



NUI Galway
OÉ Gaillimh

MA in EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDIES AND PRACTICE 2017/2018



RESEARCH BRIEFS

Centre for Adult Learning and Professional Development,
National University of Ireland, Galway

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ACADEMIC COORDINATOR'S FOREWORD

I am very pleased to be launching our first collection of Research Briefs, emanating from the Master of Arts Degree in Early Childhood Studies. This collection presents findings related to the Research Dissertations completed by the first cohort of students, in their final year of studies (2017 – 2018).

As is common in most Level 9 degrees in the social sciences, research is a core element of the students' experience. Unique to our degree and offered following a general introduction to social research, is a module dedicated to engaging with young children as co-researchers and co-constructors of knowledge through empirical study. Following on from this module, students have the option to design a final year project that includes young children as co-researchers, should they chose.

What perspectives do young children hold on pedagogical documentation? What do older children value in their school age childcare programme? How do young children perceive their rights to participation are being upheld in their preschool setting? What are parents and educators views on creative learning in ECEC? What are the attitudes of Early Childhood Educators to the inclusion of children with special needs in ECCE programmes? These are the varied and stimulating questions underpinning some of the research undertaken by the MA students and captured in this collection.

Dissemination of research messages can be challenging, particularly in a field with an emerging research community. How do you give credence to the views of participants who graciously gave their time to your project? How do you find your audience for your findings and recommendations? At a recent Early Years conference, 11 of the 12 MA graduates attended, with seven presenting their research to wide groups of peers. This is a great start! The goal of dissemination motivated us to publish this document. We hope these Research Briefs are widely distributed among the ECEC field in Ireland as the knowledge constructed and the views expressed, deserve to be shared.

At the Centre for Adult Learning and Professional Development (CALPD), at NUI Galway, we have been very proud of our track record in supporting the development of graduate-level Early Childhood Educators, since we established our part-time, blended learning Level 8 BA degree, in 2010. Since 2014, when our first group of BA students completed their degree, over 250 Early Childhood Educators have graduated from NUI Galway. Creating a follow on route of study was a natural development for the Early Childhood team at the CALPD. The new Level 9 degree offers progression routes for graduates of our own BA, for others in the Early Years field and for allied professionals wishing to expand their knowledge of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Our first intake of MA students included a cross section of roles, from those in direct practice in ECEC settings, to development workers, mentors, inspectors and tutors at third level institutions.

Developing the MA programme was very much a labour of love; seeing students develop through their two years and in turn, learning from them, is of course inspiring and rewarding. We hope the messages captured in this publication may well inspire you, cause you to look at your practice in a new light, reflect on what you read about and consider new ways of doing, new ways of knowing and new ways of being.



Dr Sheilla Garrity
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Paula Gavin

Asking the experts: An exploration of children's views and experiences of quality school-age childcare

Asking the experts: An exploration of children's views and experiences of quality school-age childcare

By Paula Gavin

Introduction

A research study which sought the perspectives of 45 children from 3 childcare services in the West of Ireland on what they perceived to be the key components of quality within school-age childcare services.

Who? What? Why?

Service 1: A crèche which caters for a wide range of children but their primary business was not school age childcare.

Service 2: A standalone school age childcare service.

Service 3: A school age childcare service within a primary school that caters for both preschool and school age children

3 diverse services were chosen in recognition of the various types' of school age childcare provision on offer in Ireland.

Why Quality in School Age Childcare?

As school age childcare is a relatively new concept in Irish childcare policy it is largely unexplored, with limited policy development or legislation. There is currently no National Strategy on school age childcare in Ireland therefore it is presently unregulated, with no quality frameworks or statutory requirements for staff to have qualifications¹. In 2017 'An Action Plan on School Age Childcare² was published. A model for school age childcare services was developed that was child and family centred and promoted the access, affordability and quality of school age childcare services. Considering the SAC model, this study specifically looked at children's perspectives of quality within their own school age childcare settings.



About the study

This study was undertaken to engage with children in obtaining their views and experiences of elements of quality that they identified as evident in their school age childcare service. This study was carried out over a period of six months using a qualitative research approach and the theme of quality was categorised under two headings³ for the purpose of gathering information from the children:



Research Briefs

This is a summary by Paula Gavin as part of her thesis conducted as part of the MA Award in Early Childhood Studies & Practice. This degree was completed in 2018 at NUI Galway through the Centre of Adult Learning & Professional Development. This Research Brief was edited by Dr Sheila Garrity. Permission for the reproduction of photographs received.

¹ DCCC (2009) *DCCC School-age childcare research report*. Available at: <http://www.childcareonline.ie/index.php/publications/childcare-practitioner-resources/42-school-age-childcare-a-guide-to-good-practice/file> (Accessed 04/02/2018)

² Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2017) *Action Plan on School Age Childcare*. Dublin: Government Publications

³ Slot, P.L., Leseman, P.M., Verhagen, J. & Mulder, H. (2015). Associations between structural quality aspects and process quality in Dutch early childhood education and care settings. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*. 33 (0), 64-76. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2015.06.001>

<u>Process</u> (what children essentially experience in their school age setting)	<u>Structural</u> (consists of the contributions to process features which create the framework for the processes that children experience)
*Children’s play and learning experiences, *Interactions between staff and children and children and children *Parental and community involvement	*Group sizes *Child-teacher ratios *Staff

Engagement with children followed Laura Lundy’s Model of Participation (2007) which outlines how to implement Article 12 of the UNCRC⁴.

Space: The researcher conducted the study within the child’s school-age childcare service so the participants were comfortable in an environment known to them.

Voice: Information was shared with children through child-friendly props. A range of child-friendly participatory methods were used for the children to express themselves both verbally and nonverbal. These included: environmental tours, drawings, puppets and focus groups. This approach draws on the *Mosaic Approach*⁵. **Audience:** The children were made aware that their views were sought as part of a research project that would be shared a wider public audience as part of research on quality school-age childcare.



Influence: The infographic poster developed following an analysis of data will be shared with the children involved in the research.

