McCloskey, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick

Keywords: Child • Participant • Identity • Ethics • Methodology

Alicja McCloskey is a lecturer in Early Childhood Education in Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Limerick. Alicja's research interests include cultural and linguistic diversity; the young child's rights, voice and agency; power relationships between the child and adult; and ethical considerations in research with young children.

Abstract

As part of my doctoral degree, I have conducted a study concerned with exploring the identities of young second-generation Polish migrant children living in Ireland. The key theoretical underpinnings informing this research relate to respecting the child's voice (Grover, 2004; Clark, 2005; Lundy, 2007), participation (DCYA, 2015; Coyne, Mallon and Chubb, 2021) and agency (Alderson, 2001), as well as seeing the child as a social actor and an active constructor of social knowledge (Christensen and Prout, 2002). Building on that, five qualitative case studies (Creswell, 2007) based on participant observations have been constructed. 'Play and talk' (Einarsdottir, Dockett and Perry, 2009) and 'Draw and talk' (Harwood, 2010) were used as methods of data collection with five children-participants, while ten semi-structured interviews (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007) were conducted with their parents and teachers. My Polish heritage allowed me to position myself as a part-insider within the Polish community. Responding to the participants' preferences, I used the Polish language when communicating with the majority of the children and with all of the parents. My study is currently at the stage where data has been collected but has not yet been subject to analysis. Therefore, in this paper I will focus on the ethical and methodological challenges specific to this research, stemming from the design and theoretical underpinnings. In particular, ethical concerns related to the children-participants will be discussed.

Aim of the Research

This paper focuses on the key ethical and methodological challenges I encountered when conducting my doctoral research with

preschool-age children of Polish heritage.

The aim of this study is to unveil the unique perspectives of the children-participants who attend English-speaking preschools and who use Polish as their home language, while growing up in Ireland. The particular focus was placed on investigating how these children develop and navigate their sense of identity, in the context of multi-layered social, cultural and linguistic dynamics.

A need for a study devoted to exploring experiences of young bilingual children living in Ireland today was identified after reviewing available literature (Darmody, Song and Tyrrell 2011; Devine, 2013; Darmody, McGinnity and Russell, 2022). The aim of this research is in line with the goals of First 5: A Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (Government of Ireland, 2018) and in particular Goal C (positive play-based early learning), aim 8.3: ELC that promotes participation, social inclusion, and diversity.

Literature Review

Conceptualising children's identities was one of the key steps undertaken when constructing the research approach and design. Given the wide range of interpretations of the notion of 'identity' and its growing popularity in discourse (De Graeve, 2016), it was vital to pinpoint its essence to allow it to be researchable in this small-scale project, but first and foremost, that would allow me to capture it adequately when working with children-participants. As a result, three key characteristics of identities were determined.

Firstly, for the purpose of this study, identities were seen as discursive and understood as

'stories that people tell themselves and others about who they are, and who they are not' (Yuval-Davis, 2010, p.266). This broad definition allows for a range of individual stories 'told' by the children to become a narrative, which in turn will unveil how they see and position themselves in relation to their immediate environment and others. It appreciates and embraces the fluid, multiple and complex nature of identity. It also includes a comparative or binary aspect (i.e., 'this is what I am/this is what I am not'), which is often essential in constructing identities by either belonging to a group or positioning ourselves in opposition to it (Gilroy, 1997).

Second, in the recognition of the multiple forms of self-expression or '100 languages' of young children (Malaguzzi, in Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1998), identities were seen as performative. De Graeve's (2016, p.104) definition of identities as *'narratives of people about themselves and others, verbal or constructed as specific practices'* encapsulates this idea. Children express their individual identities in a multitude of ways and not necessarily by verbal communication. These channels include play, body language and visual expression. Children act out or perform their identities in what they do, and the research methodology of this study had to be designed to capture these 'performances' as they unveil.

Finally, the socially constructed nature of identities (Berger and Luckmann, 1969) was recognised as imperative in achieving a fuller perspective of the researched phenomena. The role of others, and in particular the significant adults, in the life and development of self-understanding of the children was acknowledged. This is captured in defining identities as *'clusters of stories that we tell about ourselves and others tell about us'* (Anzaldúa, cited in McCarthy and Moje, 2002, p.231). These messages about the children, communicated to them by important adults, may have an impact on their developing sense of identity and belonging.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinnings of this study stem from a social constructivist paradigm in which experiences and behaviours are

understood as existing in the social context and interpreted through a meaning-making process (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). The key principles of this research are as follows:

1. Children are active constructors of social knowledge and experts in their own lived experiences (James and Prout, 1997; Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The unique perspective of a young child should be valued and recognised as valid, both as an individual lived experience and as research data (Harcourt, Perry and Waller 2011).
2. The child's voice (Grover, 2004; Clark, 2005; Lundy, 2007; Harwood, 2010), participation (DCYA, 2015; Coyne, Mallon and Chubb, 2021) and agency (Alderson, 2001) need to be recognised, prioritised and facilitated appropriately, to shift the power imbalance between the adult-researcher and the children-participants.
3. Children are skilled communicators who use multiple modes or languages to interact with others and express their identities (Malaguzzi, in Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1998; Murray, 2019). This is particularly important when researching the perspectives of children for whom English is an additional language.

Methodology

As this study seeks to unveil the unique perspectives of very young participants, qualitative case studies (Creswell, 2007) were chosen as a research approach. Non-probability purposive sampling (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018) was used to recruit five children-participants who were identified based on the following criteria:

- Children of preschool age (between 3.5 and 5.5 years old)
- Children of parents who speak the Polish language at home
- Children who attend English-speaking preschools

In an attempt to ensure that the voices of children-participants were heard and listened to, a child-centred research design was developed and implemented. This was to allow for adequate time, space and audience to

be made available to the children to tell their story (Lundy, 2007). Participant observation was used as a data collection strategy with children. Specifically, it took the form of 'Play and talk' (inspired by Einarsdottir, Dockett and Perry, 2009) and 'Draw and talk' (inspired by Harwood, 2010). In these encounters, children were engaging freely in various forms of expression, in particular play and drawing/mark-making as well as the routines and learning experiences led by the early years teachers in the preschool rooms. I was accompanying the children throughout the day while observing and facilitating their engagement, rather than proposing pre-planned activities. As a native Polish speaker, I was able to use Polish when communicating with the children who felt more comfortable using their first language. Data was collected between October 2018 to April 2019 in three preschool rooms located in two settings. Field notes and voice recordings were used during the participant observation sessions. Semi-structured interviews (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018) were conducted with the children's parents and teachers in agreed spaces. A reflexive journal was used to reflect on power relations between the participants and myself, and to note my initial attempts at interpreting the data. It served as a means of making my positioning explicit throughout the process and challenging the preconceptions, agendas and biases I brought into this project.

Ethical Considerations Relating To The Children-Participants

This research has been approved by the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC) and all ethical concerns relating to researching with human participants were appropriately addressed before commencing the process. Research with children requires particular consideration to be given to ethical implications due to the inherent power imbalance between the adult-researcher and the children-participants (Coyne, Mallon and Chubb, 2021). Barfield and Driessnack (2018) note that this disparity can be further magnified when the children-participants represent marginalised or minority groups.

In developing the research design, I was guided by the principles of children's and young

people's participation (DCYA, 2015) and the principles of best practice in the Early Years (Tusla, 2018). Given the qualitative, innovative and flexible nature of this study, a number of ethical and methodological challenges arose and have been addressed. These have been divided into groups, based on the research stakeholder they are concerning. For the purpose of this paper, I will discuss the challenges relating to the children-participants.

The importance of protecting the rights and welfare of the participants, while at the same time, ensuring the validity and reliability of the research findings, was at the core of my ethical dilemmas. In this context, the considerations included informed consent or assent, the voice and participation, the best interest of the participants and the question of inclusion/exclusion of children in the room during the process of data collection.

The child's assent was firstly sought at the beginning of the process. This was facilitated through reading and presenting information letters and consent forms, which included images and plain, age-appropriate text in Polish and English, to the children. These letters and forms were also given to the parents to discuss with their children at home. The child's 'consent' however, was seen as an ongoing process throughout the course of the study. Just like identities, it was interpreted as 'performative'. Each child could opt-in or out of engaging with me at any stage and not just by voicing their preference, but by acting in a way that would suggest it. I was carefully observing the participants for any cues and made sure to give them enough space to exercise this right. As a result, on some days I would obtain significantly less data than on others. This had to be taken into consideration when planning data collection and accepted as part of the process. It required me to constantly exercise my reflexivity, not to allow for my adult-agenda to inhibit the participant's agency.

In order to ensure that the children's voices could be freely expressed, I followed their lead when collecting the data and embraced a 'least-adult' persona (Mandell, cited in Harwood 2010). I engaged in activities and conversations with the children as we played

indoors and outdoors, drew, completed teacher-led tasks or had lunch. I strove to become more a playmate than another teacher to them. Polish and/or English were used depending on the preference of each child and the context, sometimes interchangeably. This approach allowed the children to communicate in a way most natural and comfortable to them, and for their perspectives to be accurately recorded. My identity as a Polish migrant helped me to develop trusting relationships with the participants and to gain greater insight into their lived experiences, in particular, the children who have not yet achieved fluency in English. Non-verbal signals were also seen as significant markers of the children's preferences, experiences and identities.

I relied more heavily on the field notes at the beginning of this project in order to avoid the 'intrusive' nature of the voice-recorder, until the participants were comfortable around me and understood the process. This on one hand allowed me to ensure that I prioritised each child at every step, but on the other, could provoke a concern relating to the validity of the research in terms of the accuracy of field notes taken when participating in conversations and play. To offset this, I strove to provide rich and detailed descriptions of individual encounters, including quotes, where relevant, and engaged with reflexive journaling after the data collection sessions.

Another challenge I faced related to the non-participant children who were looking for my attention and company. I had to ensure that none of these children felt rejected, yet that they were not included in the data collection as such. My plans and strategies had to be adjusted to suit the circumstances and the Dictaphone was often put aside until recording could resume. It was also crucial from the perspective of the children-participants interacting with their non-participating peers, as one of the principles of this research approach was to minimise any potential disruption to their lives caused by the data collection process.

Finally, the question of 'What happens next?' to the children-participants posed a significant ethical dilemma. Given the longitudinal dimension and qualitative nature

of engagement, the children-participants and I developed warm and friendly relationships. In order to avoid any stress that the ceasing of the research process could cause to the children, it was planned that the study would conclude towards the end of the preschool year. As the children's time in the setting would come to an end, so would the research. It was hoped that in this way the transition would be interpreted by the children as another element of progression to primary school. However, due to personal circumstances I had to conclude the data collection process a month earlier than anticipated. As a gesture of recognition of their key role in this research, the children will be presented with extracts from their contributions compiled in an attractive format, at the completion of the study.

Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed my doctoral research exploring the identities of young second-generation Polish migrant children living in Ireland today. One of the main motivations behind this study was to positively impact on the quality of educational experiences for young children of migrant heritage. It was considered on the individual level whereby, through my research, the participants were empowered to 'tell their story'. They were also additionally supported by my presence in the room, while they negotiated their way through a preschool experience, potentially facing linguistic and cultural challenges. While this phase of the study is still at the data analysis stage, I focused on the key ethical implications relating to the children-participants. These include informed participation (consent/assent), considerations regarding listening to and accurately representing the children's voices/perspectives and ensuring the best interest of the children-participants throughout the process. As the study highlighted the ethical and methodological challenges that I encountered during the data collection process, it is hoped that the study demonstrated how appropriately designed research can allow young children to engage in a research process in an ethical and meaningful way.

In the next phase of the research study, the data analysis phase, I will demonstrate how

engaging children in the research process, using sound ethical and methodological processes, may contribute to deepening our understanding of how children can navigate their identities and sense of belonging in the context of linguistic and cultural diversity in early years environments.

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Orientation Quality : Exploring the role of Early Childhood Educators from a Capabilities Approach - How can we tell the dancer from the dance?

