Researching Early Childhood
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>“A Whole new Spectrum of Queries, Concerns and Anxieties”: Exploring Families’ Childcare Decision Making within the Irish Context</td>
<td>Catriona O’Toole and Delma Byrne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Food Marketing to Young Children on the Island of Ireland: Parents’ Views, Attitudes and Practices, and Implications for Early Years Policy</td>
<td>Mimi Tatlow-Golden, Eilis Hennessy, Lynsey Hollywood and Moira Dean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Exploring Parental Attitudes towards Male Early Childhood Educators in the Republic of Ireland Today</td>
<td>David King</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Investment in Quality Early Childhood Education and Care: From Rhetoric to Reality</td>
<td>Jenny Bernard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Progression or regression. Is the pre-school quality agenda perpetuating a care-education divide in the Early Childhood Education and Care sector in Ireland?</td>
<td>Mary Moloney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Early Years Education-focused Inspections: A Reason to Celebrate?</td>
<td>Emer Ring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Keep Calm and Carry On: Children’s Self-Regulation in Early Years Settings</td>
<td>Sinead McNally and Rebecca Maguire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>ENRICHing Children’s Lives in the Earliest Years through the Implementation and Evaluation of new Wraparound Services for Parents and Infants in Disadvantaged Areas</td>
<td>Gráinne Hickey, Sinéad McGilloway, Shane Leavy, Yvonne Leckey, Mairéad Furlong and Siobhan O’Connor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>Historical and Cultural Evolution of the Montessori Method: Some Considerations for Irish Early Years Practice</td>
<td>Sinead Matson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>Transitions between Irish-medium preschools and primary schools</td>
<td>Máire Mhic Mhathúna and Fiona Nic Fhionnlaoich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>Fostering Children’s Alphabet Knowledge at School Entry through Engagement in Family Literacy Activities</td>
<td>Lisa-Christine Girard and Luigi Girolametto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80</td>
<td>A Randomised Controlled Trial Evaluation of the Lifestart Parenting Programme in Ireland</td>
<td>Sarah Miller and Laura Dunne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>83</td>
<td>An Examination of Concepts of School Readiness among Parents and Educators in Ireland</td>
<td>Centre for Early-Childhood Research at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick and Centre for Social and Educational Research, Dublin Institute of Technology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Editorial

Recent research in psychology, sociology, health and education has seen a move away from the traditional approach to studying children in isolation from the complex contexts in which they develop. Increasingly, attention is being given to understanding childhood and children in a wider socio-cultural context where children themselves are seen as active participants in the wider ecology of life.

The recognition of children as active participants in their own development has heightened awareness to including children in the research process and giving them a voice in matters effecting them – something committed to the National Policy Framework for children and young people: Better Outcomes – Brighter Futures (2014) in the Republic of Ireland and Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge (2006) in Northern Ireland.

Early childhood is an under-researched area in Ireland when compared to other periods of childhood. It is more complex to research young children, to gain understandings of their own development has raised ethical and research issues and has been met with resistance and discomfort in the research process and giving early childhood educators a voice is the first article Catriona O’Toole & Delma Byrne considers the experiences of Irish families as they navigate the early years sector in exploring options for childcare. With high costs and a lack of a cohesive and integrated system, this poses a range of constraints for families who often make decisions with limited support. Mimi Tatlow-Golden and her colleagues present the results of research on parents’ views and attitudes towards food marketing towards young children. Whilst most parents held negative attitudes towards such marketing, few believed that it had a strong influence on their own child’s eating. The authors make recommendations for how their research can inform public education and early years practice on the topic of food and advertising.

David King’s article raises the important and under-researched issue of parental attitudes towards men working as early childhood educators. His research suggests that despite some discomfort among a minority, the majority of parents showed acceptance and openness towards men working with their children.

The next group of articles fall within the realm of education and the role of quality in early childhood education and care [ECEC] services. The historic development of early education and early primary within different spheres and the persistent division between care and education comes to the fore within these articles. Jenny Bernard provides a critical assessment of government investment in supporting quality ECEC in Ireland. She argues that provision of high quality ECEC is hampered by a range of barriers, despite rhetoric to the contrary. Mary Moloney explicitly considers the divide in the ECEC sector in Ireland in her article. She argues that recent developments within the Free Pre-School Year Scheme sustain this distinction and she advocates for greater interdepartmental collaboration to address the care and education needs of all children. Following on from this, Emer Ring assesses the role and potential of the recently established early years education-focused inspections. She concludes that such inspections offer an opportunity to affirm positive high quality practice, but highlights the need for dialogue and collaboration with the early years sector.

Considering the topic of early years practice and its impact, Sinead McNally and Rebecca Maguire explore the importance of self-regulation in early childhood development and the crucial role that adult-child interactions play in helping young children to self-regulate. Their paper considers the critical role adults play in creating quality, relational early learning environments that assist young children self-regulate. Focusing on the very young child Gráinne Hickey and her colleagues provide an overview of an innovative early years service model and research programme (ENRICH) which aims to provide a wraparound intervention for children under two and their parents, with specific emphasis on multiple risk factors, gaps in treatment and engagement of harder to reach families. Sinead Matson then takes us on a historical journey of the evolution of the Montessori method and its adaption within different cultural contexts. She explores the language of ‘work’ and ‘play’ in both the Montessori method and in Aistear, the national curriculum framework and concludes that perceived differences in language are reconcilable.
Transitions are the focus of the last two articles. Máire Mhic Mhathúna and Fiona Nic Fhionnlaoich report on a study of transition from preschool to primary school in an Irish medium context raising both issues of transition between the two settings and the role of a second language within that process. Their findings point to the importance of sharing information on children’s interests, capabilities and their second language experiences effectively across settings. The final research article by Lisa-Christine Girard and Luigi Girolametto complete the cycle in looking at how the environment of the family and the fostering of literacy plays a pivotal role in the development of emergent literacy skills prior to school entry. Their Canadian study of emergent literacy provides some reflections for our understandings of school readiness and pre-academic skills within the Irish context.

Finally there are two short summaries of larger research studies. One, by Sarah Miller and Laura Dunne outlines the findings from an RTC evaluation of the Lifestart Parenting Programme. The second reports on a collaborative investigation into concepts of school readiness by the Centre for Early Childhood Research, MIE, Limerick and the Centre for Social and Educational Research, DIT, Dublin.

Collectively the articles in this issue of the Research Digest reflect the healthy state of research into early childhood in Ireland. While they identify a number of challenges to be overcome the articles also present a firm basis from which to design future research projects with the aim of enhancing young children’s early childhood experiences.

We would like to thank all authors and the reviewers for their contributions to this issue. Special thanks are also due to all who helped with proof reading and Leanne Willars for providing the design and layout.

Prof. Noirin Hayes
(Guest editor)

Dr. Louise Kinlen,
Assistant Editor
Research Fellow,
Children’s Research Network for Ireland and Northern Ireland

References


A Whole new Spectrum of Queries, Concerns and Anxieties: Exploring Families’ Childcare Decision Making within the Irish Context

Catriona O’Toole and Delma Byrne

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that early childhood is a time of vital importance in children’s development. The quality of care that children receive in their early years makes a real difference to their development and later outcomes (NSCDC, 2004, 2007; OECD, 2012; Melhuish, 2003). Today’s parents face considerable challenges in securing quality childcare and balancing their work and family commitments. Such challenges are particularly notable within the Irish context. Childcare in Ireland has developed mainly on a supply and demand basis and is largely available only from private childcare centres or from informal extended family members and community networks (Barry and Sherlock, 2008). Because of a lack of public investment, Irish parents pay amongst the highest childcare costs across all OECD countries, and those working in the sector experience very poor pay and working conditions (OECD, 2010). Penn and Lloyd (2014) highlighted that when early years services are run on this type of private market model, quality tends to be variable and access to services is inequitable. Specifically, they noted that within this model, quality depends largely on the good will of providers, as well as on parents’ income and capacity to ‘shop around’ when making childcare decisions.

Previous research on parental decisions around childcare has highlighted a complex combination of practical concerns, family values and considerations around child wellbeing. Vincent and Ball (2006) highlighted the role of social class in shaping families’ differential engagement with the childcare sector. Others have highlighted constrained choices due to family finances, inflexible work schedules, and limited availability of suitable options (Forry et al., 2013). Currently, little is known about the experiences of Irish families as they navigate the early years sector. The current research sought to address this gap by exploring parental preferences, decision-making and satisfaction with childcare within the Irish context.

Methodology

A total of ten interviews were conducted; nine of these were interviews with mothers and there was one interview in which both father and mother were present. The final sample of participants was similar in that all had attained higher education qualifications, all were in stable relationships (either married or cohabiting), and all were in paid employment although some were availing of parental leave. However, participants varied in terms of family income, family stage, ethnicity, and type of childcare arrangements. The interviews were conducted in summer/autumn 2013 (this was shortly after the airing of the Prime Time investigation A Breach of Trust, and before the publication of inspection reports).

Key Findings

We found that parents exercised considerable agency in seeking out optimal childcare arrangements based on priorities of quality and goodness of fit with family characteristics. However, they also encountered considerable constraints and barriers in navigating the early years’ sector and in accessing the type of care that met their individual needs. These themes will be discussed in turn.

Priorities and preferences in childcare choices

All parents spoke of prioritising quality when making childcare decisions. In so doing they tended to emphasise the everyday interactions that their children experienced within the setting. These process-oriented aspects of quality - or what Bronfenbrenner (2006) refers to as proximal processes - include features like warmth, openness, language and cognitive stimulation. In the current study, continuity of care, the emotional tone of the setting, and a sense of belonging were central to parent’s understandings of quality. The latter is illustrated in the following quotation:

The crèche fitted with our philosophy, the group care seemed like a really nice way, and the naturalness about the crèche - while it was regulated and part of HSE system, it actually is small enough to be very personal...And my eldest now, at four, comes home and tells me all the news from everybody, and what’s going on, and she goes to her little birthday parties from the crèche group. She has a lovely sense of community. So, fundamental from the very start, it was the very small nature of the crèche that attracted us to it. And it was that sense of community that I’d always have there.

This study formed part of a broader research project by Byrne and O’Toole (2015) and was supported by a grant from TUSLA and the Irish Research Council.

2 The Prime Time investigation was a televised documentary which uncovered instances of mistreatment of children in some crèches. The decision to publish childcare inspection reports was made by government as a result of this documentary.
There were also variations in parental definitions of quality and these were reflected in choices relating to the type of childcare. Parents who favoured centre-based care tended to associate crèches with positive opportunities for structured learning activities and socialisation. These parents attached importance to the broadening their child’s networks beyond the immediate family:

Parents sought to identify a goodness-of-fit between childcare choices and the unique characteristics of their families and individual children.

I feel the socialisation that Amelia’s getting in a crèche that she wouldn’t get at home. I see her getting bored at home, she gets bored with her toys, she gets bored looking at me, she’s kind of going ‘let me get out and let’s do something’. That’s what she gets in crèche, like there’s a different set of toys, there’s a different set of people, a different group of children and I feel she benefits from that.

However, not all parents favoured centre-based care, some spoke of having their children with a trusted childminder in a family-like environment. Others saw relatives as the best option, citing the strength of natural kinship bonds:

I don’t think twice about him staying with his granny because I know she adores him. And anything that he does, while she might, you know, be cross or she might tell him off or whatever, I know she adores him at the end of it, so she would only want to do right by him.

It was also apparent that families’ unique situations shaped their childcare decisions. For example, one father of Asian ethnicity spoke of the family’s plans to recruit a childminder from his native country so that the children would have additional exposure to the native language and culture. Additionally, the mother of an adopted daughter took cognisance of the time her daughter had previously spent time in an orphanage and made childcare choices in light of this: “I felt [that] because she may have been somewhat institutionalised....a crèche was going to reinforce this. So I was steering clear of that, if at all possible”.

Similarly, some parents were conscious of their children’s individual temperaments when considering childcare options. One parent spoke of how she felt the crèche was an ideal fit given her daughter’s “incredibly social character”. In this way parents sought to identify a goodness-of-fit between childcare choices and the unique characteristics of their families and individual children.

Constraints and barriers

Despite the sense of agency that is notable in the quotations above, it was also evident that parents experienced considerable constraints in navigating, accessing and maintaining childcare arrangements. Unsurprisingly, affordability was a key concern for many parents:

I hated the fact that money came in as a deciding factor...I’d love to choose childcare on what I feel is best for my babies, not what I feel I can afford, and that grates on me, it really, really grates on me, you know.

Another mother explained how she could not afford to give up work after the birth of her first child, but now that she is expecting her second child, the additional childcare cost is presenting another dilemma:

I know we can’t afford two kids in a crèche, that’s not going to be an option, so we’re looking at having to get somebody in to the house. So that’s a whole new spectrum of queries, concerns and anxieties, who will we get, how will we trust them, how do we know what they’re doing during the day..

Many parents invested considerable resources in making childcare decisions by actively seeking out information, making enquiries, visiting crèches and interviewing carers. In this way, decisions were often made through ‘a process of elimination’. However, it was also evident that decisions were sometimes heavily reliant on parents’ gut instinct, on word-of-mouth testimonials, and chance encounters:

And then when I came to this other crèche... I just... my gut! I just didn’t like it... The one that we chose in the end is round the corner and my niece had already been there for a year and they loved it and they totally recommended it and I got such a good vibe from it.