Collection of Data

When	How	Why
Day 1 in each service	Environmental Tour (children placed sticky notes around their service for discussion)	Structural Quality Elements
Day 2 in each service	Role play: staff interview (brain storming interview questions for new staff)	Process Quality Element
Day 2 in each service	Draw and discuss (children drew their ‘ideal’ service which prompted dialogue around quality elements)	Structural and Process Quality Elements
Day 3 in each service	Focus group with puppet (children and researcher had a discussion using open ended questions and information previously obtained in day 1 and 2)	Structural and Process Quality Elements

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was adopted to organise and highlight any key emerging themes from the data collected within this research study. 6 key themes emerged and are outlined on the infographic poster on the next page.



⁴ United Nations (1989). *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, 20th November 1989*. (Ratified by Ireland, September 1992). Geneva: United Nations.

⁵ Clark, A. and Moss, P. (2001) *Listening to young children: The Mosaic approach*, London: National Children’s Bureau for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

⁶ Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2), pp. 77-101.

⁷ Lundy, L. (2007) ‘Voice’ is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child *British Educational Research Journal*, 33 (6), pp. 927-942.

Infographic Poster for Children and School Age Childcare Practitioners

Children's views and experiences of Quality within school age childcare services

A research study was conducted with forty five children, between the ages of four and eight, from three services in the West of Ireland to seek their perspectives on quality provision within school age childcare services and this is what they have to say:



PLAY & AUTONOMY ON PLAY DECISIONS

Children want space, suitable equipment and staff that allow them free choice in play activities and ample opportunities to engage with their friends.



PHYSICAL NEEDS ARE MET

Children want their physical needs met in their service. They need sufficient space, plenty of toys and equipment that recognise their individual abilities as well as having access to age appropriate furniture and toilets that take account of their stage of development.



RESPECTED & ABLE TO CONTRIBUTE

Children want to feel respected by contributing to the decision making within their service. Children will have a better understanding and want to have a say in the designing and implementing of the rules, food choices on offer as well as daily activities such as homework.



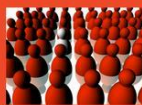
CONNECTED TO THE SERVICE

Children value an emotional connection to their service. A sense of ownership, belonging and celebration can be achieved through adequate personal space, celebration of birthdays and the development of traditions unique to their service.



STAFF WHO ENGAGE, PLAY & CONSULT

Children want adults that are kind, knowledgeable and support them in the progression of their holistic development as well as keeping them safe. Staff must be qualified and trained to cater for school age children in recognition of their growing abilities and interests.



PARENTAL & COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Children want their parents to be actively involved within their service as well as having strong engagement with the local community. Services located within primary schools need to be seen as having a separate identity from the school, while continuing to work in a collaborative manner with partner schools.

Recommendations

The key findings that emerged from this research study will add to the body of knowledge on quality within school-age childcare services in Ireland. The following tables identify areas that need to be addressed by Irish policy and practice.

Policy

Children have the agency and the right to have a say in all matters that affect them and further development of school age childcare policy needs to empower and respect children to contribute to these processes. This research has also revealed that children need spaces that meet their emotional as well as physical needs. Policy promoting the use of school buildings and community spaces need to ensure children can be catered for within these buildings with suitable space, furniture, equipment and facilities. The development of a qualified workforce with continuous professional development training that enables staff to engage, consult and play with children is an immediate requirement to ascertain quality within the school age sector.

As part of the regulatory and monitoring of school age childcare this research has demonstrated that children must be included in the regulatory process where they are asked to contribute on the process and the development of quality within their service on two levels. Firstly, as part of the development of a school age childcare quality framework the voice of the child should be utilised in the design and delivery of this document. Children's opinions should be sought in its perceived proposal and implementation.

Secondly, as part of school age childcare regulatory monitoring, space and time should be given for the voice of the child to contribute to the assessment of service. Training for regulators should include listening to the voice of the child for their perception and measurement of quality within their service.

Practice

The first recommendation for practice is the design and implementation of adequate qualifications and training for adults that work with school age children. In recognition of the different needs and abilities of these children compared to preschool children, this training must include theory, research and practical guidelines on supporting school age childcare. One proposal includes the development of a self-assessment environmental tool so practitioners can self-reflect on their environment.

A second key recommendation for practice is that all staff within school age childcare services consult and engage with children so they can contribute to the decision making within their service. Children want to feel respected and listened too, therefore school age childcare practitioners should implement Laura Lundy's Model of Participation (2007) and engage with children. Examples for practice include; adequate training for staff on utilising this model, the development of focus groups within school age childcare services which consist of children representing all age groups as well as minority groups within the service, provision of suggestion boxes as well as child friendly participation methods such as the use of cameras, puppets and drawings to the voice of all children can be heard.

Another key recommendation is that staff actively involve children's parents within their service and enable the service to feel a part of the community.



Helen Hanley

**Attitudes of ECCE Teachers in Ireland to Inclusion of Children with
Special Educational Needs**

Attitudes of ECCE Teachers in Ireland to Inclusion of Children with Special Educational Needs

by Helen Hanley

Inclusion in the Early Years

Inclusion in education has come a long way in Ireland, but much remains to be done. In the early years sector, the new Access & Inclusion Model (AIM) seeks to support access to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme for all children.

Teachers' Attitudes are Crucial

Considerable international attention has been paid to teachers' attitudes, thought to be crucial for successful inclusion. Research indicates that teachers' attitudes are changeable, affected by personal factors such as qualifications/experience and other factors such as in-class assistance.

Now More Than Ever

Ireland is now ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled Persons (UNCRPD), recognising children's right to be supported to receive their education in mainstream settings. Attention must be paid to the effects of current policy on the mainstreaming of inclusive practices.

Research Purpose

This study sought to ascertain the attitudes of ECCE teachers to the inclusion of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in their mainstream classrooms, and whether these attitudes are affected by personal or setting characteristics, including AIM.

I believe in inclusion
but...¹

*It is difficult to
access support*



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Research Briefs

This is a summary by Helen Hanley as part of her thesis conducted as part of the MA Award in Early Childhood Studies & Practice. This degree was completed in 2018 at NUI Galway through the Centre of Adult Learning & Professional Development. This Research Brief was edited by Dr Sheila Garrity. Permission for the reproduction of photographs received.

