

Professional Development for Early Childhood Professionals: Examining Pedagogy in Early Childhood

Draft

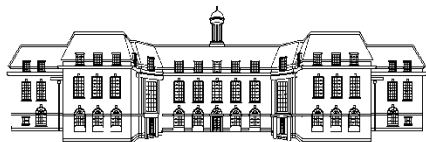
8 October 2010

Walsh, G.; Gray, C.; McMillan, D.; Hanna, K.; McCracken, O. and Carville, S.

Stranmillis University College: a College of
Queen's University Belfast

Not to be quoted without prior agreement from DES

Contact: Maresa_Duignan@education.gov.ie



STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
A College of Queen's University Belfast

**DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
AND SCIENCE**

An Roinn Oideachais Agus

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	2
SECTION 1: THE ESSENCE OF EFFECTIVE EC PEDAGOGY	15
2. The Essence of Effective EC Pedagogy	16
SECTION 2: THE NATURE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF EC PEDAGOGY IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND	67
3. Consultation with Key Stakeholders	68
4. Practitioner Focus Groups	75
5. Audit of Children’s Activities	88
SECTION 3: DEVELOPING AND USING THE PDM	115
6. Developing and Using the PDM: the Case Study Experience	116
7. Conclusions and Recommendations	152
8. References	155

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the sponsors from the Department of Education and Science in the Republic of Ireland for their financial support for the study in question. Our greatest debt of gratitude is owed to the stakeholders, practitioners and, above all, the children and their parents/guardians who allowed them to participate in the study. These four groups combined so agreeably as to make the study a most interesting and enjoyable experience. Without them, the project would not have been the success it was.

STATEMENT ON ETHICS

The research was conducted following the British Educational Research Association's Revised *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (2004) and the British Psychological Society's *Code of Ethics and Conduct* (2009). At each phase of the research ethical approval was granted by the Stranmillis University College Research and Ethics Committee.

1. Introduction

1.1 FOCUS OF THE STUDY

The project entitled “Professional Development for Early Childhood Professionals: Examining Pedagogy in Early Childhood”, funded by the Department of Education and Science in the Republic of Ireland, began in January 2009 and has spanned a period of approximately 18 months in duration. The overarching aim of the project is:

‘to enable early childhood educators/teachers to build a deeper understanding of pedagogy by identifying the nature of pedagogy in early childhood settings and by implementing a development tool for practitioners to enhance the effectiveness of their own pedagogy’.

In an effort to meet this aim the following key objectives informed the course of the project:

1. to identify the essence of effective pedagogy from national and international literature;
2. to identify the nature and effectiveness of pedagogy in diverse early childhood education settings in Ireland, based on the findings of the literature review, consultation with key stakeholders and providers and an audit of Early Years settings;
3. to develop a model to support early childhood educators/teachers to examine and enhance their own pedagogy;
4. to implement the Professional Development Programme in each of the identified settings and evaluate and review the effective aspects of the intervention; with the intention
5. to develop and disseminate exemplars and models of good practice to inform the quality of pedagogical practices in the field of early childhood education (depending on the financial resources available to DES at that time).

It is important to identify from the outset of the project that the four setting types that provided the focus of the study were childminders; sessional playgroups; daycares and infant classes.

To address the above objectives, a multi-method and multi-source approach was conducted over four key stages, each stage linked to a particular key issue. Details of the stages, including sample, data collection methods and analyses employed, are as follows:

1.2 METHODS

1.2.1 Stage 1

To address the first objective of the study i.e. *to identify the essence of effective pedagogy from national and international literature*, and prior to any data collection, an extensive literature survey was conducted. The review draws principally on international, national and local empirical evidence, with the aim of providing a comprehensive insight into the key aspects of an effective pedagogical approach for young children. The review focuses on five main sections i.e. a Rationale for an Early Childhood (EC) Pedagogy; an Examination of Effective EC Pedagogy; Towards an Integrated EC Pedagogy and the Essence of Effective EC Pedagogy, concluding with a section on the Irish Perspective on Early Childhood Pedagogy.

1.2.2 Stage 2

The methods employed in Stage 2 helped to fulfil the second objective of the project i.e. *to identify the nature and effectiveness of pedagogy in diverse early childhood education settings in Ireland*. These methods comprised:

Telephone Interviews of Key Stakeholders

Key stakeholders involved in the provision of Early Years care and education in the Republic of Ireland were identified and asked to participate in the project in February 2009. Semi-structured telephone interviews were then conducted with nine stakeholders based on an opportunity sample. The interviewed sample included members of umbrella organisations such as the Irish Preschool Playgroups Association (IPPA); Childminding Ireland; the National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA); the Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood organisation; the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA); Health and Social Services boards (HSE); the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) and trainee early childhood educators.

One to one semi-structured interviews explored stakeholders' perceptions on the nature and effectiveness of early childhood pedagogy within their particular area in the Republic of Ireland. See Appendix 1 for the interview schedule. The data were also used to inform the design of the practitioner questionnaire, the practitioner interview schedule and in turn the development of the Professional Development Model (PDM). The data were then subjected to thematic analysis.

Practitioner Focus Groups:

Participants in the stakeholder interviews helped to arrange the focus group discussions with early childhood educators/teachers who work in diverse settings in Ireland. In May/June 2009 four focus group discussions were conducted:

- One focus group discussion with 5 infant class teachers;
- One focus group discussion with 4 childminders;
- One focus group discussion with 5 full daycare practitioners; and
- One focus group discussion with 5 sessional playgroup practitioners.

In the focus group discussions, practitioners were asked to detail:

- the role of an effective Early Years educator;
- how children learn and develop best;
- any guidelines presently employed to ensure quality pedagogy in their setting;
- any difficulties experienced in providing high quality pedagogy; and
- their vision for the future of Early Years practice throughout the Republic of Ireland.

This discussion schedule (see Appendix 2) was designed based on insights gained from the literature review and the stakeholder consultations and was piloted with a focus group of childminders in April 2009, organised with the help of the Northern Ireland Childminding Association (NICMA).

The practitioner focus groups lasted between 35 and 70 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and then analysed using the MAXQDA qualitative software package.

Quantitative Audit

A quantitative audit was conducted examining the amount of time young children spend on centrally important early learning processes in each of the four setting types. These early learning processes were identified from the literature review and the telephone interviews with key stakeholders, providing the basis for the design of the survey in April 2009. The questionnaire was then piloted with Early Years students at Stranmillis University College in May 2009.

To ensure as wide an audit as possible, the postal survey was distributed to all national schools in the Republic of Ireland with membership of The Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO),

and all members of Childminding Ireland and the Irish Preschool Playgroups Association (IPPA) between June and September 2009.

Response rates were monitored throughout this period and reminders were issued.

Table 1.1 specifies the number of questionnaires issued per type of setting and the number and rate of responses received.

Table 1.1: Distribution and Response Rates per Type of Setting

Practitioner group	Membership	Total Distribution	Number of Responses	Response Rate (%)
Infant Teacher	INTO	7000	706	10.1
Childminder	Childminding Ireland	800	131	16.4
Daycare and Sessional	IPPA	2700	434	16.1

The Audit asked respondents to provide information about:

- themselves, their experience in the Early Years sector and the setting in which they work;
- the training and professional development opportunities they have engaged in;
- how often they do particular activities and use specified resources;
- what play areas they have in their setting;
- when, and how often, they have play based learning sessions in their setting; and
- their views on various aspects of play and pedagogy. (See Appendix 3 for exemplar of questionnaire).

To achieve the maximum possible response rate, the questionnaire was shortened to take no longer than 10 minutes to complete. When appropriate, questions in the audit were structured with listed options linked to tick-boxes to facilitate ease of completion and if a more open ended response was desired as for questions such as “What play areas do you have in your

setting?” appropriate space was provided to allow for this. The data were then subjected to content analysis, and later inputted into SPSS for a more detailed statistical analysis. Additional space was also provided at the end of the survey for respondents to leave “Any other comments regarding the care and education of 3-6 year old children in Early Years settings in the Republic of Ireland”. This provided respondents with the opportunity to give more detailed information on areas covered in the questionnaire or, alternatively, to comment on any aspects of Early Years education the questionnaire did not address. Such responses were later transcribed and analysed using MAXQDA qualitative research software.

1.2.3 Stages 3 and 4

Stages 3 and 4 focused on the third and fourth objectives of the study i.e. *to develop a model to support early childhood educators/teachers to examine and enhance their own pedagogy*’ and then *to implement the Professional Development Model in each of the identified settings and evaluate and review the effective aspects of the intervention*. Based on the information obtained from the literature review on effective pedagogy, the consultation with key stakeholders and providers and the quantitative audit, the research team designed a Professional Development Model (PDM) to support early childhood educators/teachers in their professional reflection and enhancement of their own pedagogy.

The research team went to great lengths to ensure that the PDM is:

- culturally appropriate;
- contains clear guidance on effective pedagogy;
- contains advice that is age appropriate for the children involved;
- is able to be employed in diverse types of early childhood settings; and
- is user friendly and accompanied by full guidance on its use.

Case study investigations were then conducted in an effort to gain a more in-depth understanding of the use and effectiveness of the PDM in practice. Key stakeholders were contacted to provide assistance in the selection of the settings and the following criteria were adhered to:

- All chosen settings were in the Republic of Ireland;
- Two of each type of setting were represented i.e. 2 infant classes, 2 daycares, 2 sessional playgroups, 2 childminders;
- One of each type of setting was in the East of Ireland (Dublin urban area) and the other was in the West (Sligo/Galway i.e. more rural environs);
- Where possible, attention was paid to the inclusion of centres with children who have special educational needs.

The PDM was piloted to a group of seven Early Years educators in Northern Ireland in November 2009. The pilot participants were employed in a range of early settings including playgroups, primary schools and a special school, and had experience working in early childhood education ranging from 4 to 15 years. As a result some amendments were made to the PDM in terms of wording and presentation.

Table 1.2 provides background information on the six settings that agreed to participate in the study. While a childminder from each region did initially agree to participate, both eventually withdrew their participation due to changes in their personal circumstances. Unfortunately, due to the late notice, it was not possible to bring on board further childminding settings.

Table 1.2: Profile of Case Study Settings

Type	Region	Number of Children	Age Range of Children (months)	Total Number of Staff	SEN Provision
Junior School	East	455	48-96	21	Yes
National School	West	287	48-132	16	Yes
Daycare	East	70	3+	17	Yes
Daycare	West	87	7+	13	Yes
Sessional	East	27	32-59	4	Yes
Sessional	West	22	35-59	4	Yes

Structure of the Case Studies

The case studies were conducted over three principal phases. Phase 1 involved a preliminary two day visit (during September and October 2009), to each of the settings to gain an insight into the quality of the learning experience on offer. Phase 2 was associated with the training of the setting practitioners in the use of the PDM and a continuous monitoring of their implementation of the PDM over the course of a 16 working week period. Whilst using the PDM each practitioner was encouraged to keep a reflection diary to record their thoughts on:

- how they use the model in the setting;
- the aspects of the model that they are focusing on;
- if pedagogy is improving as a result of using the model;
- how their skills in reflection are developing;
- if use of the model is impacting on them, the learning environment provided, the children and the parents;
- areas that are going well;
- areas that are not going well; and
- areas for further development.

The reflection diaries were subjected to thematic analyses and were used in the evaluation of the PDM.

Phase 3 then focused on a visit to each setting (May 2010) in an attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of the PDM in terms of changes to the overall quality of the learning experience on offer.

The Observation Schedule:

The Quality Learning Instrument - QLI (Walsh, 2000) was used to assess the quality of the learning experience on offer pre and post PDM implementation. Unlike many well-known measures, such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale - ECERS (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998) and its later modifications (Sylva et al., 2003), the QLI (Walsh & Gardner, 2005; Walsh et al., 2006) takes into consideration a triangle of interactions in the classroom - the children's actions, the teaching strategies and the role of the environment. One important aspect of quality is the way in which a learning environment or curriculum is "experienced by the participating children" (Katz, 1995: 120). It is this aspect of quality - how it might feel to be a child in the learning environment - that is the focus for QLI. Thus, the QLI rating in a classroom is determined by the way in which the learning and developmental needs of the main stakeholders, the children themselves, are being met within the affective, cognitive, social and physical context. It can be used in Early Years settings with 3-6 year old children and has been subjected to considerable validity and reliability analyses (see Walsh and Gardner, 2005 and Walsh et al. 2006 for further information). High levels of inter-rater reliability on the nine scales have been shown (0.73-1.0) and analysis has also revealed that the schedule has very high internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha is .94 for the total score over all nine indicators in 90 cases. It does not drop below .92 when single items are removed. Table 1.3 details the quality indicators that the QLI focuses upon.

Table 1.3: A Definition of each Quality Indicator from the QLI

Quality Indicator	Definition
<i>Motivation</i>	Children are interested in and inquisitive about their learning and show active signs of wanting to learn
<i>Concentration</i>	Children are actively engaged in the learning process, not easily distracted and attentive for reasonable periods
<i>Confidence</i>	Children feel secure and not under pressure in their learning environment and have confidence in their ability as learners
<i>Independence</i>	Children have an appropriate degree of control over their own learning and behaviour
<i>Physical well-being</i>	Children are happy, well behaved, appropriately nourished and physically at ease in their learning environment
<i>Multiple skill acquisition</i>	Children are provided with an holistic learning experience, covering a variety of skills and knowledge within an appropriate context
<i>Higher-order thinking skills</i>	Children are given the opportunity to reflect on and synthesise their whole learning experience and in so doing develop their powers of such things as memory, listening, sequencing, sorting and classification
<i>Social interaction</i>	Children are encouraged to learn in the company of others and to get along with each other and with adults
<i>Respect</i>	Children display a tolerance and respect for themselves, others and their environment

The three aspects – children’s actions, teaching strategies, and the environment – are judged in relation to each of the nine quality indicators. Using a best-fit model each setting is rated against the QLI rubric on a scale of 1 (low) to 6 (high) for each domain (total scores can vary from 9-54).

To supplement the QLI data, one to one structured interviews were conducted at each of the participating settings in which practitioners were asked to provide:

- further background information on the setting;
- a description and evaluation of the quality of their current practice;
- their views on effective pedagogy;
- their expectations for the Professional Development Model and information about any previous professional development experience. (See Appendix 4 for interview schedule).

In addition, video recordings of practice and photographs were taken to enable all members of the research team to tune in to the quality of the learning experience on offer in each setting and to assist in the evaluation process. All interviews were then thematically analysed.

1.2.4 Stage 5

Stage 5 relates to the final objective of the study i.e. *to develop and disseminate exemplars and models of good practice to inform the quality of pedagogical practices in the field of early childhood education*. Based on the research evidence exemplars and models of good practice were recommended but we are fully aware that the development and dissemination of such exemplars and models are totally at the discretion of the Department of Education and Science in the Republic of Ireland.

1.3 STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The report containing the findings from the study in question is structured in accordance with three principal sections. Section 1, entitled the 'Essence of Effective Early Childhood Pedagogy', details the findings from the detailed literature survey of local, national and international research evidence on effective early childhood pedagogy and its changing face throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries. Section 2, referred to as the 'Nature and Effectiveness of Early Childhood Pedagogy in the Republic of Ireland', draws on the findings from the stakeholder interviews, the practitioner focus group and the quantitative audit. Section 3 known as 'Developing and Using the Professional Development Model' reports on how the PDM was devised and the case study evidence. The report concludes with the identification of key recommendations for early childhood pedagogy in the Republic of Ireland, based on the overall findings of the project.

SECTION 1
THE ESSENCE OF EFFECTIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD
PEDAGOGY

2. The Essence of Effective Early Childhood Pedagogy

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this literature review is to bring together thinking on Early Childhood pedagogy, from its inception to present day. The review will draw principally on international, national and local empirical evidence, with the aim of providing a comprehensive insight into the key aspects of an effective pedagogical approach for young children. The review is structured around five main sections i.e. Rationale for an Early Childhood Pedagogy; Examining Effective Early Childhood Pedagogy; Towards an Integrated Early Childhood Pedagogy; the Dimensions of Effective Early Childhood Pedagogy, concluding with a section on the Irish Perspective on Early Childhood Pedagogy. For the purposes of this review pedagogy is defined as "... that set of instructional techniques and strategies which enable learning to take place and provide opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes, learning dispositions within a particular social and material context. It refers to the interactive process between teacher and learner and to the learning environment (which includes the concrete learning environment, the family and the community" (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002: 28).

2.2 RATIONALE FOR AN EARLY CHILDHOOD PEDAGOGY

2.2.1 A Growing Interest in Early Childhood Education and Care

Both nationally and internationally there is a general movement towards recognising early childhood as a distinctive phase which merits its own curricular and pedagogical approach, that is appropriate for young children (OECD, 2001; Goouch, 2008). Such thinking originates from the pioneering work of scholars and philanthropists such as Rousseau, Froebel and Pestalozzi who identified from as early as the 18th century that young children require a specialised form of education and care (McMillan, 2008). However it was not until the latter part of the 20th century, perhaps beginning with the Head Start initiatives of the 1960s, that such thinking came to the fore, where there appeared to be an increased interest and understanding of the

importance of and need for early childhood education and care for young children (Walsh, 2000). Since then there has been considerable growth of research (i.e. longitudinal research studies and meta analyses) on the effectiveness of high quality Early Childhood provision for young children both in terms of developmental gains and sizable improvements in school success, but also for society in terms of economic growth (Lazar and Darlington, 1982; Osborn, Butler and Morris, 1984; Barnett, 1995; Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997; Ramey and Ramey, 2004). A review of the literature base conducted by Heckmann (2000), Nobel Laureate in Economics from the University of Chicago, indicates that the long-term, economic return on investment in high-quality ECE programmes is more than 8 to 1 (Heckman 2000); whilst a more recent review conducted by Chambers et al (2010) adds to a growing body of evidence that early childhood programmes can have an important impact on increasing school readiness of young children.

Such evidence about the effectiveness of early childhood provision extends across the world (Melhuish, 2004) and has further been supported by large scale national studies e.g. Osborn and Milbank (1987) and more recently, the Effective Preschool Provision in England (EPPE) (Sylva et al 2004) and in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) (Melhuish et al, 2006) projects, highlighting how preschool experience, compared to none, enhances cognitive and social development in all children.

Coupled with the latter research evidence, is the growing body of neurological literature emphasising early childhood as a crucial time period for the development of the mental functions of children (see e.g. Brierley, 1994; Sylwester, 1995; Greenfield, 2000). This development, including the emergence of linguistic, social, cognitive and motor skills, is now recognised to be greatly influenced by exogenous factors, including the nature of the educational environment to which the child is exposed during the first 6 to 8 years of life (Bowman, Donovan and Burns, 2001), thus prioritising the importance of the Early Years experience for young children. Riley (2007) indicates that recent research in the neuroscience field has highlighted three important findings that may influence thinking about education in the Early Years, namely:

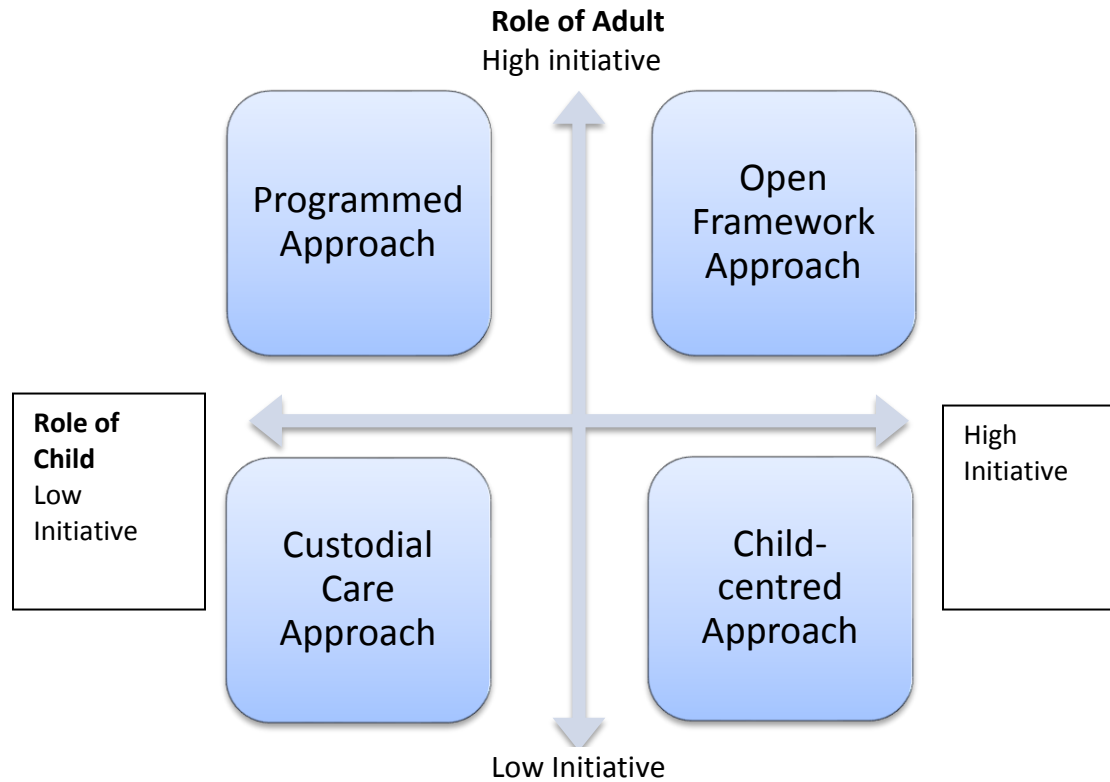
- The development of the number of synapses between neurons increases rapidly in early childhood;
- There are 'critical periods' when sensory and motor systems in the brain require experience for maximum development; and
- The more enriched and intricate the learning environment, the greater the number of synapses will form.

Against this back drop of research evidence and radical social, economic and demographic changes which have been taking place in the last 20 years in many developed nations, in particular the increase in the number of working mothers, political investment in Early Years provision has increased worldwide. Set in this context, it is arguable that the major concern no longer lies with whether early childhood programmes should be provided for young children, but controversy has arisen as to the most appropriate pedagogical approach required to ensure the all-round development of the Early Years child (Walsh, 2000).

2.2.2 Models of Early Childhood Pedagogy

Weikart (2000) provides a typology of four different curricular models commonly associated with early childhood education and care and the pedagogical approach best associated with each, as shown in Figure 2.1. In Weikart's typology, each quadrant is labelled with the type of curriculum model that would result if all classroom activities fitted into that quadrant. So, for example, a highly structured work-based curriculum would look like a programmed approach with much initiative on the part of the adult and little on the part of the child. On the other hand, the open framework model would combine a high degree of pedagogical structure with a high level of child autonomy. In this way the child may have choice but within a tightly structured and pre-planned learning environment. The greatest degree of initiative on the part of the child is provided in the child-centred model, where the adults respond entirely to the child's needs and interest and little control on their part is shown. The fourth quadrant refers merely to a 'care' model where little initiative is shown on either the part of child or adult.

Figure 2.1: Weikart's Typology of Curricular Models (see Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002).



A more simplified analysis of curricular models is provided by Bennett (2005) in terms of a social pedagogical and school readiness approach. Table 2.1 clarifies these more fully.

Table 2.1: Features of Two Curricular Traditions adapted from Bennett, (2005)

Feature	Readiness for school tradition	The social policy pedagogical tradition
The early childhood centre	Viewed as a place for learning and instruction	Viewed as a life space
Curriculum development	Prescribed, detailing goals and outcomes	Broad guidelines, with flexibility in implementation
Focus of programme	Focus on learning and skills useful for school readiness	Focus on working with the whole child and his/her family
Pedagogical strategies	A mix of instruction, thematic work and child-initiated activity	Emphasis placed on learning together through play and through educator scaffolding
Language and literacy	Emphasis on oral	Emphasis on holistic

development	competence, pre-reading and pre-mathematics	programming, growing competence in terms of language production
Targets and Goals	Prescribed, pertaining mainly to cognitive development	Broad orientations rather than prescribed outcomes
Outdoor and indoor spaces	Indoors primary learning space; outdoors principally recreational	Outdoor and indoor spaces have equal pedagogical importance
Assessment	Learning outcomes and assessment required at least on entry to primary school	Formal assessment not required – broad developmental goals
Quality control	Based on clear objectives, inspection and pre-defined learning outcomes	Participatory - based on educator and team responsibility focus on centre performance rather than child assessment

Walsh (2000) provides an even simpler definition of existing curricular models in terms of a play-based versus a more formal programme. She indicates that philosophical, psychological and pragmatic viewpoints underpin the arguments propounded in favour of each school of thought. A synopsis of these viewpoints is presented in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2: Defining Principles of Play-based and Formal curricula

	Play	Formal
Philosophical	Child placed at heart of the curriculum	Subject knowledge at the core of the curriculum
Psychological	Practice is developmentally appropriate	Young children can be taught to read, write and do numbers
Pragmatic	The whole child is developed through play	Early acquisition of basic skills raises standards

(See Walsh, 2000 for a more expansive commentary)

Walsh (2000) argues that the dichotomy between play and formal activity is inherent in all definitions of early childhood pedagogy. In her opinion the emphasis is placed either on the child's active involvement in the acquisition of learning or a formal model of schooling where the emphasis is placed on the teacher's transmission of skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic. Irrespective of the terminology used, during the latter part of the 20th century there was an upsurge in the amount of research that attempted to address the curricular or pedagogical approach that best suited the needs of the young child.

2.3 EXAMINING EFFECTIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD PEDAGOGY

In an effort to identify the research studies that have examined the effectiveness of differing curricular models and pedagogical approaches, the next section has been structured under the headings: outcome, process and early school start studies. ¹

2.3.1 Outcome Studies

Outcome Studies in the US

The most impressive and rich sources of comparative research examining the effectiveness of opposing early childhood curricular models have been conducted in the US. These studies are essentially compensatory in approach (i.e. attempting to discover which type of curriculum will make amends for economic disadvantage) and experimental in design. The stimulus for them can be traced back to the concerns of the 1960s to find an Early Years programme which would enable all children, regardless of their social background, to commence formal schooling on an 'equal footing'. These studies tend to be longitudinal in nature, examining at least three main curricular models. These mainly include a structured academic programme, known in most of these studies as 'direct-instruction', a traditional free-play approach, and a constructivist model such as High/Scope in which the philosophy is based on the teacher and child planning play-based activities together, carrying them out and then evaluating their success.

¹ The authors would like to acknowledge that this section of the report has drawn heavily on the work of Walsh (2000), entitled 'The play versus formal debate: a study of Early Years provision in Northern Ireland and Denmark'.

Perhaps the most well-known and commonly cited of these studies (despite criticisms in terms of sample size and amount of monies invested) is that initiated by Schweinhart and Weikart, which investigated the effects of differing preschool models i.e. the High/Scope programme, Distar Instruction (a formal programme) and the nursery school tradition (Schweinhart, Weikart and Lerner, 1986 and Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997). The research concentrated on 68 children from Ypsilanti, Michigan, aged three and four years old between 1967-1970. The children all came from families of low economic status and were at risk of failing in school. The outcome measures included intellectual and scholastic performance over time, self-reports at age 15 of delinquency, various aspects of social behaviour and attitudes, and mental health, employment and financial affairs. Few significant differences emerged between the curricula in relation to intellectual and academic gains, but by age 15 and 23, variations in the areas of personal relationships and community behaviour had become more pronounced. At age 15, the direct instruction participants admitted to twice as many acts of misconduct as those who experienced the more child-centred approaches. They were less likely to be appointed to a school job or office and to participate in sporting activities and in general they were less respected by their families.