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Keywords: Orientation Quality • Burnout • Capabilities approach • Functioning • Value

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Abstract

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) policy globally increasingly recognises the critical role ECEC educators play in realising quality objectives (DCEDIY, 2022). However, within the rhetoric of child-centred policy, educators have increasingly been decentred and their wellbeing has been overlooked (Cummings et al., 2020). Utilising Amartya Sen's (1980) Capability approach, we argue that orientation quality is essential for ECEC practice, highlighting the need for educators to be provided with freedoms and agency within their practice. The decentring of educators has contributed to an ECEC environment where educators are increasingly experiencing emotional burnout (Oke et al., 2019). Given this scenario, recruitment and retention, particularly of ECEC graduates in Ireland, is at an all-time low (European Commission (EC), 2021). This paper is based on the findings of two Irish ECEC studies. The first focuses on the escalating concern of emotional burnout amongst educators. The second argues that focusing on structural and process elements of quality alone is insufficient and that 'Orientation' quality, which examines how the wellbeing, attitudes, and values of the educator fundamentally impacts quality development, and must be prioritised. The authors highlight the importance of Orientation Quality as a response to contemporary sectoral challenges by drawing on Amartya Sen's Capability Approach.

Introduction

This paper will contribute to contemporary ECEC policy focusing on workforce development and addressing issues of recruitment and retention by considering the needs of early childhood educators.

This paper, framed by Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, draws on two research projects: Oke et. al. (2019) which focused on emotional burnout among ECEC educators in Ireland and Blackburne's (2020) research exploring the impact that policies emerging from the Quality Agenda in Ireland were having on raising standards in the sector, primarily from the educator perspective. Both research projects illuminated the criticality of placing policy focus on the wellbeing, respect, autonomy, and agency of the ECEC educators.

Sen's (1999) capability approach distinguishes between two aspects of freedom – the process aspect and the opportunity aspect. The process aspect "allows for freedom of actions and decisions" (p.17), whereas the opportunity aspect has to do with "the extent to which people have the opportunity to achieve outcomes that they value and have reason to value" (p.291). The central theme of the approach is 'freedom and agency'. Buzzelli (2019) argues that the capability approach provides a framework for ECEC educators to consider the freedoms they have to make decisions they value and to consider the opportunities they afford the children in their care to have agency and freedom to act

and think in ways they find meaningful. We employ Amartya Sen's Capability theory as our theoretical framework to argue that the freedom, rights, needs and emotional wellbeing of educators are critical to the development of quality improvements in the sector.

Core messages from the two research projects

Oke et al.'s (2019) inquiry indicated that high levels of emotional burnout were predicted by poor working conditions, rewards and recognition of their work. Although educators felt high levels of personal accomplishment, exogenous factors, as mentioned earlier, contributed largely to the experience of emotional burnout. Blackburne's (2020) research similarly emphasised ECEC educators' articulated need to be respected as professionals and be active, not passive agents of quality development. Both projects indicate that early years educators were frustrated by the expectations placed on them by ECEC policy, with no equivalent value afforded to them through salaries, autonomy, or societal value. Educators in both projects articulated that they were disillusioned and struggled to foresee a future for themselves in early childhood, despite valuing and enjoying working with young children. An analysis of early childhood policy internationally and in Ireland highlighted a deficit vision of the educator, who is viewed as in need of training, upskilling, monitoring, and regulating (OECD, 2019). In this paper, we argue that this deficit vision must be overturned and instead align with Sen's (1999) vision, suggesting that the educator needs to be valued and facilitated as a meaningful contributor to the practice and provision of early childhood, leading to a strength-based vision of a strong and competent adult (Moss, 2012). This need to value the educator is increasingly identified within the discourse of contemporary policy, where there has been a shift from viewing early childhood education as the remit of the private sector to a recognition of it as a public good, as was made explicit in the Programme for Government 2020 and Partnership for the Public Good, the new funding model announced in March 2022 (DCEDIY, 2021; Government of Ireland, 2020).

Quality in the ECEC sector is currently assessed

under two prisms, those of structural and process quality. Blackburne's (2020), research argues a third means of assessing quality, 'Orientation Quality', needs to be included in any evaluation of quality within the sector. Orientation Quality focuses on the educator's wellbeing, attitudes, experiences, and education. It highlights how the educator's dispositions profoundly impact the realisation of quality improvements, particularly relational pedagogy, within their settings. Orientation Quality has generally been overlooked within the rhetoric of policy development. The OECD (2019) published the first-ever Talis survey, which focused on the views of ECEC educators and made a brief reference to the impact of educators' attitudes and values on practice. We argue that this needs to be extended by increasing focus on Orientation Quality, aligned with Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (1999), where the focus is placed on educators' agency and freedoms. Therefore, the crux of our argument is that policy needs to focus on Orientation Quality to facilitate 'the functioning' of educators so they have freedom to achieve quality that is contextual and relevant to their setting, as framed by Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (Blackburne, 2020; Sen, 1993).

Theoretical Framework

Sen's Capability Approach "places humanity at the centre of attention" (1999, p. 293). This central concept is core to our argument that humanity and educators' rights must be central in quality development, together with democratic practice that values the views, knowledge, experience, and unique contextual understanding held by early childhood educators.

Buzzelli, (2015) a Professor in ECEC and formerly an educator therein, focuses on the implications of the Capability Approach for ECEC practice. He argues that context is central to the Capability Approach, which "can provide a more sensitive account of the ways contextual and societal factors support or hinder what individuals can do and achieve" (2015, p.209) This is important in terms of enabling educators to have the freedom to provide experiences and learning opportunities that can enable their achievement, and that of the children in their

care.

Furthermore, Sen (1999) highlights the dearth of focus on the interest and agency of women. This is relevant to the ECEC sector, as it is predominantly female, thus strengthening the case for this approach. Sen's Capability Approach has the potential to strengthen the early childhood sector by supporting adults to choose early childhood as a profession they value and in which they feel valued, and where they can meaningfully contribute to the development of practice locally and nationally and internationally if desired (Nussbaum, 2011).

The Capability Approach provides a framework as an alternative to economic measurements and instead focuses on socio-emotional aspects such as wellbeing, human rights, and ethical individualism (Sen, 1993). The central tenet of this approach is that individuals need to have a sense of freedom "to choose a life they value and have reason to value" (Sen, 1992, p.81). Within the context of ECEC education, this means that educators would have freedom to develop their practice based on their education and experiences.

Sen (1992) and Nussbaum (2011, p.25), argue further that capabilities are strongly linked to individual freedom and that this "freedom has intrinsic value". Sen and Nussbaum also discuss that providing capabilities facilitates 'functionings'. 'Functionings' are the skills, knowledge and experience that emerge from opportunities that are meaningful to the educator (Sen, 1993). They argue that social, political and economic conditions have a profound impact on individuals' opportunities for 'freedoms', or lack thereof, to be provided with capabilities to improve their functioning.

Capability Approach - An alternative approach grounded in human rights

Contemporary early childhood policies are frequently grounded in a children's rights perspective; however, a human rights perspective is less overtly visible (Blackburne and Oke, 2021, upcoming publication). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) opening preamble outlines that the cornerstone of human rights is the protection of "inherent

dignity", and protection of rights to provide "freedom, justice and peace in the world" (p.1). Article 22 highlights the right of freedom to achieve; Article 23, the right to favourable working conditions and just remuneration, and Article 29 states that everyone has a duty to ensure "the free and full development of his personality is possible" (OCHCR, 1948, p.8). This focus on an individual right to autonomy and agency was again enshrined in the European Union's Charter of Fundamental Human Rights, where it placed the needs of the "individual at the heart of its activities" by focusing on the "principles of democracy and citizenship" (EU, 2000, p.7). The European Pillars of Social Rights reiterate the rights to appropriate remuneration, consultation, autonomy, agency, and self-determination (EC, 2017).

It is this human rights perspective that Sen (1999) advocates for as an alternative framework to the dominant narrow lens of neoliberal economics which has operated to standardise the early years sector at the expense of human agency (Sims, 2017). Sen (1993) mentions that human potential can be realised by placing the emphasis on human rights, wellbeing and ethical individualism, thereby supporting individuals to achieve within a career they value.

The approach has relevance for future policy developments in the ECEC sector that aspires to raise standards, improve quality, and support the professionalisation, recruitment and retention of ECEC educators, particularly early childhood graduates. Human Development Index (HDI) (2020, p.iii) calls on governments internationally to move away from valuing 'what they can measure' and instead focus on 'measuring what they value'. There is evidence that governments internationally and nationally are recognising that human wellbeing cannot be ignored.

Traditionally, a focus on the needs of the ECEC educator has been absent from international and Irish policy rhetoric. Since 2018, there has been a notable shift, however, with contemporary policy increasingly focusing on valuing the educator. The 2018 and the upcoming 2024 OECD Talis Starting Strong

surveys focus on and consults with the ECEC educator, albeit within the realm of quantitative research (OECD, 2019). The 2018 survey highlighted that ECEC educators internationally felt undervalued by society, despite feeling valued by children and parents. These findings were repeated in Quality Beyond Regulations outlined in Start Strong VI (OECD, 2021). These publications centred on ECEC educators' education, training, and motivation to work with children, acknowledging that the attitudes and experience of the educator do impact on quality. This was further delineated in the publication of the ET2020 Working Group's report, which highlighted that enhanced pay, work conditions, career progression and training opportunities were critical elements required to support recruitment and retention (EC, 2021). This policy turn towards valuing ECEC educators was replicated in the Irish context.

Enhanced financial supports offered to the ECEC sector by the Irish government to ensure sustainability and staff retention throughout the pandemic was unparalleled in other industries. The government paid educators' salaries through the Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS) during the first closure and provided further financial support to meet costs through the COVID-19 Operational Support Payment (COSP) and then the Employment Wages Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) (DCEDIY, 2022a).

The Irish Programme for Government (2020) core vision is to "deliver a better quality of life for all" (GOI, 2020, p.6). In a shift away from predominantly focusing on economics, the programme acknowledged that the "wellbeing of our nation... goes beyond the narrow confines of economic growth". It promised to place future focus on wellbeing indicators as well as economic indicators "to do better by people" (GOI, 2020, p.7). The launch in 2022 of two core workforce development policies 'Partnership for the Public Good' – the new funding model' and 'Nurturing skills' – the workforce development plan provides explicit evidence of an increased commitment to valuing educators (DECDIY, 2022b; DCEDIY, 2021).

Each of these policy developments have reiterated international and national

governments' acknowledgement of the critical role the ECEC educator plays in quality. These publications recognise the difficulties facing the sector, including inadequate remuneration, excessive administrative burdens, and recruitment and retention difficulties. The central rationale behind improving terms and conditions for educators' rests in labour supply elasticity to respond to recruitment issues and to achieve the 2028 target of achieving a 50% graduate workforce, as outlined in First 5 (DCEDIY, 2022a). While the OECD (2019) noted that the attitude of the educator was fundamental to quality development, there remains insufficient focus on how ECEC educators can be supported in terms of their human rights, wellbeing, autonomy, and agency. Therefore, it is timely to meaningfully consider how governments internationally can support educators so that working in early childhood is a career they can value and contribute meaningfully to.

Methodology

Both research projects used a phenomenological approach, using online research combined with traditional research methods. Oke et al. (2019) employed a Grounded Theory Approach. Using mixed methods, the Maslach Burnout Inventory Educators Survey (Maslach, Jackson and Schwab, 1997) and the Areas of Work Life Survey (Leiter and Maslach, 2011) measured the features of ECEC work environments influencing 170 ECEC professionals' levels of burnout. Furthermore, in professional conversations (Irvine and Price, 2014) with a smaller sample (60) of ECEC educators, thematic analysis helped gain insights into the nature of experienced burnout. Blackburne (2020) used Complexity Theory as the overarching theoretical framework, with an online survey hosted by Survey Monkey to gain a broad perspective on educators' opinions on how policy was impacting on their practice and the factors they believed were fundamental to quality development. The study also engaged in deeper discussions with educators through an online forum hosted by a Secret Facebook group. A policymaker's perspective was garnered through a semi-structured interview. Findings were also analysed using

thematic analysis supported by NVIVO, Word Cloud and conceptual maps. Both research projects received ethical permission from their respective colleges and met all the ethical requirements set out by the ethics committees.