Large Survey Approach

To obtain a representative measure of teachers' attitudes and opinions about AIM in a way that was as valid, reliable and objective as possible, an **online** self-completion survey was emailed to a random sample of **1,725 ECCE services** across all counties of the Republic of Ireland.



The survey contained an **attitude scale** developed in Italy in 1998², and also used in the US in 2013³, allowing international comparisons as well as examining the effects of teacher/setting characteristics and national policy. The scale was amended for the Irish context in 2018, as follows.

- I support the concept of teaching children with special educational needs in mainstream classes.
- I am willing to teach children with special educational needs in my class.
- Children with special educational needs benefit from being included in mainstream classes.
- Typically-developing children benefit from being taught in the same classes with children who have special educational needs.
- I have/would have sufficient time for teaching children with special educational needs in my class.
- I have sufficient skills and training to teach children with special educational needs in my class.
- I have/would have sufficient assistance for teaching children with special educational needs in my class.
- I have sufficient resources (teaching materials, etc.) for teaching children with special educational needs in my class.

Teachers responded to each statement along a scale (Strongly agree/Agree/Uncertain/Disagree/Strongly disagree). From this a single **attitude score** was calculated; an average score for the whole group and average scores of subgroups depending on answers to other questions, were also calculated on the following characteristics and opinions:

Setting characteristics

- Location (County)
- Type (Community/Private)
- Group size (Number of children in the teacher's group)
- Setting size (Total number of ECCE children in setting)
- Number of staff

Teacher characteristics

- Age
- Qualification in Early Childhood Education (ECE)
- Length of teaching experience
- Qualification in Special Education
- Qualification in Leadership in Inclusion (LINC)
- Diversity Equality and Inclusion Training (DEI)
- Personal contact with a person with SEN
- Length of inclusive teaching experience
- Successful/unsuccessful self-description (SEN teaching experience)

Opinions about AIM

- Whether AIM improves the service's ability to include children with SEN
- Strengths and weaknesses of AIM
- Feasibility to use AIM level 7 funding to buy in additional assistance in the classroom
- Feasibility to use AIM level 7 funding to reduce ratios instead of buying in assistance
- Any other comments

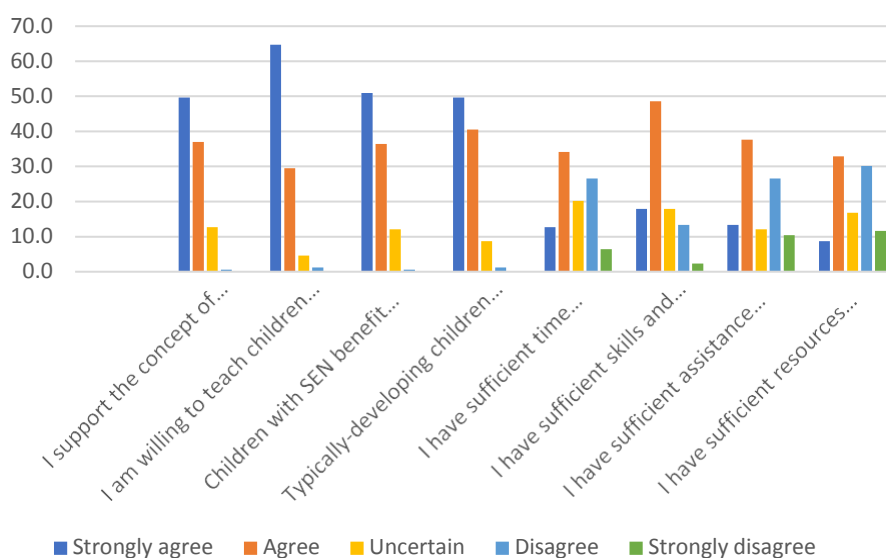
FINDINGS



173 replies received

The statement most strongly agreed with by ECCE teachers was *'I am willing to teach children with special educational needs in my class'*, suggesting a more **direct personal commitment** than the statement *'I support the concept of teaching children with special educational needs in mainstream classes'*.

Survey respondent attitudes by statement in %



Attitudes of ECCE teachers in Ireland were more positive than teachers internationally

71% of ECCE teachers **Agreed or Strongly agreed** with all statements compared to **52%** of teachers in a US study in 2013³ and **43%** of teachers in a study in Italy in 1998². The **total attitude score** of ECCE teachers was **30.71** out of 40 (77%) compared to **25.93** (65%) in the US study³.

Attitude scores varied depending on teacher/setting characteristics

More positive attitudes were associated with:

- **Special-education qualifications** and **LINC**, but not **DEI**.
- **Feasibility to use AIM funding to buy in assistance**.
- **Successful inclusive experience** as perceived by teachers.

More negative attitudes were associated with:

- Teachers being **unsure** whether **AIM** improves their ability to include children with SEN.

The majority of teachers' opinions about AIM were negative

Strengths (44%): **Support, inclusion, funding, process**.

Weaknesses (56%): **Process, time, recruitment, funding and concerns for children**.

Reasons if not feasible to buy in assistance: **Insufficient funding and recruitment difficulties**.

Reasons if not feasible to reduce ratios: **Insufficient funding and demand for places**.

Any other comments:

- Negative (75%): **Funding, recruitment and concerns for children**.
- Positive (25%): **All children are valued, children with SEN benefit and the work is rewarding**.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Special-education Qualifications Incorporate LINC content into standard ECE qualifications. In the interim, continue to provide LINC and improve the extent to which the positive effect can be spread to all staff by the Inclusion Coordinator, involving a review of DEI training content and delivery.

In-class Assistance Make it feasible for all providers to use AIM level 7 funding without incurring financial or recruitment obstacles. Avoid excluding ⅓ of services (operated by sole-traders) from the in-class assistance option; provide a pool of in-class assistants funded directly by government, as in the Mid-West model⁴.

AIM Model Prevent uncertainty about AIM by simplifying, explaining and speeding up the process.