I kind of had it in my head, I really wanted a childminder. But then I didn’t know who was good, or who wasn’t good – so I really wanted to go for somebody who was recommended. So I went to a funeral and I met a girl that I went to secondary school with, and she recommended the lady that I’m currently with.

The above narratives show that parents in general had little information available to them and did not feel supported in making childcare decisions. There often remained significant uncertainty as to whether their choices are the right ones for their children, which led to considerable stress and worry in some cases. Commenting on the process of selecting childcare one mother stated:

You find out in having kids probably the most stressful part of it is the childcare! Something I never even registered as being difficult or as being challenging...
Another mother commented:

So we were trying to decide what to do and I went and visited I’d say ten crèches... Interviewed probably another ten potential child minders and found the whole thing so traumatic. I just thought it was the most awful experience.

Furthermore, while most families expressed satisfaction with their current childcare arrangements, some experienced ongoing conflict with regard to the choices they had made:

I’ve consistently struggled with the crèche. I don’t know whether I’m happy with it or not.

I felt massively that I was handing the responsibility of moulding him and bringing him up to somebody else and I really very deeply felt that that’s not what I wanted.

Discussion and Conclusions

Families are complex and dynamic and have diverse needs in relation to early years’ services. The parents interviewed in this study used a wide range of supports, including centre-based care, grandparents and wider family members, childminders, and after-school clubs. Each have a crucial role to play and it is important that policy makers enable families to have greater access and choice to a range of quality options. As highlighted elsewhere, there is a need for a coherent and integrated system to support families in balancing work and family commitments (Hayes, 2010; NWCI, 2005; Plantenga and Remery, 2013).

It is noteworthy, that parents commented on the important sense of belonging that typified small, community crèches.

Worryingly, it is precisely these types of service that appear to be struggling financially. Indeed, many service providers are under considerable financial and personal pressure, and are fearful that their services may be forced to close (Matson, 2014). There is a strong need therefore, to consider various models of investment and support so that community services are sustainable.

Many parents make child care choices with inadequate information, no support and a great deal of stress. Although the Irish government publishes childcare inspection reports, these alone are insufficient as sources of information because they are only available for centre-based services and they focus predominantly on structural features of quality (adult-child ratios, hygiene etc). They do not give adequate information on the crucial process-oriented aspects of quality that matter most to parents and children. Given the backdrop of private market provision coupled with inadequate information, the current system places a huge onus on families to “shop around” and make discerning and nuanced judgements about the quality of services. Clearly, families have different levels of capital (economic, cultural and social) to mobilise in this decision-making process (Fuller et al., 1996). Ultimately, this situation is highly inequitable as it allows those with most resources access the highest quality options, thereby reinforcing social inequalities at the earliest and most formative stage of childhood.

References


Food Marketing to Young Children on the Island of Ireland: Parents’ Views, Attitudes and Practices, and Implications for Early Years Policy

Mimi Tatlow-Golden, Eilis Hennessy, Lynsey Hollywood and Moira Dean

Research Funding
This research was funded by Safefood, the Food Safety Promotion Board, under Fund No. [09-2010]. The authors are grateful to the preschools, schools, children and parents who took part.

Introduction
Food advertising significantly (and independently) affects children’s food preferences and consumption, with long-term effects on health (Cairns et al., 2013), and is therefore regulated across the island of Ireland. However, restrictions on unhealthy food advertising apply only during children’s TV programming, yet young children watch substantial amounts of TV at other times. Thus they continue to see at least 1000 unhealthy food ads annually in the Republic of Ireland and 700 in Northern Ireland (Tatlow-Golden, 2014).

TV remains the major viewing medium for younger children, but digital viewing is increasing (Federal Trade Commission, 2013; Ofcom, 2014). Online food advertising is unregulated; combined with continued TV food advertising exposure, even in jurisdictions with regulations, this is a concern to policy makers worldwide.

To date, most research on advertising effects has focused on later childhood, but indications are that advertising exposure in the early years affects early taste preference and brand awareness. By three to five years of age, young children who have detailed mental representations of fast-food and soft drink brands (through advertising exposure as well as experience) also have higher salt, fat and sugar food preferences (Cornwell and McAlistier, 2011). Even without conscious cognitive processing, advertising implicitly develops decades-long emotional associations with food brands, and exposure earlier in childhood may create stronger, longer-lasting attachments (Braun-LaTour et al., 2007; Nairn and Fine, 2008; Connell et al., 2014).

Across the island of Ireland, children aged three to five years had high levels of knowledge about eating healthy foods (fruit, vegetables, potatoes and milk) but knew much less about restraint regarding unhealthy foods (sweets, savoury snacks, deep-fried foods). Furthermore, when shown food brand logos, for brands advertised to a similar degree at times young children watch television, children’s food brand knowledge was significantly greater for unhealthy brands, compared to healthy ones. In addition, unhealthy food brand knowledge advanced significantly between three and four years, before children’s knowledge of unhealthy food started to develop (Tatlow-Golden et al., 2013, 2014).

Parental mediation of advertising – through explanation and/or restriction – can modify children’s food preferences and choices (Buijzen, 2009). However, parents are reported to rarely engage in such activities, focusing more on content appropriateness than advertising (Ofcom, 2014). To design effective policy for public education and early years settings in Ireland, it is essential to identify the views and practices of parents in Ireland. As part of the study, cited above, exploring pre-schoolers' understanding of food and food marketing, we examined parents’ views regarding advertising food and drink to young children and the effects on their children’s food preferences, and parents’ practices in mediating such advertising exposure.
Method

Parents (n = 100) of a socio-economically mixed sample of children, aged three to five years across the island of Ireland, completed questionnaires about family demographics and practices relating to food and media (for details about the child and parent samples, and measures used, see Tatlow-Golden et al., 2013, 2014). Parents were asked about their views of food marketing influence, mediation of advertising, and children’s food requests. A brief measure of parental attitudes to food advertising was also developed, using items drawn from the National Preschool Nutrition Survey. These were subjected to Principal Components Analysis; two components resulted, correlated with one another at r = .50, and were named Food Advertising Influence on Child, and Negative View of Advertising Influence (Livingstone et al., in press).

Results

Food requests

Over half of parents (fifty-seven per cent) said that while shopping, their child ‘always’ or ‘usually’ asked for food or drink items; nearly a quarter of parents (twenty-three per cent) said their child ‘always’ or ‘usually’ became angry if they refused.

Parent attitudes to food advertising

Parents had high scores regarding Negative View of Advertising Influence (range 1-10), (M = 8.1, SD = 1.64). Less negative views of advertising were associated with lower maternal education (r = .21, p = .043, N = 95), and more family TV exposure (r = -.25, p = .023, N = 86). Parent responses indicated they believed that Food Advertising Influence on Child (range 1-20) was moderate (M = 11.3, SD = 3.57), and it was positively associated with more family (r .34, p = .002, N = 82) and child (r .32, p = .002, N = 90) TV exposure.

Parent mediation of advertising

When asked about whether they talked with their children about TV advertising, sixty-one per cent parents ‘never’ told their child that ads wanted to sell something or did not tell the truth, with just twelve per cent ‘often’ or ‘always’ doing so; and eighty-eight per cent ‘never’ asked their child to turn off the TV or switch channels because of advertising.

Discussion

This survey of parents’ views regarding food advertising and young children, among a socio-demographically mixed sample on the island of Ireland, supports a number of actions by educators and policy-makers.

Notably, parents had very high negative attitudes to food advertising to children, yet they believed that advertising influence on their own child was moderate. Few parents believed that TV advertising influenced their child’s eating, but they pointed to other aspects of food marketing that influenced their child, including free toys, cartoon

Table 1. Parent views of social and marketing influences on their child’s eating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Parents reporting a ‘strong’ or ‘very strong’ influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free toys or promotions</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartoon or other TV characters on packaging</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Store promotions</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food tied into TV programmes</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brands and logos</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV food and drink ads</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Children aged three to five years had high levels of knowledge about eating healthy foods but knew much less about restraint regarding unhealthy foods.
and TV characters, and food tied in to TV programmes. Friends were also considered influential in terms of children’s eating. Over half of parents reported their child asked for food when shopping and nearly a quarter that saying no resulted in their child being angry. Despite this, most never talked with their child about advertising and almost all never encouraged their child to switch off from ads.

Parents’ reports of the TV channels their children view suggest that parents may not register all the TV their children are exposed to, as parents almost exclusively cited child-directed channels. However, Nielsen/TAM 2010 audience panel data for the Republic of Ireland indicates that, of the top 5 channels viewed by children aged 4-6 years, general-view channels (RTE 2, RTE 1 and TV3) were viewed more than child-directed ones (Nick Junior and Nickelodeon). Viewing patterns among children in the UK are similar (Ofcom, 2006). It may be that parents in Ireland discount family viewing and other times when the TV is on and the child is in the room – yet these are the times when children are exposed to unhealthy food advertising. Furthermore, it is likely that further exposure to unhealthy food advertising will take place in the future as children’s Internet viewing increases.

Parents may not register all the TV their children are exposed to, as parents almost exclusively cited child-directed channels.

Importantly, as digital viewing grows among young children, parents also need information and education about Internet advertising and the benefits of selecting advertisement-free viewing options online. For example, the free YouTube Kids app, recently launched in the U.S., has attracted substantial criticism for the volume and nature of unhealthy food advertising shown, and the presence of branded channels. It is currently the subject of a complaint to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission by child and consumer advocacy organisations, for unfair and deceptive advertising practices violating consumer advocacy organisations, for unfair and deceptive advertising practices.

We recommend that (1) guides be developed for early years educators with advice on developmentally appropriate ways to talk with young children about advertising and (2) food-related education units be developed for the preschool years and the first year of school, addressing not just healthy foods but also foods that should be eaten in moderation, and exploring the role of marketing and branding in the foods we eat. Indeed, the experience of school-based programmes such as Food Dudes (see http://www.fooddudes.ie) suggests that such learning has the ability to transfer not just from school to the child but also from the child back to parents at home as well.

Early years education: These findings regarding parents’ knowledge and behaviour, taken together with our findings regarding young children’s knowledge about food and food brands on the island of Ireland (Tatlow-Golden et al., 2013, 2014), point strongly to a role for early education in both food and advertising.

Implications for Early Years Policy and Public Education in Ireland

Public education: Parents have very strong negative views of TV advertising of food and drink products to young children. However, most never act on these views. It would be beneficial to inform parents about the long-term effects of food marketing and advertising; to encourage them to talk with their children about the nature of advertising from the preschool years onward; and to recommend that parents turn off the TV during ad breaks, if a child is in the room.

Public Education in Ireland

References


**Author Information**

**Dr Mimi Tatlow-Golden** is currently a Newman Research Fellow in the School of Medicine and Medical Science, University College Dublin (UCD) and conducted this research in the School of Psychology, UCD. Her research employs innovative methods to explore the well-being of children, including their mental health and self-concept, as well as their exposure to, and understanding of, TV and digital advertising.

**Dr Ellis Hennessy** is senior lecturer in developmental psychology in UCD. Her research in early childhood has focused on children’s experiences in out-of-home care, their understanding of food and TV food advertising as well as on innovative ways of researching young children’s experiences.

**Dr Lynsey Hollywood**, Lecturer in Consumer Studies, Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, University of Ulster, Coleraine, conducted this research at Queens University Belfast (QUB). Her areas of research interest are in healthy shopping, food advertising to children, new food product development and consumer choice.

**Dr Moira Dean**, senior lecturer in Psychology of Food Choice and Consumer Behaviour at QUB, has worked on projects funded by the Food Standards Agency, Safefood, the Medical Research Council, the Economic and Social Research Council and the EU. Her research addresses the psychology of food choice, risk perceptions, and dietary change in both adults and children.
Exploring Parental Attitudes towards Male Early Childhood Educators in the Republic of Ireland Today

David King

Background

The topic of men working alongside young children in early childhood care and education is impassioned, highly contemporary and topical (Cameron, 2006). It can be emotive because the idea of men caring for our youngest and most vulnerable children has, unfortunately, every so often been linked with accusations of child abuse (Waterhouse, 2000). This short article summarises the results of an exploratory study into attitudes of parents towards men working with young children (Williams, 1995; Murray, 1996; King, 1998, Cameron et al., 1999; Sargent, 2005; Cameron, 2006; King; 2014).

With less than 1 per cent of the childcare workforce male, Ireland is believed to have among the lowest male participation rate in Europe (Barnardos, 2012). While there is a need to explore the reasons behind such a fact, it lies beyond the boundaries of this research. The central goal of this exploratory study was to elicit the opinions and attitudes of parents in the Republic of Ireland towards men working with and caring for their young children.

Methodology

To both maximise response rates and to reach a diverse and geographically spacious target group, an on-line survey was developed. The topic of male involvement in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is still a relatively controversial one. In this instance a survey allowed the respondents to be completely honest in their views, something that an interview might not have allowed for. Moreover, the survey/questionnaire is an appropriate tool to use in the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data (Bell, 1993; Cohen et al., 2003).

Ten questionnaires were piloted online, and as a result some slight adjustments were made to two of the questions contained in the survey. Due to the single mode of data collection in the study, no triangulation was completed. The survey was completed online, with links to the questionnaire being posted on Irish education websites, specifically early years focused sites and social network pages. 266 respondents completed the survey of whom the vast majority were mothers (95%), while fathers represented 5%. All respondents were parents of children who currently attend or have attended preschool services in the Republic of Ireland. Given the focus of the survey, it is possible that the sample was biased in favour of parents with experience of male childcare worker. No names where required to fill out the survey, allowing for full anonymity.