Findings

The main findings from both research projects are that ECEC educators are disheartened by increasing expectations and qualifications within the sector and the lack of correlation with pay, conditions, consultation, autonomy, and agency. Oke et al.'s (2019) studies highlighted that emotional burnout was very real among Irish educators, despite a strong sense of personal accomplishment they enjoy from their work. Furthermore, the levels of emotional exhaustion experienced by educators can be predicted by demanding working conditions and limited rewards received. Blackburne's (2020) research highlighted that the educators would appreciate a partnership approach to quality improvements, which included external agencies, policymakers and inspectors engaging in meaningful consultation with them and not overlooking their views, values and experiences.

The combined findings from these projects have led the authors to call on governments internationally, and specifically in Ireland, to place more focus on Orientation Quality. This would increase the focus on educators' wellbeing, education, experience, autonomy, and agency to develop a career that they value and is contextually meaningful to the settings in which they operate.

Conclusion

Investment in early childhood has been justified based on the fundamental importance that early learning and development plays in securing long-term positive outcomes for children and society (GOI, 2018). We argue that while focusing on children's learning and development remains critical, policy must also focus on the needs and wellbeing of educators to better realise children's potential. In this regard we argue that Amartya Sen's Capability Approach is a fitting framework for fulfilling their rights. It provides insight into strengthening exogenous

aspects of development such as holistic investments and resources for enabling ECEC educators to achieve high-quality, contextually relevant practice.

Key points

- Sen's Capability Approach emphasises the need to measure the freedom and agency and wellbeing that human beings require to function. It provides an alternative to economic measurements of development.
- It focuses on the processes and opportunities that individuals have to function, such as socio-emotional aspects, such as wellbeing, human rights and ethical individualism.
- There is an emphasis on the interconnectedness of wellbeing and human potential.
- Early childhood educator 'Orientation' quality (wellbeing) is critical to accomplishing quality in Early Childhood Education and Care services in Ireland.
- This means valuing ECEC educators. It translates into empowering and enabling 'freedoms' to achieve personal career goals and practice in ways meaningful to their individual context.
- Improving working conditions, autonomy to function as professionals and consultation in policy development will go some way to achieving high levels of orientation quality.

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Inquiry-Based Emergent Curriculum using a Transdisciplinary Approach to the Visual Arts in Early Childhood Education and Care: Implications for Policy, Education and Practice

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Keywords: Inquiry-Based Transdisciplinary Learning • Early Childhood Education • Visual Arts • Initial Professional Education

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Abstract:

This research aimed to investigate practitioner approaches to the design and delivery of visual arts curricula for children availing of the Irish Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme (DCYA, 2019) and to establish what constitutes good practice in this domain.

The study comprised two components, i.e., an extensive national/international Literature Review and a nationwide Field Study.

Underpinning the research was the amalgam of theoretical and experiential knowledge and expertise, in designing/implementing an emergent, inquiry-based curriculum, advocated by the Irish National Curriculum Framework, Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and National Quality Framework, Síolta (CECDE, 2006).

The study cohort consisted of ECCE practitioners (n=30) and sector specialists (n=10), i.e., authors/researchers/mentors/academics. A Qualitative Methodology was employed, and data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, to garner participants' lived experiences. Findings identified a confluence of factors mitigating against inquiry-based learning; arts/creativity accorded low status in the majority of third-level programmes; insufficient access to Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes; disconnect between rhetoric and practice; and practitioner low self-efficacy. Challenges include perceived parental expectations, confusion surrounding the requirements in inspection by the regulatory body Tusla, and evaluation of quality through the national frameworks. Recommendations: centrally locate arts within Initial Professional Education and offer CPD opportunities nationwide. To address the findings, the researcher has devised

two resources to assist higher educational Institutions and CPD.

Introduction

The aim of the research was to investigate current approaches by practitioners in the design and delivery of visual arts curricula for children availing of the Irish Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme (DCYA, 2019). Interest in the topic was prompted by educational theory, as well as the researcher's knowledge, expertise, and experience in designing and implementing an emergent, inquiry-based, visual arts curriculum which uses a transdisciplinary approach.

Another impetus for undertaking the study was an awareness of a disconnect between what practitioners propound in theory, and the visual arts experiences/opportunities they offer in practice, as evidenced by approaches used which focus on the product rather than the creative process.

The research comprised of two components:

- 1) Extensive Literature Review; national/international
- 2) Field Study, within the Irish ECCE context, to ascertain the:
 1. Approaches adopted when designing/implementing a visual arts curriculum for children availing of the ECCE Scheme in Ireland (DCYA, 2019)
 2. Factors that mitigate against implementing an inquiry-based learning (IBL) emergent curriculum, advocated by the Irish National Curriculum Framework, Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and the National Quality Framework, Síolta (CECDE, 2006).

Literature Review

An initial desktop review of creativity/visual arts modules offered by third-level Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Degree programmes in Ireland was undertaken, to establish the status of the arts in training, nationwide.

This provided important data to assist in the interview schedule design. Thereafter, an extensive Literature Review was conducted. For the purpose of this article, however, the sole literature focus is on a selection of that literature that pertains specifically to inquiry-based learning (IBL) using a transdisciplinary approach (TDA).

The theoretical framework which underpinned the current study was based on Dewey's Theory of Constructivism (1938). Dewey (1938, in Haslip and Gullo, 2018) the renowned educational reformer propounded the Theory of Constructivism, stating that IBL is an approach to education, whereby children explore the environment and construct knowledge, based on experience. Essentially, it claims that children must interact with their environment in order to optimise learning, develop holistically and adapt to and make sense of the world about them (Dennick, 2016). More recently and in the context of learning through the arts, Walker (2014) believes that IBL is inherent to art-making and argues that the process of artistic inquiry allows children to reflect on their place in the world. It empowers them to move beyond understanding what is, and probe deeper into the realm of possibility, which is achievable through posing questions and investigating ideas.

Thompson (2019) makes a strong plea for inquiry to form the basis of all visual arts teaching curricula, as she stresses that IBL is an approach which allows children to demonstrate their capabilities and competences. Additionally, when a TDA is adopted, learning is holistic and the child develops a deeper understanding/knowledge of topics beyond the confines of previously established units of study (Bain et al., 2019). The relationship between fields of study is explored from a central point of questioning, and areas of study are not divided into discrete topics/subject areas, for example maths or science. This helps the child to draw authentic connections and

construct meaning through rich inquiry, which can then be applied to their real-life situations. The adult assumes the role of facilitator (and not teacher) to scaffold, promote, extend, and acknowledge children's curiosities, by posing questions and presenting various scenarios for consideration.

Furthermore, the literature draws attention to the value placed on the arts in education, with two noteworthy observations, i.e., the general public has limited understanding of what the arts entail, and educators often lack confidence/competence in nurturing creativity, by meaningful creative activities (Tesch, 2012). This could be attributable to practitioners' insecurity/reticence regarding the arts, which can often be traced to their own childhood experiences in art education. Subsequently and unsurprisingly, as educators themselves, they then offer children art opportunities with pre-determined outcomes (as in template-based), adult-led/product-driven, thereby stifling individual creativity and depriving children of the opportunity to experiment.

The extensive literature review, coupled with the researcher's own expertise/ experience/ knowledge in the field, formed the basis of the field study.

Field Study Methodology

Data collection in this qualitative research was by semi-structured, in-depth, individual, 40-minute interviews to facilitate open discussion.

Two study cohorts;

- Practitioners (n=30) employed in ECEC settings offering the ECCE Scheme,
- Sector specialists (n=10), mentors, trainers, researchers, authors, and representatives from early childhood organisations in Ireland.

Inclusion Criteria (Cohort 1)

Practitioners (level 7 or level 8 qualification, from an Irish University or Institute of Technology (IoT) employed in the ECCE Scheme, in a Tusla-registered centre. The snowballing technique was adopted to gain

access to ECCE practitioners and served as a referral mechanism.

Ethical Considerations

The Munster Technological University (MTU) Code of Ethics was adhered to throughout the research and access to institutions and personnel was formally obtained, having first explained the research aims and objectives. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured. An important ethical consideration was the insider-researcher position. To mitigate against any interview bias, specific strategies were employed to maintain objectivity, e.g., hypotheses and conclusions were based on empirical research and participant-generated data, and not influenced by the researcher's own stance on particular approaches to visual arts curriculum design/implementation.

Findings and Analysis

Findings, albeit from a small sample size (40 participants), are generalizable due to the appropriate and careful selection of participants, i.e., representatives from each third-level training institution, nationwide, offering level 7/8 degree programmes in Initial Professional Education. Furthermore, the 10 sector specialists have extensive experience/expertise in mentoring practitioners, as researchers, academics, and authors in the field, nationally.

Factors that inhibit an IBL approach:

1. The Arts and creativity are accorded low status in the majority of third-level Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) training programmes in Ireland,
2. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities (availability and appropriateness),
3. Ethos and management of an early years centre may not reflect an IBL philosophy,
4. Confusion regarding a variety of sector inspectors, their remit(s), roles of the inspectorates and parental expectations,
5. Disconnect between rhetoric and practice,
6. Practitioner low visual self-efficacy.

Creativity in training

Some institutions give greater prominence than others to creativity, evidenced by the type and number of creativity modules on offer, the credits accorded, and whether modules are mandatory or elective, theoretical only, or a combination of both theory and practice. Of the four universities offering degree programmes, only one has mandatory modules in creative arts and three offer 'creativity' modules during year 1 and year 2 (only). Of the university training courses, one is solely theory-based over four years, devoid of any practical arts component. By way of contrast, the Institutes of Technology (IoTs) place greater emphasis on creative arts and have mandatory theoretical and practical training in Music, Art, Drama and Dance across all IoTs which offer ECEC Ordinary and Honours Degree programmes.

Continuous professional development initiatives

All interviewees recognise the need for CPD and welcome the opportunity to upskill in the visual arts, particularly when there is an obvious deficit in IPE. Both cohorts stress the scarcity of CPD opportunities in the visual arts, and CPD per se may not even be available in a locality (an urban-rural divide).

'There are workshops out there, but they are mainly in Dublin, Galway, Limerick or Cork. I'd love to do a CPD course specific to the visual arts, but I haven't seen any around the midlands' [ECCE 11].

Political rhetoric on the importance of CPD (Zappone, 2018) means little when CPD is not readily available beyond the main cities. Additionally, some respondents who attended CPD workshops in the visual arts are frustrated at the content, which advocates an adult-led approach. These CPD opportunities may even be counterproductive, being contrary to Aistear's (NCCA, 2009) principles. Sector specialists confirm this viewpoint, stating that unless long-term/repeated engagement takes place, practitioners may view CPD as a *once-off* isolated experience. Therefore, it can be deduced that for CPD to be effective, it needs to feature on the ECEC training landscape regularly/constantly. Moreover, strong partnerships between those working

with (and on behalf of) children and those delivering CPD training, need to be established to ensure content is underpinned by artistic and pedagogic knowledge.

Conflicting ideologies; the setting and staff

ECCE practitioners identified conflicting ideologies regarding the visual arts, amongst/ between staff members and management within an ECEC setting. All practitioner interviewees stress approaches to the visual arts in ECEC settings are largely influenced by management. This management culture is also identified by the majority of sector specialists as being an obstacle to effective inquiry-based emergent curriculum (IBEC) implementation of visual arts experiences within ECCE. If a manager does not endorse an IBEC philosophy or is unfamiliar with this approach, then the individual newly qualified practitioner is faced with an onerous task. This is confirmed by ECCE practitioner interviewees who state that the ethos of an ECEC setting is often influenced by management attitudes towards the arts.

'I've noticed managers who don't really see any value in art, they tend to choose to do more product-based art with the children and they justify this because they think it's fun and something children enjoy' [ECCE 13].

This concurs with observations made by Collins (2016): When society does not value the arts, this influences practitioner perception as to the status creativity is accorded within children's education.

Parental expectations

Management and staff attitudes are influenced by parental expectations. Practitioners are often at a loss as to how to explain to parents the rationale for using more unconventional, open-ended materials for IBL. Practitioner interviewees voice how they struggle to justify transient arts experiences, which are process focussed and do not necessarily result in an end product to be taken home or put on display for parents to view (and/or for the inspectorate to assess). Therefore, many practitioners approach art to please parents, rather than putting into practice the theory of child-centred IBL, to which they subscribe. This point was confirmed (triangulated) by sector specialists

interviewed.

The Inspectorate

The challenge which the inspectorate poses ECCE practitioners is a significant finding. Ten of the thirty ECCE practitioners interviewed described feeling

'overwhelmed by the abundance of new information. There always seems to be changing criteria and expectations, new publications and new developments when it comes to inspections' [ECCE 18].