Perceptions of Success Help teachers perceive themselves as successful, that they already have the skills required to include children with SEN. Manage expectations of teachers, families and specialists; define the purpose of ECCE and agree curriculum/assessment frameworks to be used by teachers and specialists alike.

Protect Positive Attitudes ECCE teachers' attitudes to inclusion were very positive. However, opinions about AIM were mostly negative. Attitudes can be influenced by teacher/setting characteristics. Negative experiences can impact more on attitudes than positive experiences⁵. It is important to address issues as soon as possible to protect positive attitudes.

We believe in inclusion because...

All children are valued



References

- ¹ Smith, M. & Smith, K. (2000) "I believe in inclusion, but...": Regular education early childhood teachers' perceptions of successful inclusion', *Journal of research in childhood education*, 14(2), pp. 161-180.
- ² Cornoldi, C., Terreni, A., Scruggs, T. & Mastropieri, M. (1998) 'Teacher attitudes in Italy after twenty years of inclusion' *Remedial and special education*, 19(6), pp. 350-356.
- ³ Logan, B.E. & Wimer, G. (2013) 'Tracing inclusion: Determining teacher attitudes', *Research in higher education journal*, 20 [Online].
- ⁴ Government of Ireland (2015) *Supporting access to the early childhood care and education (ECCE) programme for children with a disability*. Report of the Inter-Departmental Group [Online].
- ⁵ Baron, R., Branscombe, N. & Byrne, D. (2009) *Social psychology*, 12th edn. Boston: Pearson.



Deirdre Lawlor
**Childrens Participation Rights in Early Childhood Educations and
Care Practice**



Children's Participation Rights in Early Childhood Educations and Care Practice

By Deirdre Lawlor

How best can we honour children's participation rights in practice?

Introduction

The research was conducted in a preschool service in the South West of Ireland with children from the age of three years to five years of age. It aimed to explore children's own perceptions of their participation in their preschool setting.

Background

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child¹ (UNCRC) was introduced in Ireland in 1992. Article 12 respects the views of children and supports children having a voice in matters affecting them, while Article 13 (freedom of expression) advocates for children to receive and express information through different means. Article 14 (the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion) recognises that children have their own beliefs which should be supported by adults. Article 15 (freedom of association), supports children joining organisations and places a responsibility on children to respect

the rights of others. Article 17 (access to information) strengthens children's rights to have access to information on their health and well-being.

Participation

Taking the UNCRC (1989) as a starting point, child participation means that children are able to make and express their opinions and be part of the solution in problems that are affecting them.

Benefits of Participation

- Can enhance children's confidence, abilities and learning
- Can increase children's independence and responsibility
- It promotes relationships with others and the community
- Children are enabled to better protect themselves
- Can empower children (Kirby et al., 2003, Lansdown, 2001)



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Research Briefs

This is a summary by Deirdre Lawlor as part of her thesis conducted as part of the MA Award in Early Childhood Studies & Practice. This degree was completed in 2018 at NUI Galway through the Centre of Adult Learning & Professional Development. This Research Brief was edited by Dr Sheila Garrity.

1. In 1989 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The Convention outlines how all children under the age of 18 years of age should be treated and the rights that every young child has. When Ireland committed to the UNCRC it made a guarantee to protect, fulfil children's rights under the Convention.

Lundy (2007) developed a model of participation which includes four key elements to help conceptualise Article 12 of the UNCRC. These factors include:

- SPACE: Children must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their view.
- VOICE: Children must be facilitated to express their view.
- AUDIENCE: The view must be listened to.
- INFLUENCE: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate (DCYA, 2015, p.21)

The Research Process

The research process was undertaken with children to inform practice in an early years setting on how best to honour children's participation rights. The research process included two elements:

- Child Conferencing with the use of a board game.
- Diamond Ranking Method with the use of photographs.

The research design focused on the strengths of children's abilities and fostered their rights to express their opinions in a safe and inclusive environment.

Children's perceptions were sought on how actively involved in their daily practice they were, the role of their early years practitioner and what enabling factors aided children to participate in their setting.

To begin, consent was sought from parents and guardians. 23 children were afforded with consent to engage with the data methods. Those children were then approached and assent was obtained by children either colouring a smiley face green (consent) or red (dissent).

Data was examined through thematic analysis. Codes were extracted from the data (choice, agency, friendships) and three overarching themes emerged.



The following section outlines the findings from the research process with children. 19 children took part in the Child Conferencing while 14 children took part in the Diamond Ranking Method.

1. The Role of Structures in Children's Participation

- Children made reference to the aspects of their day being shaped by the routine and structure of the setting (tidy up, lunch), which resulted in children being unable to assert themselves. Children detailed that they were powerless to influence certain aspects of their day. For example, when they could go outside.
- Children voiced that the layout of the environment was hampering their agency to access materials by themselves. Items they wished to play with were on high shelves or in cupboards they could not access independently.
- Children also referred to 'adult spaces' and what they deemed as 'children spaces', thus highlighting the divide in relationships and resulting in limited meaningful participation.

2. Facilitation of Children's Participation

- Children alluded to the fact that communication was an essential element to be able to participate in their setting.
- Personal physical characteristics such as children's hands were referenced. They were recognised as either hampering or facilitating influences on how children could be actively involved in their setting.
- Managing their own behaviour was also highlighted by children as a way in which they were afforded agency in their environment.

3. The Impact of Relationships on Children's Participation

- Children saw adults as inherently different to them and it leads to difficulty in democratic practices occurring.
- Interactions with practitioners were also highlighted by children as having an impact on their freedom to access opportunities in their environment (e.g. art and craft activities). Children often had to seek permission to engage with these activities.
- Children referred to their peers helping them participate in their setting by assisting them with activities and equipment. On the same note, children highlighted that other children restricted their participation in activities by curbing their choices and play.
- Children alluded to the fact that in certain situations, they followed the play agenda of their peers rather than exercising their own right. This resulted in limited agency and choice by children.



Listening

Children communicate through different means. It may not be just through the spoken word. Early years practitioners need to be aware of non verbal communication of children. Early years practitioners require training in the process of actively listening to children .