By age 23, the results were even more dramatic. In comparison to the direct instruction model, the child-centred graduates were involved in fewer felony arrests of various kinds, they spent less time in special education because of emotional problems, they possessed greater academic aspirations and were more likely to be living with their spouse. Schweinhart and Weikart (1997) concluded that early childhood programmes, which encourage children to initiate and activate their own learning activities, are therefore more beneficial than teacher-directed programmes.

On a less extensive scale, other studies such as that conducted by Devries, Reese-Learned and Morgan (1991) and Hart, Burts, Durland, Charlesworth, DeWolf and Fleege (1998) support these social and emotional benefits. For example Devries et al found that their play-based subjects were more interpersonally active and by the age of six the children involved possessed a greater number and variety of negotiation strategies and shared experiences. Hart et al in

addition found that more structured programmes induced twice as much stress behaviour on children among lower socio-economic status children.

It was not only on social and emotional indicators that the informal programmes were deemed to be superior. Marcon's research (1992; 2002), for example, discovered that children whose preschool experience was child-initiated outperformed their more didactic counterparts in terms of academic grades in later schooling and made the transition from preschool to primary education more easily. From these findings Marcon (2002) concluded that the overly teacher-directed approaches curtail initiative during the preschool years, where the foundation of critical thinking, he argues, is found in Early Childhood experiences that foster curiosity, independence, initiative and choice. Similarly, Frede and Barnett (1992) deduced from their findings that when a non-academic whole-child focused programme is implemented in the Early Years, the academic skills of young children are increased.

However the message is not conclusive. A body of US research findings has highlighted the more academic-oriented model as the most successful in catering for the needs of the disadvantaged. One of the most comprehensive of these studies, reviewed by Engelmann, Becker, Carnine and Gersten (1988), has been the National Follow Through Project conducted by "impartial and independent agencies" (p. 310) and assessed in a series of tests by "Stanford Research Institute and evaluated by the Abt Associates" (Engelmann et al, 1988: 310). Based on a large-scale study (approximately 75, 000 disadvantaged children from 170 communities took part each year) of students' performances in kindergarten through to third-grade (i.e. eight to nine year olds), Engelmann et al's findings favoured the direct instruction model. They reported that it was the only approach where the participants performed consistently and successfully across all measures in contrast to the more child-centred programmes. The direct instruction students also outperformed their child-centred counterparts in cognitive skills of reading comprehension, maths problem solving and maths concepts and they scored adequately in the affective domain also.

Other evaluations, such as those conducted by Weisberg (1988); Miller and Dyer (1975) and Becker and Gersten (1982) found similar results, the direct instruction models seeming to ensure greater academic achievement and achievement motivation. Meyer's study (1984) also emphasised the social gains to be derived from more formal programmes. Having compared the long-term performance of subjects who followed a direct instruction model with those who did not, Meyer inferred that the direct instruction programmes were effective in reducing the number of pupils who repeat a grade and drop out from school, while increasing the number of college acceptances.

A small number of US studies have attempted to extend the generalisability of the types of findings to include the effectiveness of Early Years programmes on the more 'privileged' classes. However such research tends to be small in scale and therefore cannot provide compelling evidence in favour of either EC programme. Stipek, Feiler, Daniels and Milburn's evaluation (1995) of different instructional programmes for young children included both economically disadvantaged and middle-class children. Overall their findings favoured the child-centred programmes on aspects of motivational measures but neither programme proved to be significantly more effective in generating cognitive advantage. If anything, letters and reading achievement were slightly more in favour of the didactic programmes. Hirsh-Pasek, Hyson and Rescorla's research (1990) concentrated entirely on the middle-classes, however like Stipek et al, the evidence amassed did not provide significant academic gains in favour of either programme. They deduced from the findings that academic programmes did not provide any advantage to the middle-class children's scholastic or intellectual development and if anything resulted in a higher level of test anxiety, less creativity and more negative attitudes towards school.

Outcome Studies beyond the Confines of the US

Findings beyond the confines of the US tend to be more favourable towards a social pedagogical and play-based approach towards EC teaching and learning. Nabuco and Sylva (1995) and Sylva and Nabuco (1996) in Portugal compared the effects of three differing curricular orientations (five High/Scope settings, five with a formal skills curriculum and five

with a traditional nursery programme (i.e. Movimento da Escola Moderna)) on a longitudinal basis. Children in the formal skills settings were found to possess a lower degree of social acceptance and more anxiety about school, while overall the High/Scope children displayed greater academic progress at school on aspects of reading and writing. Research undertaken in Bahrain corroborates this evidence (Hadeed and Sylva, 1996). Having assessed 96 children who attended either an 'educational' or 'care-oriented' preschool on measures of intellectual, social and behavioural development as well as ECERS, the findings in this study favoured the 'educational' graduates. These centres tended to be 'informal' in orientation, practising more flexible and child-oriented practices than were found in the care-oriented centres, which Hadeed and Sylva termed "institutional" (p. 9).

The Competent Children: Competent Learners Project in New Zealand which began in 1993 also furthers the debate on effective early childhood pedagogies. This longitudinal study focuses on a group of 500 young people from the Wellington region, charting the development of their cognitive competencies and their social and communication skills at two yearly intervals at ages 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14 and 16 until they are 20. The original purpose of the project was to look at whether and how early childhood helps children become lifelong learners (Wylie, Hodgen, Hopkins and Vaughan, 2009). Drawing on these findings Wylie and Hodgen (2007), indicate that children benefitted from quality early childhood education in both cognitive and social/attitudinal dimensions. Delving further into the findings they emphasise that the aspects of pedagogy that showed a lasting contribution were: high quality staff interactions with children; an environment providing books and written material and where children could select from a variety of learning activities. Child's starting age, the total length of early childhood education and the socio-economic mix of the children attending the centre also impacted significantly on the children's cognitive, social and attitudinal gains. It is argued, however, that cautious interpretation of these findings is required based on the limited sample which did not represent Maori or Pasifika early childhood services (Anning, Cullen and Flear, 2004).

The Effective Provision of Preschool Education Project (EPPE), conducted by Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart (2004), provides rigorous evidence on the quality of preschool provision in the UK. Although this study has not evaluated a particular intervention in terms of a specific pedagogical approach, its findings progress the thinking of an appropriate pedagogical approach for young children. Such research, the most intensive of its kind in Europe, set out not only to provide the “career path” (Sylva et al, 1997: 3) of 3000 children from entry to preschool until the end of Key Stage 1 and beyond, but also to establish whether some forms of preschool provision (141 settings) are more effective than others for children's cognitive and affective development. To identify effective preschool settings, a rigorous multi-source and multi-method approach was employed to include measurements of children's cognitive and social development, controlling for child and family variables and systematic evaluations of preschools using ECERS: R (the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale: Revised) and ECERS: E (the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale: Extension) (Sylva et al, 2004). EPPE has demonstrated the positive effects of high quality preschool provision on children's intellectual and cognitive and social/behavioural development, high quality provision showing the greatest benefits. In terms of preschool setting, although quality provision was evident across all settings, findings revealed that the pedagogical approach undertaken in the integrated centres (centres prioritising both care and education) and nursery settings was overall best in terms of cognitive and social outcomes. EPPE concludes that in the most effective settings play was used in an instructive fashion, but, allowing for this, any heavy emphasis upon direct teaching and formal instruction should be avoided in the Early Years (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002).

A sister study (with a smaller sample i.e. 800 children and 80 settings) known as the Effective Provision of Preschool Education in Northern Ireland Project (EPPNI) was carried out by Melhuish, Quinn, Hanna, Sylva, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart (2006). Like EPPE, they too found that preschool provision has positive and lasting effects on children's cognitive and social behaviour. Significant differences between preschool settings and their impact on children's development were also highlighted, with nursery schools and classes having the

overall best outcomes, whilst reception classes had no overall cognitive benefit. In this way it could be argued that the programme assumed to be the most academically oriented and school-like in perspective (see Pinkerton, 1990) incurred the least intellectual benefit.

An investigation into the long term impact on children's psychological and academic outcomes of a more developmentally appropriate and play-based approach, known as Early Years Enriched Curriculum (EC) in Northern Ireland (McGuinness et al, 2009 and McGuinness et al, 2010) also informs the debate about play-based and formal approaches to teaching and learning in the Early Years. The findings suggest that the impact of the EC in the Early Years had statistically significant positive benefits on children's learning dispositions and attitudes as they progressed into Key Stage 2 (i.e. years 5-7 in primary school). Compared to control classes (where a more formal curriculum had been practised) by Year 7 in the primary school, EC children had stronger beliefs that they could influence their future learning through their own efforts; they were more motivated through interest and the desire to improve their knowledge and skills; they were more curious about learning; and they were prepared to accept the mental challenge to take on more difficult work. Academically speaking, the impact of the EC from Year 3-Year 7 revealed no statistically significant differences in the reading and mental performances between EC and control children. However a more detailed analysis of children from schools in high deprivation areas showed that once the EC had bedded down, it began to have a distinctive positive effect on academic outcomes for children as they progressed up the primary school (Walsh et al, 2010).

2.3.2 Process Studies

Throughout the 1990s process studies (i.e. where the quality of a setting is judged against a set of criteria to provide a more 'inside' perspective), also informed the play versus formal debate. Although the studies are too numerous to comment in-depth on each, Walsh (2000) argues that the majority of process studies tend to be top-down in perspective (focusing on staff-child ratios, resources, the physical environment, etc.) and in general tend to paint a picture of a

more social pedagogical/play-based programme being the way forward for young children. Several of these studies are cross-cultural in perspective, where differing early childhood programmes in differing contexts are compared using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (Harms and Clifford, 1980; Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 1998) as their assessment schedule. For example Tietze, Cryer, Bairrao, Palacios and Wetzel (1996) compared the scores of samples from five countries (Austria, Germany, Portugal, Spain and the United States) using ECERS and the Caregiver Interaction Scale - CIS (Arnett, 1989). They concluded from their findings that the more child-centred approaches of the Austrian and German settings scored highest on ECERS, placing a greater emphasis on children's free choice and exploration rather than group activity. The more teacher-directed classroom approach of the Spanish settings scored lowest.

Horgan and Douglas (1995) found similar results when they compared the quality of ECE programmes in Ireland and Germany using ECERS as one of their main assessment schedules. Although the findings suggested that in both countries the early childhood philosophy was child-centred, the German kindergarten was reported to be larger and better equipped, possessing a more favourable staff-child ratio than that of the school in Ireland. The environment allowed children more opportunities for physical development as well as a greater choice of activity. In spite of the high academic status of the Irish staff, it was argued that the German practice of deferring formal learning until the post-kindergarten stage is a more efficient method than that of the Irish programme. According to the researchers, this deferral could result in a greater understanding of the academic subjects when introduced at a later stage.

A more bottom-up perspective of quality (i.e. how it would be feel to be a child in a particular setting) was sought by Broström (1995, 1998) who compared the education, motivation and social competence of six-year-olds in a play-based kindergarten in Denmark and a more formal setting in the US. The main methods of data collection were observation, interviews and conversations in everyday situations. Two different sets of criteria were included as a means of describing the level of children's learning motivation and social competence. A quantitative

analysis was included; each of the time-sampled observations was counted and analysed, based on whether they were teacher or child initiated. A survey was also administered to 378 Danish and 120 US parents. Broström deduced from this small-scale study that the six-year-olds in the US academic-oriented kindergarten scored higher on measures of learning motivation than their Danish peers. However the Danes displayed a greater degree of social competence encountering fewer difficulties when participating in group activities.

Furthermore a study conducted by Walsh (2000) compared the quality of the learning experience offered to 4-5 year old children in formal (Northern Ireland) and play-based (Denmark) settings, using an instrument known as the Quality Learning Instrument- QLI. The QLI is based on an experiential model of learning (Laevers, 1993, 2000) and focuses on nine key indicators of quality, namely motivation, concentration, confidence, independence, physical well being, multiple skill acquisition, higher order thinking skills, social interaction and respect. Based on observations conducted in both Northern Ireland (Year 1 primary classes) and Danish (kindergartens) settings and a large-scale questionnaire, Walsh concluded that an over-emphasis on the teaching of the 3Rs (i.e. Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic) is inappropriate for 4-5 year children in Northern Ireland and the more play-based approach practised in Danish settings provided a higher quality learning experience for this age group of children.

More recently a study conducted by Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Trew, Rafferty and Sheehy (2006), conducted in line with the Early Years Enriched Curriculum, provides an insight into the process quality of play-based and formal approaches from a bottom-up perspective. Detailed observations were carried out in 70 Year 1 classes in Northern Ireland: 38 in traditional Year 1 classes where the traditional Northern Ireland Curriculum was being delivered, and 32 in Enriched Curriculum classes, where a more developmentally appropriate and play-based curriculum was being piloted. The quality of the learning experience was assessed using the QLI (Walsh and Gardner, 2005). Findings revealed that the Enriched Curriculum provided 4-5 year old children in Northern Ireland with a higher quality learning experience. The young children were given more opportunities to act independently, to engage in challenging and age-

appropriate activities and overall showed higher levels of emotional, social and physical well being.

2.3.3 Early School Start

Although not directly comparing play-based and formal models, studies on the early school start debate provide additional evidence in favour of a more play-based and social pedagogical approach for young children until at least the age of six as opposed to 'too formal too soon' a model. A recent comprehensive Cambridge Primary Review entitled 'Children, their World, their Education' edited by Alexander (2009) concluded that England should conform to international practice by delaying the start of formal school until children turn six. This would extend the preschool, play-based curriculum to give children a stress-free grounding before they start formal lessons. It argued that starting formal learning before the age of six renders an ill service to young children, damaging both their confidence and their overall learning. Furthermore it states that the primary curriculum has focused too heavily on the '3Rs' and needs to be broadened to provide for children's wellbeing, engagement, empowerment, autonomy, respect and reciprocity, interdependence, citizenship, celebrating culture, exploring, fostering skills, exciting imagination and enacting dialogue.

Earlier evidence collated by Sharp (2002) for the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) provides support for many of the arguments raised by the Cambridge Primary Review for a later start to formal schooling. Although Sharp argues that the evidence in favour of an early school start is far from conclusive, she concludes that a later start to formal schooling does not appear to hold back children's progress. In fact, drawing on an array of both national and international evidence, she suggests that an early start to formal schooling can result in increased anxiety on the part of children and it can also impact on their self-esteem and motivation to learn. Although cautioning against too much evidence being placed on evidence drawn from international tests such as TIMMS, PISA etc., she indicates that many children who start school later outperform their English counterparts on international tests.

Despite Sharp's words of caution, Clouder (2003) refers particularly to evidence from several international tests to support his argument in favour of a later school start. Drawing on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, 2001) study and the Third International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS, 1996) survey, he argues that several of the top scoring countries had a school starting age of 6 or 7. Admitting that other imponderables may be at play, he still deduces from this evidence that starting formal school later does not appear to hold children back. In addition POST (2000) argues that analysis of the relationship between school starting age and academic attainment across different countries tends to highlight that an earlier school starting age (4 or 5) compared with a later starting age (6 or 7) has little advantage in terms of educational outcomes.

2.3.4 Summary of the Empirical Evidence

In summary, a review of the empirical-based literature about the play versus formal debate, although still inconclusive, would suggest a slightly stronger argument in favour of a more play-based and social pedagogical approach for young children than a more school-like, formal model of teaching and learning. Although some studies have shown positive effects in terms of educational outcomes for direct instruction programmes, Siraj-Blatchford et al (2002) would argue that the benefits of these direct instruction programmes tend to be short lived and wash out after a relatively short period of time. Furthermore they add that despite their so-called academic gains, evidence has shown that they result in increased stress and anxiety behaviours. Although the National Follow through Project is large in scale and the findings somewhat more persistent (Barnett et al., 2008), the fact that the children were not assigned randomly to each programme weakens the methodology of the study and in turn reduces the rigour of the findings to a certain extent.

Walsh et al (in press) argue, therefore, that at the turn of the 21st century a consensus was emerging, at least in the Early Years camp, that too formal a pedagogical approach is inappropriate for young children (POST, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002; BERA SIG, 2003;

Bennett, 2005; Stephen, 2006; Dockett at al. 2007). In fact as part of an International Review of Curriculum and Assessment (INCA), Bertram and Pascal (2002) reviewed the Early Years curriculum, pedagogical and assessment approaches of 20 countries across the world (Australia, Canada, England, France, Germany, Republic of Ireland, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, USA, Wales and Hong Kong). Despite differences in opinions about the specific curricular pedagogical model, there was a strong consensus about the curriculum principles for 3-6 year olds. These were:

- a child-centred, flexible and individually responsive curriculum;
- the importance of working in partnership with parents;
- the need to offer broad and relevant learning experiences in an integrated manner;
- the importance of play and active, exploratory learning;
- an emphasis on social and emotional development; and
- the need to empower the child to be an autonomous and independent learner.

(Bertram & Pascal, 2002, section 3.3: 21)

2.4 TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED EARLY CHILDHOOD PEDAGOGY

As the momentum towards a more play-based and social pedagogical approach gathers, so too does the increasing controversy about whether all child-centred pedagogies are of equal educational value. Despite the consensus in thinking that too formal an approach is inappropriate for 3-6 year old children, recent controversy surrounds the appropriate extent of play, teacher-directedness and individualisation to ensure the best educational and social outcomes for young children (Wood, 2007 a & b). According to Wood (2007a) a body of opinion is emerging that play, from an educational perspective, has to some extent been overly “romanticised” (Wood, 2007b: 312). Wood (2007b) challenges the acceptance that all play activities result in meaningful and sustained learning and warns against romanticising the power and potential of play-based activity. She argues that play activities may stimulate

learning relevant processes, but may be content free, which juxtaposes the developmental against the educational rationale for play. In fact she raises a degree of scepticism about young children's ability to benefit from free choice and to express their needs and interest through play activities. She states that although basing curriculum content on the needs and interests of young children may be "ideologically seductive" (Wood, 2007b: 312), it can be quite problematic in practice. Simply showing an interest, according to Wood (2007a), is not the same as making meaningful connections between learning and experience. In this way she indicates that play is not the only means by which young children learn.

Early Years experts such as Broström (2007) resonate such thinking. He argues that the value of play has to some extent been "over interpreted" , challenging the thinking that "all play automatically leads to the development of the young child's psyche" and that play is always a natural source of challenge (Broström , 2007: 64). Studies such as EPPE (Sylva et al, 2004), REPEY (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002) and the Early Years Enriched Curriculum Evaluation project - EYEcep (McGuinness et al, 2009; McGuinness et al, 2010 and Walsh et al, 2010) also bring into question the value of all play-based experiences for children's learning and development, revealing that simply engaging in play-based activities of any description does not always guarantee increased learning potential. Earlier Katz (1995) also warned against an over-emphasis on the importance of play, which may, in her opinion, have resulted in a misunderstanding of the roles adults assume in maximising the benefits children derive from play. Stephen (2010) too argues for the need to challenge the value of play and child-centred activity for children's learning. However in questioning child-centredness and the focus on play in early childhood education she emphasises that it should not imply a rejection but rather should ensure that the opportunities offered to young children are enriched and in so doing provide an evidence-based rationale for play, beyond an appeal to consensus and historic claims to distinctiveness.

Coupled with the debate on effective play-based pedagogy is the growing concern about teachers' lack of proficiency in implementing effectively any play-based curriculum (Wood,

2004). Drawing on earlier research evidence (e.g. Bennett et al, 1997), Wood (2004) argues that play in practice is problematic. In many cases Early Years practitioners adapt a non-interventionist approach, and play in practice is limited in “frequency, duration and quality” (Wood, 2004: 21). Similarly a review of a number of empirical studies focusing on play-based pedagogy (BERA, 2003) found that practitioners generally stress the belief that play should be given high priority in an Early Years curriculum but find it difficult to implement in practice. Practitioners, particularly in Foundation Stage classes, tend to lack the confidence, knowledge and training to teach aspects of literacy and numeracy through play. In their classes, play serves mainly a social function with little evidence of progression and cognitive challenge (BERA, 2003). Findings from the SPEEL project support such thinking. Moyles et al (2002) report that, although early childhood practitioners tend to espouse beliefs about the importance of play in children’s learning, many of these same practitioners highlighted that children in their settings did not experience a high level of cognitive challenge when engaged in free play. A more recent study conducted in Northern Ireland by Walsh and Gardner (2006) came to similar conclusions. Although it would appear that the sample of Year 1 teachers (i.e. teachers of 4-5 year olds) surveyed accept play as being of benefit to the development of the ‘whole’ child, many are still reluctant or perhaps unsure of how effective enhancement of literacy and numeracy skills can be developed through a play-based curriculum without the use of direct instruction. In this way they still appear to see play and work as two separate entities.

However recent research evidence (for example Wood, 2007 a&b; Bennett, 2005; Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002 and Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004; Walsh et al, 2010) suggests a subtle shift in thinking about early childhood pedagogy away from envisaging play and work as two separate dichotomies, towards arguing in favour of a more integrated pedagogy in the Early Years. Reflecting on much of her previous research evidence, Wood (2007a&b) calls for an integrated pedagogical approach in the Early Years. In her paper advocating new directions in play, Wood (2007a) recommends a greater degree of “Synchronicity between playing, learning and teaching” (p. 319), where the practitioner assumes a more explicit role in young children’s play. She argues for a shift towards a more proactive and intentional pedagogy away from a

“responding and facilitating” model (p. 127). Wood offers the following figure as a form of clarification of what she means by a more integrated pedagogical approach:

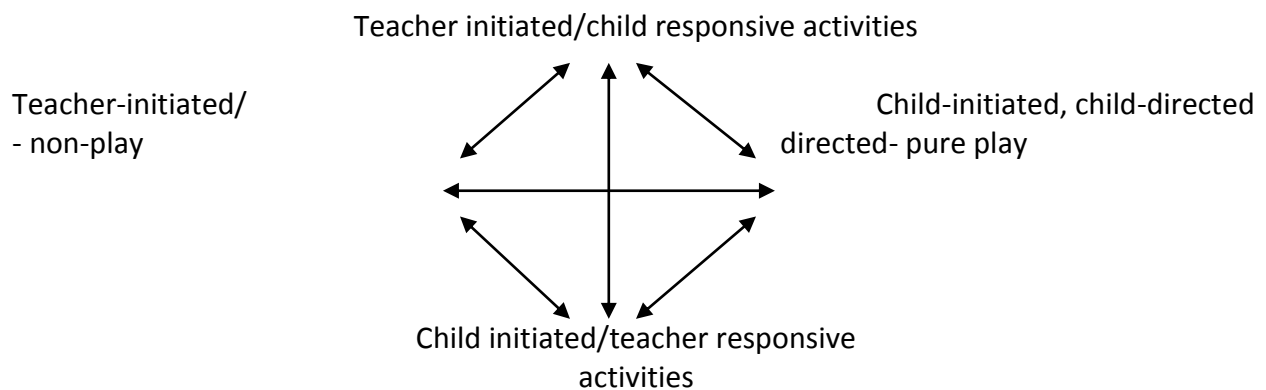


Figure 2.2: Integrated Curriculum and Pedagogical Approaches

Explaining the above figure, Wood (2007b) argues that pre-planned intentional activities are classified as work but that some of these activities might have a playful orientation.

Simultaneously adults can respond to children’s play activities by extending their interest.

Likewise children can also choose from an array of activities on offer. Some of these choices might be classified as pure play, according to Wood, if they involve characteristics such as intrinsic motivation, internal control and autonomy. However some of these choices may also be classified as work, where children choose to pursue their interests in specific areas of learning. She refers to this concept of integrated pedagogical approaches as creating a new form of pedagogical praxis, “which requires teachers and practitioners to attend closely to the choices that children make; the range of play activities in which they engage; their skills, dispositions and competences as players and learners, and the impact of their choices and activities for the whole community” (Wood, 2007b: 317). By providing this more integrated approach in the Early Years, Wood argues that the dichotomies between work/play and subject-centred/child-centred are avoided.

Walsh et al (2010) in their paper entitled ‘Implementing a Play-based and Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum in Northern Ireland Primary Schools: What Lessons have we Learned?’ confirm the need for a more complex, balanced and integrated early childhood pedagogy.

Interpreting the pedagogical lessons accrued from the Early Years Enriched Curriculum evaluation from the first four years of the Early Years Enriched Curriculum evaluation (see Sproule et al, 2005), Walsh and her colleagues point towards a new integrated Early Years pedagogy known as 'playful structure'. They describe 'playful structure' in terms of an interconnectedness/blend between play and work, where adults initiate and maintain a degree of 'playfulness' into the child's learning experience, while at the same time maintaining adequate structure to ensure that effective learning takes place. They argue, therefore, that the idea of play becomes a characteristic of the *interaction* between the adult and the child and not just a characteristic of child-initiated versus adult-initiated activities. In this way they argue that interaction adopts playful characteristics – for example, the tone is light-hearted, the activity becomes self-sustaining because both partners are enjoying it, and unexpected turns and directions are allowed.

From their extensive analyses of adult/child pedagogical interactions in preschool settings, Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2004) in their 'Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years' project, deduced that the most effective preschool settings (in terms of intellectual, social and dispositional outcomes) achieve a balance between the opportunities provided for children to benefit from teacher-initiated group work and the provision of freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities. In addition they argue that the best practitioners use a mixture of pedagogical approaches - for example scaffolding, extending, discussing, monitoring, and direct instruction – to fit both the concept or skill and the developmental zone of the children. In this way they suggest that "effective pedagogy in the Early Years is an essentially 'instructive' practice that involves both the kind of interaction traditionally associated with the word teaching, and also instructive learning environments and routines" (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002: 40).

Fumoto et al (2008) support this thinking, arguing that the concept of teaching has been precluded from early childhood education for many years, to its detriment. They argue that practices in the field of early childhood education have largely been characterised as child-

centred and holistic, with a strong emphasis on care, in sharp contradiction to the notion of teaching young children. Instead they propose that all early childhood practitioners need to engage in a form of teaching compatible with the principles of early childhood education if they are to capitalise on children's "momentum towards learning" (p. 187).

In addition others such as Hedges and Cullen (2005) have been calling for an increased focus on subject content and teaching respectively in early childhood education, emphasising its compatibility with a play-based pedagogy. Drawing on a study of practitioners, parents and children's beliefs and practices of subject knowledge in one kindergarten in New Zealand, Hedges and Cullen (2005) conclude that an early childhood curriculum's lack of emphasis on subject knowledge may limit learning and teaching opportunities as well as children's enquiry-based learning. They continue that using a discovery method as a pedagogical approach requires subject knowledge guidance to ensure that not only are the discoveries meaningful but that children's curiosity is maintained so that they can find their own answers and engage in a process of co-construction with their practitioners. Based on this thinking they argue that socio-cultural interpretation of knowledge construction "invites a reconceptualisation of practices that on the surface appear dichotomous and conflicting, such as play-based or subject-based curriculum and child-centred or teacher-centred pedagogical approaches" (Hedges & Cullen, 2005: 73). Siraj-Blatchford et al (2002) support this thinking. Drawing on findings from EPPE and REPEY, they argue that practitioners' knowledge and understanding of particular content knowledge relating to curriculum areas is a vital component of effective Early Years pedagogy and it is just as important in the Early Years as in later stages of education.

Research evidence from the 'Tools of the Mind' curriculum in the US (Bodrova and Leong, 2001) shows how a systematic approach to early literacy development can be successfully integrated into a developmentally appropriate programme with a specific focus on play and self-regulation (Barnett et al, 2008). Basic principles of the 'Tools of the Mind' curriculum include the understanding that children construct their own knowledge; development cannot be separated from its social context; learning can lead development and language plays a central role on

development. Underpinning these principles are two curricular components i.e. children's ability to regulate their own social and cognitive behaviours and an emphasis on early literacy prerequisites for later reading and writing through the medium of well planned play. In this way it could be argued that 'Tools of the Mind' provides a clear example of an integrated Early Years pedagogical approach where practitioners do not simply allow children to play in isolation; but rather they use a play planning process and specific interactions to support children's play through the use of play scenarios and scaffolded writing to enhance and progress their learning. Using a randomised control trial to compare this 'Tools of the Mind' curriculum to standard practice in preschools, Barnett et al (2008) found that this more integrated pedagogical approach improved overall classroom quality and children's executive functioning, determined by lower scores on a problem behaviour scale. Although there were some indications that it also improved children's language development, these did not stand up to further statistical scrutiny. They conclude from this rigorous study that a developmentally appropriate curriculum, with a strong emphasis on play, can improve both the social and academic success of young children.