Findings

During the analysis of the responses a number of different response types emerged; positive parental responses expressed happiness or delight at having a positive male role model looking after their child. However, some parents provided more negative feedback, expressing concerns, caution or even worry when faced with the same situation.

Specifically question 4 asked participants: “Would you be open to sending your child to a setting that employed a male carer/teacher?” A total of 264 respondents answered this question. The vast majority of respondents (95%) showed a willingness to send their child to a setting that employed a male. Question 5 asked the question whether a male childcare worker/teacher is or was employed in their child’s setting (currently or in the past). A total of 261 respondents completed this question, with 38% of the respondents indicating that there is or had been a male in the service in the early years service attended by their child. This indicates that the majority of respondents did not have
experience of a male ECCE educator.

As a busy man who owns a business, I’m afraid that I do not get much contact time with my kids during the week. I was delighted when I found out that there were male teachers at the school that would be able to set a good male example for my kids.

This theme of positivity and openness to males in ECCE was the dominant theme throughout this questionnaire, from both fathers and mothers. There were however more negative issues raised throughout the course of this research, with some parents expressing discomfort at the idea of a male in ECCE.

I would feel uncomfortable if a male was looking after my daughter. I would not mind it with my son.

Cautious, but open to my mind being changed on men working in childcare, I wouldn’t go out looking for a male to mind my child, I would instinctively go for a female.

Furthermore parents where asked what their opinion would be if a male educator were to be employed at a preschool where their child currently attended. Many stated that with the correct qualification, experience and Garda vetting, the gender of the educator or carer should not be a concern.

I would be happy. Children need male role models in their lives too. They would have gone through the same process of obtaining qualifications and Garda clearance so obviously they have a genuine interest in the care and education of children. Equal rights!

Other parents, spoke of genuine worry and fear that a male would be responsible for caring for their child on a day to day basis. Some respondents also questioned the motives of the male educator for seeking employment with preschool children.

I would be uncomfortable and suspicious.

Discussion

Negative societal opinions of men as caregivers can guide parents’ views of them as early childhood educators. Terms such as ‘shock’, ‘uncomfortable’ and ‘suspicious’ all demonstrate how some parents feel a deep sense of unease at the idea (Acker, 1991; King, 1998, Cameron 1999, 2006; Sargent, 2005). Such negative reactions were few in the responses received. In fact, the data collected directly from parents found a majority of parents open to the idea of male childcare workers.

The understanding that, traditionally, the care of young children is the role of women is a common thread running throughout the literature, (King, 1998; Cameron et al, 1999; Fine-Davis et al., 2005; Cameron, 2006) and also highlighted in this study. However, the reverse of this discourse is also present in the results. Many respondents viewed men as ‘great carers’ and ‘as caring as women’.

While it would be unrealistic to make any generalisations from a study as limited and as small scale as this, it is nevertheless enlightening to examine the ways in which traditional roles and stereotypes are confronted and reinforced in the early years sector. Benefits of greater gender diversity to the children’s care, education and general overall development are all alluded to and generally seen as a positive within the survey’s responses.

Conclusion

This study has added to the sparse literature available on the topic of men in ECCE in Ireland. The findings show that while there is still some uncomfortableness around the idea of men in ECCE, there is also a positivity within Irish parental attitudes to men working in what would still be regarded as a female profession. For males entering the early years workforce this is a highly encouraging sign.

These findings go some way to highlighting the complexity of gender relations in ECCE. The literature in the field of men in childcare focuses more on the negative issues or the reasons why more men do not choose childcare as a profession (Acker, 1991; Evans, 2002; King, 2014, Sargent, 2005). This small scale study has shown that there is an openness and support to the idea of men working with young children in Ireland.

Further research should concentrate on children’s views of their male caregivers. The question of whether children see differences between the males and females that educate and care for them, would illuminate children’s voices in this ongoing debate.

References


Author Information

David King holds a dual position of Montessori Director and Adult Education facilitator. He was led to the field of Early Childhood Education from his passion for innovative practice and progressive education. He has completed a postgraduate Montessori qualification and is currently studying for a Masters in Early Childhood Education. He is an advocate for the benefits of having men work in ECCE and has volunteered his time and energy to writing blogs and speaking on national radio stations about the topic.

Author Information

David King holds a dual position of Montessori Director and Adult Education facilitator. He was led to the field of Early Childhood Education from his passion for innovative practice and progressive education. He has completed a postgraduate Montessori qualification and is currently studying for a Masters in Early Childhood Education. He is an advocate for the benefits of having men work in ECCE and has volunteered his time and energy to writing blogs and speaking on national radio stations about the topic.

David King holds a dual position of Montessori Director and Adult Education facilitator. He was led to the field of Early Childhood Education from his passion for innovative practice and progressive education. He has completed a postgraduate Montessori qualification and is currently studying for a Masters in Early Childhood Education. He is an advocate for the benefits of having men work in ECCE and has volunteered his time and energy to writing blogs and speaking on national radio stations about the topic.

David King holds a dual position of Montessori Director and Adult Education facilitator. He was led to the field of Early Childhood Education from his passion for innovative practice and progressive education. He has completed a postgraduate Montessori qualification and is currently studying for a Masters in Early Childhood Education. He is an advocate for the benefits of having men work in ECCE and has volunteered his time and energy to writing blogs and speaking on national radio stations about the topic.
Investment in Quality Early Childhood Education and Care: From Rhetoric to Reality

Jenny Bernard

Introduction

This article critically examines investment, quality and outcomes in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Ireland and analyses the impact of policy making in this area. The rationale for investment in ECEC is notably articulated by James Heckman, Professor of Economics at the University of Chicago where he states:

*Quality early learning and development programs for disadvantaged children can foster valuable skills, strengthen our workforce, grow our economy and reduce social spending...it can prevent the achievement gap and investment in quality early childhood programs is more effective and economically efficient than trying to close the gap later on.* (Heckman, 2015, p.1)

This view is reflected in a range of recent Irish policy documents, such as the Right from the Start: Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy (DCYA, 2013), which highlights the economic benefits of early intervention. Similarly, the Inter-departmental Working Group on the Future Investment in Childcare in Ireland (2015) concludes that investment in early years improves outcomes for children and families, not only leads to developmental benefits for children but also compensates, to a degree, for other factors relating to disadvantage and parental income" (DCYA, 2015, p.9).

There is thus a high degree of consensus on the need for early investment in children’s lives and its potential to positively impact outcomes for children. The nature of such investment, including current policy and practice and the measurement of quality are discussed further in this short article.

**Investment**

Drawing on Heckman’s rationale for early investment, the question can be posed as to whether current Government investment reflects such priorities. A broad overview of annual Government investment in education demonstrates that the amount of money per capita invested in pupils at secondary level is approximately three times greater than that invested per child in pre-school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Cohort</th>
<th>Annual Government Spending per Child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-School</td>
<td>2,600 euro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Start</td>
<td>4,400 euro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary School</td>
<td>6,200 euro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>8,800 euro</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Start Strong (2015)*

A significant increase in investment in ECEC is needed if it is to be a key priority for the Government. At the announcement of the Inter-Departmental Working Group (IDWG) on childcare the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Dr. James Reilly, gave a commitment to invest, but made no reference to the amount of investment needed; “It’s time to plan a clear and coherent strategy for future public investment in childcare” (O’Reilly, 2015, p.3). There is also some confusion as to the possible focus of this future investment as the IDWG’s definition of childcare also includes after-school provision. Such provision caters for children of primary school age.

This reluctance on behalf of Government parties to specify the investment to be made in ECEC is reflected in the comments of Heckman who claims that Government investment of USD 5,000-8000 per child is needed whereas:

*Politicians are talking the talk but investing far less maybe one or two thousand. They get the good headlines that say they are doing something but without the long term results. They haven’t realised that bad childcare can be worse than none at all.* (Heckman, 2009, p.31).

It is also to be noted that outcomes for children cannot be claimed based on poor investment or without evidence based, high quality services (Heckman 2009).

**Evidence-based, High Quality Services**

How is Ireland faring in relation to the provision of high quality early years services? In the UK a key study measured the quality of early years provision and linked the level of quality to outcomes for children (Melhuish et al., 2010). In the Irish context a number of studies examined the quality of Irish early years settings (Neylon, 2012; Collins, 2014; McKeown et al., 2014).

Neylon’s (2012) study of pre-school practice and pedagogy used the international Early Childhood Environmental
Rating Scale Extended (ECERS/E) to examine quality in a randomly selected sample of early years settings (n=26), one from each county in Ireland. This study provided clear evidence of a modest standard in most aspects of pedagogy with average scores of 3.5 on the ECERS/E scale of 1-7.

This standard cannot be said to be of sufficient level to ensure improved outcomes for children as Melhuish et al. (2010) demonstrated. Their study also used ECERS to measure quality in early years settings. The researchers then linked the quality of the setting to child outcomes. They found that higher pre-school quality, as measured by ECERS, was associated with improved scores for language and communication in children aged 3-5yrs. However, positive outcomes could only be predicted where quality was rated at 5 or above on ECERS.

McKeown et al. (2014) also conducted a study of child outcomes in pre-school. They note that there are beneficial effects of pre-school education only when it is of high quality, multi-year and accompanied by support services for vulnerable families. They conclude that there is insufficient evidence to prove the effectiveness of the Free Pre-School Year as:

*It is not a multi-year programme, it does not meet the same standards of quality found in landmark studies of effective pre-school programmes and additional support services for vulnerable families are not a routine part of the programme (McKeown et al., 2014, p.10).*

At the bottom end of the scale there is also the evidence of abusive and damaging practice that was aired on RTE’s Prime Time programme ‘A Breach of Trust’ (2013). This is likely to be a systemic issue as concerns about similar poor practice and the role of the inspectorate had previously been raised internally within the HSE:

*Young children, particularly in full day-care services, are at risk due to a failure of the early years inspection service to apply appropriate standards and to enforce these standards when required (Bernard, 2012, p.2).*

On the positive side, Collins (2014), in her evaluation of the implementation of the HighScope model of practice in forty one early years settings in Co. Mayo, found an average score of 3.89 using the HighScope Programme Quality Assessment (PQA), which is rated on a scale of 1-5. While there is no existing comparison between these two assessment tools i.e. ECERS and the PQA, this is a promising finding as HighScope is an evidence-based model.

**Contradictory Messages in Policy Making**

The findings of a study of international childcare systems (Pascal et al., 2013) provide an important context for this discussion on policy making. In a comparison of fifteen European and other childcare systems the study examined what structural aspects of early education operate to improve educational outcomes for all children and particularly the disadvantaged. Five key structural indicators are considered: i) staff: child ratios; ii) staff training and qualifications; iii) regulation and data collection; iv) government strategy; and v) national pre-school curriculum requirements.

The study finds that the high performing countries have higher ratios of staff to children and higher levels of regulation than other countries. Staff training and qualifications, a government strategy and a national curriculum were seen to be of less significance.

There are several contradictory messages from Ireland’s policy makers in terms of ensuring system wide quality. In 2011 the DCYA decreased the staff to child ratio to 1: 11 in services participating in the Free Pre-School Year scheme. This was a cost saving measure. However Pascal et al. (2013, p.31) have noted that:

*There is some evidence that a higher adult: child ratio (i.e. a smaller group of children per adult) in early education programmes is helpful in ensuring the quality of interactions between educators and children. Higher ratios are seen to help create a climate of emotional security allow practitioners to be responsive to the needs of children.*

As far back as 1985 the first Department of Health Working Group on minimum standards recommended a staff: child ratio of 1: 8. Also the Early Start programme, under the aegis of the Department of Education, operates with a staff: child ratio of 1: 8 (DoH, 1985).

In relation to strengthening regulation, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2013), in direct response to the RTE Prime Time programme, set out its Pre-School Quality Agenda. Six of the agenda’s eight actions are directly related to the pre-school inspection system. The publication of inspection reports online and the recruitment of additional inspectors have been implemented. However other more important actions such as implementing new national pre-school standards and the legislated for registration system are not yet operational.

Moloney (2014) provides a detailed
critique of the pre-school quality agenda. Commenting on the other two actions, she points out that the problem actually lies in how the previous inspection system operated rather than the need for increased powers. She concludes that “equally disconcerting are the increased inspectorate powers in the areas of enforcement, prosecution and closure of settings. The inspectorate already had these powers but did not use them.” (Moloney, 2014, p.82).

In relation to staff training and qualifications, while making a fund available for training and qualifications, the DCYA recently announced that the September 2015 deadline for all early years practitioners to be qualified at Level 5 or Level 6, one of the key points in the Pre-School Quality Agenda, has now been extended until September 2016. This may have further repercussions for quality.

**Conclusion and Implications for Policy**

Policy makers in Ireland have accepted in theory that investing in quality early learning and development is a wise investment showing significant returns. The evidence, however demonstrates that universal high quality early years services and programmes have not yet been delivered. A redesign of early years services in a way which improves outcomes for all children, while narrowing the gap in outcomes between children is now required. Early years’ centres which do not meet required standards and are potentially harmful to children should no longer be allowed to operate.

The inconsistencies of DCYA policy with regard to staff ratios and qualifications should be corrected as a matter of urgency. The Government should seize the opportunity to deliver on its rhetoric of early investment in the lives of young children and do so in a way that delivers high quality outcomes for all.

