Applying participatory research with children in preschools: exploring eating patterns among disadvantaged families in Ireland

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Growing Up in Ireland, 2011:

25% - overweight or obese

Unhealthy habits formed in preschool may persist into adulthood
Socio-economic status (SES)/Disadvantaged status

• In the general population:

Low SES → lower quality diets (Darmon et al., 2005)

• Children’s diet:

Low SES → lower quality diets = higher intakes of energy-dense and nutrient-poor foods and beverages (Darmon et al., 2008)

Low SES → higher prevalence of child obesity/OW (McLaren, 2007, Williams et al., 2013)
Family style food service in preschool
International evidence

• Evidence suggests similar issues in other countries, (Sisson at al., 2012, Sigman-Grant et al., 2011, Lanigan et al., 2012).

Identified good practices:

• Staff joining children at table most of the time
• Staff rarely eating different foods in view of children
• Self-service of food by children
• Visible self-serve or availability of water
• Regular informal communication about healthy eating

Need improvement in:

• Helping children determine whether they are still hungry
• Non-food holiday celebrations with non-food treats
• Having toys and books that encourage healthy eating
Healthy Incentive for preschools project (HIP)

Study of 12 preschools in Wicklow Co, Ireland found

- Lack of nutrition policies
- No family style service
- Inadequate time for meals or snacks
- Self-service is not allowed
- Lack of age-appropriate cutlery, plates or drinking vessels
- Inadequate portion sizes

(Johnston Molloy, 2013)
What are individual, environmental, and socio-cultural determinants of eating patterns in preschool settings in disadvantaged areas in Ireland?

Objectives:
• To examine preschool food and nutrition policies
• To identify staff perceptions and behaviours related to food and nutrition in preschools
• To examine parent perceptions and behaviours related to food and nutrition for preschoolers
• To examine children’s eating patterns at childcare
• To use participatory methods to explore young children’s perceptions about healthy eating
• To explore barriers and opportunities for promoting healthy nutrition in preschools
Types of preschools in Ireland

- **Full-day care** (more than 5 hours per day);
- **Part-time care** (between 3 hours 31 minutes and 5 hours);
- **Sessional care** (between 2 hours 16 minutes and 3 hours 30 minutes);
- **Half-session care** (between 1 hour and 2 hours 15 minutes).

- ECCE scheme
- Community and private preschools

This study’s initial criteria:
   a) full-day care service with food prepared on the premises and served to children;
   b) community preschools;
   c) preschools located in disadvantaged areas.
Participatory research method with young children: Hearing children’s voices

• Children as a diverse group of active social actors who are valuable contributors to society and competent of voicing their experiences (Corsaro, 2005).

• Children’s priorities may differ from our own (Mandla, 2003)

• Interviews should be conducted in a setting where the child feels comfortable, both physically and emotionally (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2005).

• The issues highlighted in the literature as being necessary for conducting successful interviews with children included:
  – Choosing an appropriate setting;
  – The importance of building rapport;
  – Having an unstructured or semi-structured interview format;
  – Enabling children to provide a free narrative account of their lived experiences;
  – Using open-ended questions; and
  – Employing the aid of various visual or task-based activities.
Approaches with preschools

- The One Hundred Languages of Children – **Reggio Emilia approach** – children as creative communicators and conversationalists, Italy.
- **Mosaic approach** – child interviewing, photography and book making, tours, and map making - (Clark et al., 2005), England, UK;
- **Thematic drawing** with street children in Kampala, Uganda – (Biggeri & Anich, 2009).
- **Emoji** - Exploring the use of emoji as a visual research method for eliciting young children’s voices in childhood research (Fane et al., 2016), Australia
Participatory method with preschool children

- 8 preschools (3 full-day, 5 part-time)
- 10 children’s workshops (2-4 children in a group)
- Preschool children aged 3-5 (n=34)
  - Disadvantaged areas of Galway city

1. Visual activity: Vignettes;
2. Task based activities:
   - Toys – meal creation task;
   - Drawing – food likes and dislikes
Visual activities

Example of vignettes

Hi, my name is Brian, I’m 4 years old. I like to go to McDonalds and eat hamburger, chips, and soda. But we don’t go there often.

Question to a child: What do you think, is it good or bad if he eats at McDonalds every day?

Hello, I’m Katie, I am 5 years old and I live with my mummy and my little brother. My mummy says that peas are good for me and I will become stronger if I eat them, but I don’t like them.

Question to a child: What do you think does she still need to eat them?
Task based - workshops
Drawings
Challenges and reflections

• Recruitment
  – Preschools
  – Families at a disadvantage

• Methods worked well – children were engaged
  – Vignettes
  – Drawing – children loved to draw but interpretation is challenging
  – Toys – keeping them focused on the activity was challenging
    – “because I like it”...”because it is yucky”...”it is yummy”

• Talking with young children and interpreting their perceptions and opinions
  – Merging the data

• Children’s food preferences depend largely on parents’ preferences and family environment.
Next steps

Family style food service in preschool
Thank you for your attention

Your questions, comments and insights are welcome!

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