In fact it could be argued that the revised Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) guidelines (NAEYC) in the US have also moved towards a more integrated pedagogical approach. As NAEYC (2009) suggest a merging of adult-guided and child-guided experiences, they quote Epstein (2006) who states that "adult-guided experience proceeds primarily along the lines of the teacher's goals, but is also shaped by the children's active engagement; child-guided experience proceeds primarily along the lines of children's interests and actions, with strategic teacher support" (p. 3). Although the original guidelines were more aligned towards the cognitive constructivist perspective of Piaget (Van Horn & Ramey, 2003), a more 'socio-constructivist' model of developmentally appropriate practice, giving greater weight to the role of the adult, is voiced in the more recent principles (see Walsh et al, in press). These include:

1. the interrelationship of development across different domains (physical, social/emotional, and cognitive);
2. the sequential, cumulative nature of development;

3. the variation in rates of learning and development between children;
4. the dynamic interaction of biological maturation and individual experience in children's learning and development;
5. the existence of optimal periods for certain types of learning;
6. the course of development towards greater complexity, self-regulation, and symbolic representation;
7. the importance of positive relationships with adults and peers for optimal development;
8. the influence of multiple social and cultural contexts on development and learning;
9. the variety of ways in which children learn, and therefore the range of teaching strategies that are effective;
10. the importance of play in developing self-regulation, language, cognition and social competence;
11. the effectiveness of challenging children to perform at just above their current level of mastery, and to practise newly acquired skills;
12. the circular relationship between children's experiences, their motivational dispositions (such as persistence, initiative and flexibility) and their learning and development.

(NAEYC, 2009)

Drawing on OECD evidence, Bennett (2005) also draws attention to how several European countries, even those with a strong tradition of a play-based pedagogy, are beginning to pay greater attention to educational significant goals in the Early Years. Increasingly, it would seem that OECD countries are placing greater emphasis on a more integrated pedagogical approach in the Early Years, where aspects of literacy and numeracy are being pursued through indirect and play-based approaches. Bennett (2005) cautions, however, that to neglect the basic principles of early childhood education in favour of what may be "premature cognitive programming could well be a loss for young children, communities and societies at large" (p. 15). In this way, although a move towards greater integration of pedagogical approaches is being encouraged, an overly formal, instructive Early Years approach is firmly rejected (Bennett, 2005).

In summary, from the beginning of the 21st century, there is a small but growing body of evidence to suggest that although play should still be at the heart of early childhood pedagogy, there is a shift away from the overly maturistic and romantic notions of play-based pedagogies in early childhood education and care (Walsh et al, 2010 and in press). Instead it would appear that the way forward in early childhood pedagogy, according to the literature base, is to bring

the opposing cultures of play and instruction more closely together in an effort to respond to the multi-faceted way in which young children learn (e.g. Goswami and Bryant, 2007) and to meet their every changing needs and interests. As Stephen (2010) suggests, the time is ripe to engage in a critical empirical and theoretical look at the value of play in an effort to improve the overall quality and effectiveness of early childhood pedagogy. The challenge for early childhood practitioners is to strike an appropriate balance between allowing children to express their creativity through play, with the attendant social and emotional benefits, and providing enough structure and challenge in the process to ensure genuine progression of their cognitive skills.

2.5 THE DIMENSIONS OF AN EFFECTIVE INTEGRATED MODEL OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PEDAGOGY

In this section of the report an attempt has been made to extrapolate from existing and emerging evidence how an integrated pedagogy for young children can be effectively realised in practice. Based on the thinking of Adams et al. (2004), Watkins & Mortimore (1999) and Stephen (2010), Walsh et al (in press) report that until recently the idea of pedagogy was rarely discussed in the UK educational literature, where emphasis tended to be placed on the content of the curriculum and the associated desired learning outcomes (Alexander, 2009). For this reason the evidence base on how to effectively implement an integrated model of EC pedagogy is relatively sparse.

Details of the principal studies and reviews drawn upon for this section of the report are detailed in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3: Key Evidence to Inform the Essence of Integrated Early Childhood Pedagogy

Source	Authors	Date	Summary
Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY)	Iram Siraj-Blatchford, Kathy Sylva, Stella Muttock, Rose Gildea and Danny Bell	2002	Largely based on intensive case studies conducted in 12 Early Years settings, chosen on the basis of child social/behavioural and cognitive outcomes from the EPPE project as 'good' practice settings. Data included documentary analysis of inspection reports, policy statements, systematic and naturalistic observations of children and staff, staff and parent interviews and focus group discussions within each case study setting.
OECD evidence	John Bennett	2005	Based on the thematic reviews of early childhood education and care, carried out by expert teams in 20 OECD countries
Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (SPEEL)	Janet Moyles, Siân Adams and Alison Musgrove	2002	Ethnographic study – fieldwork in a sample of 27 geographically spread Early Years settings identified as having effective pedagogical practices, a literature review, a comparison methodology to establish levels of internal consistency and interrogation and interpretation of data by researchers and EAG members
Quality Teaching Early Foundations: Best Evidence Synthesis	Sarah Eve Farquhar	2003	Review of evidence-based literature on effective pedagogy in early childhood education and care for the Ministry of Education in New Zealand
Pedagogy: the Silent Partner in Early Years Learning	Christine Stephen	2010	Draws on the evidence collated from two empirical studies: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Interplay – an ESRC funded study aimed to enhance young children's engagement with technology – carried out in two clusters of 4 preschool settings, working intensively with 14 practitioners over the course of one school year; 2) Part of the Scottish Applied

			<p>Educational Research Programme, exploring the shift to active learning at the beginning of primary school in two local authority areas – data included interviews with teachers; interviews with school managers and local authority representatives; interviews with parents; conversations with children and repeated systematic observations in each classroom on four occasions over the school year.</p>
<p>Dimensions of Pedagogical Quality in Preschool</p>	<p>Sonja Sheridan</p>	<p>2007</p>	<p>A meta-analysis of the results of four empirical studies - the first two studies were part of a research project, which aimed to develop a theoretical model for competence development. In both studies 31 teachers from nine preschools participated in the development programme. In both cases the studies commenced with external and self evaluations of quality using ECERS. The third study entitled ‘Children’s conceptions of participation and influence in preschool- a perspective of pedagogical quality’ involved external and self-evaluations of quality in 14 preschools using ECERS. Interviews were also conducted with 39 five year old children. The final study ‘Evaluations of pedagogical quality on early childhood education – a cross-national perspective’ involving two different countries and cultures namely Sweden and Germany. Again evaluations were conducted using ECERS in 20 preschools, 10 in each country.</p>
<p>Playful Structure: Six Pillars of Developmentally Appropriate</p>	<p>Glenda Walsh, Liz Sproule, Carol McGuinness, Karen Trew and Gordon</p>	<p>In press</p>	<p>This guidance draws on several sources of evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theory, research and practice about the meaning of ‘developmentally appropriate’

Practice

Ingram

practice and a play-based curriculum;

- Interviews with the Northern Ireland teachers (approx 119) who taught the first two cohorts of children who participated in the Enriched Curriculum and with teachers who received the Enriched Curriculum children into their classrooms as they progressed up through the school.
- Structured classroom observations in over 100 Year 1 and Year 2 Enriched Curriculum classrooms, using the Quality Learning Instrument (QLI), which was specially designed and validated for observing the quality of children's learning experience in Early Years *primary* classrooms.
- Additional intensive observations conducted in a sample of 8 classrooms that had particularly high ratings on the Quality Learning Instrument. A team of two/three observers spent a minimum of three consecutive days in each of these high quality settings; 150 hours of observations were recorded, 45 hours were video recorded. The purpose of these observations was to identify pedagogical practices that enabled some settings to provide a higher quality learning experience for 4-6 years olds compared to others. These observations were the main source of evidence for the specific guidance, and the classroom cameos are drawn from the video recordings in these classrooms.

The key dimensions which have been identified are: 'Playful and instructive activities'; 'Skilful interactions'; 'Structural framing'; 'Nurturing relationships'; 'Collaborative partnerships'; 'Professional knowledge and understanding' and 'Reflection and evaluation'. Each of these key dimensions will be addressed in turn.

2.5.1 Playful and Instructive Activities

Common to the existing evidence on the essence of effective early childhood pedagogy, is the underpinning notion that the activities available should be playful yet educational (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002; Walsh et al, in press; McGuinness et al, 2010; Bennett, 2005). Wood (2007) attempts to paint a fuller picture of what these activities might look like in practice. She refers to curriculum-generated play experiences which are planned intentionally to help children learn specific skills and concepts such as using number stories and rhymes (mathematics), exploring characters and plots in favourite stories (language and literacy) and making props and resources for role play (design technology). Whilst play-generated activities emerge from children's own interests and ideas, they can be extended and developed through support from practitioners through stories, information and communication technologies, out of school activities and visitors to school.

Much of this thinking resonates with the earlier work of van Oers (1996). Referring to the teaching of maths in Early Years classrooms, van Oers (1996) offers two models of thinking i.e. 'mathematising' play and making maths playful. The former suggests that the structured play activities such as sand and water, the home corner etc. can provide opportunities for young children to develop their mathematical skills; whilst the more structured mathematical tasks can be made more playful by introducing for example a puppet or the use of mathematical games. More recently van Oers (2003) refers to the importance of rules in children's play in an effort to develop their cognitive processes such as literacy and numeracy. He suggests that the richness of resources available in the context of play provide opportunities for teaching and

learning and it is the role of the practitioner to manage these effectively, without impairing the quality of play.

Similarly in a Danish context, the importance of rule-governed play has also been stressed by Broström (2007) in his concept of 'frame play' – a kind of structured dramatic role play.

Broström (2007) provides some help with this issue. He argues that in frame play an interplay between practitioners and children takes place where they plan and play together. He argues that the following seven pivotal points are essential for frame/expansive play:

- reading aloud a short story of high quality literature;
- based on the story, teacher and children carry through a structured conversation, known as literature dialogue;
- after the dialogue they make drawings to illustrate their understandings of the text;
- from this point, the children in groups are asked to turn their literature experiences into play. Here the teacher has mainly an observing role and uses the approach 'teacher in role';
- sometimes they will be asked to present their play to the rest of their peers and teachers;
- after presentation of the play, the teachers and each play group will share in a 'learning dialogue'; and
- during all phases, the teacher and the children have 'philosophical dialogues', reflecting on their thoughts and intentions during the drawings and play activities.

(Broström, 2007: 70).

Through integrating some aspects of instruction into play, Broström suggests that the child begins to build up a mental picture of the importance of formal learning, going through a mental transition from play motivation to learning motivation. It could be argued that frame play intercedes between play and formal learning, providing a form of mediation between work and play.

Howard and Westcott (2007) also call for this blending of play and work, a process they refer to as playfulness. Drawing on earlier research, Howard and Westcott (2007) stress that practice is more effective when approached in a playful rather than a formal manner. To maximise

playfulness, they stress the need for practitioners to be cooperative partners in children's play and that play should occur in all areas of the classroom throughout the day e.g. introducing story props into the role play and dressing up basket and replacing the traditional book corner with story sacks and a story tent. Changing the location of storytime, for example reading stories in the role play area or enacting appropriate stories outside, can inject playfulness, according to Howard and Westcott (2007), into reading activities.

Goouch (2008) supports the need for what she refers to as 'playful pedagogies' in the Early Years. In her argument for such an approach, she claims that through e.g. the use of narrative or resources practitioners can create opportunities which enable them to follow children into play and engage in a process of co-construction. But in order to do so, she affirms that practitioners must be able to "catch the inner gleam of children" (Claxton, 2000: 49) and forego "preordained curricular objectives" to allow children's play objectives to be followed, developed and extended and in so doing trusting that cognitive development will take place without the need for "contrivance, hijacking or subverting children's intentions" (p. 95).

2.5.2 Skilful Interactions

Skilful interactions have also been identified by several researchers (such as Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002; Farquhar, 2003; Sheridan, 2007; Goouch, 2008, Walsh et al in press and Stephen, 2010) as a key component of an effective pedagogical model. Drawing on evidence from the influential REPEY study (currently the only study to link good classroom practice with successful outcomes), Siraj-Blatchford et al (2002) and Sylva and Siraj-Blatchford (2004) point to the need for insightful intervention on the part of the practitioners. They conclude that the most effective practitioners encourage a process of 'sustained shared thinking' where the practitioner uses a variety of strategies such as modelling, questioning, explaining, demonstrating and scaffolding in an effort to engage children and practitioners in meaningful discussion aimed at co-constructing meaning and understanding.

They further clarify that sustained shared thinking is “an episode in which two or more individuals ‘work together’ in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend thinking” (Sylva et al, 2004: 36).

Based on evidence collated from her ‘interplay’ study (an investigation of playroom pedagogy in relation to technological resources), Stephen (2010) refers to the need for ‘proximal guided interaction’ on the part of the practitioner to support children’s learning. According to Stephen (2010), proximal guided interaction, like sustained shared thinking, is concerned with the direct actions of adults as they engage with children to support their knowledge acquisition. However she argues that such a technique goes beyond the conventional language techniques associated with scaffolding children’s learning experiences. Rather in proximal guided interactions the emotional and social aspects of pedagogical interactions are made evident. For example she found that participating in children’s emotions of e.g. fun or anxiety can make an important contribution to their learning dispositions such as confidence and persistence. In this way she argues that pedagogical interventions such as emotional engagement, physical actions, touch, non-verbal gestures as well as language all have an important role to play in supporting children’s learning.

Drawing on evidence collated from the New Zealand Competent Children project (1999), Farquhar (2003) indicates how Early Years practitioners being responsive to individual children, asking open-ended questions, joining children’s play, allowing children time to complete their activities and guiding them in the Early Years centre can all impact significantly on a range of children’s competencies. In addition to the term ‘scaffolding’ children’s learning experiences, she argues that practitioners also need to engage in a process of ‘weaving’. To explain the difference between these two metaphors, she calls on the work of Dyson (1990):

“Whereas scaffolding is a vertical metaphor, one that represents how those who are more skilful support children’s progress within one activity, weaving adds a horizontal

dimension. It suggests how children's progress in any one activity is supported by their experiences on varied (other) activities" (cited in Farquhar, 2003: 33).

Walsh et al (in press) emphasise the need for skill and flexibility in the Early Years practitioner role and argue that such thinking finds resonance in the variety of roles provided by Dunkin & Hanna (2001). Drawing on the results of the Competent Child longitudinal study in New Zealand (Wylie, Thompson & Lythe, 1999) Dunkin and Hanna (2001) created a teaching resource, called *Thinking Together* which elaborates a range of high quality adult-child interactions that can occur in playful settings and a range of roles that adults can adopt to help shape the interaction and set the tone.

These roles are:

- Co-player/play partner — playing alongside the children like a peer;
- Co-learner/co-explorer — modelling the role the practitioner would wish to see the child taking e.g. looking for resources or information, asking a more knowledgeable person for help and struggling with a problem;
- Facilitator — providing strategies and ideas, supporting recall and creating opportunities for children;
- Listener/decoder — acting as a sounding board for the child's ideas, reflecting their thinking back to them, restating the child's utterances so that they make more sense or simply taking time to listen to what the children have to say;
- Co-planner — interacting with the child to further develop the activity e.g. making suggestions when the child is at a stand and commenting favourably on good ideas;
- Commentator — providing constructive advice as in "That's a good idea but it would be even better if..."

Referring specifically to the development of young children's thinking and having conducted a review of literature in this field, Walsh et al (2007) also draw attention to the importance of practitioner interaction and argue that such pedagogical strategies tend to fall into four main phases. They indicate that the process of an intervention should commence with a 'tuning in' phase. Here practitioners take time to familiarise with what a child or group of children are doing and then make a decision as to whether they need to intervene or not. If they do decide

to intervene, the need to act sensitively is clearly emphasised. The next phase, in their opinion, is developmental, where the practitioner uses modelling, scaffolding or questioning strategies (amongst others) to extend the thinking experience. The creative phase, according to Walsh et al. (2007), may run alongside the development phase where the teacher simply provides open-ended and play-based tasks for the children to engage in or it may be envisaged as an extension to the development phase. Here the teacher will encourage the child/ren to think beyond the routine, emphasising the importance of completing an activity with flair and coming up with creative solutions to a problem/question. The final phase is reflective in nature. This phase involves encouraging the young children to reflect on what they have done and engage in a process of self-assessment. Hence a degree of 'cognitive conflict' will be introduced on the part of the child, where the teacher/significant other, through his/her tactful use of language/questioning, might introduce a degree of challenge/ambiguity to the child/ren's thought, encouraging learning to take place.

2.5.3 Structural Framing

Over and above the face to face interactions between practitioner and child, the REPEY findings also draw attention to the importance of 'behind the scenes activity', which they describe as 'pedagogical framing'. According to Siraj-Blatchford et al (2002), the latter includes planning, assessment, resources, the establishment of routines and the arrangement of space. They found that the quality of pedagogical framing impacted as greatly as that of 'pedagogical interactions' on children's learning outcomes. Similarly Stephen (2010) highlights the importance of 'distal guided interaction' (i.e. indirect interactions when children are not present) as an essential support for learning. In the Interplay project, distal guided interactions included arranging access to the technologies, planning and ensuring that the resources were appropriate. Through distal guided interactions, Stephen argues, two levels of social mediation are apparent. Through their indirect actions practitioners mediate the learning environment, guiding the technology, arranging the setting to ensure optimum support is available and delaying their own resources to allow for necessary proximal interactions. In addition she

explains that a further level of mediation, which often goes ignored, is derived from the policies and expectations of practice which influence the behaviour and decisions of practitioners, mainly where planning and monitoring are concerned. In this way she explains, it is necessary not to overlook the difference indirect interactions can have on children's learning, indicating the need to think beyond the immediate inter-personal interaction to the ways in which cultural experiences can also impact on children's experiences and outcomes.

One of Sheridan's (2007) key dimensions of pedagogical quality, known as the setting/learning context, also resonates much of this thinking about indirect interactions. Based on a meta-analysis of four empirical studies, she too highlights the importance, of structural pedagogical processes such as space, equipment, materials and how they are arranged and used, the organisation of the content and activities as well as the atmosphere, the attitude of the practitioners, their educational strategies etc. for children's learning and development. Walsh et al (in press) reinforce this thinking, indicating that providing an appropriate structure for children by identifying clear learning intentions and the ability to communicate these to young children in ways that are meaningful to them is requisite to allow for smooth progression and gentle transitions as children meet new cognitive and social challenges. Drawing on the OECD findings, Bennett (2005) also refers to the significance of the learning context in terms of favourable child-staff ratios, the adequacy of buildings, resources and learning environments. He extends this thinking further to include the training and support practitioners receive as well as the legislation and curricular regulations that governments bring to early childhood policy, all having an impact on practitioners' values and understandings of early childhood education and care, hence influencing the everyday experience they offer young children.

2.5.4 Nurturing Relationships

The need for positive relationships between practitioner and child has also been identified as an integral component of an effective pedagogical model (Moyles et al, 2002; Bennett, 2005; Sheridan, 2007; Hayes, 2008 and Walsh et al, in press). Although reputable studies such as

REPEY have overlooked the significance of the emotional aspect of pedagogy and been criticised for it (see for example Brock, 2009), others such as SPEEL (Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning by Moyles, Adams and Musgrove, 2002) and Bennett (2005), drawing on the OECD evidence, see it as critical. Bennett (2005) argues against an instrumental relationship between child and practitioner, where the focus is merely on achieving targets. Such a relationship, he argues, can interfere with the child's need for autonomy and also undermine the affective link between child and practitioner. He draws a parallel with PISA evidence, which too equates successful learning, even at secondary level, with a positive atmosphere and good relationships with the practitioners. Further studies have also shown the advantages of positive teacher-child relationships, not only in terms of increased social and emotional competence on the part of the children which lasts over time (Howes and Smith, 1995; Howes et al, 2000), but also in their ability to adjust to the demands of formal schooling (Birch and Ladd, 1997). Mashburn and Pianta (2006) emphasise that positive relationships between teacher and child during the Early Years of schooling also have positive effects on children's long term school outcomes. Drawing on empirical evidence of Hamre and Pianta (2001), they indicate that children who have close relationships with their Early Years teachers achieve higher social and academic outcomes in the early grades, with benefits that last into later school years.

The role of the practitioner in securing a positive relationship with young children is therefore paramount and Sheridan (2007) argues the need for him/her to adopt a 'democratic/learning-orientation strategy' (p. 206) i.e. an engaged, sensitive, social and negotiating approach. Drawing on her meta-analysis of four empirical studies (see Sheridan, 2007), characteristics of this democratic strategy include participation, communication and cooperation between children and practitioners, where mutual respect, trust and open-minded reciprocity reign.

In a similar vein, Hayes (2008) contends that 'care' should be reconceptualised as 'nurture', in an effort to strengthen the educational value of care, moving beyond the custodial notion of 'mothering' whereby the adult is required to "actively nourish, rear, foster, train and educate

the child through his or her practice” (Hayes 2008: 437). In fact she proposes the need for a ‘nurturing pedagogy’ in the Early Years which is underpinned by respect for the child as a participating partner in the learning process, while at the same time respecting the dual nature of early education as “care and education in practice” (p. 438). Bennett (2005) supports this thinking, asserting the need for the social pedagogical aspect of Early Years education and care not to be overlooked. He draws on the words of the OECD report on Germany, to clarify his thinking:

“...this is not the child only of emotions – the psycho-therapeutic approach; nor only of the body – the medical or health approach; nor only of the mind – the traditional teaching approach. For the pedagogue, working with the whole child, learning, care and, more generally, upbringing (the elements of the original German concept of pedagogy: Bildung, Betreuung and Erziehung – education, upbringing and care) are closely related – indeed inseparable activities at the level of daily work. These are not separate fields needing to be joined up, but inter-connected parts of the child’s life” (cited in Bennett, 2005: 18).

In short, the role of the Early Years practitioner extends beyond the head (involving reflection on practice) and hands (meeting physical and social needs) to include the heart (building relationships) (Broström, 2005; Petrie et al 2006).

2.5.5 Collaborative Partnerships

A critical element of effective pedagogy in the Early Years is the practitioner’s ability to form positive relationships with parents and the outside community (Moyles et al, 2002; Farquhar, 2003; Bennett, 2005 and Dockett et al, 2007). Evidence from the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years project (REPEY) (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002) has identified the consistent benefits of a positive home-school liaison for children’s learning and development, suggesting that better outcomes are associated with families having a better understanding of

the purpose and process of early childhood education and care. Building these positive partnerships, according to Farquhar (2003), can be achieved by supporting parents to develop their pedagogical capacity through getting involved in the Early Years setting and practitioners making their pedagogy explicit and by developing strategies to cross the home-school boundary and involve families in children's learning in the Early Years setting, even when they are physically unable to participate in the learning programme due to employment or other reasons. Farquhar draws on the work of Bridge (2001) who conducted an action based study to increase the involvement of parents at her rural setting. Initially she asked parents and children to plan an activity together in the home. Then children's play was observed at the setting and finally parents were asked about their involvement in the setting through planning. The findings revealed that, when parents were involved in the planning process with the children, in turn children produced more 'living play', based upon their family culture. Practitioners also benefitted by developing an improved understanding of children's play; whilst parents felt more on equal terms with the practitioners as they knew what the children were doing and why. Overall parents and practitioners felt they were more involved in children's learning than before because of the shared planning undertaken in the home.

Dockett et al (2007) support this thinking, emphasising that partnerships between families and practitioners which are positive, reciprocal and trusting are the corner stone of early childhood education. They argue that relationships between families and settings are at their best, when family members have the time and expectation to engage with schools, when there are relatively few differences between the cultures of their home and the school and when the environments and expectations of school and home are similar. However they raise the issue that it is in those situations where there is a degree of mismatch between home and school that most effort on the part of the practitioner is required. They assert that overcoming barriers to positive relationships depends greatly on practitioners recognising that for some families the school setting can be intimidating and that their reluctance to become actively involved does not necessarily reflect indifference.

Farquhar (2003) develops this point further, indicating the need for the effective practitioner to manage these mismatches. She claims that evidence on investigating differences specific to ethnicity and social class provides a sound basis for ensuring links between the cultural contexts in which children are socialised. However she cautions that such links can be weak if the practitioner bases his/her pedagogy on their personal view of group differences and is not fully aware of the children's own family cultural contexts. Referring to evidence derived from studies conducted by Sims and Hutchins (2001) she proposes the need for Early Years practitioners to visit children in their own environment and to get to know them through informal contact, to employ bilingual support workers and the provision of a culturally structured environment in which language plays a vital role in children's enculturation.

As Fler & Williams-Kennedy state:

“Building partnerships between schools and families is more than simply listening to each other. It is about joint construction of outcomes and pathways, and the active positioning of indigenous families as knowledgeable.....about their children and culture” (cited in Farquhar, 2003: 24).

2.5.6 Professional Knowledge and Understanding

Drawing on their Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning, Moyles et al (2002) conclude that effective pedagogy is multi-faceted, moving well beyond the confines of everyday practice to include pedagogical knowledge and understanding. They claim that “the key to effective pedagogy is the way in which principles are established and the way in which understanding of children's learning and developmental theories is applied in practice, informed by practitioners' values, beliefs and understandings” (p. 120). In this way they assert that the effective practitioner should have acquired an informed knowledge and understanding of early childhood development, education and care, including management and organisational factors. They add that effective pedagogy is “dependent on practitioners acquiring, using and

applying their professional knowledge” (p. 121), which incorporates knowledge of children’s learning; classroom management and organisation; the use and management of appropriate resources; pedagogical processes that enable children to access learning; specific knowledge about learners, knowledge of educational contexts as well as the knowledge of the aims and purposes of education, its values and philosophies (Shulman, 1999).

Walsh et al (in press) argue the need for Early Years practitioners to have a sound knowledge and understanding of young children’s developmental pathways in order to be able to ascertain in what direction the child’s understanding is going next and to use this knowledge to plan pedagogical sequences that provide for children moving forward in their learning. Professional knowledge in terms of knowledge of societal changes is also called for by Sheridan (2007). She stresses that practitioners need to have a sound understanding of how new laws, attitudes, requirements, the economy, research etc. impact and influence their pedagogical role. One such discourse, she emphasises, is that of children’s social, political and civil rights, in particular their right to be seen as subjects rather than objects.

Farquhar (2003) focuses specifically on practitioners’ content knowledge (subject based and general knowledge) as a key component of effective pedagogy in the Early Years. Referring to evidence collated by e.g. Siraj-Blatchford et al (2002) and Hedges (2003), Farquhar (2003) advocates the need for Early Years practitioners to have, not only the knowledge, but also the confidence to be able to promote children’s learning in specific content areas. She calls on the need for this knowledge base to be addressed in undergraduate and professional development programmes for Early Years practitioners.

Moyles et al (2002) concur with the need for practitioners’ knowledge and understanding to be included in all initial and in-service training programmes. They argue that single day courses are insufficient to give practitioners the depth of knowledge required to ensure effective pedagogy. In addition they stress that “raising awareness is not the same as developing reflective, thoughtful and effective pedagogues” (p. 135).