**References**


**Author Information**

**Jenny Bernard** is an Early Years Consultant with considerable experience and expertise in the field of Early Years, having held key positions in both the statutory, voluntary and community sectors. Upholding children’s rights is at the core of her work. She has developed a number of innovative services designed to achieve children’s successful participation in high quality early education and care, including the implementation of the HighScope model of practice in County Mayo. As Early Years Services Manager in the Child and Family Agency (formerly HSE), she was responsible for managing Early Years Inspections and the development of Early Years Family Support.
Progression or regression. Is the pre-school quality agenda perpetuating a care-education divide in the Early Childhood Education and Care sector in Ireland?

Mary Moloney

Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) services tend to embody two differing traditions: care and education which manifest as ‘split systems’ where both the care and education sectors are divided and governed, in terms of policy making and governance by different ministries (Kaga, Bennett and Moss, 2010). Ireland has long had a 'split system’ of care and education where responsibility for early education for four and five year olds rests with the Department of Education and Skills (DES), while the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) holds responsibility for children from birth to school going age. In spite of repeated calls to develop a coordinated and integrated policy approach under a lead Ministry (Hayes and Brady, 2006) to address the care and education of children from birth to six years more holistically and coherently (OECD, 2006), policy in Ireland repeatedly perpetuates a structural and conceptual distinction between education and care. Hence, early childhood services remain “fractured across the welfare (childcare) and educational (early education) domains” (Hayes, 2008, p.33) with childcare predominantly positioned as a private good to be dealt with, and paid for by the family, and education positioned as a public good provided for free by the State (Adshead and Neylon, 2008). Consequently, both sectors differ in relation to governance, investment, staff qualifications and remuneration, access criteria, and regulation.

Notwithstanding attempts to bridge the divide between the sectors, and to enhance the quality of ECEC provision through initiatives such as Síolta: the National Quality Framework (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), 2006) and Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2009), there is a “considerable gap between policy and practice that seriously undermines children’s experiences in early childhood settings” (Moloney, 2011 p. 172). Indeed the gap between policy and practice, and the negative impact upon children’s experiences were brought to the fore in 2013 when poor practices in a number of ECEC services were publicly exposed on national television. While unsettling and shocking, for many, this exposé was not surprising as the state repeatedly invests far below the international benchmark of 1% of GDP in ECEC. Therefore while the average across OECD countries is 0.8%, public investment in Ireland’s ECEC services is 0.2% of GDP (Start Strong, 2015).

Following the 2013 exposé, the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Frances Fitzgerald, T.D. launched a pre-school quality agenda comprising of eight key areas of action to address the issues within the sector as a matter of urgency. Among the areas identified was the need for increased qualification requirements for educators working within the Free Pre-school Year Scheme (ECCE scheme) introduced in 2010, a mandatory training requirement for all other staff, and a strengthening of the national inspection system.

Addressing the qualifications issue

The purpose of the ECCE scheme is to provide access to a free pre-school year to children in the year before they start primary school. Participating settings are required to adhere to the principles of Síolta and Aistear. The State pays a capitation fee to participating settings, and in return, they provide a pre-school service free of charge for fifteen hours per week, over 38 weeks (September to June). Currently, 97% of eligible children are availing of the scheme (DCYA, 2012).

At EU level it is recognised that the “pre-school period is the most important time in a child’s emotional and social development…staff working with pre-school children should therefore have appropriate qualifications” (EU, 2011, p. 7-8). In countries where staff are not required to undertake professional training or gain specific qualifications to work with young children, “many of them lack the interactive skills and overall proficiency necessary to ensure that the children in their care develop adequate cognitive skills” ( Ibid. p. 12). Critically, the ECCE scheme was the first funding programme in Ireland to introduce staff qualification levels.

All pre-school leaders delivering the scheme must hold a nationally accredited Major Award in Childcare/Early Childhood Education at Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) or equivalent. In addition, a higher capitation rate is paid to settings employing pre-school leaders qualified to Level 7 or 8.
Following the launch of the pre-school quality agenda, Frances Fitzgerald, T.D. quickly addressed the issue of qualifications more generally, noting that “training is a big issue for the sector and it needs to be supported in terms of gaining those qualifications…” (Oireachtas, 2013).

A mandatory minimum qualification of Level 5 on the NFQ for all staff working with children in early childhood settings has now been introduced with effect from September, 2016, and the qualification level for pre-school leaders delivering the ECCE scheme has been increased from Level 5 to Level 6. Regardless of EU recognition of the importance of the pre-school period in a child’s learning trajectory, and the EU (2011) recommendation that at least 60% of staff should be qualified to Bachelor level, there is no indication to date that the government intends to introduce any benchmark in this regard.

**Early childhood educators and inspectors are seen as co-professionals**

It is interesting to note that while Síolta and Aistear, which are perceived as essential “pillars of quality” (DCYA/DES, 2011 p. 18), uphold the inseparable nature of care and education from birth to six years, the present approach to qualification requirements further perpetuates a two-tiered ECEC system. Consequently, educators in the ECCE scheme are ostensibly educating children, and are therefore required to hold a Level 6 qualification, while those working with children from birth to three years require Level 5 and could be viewed as simply caring for children, for which a minimum basic qualification is considered sufficient.

**Strengthening the inspectorate**

Since pre-school inspections began in 1996, they have been undertaken “predominantly by public health nurses acting as early years” (Jeyes, 2013). According to Start Strong (2013) the qualifications and role of the inspectorate “is too narrow with the primary focus on health and welfare, rather than more broadly” (p. 3), and as a result, there is a reality disconnect between those working in the sector and those inspecting ECCE settings (Moloney, 2014).

On many levels therefore, the imminent involvement of the DES in the inspection of settings participating in the ECCE scheme is a positive and progressive development. It validates the work of early childhood educators by adopting a strengths-based approach to inspection. Accordingly, the main focus “will be on the quality of the dynamic processes that facilitate children’s learning in the early years setting… [and the] ongoing development of quality through co-professional dialogue between practitioners in early years settings and DES Early Years inspectors” (DES, 2015a).

This approach represents a new departure for the ECEC sector where early childhood educators and inspectors are seen as co-professionals, and where the inspectorate is interested in what these educators are doing well, in encouraging self-evaluative review processes, and supporting them to enhance quality provision, rather than the current system which instils a culture of compliance through fear (Moloney, 2014). Moreover, the DES is recruiting a number of early years inspectors who must hold an honours primary degree (Level 8, NQF) in Early Childhood Education and Care plus at least 5 years’ experience within early years settings (0-6 years). This recruitment process establishes a career pathway for early childhood graduates while also ensuring that those with the appropriate knowledge and skills are included in the early years inspection team. Heretofore graduates from BA ECCE programmes have struggled for recognition of their degree (Moloney and Pope, 2013) and many have left the sector to take up employment opportunities elsewhere (Madden, 2012; Moloney and Pope, 2013; Moloney, 2014).

**Reinforcing the care-education divide**

Although the proposed DES education focused inspections are primarily a positive development, they none-the-less reinforce the care-education divide discussed earlier. The decision to focus solely upon settings participating in the ECCE scheme (DES, 2015), as well as the increased qualification requirements for pre-school leaders working in the scheme, implies that the free pre-school year is the only aspect of provision that is educational.

Alongside this, and further sustaining the care-education divide, there is now a parallel system of inspection where TUSLA (the Child and Family Agency) inspects all settings in relation to health and safety, while the DES inspects the quality of educational provision in settings participating in the ECCE scheme.

As mentioned, Ireland has a split system of education and care. The present emphasis upon the ECCE scheme in terms of funding, qualification requirements and inspection, not only sustains the distinction between education and care, it also leads to an emerging divide between children aged from birth to three years, and children aged from three to six years.

Worryingly, children under three years are increasingly disadvantaged in terms of investment, qualified staff, and a holistic approach to their early care and education. Drawing upon international experience Kaga et al. (2010) hold that the best provision for children under three years is achieved when policy making is ‘unitary’ with a single set of rules, supports and funding arrangements.
Conclusion

Progress has been made in relation to the introduction of the ECCE scheme, raising the qualification requirements for those working in the scheme, and introducing education focused inspections for settings participating in the scheme. These developments however show considerable regression with regards to developing an integrated model of education and care in terms of government administration, funding and staff training. This is especially the case in relation to children under three years old, where lower qualification levels are required, settings remain outside of the remit of the DES education focussed inspections, and where there is no comprehensive national funding policy. Additionally, although progress has been made in incentivising services participating in the ECCE scheme to employ graduates at Level 7 or above, there is no reward for obtaining a degree in early childhood education and care, and there is no incentive for existing educators in the field to upskill to higher level qualifications.

These issues must be addressed at a policy and a planning level. In the long term the present fragmented governance and funding structure is unsustainable, and unacceptable especially with regards to children under three years. To advance the oversight and regulation of the ECEC sector in Ireland, and to ensure equity for all children, it is paramount that the DES works collaboratively with the DCYA to agree where ultimate responsibility lies for the sector, and to develop and implement a coherent single, unified approach to training, inspection and funding for all settings outside of the primary school system.

References


Author Information

Dr. Mary Moloney is a researcher, author and lecturer in Early Childhood Education and Care. Her special interests include but are not confined to how early childhood policy translates into everyday practice, professional identity and governance within the early years sector. She is also interested in international perspectives on early childhood education and has visited a broad range of countries including Slovenia, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, New Zealand and Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy. In 2014, Mary received a teaching hero award from the National Teaching and Learning Forum for her work as lecturer in early childhood education at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.
Early Years Education-focused Inspections: A Reason to Celebrate?

Emer Ring

Introduction

The Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills (DES), at the request of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), is currently developing a model of early years education-focused inspections (EYEIs) to evaluate the quality of educational provision in early years settings participating in the Free Pre-school Year (FPSY) in Early Childhood Care and Education scheme. The FPSY was introduced in January 2010 with the specific purpose of making early learning opportunities available to all children aged more than three years and two months on September 1st in the relevant pre-school year. The initiative represents an annual government investment of 170 million euro (DES, 2015a). On May 26th 2015, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) organised a briefing and consultation meeting for early years’ education stakeholders. Dr. Maresa Duignan, Early Years Specialist, at the DES described the occasion as an opportunity to celebrate and affirm the early years’ sector and the EYEIs as a huge opportunity to impact on the lives of children (Duignan, 2015). This article explores whether indeed the proposed EYEIs are a reason to celebrate.

The Inspection of Early Years Education in Ireland: A Historical Context

In contrast to other European countries, where the provision of early childhood care and education has been a feature of children’s experience for many decades, Ireland has only recently begun to focus specifically on children’s pre-primary experiences. Recent research suggests that the school-starting age of four in Ireland is based primarily on historical, socio-economic and political contexts, which prevailed at the establishment of the primary school system in 1831. The school-starting age of four in Ireland is based on the establishment of the primary school system in 1831 (Centre for Early Childhood Research at Mary Immaculate College (CERAMIC) and Centre for Social and Educational Research (CSER), 2015). In Ireland, primary education has developed separately from pre-primary education. While the funding of primary education has been the remit of the Department of Education and Skills, in its various iterations, the funding of pre-primary education has been the remit of up to nine separate government departments (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR), 1999). Similarly in Ireland, the inspection of primary education has developed separately from the inspection of pre-primary education. The Irish national school system was established in 1831 and a state school inspectorate system, followed in 1832 (Coolahan and O’Donavan, 2009). This inspection system built on an existing school inspection system developed in 1818 by the Society for the Promotion of the Education of the Poor of Ireland (the Kildare Place Society). The inspection system at pre-primary level was up until recently the remit of the Health Service Executive (HSE) and is currently the remit of TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency (Ireland, 2013). Inspections are conducted by pre-school inspectors who are professionals with expertise in children’s development and environmental health (Hanafin, 2014). An analysis of pre-school inspection reports (n=3,007) conducted in the period from January 2012 to May 2013 demonstrates that most pre-school services were compliant with most regulations and that about three-quarters of all regulatory requirements inspected were assessed as compliant (Hanafin, ibid). The EYEIs provide an opportunity to extend the existing inspection system at pre-primary level to focus specifically on the nature, range and appropriateness of the early educational experiences for children participating in the FPSY (DES, 2015a).

The Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills

The Inspectorate of the DES operates under the Education Act, 1998 (Ireland, 1998). The functions of the Inspectorate are detailed in section 13 of the Act and include advisory, supportive and evaluation roles. The general principles under which the Inspectorate carry out their work are set out in the The Code of Practice for the Inspectorate (DES, 2015b). Four key principles underpin the work of the Inspectorate: A Focus on Learners; Development and Improvement; Respectful Engagement and Responsibility and Accountability. The purpose of these principles is to provide a benchmark against which the quality of the Inspectorate’s professional practice can be assessed. At the heart of the Inspectorate’s role is improvement in the quality of learning and teaching for children. Through the provision of high quality evaluation and advice, the DES Inspectorate has contributed significantly to the vast improvements evident in the Irish Education system (Coolahan and O’Donavan, 2009). High levels of satisfaction are consistently
expressed with the performance of the inspectorate (MORI Ireland, 2005; DES, 2013). The involvement of the DES Inspectorate in EYEIs represents a valuable opportunity for early years settings to benefit from vast knowledge, expertise and experience that has been developed by the Inspectorate since its inception.

Rationale and Purpose of Early Years Education-focused Inspections

The rationale and purpose of EYEIs are detailed in the Early Years Education-focused Inspections in Early Years Settings Participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme: Briefing Paper: 26th May 2015 published by the DES (DES, 2015a). Through EYEIs, the importance of high-quality early education in building the foundations for lifelong learning and enabling children to reach their full potential will be highlighted. Early years educators will benefit from the supportive and advisory role of the Inspectorate, which will contribute to the ongoing development of quality and best practice in early years settings participating in the FPSY scheme.