Practitioners are not always clear as to each individual role and remit. They also feel inundated with information (documentation) regarding the changing nature of the inspectorate and are challenged by the effort needed to keep up to date.

Disconnect between rhetoric and practice

Practitioners confidently cite the merits of child-centred, visual art opportunities and equate 'good practice' with one whereby the adult assumes a non-didactic role but acts as a facilitator to scaffold children's learning and development. In this regard, all practitioner interviewees describe how they are cognisant of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) when designing and implementing curricula in the visual arts. Significantly, however, when probing questions were posed, to elicit examples of visual art opportunities which are representative of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) themes in action, they cited ones with pre-determined product-based outcomes, showing a disconnect between rhetoric and practice as evidenced by the following quote:

'It's easier to show them [children] how to do art when we have structured art activities around a theme where we are all doing the same thing. It also helps me take note of their motor skills, their hand-eye coordination, dexterity and so on' [ECCE 7].

Additionally, sector specialist interviewees (many of whom mentor practitioners, nationwide) recognise this mismatch between what practitioners subscribe to in theory, and what they actually do in practice.

Practitioner low visual self-efficacy

Practitioner low visual self-efficacy was identified as being a significant challenge to effective implementation of IBL using a Transdisciplinary Approach. Lack of confidence in one's own creative ability, results in over-reliance on adult-led, product-driven activities sourced from social media platforms, e.g., Facebook and Pinterest. Respondents are also insecure regarding assessment and documentation of learning through a process approach and display only a theoretical understanding of IBL. Many stated that a deficit of practical visual arts modules during training leaves them disadvantaged to implement a process approach to curriculum. Furthermore, practitioner and sector specialist respondents are of one voice that CPD opportunities with a focus on the process-approach to the visual arts would be most beneficial in allaying feelings of low visual self-efficacy.

Limitations

The findings represent a small sample size (40 participants) which was obtained through purposive random sampling, by accessing a list of ECCE settings from the Tusla website. Stangor (2015) emphasises the need for appropriate sample representation, rather than random selection, as this helps alleviate concerns surrounding the researcher making inferences or generalisations about the population sample. The Snowballing Technique was adopted to secure access and as a referral mechanism. The researcher was cognisant of the possibility of bias when using this particular technique as it is recognised that participants may tend to refer others (for inclusion in the research) who are of a similar mindset/hold similar views, as themselves (Croucher and Cronn-Mills, 2019). However, this was counteracted by the advance provision of clear and precise information on the research and very specific inclusion criteria. Another limitation was that some prospective participants were unable to partake in the study and their inclusion would have added depth and breadth to findings, e.g., representatives from Tusla. As a result of the findings, recommendations for further research would be the inclusion of representatives from the regulatory body and parent and child

viewpoint(s) as well as educators from IPE programmes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research suggests that an over-emphasis on art theory, rather than engagement in practical visual arts experiences (during training) may leave practitioners ill-equipped to design and implement a visual arts inquiry based emergent curriculum, as advocated by the National Curriculum Framework, Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and the National Quality Framework, Síolta (CECDE, 2006). This could be avoided if higher educational institutions were to locate the visual arts centrally, by providing both theoretical and practical modules during at least three of the four undergraduate training years. Furthermore, level 7 and level 8 programmes could benefit from adopting an experiential approach, albeit with theoretical pedagogic underpinning. Another important finding is that even when practitioners *are* trained in IBL, they often struggle to implement this approach, on entering the workforce. This is attributable to being restricted by the ECEC setting, ethos and culture, as well as the aforementioned regulatory body and perceived parental expectations.

In an attempt to address these very real challenges, two resources have been designed by this researcher. The first resource is a Model Framework based on the visual arts model for ECEC Initial Professional Education (IPE), currently employed at Munster Technological University (MTU) Cork. This approach to training centrally locates Inquiry Based Learning using a Transdisciplinary Approach to the visual arts and addresses *good practice*. The model is available to all third-level training institutions nationwide. The second resource is a proposed visual arts Continuous Professional Development (CPD) Model for a *Special Purpose Award*, and its content structure is based on the IPE model as employed at MTU. The proposed CPD model could be adapted, whereby specific modules and content would be accessible to individuals delivering IPE. This would equip lecturers, trainers and mentors with the necessary expertise in both pedagogy and the visual arts. The content structure of the CPD *Special Purpose Award* ensures a

balance between theory (which underpins how children learn through the visual arts) and practical experiential workshops. Central to the workshops would be the seven elements of art; Line, Shape, Form, Space, Texture, Colour and Value, explored through mark-making, painting, printmaking, sculpture, loose parts, transient art and ICT. The workshops would culminate in visual portfolios of learning, whereby participants would engage in recording and documenting their individual learning trajectory as well as that of the children with whom they interact within ECEC settings. Learning would translate from theory to practice, as participants implement a visual art IBEC in their respective ECEC settings, observing and documenting children's experiences while engaging in self-reflective practice. The delivery of the CPD *Special Purpose Award* could incorporate a combination of online learning as well as hands-on practical workshops, seminars, and in-service cluster groups, to accommodate educators, nationwide.

The aforementioned resources have been designed in a strategic drive to address the research findings, in a practical sense. They could serve to equip current and future personnel with the requisite knowledge, skills, and expertise, to effectively implement an emergent, inquiry-based, visual arts curriculum, using a transdisciplinary approach, in the pursuit of good practice.

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Using Communities of Practice to Support STEM Education in Early Childhood Care and Education: A Proposal

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Keywords: STEM Education • Community of Practice • Continuing Professional Development

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Julie Winget Power worked in the early years sector managing early years settings for 34 years. She retired from practice in 2020 to work full time in TU Dublin lecturing on their BA Early Child Education and Care programme. She is currently undertaking PhD studies in Maynooth University.

Abstract

Over the last decade Ireland has experienced increased interest in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education across educational contexts from early childhood to adult learning (Department of Education and Skills 2017a; DES, 2017b; DES 2020). The STEM Education Policy Statement and Implementation Plan positions early years educators (EYEs) as key players in facilitating young children's experiences with STEM activity. The plan states that early years educators should possess a thorough understanding of STEM and the teaching and learning of these disciplines. As a result, early childhood settings are now inspected in the area of STEM provision (DES, 2018). However, early years educators in the Republic of Ireland have not received training in the area of STEM education and are often unsure how to provide this important aspect of education in their preschool settings (DES, 2020). Consequently, early years educators must be supported in their role in providing STEM experiences and in supporting children's engagement with STEM learning in early childhood contexts. To address this need for continuing professional development (CPD) UCD, proposes to establish a 'STEM Network', a community of practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015), to support educators of children from 0-6 years, in developing their subject content knowledge and appropriate pedagogies in relation to the implementation of STEM education within preschool practice.

Introduction

In recent years, both STEM education and early childhood education and care (ECEC) have been at the forefront of national discussions about educational policy. Since 2016, a focus on STEM education is increasingly visible in policy documents in the Republic of Ireland. These documents address a perceived lack of focus on STEM education to date and attempt to address some of these issues with the integration of STEM across the education continuum. This paper outlines the impact (or lack of impact) these policy documents have had on ECEC practice and considers the establishment of an ECEC sector-led community of practice (COP) to support early years educators in facilitating STEM education in ECEC settings.

Literature Review

The need for STEM CPD in ECEC

A growing body of research provides insight into the challenges that can be encountered in providing STEM learning opportunities for children in ECEC. It is well established that early years educators (EYEs) have an important role in supporting young children's interest and engagement in STEM education (Simoncini & Lasen, 2018). Educators' beliefs have an impact on teaching and professional development interventions have been shown to positively change attitudes and practice relating to the implementation of STEM subjects in early

childhood (Vidall-Hall, Flewitt & Wyse, 2020; Nikolopoulou & Gialamas, 2015).

Despite the fact that international policy and research focus on an integrated STEM approach, there is no *one way* to integrate STEM into a curriculum. Many educators recognise the need to improve their capacity to effectively integrate STEM into their curricula and further enhance their STEM content knowledge. However, while some educators report confidence in teaching STEM, they often struggle when they come to incorporate STEM into their daily practice (Park et al., 2017). To date, there is no effective CPD available to guide educators to integrate STEM education into their ECEC classrooms (Ring et al, 2017). Early years educators need more robust CPD and training to effectively engage young children in developmentally appropriate STEM learning outlining that training needs to be practical, interconnected, ongoing, and include STEM content and effective pedagogical strategies and techniques (McClure et al. 2017).

Educators identify numerous challenges in implementing STEM in practice including a lack of professional development; a lack of knowledge about STEM topics; lack of time to teach STEM; a lack of instructional resources and a lack of ability to provide integrated STEM learning opportunities and activities (Park et al., 2017). Anecdotal evidence also suggests that educators are wary of STEM subjects, and maths anxiety and tech phobia are prevalent. Unsurprisingly there is a positive relationship between the level of educators' willingness to teach STEM, and their awareness of the importance of STEM education (Park et al., 2017). Therefore, CPD that will enhance educators understanding of the significance of ECEC STEM education, knowledge of STEM subjects and help address challenges that they may grapple with in teaching STEM, are necessary. STEM education and pedagogy should be included in initial professional education (IPE) and CPD to build capacity of those entering the sector and to meet the STEM education needs of the children already in ECEC settings (Çiftçi et al., 2020).

The Irish Policy Context

The Report on STEM Education (The STEM

Education Review Group, 2016) instigated the process of enhancing STEM education across the education continuum in Ireland. The report identifies STEM education as an essential factor to 'drive our economic competitiveness and to provide the foundations for future prosperity' (p. 7). This report was compiled by experts in STEM education as well as 'industry figures from world-leading companies including Intel and IBM'. Learning approaches, such as *Inquiry-based* and *Problem-based learning* were recommended by the group as being appropriate strategies for the teaching and learning of STEM subjects, approaches not unfamiliar to educators. However, given the confines of the STEM Education Review Group's work, representatives from the ECEC sector were not included in private meetings, or the public consultation that followed. Consequently, the ECEC sector was not considered, and the focus remained on primary and secondary education.

STEM Education Policy

2017 saw the introduction of the *STEM Education Policy* (DES, 2017a) 'to achieve an improved STEM education experience and outcomes for learners from early years to post-primary school' (p. 12). A key tenet of this policy is that educators will have a high awareness of the importance of STEM education and of the policy document itself. The policy acknowledges that STEM education begins early in life and positions early childhood as a site for early STEM exploration through active, sensorial experiences. The role of these experiences in laying the foundations of the necessary dispositions (e.g., curiosity, inquisitiveness), key skills (e.g., problem-solving, critical thinking) and knowledge required for later STEM learning is stated. The policy outlines key areas for action within four pillars deemed critical for achieving improvements and learner outcomes across the Irish educational system in relation to STEM education.

- **Pillar 1.** Nurture learner engagement and participation
- **Pillar 2.** Enhance early years educator and teacher capacity
- **Pillar 3.** Support STEM education practice
- **Pillar 4.** Use evidence to support STEM education

Within this document, the necessity for educators to possess the content knowledge, appropriate pedagogical knowledge, assessment skills and confidence to facilitate effective STEM education is explicitly stated under *Pillar 2*. It is asserted that this should be provided through training. *Pillar 3* states that practitioner capacity will also be developed through the provision of examples of 'highly effective practices', through the DES inspections, 'online materials and publications', as well as through 'professional networks and communities of practice' (p.15). In light of this policy The Early Years Education Inspection Tool was updated and now includes explicit criteria related to the development of 'STEAM dispositions' (DES, 2018, p. 22). It is noteworthy that policy documents continue to use the acronym STEM, while the DES EY Inspection Tool uses STEAM.

STEM Education Implementation Plan (2017-2019)

The STEM Education Policy was accompanied by an implementation plan (DES, 2017b). This plan outlined the timeline for implementation of actions mentioned within each of the four pillars across three phases: *Phase 1: Enhancing* (2017-2019); *Phase 2: Embedding* (2020 – 2022); *Phase 3: Realising* (2023 – 2026). Indicators for success of the implementation plan include ensuring that all educational establishments develop an awareness of the importance of STEM education, the importance of female participation in STEM education and that a programme of professional development be made available for early years educators. It is envisioned that these programmes, together with guidance from the DES inspectorate, will enable educators to facilitate high-quality STEM education within their settings. It is worth noting that *Phase 2, Embedding*, has yet to begin due to the pandemic but it is understood that some training materials are available, and some STEM resources are available on the *AistearSíolta* website.