2.5.7 Reflection and Evaluation

A further critical element of effective pedagogy, according to Moyles et al (2002), is the ability of the practitioner to engage in a process of professional thinking which includes the ability “to reflect on practice and to make informed decisions through well conceived examination and analysis of pedagogy. It involves the thinking practitioner in articulating and evaluating practice and a continuous strive to improve” (p. 5). By engaging in such a reflective process, Moyles et al argue that changes will occur and in turn the overall effectiveness of pedagogy will be increased. They highlight how, when engaged in reflection, the practitioner learns from experience, unfolding each pedagogical decision in terms of its cognitive and affective gains. Farquhar (2003) adds to this thinking, indicating that it is not just the practitioner’s knowledge base, their years of experience and their levels of initial education and professional development that make a difference to children’s learning and development, but how these in turn influence their practice. She continues that when practitioners become more critical of their own pedagogy, this can enhance their understanding and challenge their practices. She concludes that:

“Effective teachers teach metacognitively, reflecting on their own thinking and children’s thinking as learners. They engage in reflection and planning with colleagues and use a range of methods to help identify how pedagogical practice can be improved to benefit children and further increase their effectiveness” (Farquhar, 2003: 30).

Kilderry (2004) develops this thinking more fully, arguing the need for effective practitioners to adopt a critical pedagogical approach, not in the sense of being disapproving, but rather in an effort to distinguish between the subjectivities and objectivities of curricular content. She argues that it provides a critical lens which enables practitioners to constructively review practice. Drawing on the work of Kessler and Hauser (2000) on critical pedagogy and the politics of play, she reveals how practitioners by engaging in this critical pedagogical approach can become more intellectually adept about the benefits and discrepancies of free play. By

becoming more critically aware, Kilderry argues that practitioners make a seismic shift from simply responding to curricular frameworks and subscribing to the notion that anyone can teach young children, to critically engaging with curricular decision- making.

2.5.8 Summary of the Essence of Effective EC Pedagogy

By way of conclusion, therefore, seven key dimensions have been identified from the evidence base as being integral to the effective implementation process of an integrated model of EC pedagogy as illustrated in Figure 2.3.

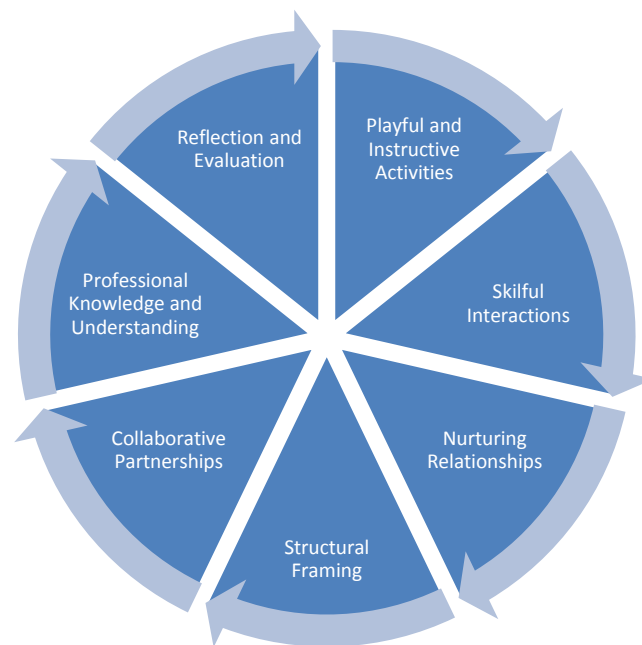


Figure 2.3: Key Dimensions of an Effective Early Childhood Pedagogy

One of the key dimensions identified by the literature is ‘Playful and instructive activities’ i.e. activities that are playful in orientation but adequately instructive in perspective to allow for adequate learning and development on the part of the child. In addition to the activities provided, the practitioner needs to skilfully interact with the young children, using a selection of different roles and strategies in an effort both to support and extend the learning taking place. Over and beyond the cognitive aspect of pedagogy, an emotional dimension in the form

of nurturing effective relationships with young children has also been identified as requisite. The literature base has emphasised how such a relationship must extend beyond care to include a form of nurture where the work of the head, hands and heart are blended as one. In order to provide the appropriate activities and interact and relate effectively with the young children much 'behind the scenes' activity on the part of the practitioner is required in terms of observing, planning, organising and assessing. Such activity, according to the literature, also includes the need to develop collaborative relationships with parents and the wider community in an effort to meet the needs and interests of the young children as fully as possible. These skills and strategies on the part of the practitioner are fully informed by their level of professional knowledge and understanding, another key dimension identified by the literature base as impacting on the effectiveness of early childhood pedagogy. The need for practitioners to be well educated and to keep themselves abreast of new ideas and initiatives within early childhood has been identified as paramount. However to have acquired the knowledge is not sufficient in itself. Integral to maintaining high quality pedagogy in the Early Years are practitioners who engage in an informed process of critical reflection and evaluation on a regular basis.

It could be argued that these seven key dimensions, identified by the literature base, can be classified according to three main perspectives namely the child, the practitioner and the professional – each perspective of equal importance to the effectiveness of early childhood pedagogy. The child perspective is right at the heart of the wheel and includes the dimensions 'Skilful Interactions', 'Nurturing Relationships' and 'Playful and Instructive Activities' which involve and impact directly on the children. The practitioner perspective forms the next rim of the wheel, comprising the process of preparing, planning and organising known as 'Structural Framing' and the collaboration with parents and the wider community i.e. 'Collaborative Partnerships'. 'Professional Knowledge and Understanding' falls into the professional perspective along with 'Reflection and Evaluation' and forms the outer rim of the wheel. Without the capacity to keep abreast of new initiatives and research in the field of Early Years and the ability to engage in constructive critique of the learning process the wheel will not

continue to turn. The whole pedagogical experience can be summed up and consolidated in the following early childhood pedagogical wheel:

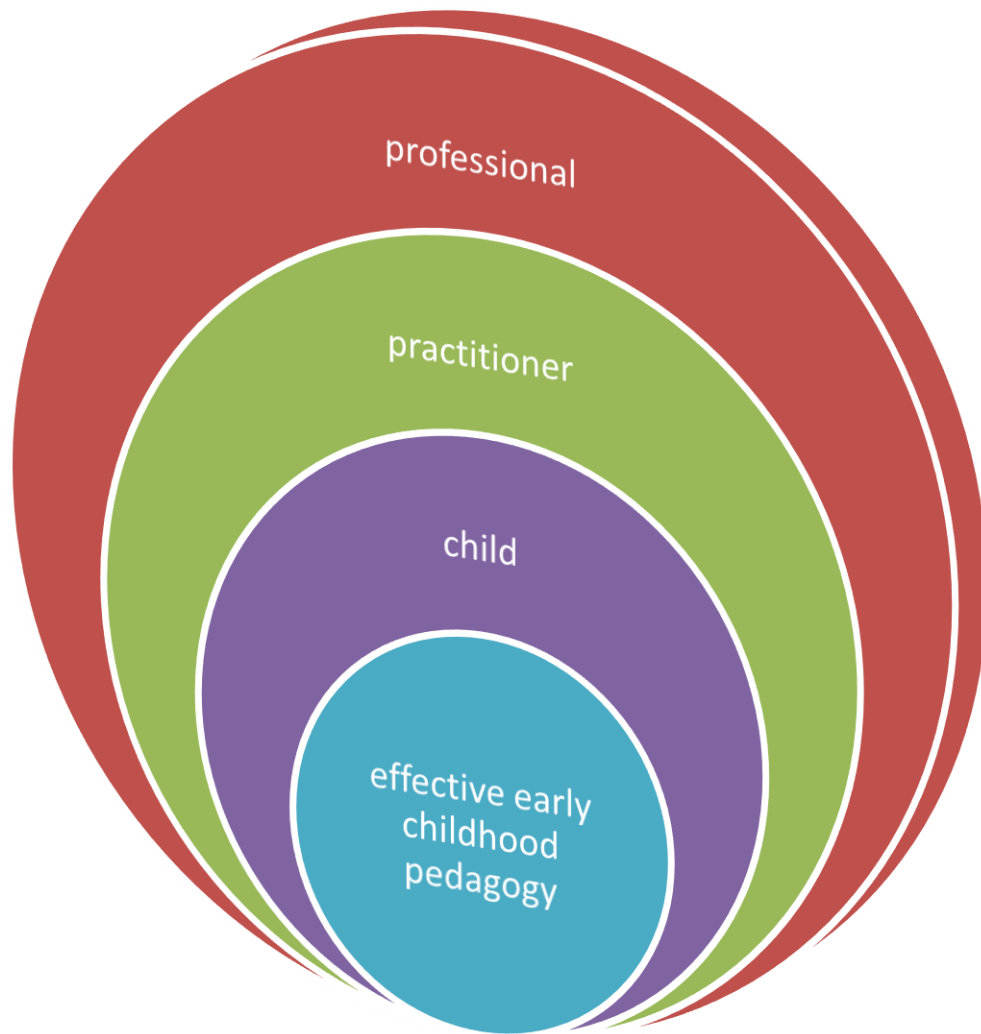


Figure 2.4: The Effective Early Childhood Pedagogy Wheel

2.6 AN IRISH PERSPECTIVE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD PEDAGOGY

The final section of this review will focus specifically on the EC experience of the Republic of Ireland and address their perspective on EC pedagogy from the early 1900s to the present day.

2.6.1 An Irish Perspective on Early Childhood Pedagogy: 1920-1960

Historically early childhood education and care in the Republic of Ireland has been sparse, scattered and unregulated (Hennessy and Hayes, 1997; Fallon, 2005; Hayes, 2008). For the most part of the twentieth century, the vast majority of young children in Ireland have been cared for by their mothers in their homes (Kiernan and Walsh, 2004; Fallon, 2005), where the percentage of Irish married women in the workforce consistently remained low, reducing from 5.6% in 1936 to 5.2% in 1961 (Walsh, 2005). As Fallon (2005) stresses, families tended to be large and older siblings and the extended family, in the main, grandmothers (who frequently lived in the family home), cared for the young children. The State tended to assume a passive role in the upbringing of young children, where the responsibility to provide for and protect young children lay directly with the parents or carers. Preschool provision was indeed rare if not nonexistent during these years. Traditionally speaking, therefore, it could be argued that the primary concern of Irish parents at that time was principally their children's physical well being, with little emphasis being placed on the educational aspect of their development (OECD, 2004).

Parents cared for their children at home until they commenced their formal education in the national school system. The statutory school starting age in Ireland was and still is six years of age and the primary concern of national schools from their inception has been educational (Fallon, 2005). Although the State's role was non-interventionist in perspective, the Catholic Church, on the other hand, appeared to have had considerable influence on many aspects of Irish family life, including education, a position consolidated by the 1937 Constitution (Walsh, 2005 and Fallon, 2005). As Walsh (2005) argues: "all aspects of life, including the family and

education, were viewed through a nationalistic and Catholic lens in the period following independence” (p. 257). During this time the function of education was principally religious, moral and intellectual rather than a mechanism for economic gain. The curricular emphasis therefore was on a revival of the Irish language and culture and on content pertaining to moral and literacy development (Walsh, 2005). As Donagh (1993) argues: “prior to the 1960s, the purpose of the education system could be summarised as to teach children to save their soul andto love all things Irish” (cited in Walsh, 2005: 336). Emphasis on children’s individual needs and interests was far removed from the curriculum at that time, where the pedagogical approach was principally didactic and authoritative in perspective (Walsh, 2005 and Fallon, 2005). Fallon (2005) adds that many teachers expressed concerns about the effectiveness of the pedagogy used during this period, emphasising how it inhibited children intellectually, repressed their self-esteem and confidence and led to mental and in some cases physical damage.

2.6.2 Emergence of an Early Childhood Pedagogy in Ireland: 1960-1990

Societal changes and economic prosperity during the 1960s and 1970s invigorated renewed interest and debate in early childhood education and care. Reduced family size and an increased female participation in the labour workforce resulted in out of home childcare becoming a necessity for some families (Walsh, 2005). Hayes (2008) indicates that the 1970s and 1980s therefore saw a slow but steady development of early childhood services particularly for three to four year old children (four to six year olds were enrolled early in infant classes in national schools), and such development was driven principally by the voluntary sector. As Fallon (2005) argues, during this time Barnardos arrived in Ireland, the Irish Preschool Playgroup Association was founded, the first Naionrai (Irish language preschool) was established and Montessori training opportunities were expanded. Hayes (2008) adds that the number of private crèches and nurseries also began to increase slowly and in 1986, the National Children’s Nursery Association (NCNA) was established. The types of settings beginning to emerge can be categorized as follows:

- Sessional playgroups and preschools: children attend less than three-and-a-half hours per child per day and children normally attend in the morning or afternoon. In the main, these services cater for children aged from two years 10 months to four or five years of age, and combine education and care through play;
- Full day nurseries and crèches: children attend for more than three and a half hours per day and they cater for children from as young as two or three months to six years of age and older in terms of after school facilities. A structured educational element is offered for children aged three to five years, focusing on e.g. Montessori, High/ Scope or a purely play-based philosophy;
- Parent and toddler groups: these offer opportunities for both parents and children to interact socially through the medium of play;
- After school and out of school care: offering services for children after school and during school holidays; and
- Home visits: these services are delivered to parents and families in the home environment on a regular (usually monthly) basis and are designed to support and empower parents' role as the primary educator of the child (Fallon, 2005).

The above services principally were and still are based on well established early educational approaches, including Montessori, Steiner, Froebel and High/Scope and therefore a pedagogy which focused both on education and care was beginning to emerge, at least in rhetoric. So at a time when there was little State support, it was these organisations that helped to fill the gap, endeavouring to provide quality services for preschool children (OECD, 2004). The fact that some of these settings such as playgroups only provided a service for two or three hours a day, highlights the fact that parents were beginning to recognise the value of such provision for other reasons, beyond simply caring for their children while they worked (Hennessy and Hayes, 1997).

As Mahoney and Hayes (2006) argue "...up until the mid 1990s the number of policy documents specifically relating to the quality of early childhood care and education were very scarce, therefore many voluntary groups adopted the role of developing and administering quality childcare initiatives within the Irish Republic" (p. 19).

State intervention during this time was extremely limited and focused solely on children who were deprived or at risk in some way (e.g. children who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, have a special need or whose parents may suffer from an illness and are not able to look after them). The best known of these preschool projects was the Rutland Street Preschool Project which was opened in 1969 in a deprived area of inner city Dublin, and with the exception of some preschool services for children from the travelling community in the 1980s, this remained the State's only preschool project until the Early Start preschools in the mid 1990s for children in some economically deprived areas of Ireland (Hennessey and Hayes, 1997 and Fallon, 2005).

Major curricular change was also taking place at this time in the Early Years of the primary sector. A New Curriculum (DoE, 1971), which was more child-centred and play-based in perspective, was introduced in 1971. Inherent in this curriculum was the emphasis placed on content but also on the learning dispositions of young children and the pedagogical approach adopted by the teacher (Walsh, 2005). However economic recession of the 1970s marred its implementation, with class sizes remaining very large and the network of support planned for teachers did not materialize (Fallon, 2005).

2.6.3 Current Status of Early Childhood Pedagogy in Ireland: 1990 - present day

From the 1990s Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland has escalated to the forefront of the political agenda (Hayes, 2008). As Kernan and O'Kane (2006) state: "During the past decade, there has been an increase in policy attention to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), accompanied by an increase in the number of children using ECCE services" (p. 171). Economic, demographic and social changes, as well as change in the way early childhood is perceived in the Republic of Ireland, have transformed the way in which young Irish children are cared for (Kiernan and Walsh, 2004). The economy has seen substantial growth during this period, known as the Celtic Tiger, with an annual growth rate of 4.7% between 1990 and 1995, and 6.7% between 1995 and 2000 (Duffy, Fitzgerald, Kearney & Smyth, 1999). Increased numbers of

mothers returning to the workforce and greater urbanisation taking place, leading to fewer children being cared for by the extended family, have resulted in a greater demand being placed on early childhood services. Furthermore a change in attitude on the part of parents regarding the value of learning and development in the Early Years has placed an even greater pressure on the need for quality early childhood services to be in place (Kiernan and Walsh, 2004; Fallon, 2005).

A suite of policy developments occurred since 1990, which according to Duignan (2005) began in the Republic of Ireland, the process of creating a single identity for the diverse range of Early Years provision, where the importance of a distinct, integrated Early Childhood Care and Education sector was beginning to come to the fore (Kiernan and Walsh, 2004). These policy initiatives included the Childcare Act (1991) which ensured for the first time that ECCE settings in Ireland were regulated and standards were established (Hayes, 2008). The Irish ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child followed in 1992, which according to Kiernan and Walsh (2004) was an important milestone in ECCE in Ireland, where there was finally a recognition on the part of the State that young children have rights different to those of adults and a shift in thinking on the State's part that it should play a part in assisting parents in their childcare responsibilities. Two further strategies were implemented before the turn of the 21st century which were influential in progressing a united ECCE sector: The National Childcare Strategy recognised the importance of quality childcare and its role in young children's development (Mahoney and Hayes, 2006) and marks the link between care and education in the holistic development of young children (Kiernan and Hayes, 2004). This link was also recognised in the White Paper Ready to Learn (DES, 1999), highlighting that young children's care and education should not be separated, but should be provided in "a complementary seamless fashion" (DES, 1999: 4). In so doing it drew attention to the various curricula being implemented in ECCE in Ireland and called for a set of guidelines to be drawn up which could underpin any Early Years curriculum. A key feature of this White Paper was the recommendation of an Early Childhood Education Agency, which came in the form of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education in 2002. The Centre's core function was

to produce a National Quality Framework for Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland.

The National Children's Strategy: Our Children – Their Lives, published by the Department of Health and Children in 2000 "marked a further shift in the development of a rights based approach to children" (Kiernan and Walsh, 2004: 7). Guided by principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the strategy had three national goals. These were to ensure that children would have a voice, their lives would be better understood and that children would receive quality support and services (OECD, 2004). Subsequently in 2004 the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) published a document entitled 'Towards a Framework for Early Learning'. Although pertaining more to the primary sector, this document details the importance of a national curricular framework for the entire Early Years sector in Ireland, focussing on four interconnected themes: well being; identity and belonging; communication and exploring and thinking. It recommends that young children should be placed at the heart of the planning process, where learning opportunities respond to and are guided by the children's strengths, needs and interests (Hayes, 2008). Towards the latter part of the first decade of the 21st century, therefore, two national frameworks for ECCE in Ireland were being developed, culminating in 'Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood', published by CECDE in 2006 and 'Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework' published by NCCA in 2009. Both frameworks are grounded in research evidence. For the purposes of Síolta, Duignan (2005) details that four key strands of research were involved in the development of this framework on CECDE's part, namely:

- Talking about Quality (CECDE, 2004) - a national consultation with stakeholders in ECCE;
- Insights on Quality (CECDE, 2005a) - a review of national policy, practice and research, focusing on quality;
- Making Connections (CECDE, 2005b) – a review of the international context for quality through consideration of a range of selected countries; and
- Early Childhood in Ireland/Evidence and Perspectives (CECDE, 2005c) – a report on the CECDE position on child development and learning.

Aistear has been informed by three research papers namely:

- Play as a context for Early Learning and Development (Kiernan, 2007);
- Perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood (Hayes, 2007); and
- Children's early learning and development (French, 2007).

In this way both frameworks are embedded in a pedagogical approach that is play-based in perspective and integrates both care and education, moving away from overly didactic practice or a purely child-centred focus.

Furthermore from January 2010, as part of the Irish Government's ECCE schemes under the National Development Plan (2007-2013), a part-time free school place is available for all children aged 3 and 3 months to 4 years 6 months at 1st September each year.

2.6.4 Way forward: 2010 onwards

However, despite the excellent progress made at least at policy level throughout the last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century, it would seem that ECCE in Ireland has still far to go before such rhetoric becomes reality (Hayes, 2006; Dunphy, 2007). Although empirical evidence on quality early childhood care and education in Ireland has been somewhat lacking (Mahoney and Hayes, 2006), that which does exist has drawn attention to the overly directive nature of pedagogy in infant classes, where play tends only to be used as a reward for work (OECD, 2004; Murphy, 2004). However, beyond infant classes, it would appear that even in many Irish Early Years settings where play is the principal pedagogical approach employed, evidence would suggest that it often takes place in an educational void, with little recognition of its developmental potential (Hayes 2007; Kiernan 2007). Therefore in spite of the curricular developments within Irish policy, there is an underlying impression that the implementation phase may not augur well (Dunphy, 2007). Murphy's study (2004) revealed that pedagogical changes could not be achieved in infant classes simply by issuing new curricular statements. Dunphy (2007) adds that the newly proposed socio-culturally oriented curriculum such as Aistear will present a number of challenges for Early Years practitioners in

relation to pedagogical strategies and assessment practices. In an effort to enhance early childhood pedagogy in Ireland, she recommends that practitioners need to become more knowledgeable about the principles underpinning change and engage in a process of reflection. Hayes (2007) extends this thinking, arguing that an integrated early childhood pedagogy equally balanced between care and education, requires a well-educated workforce, significant financial investment and an on-going review of the early educational opportunities for children up to six years of age. In addition there is a general consensus within the literature that change depends on the actions, values and beliefs of individuals (see for example: Fullan, 2001, 2003; Tubin, 2004; Morrison, 1998; Stoll and Fink, 1996 and Whitaker, 1993). If Early Years educators/teachers are not ready to embrace the necessary changes, the whole process can become futile (Walsh et al, 2006). Drawing on the work of Moyles, Adams and Musgrove (2006), Walsh et al (2006) recommend that individual practitioners should be encouraged to reflect more closely on their own pedagogy - and effectively to become learners in the classroom themselves. Professional development is promoted by personal learning and understanding and needs time for the teachers concerned to try out the new ideas for themselves. Once the community of Early Years practitioners begins to make meaning of the pedagogical implications, grounded change in curriculum can be successfully initiated in parallel. Effective change will not take place overnight. We need to start from where the educators are already and build on the existing good work that is being undertaken. The key stakeholders need to feel part of the change process and not feel excluded. It is based on this premise that real change in Irish early childhood pedagogy may be realised.

SECTION 2
THE NATURE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF EARLY
CHILDHOOD PEDAGOGY IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

3. Consultation with Key Stakeholders

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the findings from the telephone interviews conducted with key stakeholders, both voluntary and statutory, tasked with the responsibility for Early Years provision in the Republic of Ireland. This included members of umbrella organisations representing practitioners such as the Irish Preschool Playgroups Association (IPPA), Childminding Ireland, the National Children’s Nurseries Association (NCNA); the Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Organisation; the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), Health and Social Services boards (HSE); the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) and educationalists from a number of key institutions providing Early Years qualifications.

The consultation interviews had a dual purpose: first and foremostly to explore the views of the participants on the nature and effectiveness of pedagogy within their particular sector in an effort to identify the variables that impact on the nature of pedagogy in the Republic of Ireland. However, the research team also used the knowledge base and expertise of these stakeholders to provide valuable information on policy, documentation and the suitability of Early Years settings.

Although, as anticipated, each stakeholder raised issues specific to their own organisation and agenda within the interviews, this short chapter reports only the common messages to emerge from all the interviewed stakeholders regarding their perceptions on the nature and effectiveness of Early Years pedagogy in the Republic of Ireland.

3.2 PEDAGOGY

The Early Years experts indicated that although pedagogy is generally a “*very under-used*” and “*ill-defined*” concept in the Republic of Ireland, they strongly stressed the need for a common understanding of the fundamentals of effective Early Years pedagogy that accounts for

differences between settings, and allows practitioners to adapt to the needs of their children. The following citation confirms this understanding more fully:

“I think there should be framework documents or framework curricula; there should be a number of philosophical positions and understandings of how young children think. The implementation should always be left to the professional. So from classroom to classroom it could look different, but there would be fundamentals in place that should be clear.”

There was a clear consensus in the thinking of this diverse group of stakeholders that diversity and flexibility in early childhood education and care are to be welcomed in the Republic of Ireland to meet the range of needs and interests of the diverse population. But in so doing, there are core principles of best pedagogy that need to be inherent in all settings irrespective of their philosophies and values. As one stakeholder voiced:

“After all, we now know from theory and research that young children learn best through doing so this is a requisite pedagogical approach for all settings to embrace. The days of chalk and talk for young children are in the past”.

3.3 PLAY

Another clear message to emerge was the importance of play in relation to children’s learning. The stakeholders indicated that throughout the Early Years sector play was now increasingly acknowledged, at least in rhetoric, as the best medium through which young children learn and develop. Some, however, voiced concerns as to how effectively play was implemented in practice, particularly in relation to more formal settings such as infant classrooms where there was a common understanding that some teachers may simply pay *“lip service to the importance of play”*.

As one stakeholder explained:

“Everyone in the sector really believes play is the vehicle for learning for young children, whether or not it gets carried out in reality. It’s another thing actually getting through to people to understand what exactly play is. At one end you have very child centred or child initiated play up to very structured adult choosing activities where play is very much the adult’s agenda. There appears to be no common understanding of its meaning”.

What appeared to be of concern to several of the stakeholders was the lack of educational value attributed to play. In their opinion, Early Years practitioners provide play but they see it as a means of developing children’s social and emotional well being. The cognitive aspect of learning and development is still, according to these experts, strongly equated with pen and paper activities. Furthermore the stakeholders raised the lack of understanding some practitioners have of their role in young children’s play. For some practitioners it is simply a means of facilitating young children’s play and “letting them get on with it”; but for other practitioners, according to the stakeholders, it is complete adult direction of the play experience, where autonomy on the part of the children is unrecognised. In this way, as raised by the stakeholders, the dichotomy between play and work is still very much at the heart of Early Years pedagogy in the Republic of Ireland and balancing the art of direction and interaction to scaffold and extend the learning experience needs further consideration.

However the stakeholders were also unanimous in voicing that it was not only some practitioners who had this rudimentary understanding of the benefits of play. They also extended this lack of knowledge to some policy-makers in the Republic of Ireland, as expressed in the following citation:

“I think there is still a real misunderstanding of the value of play at top policy level. They see it as something amusing for children to do. In real terms I don’t think the penny has dropped about just how educationally important it is.”

3.4 PROFESSIONALISM

All stakeholders were firmly of the opinion that changes in mindset were paramount within Irish society if Early Years pedagogy was ever to be fully embraced. Societal perceptions of Early Years work, in their opinion, tended to be equated with ‘mothering’ requiring a less qualified workforce than for other professions, *“stemming from a tradition of care rather than from education”* (stakeholder 4). Several of the stakeholders attributed this low status to the lack of appropriate and rigorous qualifications, as is reinforced by the subsequent citation:

“I would put great emphasis on a high educational standard. You need a good education, but if the attitude is strong enough that anybody can look after children then that is a problem in relation to the deliverance of high quality”.

Some of the experts voiced the over-emphasis of skill-based training for many of the opportunities which, in their opinion, provides little opportunities for trainee practitioners to engage in critical reflection of effective pedagogy and in many cases does not ensure adequate professional knowledge and understanding of the field in question. Many of the stakeholders argued that training should be based around emerging pedagogical theories and knowledge and encourage, on a day to day basis, *“the linking of practice to theoretical underpinnings”* (stakeholder 1) and *“the ability to reflect and critique their own practice”* (stakeholder 5).

3.5 FUNDING

Finance was also discussed and a number of the stakeholders expressed concerns about what the current economic climate would mean for the future of Early Years provision. Many

expressed how the recession has already ensured large cutbacks in the Early Years budget which has impacted on the quality and effectiveness of Early Years provision. Comments included:

“What the cutbacks that were announced in our last budget in October have done is increased the class sizes in infant classes. This is a big problem as children come from a playgroup situation where they have no more than 8 to 10 children per adult, and then they go into a classroom the following September where there is possibly 30 children per adult, so this is a huge issue for the children in terms of their transition from the preschool setting” (stakeholder 6).