The implementation of the internationally acclaimed Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009); Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), 2006) will be further complemented and enhanced through EYEIs. The publication of written inspection reports will assist in the dissemination of good practice in early years education nationally and provide information for parents on the quality of early education in early years settings participating in the FPSY scheme. Critically EYEIs will provide an opportunity for the existing positive practice in early years settings to be identified and affirmed.

Early Years Education-focused Inspection Framework

A quality framework for EYEIs against which inspections will be conducted has been developed (DES, 2015a). This framework is informed by Aistear; The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009); Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE), 2006); pilot inspections conducted by the DES and HSE inspectorate in 2011; national and international research and policy related to early years education and a review of relevant agencies’ inspection processes and protocols in early years settings. The framework views the key elements of best practice in early years education through four lenses as detailed in Figure 1. below.

The importance of high-quality early education in building the foundations for lifelong learning and enabling children to reach their full potential will be highlighted

A Reason to Celebrate?

It is envisaged that the EYEIs will be piloted in Autumn 2015 and that the process will subsequently be shared and discussed with early years stakeholders. EYEIs are a reason to celebrate in terms of the potential
benefits to society, parents and most importantly children. A substantial corpus of international research supports the view that a playful approach to learning is best suited to achieving the goals of early childhood education (Fisher et al., 2011). While Siolta (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009) both endorse play as a key context for learning, experiences elsewhere indicate that a play-based approach can be difficult to implement in practice (Moyles, 2010; Wood, 2013). Appreciating these challenges, the strong focus on play in the EYEIs provides a unique opportunity to support the development of sustainable pedagogies of play in the early years.

Clearly the provision of continuing professional development and engaging in ongoing professional dialogue and discussion with the early years sector must continue to be central to the development of EYEIs. EYEIs are a reason to celebrate and prejudices. It requires openness to awareness and suspension of our judgements and certainties are questioned” (Rinaldi, 2001, p. 1). “listening is not easy. It requires a deep understanding and suspension of our judgements and prejudices. It requires openness to change. It demands that we value the unknown and overcome the feelings of emptiness that we experience when our certainties are questioned” (Rinaldi, 2001, p. 1).

Providing access to high-quality early childhood care and education experiences for children can enhance and optimise children’s learning and development and impact positively on their future attainments. In these environments children’s dispositions for learning are developed and sustained. Poor quality early childhood environments impact negatively on children and place them at an early disadvantage, which is more difficult and costly to compensate for at later stages in their education (Heckman, 2013). Through investing in early childhood care and education and providing high-quality experiences for children in the early years, society places a value on childhood and on children.

References


Author Information
Dr. Emer Ring is Head of the Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Emer previously worked as a class, learning support and resource teacher at primary school level and a senior inspector with the Department of Education and Skills. Emer lectures on the Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (BAECCCE), the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) programme and the Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Practice (BAECP). These programmes are strongly influenced by progressive movements in early years and special education internationally.
Keep Calm and Carry On: Children’s Self-Regulation in Early Years Settings

Sinead McNally and Rebecca Maguire

Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Ireland promotes the development and education of children aged from birth to six years. Over a third of nine-month-olds and over half of three-year-olds experience some form of non-parental care in Ireland (Williams et al., 2013), with type and duration of ECEC experiences varying considerably. However, almost all children aged between three and four years avail of the free pre-school year which was introduced in January 2010, administered by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Irish ECEC policy is developing rapidly. Responsibility for policy developments in the ECEC sector is shared by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). Two key frameworks underpinning ECEC provision are Síolta, the national quality framework for Early Childhood Education (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006) and Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009). Implementation of the early childhood curriculum is not mandatory, however, in ECEC settings (French, 2013).

Síolta and Aistear are related in goals and themes (NCCA, 2009): both frameworks highlight the period from birth to six years as a ‘significant and distinct’ time of development, emphasising the importance of adequate supports and resources during this period. The fourth Síolta principle clearly states the unique responsibility that adults in Early Years settings hold with regard to children’s development: “Responsive, sensitive and reciprocal relationships, which are consistent over time, are essential to the wellbeing, learning and development of the young child.” (CECDE, 2006). While Síolta and Aistear do not explicitly outline the mechanisms by which these relationships impact children’s development, the research evidence for responsive and sensitive caregiving is expounded for practitioners elsewhere (see Hayes, 2013, for a comprehensive but accessible overview of research in this area).

Understanding how adults impact children’s development in the early years is critical to successful implementation of practice recommendations. Much of the evidence in support of positive adult-child relationships refers to the impact of environment on children’s self-regulation processes. Self-regulation is considered a cornerstone of early childhood development (Shonkoff and Philips, 2000; Gillespie and Seibel, 2006; Meadows, 2009) and impacts significantly on a host of children’s outcomes throughout the life course (Moffitt et al., 2011).

Critically for ECEC professionals, the development of children’s self-regulation is susceptible to the quality of the environment, making the provision of support and opportunities that help children self-regulate an essential element in quality ECEC (Shonkoff and Philips, 2000). The aim of this paper is to complement the current practice recommendations regarding the important role of the adult in young children’s learning environments. It aims to do so by highlighting the mechanisms by which quality ECEC can positively impact self-regulation processes which are foundational for wellbeing and academic success throughout the lifespan.

Defining Self-Regulation

While there are various definitions of self-regulation (Duckworth and Kern, 2011), it is commonly understood as a set of complex processes that allow a child to respond appropriately and adaptively to their environment to achieve higher order goals (Tangney et al., 2013; McClelland et al., 2015). Self-regulation rests on a number of emotional and cognitive mechanisms, all of which may be influenced by the social context (Blair and Diamond, 2008).

Children’s ability to self-regulate is recognised as a key predictor of a range of psychological and behavioural outcomes including academic success, social and emotional well-being, income level, and job satisfaction (e.g. Tagney et al., 2004; Moffitt et al., 2011; Converse, et al., 2014). Conversely, difficulty in regulating behaviour is often cited as the root of a variety of social and psychological problems in later childhood and beyond (Dishion and Connell, 2006; Baumeister et al., 2013). Furthermore, children who cannot easily self-regulate are less likely to show resilience in adverse situations (Lengua, 2002; Wachs, 2006; Meadows, 2009).

Development of self-regulation

While all children develop their capacity to self-regulate over the first five years...
of life (Kopp, 1982; Posner and Rothbart, 1998; Blair and Diamond, 2008), they vary considerably in this ability (Eisenberg, 2012). This is likely due to a combination of biological (e.g. temperament), cognitive (e.g. executive control) and environmental factors which exert differing influences at different stages of development (McClelland et al., 2015).

Early self-regulatory tasks require children to control their emotional reactions (Eisenberg, 2012) which is impacted by temperament, or individual differences in responding to external or internal events (Thomas and Chess, 1977; Thompson, 2001). In particular, individual differences in reactivity and emotionality are associated with different regulatory outcomes, for instance in preschool classroom behaviour (Rimm-Kaufman and Kagan, 2005). Another core temperamental construct is ‘effortful control’ which is related to low negative emotionality in childhood (Rothbart et al., 2011). In this framework, self-regulation is viewed as the set of processes that modulate reactivity, or the intensity to which a child responds to changes in their internal or external environment (Rothbart et al., 2011). Effortful control emerges between the ages of 6-12 months with considerable improvement by the age of 3 ( Posner and Rothbart, 2000). Temperamental differences in infancy and toddlerhood, adults can support emerging independence (and continuing dependence), through the inclusion of manageable challenges that promote healthy emotional and behavioural regulation (Shonkoff and Philips, 2000).

The Role of Adult-Child Relationships in Self-Regulation

Thus, while self-regulation depends on biological and cognitive factors, it is also clearly influenced by children’s environments. Indeed when examining task persistence, which is considered a behavioural measure of self-regulation, Deater-Deckard et al. (2005) found characteristics of the early environment to be the most important influence in early childhood. Quality of parenting, including maternal sensitivity, (Kochanska et al., 2000; Kopp, 1982), attachment security (Kochanska et al., 2009) and parenting styles (Belsky and Beaver, 2011), are known to impact on self-regulation and executive functioning from as early as 18 months of age (Bernier et al., 2010).

Taken together these findings highlight the potential for early years practitioners to nurture children’s self-regulatory abilities. Early childhood is a crucial period for laying the foundations for self-regulation (Meyers and Berk, 2014) with a growing recognition that adults in early childcare settings play an important role in facilitating these skills (Bodrova and Leong, 2007; Florez, 2011). Researchers and practitioners recognise the importance of a goodness-of-fit with regard to acknowledging and responding to children’s temperaments (Gillespie and Seibel, 2006) and suggest that by understanding the impact of temperament on self-regulation Early Years practitioners can best develop strategies that support self-regulation (Shonkoff and Philips, 2000). Explicitly considering temperamental differences and self-regulatory abilities helps maintain objectivity and understanding in responding to what may be considered more challenging behaviour or ‘difficult’ temperaments (Gillespie and Seibel, 2006). Adults in early years settings provide critical external support for self-regulation in early childhood: Early years practitioners support babies’ internal ability to regulate through consistent responsivity (Perry, 2001) but also by offering young children opportunities to take responsibility for their own self-regulation as they become developmentally capable. In practical terms, this means observing, responding, providing structure and predictability, arranging developmentally appropriate environments, and defining age-appropriate limits, while showing empathy and caring (see Hayes (2013) for practice applications).
Conclusion

Self-regulation is a cornerstone of early childhood development and plays a key role in resilience, enabling children from diverse backgrounds to reach similarly positive outcomes (McClelland et al., 2015). The literature discussed provides clear evidence that caring, consistent relationships with adults enhance self-regulation by supporting the development of persistence, attention and the ability to cope with emotional arousal associated with working through challenges (Bandura, 1997; Dweck, 1999).

It is particularly important to highlight individual differences in temperamentally-based self-regulation in the context of early years settings in order to show that children vary in their development of these important skills and that responsive caregiving can make a significant difference. The growing policy focus on quality in Early Years settings, in conjunction with new evidence emerging from the Growing Up in Ireland study (see www.growingup.ie for more details), provides an unprecedented emphasis on the influence of early childhood environments and adult-child interactions, individual differences in early childhood, and children’s outcomes. This work supplements the wealth of international evidence on the role of temperament, self-regulation and responsive caregiving on children’s development in the early years and highlights how adults in early years settings are in a pivotal position to help young children self-regulate. This will in turn have a significant impact on numerous outcomes such as school readiness, social competence and psychological well-being.

References


Hayes, N. (2013) Early Years Practice: Getting it Right from the Start, Gill and McMillan Ltd.


ENRICHing Children’s Lives in the Earliest Years through the Implementation and Evaluation of new Wraparound Services for Parents and Infants in Disadvantaged Areas

Gráinne Hickey, Sinéad McGilloway, Shane Leavy, Yvonne Leckey, Mairéad Furlong and Siobhan O’Connor

Introduction

A growing body of international evidence demonstrates that prevention and early intervention programmes can significantly enhance child outcomes and contribute to better adult functioning and wellbeing (Allen, 2011). Children who show early signs of maladjustment are at greater risk of poorer adult outcomes including antisocial behaviour, criminality, low occupational status, welfare dependence, teenage parenthood and problematic relationships in adult life (Rutter et al., 2006; Odgers et al., 2008). Patterns of psychological problems and social dependency have also been found to echo across successive generations of the same family, perpetuating the cycle of disadvantage (Serbin and Kemp, 2004; Belsky et al., 2009). These difficulties have profound social and economic implications and costs, not only for affected individuals and families, but also for wider society (Scott, 2005).

Research has found that improvements in childhood outcomes are pivotal to preventing or alleviating harmful life trajectories and interrupting what is often an intergenerational cycle of disadvantage (Engel et al., 2011). Children from birth to three years may be the most receptive to intervention, and early intervention and prevention programmes have also been found to more cost-effective than later interventions (Zero to Three, 2012). In addition, public investment in prevention and early intervention services must represent good value for money and policy makers, practitioners and
Development of early years services/interventions in Ireland

There has been a growing commitment in Ireland to investing in high-quality child and family services (DCYA, 2014). Recent years have seen the expansion of community-based initiatives based around prevention and early intervention programmes which focus on providing parenting supports and target childhood inequality (DCYA, 2013). There has also been increasing investment in research (DCYA, 2011) and considerable strides have been made towards identifying evidence-based parenting supports which can improve child outcomes in an Irish context. For example, the Incredible Years Ireland research programme demonstrated that group-based parenting programmes can result in sustained clinically significant improvements in child adjustment and in parental mental health and wellbeing whilst they are also cost-effective with potential long-run economic returns (McGilloway et al., 2012; McGilloway et al., 2014; O’Neill et al., 2013). Despite such developments, research also indicates that parenting programmes may not always reach, or meet the complex needs of, the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children and families (McGilloway et al. 2014; Reyno and McGrath, 2006). Notwithstanding the burgeoning research in this area, gaps remain in our understanding of what constitutes effective and cost-effective parenting intervention in the earliest years of life. Research is also needed to further our understanding of effective implementation and how evidence-based programmes can be embedded within routine or usual care services both in Ireland and elsewhere.

In this paper, we describe an innovative early years service model and research programme. The ‘Up to 2’ or ‘Parent and Infant’ programme is a complex, multi-component intervention for parents and infants aged 0-2 years. This new programme is being evaluated as part of the ENRICH (Evaluation of wRaparound in Ireland for CHildren and Families) research programme – a five-year programme of research funded by the Health Research Board and being undertaken by a research team in Maynooth University’s Department of Psychology, in collaboration with a multidisciplinary consortium of senior academics from other national and international institutions.