Despite the publication of the STEM education statement and implementation plan a recent document (DES, 2020) noted that of the 29 ECEC settings included in the study, none were familiar with the national policy for STEM education, and 28% of children's STEM

experiences in early learning and care settings were deemed to be 'unsatisfactory' (p. 19). The report concluded that this finding was the result of a lack of training in STEM education for the early childhood sector and recommended that STEM education feature in both IPE and CPD programmes.

Theoretical Framework

The STEM Implementation Plan (DES, 2017b), which is currently under review, identified the need to develop STEM content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, educator confidence and skills through the provision of a variety of 'high-quality STEM related opportunities for early years educators ... to support their own professional learning' (DES, 2017a, p.18). By 2020 however, the Department of Education acknowledged the lack of progress made in ECEC STEM when compared to primary and post-primary education, and recognised the need for additional 'policy initiatives, supports and actions' (DES, 2020, p. 33) to enable ECEC to fully participate in the national STEM agenda. While CPD and the provision of resources are useful in developing STEM understanding in the sector, not all CPD is equally effective.

One-time CPD training days are often unproductive (Rogers et al, 2017). In their study of professional learning in ECEC, Rogers et al. (2017) found that CPD is most effective when it involves a chance to integrate new knowledge and understanding into day-to-day practice, and to reflect on this over time. Didactic workshops that are more generalized in nature often fail to produce the transfer of skills to the setting or a meaningful change in pedagogy (Sheridan et al., 2009). Further, the varied qualifications and professional profiles of the ECEC sector in Ireland suggest the need for different types of intervention and professional development depending on the profile of the professional.

The STEM Policy Implementation Plan identified the National Síolta Aistear Initiative (NSAI) as the mechanism through which the STEM capacity of educators would be enhanced (DES, 2017b). The NSAI piloted workshops with predetermined content facilitated by approximately 35 separate national voluntary childcare organisations in 2016-2017. The NSAI

pilot review report (NCCA, 2018) found that participants felt that the workshops provided were not sufficient to assure 'meaningful and lasting' change. Therefore, we suggest using an ongoing and regular ECEC-led intervention to build knowledge from the ground up.

Utilising a Community of Practice.

Communities of Practice (COP) are described as groups who share a passion or interest about something they do and interact regularly to learn how to do it better (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner 2015). COPs act as supportive, dynamic communities where individual and group social learning is explored, challenged, shared, and grown. They are flexible, practical, and designed to meet the needs of the group's members. The term community of practice was first coined by Lave and Wenger (1991) to describe how novices learned from established communities of experts. The process of participation by which novices joined and became central to the community, was called 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The primary focus and value of this theory was in describing the learning that occurs through a situated process of participation and socialisation. Community of practice theory is informed by, and informs, social learning theory meaning new behaviours can be acquired by observing and imitating others. Ideally made up of members with multiple expertise (educators, researchers, academics and ECEC students) each individual has something to offer to the group.

Internationally, COPs have been successfully adopted by ECEC students in higher education with multiple benefits reported including increased motivation, self-confidence, and experience of leadership roles (McDonald & Cater-Steel, 2017). In Ireland, virtual COPs have been used to support individuals from a number of different organisations to share practice (McDonald & Cater-Steel, 2017). Whether online or in-person, the establishment of COPs will address the need to create multiple supports to build capacity, competence, and confidence in STEM from within the sector; growing expertise from the bottom up, rather than waiting to receive CPD imposed from the top down. In DCU, we argue that COPs are ideally placed to

meet many of the actions outlined in the STEM implementation plan by; sharing resources; discussing and reflecting on suitable concepts and pedagogy; sharing practice that enables children's meaningful engagement with STEM; and create a vision for what EC STEM should look like in Ireland.

Implications for Policy and Practice

There is a need for further research into how information is disseminated through ECEC settings after CPD has taken place. According to Sun et al. (2013) the 'spill over effect' of CPD is often underestimated. Research has found that sharing knowledge and new ideas through informal channels may be especially prevalent and significant to ECEC educators' professional learning, as almost 50% of staff report sharing information they received from off-site professional development with colleagues in their setting (Cramer et al., 2021). This informal dissemination has been found to be particularly impactful and COPs could provide regular CPD allowing educators to return to their setting with new ideas, understanding and knowledge to share with colleagues.

The process of how to develop, cultivate and sustain a COP for the purpose of supporting individual and collective learning and innovation needs to be addressed. Sustainability of COPs requires investment and support. The key features that enable COPs to flourish and succeed include leadership development, distribution, and succession planning; a viable financial model; a professionalised/ committed staff; feedback and advice mechanisms; research and assessment; and an articulated community strategy (Kezara & Gehrke, 2017). If this method is to be adopted, consideration will need to be given to *how* these groups can be established and sustained over time. In the interim, the STEM network already established in DCU could successfully facilitate online and face-to-face COPs and help to share practice building on the structures, knowledge, and leadership already in place.

Conclusion

We argue that COPs, along with effective CPD and IPE, should be considered as a key

approach in supporting STEM education in ECEC and that this should be named in the next STEM Implementation Plan. COPs can bring together the varied expertise in the sector - ECEC students, early years educators, researchers, lecturers, and those from policy and support roles. COPs led and managed by the ECEC sector will recognise how the approach to STEM will, and should, differ to later schooling. Play, holistic learning, inquiry-based and child-led approaches should form the basis of this practice. The STEM education policy documents call for leadership among educational sectors in the area of STEM and we propose that COPs can facilitate leadership development within the ECEC sector. In addition, COPs have the potential for cross-sectoral collaboration between pre- and primary education, a strategy also called for within the STEM education policy documents.

Since presenting this proposal at the ECI research day (April, 2021), the EC STEAM network, a COP for informal learning in relation to STEM topics has been established by the team. This is a friendly sharing space, where members share practice and ask advice. We welcome early years students, educators of children from birth to six (preschool and early primary) and lecturers/researchers in STEM education in ECEC. This informal CPD group meets once a month. To join, e-mail: cora.gillic@dcu.ie, Sandra.m.oneill@dcu.ie or Julie.WingetPower@tudublin.ie.

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“My Really Sticky Hands” – The Importance of Tactile Sensory Play for Under 3s

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Keywords: Mosaic Approach • Tactile Sensory Play • Under threes
Exploration and Curiosity • Child development

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to develop and introduce tactile sensory experiences through play, for children in an under threes room in an early years setting. The study sought to gain an understanding of the importance of tactile sensory play (TSP), for young children, through the introduction of various tactile sensory materials (TSM). This action research project consisted of two research cycles, each lasting five days. The first cycle initiated the introduction of tactile sensory materials (TSM) during free play. The second cycle was initiated with the creation of a house from the findings of cycle one, which resulted in a different use of the materials and the creation of ‘helicopter’ role play. Using the Mosaic Approach and the Leuven Scales of wellbeing and involvement as frameworks for data collection. Thematic analysis identified seven main themes from two observation cycles: (the exploration of schemas), (curiosity, involvement and self-regulation), (representation and role play), (socialisation, teamwork and communication skills), (fine motor skills), (mathematical concepts), and (the role of the practitioner).

Introduction

This research provides an insight into the world of children’s tactile sensory play (TSP). This research provides evidence of the exploration of various lines of enquiry and learning opportunities, initiated by the introduction of new tactile sensory materials (TSM), identifying such materials as essential tools for children under three years in encouraging all areas of development.

This Action Research project involved the

development and introduction of tactile sensory experiences for seven children aged between one and three years in an early years setting. Data was collected by observing the children during these tactile sensory play experiences. Narrative observations and pictures were used to identify how the children interacted with TSM. Through observing and encouraging children’s interactions with the materials, their lines of enquiry were identified and recorded.

The project encouraged tactile sensory play (TSP) through the introduction of a basket of TSM (including feathers, sandpaper, tassels, silk, lace, velvet, and textured voiles) during morning free play. The researcher observed how children interacted with TSP to identify lines of enquiry which TSP may encourage using an Action Research study design.

In the literature, the use of tactile materials is important for children under three in stimulating the development of the tactile sense, aiding in developing and maintaining neuron connections in the brain (Gascoyne, 2011; Canny et al., 2017). The brain is most responsive to external stimuli during the first three years of life (Research Review, 2015), indicating the importance of exposure to various stimuli during this critical developmental period. Through Tactile Sensory Play, Gascoyne suggests that “all learning in life ultimately stems from the senses, an amazingly sophisticated system for receiving and decoding information” (Gascoyne, 2012. p18).

This study used an Action Research study design through the implementation of two cycles over two weeks. Tools from the Mosaic Approach (Clark & Moss, 2011) were used

for data collection and data was thematically analysed to understand the importance of this type of play with children in this age group. This study also discusses the practitioner's role in TSP and the implications of the findings for everyday practice.

Literature Review

TSP provides opportunities to explore and learn through our sense of touch. Providing a sensory rich environment is essential in early years settings, having positive effects on learning experiences now and in the future by establishing neuron connections in the developing brain. These connections are then cemented by repetition of similar activities (Gascoyne, 2011). At birth, an infant's brain is only 20 percent developed and in the first three years roughly 700 neuron connections are made per second (Canny et al. 2017, p.9). This is crucial information for practitioners, to facilitate exposure to various stimuli within this period, and to understand the impact sensory play has on a child's later learning potential. Sensory play can also be used as a calming technique for young children (Usher 2013), assisting in self-regulation.

Fine motor development is key in early childhood, aiding the development of academic and pre literacy skills. Small muscle groups are found in the fingers, supported by the joints, forearms, shoulders and spine (Randelovic et al. 2018). TSP provides a medium to develop these small hand and finger muscles as well as hand-eye co-ordination and object manipulation. Fine motor development can be found in the learning goals of Aistear, our National Curriculum Framework.

Infants and young children are pre-wired to explore through touch, which Piaget named as the stage of cognitive development (from birth to two years) the 'sensorimotor' stage. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is used by practitioners to establish what a child can already do and guide them to achieve something that they haven't yet mastered (Pound, 2014).

Aistear and Síolta are the national frameworks that practitioners follow when planning

activities. Aistear identifies four main themes: Identity and Belonging, Exploring and Thinking, Communication, and Well-Being (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2009). Síolta is the national quality framework underpinning the work of early years practitioners by providing principles and standards to promote quality within the sector (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), 2006). These frameworks enable practitioners to create a learning space where children acquire unique and extensive learning opportunities.

This study aims to identify the importance of TSP for children under three in early years settings by observing lines of enquiry through free play with TSM. By doing so, this study can provide information to early years practitioners to help inform practice and add to the body of existing literature regarding TSP with children under three.

Methodology

Study Design

Action Research was chosen as the methodology most suited to achieving the aims of the study, as it is an opened-ended, cyclical research method requiring planning, implementation of the activity, reflection on how the activity was executed, and evaluation of the effectiveness of the activity, leading back to planning based on previous observations (McNiff, 2002). Action Research requires non-probability sampling techniques; therefore, convenience sampling was used. In total, seven children aged between one and three in the under threes room in a rural early years setting participated in this project, with consent from parents and the service manager. Assent was gained from all children by means of verbal and non-verbal communication. All participants remained anonymous in data collection and write-up, and children were free to join and leave the activities as they wished.

Data Collection and Analysis

The Mosaic Approach was used as framework for data collection (Clark and Moss, 2011). The data generation techniques used in this research included: narrative observation in the form of note taking, child conferencing,

reflective diary, and photographs, as per the Mosaic Approach (Clarke and Moss, 2011).

The children's level of well-being and involvement was quantified using the Leuven Scale for Wellbeing and Involvement. The Leuven scale is a 5-point scale to measure a child's emotional wellbeing and involvement and the scales provide a way to identify how best to support individual children (Laevers, 1994).

Two research cycles were conducted, each lasting five days. The first cycle introduced the sensory materials and allowed exploration during free play. Cycle two was initiated with the creation of a 'house' from the findings of cycle one. Sheets were draped over the furniture to create a house and the sensory materials were placed beside.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse results and identify recurring themes.