“At present there are very few support mechanisms for the ongoing delivery of a quality childcare service. Very few can get grants towards training or other costs. This now is generally absorbed by childcare providers and this is certainly not on. Childcare services are currently in a vicious circle. If they raise their costs parents will not be able to afford the provision; but if they don’t things are getting more and more squeezed, which in turn impacts on the overall quality of the pedagogy provided.”

“If we can’t afford to send the practitioners for appropriate professional development, then we are in big trouble. How are they supposed to keep abreast of new ideas and initiatives? Practice will just become stale as a result”.

A few stakeholders cautioned against blaming the lack of funding for everything. These experts stressed the need for more consultation with Early Years experts as *“it is not enough simply to throw money at a problem as has sometimes occurred in the past”* (stakeholder 2). In the times of plenty, some of the stakeholders expressed that money had been wasted due to poor management of resources.

3.6 LEADERSHIP

This discussion on mismanagement of resources led to the topic of leadership. A lack of coordinated leadership at a policy-making level was a major concern for several stakeholders. Some Early Years experts voiced a frustration with the pace of change and linked this more generally to the low status of childcare in Irish society. Examples of comments included:

“There is just not enough expertise developing, people with higher qualifications, thinking about these things, reflecting on these things. There are so many people who think that they know about effective Early Years provision but they don’t clearly know” (stakeholder8).

“Leadership more than anything is paramount. You can get all the good people in the world further down but unless you can get people to make the right political decision, then you are at a dead end. You have to have leadership, but leadership with power. I think it’s a very powerless section of society, the Early Years sector” (stakeholder2).

In the main the stakeholders were of the belief that the Early Years sector needed a better voice in Irish society, where children’s needs and interests were brought to the fore and fully taken into consideration and effectively acted upon.

3.7 SERVICE PROVISION

When asked about their vision for the future of Early Years care and education in the Republic of Ireland, most stakeholders stated they would like to see the development of a free, universal, high quality Early Years system. They argued this would result in more effective provision for disadvantaged children than currently exists, while simultaneously providing an effective service for all young children in the Republic of Ireland. One respondent summarised this position:

“I would like to see comprehensive, reasonably standardised and high quality preschool services available in all communities, and that availability should be there regardless of ability to pay, because coming at it from a welfare perspective there is a lot of value, particularly in areas of social and economic disadvantage, of having access to quality preschool services, and there is plenty of research to demonstrate this value in later years” (stakeholder 5).

3.8 SUMMARY OF STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVE

From a stakeholder perspective, the main messages to emerge from their consultations on the nature and effectiveness of Early Years pedagogy in the Republic of Ireland included:

- Diversity and flexibility are welcomed in the Early Years sector but should be accompanied by a fundamental set of principles on quality pedagogy;
- A fuller understanding of the value of a play-based pedagogy;
- Greater funding should be invested in Early Years and the monies available should be spent wisely;
- More professional status should be awarded to all aspects of the Early Years sector;
- Rigorous and effective training programmes should be available for all Early Years practitioners which allow for the acquisition of sound professional knowledge and understanding and the capacity for critique and debate;
- Effective political leaders to drive the Early Years agenda are necessary; and
- Universal high quality Early Years provision for all, irrespective of social status.

4. Practitioner Focus Groups

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports findings from four focus group discussions conducted with infant teachers (IT), childminders (CM), sessional playgroup practitioners (SP) and daycare providers (DP) in the Republic of Ireland. Each interview lasted between 35 and 70 minutes, and was recorded and transcribed for analysis using the MAXQDA qualitative software package. Examples from the transcripts are included below to illustrate the key themes that emerged during the discussion sessions. Findings are grouped under three main areas and detail the practitioners' perceptions on: effective early childhood pedagogy, the current nature of early childhood pedagogy in the Republic of Ireland and their aspirations for the future. As for the stakeholder chapter, the common themes to emerge from the discussions with the practitioners principally on the nature and effectiveness of Early Years pedagogy in the Republic of Ireland have been detailed in this chapter.

4.2 EFFECTIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD PEDAGOGY

The majority of the focus group participants believe that a young child's early learning experience should be child-centred, play-based and self-directed. This was explained in terms of children *"following their own interests"* (SP, DP) and by actively *"doing things"* (IT, SP, DP, CM) or engaging in *"real life experiences and social interactions"*(CM). In this way there appeared to be a consensus amongst all of the practitioners, irrespective of setting type that young children learn best through play as confirmed by the following citation:

"Certainly, the children learning by doing something, learning by actually getting their hands into something is far better, definitely." (IT)

Over and above activity based learning, practitioners were of the opinion that there was a need from a practitioner perspective to steer away from an overly directed role and ensure a greater degree of following the needs and interests of the children in the Early Years setting.

Professionals working in sessional playgroups and daycare settings believe that adult-directed learning ignores individual differences, reduces freedom of choice and fails to give children the opportunities they need to develop their own interests. For these practitioners flexibility rather than a rigid time table was thought to promote learning. Vocabulary such as 'observe', 'support' and 'extend' was used by discussants in each of the four focus groups to describe the role of an effective Early Years educator. Exemplars from these discussions are included below:

"You can't impose learning for example, telling the child who has absolutely no interest the colour of a picture because you want them to know the colour of the picture. You would be far better building with the blocks of wherever their interest is." (SP)

"I think children learn best under their own steam, to be allowed to extend as far as they want to extend it with the support, and not cut off at certain points, if it's going really well let it flow." (DP)

Some of the practitioners, in particular the childminders and infant teachers, emphasised the need to interact with the children on appropriate occasions in an effort to scaffold and extend the learning experience, but some were very quick to recognise that this was not the easiest role to master.

"I suppose you help them to learn as well just from everyday situations the intellectual side, the learning, you can stimulate them."(CM)

“You can’t just ignore them when they play either. It is getting the right balance between telling them what to do and supporting them to learn more. It’s not the easiest skill to acquire.” (IT)

The majority of practitioners were in agreement that the development of children’s well-being, self-confidence and self-esteem was an essential aspect of quality pedagogy. As one playgroup practitioner voiced *“children learn best when they have a good sense of self. When they have good self-esteem they can engage with any learning”*. In addition a daycare provider stated: *“they [children] learn when their physical needs are met i.e. when they are fed and not hungry”*. The majority of childminders were of the opinion that their homely environment and small numbers enable them in particular to prioritise the well being of the children in their care and through the appropriate interaction increase young children’s learning opportunities and build their confidence.

Practitioners also commented on the range of roles an effective early childhood educator must adopt. As one sessional practitioner explained *“you’re an educator, you’re a nurse, you’re a mummy, you don’t just support the child you support the whole family”*. Likewise, a daycare provider described her responsibilities as *“multi-everything: multi-caring, multi-training, and multi-business”*. Infant teachers also identified with the need for flexibility in their role and the ability to quickly adapt to frequent on an everyday basis in the classroom:

“Flexible I think is a really good word...every other teacher in the school can plan for what they are getting, they know what they are getting, but we can’t. We have to kind of go with the flow and be as flexible as possible. Every child is so different.” (IT)

“Each year you come into the job, into the classroom, there is something new there that I haven’t come across before. Some new type of learning or some different way of approaching something, a different difficulty, a syndrome, or whatever it is.” (IT)

4.3 THE CURRENT NATURE OF EARLY YEARS PEDAGOGY IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

4.3.1 Guidance Materials

When asked about the guidelines in place to ensure quality pedagogy, infant teachers, sessional and daycare practitioners stressed the importance of the Síolta Guidelines and handbooks, which they described as *“wonderful”*(IT) and *“very good”* (DP) . In addition, daycare and sessional practitioners mentioned the Irish Preschool Play Association (IPPA) guidelines and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment framework for Early Learning as key resources. By contrast, childminders stressed the role of the Health and Social Care guidelines, however they pointed out that they only apply if the practitioner notifies the Health Board, and childminders are not required to by law if they look after fewer than four children.

All the practitioners, irrespective of their backgrounds, were in agreement that such policy documentation certainly had its role but that further help and support was required on the part of the government to enable quality pedagogy to be effectively implemented in Early Years settings. A number of key messages were brought to the fore.

4.3.2 Training and Professional Development

Training and professional development emerged amongst practitioners as being of central importance to impacting on the effectiveness of Early Years pedagogy. Some described training as a *“constant”* (IT, SP), *“ongoing”*(DP, SP) and *“continuous”*(SP) requirement. Comments included:

“It’s continuous and on-going. I started 23 years ago and am still learning. There is always something new.” (SP)

“We should be up-skilled constantly to keep on top of what is best practice.” (IT)

In contrast, concern was voiced about the overly skill-based aspect of some of the current qualifications and the need for a higher level of qualification to ensure that Early Years practitioners were fully equipped to embrace the needs of the young children in their care. According to one practitioner who was the manager of her setting: *“some of my girls are currently doing a qualification which hasn’t changed from a good few years back, it hasn’t moved on. Even with pedagogy, they haven’t heard of it or they haven’t introduced it”.*

All of the practitioners were unanimous in the value they attributed to professional development in terms of courses, practical workshops etc., but already the number of these they could attend was diminishing as a result of financial restraints. As one practitioner stated:

“There is just no money for anything anymore. How can they expect us to be up-to-date in our practice, if there is no money to provide courses, let alone attend them?” (SP)

4.3.3 Finance

In fact lack of funding in general was a theme raised by all practitioners. Professionals from sessional and daycare settings indicated that the prevalence of low and often minimum wage rates for workers in the Early Childhood sector acted as a significant barrier to quality. They believe that low pay tends to discourage high quality practitioners from working in the Early Years sector, has a negative impact on staff retention and is a disincentive to further training. Moreover, most think that the low wages paid within the sector reflects a more general and

worrying perception of work with young children as a low status job rather than a high status profession. The following exemplars capture the views of the majority:

“If we are linking quality to training, and quality to those trained people working directly with the children and if you have a very limited amount of budget coming in, how are you going to be able to pay, how are you going to keep people in the industry?” (SP)

“I also think the general wages that the staff are paid, because it is almost treated like a transient job. Ok so you finish schooling, you go and you do childcare, but when are you going to get a real job that pays money? And it’s actually unfair because unless you pay well over the odds, you don’t keep your staff and unless you pay for their training you don’t keep them! (DP)

“There are very few jobs where you work for a minimum wage, do your job for 9 hours and then leave there and go to a workshop until 10’oclock at night.”(DP)

What was of financial concern to infant teachers was the lack of funding available for basic resources such as photocopying and childminders indicated that there were few grants available for them to replace, update or buy new equipment and resources:

“I have a problem with finance because as a class teacher I ask the parents for the money they have to pay me say for photocopying, for stationery, for textbooks and things like that, and if they don’t pay me I have to spend my own money. I think that is absolutely ridiculous.” (IT)

“More funding, I suppose you need to keep changing equipment and resources.” (IT)

“Equipment and things is pretty expensive if you are doing preschool as well at home. I do find that the preschool stuff is very expensive.” (CM)

4.3.4 Additional Support

A number of sessional practitioners and infant teachers voiced concerns about the lack of assistance provided for children with special educational needs. Some commented on the conflict between supporting the individual child with special educational needs and providing quality provision for the group as a whole. Examples include:

“If you have a child with a behavioural problem, as a result of whatever, and he doesn’t have a special needs assistant and you are trying to provide a quality service for the other children, one child can take up a huge amount of your time, and some of the other children may get neglected as a result, so that is a challenge.” (SP)

“But like you say, if you don’t have an SNA and a child wets themselves, you are doing it, but who is looking after your class? You’re right, assistance would be great.” (IT)

Infant teachers also raised the need for classroom assistance and improved support from services, mentioning areas such as psychology, speech and occupational therapy. In particular they voiced concern about appropriately implementing a play-based curriculum, without the support at least of one classroom assistant. The following citation sums up the thinking of the infant teachers:

“How can we be expected to provide a play-based curriculum and not even have an extra pair of hands in the classroom? I go home in the evening exhausted as I am running about like a headless chicken setting up play-based activities, trying to interact with the children to extend their learning, then maybe one child misbehaves and I have to deal with him or her and to top it all another child gets wet in the process and I have to try and get him or her dressed again. At the same time there might be some wonderful play going on in the home corner that I would like to observe and learn more about.” (IT)

4.3.5 Parents

Although all of the practitioners associate a quality service with a good working relationship with parents, there are, however, subtle differences in the nature of the relationships envisioned. Despite infant teachers, sessional and daycare practitioners talking about the importance of fostering a collaborative and interactive relationship with parents, they describe it in different terms. For example, in the focus group discussion infant teachers alluded to *'working with parents,'* whereas sessional practitioners talked about *'sharing with parents'.*

The majority of practitioners in each of the group discussions believe that very often parents and Early Years practitioners have very different expectations of a quality Early Years service and this can cause constraint on some occasions. In the first instance, according to some of the practitioners, parents tend to be more impressed by contextual issues such as a well presented and well organised room and secondly their perceptions of what constitutes quality pedagogy do not always equate with those of the practitioner. To alert parents to the importance of the setting's pedagogical approach, a number of practitioners hold information evenings and open days. It is hoped that these sessions will enable parents to reinforce the pedagogical approach employed by the setting at home. As one daycare coordinator explained:

"We do a lot of open evenings for the parents and at the beginning it was about showing off the place and then we actually went: "hold on, let's actually show them what we do and the benefits of what we do". Our way of talking to them changed, our way of showing them what we did changed, and so instead of having the place fantastic and clean and beautiful, we did have all of the shaving foam on one table and the glue and the glitter out, we got the parents to play with it and it made a huge difference". (DC)

Although these evenings can be very rewarding, several of the practitioners feel that they are not enough to change parents' mindsets of what they perceive to be quality practice. In particular childminders and infant teachers emphasised the pressure they often experience

from parents to undertake more formal tasks with their children, particularly regarding literacy and numeracy. The following comments help to explain this issue more fully:

“With the older boy, his mum is a lecturer, and they didn’t want him to go to preschool, they wanted him to stay with me. They wanted him to learn words and were anxious for him to be able to read. So because they said that, I worked out a system so now he has about 10 words and he can make loads of sentences out of them...But I find for myself, their favourite thing, even with the older boy, if they were given their choice, would be out the back to play.” (CM)

“Sometimes I feel I am hitting my head off a brick wall. You are trying your best to provide play-based activities for the children which are stimulating and fun and then a parent comes knocking on your door wondering where the reading book is.” (IT)

Meeting the needs of parents and children was seen to be a challenge in particular by the infant teachers and childminders and they felt at a loss as to how traditional mindsets could be changed.

4.3.6 Inspection

Concerns regarding the inspection process were expressed by practitioners in all four focus groups. The issues raised included the “*black and white*”(SP) nature of the process whereby a setting is judged to be “*compliant or-non compliant*” (DP, SP) and that it was frequently a “*box ticking*”(IT, CM) exercise. The following exemplars sum up the views of the majority:

“It is very narrow in the sense that it is compliance or non-compliance. There is no measure of quality. You could be very involved with getting your Síolta up and running and working closely within the framework that is recommended, but at the moment it is just

compliant or non-compliant. Not, you know, this is a really quality service. There is no leeway to do that.” (SP)

“It was all tick-boxes and they produced a report which was fine but it gave no sense of our school, it is such a lovely, rural, family orientated school... we are very environmentally friendly, we have our own garden and all of that, not a mention, nothing. It was just a cold, generic document and I was disgusted.” (IT)

Early childhood professionals also discussed the limited focus of the regulations and inspection process , with assessments concentrated too narrowly on health and safety (SP, DP) , the aesthetic environment (SP, CM) and other “*things that they can measure*” (IT) such as how often particular activities are planned (IT, DP). Despite the new emphasis on the curriculum and children’s learning, some daycare and sessional practitioners felt progress was being delayed by the public and environmental health backgrounds of inspectors who lack “*knowledge about pedagogy.*” (SP)

“I actually had a safety environmental health girl, she only wanted to tick boxes, she wanted it homely, and she had no interest in what I was actually doing with them during the day.” (CM)

“Now there is an emphasis, all of a sudden, on the well being of the children and the curriculum, but the problem we are encountering is that inspectors themselves are not particularly trained in childcare, they do not have a childcare qualification, and it can be very frustrating.” (SP)

“I find they are a little bit behind really, they looked for a, b and c on a checklist, didn’t really understand the curriculum and we spent a long time trying to explain our curriculum to them. They were more interested to see do we plan each week, how we plan for a year, they don’t really understand pedagogy.” (DP)

Some practitioners from sessional, daycare and school settings were also concerned with the pattern of inspections. In particular, they believe that they are too infrequent with the time between inspection visits varying within and between counties. In essence they would like greater rigour attached to the inspection process to ensure equality across settings and between counties.

4.4 ASPIRATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

To conclude the focus group discussions, practitioners were asked about their vision for the future of Early Years education in the Republic of Ireland. Three key themes emerged: legislative reform, better co-ordination and improving the transitions process between settings.

4.4.1 Legislative Reform

Practitioners were all firmly of the belief that all children should have a free preschool place. On the one hand, sessional practitioners recognised the significance of the new initiative introduced by the government in 2010 to guarantee a free preschool year for every qualifying child. On the other they were concerned that, due to the lack of consultation on the process, they might be left to meet some of the costs arising from the scheme which in turn will have a negative impact on the quality of their provision. Daycare and sessional practitioners raised the need for a minimum level of qualification for all Early Years professionals as *“a legislative requirement”* and the need to improve status for the Early Years workforce, whilst large class sizes were an issue for the infant teachers. They pointed out that it takes them much longer to get to know individual children in large classes and consequently makes it harder to identify children with additional needs. For this reason they were requesting some legislation that would cap the number in infant classes at 20 maximum.

4.4.2 Better Coordination of Services

More generally, childminders and daycare practitioners raised concerns about the variation in quality across the industry, referring to the existence of practitioners who *'just babysit'* or are of a poor standard. Sessional practitioners and infant teachers discussed the need to better coordinate the variety of services supporting Early Years provision, suggesting they should be united under a single umbrella organisation. At present there is no single body coordinating Early Years services, according to the practitioners and as a result *"nobody really cares what you are doing and why"* (SP) and *"you end up running around in all directions trying to meet everyone's needs and you end up in truth meeting none"*. Sessional and daycare practitioners in particular called for the need for greater coordination and joined up thinking on salary issues in the Early Years sector, as detailed in the following citation:

"It is about time that Early Years was accredited the professional status it requires and in turn that professionals working in the field should be paid accordingly."(SP)

There was agreement around the issue of greater leadership in the field of Early Years in the Republic of Ireland and the need for a suitable candidate to lobby their campaign.

4.4.3 Improving Transitions between Settings

Final comments were focused on the issue of transitions. Infant teachers and childminders emphasised the need for improvement in the transition process that currently exists between preschool and school-based settings. In support of their argument, infant teachers pointed out that the differing pedagogical approaches of preschool and infant school settings create a *"huge leap"* for young children who differ in terms of their age on starting school and the social skills they have acquired in their previous setting. Teachers also raised concerns with the practices of some Early Years services. They described *"trying to unlearn"* or *"trying to undo the harm"* of preschool learning in areas such as letter formation. To bridge the gap suggestions

were made about introducing an infant reception class at schools to better prepare children for the school context.

4.5 SUMMARY OF THE PRACTITIONER FOCUS GROUPS

The main messages to emerge from the practitioner focus groups on the nature and effectiveness of Early Years pedagogy in the Republic of Ireland are as follows:

- An effective early childhood pedagogy is perceived as being play-based in perspective, supported by skilful professionals in the field who know when and when not to intervene in the learning experience and simultaneously can develop warm and secure relationships with the children in their care;
- Although practitioners welcome the policy documentation that exists, they feel further support from the government is required to support them in their role;
- More rigorous training and more opportunities for professional development are requisite;
- Greater funding investments in the Early Years are paramount;
- Additional support in terms of special needs and classroom assistants is necessary;
- A change in mindsets of parents around the value of play-based pedagogy is needed;
- The inspection process needs to be completely reconsidered and undertaken by professionals knowledgeable in the field of Early Years;
- Aspirations for the future include legislative reform on issues such as pay, status and qualifications; better coordination of services and the need to foster smoother links between preschool and school settings.

5. Audit of Children's Activities

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports evidence from a questionnaire survey designed to audit Early Years provision across the four setting types (i.e. infant classes, sessional playgroups, daycares and childminders) in the Republic of Ireland. The content of the survey was informed by the literature review and focus group discussions with key stakeholders and service providers. The first section of the survey sought factual information about the number and age of the children and staff in each setting. Details concerning staff qualifications and training courses attended were also sought. The main body of the survey focused on the extent and type of play based activities available to young children in each of the settings. Quantitative data from the survey were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and subject to descriptive and inferential analysis. As the information from the survey was entered into the database some selectivity was noted on the part of a number of Early Years professionals who had failed to complete several of the open-ended questions in the survey. To ensure the views of each of the responding groups were fairly represented the qualitative results reported in this chapter were drawn from a subset of 500 surveys comprising 125 from each of the four professional groups who responded to the survey.

5.2 SAMPLE POPULATION

The distribution of the postal questionnaire survey was facilitated by key Early Years professional organizations in the Republic of Ireland: Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO), Childminding Ireland (CI) and the Irish Preschool Playgroups Association (IPPA) who represent sessional playgroup and daycare practitioners. This approach yielded a response rate of 1271 surveys comprising 706 (55.5%) completed surveys from infant teachers, 307 (24.2%) from sessional playgroup staff, 131 (10.3%) from childminders and 127 (10.0%) from daycare staff. An examination of the returns received by urban and rural geographical locations suggests

that the majority of responses were from professionals working in rural Ulster (75.5%), Connaught (75.1%) and Munster (60.2%). From Figure 5.1 below it can be seen that the greatest percentage of urban responses were from professionals working in Leinster (54.4%) and Munster (39.8%). Worthy of mention, the figures reported in Figure 5.1 are commensurate with the population data for the counties and provinces of Ireland obtained from the 2006 census and detailed in Table 5.1 below.

Figure 5.1: The Percentage of Survey Responses by Urban and Rural Location

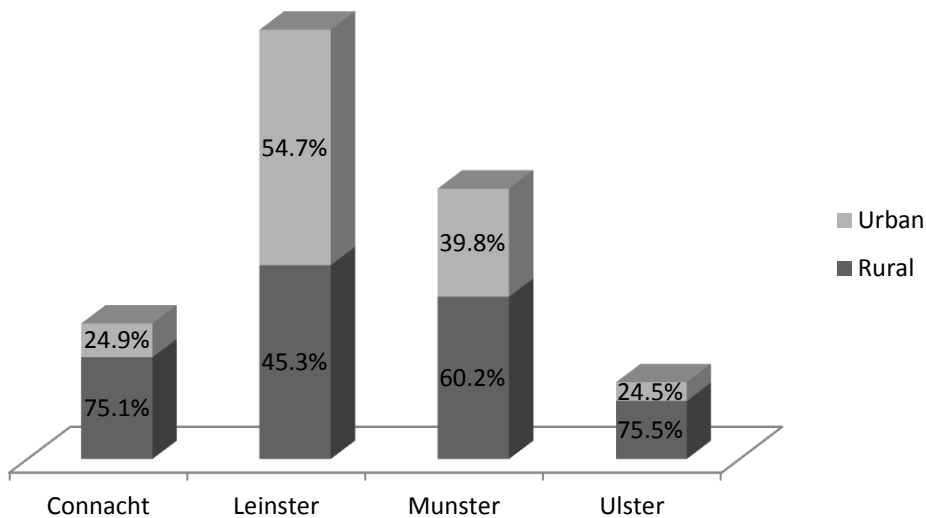


Table 5.1: The total proportion of responses by geographical location and the 2006 Census

Province	The total proportion of responses	The total proportion of population (Census data)
Connaught	14.9%	11.9%
Leinster	47.0%	54.2%
Munster	29.7%	27.7%
Ulster	8.4%	6.3%

5.3 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

5.3.1 Practitioner

Consistent with research by Heather (2005; 2006) and Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) who report the under representation of men in the early childcare workforce, the vast majority of survey respondents were female (98.4%). The results presented in Table 5.2 show that a very small percentage of responses were received from male infant teachers (1.6%) and men employed in daycare settings (1.8%). Further analysis of the evidence suggests that the majority of infant teachers (58.9%) tend to be younger (between 18 and 35 years of age) than their counterparts in other sectors and sessional playgroup practitioners (44.7%) tend to be older (46 years of age or over). A significant proportion of respondents did not however specify which vocational or other qualifications they possessed in the space provided.

As might be expected, the majority of infant teachers (94.9%) possess a tertiary level degree or post-graduate qualification. In contrast, the highest qualification held by the majority of sessional playgroup staff (58.6%), daycare staff (56.6%) and childminders (56.5%) was 'vocational' or 'other' although a significant proportion did not specify this qualification in the space provided. Of those that did, 29.3% of sessional practitioners, 16.5% of daycare staff and 16% of childminders indicated they possessed a level 5 qualification in childcare in terms of the National Framework of Qualifications. A further 20.5% of daycare practitioners, 9.4% of sessional practitioners and 3.8% of childminders stated they had attained level 6. A diploma in Montessori teaching was also commonly reported, by 17.3% of sessional practitioners, 11.0% of daycare practitioners and 10.7% of childminders.

As further indicated by Table 5.2, the majority of Early Years professionals have more than ten years experience. Measured in terms of years in practice, sessional playgroup staff (67.8%) daycare providers (55.2%) and childminders (50.4%) appear to have greater experience than infant teachers who are also the youngest group. The majority of sessional playgroup

respondents report working in their current setting for more than six years (69.4%), whereas the majority of child minders (60.6%) have cared for children in their own home for less than five years.

Table 5.2. The Gender, Age, Educational Qualification and Experience Reported by Setting.

		Total	IT	CM	SP	DC	CHI	SIG
		(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)		Value
Gender	Male	1.6	2.7	0	0	1.8	N/A	N/A
	Female	98.4	97.3	100	100	99.2		
Age	18-35	44.1	58.9	31.3	17.4	39.2	195.829	0.000
	36-45	27.5	17.0	48.9	37.8	39.2		
	46 or over	28.4	24.1	19.8	44.7	21.6		
Education	Secondary	9.0	0.3	25.9	24.6	14.1	704.510	0.000
	Tertiary	65.5	94.9	17.6	16.8	29.3		
	Vocat./Other	25.5	4.8	56.5	58.6	56.6		
Experience	0-9 Years	50.4	59.4	49.6	32.2	44.8	64.403	0.000
	10 or Over	49.6	40.6	50.4	67.8	55.2		
Setting	0-5 Years	49.4	54.4	60.6	30.6	55.2	57.875	0.000
	6 or Over	50.6	45.6	39.4	69.4	44.8		

Table 5.2 also includes the results of chi-square tests conducted to determine whether or not the differences observed between setting types and the issues examined above were statistically significant. The chi-square results presented in the left hand column signify that differences between setting types are highly significant ($p < 0.001$) for age, highest educational qualification, years experience in early childhood education and years experience in current setting. The low number of male respondents rendered it inappropriate to calculate gender differences.