Consulting

Children look for opportunities to be included in all aspects of their day. They need to be consulted with, and explanations given as to why their opinions may not be feasible in such environments or situations.

Children need to be aware of their responsibilities and how their actions can impact on their peers participation.

Recommendations

Reflection

Early years practitioners need to critically reflect on how they view children and how their practices can impact on how children's participation rights are realised.

Children need to be encouraged to reflect on their role in facilitating their own participation and of their peers.

Environment

Children require a safe environment where they feel confident to express a view and form opinions.

Children place an emphasis on an environment that is accessible to all. This in turn will promote children's agency and choice and foster their sense of belonging.

References:

- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2015) *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation*. Dublin: Government Publications.
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Angela Walsh

**Young children's perspectives of child-teacher interactions when
compiling Learning Portfolios**

Young children's perspectives of child-teacher interactions when compiling Learning Portfolios:

A case study to inform pedagogical assessment by Angela Walsh

Learning Portfolios
document and makes
children's learning visible.

Pedagogy refers to how we
teach, not what we teach.



Pedagogical assessment
practices make sense
of past learning to
guide future learning

Research Brief

Learning Portfolios have become a popular pedagogical tool to document children's learning and development in many countries around the world. They are recommended by Aistear¹, the Irish early years curriculum framework, for the collection of child's efforts, progress and achievements that tells the story of each child's learning journey.

There is strong evidence that early childhood experiences such as compiling Learning Portfolios can have a positive effect on well-being in the child's early years that carries into their future.

The aim of this research was to explore young children's perspectives of child-teacher interactions when compiling Learning Portfolios in an early years setting in Ireland.

The researcher is the pedagogical leader and assistant manager of this service, where the implementation of individualised Learning Portfolios is in its fourth year. The setting continuously seeks to assess and enrich this practice for both children and teachers. This research explored an aspect of this practice that had not been addressed before, the children's perspectives.

The researcher extensively reviewed early childhood literature: theories of child rights and well-being and the Bio-ecological Model of Human Development underpin the research.



¹ NCCA/National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2009) *Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, principles and themes*. Dublin: NCCA

Methodology

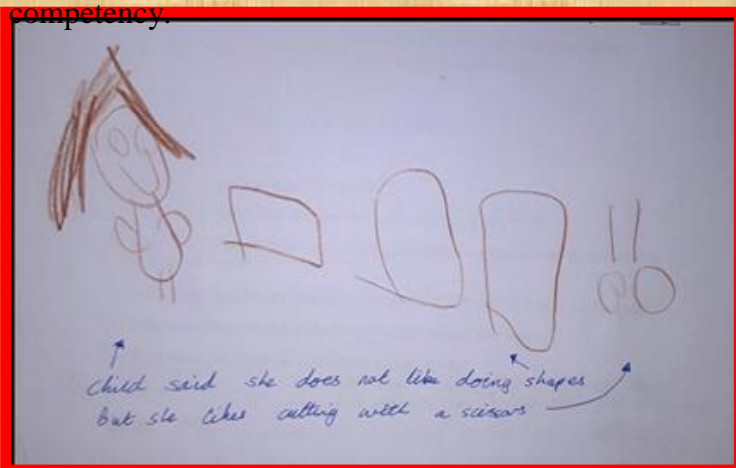
A case study methodology was developed, whereby, audio recorded child conferencing sessions were conducted with sixteen four- and five-year-olds, two children at a time. During eight child conferencing sessions, using an adapted Mosaic² approach, multiple methods were used to access the voice of the child beyond the spoken word. This included drawings and drama with puppets, to review their Learning Portfolio experiences.

The data collected from each session was thematically analysed through review of audio recordings, researcher notes and transcriptions to extract major themes, and colour coding was used to extract subthemes.

Research Findings

On analysing the data collected findings emerged that highlight the richness of current Portfolio compilation processes. The children who took part expressed feelings of happiness and were enthusiastic about the opportunity to express their thoughts, feelings and imagination in and about their Portfolios, while also acknowledging their own

competency.



Major themes emerged that corresponded to the Aistear curriculum themes of:

Communicating --- The participants desired for their teachers to take the necessary time to listen beyond the spoken word, and to fully engage with all their forms of expression.

Exploring and Thinking --- The participants expressed the desire that their actions, thoughts, interests and growing sense of agency be valued more within the process of compiling Portfolios.



Identity and Belonging --- The participants desired for their families to feature more prominently within their Portfolios, and more specifically, their own drawings of their families. Some participants expressed their dislike when their personal identity was not represented in keeping with their current abilities or appearance.

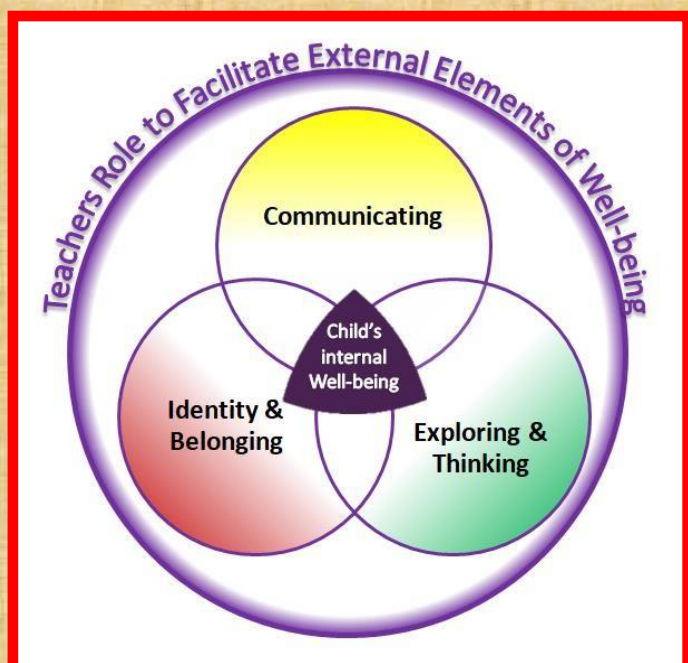
Well-being --- Collectively the above three themes bring about more holistic learning, development, and an enriched sense of internal well-being for the child. Moreover, where one or more of the three themes were absent, the child's internal well-being appears to have been negatively influenced. This reveals an alternative way to view well-being as subdivided into its internal and external elements. The participants viewed the role of the teacher as the facilitator of the resources they require to engage with the activities that bring about their internal sense of well-being.