Limitations

Possible limitations of the research include a short time frame for field research, size of research project (small-scale), geographical boundaries, and a target age group of twelve months to thirty-four months which limits the findings to this age group.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were observed using the Guidance for Developing Ethical Research Projects Involving Children from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The core ethical concepts were followed throughout, including minimising any risk of harm to participants, ensuring informed consent and assent, and always maintaining confidentiality and anonymity.

The researcher has, in undertaking this study, committed to the wellbeing, protection and safety of the research participants, respected the rights and wishes of participants throughout, endeavoured to conduct high quality scientific research, and committed to relaying the results of this research to relevant stakeholders (DCYA, 2012).

Findings

Exploration of Schemas

A schema is defined as "pattern of repeatable actions that lead to early categories and then to logical categorisation" (Athey, 2007, cited by Atherton and Nutbrown, 2013). Schemas were observed and repeated throughout both cycles, supporting Gascoyne's (2011) and Goldstein's (2012) suggestions that repetition is required to cement new neuron connections in the brain. Noted schemas included trajectory, filling and emptying, transporting, heaping and scattering, enveloping, on top, and going through boundaries (Pen Green, 2018). The exploration of these schemas was supported by the availability of the TSM and their use during free play. The trajectory schema was noted by children (aged 15 months and 26 months) blowing the feather across the table and swinging the tassels and fabrics. There were many displays of the transporting schema with children using the basket to move the materials around the room, initiating various lines of enquiry. Heaping and scattering was also frequently observed when the children pulled the materials out of the basket to search through them. Schemas are embedded in the Aistear curriculum framework under the theme of 'Exploring and Thinking Aim 2 LG 4 (NCCA, 2009. p.44).

Curiosity, Involvement, and Self-Regulation

Curiosity is defined as a "feeling- a stirring, a state of unrest" Engel (2015. p.7), and identified by behaviours such as investigating, manipulating, inspecting, and questioning (Bradbard and Endsley, 1978. P. 4.). Following Piaget's sensori-motor stage, children learn to "manipulate the environment" in the preoperational stage (Pound, 2014. P.47). The children engaged in both stages simultaneously by exploring the tactile materials and manipulating the objects to provide different play opportunities. Their curiosity was noted, particularly in the beginning, through questioning and non-verbal gestures. For instance, children (age 23 months and 26 months) asking "what's this?" when holding the material, and "what's in there? Can I see?". The children were also observed exploring the materials with their hands, fingers, and mouths. Sensory information is organised by the brain and analysed in different areas (Gascoyne,

2012), suggesting that the information the children received from the materials in their hands, is sent to the brain to be analysed and stored in a process called 'sensory processing' (Gascoyne, 2011; Goldstein, 2012).

The children's level of wellbeing and involvement was quantified using the Leuven Scale of Wellbeing and Involvement (Northumberland Education, 2017). On the wellbeing scale the children consistently matched to level 4 and 5 (high and extremely high). Their level of involvement varied day to day as well as on an individual basis from 3-5 (moderate to extremely high). Though they may have appeared busy, they were focused and involved in the activity at hand, supporting Usher's (2013) theory that TSP provides a calming environment for children, therefore aiding the development of self-regulation, which Shanker (2012, P.4) defines as "a child's ability to deal with stressors effectively and efficiently then return to a baseline of being calmly focused and alert".

Representation and Role Play

Imagination is an important element of children's play. Allowing this activity to be carried out during free play encourages exploration through children's creation of imagination and role play scenarios. This type of play often incorporates the use of representational (or symbolic) play, which Vygotsky states "is a part of the process of liberating thought and meaning from concrete objects" (Elder and Pederson, 1978 P. 500). Many examples of representation and role play were witnessed, for example: acting out the role of 'daddy', creating a 'house' under a table, and using the materials to make a train around the room. The biggest example was seen in cycle two where the children used the materials to develop the 'helicopter' concept, an extension of the 'house' role play scenario from cycle one. This involved the children (with the help of the researcher) creating a 'helicopter' from a bed sheet and chairs. The children sat in the 'helicopter', engaging in imaginative play, verbal and non-verbal exchanges, and teamwork.

Socialisation, Teamwork and Communication

The tactile materials initiated a variety of social situations, teamwork, and opportunities for

verbal and non-verbal communication. Social development is important in early childhood as children begin to make sense of their world and the social aspects it involves. Many types of play were observed during the exploration of the materials including solitary, onlooker, and parallel play. During these types of play, children interacted through verbal and non-verbal (gestures, eye contact, and body language) communications with their peers and the adults in the room. A prime example of their use of non-verbal skills occurred as they created a train around the room using just a long piece of fabric. In this case it was observed that there was no verbal exchange, though the children were able to work together using just their non-verbal communication skills to successfully create a moving train.

Fine Motor – Prewriting Skills

The children were observed predominantly exploring the materials throughout cycle one and two using their hands and fine motor skills. In cycle two the first glimpse of children engaging in mark making as part of the 'helicopter' role play was observed when the children requested paper and pencils to "draw" with. The development of fine motor skills is outlined as an important learning goal in Aistear under the theme of 'Well-Being - Aim 2 LG 3' (NCCA, 2009. P.17). Randjelovic et al (2018) identify that the fine tuning of fine motor skills is a requirement for the development of graphomotor (writing) skills later in childhood. This research identifies the use of fine motor skills as a key factor in the exploration of the tactile sense, in addition to extending the use of these skills to prewriting tasks.

'Bigger' and 'Smaller' Mathematical Concepts

Mathematical concepts such as weight, size, and shape were observed as the children investigated, explored and manipulated the materials through TSP. For instance, the exploration of schemas whilst engaging in TSP incorporated the use of mathematical concepts, such as weight and volume, when carrying the basket with the materials in it versus carrying the empty basket. Cycle two identifies the use of the 'bigger and smaller' mathematical concept when the children attempted to make the 'house' bigger and smaller by adding and removing objects from the sheet (used as

the roof). The importance of exploring these mathematical concepts is outlined in Aistear's theme of 'Exploring and Thinking' Aim 1, Learning Goals 5 and 6 (NCCA, 2009. P.44).

Practitioner's Role

Another interesting finding is the role of the early years practitioner, as identified throughout the Aistear and Síolta frameworks. As practitioners, we should think about how we help children learn and use different ways (such as TSP) to encourage learning and development (NCCA, 2009). This can be achieved through our in-depth knowledge of the themes and learning goals of Aistear, in addition to our theoretical knowledge. Síolta states the importance of our role in providing quality care and education for young children in Standard 11 – Professional Practice and in Principle 9 (CECDE, 2006). Current knowledge of theory and research is key in developing quality practice. It is our duty as educators to continue our professional development, to be aware of current studies, and to develop other skills such as reflective practice and tailoring experiences to individual groups.

Discussion

This project provides an insight into the world of children's TSP. Cycle one revealed many lines of enquiry from the exploration of tactile materials, including the exploration of schemas, curiosity, and socialisation and communication, to the initiation of role play scenarios. The same was noted throughout cycle two, though pre-writing skills and mathematical concepts were also observed. These findings indicate that TSP is an important activity for exploring and encouraging a variety of developmental areas for children under three. The use of these materials during free play allows for practitioners to observe and extend these lines of enquiry and allows the children to explore in a way which is meaningful to them. The use of free play is key in allowing uninterrupted exploration of the materials.

It is evident that TSM promotes many types of social play including onlooker, parallel, and co-operative play for children aged one to three years. The adult is also responsible for providing an engaging and inclusive environment with a variety of resources, in addition to allowing

sufficient time for children to fully engage in the experience. Repetition of certain activities was evident with all seven children who participated in the activities (aged one to three years), for instance the repeated exploration of schemas such as trajectory and transporting and the use of the materials for role play scenarios, supporting the theory that repetition is key for early brain development (Goldstein, 2012).

Tools from the Mosaic Approach supported the educators to observe how children interact with TSP. The use of the Leuven Scale of Wellbeing and Involvement captured children's levels of wellbeing and involvement, which ranked very high and high in both areas. The use of these tools in early years settings can help to identify children's lines of enquiry and their levels of wellbeing and involvement. A proposed cycle three would include exploration of TSM in the outdoor environment, allowing for the use of natural materials and the use of a larger space for exploration.

Implications for Practice

Providing TSM creates a world of exploration, learning and development for children under three in early years settings. As identified in the study, these tactile sensory materials encourage various lines of enquiry, providing many benefits to overall development. Crucially, allowing children the time and freedom within the daily routine to explore endless possibilities in many developmental areas. This may be in the form of a sensory corner where materials can be periodically changed to create novelty and provide new learning experiences (Gascoyne, 2012).

Observation, child conferencing, and photographs (as per the Mosaic Approach) are important tools to observe how the children interact with materials and allows us to provide tailored learning experiences in early years settings. This research mentions the importance of practitioner knowledge of research and continuous professional development (Bradbard and Endsley, 1978) to guide our practice and has highlighted reflective practice (Gascoyne, 2012) as a tool to improve and maintain quality in the early years sector.

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The challenges and opportunities of COVID-19 for childminders in Ireland

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Keywords: Childcare policy • Healthcare policy • Financial impacts • Stress • Resilience

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Mary's role as Head of Training and Development with Childminding Ireland is to support childminders throughout their continuous professional development. Mary plays a key role in collecting childminding data, including designing surveys in collaboration with interested bodies, to the dissemination of the surveys, analysis and presentation of the results.

Abstract

To document the impact of COVID-19, this article draws on secondary analysis of two Childminding Ireland surveys: the annual anonymised survey of members and contacts in October-November 2020 (n=940), and a spot survey in January 2021 (n=394). The surveys asked specific questions regarding the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on childminders and their services.

During lockdown, Childminding Ireland experienced increasing contacts from unsupported childminders (n=2,000); thus, the annual survey had the highest response rate ever. Few childminders reported closures as a result of COVID-19 infections among families; only one reported closure due to her own illness. However, only 16% of respondents reported minor or positive adjustments to the restrictions, including starting childminding because crèches were closed.

For most childminders, who are unsupported by government subsidies, the financial impact of Covid-19 restrictions was predictably severe: 46% of respondents experienced a loss of income. A further 24% reported experiencing emotional and relational stress and anxiety, while 14% reported added expenses, workload and longer working hours to implement COVID-19 guidelines. In addition, 85 respondents received the once-off Re-opening Grant (€1,000).

The pandemic has highlighted the crucial role

of childminders in supporting workers and their resilience in continuing to provide services, while exposing the poor supports afforded them.

Introduction

Approximately 10% of children aged 0-12 years (88,000) (Central Statistics Office, 2017) are in the care of paid childminders and other professional home-based caregivers, in the Republic of Ireland, at least part-time. A childminder singlehandedly minds children in the childminder's own home. Childminders are self-employed, agree their own terms and conditions with parents, and are responsible for their own tax and PRSI arrangements. Under current regulations (Government of Ireland, 2016; Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), 2018), childminders can only register with Tusla, the national Child and Family Agency, if they mind 4 or 5 unrelated preschool children or 7-12 school age children at any one time.

The latest estimated number of childminders is 15,000 (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, (DCEDIY) 2021), although it could be as high as 33,000, depending on the estimated average number of children minded per childminder¹ (McGinnity, Russell and Murray, 2015). Currently, we still rely on estimates as only 77 childminders were registered with Tusla in January 2021, in addition to 690 childminders caring for three children or fewer, who were registered

¹ McGinnity et al., 2015 estimate the average as 2.6 children per childminders.

with Revenue in order to avail of the Childcare Tax Relief². This relief allows childminders to earn up to €15,000 per annum without paying income tax while paying for self-employed social insurance towards maternity leave and pension.

The aim of this research was to document the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on childminders in Ireland, to analyse the challenges and opportunities and to explore any possible long-term impacts on childminding nationally. The key questions were:

1. How did childminders continue working during the pandemic?
2. How did restrictions affect them financially and personally?

Literature Review

To examine the impact of COVID-19 public health policy, this analysis was conducted in the framework of Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) looking at macro- level policy and its impact on micro-level childminding services. It also used the daily routine as a lens to consider childminders' values and beliefs, framed by eco-cultural theory (Tonyan, 2015).