Table 5.3 details the training courses attended by a sub sample of Early Years practitioners

Table 5.3: Training Courses Attended by Early Years Professionals

	Total		IT	CM	SP	DC
	N	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
First Aid	410	88.2	59.6	92.5	99.2	96.0
Child Protection	285	61.3	33.3	54.2	72.1	79.8
SEN Disability	85	18.3	16.2	23.3	17.2	16.1
Handling / Lifting	82	17.6	2.0	12.5	12.3	40.3
Hygiene /Nutrition	77	16.6	0.0	20.0	8.2	34.7
Health safety / Fire	63	13.5	2.0	21.7	9.0	19.4
Literacy	52	11.2	22.2	6.7	12.3	5.6
Behaviour Manage.	49	10.5	5.1	8.3	12.3	15.3
FETAC Level 5	48	10.3	1.0	11.7	13.1	13.7
PE / Buntus	45	9.7	15.2	4.2	9.0	11.3
Arts / Crafts	41	8.8	11.1	6.7	6.6	11.3
Quality Awareness	36	7.7	0.0	24.2	1.6	4.0

**Based on a sub-sample of 500 respondents*

Responses to this open-ended question drawn from a sub-sample of 500 questionnaires suggest that Early Years professionals attend a considerable number and wide range of courses. Listed in order from the most to least commonly reported, the findings presented in Table 5.3 indicate that the vast majority of professionals in all sectors attended first aid (88.2%) and child protection (61.3%) courses. Other courses attended include manual handling and lifting (40.3%), food hygiene and nutrition (34.7%), behaviour management (15.3%), FETAC level 5 (13.7%) and arts and crafts (11.3%). The results in Table 5.3 suggest that daycare practitioners attend the greatest number of courses and infant teachers the least number. Given the differing responses reported the findings were not considered amenable to inferential analysis.

5.3.2 Setting

Table 5.4 presents information provided by respondents on the number of children and staff employed in their setting.

Table 5.4: The Average Number of Children and Staff by Setting.

Children/Staff	Infant Classes		Childminders		Sessional Playgroups		Daycares	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
No. of children	116.4	136.4	4.4	2.3	20.9	10.7	43.3	27.6
No. of SEN	9.0	18.3	0.2	0.5	1.7	2.9	1.9	2.3
No. of Ethnic min.	10.6	30.1	0.4	0.9	1.8	3.3	3.9	8.6
No. of FT staff	9.9	9.9	N/A	N/A	1.7	1.1	4.8	3.9
No. of PT Staff	1.5	1.9	N/A	N/A	1.8	1.3	3.6	3.4

As might be expected infant teachers report having the highest number of children in their setting (116.4), followed by daycare providers (43.3), sessional playgroup providers (20.9) and childminders (4.4). The standard deviation (SD) reported for each setting indicates variation in the responses given for each setting – a high SD reveals large difference in the numbers reported but a low SD suggests the numbers reported are quite similar. The figures in Table 5.4 show considerable variation in the number of children attending school, daycare and sessional playgroups (136.4, 27.6 and 10.7 respectively), less variation can be seen in the numbers reported by childminders (SD = 2.3). Although a negligible proportion of children in each setting were reported to have a special education need or to come from an ethnic minority group, infant teachers reported a higher average number (9.0 and 10.6 respectively) than other settings. Similarly schools have a higher number of full time staff (9.9) than other Early Years settings. On average daycare settings have twice as many part-time staff (3.6) than schools (1.5) or sessional services (1.8). When calculated as a ratio, schools are seen to have one member of staff for every 10.2 children, which is much larger than sessional playgroups (1: 6) and daycares (1: 5.2).

5.3.3 Income

Early Years educators were asked to indicate their setting's source of income as detailed in Table 5.5.

Table 5.5: The Main Source of Income in Early Years Settings.

	Total	IT	CM	SP	DC
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Government	61.7	98.1	0.0	16.0	35.4
Parents	47.7	7.6	100.0	97.1	95.3
Grant	10.9	9.5	10.0	10.8	20.5
Charity	7.8	9.5	0.0	6.2	11.0
Other	7.0	8.9	1.5	5.6	5.5

The findings reported above in Table 5.5 suggest that the majority of childcare and education costs in Ireland are shared by the government (61.7%) and parents (47.7%), with grants (10.9%), charities (7.8%) and 'other' sources (7.0%) providing some additional income.

Examined by setting, the results indicate that schools are mainly funded by the government (98.1%), whereas childminders (97.1%), sessional playgroups (97.1%) and daycare providers (97.1%) are almost entirely funded by parents. In contrast, daycares report the highest percentage of grant and charity funding (20.5% and 11.0% respectively).

5.4 AUDIT OF ACTIVITIES AND MATERIALS ON OFFER WITHIN SETTINGS

5.4.1 Play Activities and Materials

Table 5.6 lists the range of activities and materials provided by practitioners on either a 'daily' or 'not on a daily' basis.

Table 5.6: The Play Activities and Materials Provided in Early Years Settings

Statement- How often would you:	Daily	Total (%)	IT (%)	CM (%)	SP (%)	DC (%)	CHI	SIG Value
A. Use play as a learning tool	Daily	85.5	78.1	90.5	95.7	96.8	72.511	0.000
	Not Daily	14.5	21.9	9.5	4.3	3.2		
B. Encourage children to participate in imaginative play	Daily	62.6	45.6	75.2	85.9	88.1	201.498	0.000
	Not Daily	37.4	54.4	24.8	14.1	11.9		
C. Encourage children to make marks on surface with writing implements.	Daily	72.5	70.8	53.5	82.3	77.6	40.685	0.000
	Not Daily	27.5	29.2	46.5	17.7	22.4		
D. Use books and pictures to tell stories	Daily	86.9	85.4	77.2	92.1	92.9	23.318	0.000
	Not Daily	13.1	14.6	22.8	7.9	7.1		
E. Encourage children to engage with books (e.g. in the book corner, library)	Daily	86.7	83.6	75.2	94.4	96.8	46.507	0.000
	Not Daily	13.3	16.4	24.8	5.6	3.2		
F. Engage in songs and rhymes playfully	Daily	87.2	89.2	73.6	87.8	88.8	24.091	0.000
	Not Daily	12.8	10.8	26.4	12.2	11.2		
G. Provide music and opportunities for dance	Daily	51.7	46.4	62.0	52.6	68.0	26.686	0.000
	Not Daily	48.3	53.6	38.0	47.4	32.0		
H. Provide small items (e.g. beads to string, small Lego)	Daily	69.2	62.5	52.0	85.6	83.3	82.089	0.000
	Not Daily	30.8	37.5	48.0	14.4	16.7		
I. Provide materials for construction (large blocks, duplo, Lego, etc...)	Daily	75.0	66.0	76.7	88.5	90.5	76.228	0.000
	Not Daily	25.0	34.0	23.3	11.5	9.5		
J. Provide 'small world' toys (e.g. garage, farm set)	Daily	68.9	51.6	83.8	91.7	94.4	222.196	0.000
	Not Daily	31.1	48.4	16.2	8.3	5.6		

The findings suggest that all Early Years settings offer children a wide range of play based activities daily. The vast majority of settings 'use play as a learning tool' with daycare (96.8%) offering it the most often followed by sessional playgroups (95.7%), childminders (90.5%) and infant teachers (78.1%). The use of books was clearly important in all four setting types with a high proportion of providers encouraging children to engage with books and using books and pictures to tell stories. Both learning experiences were more frequently reported by daycare providers (96.8% and 92.9%) and sessional playgroups (94.4% and 92.1%) than by infant teachers (83.6% and 85.4%) and childminders (75.2% and 77.2%). Similarly, daycare providers report encouraging imaginative play (88.1%), using songs and rhymes (88.8%), music and dance (68.0%), construction play (90.5%) and small world play (94.4%) more frequently than other provider groups.

In contrast, infant teachers were more likely to provide activities that promote language and literacy development, such as mark making (70.8%) and songs and rhymes (89.2%). Childminders, it appears, were least likely to offer these activities.

In all cases differences in the provision of these experiences and materials were found to be highly significant ($p < 0.001$). Interestingly, the chi-square results included in Table 5.6 indicate that the greatest differences obtained were in relation to encouraging imaginative play and providing small world toys, where the proportion of infant teachers was much smaller than other groups.

5.4.2 Formal Activities and Materials

In contrast to the information reported in Table 5.6, Table 5.7 includes information on the formal learning opportunities offered by the four respondent groups.

Table 5.7: The Formal Learning Activities and Materials provided in Early Years Settings.

How often would you:	Daily	Total	IT	CM	SP	DC	CHI	SIG
			(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)		Value
A. Provide opportunities for colouring pictures	Daily	83.4	89.8	76.2	73.7	78.6	48.600	0.000
	Not Daily	16.6	10.2	23.8	26.3	21.4		
B. Teach children to write letters	Daily	54.9	78.9	19.8	22.0	27.7	381.199	0.000
	Not Daily	45.1	21.1	80.2	78.0	72.3		
C. Teach children to read	Daily	62.4	93.8	26.3	13.7	23.5	704.744	0.000
	Not Daily	37.6	6.2	73.7	86.3	76.5		
D. Teach early number concepts	Daily	74.1	95.0	46.0	46.6	48.8	367.489	0.000
	Not Daily	25.9	5.0	54.0	53.4	51.2		
E. Set homework for children	Daily	42.0	71.2	8.5	1.7	2.5	567.911	0.000
	Not Daily	58.0	28.8	91.5	98.3	97.5		
F. Encourage use of computer	Daily	66.1	90.1	37.8	44.1	66.1	418.502	0.000
	Not Daily	33.9	9.9	62.2	55.9	33.9		

Formal learning appears to characterise the early learning experiences of children in infant classes in the Republic of Ireland. Infant teachers report teaching their young children a range of skills including early number concepts (95.0%), reading (93.8%), letter writing (78.9%) and computer use (90.1%). In addition, the majority set a daily homework (71.2%). Formal learning also occurs on a daily basis in preschool settings with a considerable proportion of daycare providers (66.1%), sessional playgroups (44.1%) and childminders (37.8%) encouraging children to use computers, early number concepts (48.8%, 46.6% and 46.0% respectively), letter writing (27.7%, 22.0% and 19.8% respectively) and reading (23.5%, 13.7% and 26.3% respectively). It is also interesting to note that a small percentage of childminders (8.5%) set a daily homework. Further analysis revealed that all of the differences reported were highly significant ($p < 0.001$).

5.4.3 Play Areas

The play areas provided in each of the four settings are detailed in Table 5.8.

Table 5.8: Play Areas provided across Four Setting Types

Play Area	Total		IT	CM	SP	DC
	N	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Sand	360	76.1	49.1	73.7	86.4	91.1
Water	288	60.9	21.7	55.1	76.8	83.9
Library/Reading	209	44.2	23.6	33.9	51.2	64.5
Construction	195	41.2	34.9	25.4	48.8	54.0
Art/Painting	190	40.2	13.2	29.7	54.4	58.9
Home Corner	183	38.7	13.2	13.6	61.6	61.3
Outdoor Play Area	180	38.1	7.5	61.0	30.4	50.0
Drama / Dress up	124	26.2	24.5	16.9	34.4	28.2
Imaginative Play	94	19.9	25.5	8.5	21.6	24.2
Play-dough	90	19.0	12.3	5.9	37.6	18.5
Games Puzzles	84	17.8	21.7	9.3	24.0	16.1
Play General	81	17.1	21.7	38.1	5.6	4.8
Kitchen	74	15.6	17.9	13.6	16.8	14.5
Tabletop	65	13.7	9.4	7.6	19.2	17.7
Rest/ Quiet Area	50	10.6	3.8	8.5	10.4	18.5

**Based on a sub-sample of 500 respondents*

The findings suggest that the majority of settings have areas for sand (76.1%) and water (60.9%), with library (44.2%), construction (41.2%) art (40.2%), home corner (38.7%) and outdoor play (38.1%) areas widely available.

Consistent with the findings reported thus far, daycare and sessional playgroup settings appear to provide a greater range of play areas. For example, a higher proportion of daycare practitioners provide children with access to sand (91.1%), water (83.9%) library (64.5%), construction (54.0%) and art (58.9%) areas as compared with other Early Years providers. Conversely, sessional playgroup staff offer children greater access to drama/dress-up (34.4%), play-dough (37.6%), games/puzzles (24.0%), and tabletop (19.2%) play. The findings were not considered amenable to inferential analysis due to the differing responses reported.

5.4.4 Additional Activities

Examination of the results presented in Table 5.9 reveal that practitioners tend to offer a range of activities that take place outside the child’s immediate learning environment such as outdoor visits (35%), real life experiences (31.8%), and outdoor play (27.6%).

Table 5.9: Additional Activities provided in Early Years Settings

Activity	Total		IT	CM	SP	DC
	N	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Outdoor visits	143	35.0	26.0	45.1	21.8	44.0
Outdoor real life	130	31.8	15.6	69.0	12.7	23.9
Outdoor Play	113	27.6	13.0	35.4	33.6	23.9
Animals / Nature	90	22.0	19.5	15.0	30.0	22.9
Music / Dance	89	21.8	22.1	9.7	34.5	21.1
Art / Painting	86	21.0	22.1	15.9	30.9	15.6
PE	80	19.6	26.0	6.2	22.7	25.7
Games / Puzzles	66	16.1	22.1	13.3	23.6	7.3
Themed Activities	46	11.2	13.0	3.5	17.3	11.9
Visits to Setting	34	8.3	6.5	0.0	7.3	19.3

**Based on a sub-sample of 500 respondents*

There is considerable variation in the type of additional activity offered by the setting providers. Childminders are more likely to offer children outside visits, outdoor real life opportunities such as going to the post office and outdoor play (45.1%, 69.0% and 35.4% respectively), whereas sessional playgroup practitioners provide the greatest variety of activities including opportunities for children to engage with animals/nature (30%), music and dance (34.5%), art and painting (30.9%), games and puzzles (23.6%) and themed activities (17.3%). Given the differing responses reported findings were not considered amenable to inferential analysis.

5.4.5 Frequency of Play-based Activities

The findings presented in Table 5.10 show that the majority of respondents (72.1%) provide play-based learning sessions on a daily basis.

Table 5.10: Frequency of Play-based Learning Sessions in Early Years Settings

Frequency	Total (%)	IT (%)	CM (%)	SP (%)	DC (%)
Every Day	72.1	62.2	72.7	85.8	93.6
4 Days	6.3	7.2	6.3	6.0	2.4
3 Days	12.2	17.0	12.5	4.6	4.0
Less than 3 Days	9.4	13.7	8.6	3.6	0.0

Daycare providers (93.6%) offer the highest percentage of play-based learning sessions followed by sessional playgroup staff (85.6%), childminders (72.7%) and infant teachers (62.2%). Worthy of note is the finding that play-based learning sessions are available on fewer than 3 days per week in a small percentage of

infant classes (13.7%), childminders (8.6%) and sessional settings (3.6%). Differences noted in the frequency of sessions provided by the four provider groups were not amenable to further statistical analysis.

5.4.6 Timing of Play-based Learning

From Table 5.11 it can be seen that the majority of providers offer play based activities in the morning (55.4%) or in both the morning and afternoon (38%).

Table 5.11: Timing of Play-based Learning in Early Years Settings

When	Total (%)	IT (%)	CM (%)	SP (%)	DC (%)
Morning	55.4	52.6	34.4	80.0	33.1
Afternoon	6.6	9.4	11.7	0.0	0.8
Both	38.0	38.0	53.9	20.0	66.1

A greater proportion of playgroups offer morning play-based learning sessions (80%), whereas the majority of daycare providers offer afternoon sessions (66.1%). These findings are consistent with the time children usually spend in each setting, with a greater number of children attending morning playgroup sessions and after school daycare in the afternoon. Similar to the results reported in Table 5.10, differences noted in the timing of the sessions provided by the four provider groups were not amenable to further statistical analysis.

5.5 PRACTITIONER PERCEPTIONS OF PLAY

5.5.1 The Importance of Play

The results presented in Table 5.12 suggest that the majority of Early Years educators place considerable importance on children’s play. This is reflected in the finding that at least 95% agreed with the statements *“Children can have significant learning experiences during play”* and *“I believe play should have a central place in children’s learning”*, and disagreed with the statement *“Play has little impact on children’s intellectual development”*. Furthermore, it is evident that practitioners value their interactions with children during play, with 96.1% agreeing that *“I enjoy play-based learning sessions”*. A large majority also reported that *“play offers the opportunity for adults to assess children’s development”* (94.6%) and indicated *“it is important to record observations about the children’s learning”* (80.2%). Given the similarity in

the attitudes to play reported by each of the four provider groups, the findings were not amenable to further statistical analysis. In contrast, there was greater variation in the responses to the question concerning the importance of recording 'observations about the children's learning'. Further analysis indicated a highly significant difference ($p < 0.001$, $\chi^2 = 40.347$) with sessional practitioners (90.3%) followed by daycare providers (87.8%), infant teachers (76.4%) and childminders (71.3%) believing this is an important aspect of their work.

Table 5.12: Practitioner Perceptions on the Importance of Play to Children's Learning

Statement	Response	TOTAL (%)	IT (%)	CH (%)	SP (%)	DC (%)	CHI	SIG Value
<i>I enjoy play-based learning sessions.</i>	Agree	96.1	94.7	96.1	99.0	97.6	N/A	N/A
	Uncommitted	2.4	3.7	2.4	0.0	0.8		
	Disagree	1.5	1.6	1.6	1.0	1.6		
<i>Children can have significant learning experiences during play.</i>	Agree	97.9	97.4	96.9	99.3	98.4	N/A	N/A
	Uncommitted	1.0	1.3	1.6	0.0	0.8		
	Disagree	1.1	1.3	1.6	0.7	0.8		
<i>I believe play should have a central place in children's learning.</i>	Agree	96.1	94.9	94.4	98.6	99.2	N/A	N/A
	Uncommitted	2.6	3.7	3.2	0.7	0.0		
	Disagree	1.3	1.4	2.4	0.7	0.8		
<i>Play has little impact on children's intellectual development.</i>	Agree	3.9	3.1	3.9	5.4	4.9	N/A	N/A
	Uncommitted	1.1	1.4	0.8	0.7	0.8		
	Disagree	95.0	95.5	95.3	93.9	94.3		
<i>Play offers opportunity for adults to assess children's development.</i>	Agree	94.6	94.5	91.4	96.3	94.4	N/A	N/A
	Uncommitted	3.2	3.7	5.5	1.4	2.4		
	Disagree	2.2	1.8	3.1	2.4	3.2		
<i>During play it is important to record observations about the children's learning.</i>	Agree	80.2	76.4	71.3	90.3	87.8	40.347	0.000
	Uncommitted	13.0	16.4	15.5	6.3	7.3		
	Disagree	6.8	7.3	13.2	3.5	4.9		

5.5.2 The Role of the Adult in Children's Play

Table 5.13 suggests practitioners recognize the importance of child initiated rather than adult led play. For example, the majority of daycare providers (75.2%), playgroup staff (74.9%) and child minders (61.9%) believe that children do not learn more from adult initiated play. Consistent with this view, the majority of daycare providers (84.9%), playgroup staff (74.1%) and child minders (54.0%) believe that play should be initiated by the child. Although a number of teachers (47.5%, 34.9%) hold similar views, a sizeable proportion (38.4%, 40.8%) neither agreed nor disagreed with these statements. Similarly, practitioners were equally divided on the issue of whether 'children are best left to play by themselves.' This is evident in the finding that whilst the majority disagreed with this statement, 20% agreed and 30% said they neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement. The results presented in Table 5.13 reveal that there was similar ambivalence in the responses given to the question asking if 'play impacts more on social development than cognitive.' In contrast, providers overwhelmingly disagreed with the statement that 'play is good in theory but difficult to put into practice'. Further examination of the results showed the differences to be highly statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) when subject to inferential analysis.

Table 5.13: Perceptions on the Role of the Adult in Children's Play

Statement	Response	IT (%)	CH (%)	SP (%)	DC (%)	CHI	SIG Value
<i>Children learn more through adult led activities than play.</i>	Agree	13.1	8.7	10.0	5.8	84.185	0.000
	Uncommitted	39.4	29.4	15.1	19.0		
	Disagree	47.5	61.9	74.9	75.2		
<i>Play should be child-led / initiated.</i>	Agree	34.9	54.0	74.1	84.9	185.793	0.000
	Uncommitted	40.8	25.0	15.0	9.2		
	Disagree	24.4	21.0	10.9	5.9		
<i>Children are best left to play by themselves</i>	Agree	15.4	23.3	25.1	17.2	24.853	0.000
	Uncommitted	37.8	30.8	23.9	28.4		
	Disagree	46.8	45.8	51.0	54.3		
<i>Play impacts more on social development than cognitive</i>	Agree	21.3	28.7	33.8	20.7	32.851	0.000
	Uncommitted	27.9	25.4	13.5	23.1		
	Disagree	50.8	45.9	52.7	56.2		
<i>Play is good in theory but difficult to put into practice</i>	Agree	21.0	6.3	3.8	4.0	89.427	0.000
	Uncommitted	7.2	6.3	2.1	2.4		
	Disagree	71.8	87.4	94.1	93.5		

5.6 QUALITATIVE COMMENTS

5.6.1 Introduction

The final section of the questionnaire included an open-ended section for 'Any other comments.' Analysis of the qualitative data using the qualitative software package MAXQDA revealed that, of the 40% (n=508) who included a comment, the highest percentage were from infant teachers (45%, n=318) followed by daycare practitioners (37.8%, n=48), sessional practitioners (35%, n=109) and childminders (25.2%, n=33). The majority of comments focused on the lack of funding, class size and classroom support, play as a medium for learning, training and the lack of cohesion in Early Years education. This section of the report will explore each in turn.

5.6.2 Lack of Funding

Lack of funding was of particular concern to a number of infant teachers (6.2%) who pointed out that it impacted on their provision of play-based activities. The following exemplars capture their concerns:

"Due to a severe lack of funding in my school, 80% of the play based activities are funded out of my own pocket".

"Lack of space and funding of equipment limits exposure to play corners within the classroom."

"Not enough funding for play-based resources."

The financial concerns of sessional and daycare practitioners were more personal and focused on the poor salaries available within their sectors which serve to demotivate staff.

“12 Euro an hour for a daily rate highly undermines my professional dedication and commitment to a high quality service.” (SP)

“Diminishing pay and conditions don’t encourage the brightest and the best to consider a career in childcare.” (DP)

5.6.3 Class Size and Classroom Support

Class size was the second most frequently mentioned issue with infant teachers (9.4%) noting the problems this creates for children transferring from preschool settings where they have larger spaces to play and for infant teachers in developing a child-centred approach to classroom learning.

“The child-teacher ratio is much too high to allow for individual learning styles to be catered for appropriately. Smaller class sizes would result in increased individual attention, greater awareness of each child’s strengths and weaknesses, and more space for group activities etc.”

“Once a child starts primary school education in the Republic of Ireland there is a strong possibility that the class size and space will dictate a programme that suits classroom management rather than child-centred learning.”

“I feel the teacher: pupil ratio in classrooms in the Republic of Ireland makes it difficult to offer children the best advantage in terms of Early Years education. I feel children under six should be in smaller classes with less than 21 children. This would allow more space in the classroom to provide different play areas and learning areas.”

Despite working with large class numbers, a number of infant teachers (4.7%) pointed to the lack of classroom support available to help them develop the children's learning.

"SNA or classroom assistants are often an invaluable asset to guiding and aiding children's learning in an Early Years setting – classroom assistants are not available to us in junior classes in the Republic of Ireland." (IT)

"I feel it is essential that each Early Years classroom have a childcare/special needs assistant working with the class teacher and the children." (IT)

5.6.4 Play

Consistent with the findings reported in Tables 5.10 and 5.11, a number of practitioners (4.9%, n=25) from all sectors believe that play is of key importance in the child's holistic development.

"Play is what children have to do in order to grow and develop to their full potential." (SP)

"Play allows the child to test their own capabilities. It promotes the holistic development of the child." (DP)

"Play is very good for social development – teaching sharing, taking turns, looking after activities, tidying up. It also provides opportunities for language development and helps young children to interact." (IT)

"There should be more recognition of the value of play. Children learn and develop through play." (CM)

Others believe that adults can play an important role in extending and developing children's play:

“The adult role in our setting is to be there to support if the child needs it, otherwise to observe and sometimes extend the play by making a comment or adding a toy etc.” (DC)

“I think the adult’s role is to recognise when their input is of value, when scaffolding is required i.e. by introducing new ideas to extend the play, encouraging a new child into the group, etc. (SP)

There was also a sense of frustration with parents’ lack of understanding that play offers a valuable learning resource for children and a general belief that more should be done to inform them about its benefits.

“Play is perceived as entertainment and not as a method of education (SP)

“More could be done to inform parents of the necessity of play” (IT)

“There is not enough information given to parents and carers about the importance of play in child development. Parents feel learning letter, numbers etc are more important than play.” (SP)

“Adults [parents] especially need to be informed on the benefits of constructive play. Most see it as that their child isn’t learning or being taught if they are seen to be playing a lot of the day.” (IT)

5.6.5 Training

Another area of concern particularly for preschool practitioners (4.9%) concerns the lack of quality training available to Early Years professionals and the variable quality this creates within and between settings.

“The quality of courses leading to the same qualification can vary hugely.” (DC)

“More training is needed and should be more widely available.” (DC)

“Quality varies greatly from centre to centre.” (SP)

There was general agreement that:

“People working with children should have a proper qualification and be recognised as professionals.” (DC)

5.6.6 Greater Cohesion

Other comments centred on the need for greater cohesion within the sector and the need for a standard Early Years curriculum and the inspection process. The following comments sum up the views of most on these issues.

“A standard curriculum needs to be put in place for all services to carry out.” (DP)

“I think it is important that a curriculum is put in place for this age group and is uniform throughout the country.” (DP)

“A more supportive, consultative approach by the HSE [is required] in order to achieve best practice.” (SP)

5.7 RESULTS IN SUMMARY

- An examination of the survey responses indicates that each of the four main provider groups in early childhood education and care in the Republic of Ireland are fully represented. Care was also taken to ensure that the views of Early Years professionals in urban and rural areas in each of the four provinces were fairly reported. This yielded a response rate of 1271 which is fully commensurate with the 2006 population census for Ireland.
- Consistent with the gender patterns reported elsewhere, the vast majority of Early Years professionals responding to the survey were female (98.4%) with a few responses received from male infant teachers (2.7%) and daycare practitioners (1.8%).
- Some variation was noted in the age, qualifications and experience reported by the four respondent groups. Infant teachers tend to be younger, more highly qualified but less experienced than their counterparts in other settings, whereas sessional playgroup staff have more experience (67.8%) and have worked in their current setting for longer than other providers.
- First Aid (88.2%) and Child Protection (61.3%) training are popularly attended courses. With the exception of literacy (22.2%) and PE/Buntus (15.2%), infant teachers attend fewer courses than other practitioners. Conversely daycare providers attend a greater range of courses, with the highest percentage attending practical courses in handling/lifting (40.3%), hygiene (34.7%) and health & safety/fire (19.4%). Child minders also attend a wide range of courses including special educational needs & disability training (23.3%) and quality awareness (24.2%). A small percentage (10.3%) of professionals in all sectors indicated that they are currently studying for their FETAC Level 5. The highest number in this category was comprised of daycare providers (13.7%), sessional practitioners (13.1%), childminders (11.7%) and infant teachers (1.0%). Nevertheless annotated comments made in the final section of the survey

suggest that Early Years practitioners are poorly paid and find it difficult to access quality training.