² Clark, A. and Moss, P. (2011) *Listening to Young Children: The Mosaic Approach*. London: National Children's Bureau Enterprises Ltd.

Recommendations

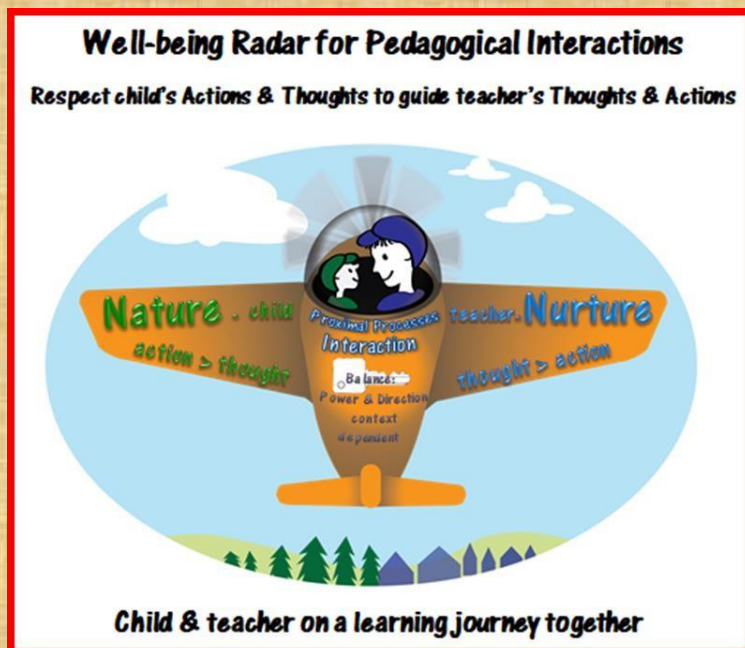
First Recommendation Well-being should be conceptualised as comprising both internal and external elements and recognised as influenced by its relationship to the remaining three Aistear themes of Communicating, Exploring and Thinking, and Identity and Belonging, in order to guide teaching practice when compiling Portfolios with young children. This highlights the crucial role of the teacher as facilitator of the external elements of well-being. Among these elements is the adherence to the policies of the setting, the preparation of the physical environment, and dedicating the necessary time to interact with and listen to children, thereby, facilitating the emergence of children's internal well-being.

By focusing on Communicating, Exploring and Thinking, and Identity and Belonging when interacting with children during the compilation processes of Portfolios, the teacher also creates a space to enrich children's internal sense of well-being and learning experiences, therefore recommended for in-house training and CPD programs.



Second Recommendation

Apply the 'Wellbeing Radar' for Pedagogical Interaction to guide pedagogical practice in general.



The 'Well-being Radar' is proposed to guide the teacher's navigation within child-teacher interactions as the child journeys along the pathway of learning. The metaphor of a plane represents the child and teacher on a learning journey together, open to the influences of the changing nature of their surroundings, where the process of the child-teacher interactions are the engine to power and steer learning, development, intrinsic well-being and well-becoming.

The balance of power and direction is context-dependent influenced by the teacher's attentiveness to and respect for the child's actions and thoughts (nature) and guided by the teacher's thoughts and actions (nurture), centred on safeguarding the child's well-being. This approach recognises the child's need for nurturing support from the teacher. Such an approach to pedagogical interactions requires the ability of the teacher to reflect in the moment as they interact with the child, underpinned by knowledge of the child's natural development, strengths, and

interests, and by early childhood pedagogical practice that values the maturing process from interdependency towards independence, towards a time when the child can go solo and pilot their own learning journey. This is the space where learning opportunities present themselves for teachers to role model, guide and support learning, development and the emergence of dispositions and growth mind-sets to support learning now and into the future. Therefore, the 'Well-being Radar' for Pedagogical Interactions hinges on the ability of the teacher to reflect through the lens of well-being. This approach is proposed to guide and support pedagogical assessment practice and is recommended for in-house training and CPD programs.

Third Recommendation Consider two future research avenues: conduct the same research but with a broader sample at the national level, ascertaining if the finding of this research are comparative to a wider national demographics. The inclusion of the perspectives of teachers and parents in research that explores child-teacher interactions when compiling Learning Portfolios would be beneficial.



Conclusion

Learning Portfolios are not just a compilation of the child's work. They also exemplify and provide insights into the child's knowledge, skills and competencies supporting the child to be a continuous self-motivated learner as they journey through a life

of learning. Where the teacher values the processes of assessment *of* and *for* learning as shared with the child, the teacher is valuing childhood as a 'time of being', and a 'time of becoming'. When considered together these value the child's journey of learning. To disentangle the complexity of the processes of compiling Learning Portfolios, the teacher needs to understand and value dialogue, rich interaction and seek out the voice of the child beyond the spoken word.



The role of the teacher is also complex, and as such, strategies to focus the role on that which is of most value to the child's well-being and well-becoming should be prioritised. The proposed 'Well-being Radar' for Pedagogical Interactions can help unpack the role of the teacher in guiding the lifelong learning journey of the child. By reflecting through the lens of well-being the teacher can translate the 'nouns' of the child's emerging dispositions into the 'verbs' of the teacher's pedagogical assessment practice. As this research brief is now drawing to an end the last word should by right be with the child. Therefore, I conclude with a short statement that encapsulates the research findings from the child's perspective:





Niamh Whehelan
Encouraging Sparks to Ignite : An Exploration of creative learning
in the early years



Encouraging Sparks to Ignite:

An Exploration of creative learning in the early years
by Niamh Whelehan

PLACING CREATIVITY AT THE CENTRE OF EARLY YEARS EDUCATION

For thousands of years, human beings have used art and creativity to record their experiences and make sense of their world. To many of us, 'creativity' is a mysterious quality that some people are born with. But the truth is everyone is and can be, creative. The thesis, 'Encouraging Sparks to Ignite: An Exploration of Creativity in the Early Years' examines the challenges and the possibilities for positioning creative learning at the centre of the curriculum in the early years. Using interviews carried out with parents and practitioners, it investigates the way that creative learning is perceived by parents and practitioners, and aims to unsettle commonly held assumptions related to creative learning, whilst recognising that change is required in the way creativity is approached in early years education today.