Facing a highly infectious disease, Irish early education services followed rigorous guidelines as recommended by Hashikawa et al., (2020). These included: daily health checks, face masks, respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene, increased cleaning, sanitising and disinfection, and the reduction of social contacts using 'pods' of no more than five pre-school children, as well as isolation guidelines in case of infection. Specific guidance was issued for childminders also³.

Blum & Dobrotić (2020) have analysed the interaction between health care and education and childcare policy in the pandemic in countries across Europe, including Ireland. They identified a wide range in COVID-19 policy, from a population approach to prevention, (where the whole population is locked down to prevent spread) to the high-risk targeted approach, (where only the most vulnerable are cocooning and shielding). The differences in approach

impacted directly on closures or openings in childcare settings, from full closure of businesses with childcare for essential workers only, as in Ireland, to society remaining almost fully open with childcare available as usual, as happened in Sweden. Examining COVID-19 closures in relation to the three strands informing Irish childcare policy namely, 1) the child's right to an early education, 2) work-family reconciliation, and 3) targeted early intervention, it is clear that work-family reconciliation was the top priority in Ireland during lockdowns, with early education and intervention trailing behind.

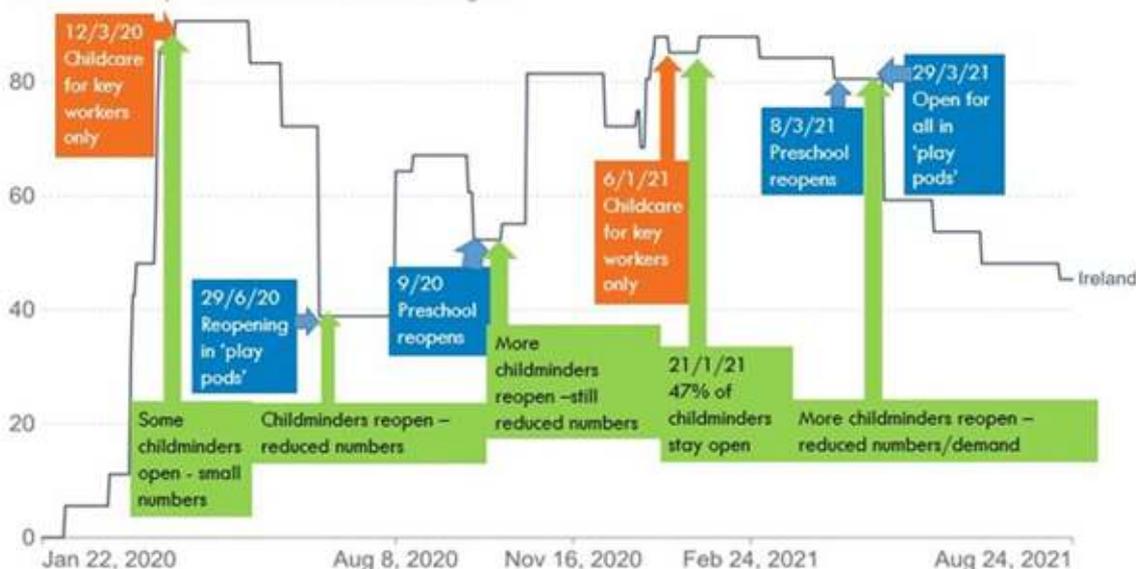
According to the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) (Hale et al., 2021), Ireland sat at the upper levels of the Stringency Index for significant periods during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a population approach to prevention leading to workplace, school and preschool closures, travel bans and restrictions, as well as limitations on churches, retail, and restaurants. In figure 1, you can see the relationship between the closures in society in orange, mirrored in closures and reopening of childcare facilities in blue, alongside childminders operations in green.

² <https://www.revenue.ie/en/personal-tax-credits-reliefs-and-exemptions/children/childcare-services/index.aspx>

³ <https://first5.gov.ie/guidance/child-minding>

COVID-19: Stringency Index

This is a composite measure based on nine response indicators including school closures, workplace closures, and travel bans, rescaled to a value from 0 to 100 (100 = strictest). If policies vary at the subnational level, the index is shown as the response level of the strictest sub-region.



Source: Hale, Angrist, Goldszmidt, Kira, Petherick, Phillips, Webster, Cameron-Blake, Hallas, Majumdar, and Tatlow (2021). "A global panel database of pandemic policies (Oxford COVID-19 Government ResponseTracker)." *Nature Human Behaviour*. – Last updated 30 August 2021, 04:50 (London time)
OurWorldInData.org/coronavirus • CC BY

Figure 1: COVID-19 closures/re-openings for childcare and childminders in Ireland

Methodology

The key data were drawn from a reflexive thematic analysis using NVivo and Excel (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2021) of the free-text questions in Childminding Ireland's annual anonymised survey of members and contacts in October-November 2020 (n=940), regarding the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on their services. This was supplemented by a spot survey in January 2021 (n=394). Participants consented to complete the surveys for the purpose of informing decision makers of childminders' opinions and concern. However, since the research concerns a self-selecting sample of childminders, caution should be exercised in applying the findings to Irish childminders generally.

Findings

During the first six months of the pandemic (March-September 2020), Childminding Ireland experienced increasing contacts from unsupported childminders (n=2,000), suggesting increased demand for small childminding services in the context of the closure of almost all centre-based provision. Hence, this annual survey received the highest

number of respondents ever: 924. There were 619 responses to the free-text question: 'How has Covid-19 impacted on you and your childminding service?' The annual survey was conducted from October 27th to November 9th, 2020; all responses referred to the period from March 12th onwards.

Closures and Openings

A small number of childminder respondents (n = 40) remained open during the first, most stringent lockdown (March 12th -June 29th, 2020) mainly because they were caring for the children of essential or self-employed workers. Some respondents found there was increased interest in childminding places due to the small number of children, while a couple of respondents opened a childminding service as all centre-based provision was closed. During the initial three-month lockdown, an emergency in-home support scheme for essential workers had to be abandoned because only six providers signed up⁴. However, one childminder found it was unfair and risky that childminders were encouraged to remain open because they worked with small numbers.

⁴ <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/701e2e-statement-on-cancellation-of-temporary-childcare-scheme-for-essentia/>

From June 29th onwards as lockdown lifted, childminders began to reopen but with generally fewer children and reduced hours. Childcare centres were also permitted to re-open with pods of five children to create a more hygienic, safer environment. However, nearly 70% of centre-based services remained closed for the summer, with only 22% operating at full capacity according to a survey (n = 868) by the Federation of Early Childhood Providers (FECF), 8th-12th July 2020⁵.

When all schools and preschools re-opened in September, more childminders also reported reopening at this point due to greater demand, but mainly with reduced numbers and hours. By the time of the survey in October 2020, only 10 childminders reported being out of work.

Moreover, in January 2021, when centre-based childcare services were again closed almost completely due to COVID-19, a spot survey (n=394) conducted by Childminding Ireland on January 21st 2020, found that 185 (47%) of respondents were keeping their childminding services open.

Financial impacts

However, childminders were severely impacted financially by COVID-19 restrictions. This was the most significant stress of the pandemic: most respondents were out of work for three to six months. Since most childminders are excluded from the national preschool and childcare subsidy schemes, they could not access State financial supports for early years workers: 46% of respondents reported experiencing loss of income. Moreover, since most were not registered as self-employed with Revenue either, these childminders could not access financial supports such as the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP⁶).

In fact, only 690 Revenue-registered childminders could claim the PUP, while 77 Tusla-registered could avail of the Temporary COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (DCYA, 2020). These were among the 16% (n=99) of survey respondents who indicated that they were coping well, experiencing minor or positive impacts, such as actually opening a service or working with new families. The majority suffered high levels of stress and fear of contracting COVID-19: if they fell ill, they could not work and would lose income.

5 https://issuu.com/paa-pr/docs/fecp_july_survey_of_childcare_providers

6 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b41bb-covid-19-social-welfare-schemes-available-to-a-self-employed-person/>

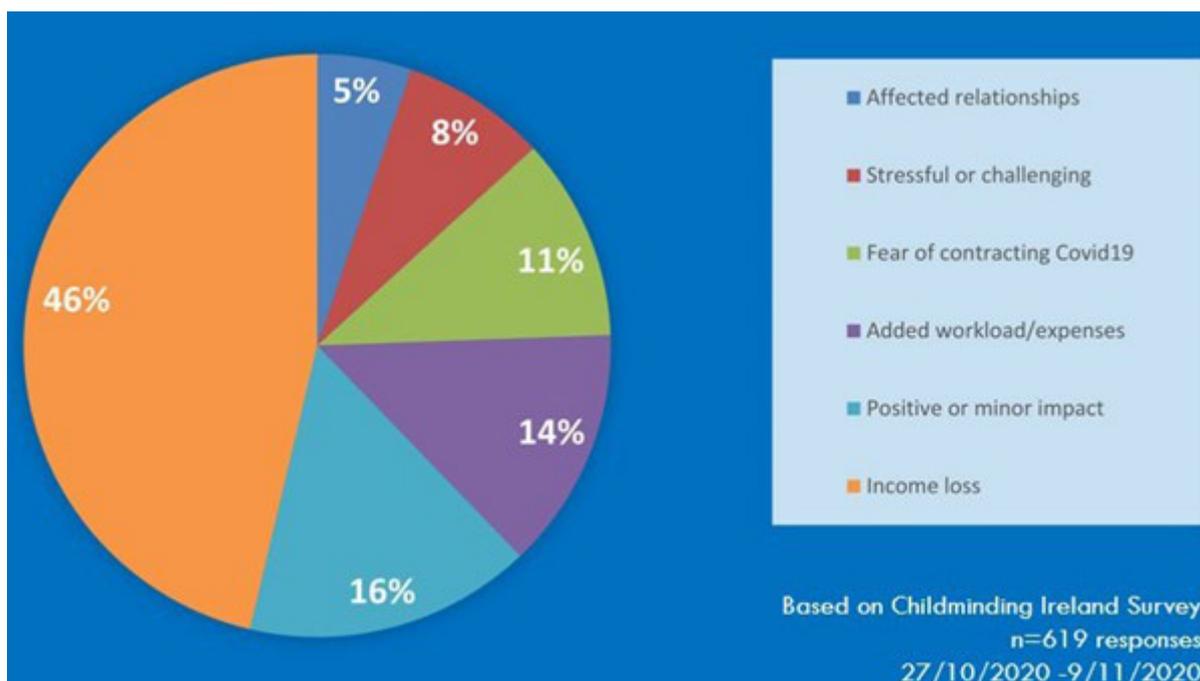


Figure 2: Impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on childminders in Ireland 2020

Impact on the daily routine

A further reported burden was the added expenses and hygiene-related workload due to reopening a childminding service. Childminders reported increased hours spent cleaning, with the additional expense of hygiene products, along with anxiety about extra exposure to COVID-19. At the same time, most were working reduced days and hours, sometimes with fewer children, and therefore earning less income. All this had significant impact on their daily routines, as well as on the relationships between minded children and the family. The following comment illustrates the type of dilemma childminders faced:

'I only mind two children because I deliberately want to keep my pod small as my elderly mother lives with me. There is a huge amount of extra sanitising. I mind two brothers and they are normally in the kitchen family room with me and my family but due to Covid I have to keep them in the playroom away from the family which they find strange as they are so used to doing their homework at the kitchen table and bringing their toys in from the playroom to the family room. It is more isolating for the boys, and they don't feel as much a part of the family as they usually do.'

COVID-19 re-opening grants

The demands of public health and hygiene measures became much more important for childminders during the pandemic, as it did for all childcare facilities attempting to implement sanitary protocols to protect children and adults working in childcare (Hashikawa et al., 2020). A Childminder Reopening Grant was made available in June 2020 (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2020). This was a once-off grant of €1,000 per childminder available to assist with the additional costs of re-opening: in all, 308 grants were awarded (Childminding Development Officer, personal communication). In response to the question on grant uptake in the survey, 85 childminders reported receiving the grant: most respondents reported either not needing a grant as they had never actually closed or believing they were ineligible due to receiving previous grants in 2019.

The following excerpt describes the adaptations

made by one childminder with the help of the grant in response to pandemic restrictions:

'I reduced the number of children I cared for and adapted my playroom and created a new side entrance. Stopped parents from entering my home. Reduced my income due to parents working from home and only needing part time hours. My working day is longer due to increased efforts to reduce cross contamination and daily sanitation of all play equipment and surfaces.'