- As might be expected child minders report having the lowest (4.4) and schools the highest average number of children (116). There was, however, considerable variation in the number reported by infant teachers. Similarly the number of children in daycare (43.3) appears to vary quite widely but the number reported for sessional playgroups (20.9) was relatively constant. Lack of space size was a particular issue for infant teachers who believe it dictates the use of space and constrains the type of play based activities available to children in the classroom.
- Whereas the government funds primary education (98.1%), parents are the main source of income for childminders (100%), sessional play groups (97.1%) and daycare (95.3%). Other income sources include grant funding bodies (10.9%) and charities (7.8%). Despite receiving their funding from the Department of Education infant teachers pointed out that there is not enough money for play-based resources, for classroom assistants and, in a few cases (2%), they have paid for their own classroom materials.
- The findings suggest that all Early Years settings offer children a wide range of daily play based activities daily with daycare (96.8%) offering it the most often followed by sessional playgroups (95.7%), childminders (90.5%) and infant teachers (78.1%). Similarly, daycare providers report encouraging imaginative play (88.1%), using songs and rhymes (88.8%), music and dance (68.0%), construction play (90.5%) and small world play (94.4%) more frequently than other provider groups. In contrast, infant teachers are more likely to provide activities that promote language and literacy development, such as mark making (70.8%) and songs and rhymes (89.2%). Childminders were least likely to offer these activities.
- Formal learning appears to characterise the early learning experiences of children in infant classes in the Republic of Ireland. Infant teachers report teaching their young

children a range of skills including early number concepts (95.0%), reading (93.8%), letter writing (78.9%) and computer use (90.1%). In addition, the majority set a daily homework (71.2%). Formal learning also occurs on a daily basis in a considerable proportion of preschool settings with daycare providers (66.1%), sessional playgroups (44.1%) and childminders (37.8%) encouraging children to use computers, early number concepts (48.8%, 46.6% and 46.0% respectively), letter writing (27.7%, 22.0% and 19.8% respectively) and reading (23.5%, 13.7% and 26.3% respectively). Worthy of mention, a very small percentage of childminders (8.5%) set a daily homework. This may, however, owe more to parental expectations than to the pedagogical approach of the practitioner. Annotated comments made in the last section of the survey suggest that a number of parents do not value play as a medium to progress children's learning.

- There is considerable variation in the range and type of play areas available to children in the four settings. Although sand (79.1%) and water (60.9%) areas are available in most settings, a higher percentage of day care providers (64.5%) and sessional playgroups (51.2%) provide a library/reading and a home corner (61.3% and 61.6% respectively). Childminders (61.0%) provide outdoor play areas and are more likely to give children an area for general play, whereas a higher percentage of daycare providers and sessional practitioners provide areas for construction play (54.0% 48.8% respectively) and art/painting (58.9% and 54.4%).
- In addition, a range of other activities are regularly available for children beyond the immediate environment including outdoor visits (35.0%), outdoor real life opportunities (e.g. a visit to the post office) (31.8%) and outdoor play (27.6%). Again there was considerable variation in the range and type of opportunities provided with childminders (69.0%) more likely to offer real life opportunities and sessional practitioners to offer music/dance (34.5%) and give children an opportunity to engage with animals/nature (30.0%).

- Play-based learning sessions are generally available on a daily basis in all settings (72.1%) in the morning (55.4%) or in both the morning and afternoon (38.0%). The timing of play based sessions appears to reflect the hours children typically attend playgroup, school, afterschool daycare and childminders.
- In contrast to their actual practice, it would seem that the vast majority of Early Years professionals place considerable importance on children's play, recognise the value of interacting with children through play and support the notion of child initiated rather than adult led play. Most believe that children do not learn more when play is adult initiated (playgroup staff, 74.9%; daycare providers, 75.2% and child minders 61.9%) and think it should be initiated by the child (daycare providers, 84.9%; playgroup staff, 74.1% and child minders, 54.0%).

SECTION 3
DEVELOPING AND USING THE PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT MODEL

6. Developing and Using the PDM: the Case Study Experience

6.1 BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the findings from the detailed case studies that were conducted in six Early Years settings over a six month period. Its main aim is to highlight the practitioner response to using the PDM and the overall effectiveness of the PDM in terms of the quality of the learning experience. The findings comprise information gleaned from the one-to-one interviews conducted with each of the principal practitioners participating in the study before and after using the PDM, the reflective diaries that each of these practitioners maintained over the sixteen week period to record their experience of using the PDM and detailed observations using an instrument known as the Quality Learning Instrument (Walsh and Gardner, 2005) which evaluated the quality of the learning experience before and after using the PDM in each of the six settings². The chapter consists of four main sections:

- An insight into the Professional Development Model;
- A broad overview of each of the six case study settings;
- The practitioner experience of using the PDM, extrapolated from the interview and diary findings; and
- The quality of the learning experience, gathered from the QLI evaluations pre and post PDM implementation.

6.2 THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT MODEL

A major aim of the EPEC research project was to develop ‘a model to support early childhood educators/teachers to examine and enhance their own pedagogy’. This section explains how the Professional Development Model (PDM) was devised, outlines its content and describes the support structures provided for participants during the implementation period of the model in six Early Years settings.

² Although six settings began the study, one of the day cares did not participate in the final phase of interviews and the QLI evaluation.

6.2.1 Rationale

The purpose of the model was to support early childhood educators/teachers in their professional reflection and enhancement of their own pedagogy. The PDM was based on the socio-cultural learning principle outlined in the Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (SPEEL) (Moyles et al 2002) that effective Early Years practitioners have the ability to:

- be reflective
- be questioning
- be analytical
- be committed to learning and professional development
- welcome and initiate constructive, critical engagement with peers and others.

With this in mind, the research team aimed to provide an integrated package consisting of the PDM document, initial training and ongoing support to enable participants to develop and utilise these professional qualities. The PDM itself was designed to provide culturally appropriate, clear guidance on effective pedagogy for all types of Early Years setting and to contain advice that is age appropriate for the children involved within a user friendly format.

6.2.2 Content

The PDM was based on current ideas of best practice supported by a review of international research and theory in the field of Early Years pedagogy, as outlined in the Literature Review of this report. It was also informed by recent developments in the Republic of Ireland including Síolta, the National Quality Framework in Early Childhood Education, and Aistear, the new framework for Early Learning. Finally, the PDM also drew on original data obtained from the consultation with key stakeholders, the audit of activities, the practitioner focus group discussions and the first round of case study setting observations. This enabled the identification of five key dimensions of effective pedagogy:

1. Nurturing Relationships with and between Children
2. Playful and Engaging Activities
3. Collaborative Partnerships
4. Skilful Interactions
5. Management and Organisation

6.2.3 Format

The PDM is presented in a ring binder, with a short Introduction and a section explaining how to use the model. The five main sections are colour coded and each follows the same format: a rationale for the inclusion of this dimension of effective pedagogy; a list of quality indicators; a cameo of effective practice based on Early Years practice; a link to relevant web based video material; some questions to help the practitioner reflect on their current practice; a list of potential areas for development and numerous practical task examples from which the practitioner may choose one or more on which to focus. Each section concludes with diary reflection pages with headings to encourage professional reflection through making entries during the implementation of the PDM. (A full copy of the PDM is included at Appendix 5).

6.2.4 Training

Training sessions were conducted both in Dublin and in Sligo and in each case participants were introduced to the overall aims and progress of the EPEC research project and, more specifically, to the content of the Professional Development Model. The aim of the training session was to encourage project participants to engage in 'reflection-on-action' (Schön 1987) both in order to select the dimension of the PDM best suited to the needs of their setting and also to continue this reflective process throughout the project implementation period. To this end session participants engaged in discussion about quality pedagogy and expressed their perceived strengths and development needs in this area. Video material was used during the training session to reinforce aspects of good practice in Early Years

pedagogy. One dimension of the PDM was used as an exemplar to guide participants through the three steps involved in using the PDM:

- *Step 1: Understanding effective pedagogy* – reviewing all five dimension rationale statements, quality indicators, cameos of effective practice and web based materials to help identify practice strengths and development needs. One dimension is then chosen for implementation and Steps 2 and 3 are carried out in relation to this one dimension.
- *Step 2: Reviewing and evaluating practice and planning for professional development* – using reflective questions to direct self-evaluation and choosing from a list of potential areas for development and practical tasks to complete.
- *Step 3: Documentation* – recording thoughts and actions during implementation of the professional development plan.

It was emphasised that, although only one dimension is initially selected for focus, the PDM would ideally be used in its totality as part of a setting's longer term professional development programme. Following the training session, each participant was asked to select one dimension and to implement it in their setting over a period of 16 working weeks, recording their progress throughout in a structured reflection diary.

6.2.5 Ongoing Support

Two members of the research team with extensive Early Years practice experience had been designated to provide the training sessions and ongoing support for case study participants. These team members remained in contact with the practitioners by telephone and email throughout the PDM implementation stage, one taking responsibility for practitioners in the Dublin area and the other for the Sligo group. Additional support was provided by a face to face meeting with the designated research team member at the mid-way point of the PDM implementation period. This session was designed to allow the participants to meet as a group to discuss their experiences of implementing the PDM in their EY settings. Leeson (2004) recommends that the formation of effective reflective skills may be achieved through a range of strategies including using reflective journals, working as a pair together with a

buddy or critical friend or in discussion groups. The training and support provided during the PDM implementation period made use of all these strategies. Joint involvement in the project over a six month period enabled a rapport to develop between researcher and participant so that implementation problems and possible solutions could be freely discussed and meaningful ongoing support provided.

6.3 PROFILE OF SETTINGS

The following tables provide contextual information on each of the six Early Years settings (i.e. three from Dublin and three from Sligo) which participated in the case studies.

6.3.1 Setting A

Setting type	National Junior School/Infant Class
Classification	Dublin, Urban
Operation	09.00 to 13.40, 5 days per week
Children	An enrolment of 445 pupils. The setting caters for children in four year groups, junior infant class to second class i.e. children aged 4-8 years, with four classes per year group. This infant class has 25 children.
Staff	The setting has 16 class teachers and three learning support teachers, one for junior and senior infants, one for first and second class and one for pupils with English as a second language.
Environment	Large modern urban school. The setting has 17 classrooms with shared activity areas, a computer room, resource rooms and a large Physical Education hall
Typical daily routine	09.00 Play 09.30 Roll 09.40 Curriculum Areas 10.30 Break 10.45 Curriculum Areas 12.00 Lunch 12.40 Curriculum Areas 13.40 Home

6.3.2 Setting B

Setting type	National School/Infant Class
Classification	Sligo, Rural
Operation	08.50 to 13.30, 5 days per week
Children	An enrolment of 287 pupils. The setting caters for children in all 7 year groups i.e. children aged 4-11 years. This infant class has 22 children.
Staff	Setting has 16 class teachers and 3 learning support teachers, one for junior and senior infants, one for first and second class and one for pupils with English as a second language.
Environment	Reasonably large school with PE hall.
Typical daily routine	08.50 Play 09.20 Roll 09.30 Curriculum Areas 10.15 Break 10.45 Curriculum Areas 12.00 Lunch 12.40 Curriculum Areas 13.40 Home

6.3.3 Setting C

Setting type	Sessional Playgroup
Classification	Dublin, Urban
Operation	Session 1:- 09.00-12.00; Session 2:- 12.15-15.15
Children	An enrolment of 27 pupils (16 morning session; 11 afternoon session)
Staff	Staff consists of a playgroup manager, a play assistant, and two special needs assistants. The manager is currently doing the Fetac level 6 in childcare, two staff have Fetac level 5 and one practitioner has a certificate in Montessori teaching.
Environment	House in residential area with large extension for playgroup and outside play area.
Typical daily routine	09.00 Children arrive 09.15 Circle time 10.00 Activities in small groups 10.45 Free play time sometimes outside 11.30 Lunch time, 12.00 Story time. 12.15 Home time

6.3.4 Setting D

Setting type	Sessional Playgroup
Classification	Sligo, Rural
Operation	Session:- 09.00-12.30
Children	An enrolment of 22 pupils
Staff	Setting has four staff in total, a playgroup manager, an assistant and two temporary staff who provide support for a few hours a week. All staff have Fetac level 5 in childcare, with the two full time staff also having a certificate in Montessori teaching.
Environment	Reasonably large purpose built building in industrial estate with outside play area.
Typical daily routine	08.45 Free play as children arrive 09.30 Circle time 10.00 Activities 11.00 Break time then outside play if weather is good 12.00 Circle Time 12.30 Home

6.3.5 Setting E

Setting type	Full Day Care
Classification	Kildare, Rural
Operation	07.30-18.30 (including sessional service 9.00-12.30, and part-time services 8.30- 13.00 or 13.30 to 18.30)
Children	Varies, but never more than 70 children in the building at one time
Staff	17 in total including four Montessori teachers (two in each room), a senior supervisor, the setting coordinator and a chef. The childcare staff have as a minimum a Fetac level 5 qualification and 6-8 months experience in another crèche. When employed they begin courses in first aid, fire safety, curriculum planning, child protection, activities for under sixes and positive behaviour management. In addition, the Montessori teachers have a diploma in Montessori teaching, one staff member has a degree in Psychology and Child Development, the senior supervisor has Fetac level 6 and the coordinator has Fetac level 6, a diploma in crèche management, diploma in Montessori teaching and a degree in business studies.
Environment	Reasonably large purpose built building in residential area with outside play area. Several rooms including baby room (children up to 1 year old), 'tweenies' room (12- 18 months), 'wobblers' room (18- 24 months), 'toddlers' room (2-3 yrs), and two rooms for Montessori classes (3-5 yrs).
Typical daily routine	Morning – Breakfast 08.15 Free Play Time 08.45 Montessori curriculum

	10.00 Break, then outdoor play 10.45 Montessori curriculum 12.15 Lunch 12.30 Outdoor Play, weather permitting 14.00 Structured play activities 15.30 Circle time- story time 16.00 Teatime 16:20 Quiet-time – circle time discussion 16:40 Free play, with parents collecting children
--	--

6.3.6 Setting F

Setting type	Full Day Care
Classification	Sligo, Small town
Operation	07.30 – 18.30, including playschool (9.30-12.30), and afterschool (14.00-18.30)
Children	An enrolment of 87 children
Staff	13 staff in total- part time and full time, mostly trained to Fetac level 5 and a few members also have Montessori level 6. Two of the members complete their course 1 day a week and work in this setting 4 days a week. One child with Cerebral Palsy has a dedicated Special Needs Assistant.
Environment	Reasonably large purpose built building in small town with outside play area.
Typical daily routine	07.30 Settling in time and breakfast 09.00 Age related groups with free play in most groups 10.15 Snack time 10.30 Curriculum activities 12.00 Lunch time 12.30 Free play for older children in large upstairs playroom, sleep for younger children 15.00 Snack time 15.30 Preparing for home, play-based activities as children collected

6.3.7 Summary of Profiles

- Generally all settings followed a similar daily routine, where in the main the emphasis was placed on structured activities;
- There were disparities, however, between the settings in terms of length of time children spent there, child-staff ratios and type of environment;

- There was also a difference in level of qualifications between the infant classes (both infant teachers possessing a degree in primary education) and the playgroups and day cares (most of the practitioners possessing at least a FETAC level 5 or a certificate in Montessori teaching).

6.4 THE PRACTITIONER EXPERIENCE

This section summarises the main findings collated from the one-to-one interviews conducted with the principal practitioners involved in the study across the six settings and the reflective diary accounts.

6.4.1 Pre Implementation

Expectations for the Project

Prior to participating in the project, the professional development experience of the practitioners varied. Practitioners from County Sligo expressed that they had received little or no previous professional development experience. By contrast, the three participants from the Dublin region outlined various courses and seminars they had attended over recent years.

All practitioners were positive about participating in the project. Some stressed their openness to new ideas in Early Years pedagogy, while others mentioned a willingness to explore anything that may benefit children’s learning in practice. Both participants from the sessional playgroup settings did however raise initial concerns about the impact of taking part in an additional project in light of their current workload and commitments.

When asked what expectations they had of the Professional Development Model, the practitioners anticipated a user-friendly document that would contain a range of “good practical ideas” they could implement in their setting:

“It sounds great. I think if it’s easily read, not too many words on the page, aesthetically pleasing to the eye, good easy signposting if you like in it, it will work really well.” (E)

“I hope to get some ideas how to improve teaching methods or reactions to what the children have done.” (D)

Participants also identified aspects of their current practice they would like to change, including providing more child-centred activities, developing children’s own interactions and improving observation and assessment:

“I’d love to be able to get them to do more group work and working together as a team, even working in pairs and working together to solve things.” (A)

“I suppose I would like to improve a bit on documentation. We do meet once a week and go through how the children are improving, but I think we could maybe do a little bit more written assessment of their development.” (C)

Views on Early Years Pedagogy

All practitioners described their setting as providing both care and education for young children, with a number suggesting that care and education are interdependent and equally important for the holistic development of the child. The Dublin playgroup leader, for example, stated *“I can see both happening in that they are learning all of the skills of life”*. When asked how 3-6 year old children learned best, practitioners from each setting highlighted the significance of active learning, of *“doing things and being involved”*. Some participants also emphasised the importance of play, and in relation to this, children’s own interests and interactions. Examples of comments include:

“I think active learning, when they are doing something. I know you have to do lessons where you are listening and they are speaking, but I think that when they are doing their activity they are learning best, and they talk and learn from the children around them.” (B)

“I think if you try and work with them and what they enjoy they learn better.” (D)

6.4.2 Implementation

Following consideration of the PDM document, setting A and setting C decided to focus on ‘Nurturing Relationships with and Between Children’, Setting B and Setting E on ‘Skilful Interactions’ and setting D on ‘Collaborative Partnerships’. All participants indicated that they were prepared to explore new possibilities for improving practice in their chosen area.

Nurturing Relationships With and Between Children

Both settings A and C selected ‘Nurturing Relationships’ primarily due to a concern for particular children in their setting, who they believed would benefit from improved support in forming relationships and developing social skills. The infant teacher (Practitioner A) wished to create a more inclusive environment for a young child with Down’s Syndrome and the sessional playgroup manager hoped to encourage greater participation from a number of the quieter children in her setting. Practitioner A decided to focus on two aspects of ‘Nurturing Relationships’ in particular: “Being Sensitive to Children’s Emotions”, as she wished to *“help the children discuss their emotions and become more aware of the different feelings they have”*, and “Encouraging Children’s Relationships with each other” as she hoped to *“encourage the children to create good friendships in the classroom”*. To achieve this she introduced circle time at least once a week to provide time for whole class discussion and altered activities in curriculum areas to promote empathy in drama, for example, or teamwork in PE. She also introduced a buddy system for the playground and taught the children various yard games *“to encourage them to play with others in the class they may not have been friendly with before”*.

Reflecting in her diary, Practitioner A indicated that despite initial difficulties adjusting to circle time and the buddy system, *“the children responded well to the tasks and their relationships with each other have come on a lot”*. She was also particularly pleased with how other children formed relationships with the child with Down’s Syndrome, who was *“now a lot more accepting of him and play with him”*.

Practitioner C concentrated on “Responding to Children’s Interests and Views” and hoped *“to empower the children to be more active in their learning”* and *“develop thinking skills and planning skills that will benefit them throughout their life”*. She intended to accomplish this through improved planning, stating *“I tried a plan and recall system before and failed so I want to find a way to make it work, because I believe strongly in the benefit of such a system”*. In particular she sought to develop *“a fairer system of planning where each and every child gets an equal opportunity to express his or her wishes”* as previously *“the quieter children tended to lose out”*.

After reflecting on why the system failed to work previously, the emphasis in planning was initially shifted from whole class circle time to lunch time. Rather than focusing on what the children wanted to do at the beginning of the day, which tended to be dominated by the more vocal children, they were each asked towards the end of the day what activities they had enjoyed. These activities could be extended if necessary the following day. Then planning was extended, *“by first asking children what they wanted to do at the beginning of the day and then what they had actually done, thus encouraging them to plan and follow through”*. Practitioner C reported in her diary that planning had improved and noted that even by the end of the first week of implementation *“it was very satisfying to see planning happening so naturally”*.

Skilful Interactions

Settings B and E selected ‘Skilful Interactions’ as their focus. Practitioner B, an infant teacher, aimed *“to gain a deeper understanding of the children’s, thinking, reasoning and interests”*, and *“to assess who is socializing effectively and who may need a little guidance”* and focused on the “tuning in”, “developing” and “reflection” areas of this section. The day care manager at setting E hoped by reflecting on their interactions staff would gain a greater understanding of the children’s needs, and thus help the setting *“work towards the children learning to their optimum ability”*. She decided to apply all four areas of the ‘Skilful Interactions’ section.

Practitioner B observed and took notes on particular activities during morning playtime to tune into what activities were motivating the children, what resources they were using and

how this impacted on their social interaction. Despite finding it difficult initially to “hold back” and not become involved in the activities, she observed behaviour that she had not been aware of previously. She writes in her reflection diary, for example, *“I was surprised how little oral communication was to be heard during certain activities. Generally the room gets noisy during playtime, but I found that when it came to jigsaws and even construction toys the children preferred to work quietly alone. It made me ask myself should I encourage the children to work in pairs when completing a puzzle?”*

Having reflected on the children’s interests, Practitioner B moved on to interacting with them and concentrated on role-play activities in particular. She noted in her diary how some children found it difficult to play in role and she introduced problems and provided props to stimulate their imagination. She also focused on developing the social skills of a young child with special educational needs to help him learn to play cooperatively with others. Having observed this child’s love of drama, she gave him the opportunity to initiate and lead the play, by inviting others to join in and by modelling social interactions for him. She also extended his thinking by referring to previous knowledge and using open ended questioning with him. On reflection, she stated the role-play activities *“create and encourage a lot more oral language opportunities and creativity than other activities I had provided until now”*.

Practitioner E observed how children interacted during library activities in her day care service, and listened to the children talk to each other about the books they had chosen. She then implemented a strategy of encouraging the children’s choice of books, modelling alongside the children and extending how they used the books by exploring themes and using open ended questions. In her reflective diary Practitioner E did outline a number of difficulties with this approach. For example, she writes:

“We always respect the child’s choice of book. Sometimes this is a little difficult, for example, a parent comes back and says that her child chose a book that was too difficult, or that he had chosen two weeks ago, etc. We explain to the parent that it is the child’s decision which book he / she chooses and although we steer and encourage them we do not tell them which book to choose. Some parents find this a little difficult, until explained properly to them.”

The setting also implemented strategies to promote creativity. Staff were encouraged to use more “what, why and how” questions and introduce unpredictable “what if” elements when interacting with the children. The practitioners also observed what the children were acting out in their role play and provided materials to extend the play. Reflecting on the outcomes for the setting Practitioner D believed the children learned more and were more creative with the activities. She also noted the staff had benefitted in terms of *“finding new ways to encourage the children to express themselves”* and that they *“now see more possibilities with the equipment in the room.”*

Collaborative Relationships

Practitioner D selected ‘Collaborative partnerships’ because she wanted to *“do more to involve the community and the parents”* with the service and particularly hoped to promote cultural awareness by inviting families from various ethnic backgrounds into the setting. She also wished to *“become more aware of all services in the community and pass this information on to newcomers to the area.”* To achieve this, a number of visits were organized:

- The mother of an Asian child in the setting was invited to talk to the children about her culture
- A local pharmacist was invited to talk to parents about childhood illnesses
- A local Tenor, also a parent, was invited to give the children singing lessons once a week.

The children also engaged in a project celebrating Chinese New Year. A local Chinese restaurant owner was invited and he brought in food to taste, showed the children chopsticks and artwork and photographs from China. The children then carried out an art project based on China.

6.4.3 Post Implementation

The PDM Document

When asked about the form and content of the PDM document itself, all participants were positive about its presentation and format. One participant considered her particular section *“clearly explained and easy to work with”*; whilst another commended the cameo section: *“I felt like I was in someone’s classroom.”* The structure of the diary format was considered *“useful to discipline thoughts.”* One participant recommended that some suggested tasks might be shortened to make them more achievable within a working day and that the document should make clear that not all tasks need to be undertaken. Another participant found the reflective questions for her chosen dimension helpful but perhaps rather closed; in any case their success would, she felt, depend on the reflective abilities of the practitioner using the PDM.

The practitioners across all of the case study settings commented on the links with the Síolta and Aistear frameworks, explaining that they *“did not feel that we were doing something new”* though it did *“add to what we already know and have to implement”*. Practitioners also liked the layout, *“the way it was organized in sections and you could just focus on one section at a time.”* The document was also described as *“clear and concise and easy to follow”* with *“wording in it very easy to read.”* This is significant as a number of practitioners highlighted the fact that had already encountered difficulties with the Síolta handbook which was described as *“chunky”* and *“wordy.”* One practitioner summarized this:

“The PDM incorporates most of the Síolta standards that we would be working by now and Aistear, and so we would not have looked upon it as an extra chore or an extra task. Personally I find a lot of the Síolta standards can be worded a bit difficult for a lot of childcare workers who are just out of school and have just done the basic childcare course - the language is a bit technical whereas the PDM I found it a lot more straightforward, at the end of the day it is easier to understand.” (D)

Benefits and Challenges

Benefits of taking part in the project were expressed in terms of setting, children and practitioners: for example, one participant who focused on 'Collaborative Partnerships' commented: *"We now feel we have a more integrated service in the community"*. In terms of specific benefits to the children, one practitioner who focused on 'Nurturing Relationships with and between Children' noted that *"the class as a whole is very good at turn-taking now"*. She also reported that the children are now more likely to try to solve their own disputes. A practitioner who worked on 'Skilful Interactions' found that the children *"approach me more now and are socially more secure because of my interactions"*. She also reported that the children have become more imaginative in their play and, as reported by several practitioners, their language abilities have benefitted from increased *"social chat"*. She commented frankly on the beneficial effect of the project on her own development as a reflective practitioner: *"Overall, I notice things that I had been unaware of"*. A practitioner who had focused on 'Nurturing Relationships with and between Children' reflected: *"I think I have grown in understanding of the subject matter and am more confident in this area of teaching"*. In addition, she noted that her staff team *"can see so many more possibilities... than they could before"*. Another participant who was working on 'Playful and Engaging Activities' was grateful for the short time frame in which to prioritise staff discussion about pedagogy, since often such discussions *"might have been displaced by other demanding activities"*. She reported that staff in her setting had found the PDM work entirely compatible with the curriculum development work they were carrying out in relation to Síolta and Aistear.

Some practitioners explained they gained a greater insight into their children's interests, with the children also benefitting from gaining more of a voice within the setting. Others commented more generally on how involvement in the project provided a rare opportunity for critical reflection and indicated that their practice had improved as a result of implementing the PDM:

"I hadn't really done anything like this before- like looking at my teaching and looking at it critically, so it was great for me to look and see what I wasn't doing the best and

what I could improve on. I actually loved it and to actually get an insight into the kids and what I should be doing". (A)

"I think it made us better practitioners. I think it made us more reflective of our work. I think it made us realise the importance of the children's views and how they can give information and participate in the curriculum and the activities. The children really enjoyed being more of an active part of the environment and I don't think that would have happened nearly as quickly if we had not participated in the project". (E)

Challenges faced during the implementation of the PDM were also addressed. One participant expressed frustration that *"staff discussions do not necessarily lead to change"* and spoke of the difficulty of effecting change in pedagogical mindsets and routines. Another practitioner similarly commented that implementing the PDM had involved *"altering the mindset of the staff"* who had tended to focus on outcomes rather than on skilful interactions. The effects of the recession in terms of staff redundancies and resource shortages were cited as problems faced during implementation of the PDM, in addition to the pressures faced by infant teachers in terms of lack of classroom assistance and the time demands of the formal curriculum. Participants from each setting type indicated time and workload constraints were a challenge in their sector and expressed a concern that some practitioners may shelve the PDM. One stated, for example: *"I know people are being bombarded at the moment with Síolta and Aistear and if they were handed another folder they might just say no"*. Practitioners also noted that it took a period of time initially for children to adjust to the changes implemented within the setting. The Sligo participants raised an additional concern that parents do not yet fully understand the value of play, and would complain if they did not see evidence of more formal learning:

"I myself wouldn't mind if it was all play, but the parents would have to know why". (B)

"There would be a lot of pressure from parents these days on do they know their numbers, their phonics". (D)

Views on Early Years Pedagogy

Practitioners were asked if their views on how 3-6 year old children learn had changed since participating in the project. Both participants from Sligo stated that their understanding of how young children learn had changed as a result of participating in the Project. The other Early Years educators explained that, although they had been aware of the importance of the area they selected to how children learn, the PDM had given them a better understanding of how to implement this in practice. Examples of comments include:

"I suppose that play does have more importance than I would have thought before. And sometimes if they do change the subject if it is a playful element they are adding sometimes you just go with it, so yes there has been a change in that regard". (B)

"We always knew that they learned from a hands on effect and we were always very hands on, but what we have done is altered some of the curriculums and made them more play based and realised what we wanted as the learning outcome is not necessarily what the child needed as the learning outcome". (E)

All practitioners gave examples of how their understanding of the role of an effective Early Years educator had changed:

"I kind of knew before that group work and learning from peers would help them but I think using the PDM encouraged me to do those things more, and it opened my mind more to bringing those practices more into my teaching so doing more pair work with them in the class and group work which I wouldn't have really done before, and I actually do that a lot more than I would have". (A)

"Before I would have been more concerned with 'has the academic side been covered'? There would be a lot of pressure from parents these days on do they know their numbers, their phonics. Now we cover it now and we try to link it in a fun way. I would put more emphasis now on are they more secure, are they more independent, are they able to tell you what's wrong and identify their needs? So I suppose my view of the teachers would be that's more important now, that has changed". (D)

Further Development of the PDM

Practitioners were asked how the PDM could be used as a professional development tool throughout the Early Years sector in the Republic of Ireland. Participants from each setting type commented on the importance of the training days to their understanding of the PDM and indicated many practitioners would find additional outside support beneficial.