What is Creativity?

Defining creativity can be an ambiguous task as it is an elusive term that holds different meanings for different people. Data gathered for the purpose of this study examined parents and practitioners perceptions of creativity, with many terms related to creativity and imagination emerging. Parents and practitioners used words like 'explore', 'flow', 'making', 'holistic' and 'questioning' to describe their view of creativity, while others recognise it as

'making interesting connections', 'expressing oneself' and the 'ability to think freely' to describe creative endeavours. Research also identifies creativity in several ways such as occurring when all intelligence work in harmony, or as the ability to problem-solve and question knowledge. All discoveries began with someone exploring new possibilities and imagining a solution. Human development depends on the ability to imagine and create. The Convention on the Rights of the child (1989, Article 31) states that all children of all ages have the right to access and fully participate in cultural and artistic life.

Creativity and Education

Internationally, the last decade has seen increased growth in the development of curriculum frameworks aimed at enhancing young children's learning experiences. Interest from policymakers and researchers has increased recently as the discussion that highlights investment in the early years leading to future economic success gains momentum. As global competition increases, it is argued that policymakers are turning their attention to early years services, believing them to be fundamental in establishing an adaptable future workforce. It can also be argued that early years

practitioners are facing increased pressure to prioritise academic learning at the expense of more creative childhood activities.¹

Being creative is inherently important to the development of the young child, as it brings with it the ability to question, make connections, innovate, problem-solve, communicate, collaborate, and reflect critically.² In an ever-changing global market, these are all skills demanded by contemporary employers and will be vital for young people to play their part in a rapidly changing world. However, despite the importance of these skills, there is increased pressure on early years educators to engage in a more standardised approach to education.

¹ Bodrova, E. (2008) Make-believe play versus academic skills: a Vygotskian approach to today's dilemma of early childhood education, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 16:3, p.357-369.

² Robinson, K, 2006. Back to Basics: Arts Education in the 21st Century. Keynote Speech. UNESCO World Conference on Arts Education. Lisbon, Portugal, 6 – 9 March.

Methodology

This research used qualitative methods that include five semi-structured interviews with parents, and five semi-structured interviews with early years practitioners. These interviews were approximately forty minutes in length. The cohort was entirely female. Two observations were carried out at an early years setting; one of the children during a free play session and the other during a structured art activity. Thirteen children took part in the observation; six girls and seven boys.

Thematic analysis was used to examine the data from the semi-structured interviews while data analysis of the observations drew on Gore's (1995) micro-practices of power perspective. Reflective practice was an ongoing feature of this research. For example, a pilot interview was conducted during the early stages of research to address any issues that might arise during the interview process. A reflective journal was kept by the researcher throughout the process. There were limitations to the study. The cohorts of interviewees are entirely female and so provide a biased viewpoint, as there is no male perspective present. The researcher is



aware that both interviews and observations in this research provide a brief snapshot of the setting observed and so are limited what conclusions can be drawn.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Qualitative: Qualitative Research is primarily exploratory research. It is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations.

Semi-Structured Interview: A semi-structured interview is a qualitative method of inquiry that combines a pre-determined set of open questions (questions that prompt discussion) with the opportunity for the interviewer to explore particular themes or responses further.

Thematic Analysis: Thematic analysis emphasizes pinpointing, examining, and recording patterns (or "themes") within data collected.

Micro-practices of Power: Examines the different ways power can present in everyday life.

Research Findings



'I think your own inhibitions may be the biggest issue really when it comes to trying to be creative.'

Kaiya, Parent

'I'm no good at art, you know, so I think that's part of it.'

Úna, Early Years Practitioner

Findings in 'Encouraging Sparks to Ignite: An Exploration of creativity in the Early Years' identified numerous factors that create challenges for creative learning in the early years. Several themes were identified in data collected from interviews which identified mess and stress, practitioners' perceptions of what it means to be creative, a lack of resources and a pressure to get children to a certain point in preparation for primary school as impacting on creative learning in the early years.

But I'm not creative...

A common theme that emerged from interviews centred around adults own perceptions of creativity. Several parents and practitioners revealed a lack of confidence in their own creative abilities and said they felt this impacted on how creative they are with children. While all participants interviewed agreed that creative learning is really

important for the child, they expressed children. While all participants interviewed agreed that creative learning is really important for the child, they expressed feelings of 'not knowing what to do' and 'not being good at art' as reasons why they would not engage in art or music activities on a regular basis. Research supports the notion that it is the process that is important for the child, not a perfect finished product, for it is in the process that skills like problem-solving and imagination are developed. When adults become preoccupied with making something that is 'perfect' or 'finished' then they can lose sight of other opportunities for growth and development that are gained as part of creative learning. Several participants cited a lack of encouragement in how to be creative as a reason for not engaging in creative activities regularly.

Mess and Stress

In the context of creative education, research supports the notion that providing children with a broad range of learning materials and opportunities can stimulate imagination and creative learning. The issue of mess was one that recurred in the data with both practitioner and parents alike. Practitioner interviews revealed discourse in early years settings relating to mess and the way that it can affect creative activities in the setting. Several interviewees expressed an opinion suggesting the level of mess created when children are given free access to art supplies is problematic for them. Juliet stated;

'Practitioners are stressed and I can see why. They don't want mess in the room because you only have a certain time to do things and if you have ten minutes to clean up a room before another batch come in, you're not going to want to take out glitter and paint, you know. I can see people's reasoning for it.'

Juliet, Early Years Practitioner



Parents also expressed opinions that indicated a preference for 'clean' art in their homes that did not generate too much mess.