For social distancing, creating a meeting point with parents outside the home was a common adaptation. Yet, despite some closures (n=5) due to COVID-19 testing and quarantine, only one childminder in the survey reported catching COVID-19. Moreover, after reopening in June or September 2020, most seem to have continued working from that point on and did not close again.

Conclusions

In relation to national early years policy, there is no doubt that current exclusion of childminders from the national system made the COVID-19 pandemic a much more difficult experience than for other childcare workers. The overall picture was one of decreasing hours and numbers yet an increasing workload. Being unable to access any type of financial support left many childminders with no income whatsoever for a period. This experience could possibly lead to increased interest in the development of regulations and supports for childminding, as outlined in the National Childminding Action Plan 2021-2028 (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY, 2021) published in April 2021.

However, the pandemic has also highlighted childminder resilience in very trying times. The fact that 47% of respondents (n=185) were continuing to work in January 2021 emphasises childminders' willingness to continue to meet the childcare needs of families in difficult circumstances. In that context, it is very clear the childminders function primarily on the family- work reconciliation axis in national early provision. Encouraged to remain open, they met childcare needs of emergency support workers and essential workers, without whom we could

not have functioned as a society. However, with increasing numbers likely to continue working remotely in the future (Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment, 2021), this resilience will no doubt be tested as childminders adapt to a new work-family reconciliation ecosystem.

Ultimately, the weaknesses of our national early years system were exposed in the stressful situation many childminders endured. It is hoped that the new regulatory system supporting childminders will prove more effective and better adapted to childminders' needs in the future.

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Reflective Papers

An Exploration of the lived experiences of a group of Early Learning and Care workforce and their professional identity during COVID-19

By Maeve Dempsey and Lindsay Malone, Institute of Technology Carlow

Keywords: Early Years Educators • Professional Identity • COVID-19

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Lindsay has worked in the Faculty of Lifelong Learning since 2014 where she has lectured across Early Years and Social Care Programmes before moving on to become Deputy Head of Faculty of Lifelong Learning in 2019. Prior to this, Lindsay managed a number of Community Development, Social Care, Youth Work and Early Years organisations in the Southeast. Lindsay holds a Bachelor of Arts (honours) in Applied Social Studies (Professional Social Care), a Master's in Teaching and Learning in Further and Higher Education, a Postgraduate Diploma in Childhood and Youth Practice and Lindsay is currently completing a PhD in Social Justice and Education.

Introduction

On 1st January 2021, public health officials confirmed that Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) services could continue to operate during the national Level 5 restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. ELC services were considered necessary in supporting critical frontline workers to deliver essential services, with the sector operating for vulnerable children and children of essential workers only. Though supports were given to ELC services during the pandemic and the publication of Nurturing skills and Partnership for Public Good (DCEDIY 2021), it remained a challenging time for those employed in the sector.

This study was undertaken to explore the experiences of Early Years Educators (EYEs) working within these services throughout COVID 19 who were required to engage in close physical contact with young children during a time of increased infection rates and national level 5 restrictions. The study involved early years educators (EYEs) from across the Southeast of Ireland who engaged in a focus group to explore their experiences. Findings indicate that participants felt that their role is perceived as supporting and secondary to frontline staff. Frontline staff in this context refer to the EYEs who work directly with children

each day, as opposed to Managers of services. Professional identity is regarded by Browne (2011) as relating to 'how individuals see and define themselves and how other people see and define them'.

Aim of Study

The aim of this study was for two Associate Lecturers who teach EYEs, to explore the impact the pandemic has had on individual sense of professional identity and perceived societal views, including that of meaningful relationships with parents and families. The knowledge gained from this study would then enhance the associate Lecturers own knowledge of the challenges which EYEs experienced during COVID-19 whilst also contributing to the existing body of knowledge in relation to professional identities of EYEs.

The professionalisation of the ELC sector has been widely 'contested ground', both internationally as well as in Ireland. From an Australian perspective, Woodrow (2007) offers insights that ambiguity about the professional identity of the ELC sector has been shaped by a disjointed mix of policy and practice informed by a diverse knowledge base across the multiple Government Departments. This mirrors the experiences of those working in Ireland

along with other factors (Moloney, 2010a). Such as training structures and the poor working conditions and low salaries which also make the professional identity of the sector problematic (Moloney, 2010a, Woodrow, 2007).

Methodology

The study adopted an interpretivist approach by engaging a sample group of EYEs in one focus group. This approach to research was chosen as it is a suitable qualitative approach to gathering and analysing the data in order to interpret and extract meaning from their experiences shared in the focus group. The sampling procedure used was convenience and purposive (Schutt, 2006). The research sample consisted of 7 EYEs from ELC services in Ireland, working with children aged birth to 6 years. An information letter was provided to the participants in advance which outlined the rationale for the study, the benefits of taking part and the freedom to withdraw prior to the focus group. In line with the Level 5 restrictions at the time, the focus group was conducted remotely using Zoom and participants consented to taking part through Google Forms and again reconfirmed their consent to take part at the briefing prior to the focus group commencing. To uphold anonymity any opinions shared during the interview were anonymized to ensure no identifiable data was used. All participants consented to the focus group being recorded and to consent forms and audio recordings being retained as part of the research process, but not for publication. All reasonable steps were taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project. The objectives of the study were to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the professional identity of a group of ELC workers at both an individual and societal level and in doing so, to provide a platform to EYEs at multiple levels to express their lived experiences and have their voices heard.

Findings and Analysis

The results, from the thematic analysis, indicate that the pandemic has had significant negative effects on the role of EYEs on their health and safety, on funding for their services, and has

caused them to question the value of their educational achievements. To expand on this, the EYEs felt that their health and safety was very much a secondary consideration in relation to the provision of education and care to children. In terms of their educational achievements, all of the participants held a level 8 award, with some holding a level 9 award, and they felt having upskilled to these levels in their own time, it now has little bearing on how their professional identity is regarded, as they felt they are considered as childminders rather than educators. From a positive perspective, the EYEs felt appreciated by parents and believed their meaningful relationships with parents were even more enhanced. That said, the shift that EYEs spoke to, in terms of the perceived shift in societal perception of EYEs and their role in the lives of children and families is somewhat bleak, with participants feeling their role is perceived as supporting and secondary to frontline workers, rather than as educators of children.

Conclusion and recommendations

This research has explored the lived experiences of EYEs during COVID-19 to ascertain how it has impacted their professional identity at both micro and macro levels. The results indicate that the pandemic has had significant negative effects on their role, on funding, their safety and health and also the value placed on their educational achievements. What has become evident throughout the COVID-19 pandemic is the need for a robust ELC sector that is no longer dominated by a lack of recognition in terms of pay and identity, funding security, and now, safety concerns. The researchers plan to re-engage the group in a follow up focus group to see what their experience has been whilst working in post-lockdown conditions.

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Parental Partnership and Involvement

By Margaret Bermingham, National University of Ireland, Galway

Keywords: Parents • Individualised • A Mesosystem Bridge
Funds of Knowledge • Values-based Approach

Margaret recently graduated from NUI Galway with an MA in Early in Childhood Studies. Margaret ran her own playful ECEC setting and currently works in a quality leadership role. Margaret believes in an individualised approach to supporting children's learning through forming relationships with people who are most important in children's lives.

Introduction

Welcome to a reflection on my research about parental partnership and involvement in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). The objective of the study was to explore the experiences, understandings, and perspectives of parents, educators and children on this important topic. My research question is *what if we in ECEC recognise children's parents as individuals instead of as a common group?* My study was framed by bioecological systems theory, a model of human development in which parental partnership and involvement are considered a bridge between children's different environments or 'systems' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; O'Toole et al., 2019). Here, I reflect on the process of research and present the findings.

While numerous definitions and understandings of parental partnership and involvement exist, most agree that it leads to better outcomes for children (Garrity and Canavan, 2017). Parental partnership and involvement are imperative because parents are *'fundamental... for children's growth and wellbeing'* (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 1989, p.1). Also, parents play a critical role in children's lives, *'having by far the biggest impact'* (Garrity and Canavan, 2017; Government of Ireland, 2018, p.21). Parental partnership and involvement in ECEC both facilitate and support parents' critical role in the children's lives.

Aim of the study

I chose a case-study design because I was drawn to Geertz's (1968, p.4) notion that, sometimes we *'find in the little what eludes us in the large'*. I wanted to gain a holistic view of the topic in a purposively selected pre-school room. The sample frame consisted of 66 parents of

33 children (aged 3-5) attending the room in an ECEC setting, as well as 3 educators. Two parents and three educators consented to participate and six out of 33 children assented. It was important to me to involve and truly listen to children because my philosophy on the nature of childhood frames children as experts in their own lives. I respect children as skilful communicators (Rinaldi, 2012), with the right to express and have their views considered (UNCRC, 1989). Ethical oversight and approval came from National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG).

Methodology

I discussed previous parental events that the service held with parents and educators through semi-structured interviews and focus groups and included documentary evidence using the service's parents' handbook, policies, displays, and notices. Thematic analysis was utilised to identify themes within the data gathered (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I felt overwhelmed by the volume, breadth and depth of data gathered across the multiple categories, and I struggled in the analysis process to condense the data into manageable findings.

Children were invited to talk about their family's visits to pre-school using photographs of previous family events and to draw something about their family. A sample of their drawings here shows *'the playground'* and *'a sheep'*.



Figure 1: The Playground



Figure 2: A Sheep

The sessions were structured as a small-group activity within the existing free-flow provision of the morning routine, with children's assent gained at an initial information session. On reflection, I should have been more flexible in accepting all children's ongoing assent, because many children who did not initially give assent, moved freely into the activity and participated. Instead, I took note of and responded only to those who gave initial assent and whose parents consented to their participation. I also reflected that if I had discussed the nature and process of researching with children directly with the parents, I may have secured more parental permissions. Including more children would have given their expressions more weight within the overall findings. Another limitation, as with any case-study design, findings can be contextual rather than generalisable (Denscombe, 2017).

Findings and Analysis

The setting held events for parents to celebrate typical Irish cultural festivities such as Halloween, Christmas and graduation. While these events were reported by participants as enjoyable and as valuable opportunities to build positive relationships, existing research suggests that events aimed at parents as a homogenous group can ignore or perpetuate social inequalities (Van Laere et al. 2018).

Practitioners make an implicit assumption that all families participate similarly, regardless of individual cultural background or other circumstances (IBID). Conversely, if we consider families individually, we might ask how do you celebrate Christmas? Does your child like Halloween? What festivities or rituals do you celebrate at home that we could also celebrate here? Does your child want to perform in a graduation show?

The setting invited parents individually to visit the pre-school to share something that the family enjoys at home, such as a family interest, hobby, or activity. One Mum visited to make slime because this is a personal family activity. All the participants (parents, practitioners and children) reported this activity as a huge success. Recognising and involving Mum's slime-making links to 'funds of knowledge'; a concept, in which children's homes are considered rich learning contexts, and defined as *'the knowledge and skills that children obtain through the course of family life...'* (Moll et al., 1992 p.133). This example of Mum making slime in the pre-school links to the mesosystem concept in bioecological systems theory, offering a visceral link or a visible 'bridge' for that child between his/her different environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hayes et al., 2017). This bridge, when strong and consistent enables children to apply learning across environments, deepening their experiences, understandings, and growing knowledge (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Third, the children's message underscored that familiarity, belonging, and connecting with people, activities and places pertaining to their home life were important to them.

Conclusion

I learned that the findings and discussion could be enriched by involving a wider diversity of participants (full day-care and community service users, fathers, people from different cultural backgrounds). I learned how to accept and overcome challenges around researching with children. I learned to value how children's voices can contribute to my understanding of theoretical concepts. For example, the children's message around the importance of their family life to them

directly links to the theoretical concepts of 'funds of knowledge' and the 'mesosystem bridge' that underpin parental partnership and involvement practice. Ultimately, I learned that whatever the mechanism, parental and family engagement must be individualised and values-based. To achieve this in practice, I intend to hold continual reviews of communication methods, implement multiple and flexible methods of communication according to family circumstances, and extend the initial '*getting-to-know me*' process to become ongoing, fluid and responsive to families over time. I will involve parents and children in the planning of events and invite parents to become involved in their children's learning based on their family's funds of knowledge.

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