The local service model

The Up to 2/Parent and Infant (PIN) programme was developed by Archways (an NGO that specialises in the promotion of evidence-based programmes for children and young people), in collaboration with Public Health Nurses (PHNs) and other community-based organisations. The new programme is rooted in the principles of wraparound intervention and involves collaboration between key multi-disciplinary stakeholders to tailor service delivery to child/family/community needs, address multiple risk factors, tackle gaps in treatment and address barriers to engagement for ‘harder to reach’ families (Bruns and Walker, 2011).

The programme combines a range of developmentally-appropriate parent and family supports delivered in a single intervention process (Figure 1). The programme is designed to be flexible in the sense that content and delivery can be tailored to family/community needs, but also has standardised core elements including two newly developed Incredible Years parenting programmes. Parents who have recently given birth are offered a 16-week mother and infant programme straddling the first 6 months of development. During this period, the Incredible Years Parent and Baby Programme (IY-PBP) will be delivered in conjunction with information and awareness-raising workshops and courses for new mothers (e.g. baby massage classes, weaning workshops, paediatric first aid course; toddler healthy eating classes). Around the 12 month developmental period, further support is provided through a play and oral language development programme. Subsequently, when the child reaches 18 months, the Incredible Years Parent and Toddler Programme (IY-PTP) will be delivered.

Figure 1. Outline of the Up to 2/Parent and Infant Programme

The goals of the programme are to: enhance parent-infant relationships and encourage secure attachment; empower parents, strengthen parent competency and build social support networks; encourage
positive child health and development and prevent child injury; promote cognitive and pre-literacy skills; prevent conduct-disordered behaviour; and enhance infant socioemotional development.

The programme is being implemented as part of the Area Based Childhood (ABC) programme in two separate sites in Ireland: Clondalkin, Co. Dublin and Drogheda/Dundalk, Co. Louth. Both areas are characterised by significant socioeconomic disadvantage. The programme is expected to be delivered at any one time point to two to three groups of parents (each group will comprise approximately ten parents) in cycles over the course of one year. Programme delivery began in January 2015 in Clondalkin, whilst roll-out in Drogheda and Dundalk will commence in September 2015.

The ENRICH research evaluation

The ENRICH research programme involves a methodologically rigorous, multi-method evaluation comprising three interlocking studies including: (1) a longitudinal, controlled before-and-after impact evaluation to assess the effectiveness of the new programme; (2) a process evaluation to explore programme implementation and the contextual factors that influence or shape implementation; and (3) an economic analysis designed to assess the cost-effectiveness and longer-run cost-benefits of the programme.

The specific objectives are as follows:

- To analyse the impact of the programme on parent and infant outcomes including parental competencies, parental psychological wellbeing, parent-child interactions, the home environment and child development and socioemotional wellbeing, and to compare outcomes in the short to medium term between families who receive wraparound supports and those receiving services as usual.
- To document how the intervention was developed and examine in detail the implementation processes and mechanisms, including the extent to which the intervention was delivered as intended (e.g. implementation fidelity; theoretical fidelity).
- To describe the patterns of parental engagement with, and response to, the programme and to explore, in parallel, contextual factors which may facilitate or inhibit effective implementation processes.
- To investigate patterns of service utilisation, calculate the costs of service delivery and combine data on outcomes and costs to estimate the programme’s cost-effectiveness, as well as longer-run cost-benefits.

Conclusion

A significant proportion of Irish children are at risk of adverse early experiences which, in turn, may undermine their ability to achieve their full potential (Williams et al., 2009). However, there remain significant barriers to ensuring that vulnerable children and families receive high-quality prevention and early intervention services (Horwitz et al., 2010). In the context of an increasing commitment to public investment in early years services, it is imperative that high quality research is conducted to identify and evaluate programmes which meet the complex needs of vulnerable families and to help articulate how such services can be embedded within mainstream settings in Ireland.

The first set of findings emerging from this research programme should be available in early 2016 and it is envisaged that this study will provide important information about the implementation, effectiveness and cost-effectiveness, of a new wraparound model of service provision for parents and infants. The research will also generate valuable insights into the factors which facilitate or impede the effectiveness of early years parenting supports.

Another important element of this research will involve the development of a model of knowledge transfer based on an analysis of barriers and facilitators to the transfer of research evidence into child health and social care policy and practice. The aim of this strand of work is to enhance the utilisation of a high quality evidence base that has been, and continues to be, generated by many early childhood-focused researchers in collaboration with practitioners and service providers throughout Ireland.

(Further information is available at enrichireland.com).

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the Health Research Board for supporting the ENRICH research programme through its new Collaborative Applied Research Grants scheme.
References


Author Information

Dr Gráinne Hickey is Research Programme Manager on the ENRICH team. Her research interests include child development, prevention and early intervention, evidence-based practice, evaluation and public health research.

Dr Sinéad McGilloway is the Principal Investigator of the ENRICH programme and Director of the Mental Health and Social Research Unit at Maynooth University Department of Psychology. She has research interests in child and adult mental health, mental health services, research evaluation, early intervention and prevention, systematic reviews and palliative care.

Shane Leavy is a Research Assistant and Data Manager with the ENRICH team. He holds an MSc in Applied Social Research and has worked on a range of research projects with the Economic and Social Research Institute.

Yvonne Leckey is a Researcher/Fieldwork Coordinator on the ENRICH programme. She holds an MA in Anthropology and has research interests in child development and mental health, early intervention and evidence-based practice, substance misuse and related health outcomes.

Dr Mairéad Furlong is a postdoctoral researcher with the ENRICH team. Her research interests include early intervention and evidence-based practice, systematic reviews, mixed methods and health and social inequities.

Siobhan O’Connor is a Doctoral Fellow on the ENRICH research programme and is working to develop a knowledge transfer model to address the use of research evidence in policy and practice within child health and social care.
Historical and Cultural Evolution of the Montessori Method: Some Considerations for Irish Early Years Practice

Sinead Matson

Introduction

In this paper I will give a brief overview of the original literature surrounding the Montessori Method, how Montessori used a process of action research to evolve her method, the cultural interpretations or variations of the Method and what implications or opportunities this has for practitioners currently mapping the children’s learning in Montessori environments with Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009).

Background and Context

In 2009, with the introduction of the Free Pre-School Year, Irish Montessori pre-schools agreed to use Aistear, a play based curriculum framework to map the learning goals and aims of the children in their settings. This brought about a conflict of pedagogical language. Aistear uses the language of ‘play’ while Montessori used the language of ‘work’ to describe the activities of the child in a Montessori setting (Montessori 1936). When examined more closely the two are in fact found to be describing the same phenomenon. Play, in Aistear is defined as ‘a way of doing things’ and toys are described as ‘props’ (NCCA 2009). ‘Work’ in Montessori terms is any activity the child is concentrating on and the Montessori materials are used as props to facilitate that concentration (Montessori 1909, 1936, 1948).

The argument could be made by practitioners that the Montessori Method is somehow incompatible with Aistear and should remain true and unchanged from its original form. The literature surrounding the evolution of the Montessori Method, both culturally and historically, will be used to question the validity of this view.

An Examination of the Literature

In her book The New Children: Talks with Dr. Maria Montessori (1919) Sheila Jamieson Radice discussed how she used a combination of her conversations with Montessori along with articles which appeared in The Times Educational Supplement from September to December 1919 to answer some questions readers had about the Montessori Method. Radice details how Montessori’s colleague, Anna Maccheroni, commented that the Montessori Method was not finished or finite, but that it was evolving and would continue to evolve. Later Radice (1919, p. 30) credits Montessori with saying that the materials are not “all-sufficient” and that not only “should” more materials enter the method but they “must”. Culverwell also mentions this in his exploration of the Montessori Method (Culverwell, 1913) as does Henry Holmes in his introduction to the American version of The Montessori Method (Montessori, 1912). Thus, it is possible to draw the conclusion that both Montessori and her academic contemporaries were agreed that the Method is flexible and responsive and not a finite, fixed Method but one which evolves within time and context.

If it is possible to conclude that Montessori herself, and her fellow contemporaries agreed the Method was not finite and should evolve; the implications of that conclusion are that it did evolve and continues to evolve. This knowledge should empower the Montessori practitioner in Ireland to use the Montessori Method as an action research process (Montessori, 1909/1912) and to introduce other materials which children respond to and apply the same Montessori principles inherent in the method.

Some authors (Holmes 1912; Culverwell, 1913; Smith, 1912; Craig, 1913) spoke about the need to, and feasibility of, adapting the Montessori Method to reflect the needs and culture of the child’s own country. Radice (1919) compares the average English school to their Italian counterpart and comes to the conclusion that they are not parallel but unique to their own culture. Holmes went as far as to suggest that either the Froebelian and Montessori system be interwoven together or that American children should undertake a two year course with the first year being dedicated to Montessori and the second to Froebel (Holmes, 1912). This begs the question, what modifications and adaptations were made between 1912 and today which are considered to be fundamental components for contemporary Montessori schools. Given that Dr. Montessori herself signed off on Holmes’ very radical introduction which suggested mixing two methodologies, can it be taken as an indicator that Montessori, in 1912, was open to the idea of the method being modified to suit each child’s individual culture?

3 Henry W. Holmes, Harvard University wrote the introduction to English version of The Montessori Method by Dr. Montessori published in America.
Taking it that Montessori was open to the idea of the method being modified to suit the child’s culture and using the process of action research to eliminate and identify elements and practices which captured the child’s interest (Montessori 1909/1912), we can conclude that Aistear (which developed out of research with children in Ireland (NCCA, 2009)) gives practitioners a context within which to develop and evolve the Montessori Method further.

In Montessori’s first four Casa dei Bambinis (opened between 1907 and 1912) there is plenty of written evidence to suggest that while there were no dolls or dolls teaset available to the children, there were a lot of gross motor, opened ended, manipulative toys available, particularly outside (Bailey, 1915; Craig, 1913; Culverwell 1913). Professor Culverwell (1913) noted that as well as the gymnastic exercises, silence and marching games, the children play with hoops, balls, bean bags, swings, kites, Froebel’s occupations and gifts as well as modelling clay and gardening. Smith, who also travelled to Rome, observed the children working in the four established Casa’s in 1912; he noted the children building with blocks and sticks and remarked that free play had its place in the children’s physical training (Smith, 1912, p. 48 and 49). As well as the above documented use of Froebel’s gifts and occupations, Montessori herself credited some of her didactic materials and methods which she introduced and kept as part of her action research process to French physicians Jean Itard and Edouard Seguin (Standing, 1957; Montessori 1909); thus it can be concluded that Montessori was open to different types of play, play materials and methods in her schools as long as the children were drawn to them and used them.

Standing (1957), in Montessori’s biography, also notes that it would be wrong to assume that Montessori would like practitioners to suppress any make believe activities that come from the children. Rather she would have asked the practitioner to observe the child and identify that the make believe play is not due to any deficit in the environment (i.e. an unfulfilled desire for something real). He also wrote that Montessori believed that fantasy should not be enforced on the child by the adult (Standing, 1957). Montessori, herself wrote in the concluding lines of a 1948 re-working of The Montessori Method published as The

---

4 The NCCA carried out a ‘Portraiture Study’ of children between birth and six in Ireland, gathering information on what they liked to do, who they liked to spend time with and the places they liked to spend time in, to best inform the development of Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.

5 Montessori discusses in The Secret of Childhood (Montessori, 1936) how she removed the dolls and tea sets from the first Casa Dei Bambini through a process of action research when she saw the children were not attracted to using them, choosing instead to mimic the role of adults in the home environment through the use of practical life exercises and the didactic equipment which Montessori adapted to their needs and wants. When this author researched further it was noted that tea sets in Italy in 1907 were made for dolls and were no bigger than an inch to two inches in height and not the size of a dolls’ tea set in Ireland in 2013.
Discovery of the Child that, “a child who shows a desire to work and learn should be left free to do so even if the work is outside the regular programme” (Montessori, 1948). This provides clear evidence that imaginative role play was facilitated, as was alternative use of the didactic materials, in Montessori’s time.

Conclusion

As Montessori practitioners map children’s use of the Montessori didactic materials and their ‘work’ in the Montessori environment to the Aistear framework (NCCA 2009), it is important to remember the cultural and historical evolution of the Method throughout time. There is evidence to suggest that while the pedagogical languages of Montessori and Aistear differ they share one and the same meaning, which should reassure practitioners trying to reconcile the Montessori Method to the Aistear curriculum framework. Considering the literature, I have demonstrated how Montessori and her academic contemporaries expected the Method to evolve and change as it situates itself in other cultures and times. This should empower Montessori practitioners who may feel challenged in mapping Montessori under the Aistear framework.

References


Sinead Matson is currently a PhD student with Maynooth University. Her research interests include early childhood education and care, professionalism and professional practice in early childhood education, the evolution of the Montessori Method, play in early childhood education and the culture of play in Ireland from birth to six years. Sinead has worked in the Montessori and ECE sector for fourteen years both as a Montessori practitioner and a lecturer.