'not so much painting because it's really messy but we draw and make stuff, junk art.'

Mary, Parent

'she loves sticking and making but the glue just gets everywhere and we're renting.'

Síle, Parent

'Certain things aren't allowed in the house. I learned my lesson with markers, we're back with crayons! I'm still trying to clean marker off the walls.'

Anne, Parent



Lack of Resources

A theme that recurred throughout the data gathered from parents and practitioners was a lack of resources and provision of materials as a major issue that affects creative learning in the early years. While practitioners recognised the value of creative learning, they articulated how financial constraints often mean a lack of basic materials in settings and this impacts on creativity for the child. Surprisingly, practitioners explained how they often spend money from their own wages on art materials, as it is easier than trying to constantly justify spending to management. Erika said:

'I just think I'm going to buy it myself so that they can't come back to me and ask 'why did you spend that money?' Do you know, at least if I buy a tub of glitter for myself and it falls on the floor then I don't have to explain why money was spent on it and now it's gone...'

Erika, Early Years Practitioner

'I have a certain budget and it can be impossible to provide so much for everybody and it has to stretch farther than it can.'

Sarah, Early Years Practitioner

Data collected in this research also recognised a lack of space as being a significant factor that impacts on children's creative learning. Several practitioners stressed how the amount of space in their settings often affects the approach adopted toward creative and art-making processes. Juliet identified that:

'Definitely space impacts what we do around art and messy play'

Anne, Early Years Practitioner

School Readiness vs. Here and Now

Data collected in this research illustrated pressure on practitioners to encourage children to develop

certain skills before starting primary education. In contrast to this, practitioners talked about a vision of early childhood that is holistic and which incorporates both education and care, thus focusing on the 'here and now' rather than on skills for the future. Yet, practitioners expressed the opinion that there is an emphasis on school readiness and the acquirement of literacy and numeracy skills. Reflecting on parental perceptions of what children need to know when starting school Vera comments;

'There is a perception that they need to develop an ability to sit down and wait and take their turn.'

Vera, Early Years Practitioner

'So there is a lot of talk around going to school and can they hold a pencil?'

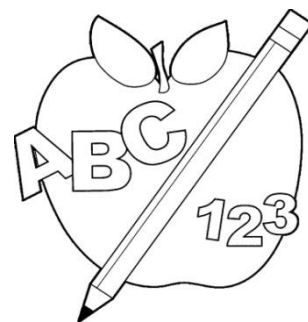
Erika, Early Years Practitioner

An unexpected outcome in these findings in this research 'Encouraging Sparks to Ignite' was the way that discourse around the universal child development impacts practitioner and parental views of creative learning as an 'add-on' that happens when other, more important learning has occurred. One practitioner, Sarah, reflected on a parent who expressed concern over the speed at which her son was reaching developmental milestones.

'She did say that he wasn't able to hold a scissors and he wasn't able to count to twenty. This was in October. He's 5.'

Sarah, Early Years Practitioner

Most participants reflected on the struggle faced by practitioners and parents when addressing what is valuable learning for the child in the early years.



Recommendations

'Encouraging Sparks to Ignite: An Exploration of Creativity in the Early Years identified several factors that influence the role of creativity in early year's education such as adults perceptions of what it means to be creative and a lack of resources in which to plan and implement creative learning.

The thesis makes recommendations to allow children to develop creative learning skills. These include:

1. Using open-ended **natural materials**.
2. Creativity workshops for practitioners and parents.
3. Increased investment in creative learning from government.



Creative Workshops

The findings in this study suggest that early years practitioners and parents may lack confidence in their ability to promote creativity and creative learning. Educating practitioners and parents in order to encourage more positive dispositions regarding their own creative abilities would enable them to better support children's natural curiosity and creativity. Encouraging practitioners and parents to be confident in their own creative abilities is fundamental to supporting creative learning for children in the early years. This study recommends the development of immersive workshops that would allow adults access to a wide range of materials and creative processes. Workshops would be set up so that the adult encounters the materials as a child would in settings. Inspiring ideas for adults to take away and use in practice with children would be key to the success of these workshops.

Open-Ended, Natural Materials

Engaging with natural materials encourages children to play, think, feel, imagine, socialise, and concentrate.³ Using open-ended, naturally sourced materials presents children with more scope for imaginative and creative play. Creative learning involves opportunities that allow a child to investigate, discover, invent, and cooperate. ⁴ Providing a child with too few choices can decrease motivation and achievement. Offering a child several choices that are not very different from each other can have the same effect.⁵ Using open-ended materials allows the child greater scope for imagination when creating art. Anticipating what the finished piece of art will look like can inhibit the child's ability to be creative, as it places the purpose of the activity on pleasing the adult or producing a predetermined outcome. Examples of open-ended materials are raw materials such as those found in nature, recycled materials such as those repurposed through junk art, and recycled items from the home such as old clothes and kitchen items. Using items like these instead of commercial shop bought art materials, can also address the issue of financial pressure as items like these are generally found and free. The findings from this research support the limited use of commercial materials and equipment. Pre-structured toys can only be used in one prescribed way, whereas open-ended materials can be used as props for all kinds of play scenarios. Shells, for example, can be used to print textured patterns, to build with, as money in the play shop, and as food in the home corner. In contrast, a plastic representation of food serves only one role - a plastic representation of food.



3. Meggitt, C & Bruce, T (2015). *Child Care and Education (Early Years Educator)*. UK: Hodder Education. pp. 1-333.
4. Rosen, R. (2010). We got our heads together and came up with a plan. *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 8(1), 89-108.
5. Ellyatt, W. (2010). A science of learning: new approaches to thinking about creativity in the early years. *Born Creative*. 1 (1), pp. 89 -99.



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Research Briefs

This is a summary by Niamh Whehelan as part of her thesis conducted as part of the MA Award in Early Childhood Studies & Practice. This degree was completed in 2018 at NUI Galway through the Centre of Adult Learning & Professional Development. This Research Brief was edited by Dr Sheila Garrity. Permission for the reproduction of photographs received.