Transitions between Irish-medium preschools and primary schools

Máire Mhic Mhathúna and Fiona Nic Fhionnlaoich

Introduction

The transition from preschool to primary school is recognised in early childhood education literature as an important social and educational process for young children and their families (Hopps, 2014). This paper will consider a research project which was commissioned by Forbairt Naíonraí Teo (agency for Irish-medium preschools) and Gaelscoileanna Teo (agency for Irish-medium Schools) in 2010 on transitions between pre-school and primary school through the Irish language and aims to contribute to understanding the role of second languages within the transition process. A ‘second language’ is understood to mean a language that is learned after the native language has been acquired (Ellis, 2008, p.5). Both naíonraí (Irish-medium preschools) and gaelscoileanna (Irish-medium immersion primary schools) adopt a total language immersion approach in regard to using the Irish language for all classroom activities and interactions (Johnson and Swain, 1997). The paper presents an overview of the three phases of the project: a literature review, a small scale pilot study and an evaluation of the project. The paper concludes with some final reflections.

Phase 1: Literature Review

The analysis of the early childhood education literature on transitions revealed that most children face a number of changes as they transition from pre-primary to primary school (OECD, 2006; Brooker, 2008; Dockett et al., 2013). These include changes in their physical environment, personnel and pedagogical changes, changes in their own

Most children face a number of changes as they transition from pre-primary to primary school
identity and self-image, socialisation into the world of school and friendship and emotional security. The policy context was also examined, specifically the Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 1999) and two educational frameworks that could act as a bridge across the sectors. Aistear (NCCA, 2009) is a curriculum framework for children from birth to six and Síolta (CECDE, 2006) is a quality framework also for children from birth to six.

There was very limited discussion in the literature on second language issues during the transition process and the project team drew on second language acquisition theories for insights into the language related issues. The interactionist approach was found to be particularly relevant to transitions as it links features of input and the linguistic environment with learner internal features (Mitchell and Mylers, 2012). Children who have spent one year in the naíonra will still be emergent bilinguals at the time of transition to primary school (Úi Chonghaile, 2012). The vocabulary they know will be related to naíonra activities, routines and incidental talk. They will have learned a stock of formulaic utterances for regular events in the naíonra, to ask for help, to describe their play and they will be familiar with the managerial language used by the early educators. They will have a repertoire of songs and nursery rhymes. The children’s active use of Irish will be scaffolded by the naíonra staff in specific ways, making use of their own personal second language teaching strategies. In summary, the children’s understanding and active use of the second language is context-bound, and is both formed and supported by the naíonra context. School is a new context with different routines, new learning experiences, new styles of interactions and above all new people. Unless there is very good, detailed communication between the naíonra and the primary school, the opportunity for children to transfer their knowledge from one context to another could be diminished or lost.

The children’s understanding and active use of the second language is context-bound, and is both formed and supported by the naíonra context. Additional insights were gained from over one hundred participants in two national workshops for early years educators and primary teachers. A research report was drawn up and recommendations were made for a transitions programme template, based on principles set out by Fabian (2002) and Dunlop and Fabian (2007). The following areas of development were proposed: identifying the aims and ideal situation at a local level, listing existing events and procedures, selecting initiatives and agreeing a timeframe, discussing resourcing and planning the evaluation of the project. A list of exemplar activities for the Irish-medium context was drawn up and included the provision of information for families from the naíonra and gáelscoil, school experience for the children before starting school and encouraging formal contact between the naíonraí and the school. This was published on-line (Mhic Mhathúna, 2011a) and as a summary booklet (Mhic Mhathúna, 2011b).

Phase Two: Small Scale Pilot Study

A co-ordinator was appointed to manage a small scale transition programme between two primary schools and four associated preschools in 2012. In order for the scheme to work, it was necessary to appoint a person who would know both sectors well and who would be highly regarded by both sectors. They also had to be a fluent Irish speaker who could communicate well and offer guidance. The primary schools were selected on the basis that one school had a naíonra on-site and the other did not. Meetings were set up between each school, the local naíonraí and the co-ordinator. The schools and naíonraí selected activities that were deemed appropriate for their contexts. It was clear that work was already being done by both the naíonraí and the schools to prepare children for the transition. Participants recognised the need for formal links between the naíonraí and the schools to further this work and ensure it was more collaborative.

In both contexts the value of sharing information about the children, with the permission of parents/guardians, was highlighted. The Child Snapshot (Ó’Kane and Hayes, 2013) and a locally developed profile were used to record this information. Information on the phrases, songs and poems used in the naíonraí was forwarded to the school, with a booklet created by each child about themselves. A number of visits were arranged to the school for the naíonraí children and early educators to increase their familiarity with the school and the staff. The principal and/or the junior infant teachers also visited the children in the early childhood settings. These visits were timed to support the practices already in place, where children visited the school with parents/guardians.

The pilot scheme was evaluated using semi-structured interviews with the two school principals and questionnaires for the four early childhood educators and four junior infant teachers. The questionnaire contained both open and closed questions about the implementation of the transitions scheme in regard to contact with families, giving children
experience of school/transition activities, communication between the school and the naíonra and the role of the co-ordinator. One questionnaire was returned from the staff of each of the four naíonraí and all four junior infant teachers responded individually. In all cases the participants felt that the scheme supported the development of formal communication between the naíonra and the gaeilgeoirí and also the sharing of information about the children (with parental permission) and about the work in each context. A number of statements from the participants are included below, translated from Irish.

We sat down a few times together and we discussed for the first time ever the children leaving the naíonra and starting in the school and how best to work together in the best interest of the child (Early Childhood Educator)

We saw the work being done in the school and the differences and similarities that existed (Early Childhood Educator)

We now know the teachers and the principal and they know us (Early Childhood Educator)

I had the opportunity to meet the children before they started and to develop a relationship with them to ease the transition (Teacher)

During the pilot scheme we found out that the children had much more Irish than we had previously thought (Principal)

As part of the pilot scheme, parents/guardians were given a resource pack of books and CDs to support and encourage the use of Irish during the summer holidays. In addition, parents/guardians were invited to sign up for a bilingual electronic newsletter that was circulated fortnightly during the summer holidays.

Phase Three: Follow up Study

To evaluate the longer-term impact of the pilot project, a follow-up interview was conducted with the two school principals a year later, in April 2013. In one case the initiatives had continued between the school and both naíonraí, one on-site and one off-site. A development in the second year was that the activities began earlier in the year. The principal hoped to develop the involvement of the parents in the initiatives in the third year of the project. The principal in the other school noted that in the second year the initiatives continued between the school and one naíonra, which had moved on-site. Due to the distance between the other naíonra and the school there was less contact during the pilot project and afterwards. However, information on individual children was provided by the early childhood educators through the completion of the Child Snapshot (O’Kane and Hayes, 2013).

Final Reflections on Benefits and Challenges

In this small-scale study, the benefits of the process emerged clearly in the feedback received from participants. The importance of sharing information on children’s interests, capabilities and strengths, including specific information on their second language experiences was acknowledged by all participants. The context-bound nature of this experience meant that teachers needed to know how to facilitate, prompt and scaffold children’s emerging bilingualism as well as learning about the children in advance of the school year. The benefits of sharing information about the work of the naíonra and the school were also highlighted by the participants and did not appear to lead to greater “schoolification” of the preschool, a concern that was highlighted in the first phase of the project. Most significantly, the vital role of parents in their children’s educational transition became obvious and the necessity of finding ways of communicating with them in person was noted. It is therefore recommended that parents be more involved from the beginning in any future transition programme.

References


Fostering Children’s Alphabet Knowledge at School Entry through Engagement in Family Literacy Activities

Lisa-Christine Girard and Luigi Girolametto

Introduction

The development of emergent literacy skills in early childhood is best conceptualised as a continuum that occurs prior to entry into formal schooling and formal instruction. Thus, the family literacy environment and the activities that parents engage their children in can play a critical role in the development of these skills (Evans et al., 2000; Sénéchal and LeFevre, 2002; Burgess et al., 2002; Carpentieri et al., 2011). Emergent literacy encompasses skills such as print concepts, alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and oral language (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998; Phillips et al., 2008). Alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness at entry into school have in particular been found to be strong predictors of decoding and future success with reading acquisition (Lonigan et al., 2000; Savage et al., 2001). While emergent literacy skills are highly inter-related (Lonigan et al., 2000), their acquisition is variable and appears to depend, in part, on early literacy experiences in the home environment (e.g. Carpentieri et al., 2011). Thus, a better understanding is needed of the role of family literacy activities in fostering children’s emergent literacy at school entry, given its association with subsequent reading acquisition. The overall objective of the current study was to identify whether specific family literacy activities predicted children’s emergent literacy skills at entry into formal schooling. Further, the study aimed to identify which activities were the best predictors of specific skills.
Methods

This study included data from eighty-seven children attending Junior Kindergarten and their families sampled from eleven different schools located in low-income neighbourhoods in Toronto, Canada (median neighbourhood income ranged from $12, 401–$28, 953; Statistics Canada, 2011). Junior Kindergarten is an optional additional year in the formal education system in Ontario, Canada. Children are eligible to enroll at four years of age. Initial recruitment resulted in 106 children that had returned the written parental consent form. Of these, 105 met the eligibility criteria (i.e., having scored within 1.5 standard deviations of the mean on the measure of non-verbal IQ), and eighty-seven completed and returned the family literacy questionnaire. All eighty-seven children gave verbal assent prior to the assessments. Sample characteristics are provided in Table 1. Data were collected in schools using a battery of standardised assessments and a parent questionnaire. The assessment battery included: the Wide Range Achievement Test- Early Reading Assessment (Robertson, 2003), the Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing (Wagner et al., 1999), the Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary (Brownell, 2000) and the Columbia Mental Maturity Scale (Burgemeister et al., 1972). A family literacy questionnaire, adapted from Boudreau’s (2005) parent questionnaire, was sent home and assessed three different areas of early literacy, including the child’s interaction with storybooks, interaction with writing activities and interaction with letter-sound activities.

Results

First, a series of bivariate correlations among the three family literacy subscales, children’s alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, expressive language and nonverbal IQ were conducted and are presented in Table 2. As a result of the statistically significant associations observed in Table 2 between engagement in letter/sound activities and alphabet knowledge and additionally between shared storybook reading and expressive language ability, two separate hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted using alphabet knowledge and expressive language respectively, as outcome variables. Due to the multicultural composition characteristic of Toronto communities, in addition to the strong association between cognition, language, and literacy, we also controlled for children’s exposure to a second language and their non-verbal cognitive ability in our regression analyses. The results of the first multiple regression (presented in Table 3) indicated that higher frequencies of interactions with letter/sound activities in the home accounted for a significant amount of unique variance (i.e., eight percent) in predicting children’s alphabet knowledge at entry to Junior Kindergarten after controlling for children’s non-verbal IQ and second language exposure, $R^2 = .21$, $F(1, 84) = 8.83$, $p < .01$, which is a modest effect. The results of the second multiple regression revealed no significant association between parent-child storybook activities and children’s English expressive vocabulary at entry to Junior Kindergarten after controlling for non-verbal IQ and second language exposure, $R^2 = .35$, $F(1, 84) = 1.40$, $p = ns$.

Table 1 - Demographic Characteristics of the Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N=87</th>
<th>N=87</th>
<th>N=87</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>49.4%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at Pretest (months)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td>44-58</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Group:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Heritage</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Heritage</td>
<td>44.8%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Heritage</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Heritage</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure to a Second Language:</td>
<td>52.9%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Exposure to a second language refers to the child being exposed to a second language in the home on a regular basis.

Table 2 - Zero-Order Correlations among Alphabet Knowledge, Family Literacy Practices, Expressive Vocabulary and Non-Verbal IQ at Entry to Junior Kindergarten

Table 3 - Multiple Regression Analyses of Early Literacy

Variable | Alphabet Knowledge N=87 | Phonological Awareness N=87 | Expressive Vocabulary N=87 |
----------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
Parent-Child Storybook Reading | ns | ns | $r = .262**$ | $p = .007$ |
Interaction with Writing Activities | $r = .188$ | ns | ns |
Interaction with Letter/Sound Activities | $r = .338**$ | ns | ns |
Non-Verbal IQ | $r = .120$ | $r = .394**$ | $r = .413**$ |

Note: Alphabet Knowledge assessed using raw scores from the Letter/Word Discrimination subtest (WRAT-ERA, Robertson, 2003). Bonferroni-Holmes adjustments were made per column for each outcome variable. Group means were used for the two children who had missing data on the Family Literacy Questionnaire.
The current study examined the contributions of three specific family literacy activities towards children’s emergent literacy skills (i.e., interactions with alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and expressive language). We looked at potential impacts of both direct teaching (e.g., interactions with writing and letter/sound activities) and indirect facilitation (e.g., storybook reading) and their impact on children’s emergent literacy skills at entry to formal schooling using a sample of junior kindergartens from low SES neighbourhoods. The results revealed that direct teaching of letter/sounds in the home contributed eight percent of unique variance in children’s alphabet knowledge after controlling for non-verbal IQ and second language exposure. These results are in line with previous study findings that ranged from seven to twenty-four percent of the explained variance (Sénéchal et al., 1998; Evans et al., 2000; Sénéchal and LeFevre, 2002; Kirby and Hogan, 2008; Hindman and Morrison, 2012). No other statistically significant associations were found. These results then suggest that in the current sample, parents’ engagement in letter/sound activities in the home helped to build children’s alphabet knowledge prior to entry into formal schooling.

There has been recent attention to the importance of school readiness in Ireland, which encompasses a holistic view of the child’s development including pre-academic skills such as letter and numeracy knowledge (Mhathúna et al., 2015). These pre-academic skills that children enter into the schooling system with, may play an important role in the ease of transition from home to school life and towards children’s long-term academic success (Forget-Dubois et al., 2007). That parents can engage their children in particular types of activities to better prepare them for the classroom and success within the classroom environment has implications for knowledge dissemination.

These results reflect data gathered within a Canadian setting however the findings are particularly salient in an Irish context given that reports suggest primary classes in Ireland are among the second largest across Europe, only slightly behind the UK with an average of 25 students per class. Larger class sizes typically result in less individualized attention as a result of a larger teacher to student ratio. Thus, if parents can better equip children with early foundational skills such as alphabet knowledge, this may place their children at an advantage in the early academic years.

Engagement in letter/sound activities was one of the most frequent parent-reported family literacy activities in the current sample. Parents reported on average, that interactions with letter/sounds occurred daily. This suggests that it is not only engagement in an activity that helps the child to acquire and consolidate specific skills, but also a higher frequency of the activity which can result in desired beneficial effects. Theoretically, this finding is important because children who enter into formal schooling with knowledge of letters have a stronger foundation for learning letter-sound correspondence and phonological awareness skills, which have been found to be among the strongest predictors of decoding ability over time (Lonigan et al., 2000; Ehri et al., 2001; Savage et al., 2005; Savage, Carless, & Ferraro, 2007).

The literature often shows that children from more disadvantaged backgrounds seemingly lag behind their more advantaged peers across multiple domains of development including literacy development (Lee & Burkam, 2002). These results are then promising given that the children and families in the current study were sampled from low SES neighbourhoods and positive effects of direct parental teaching on alphabet knowledge at entry to school were supported.

While no significant association was found with respect to storybook reading and expressive language outcomes, this may have in part been the result of our sample characteristics in combination with the study design. More specifically, many children who took part in the study were exposed to a second language in the home resulting in the possibility that the shared storybook activities were conducted in a language other than English. No information regarding the language in which parents read to their children was collected.

Table 3 - Multiple Regression Analysis on Interaction with Letter/Sound Activities and Alphabet Knowledge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step and Predictor</th>
<th>Alphabet Knowledge General Model Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$R^2$ $\Delta R^2$ $\Delta F$ $SEB$ $\beta$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1 Cognition</td>
<td>.01 .01 1.23 .16 .03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2 Second Language Exposure</td>
<td>1.2 1.1 10.41 -3.1 -1.31**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3 Interaction with Letter/Sound Activities</td>
<td>2.1 0.8 8.83 .30 .62**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $N = 87$ **Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).**

Discussion

In the current study we examined the contributions of three specific family literacy activities towards children’s emergent literacy skills (i.e., interactions with alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and expressive language). We looked at potential impacts of both direct teaching (e.g., interactions with writing and letter/sound activities) and indirect facilitation (e.g., storybook reading) and their impact on children’s emergent literacy skills at entry to formal schooling using a sample of junior kindergartens from low SES neighbourhoods. The results revealed that direct teaching of letter/sounds in the home contributed eight percent of unique variance in children’s alphabet knowledge after controlling for non-verbal IQ and second language exposure. These results are in line with previous study findings that ranged from seven to twenty-four percent of the explained variance (Sénéchal et al., 1998; Evans et al., 2000; Sénéchal and LeFevre, 2002; Kirby and Hogan, 2008; Hindman and Morrison, 2012). No other statistically significant associations were found. These results then suggest that in the current sample, parents’ engagement in letter/sound activities in the home helped to build children’s alphabet knowledge prior to entry into formal schooling.

There has been recent attention to the importance of school readiness in Ireland, which encompasses a holistic view of the child’s development including pre-academic skills such as letter and numeracy knowledge (Mhathúna et al., 2015). These pre-academic skills that children enter into the schooling system with, may play an important role in the ease of transition from home to school life and towards children’s long-term academic success (Forget-Dubois et al., 2007). That parents can engage their children in particular types of activities to better prepare them for the classroom and success within the classroom environment has implications for knowledge dissemination.

These results reflect data gathered within a Canadian setting however the findings are particularly salient in an Irish context given that reports suggest primary classes in Ireland are among the second largest across Europe, only slightly behind the UK with an average of 25 students per class. Larger class sizes typically result in less individualized attention as a result of a larger teacher to student ratio. Thus, if parents can better equip children with early foundational skills such as alphabet knowledge, this may place their children at an advantage in the early academic years.

Engagement in letter/sound activities was one of the most frequent parent-reported family literacy activities in the current sample. Parents reported on average, that interactions with letter/sounds occurred daily. This suggests that it is not only engagement in an activity that helps the child to acquire and consolidate specific skills, but also a higher frequency of the activity which can result in desired beneficial effects. Theoretically, this finding is important because children who enter into formal schooling with knowledge of letters have a stronger foundation for learning letter-sound correspondence and phonological awareness skills, which have been found to be among the strongest predictors of decoding ability over time (Lonigan et al., 2000; Ehri et al., 2001; Savage et al., 2005; Savage, Carless, & Ferraro, 2007).

The literature often shows that children from more disadvantaged backgrounds seemingly lag behind their more advantaged peers across multiple domains of development including literacy development (Lee & Burkam, 2002). These results are then promising given that the children and families in the current study were sampled from low SES neighbourhoods and positive effects of direct parental teaching on alphabet knowledge at entry to school were supported.

While no significant association was found with respect to storybook reading and expressive language outcomes, this may have in part been the result of our sample characteristics in combination with the study design. More specifically, many children who took part in the study were exposed to a second language in the home resulting in the possibility that the shared storybook activities were conducted in a language other than English. No information regarding the language in which parents read to their children was collected.
However, children were assessed on their expressive language in English only. If the storybook reading were done in a language other than English, we would not necessarily expect to find an effect on English language outcomes. Therefore this insignificant finding should be evaluated with caution, as previous studies would support the benefits of shared storybook reading on children’s oral language development (e.g., Sénéchal et al., 1998).

We also found no significant effect on phonological awareness outcomes however this may have been due to floor effects on phonological awareness measures and consequently minimal variability in the children’s data. Future studies are needed with respect to these latter two null findings before firm conclusions can be drawn. Overall, these results support the benefits of specific early family literacy activities that parents can engage in within the home environment to help support the development of children’s alphabet knowledge at entry into formal schooling.

References


A Randomised Controlled Trial Evaluation of the Lifestart Parenting Programme in Ireland

Sarah Miller and Laura Dunne

Introduction

Healthy child development relies on families providing a safe and nurturing environment for their child. Research indicates that to improve outcomes for children, educating parents is more effective than intervening directly with children (Kendrick et al., 2000; Sweet and Applebaum 2004; Flett 2007; Phillips and Eustace 2008; Rushton et al., 2009). It is with this in mind that we present the results of a randomised controlled trial (RCT) evaluation of the Lifestart parenting programme. Lifestart is a structured child-centred programme of information and practical activity for parents of children aged from birth to five years old. It is provided by trained, paid family visitors and offered to families regardless of circumstance. The study aimed to determine whether the programme is effective in improving parent and child outcomes.

Methodology

424 parents and children aged less than twelve months were recruited from across Ireland via a coordinated and multi-stranded recruitment campaign in 15 Lifestart project areas. The campaign involved: distribution of a leaflet advertising the study, advertising through local media and ‘on the ground’ awareness raising. Once parents consented to take part they were randomly assigned to either the intervention group (n= 216), who received the programme for five years, or the control group (n=208) who did not receive Lifestart. Both groups completed outcome measures at three time points: pre-test, mid-point (aged three years) and post-test (aged five years). A qualitative process evaluation was conducted alongside the RCT.
Results

Intervention parents reported lower levels of parenting stress (ES=-.220; p=.045), greater knowledge of child development (ES=.277; p=.016) and higher levels of parenting confidence (efficacy) (ES=.213; p=.047). There were no differences between the control and intervention groups in community participation (social capital).

Small, positive changes were observed in four of the five child outcomes: better cognitive development, increased prosocial behaviour, decreased difficult behaviour and fewer referrals to speech and language therapy. Effect sizes ranged from .07 to .16 and were not statistically significant.

The findings from the process evaluation indicated that families greatly enjoyed the programme. Some parents reported an improved relationship with their child, attributed to having better ideas for play activities and communication. A number of parents noted that the programme had extended their child’s learning, contributing to their preparedness for school. The relationship with the family visitor was identified as a key factor in the successful long-term acceptability and enjoyment of the programme.

Conclusion

This study shows that Lifestart works as intended and is effective in improving parent outcomes. These findings are consistent with the wealth of evidence which shows that home based parenting programmes like Lifestart are an effective (and cost effective) way of improving parent and child outcomes in the short and long term (Sweet and Applebaum 2004; Kaminski et al., 2008; Filene et al., 2013).

References


Author Information

Dr. Sarah Miller is a Lecturer in the School of Education and Deputy Director of the Centre for Effective Education. She teaches quantitative methods and statistics and her research expertise is organised around three inter-related themes: programme evaluation, parenting and child development. Within this she has a particular interest in socio-emotional wellbeing among pre-school and primary school children. Sarah has considerable experience of designing, conducting and publishing large-scale randomised controlled trials, systematic reviews, quasi-experimental evaluations and cross sectional surveys. Currently she is Principal or Co-Investigator on three large-scale randomised controlled trials in Education funded by NIHR, ESRC and EEF.

Dr. Laura Dunne’s research interests lie in three main areas; health and wellbeing, child development, and programme evaluation. She has extensive experience conducting both quantitative and qualitative research. She has completed a number of major evaluation and research projects and is committed to research in the field of child development and the improvement of outcomes for children. In recent years she has focused on “what works” in schools. She is currently carrying out a Northern Ireland wide survey exploring the role schools play in improving children’s health and wellbeing in partnership with the UKCRC Centre of Excellence for Public Health, NI.
An Examination of Concepts of School Readiness among Parents and Educators in Ireland

Centre for Early-Childhood Research at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick and Centre for Social and Educational Research, Dublin Institute of Technology*

Introduction

In Autumn 2012, a research team from Mary Immaculate College, Limerick and the Dublin Institute of Technology was awarded a contract by the Irish Research Council to examine concepts of school readiness among parents of children in the Free Pre-school Year (FPSY) in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and early years educators at pre-primary and primary levels. This research was commissioned by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and is currently in press.

Methodology

In addition to an extensive literature review, face to face semi-structured interviews were conducted with school principals and junior infant teachers (n=14) and with early years educators and managers (n=19). Telephone interviews were conducted with parents (n=30) and child conferences were conducted with children availing of the FPSY (n=57) (Clark and Moss, 2011). An online survey based on the findings of the qualitative phase was sent to a representative sample of 500 FPSY (Response Rate = 39%) settings and 500 primary schools (Response Rate = 24%).

Overview of Key Findings

The concept of school readiness as understood by the research participants emerged as a multi-faceted concept. School readiness was clearly located along a maturationist-environmentalist (Dockett and Perry, 2002) continuum where readiness was associated with a child’s age as well as external evidence of the acquisition of specific skills such as the child’s ability to recognise colours and shapes. All participants rated social and emotional skills as highly important for children starting school, while the significance of children’s pre-academic skills was consistently ranked higher by early childhood educators than by primary school participants. Differences were evident between participants’ views of children’s optimal school starting age. These ranged from between four and a half and five years to five and half years for primary school participants with most early childhood educators identifying six as about right. The majority of parents identified five as the minimum school starting age. Factors identified as influencing parents’ decisions to send their children to school included the cost of child-care and parents’ personal experiences. Children’s responses and drawings confirmed all participants’ views that the move to “big school” constitutes a significant event in the child’s life.

References


Author Information

The Centre for Early-Childhood Research at Mary Immaculate College (CERAMIC), Limerick conducts research related to policy and practice in early years education nationally and internationally. The Centre for Social and Educational Research (CSER) is located at the Dublin Institute of Technology and conducts research related to social and educational issues. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs in association with the Department of Education and Skills commissioned research through the Irish Research Council (IRC) to examine concepts of school readiness among parents and educators in Ireland and awarded the tender to an inter-institutional research team from CERAMIC and CSER.

---

The Children’s Research Network for Ireland and Northern Ireland

The Children’s Research Digest is hosted by the Children’s Research Network for Ireland and Northern Ireland. The Network is a membership organisation that aims to support the research community to better understand and improve the lives of children by:

- Creating and maintaining an inclusive, independent, non-profit network
- Sharing information, knowledge, experience, learning and skills.

Since its launch in 2010, the Network has over 300 members from academia, government, voluntary and independent sectors of children’s research on the island of Ireland. The Network seeks to build bridges between researchers in the various sectors of the community and develop structures to promote the sharing of information, learning and good practice.

We hope that the Children’s Research Digest will contribute towards the sharing of such learning by members both with other members and among the wider research community. Other ways in which learning is shared include an annual conference, thematic sub-groups (such as the Early Childhood Research Group), seminars throughout the island, an annual PhD symposium and projects days where links are built between practitioners and researchers.

The Network accepts new members at any time of the year. As a member you are entitled to reduced cost or free attendance at training sessions and other events, mailings on upcoming events, news and jobs in the sector, access to our LinkedIn group, membership of sub-groups and the possibility to publish in the Children’s Research Digest. We also produce a Members Directory with listings of names, organisations, contacts details and research interests of members.

12 month membership is currently:

- €25 full-time employed
- €15 part-time employed or retired
- €10 students and unwaged

You can join or renew at www.childrensresearchnetwork.org

The Network is supported by the Atlantic Philanthropies, Department of Children and Youth Affairs.