Suggestions were made as to how the training could be broken down into a series of professional development days to focus on each dimension of the PDM separately. In addition, both infant teachers thought an internet forum could be used to enable practitioners to communicate with others implementing the same area and share ideas. Examples of comments include:

“The PDM was explained very well on the training day, and I suppose if we didn’t have that it would have been more difficult. She did simplify it very well and it is very straightforward once you read through it, but she did start it off for us and explain it; you would need that at least I feel”. (D)

“I would have loved it if there was a forum you could have gone to with other teachers who were using it to get their ideas on how they do it. I was thinking at the start ‘gosh what am I going to do with this relationships thing’? So I went to the website and there were a good few examples and the links and everything were brilliant, but it would be great if there was a forum and you could say ‘what are you up to,’ ‘what are you doing with this’? I think a lot of teachers would love that”. (A)

One of the practitioners also suggested that the essence of the PDM should be integrated into further professional development courses and even initial teacher education and other appropriate forms of Early Years practitioner training.

6.5 THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

This section provides an insight into the quality of the learning experience across the settings prior to PDM implementation and then post PDM implementation, approximately six months later. As mentioned in the introduction (see section 1.2.3) the quality of the

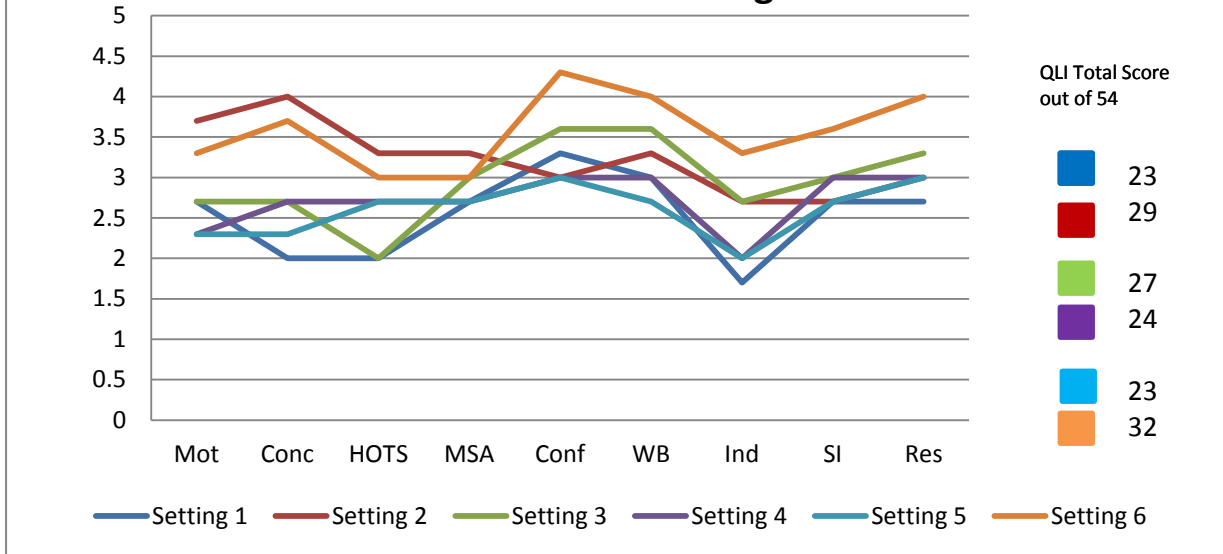
learning experience was assessed using an observation instrument known as the Quality Learning Instrument (Walsh and Gardner, 2005; Walsh et al, 2006).

As this section of the chapter reports the quality of the learning experience across the settings pre and post PDM implementation, the setting order has been mixed up to ensure that settings are less easily identified, in turn enhancing the overall level of confidentiality.

6.5.1 Pre PDM implementation

The quality of the learning experience was assessed in each of the case study settings before an aspect of the PDM was chosen to focus on. In this way the initial rating could act as a baseline measure of the quality of the learning experience in each setting and when compared to the rating after PDM implementation, would provide evidence of where, if any, improvement lay. As no control settings were employed for this aspect of this study, it is impossible to attribute improvement directly to the PDM experience. However it is important to note that the settings were not involved in any other form of professional development during the course of the PDM implementation process. The nine quality indicators on the QLI are scored from one (low) to six (very high); giving a total score that can range from 9-54. Figure 6.1 below shows the distribution of total scores across each of the six settings for each indicator, displaying an average score for each indicator as well as an overall total QLI score.

Figure 6.1: QLI Total Scores and Individual Indicator Scores Per Setting



At first glance it would appear that setting 6 scored highest (32 out of a possible 54 points i.e. 59%) and settings 1 and 5 scored lowest (each scoring 23 out of 54 i.e. 43%), with little difference between the remaining settings (scores ranging from 29- 24 i.e. 54% to 44 %). On closer examination Figure 6.1 reveals that Setting 6 outperformed all other settings on five of the nine indicators, namely ‘confidence’, ‘well being’, ‘independence’, ‘social interaction’ and ‘respect’; while it scored slightly less well than setting 2 on ‘motivation’, ‘concentration’, ‘HOTS’ and ‘multiple skills acquisition’ (3.3, 3.7, 3.0 and 3.0 respectively). Perhaps these findings might be explained by the fact that setting 6 is a day care, with a good child-staff ratio, a purpose built learning environment and the main emphasis at pre implementation stage was placed on ensuring a positive, caring ethos while the children’s parents are at work and the educational aspect was less prioritised.

Setting 2 on the other hand is an infant classroom and therefore greater priority was placed perhaps at pre implementation stage on the cognitive dimension of learning and development and less on nurture, although on the emotional indicators of ‘confidence’, ‘well being’ and ‘respect’, setting 2 still scored at least satisfactory. It was on the quality indicators ‘independence’ and ‘social interaction’ that setting 2 scored below average perhaps reflecting once again the school ethos, where emphasis was placed on whole class teaching and the activities were principally teacher directed.

Settings 1 and 5 performed poorly across all indicators with the exception of 'confidence' and 'well being' for setting 1, scoring 3.3. and 3.0 respectively and setting 5 'confidence' and 'respect', with an average score of 3 on each. In setting 1, a playgroup, there was a particularly poor showing on the indicators 'concentration', 'HOTS' and 'independence'; whilst in setting 5, an infant classroom, it was on 'motivation', 'concentration' and 'independence' that it scored well below average. In both settings there appeared to be an over-emphasis on teacher – led activities that did not always appear to meet with the children's needs and interests, resulting in children who at times lacked engagement. On further extrapolation of the results in terms of the QLI's learning triangle (i.e. the children's actions, the teaching strategies and the role of the environment), it would appear that in setting 1, the learning environment's average score (1.6) was much less than that of the teaching strategies (2.8) and the children's actions (3.1). In setting 5, there was less disparity across the three dimensions, with a slightly lesser score for teaching strategies (2.3) as compared with children's actions (2.7) and the environment (2.8). Therefore it could be argued that the quality of the learning experience in setting 1 was particularly hindered by the physical environment; whilst it was the overly authoritative approach adopted by the teacher in setting 5 that appeared to impact negatively on the quality of the learning experience.

The remaining two settings i.e. 3 and 4 (day care and playgroup respectively) scored quite similarly across the nine indicators, scoring satisfactory or slightly above on the social and emotional indicators of the QLI, namely 'confidence', 'well being', 'social interaction' and 'respect'. However their scores for the cognitive indicators i.e. 'motivation', 'concentration', 'HOTS', 'MSA' and 'independence' were all below average. Once again this might be explained by the overall caring ethos prioritised in each of these types of settings, with appropriate learning experiences receiving less value. Interactions on the part of the Early Years practitioners to scaffold and enhance the children's knowledge and cognitive development were also minimal in both of these settings.

Overall it would seem that at the pre implementation stage all settings scored modestly, with total scores never reaching beyond 59%. In this way it could be argued that some degree of professional development would be beneficial for all concerned. On closer examination of the quality indicators, the highest average score across all six settings was

for 'confidence' (3.4), 'well being' (3.3) and 'respect' (3.2), with lowest scores for 'independence' (2.4) and 'HOTS' (2.6). Average scores for the remaining four indicators i.e. 'motivation', 'concentration', 'MSA' and 'social interaction' were 2.8, 2.9, 2.9 and 2.95 respectively. At pre implementation stage findings intimate that in the main the six settings scored higher on the emotional indicators and less well on the dispositional and in particular the cognitive indicators. It was on the indicator 'independence' that all six settings scored lowest, where an overly teacher-directed approach was apparent in all settings, even in those where a caring ethos was prioritised and therefore it would appear that all practitioners could benefit in the main from the basic PDM indicators of 'Skilful Interactions', knowing how and when to interact appropriately to enhance the overall learning experience, but simultaneously 'Nurturing Relationships', to mediate between the caring and educational experience to ensure the best all round experience for all young children. The other basic PDM indicator 'Playful and Engaging Activities' would also be beneficial for all practitioners, where they all appear, perhaps with the exception of setting 2, to be showing some difficulty in blending play and work in the activities they offer, i.e. ensuring that the activities provided are adequately playful but at the same time extending young children's overall learning and development.

Figure 6.2 provides an insight into the overall quality of the learning experience per type of setting. Out of the six participating settings, at pre implementation stage, it would appear that the day care settings were slightly outperforming the infant classes and playgroups, particularly on the social and emotional indicators, namely 'confidence', 'well being', 'social interaction' and 'respect'. It was only on the indicators 'concentration' and 'HOTS', that they were outperformed by the infant classes. Although all settings dipped on 'independence', the two day cares still performed slightly better than their counterparts.

However it is important to note that these findings should be read with much caution and no generalisations regarding the quality of setting type can be drawn as the sample size is too small from which to make any conclusions.

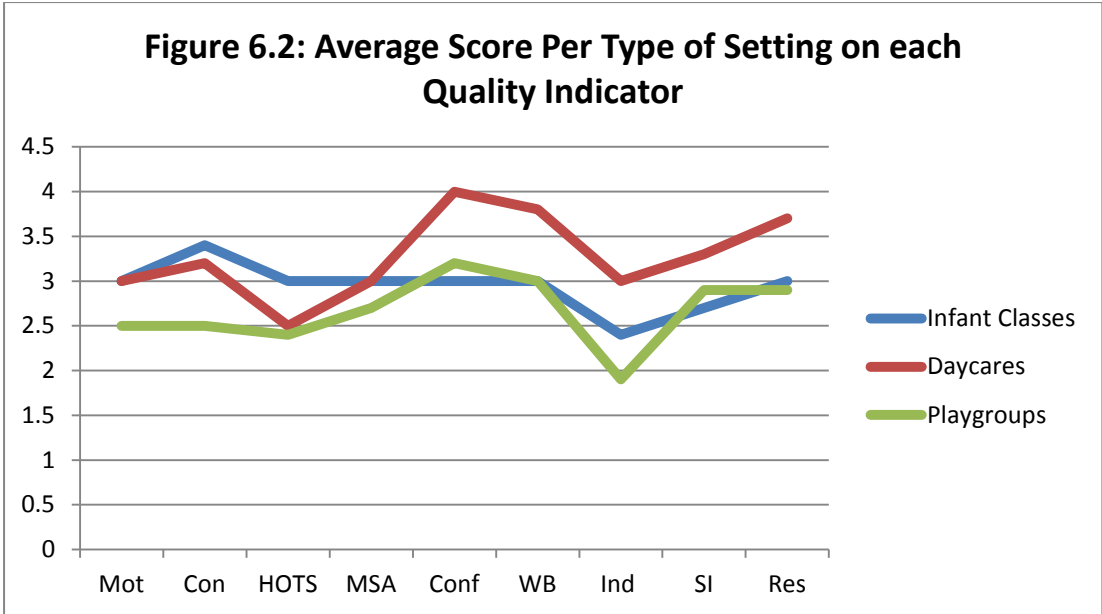
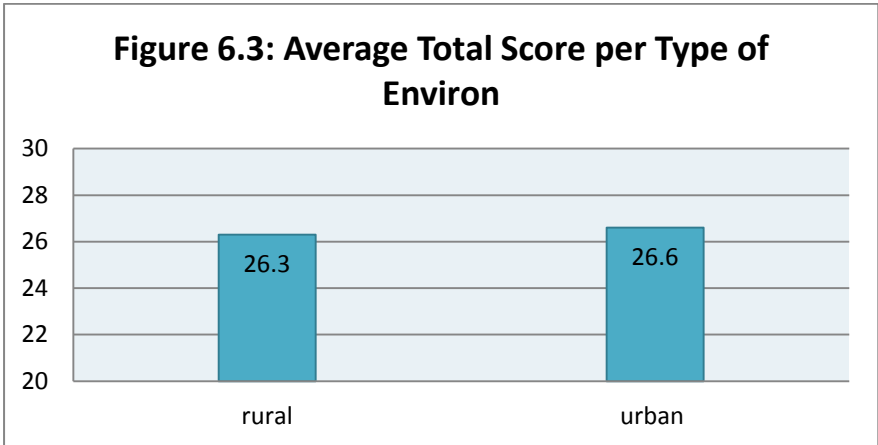


Figure 6.3 provides a further insight into the quality of the learning experience pre implementation according to the rural versus urban environs.

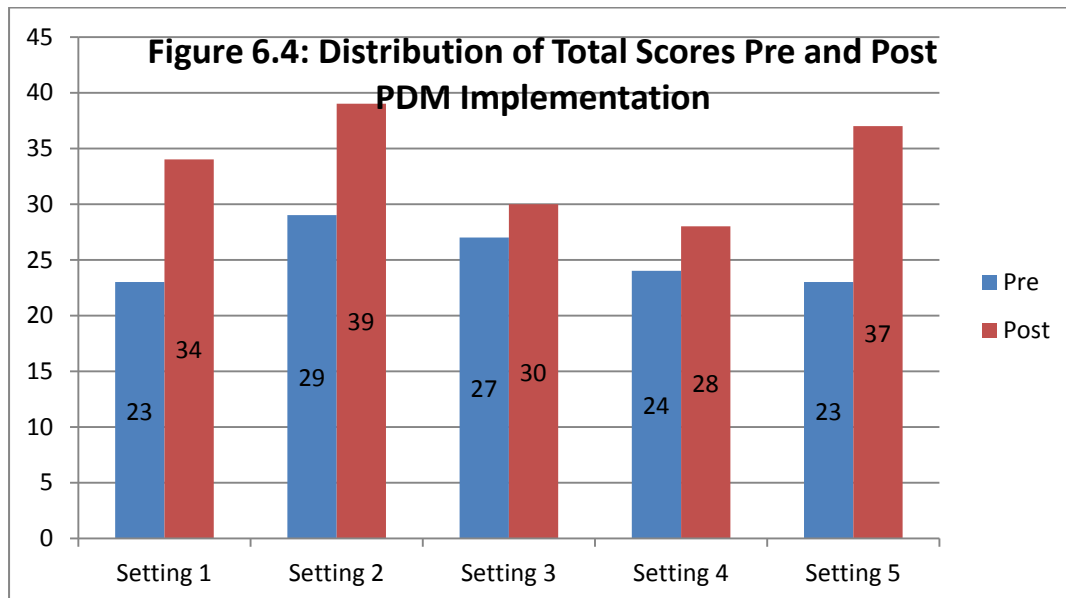


At pre implementation stage the findings would suggest that there is little to no difference between the average total scores of the settings when collated according to type of environmental background. Although, once again, the sample size is too small from which to draw any conclusions, but based on the six participating settings for this study, it could be argued that where the setting is located in terms of rural or urban locations impacts little on the quality of the learning experience.

6.5.2 Post PDM Implementation

Figure 6.4 demonstrates that after using the PDM for a period of approximately sixteen weeks, the quality of the learning experience improved across all five settings.

Unfortunately a final assessment did not take place in setting 6 as the team had to withdraw from the project due to extraneous circumstances.



The greatest improvement took place in setting 5, closely followed by settings 1 and 2.

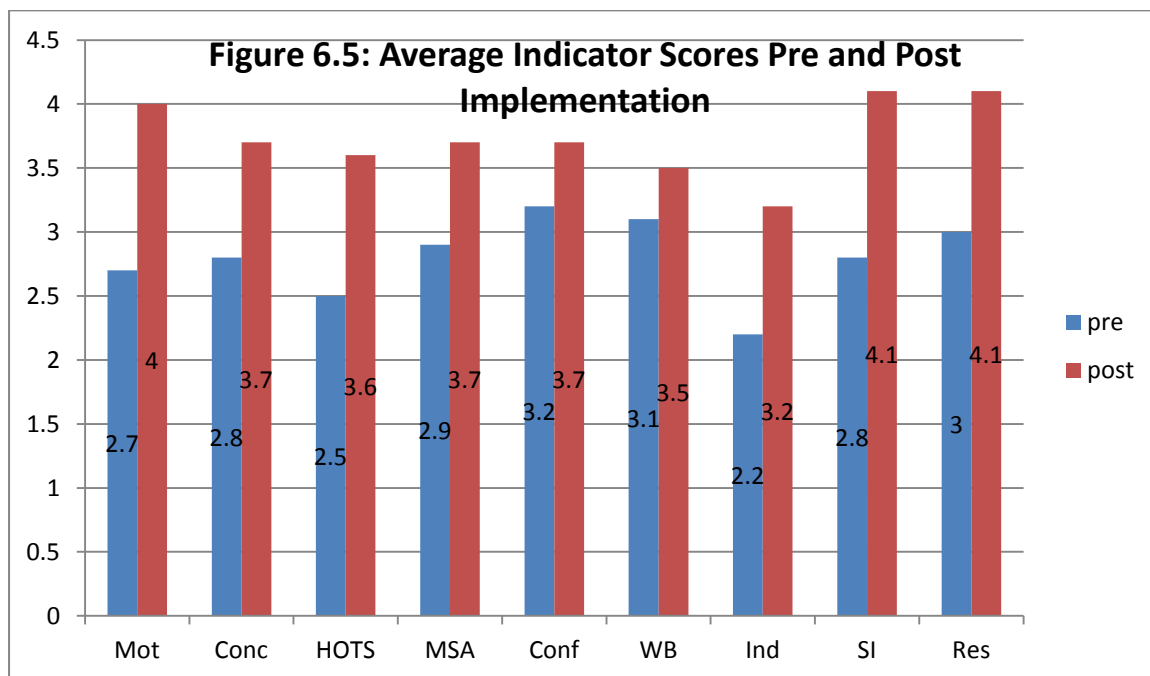
Perhaps the marked increase in total scores in settings 1 and 5 might be explained by the fact that their scores were lowest pre implementation and therefore had the greatest potential for improvement. On the contrary, however, this also would suggest that they had the farthest to go to improve and therefore the most work to undertake. Unlike settings 1 and 5, setting 2 in the pre implementation phase had scored second best but still improved by 10 points. Perhaps this increase might be explained by the fact that already the practitioner was undertaking a satisfactory job and showed good potential, just requiring a form of professional development such as the PDM to provide that additional help to enable the overall quality of the learning experience to be enhanced. Least improvement was found in settings 3 and 4, total scores increasing by 3 and 4 points respectively. The marginal increase perhaps was as a result of the suitability of the PDM dimension that the

practitioners decided to focus on or even the amount of time and effort that the staff invested in the implementation process.

The main message to be derived from figure 6.4, however, is that the quality of the learning experience increased to a greater or lesser extent after having used the PDM.

Average Quality Indicator Scores across all Settings Post Implementation

At post implementation phase all of the quality indicators from the QLI showed a higher average rating than at pre implementation stage as displayed in Figure 6.5.

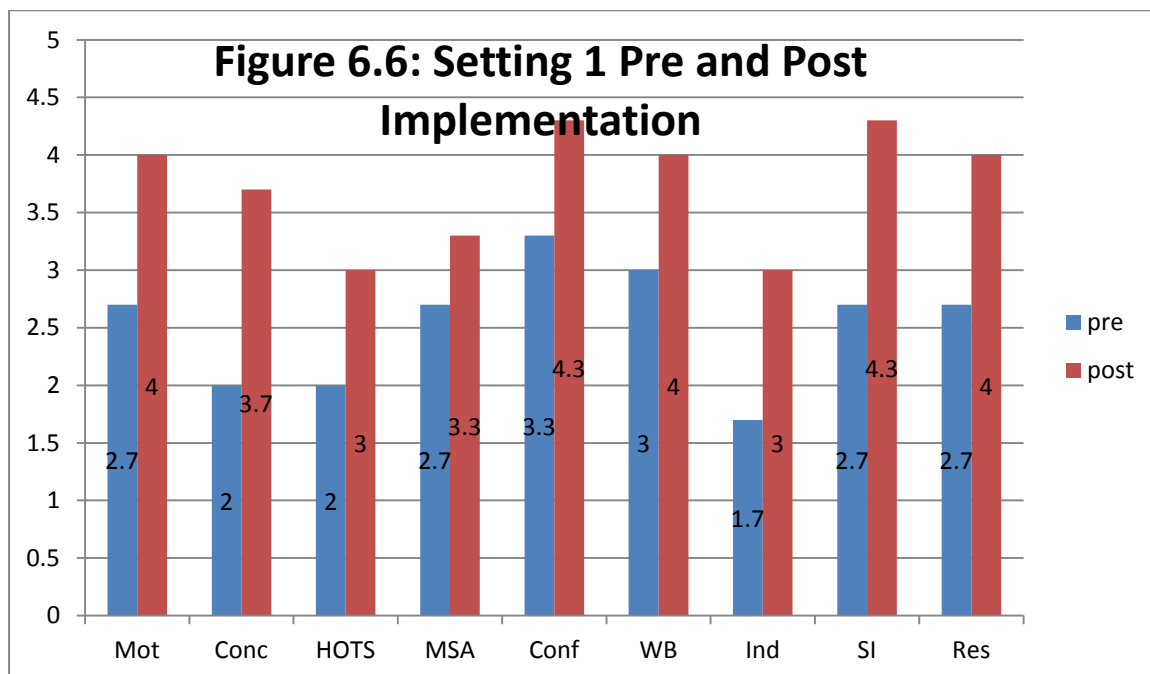


The indicators that showed the most improvement were ‘motivation’, ‘HOTS’, ‘independence’, ‘social interaction’ and ‘respect’, where average ratings all increased by more than 1 point. The principal reason why these particular indicators experienced such a pronounced improvement might be explained by the specific dimensions of the PDM that were focused on namely ‘Skilful Interactions’ (x 2 settings); ‘Nurturing Relationships’ (x2 settings) and ‘Collaborative Partnerships’ (x1 setting), where the emphasis lay principally in the cognitive, dispositional and social dimensions. Least improvement was apparent on the emotional indicators ‘confidence’ and ‘well being’ which might be illustrated by the fact that it was these indicators which scored highest in the pre implementation phase but it could

also be argued that the chosen dimensions of the PDM were embedded in an integrated pedagogical model, which moved beyond the physical element of caring for children, but rather accentuated the importance of nurturing children in an effort to enhance their educational experience.

Individual Settings Pre and Post Implementation

This sub section will look more closely at the changes resulting from the PDM implementation at a specific setting level across the nine quality indicators of the QLI.

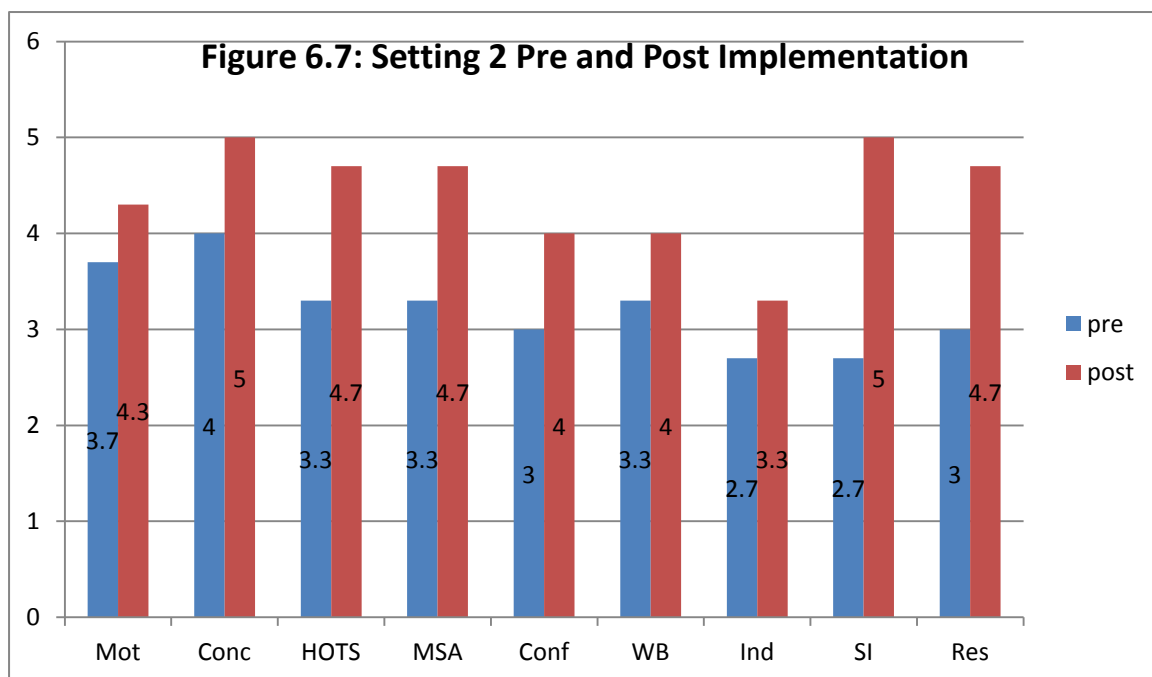


Setting 1, which focused on 'Nurturing Relationships', improved on all nine indicators, with marked improvements on 'concentration' (1.7 points), 'social interaction' (1.6 points) and 'motivation', 'independence' and 'respect' all increasing by 1.3 points. Improvement by 1 point also took place on 'HOTS', 'confidence' and 'well being', with least improvement (but still a respectable 0.6 point increase) on 'Multiple Skill Acquisition'. In this way it could be argued that substantial improvement was made across all aspects of the QLI, with greatest increase on the social and dispositional domains.

The observations would suggest that it was the more child-focused activities and overall child centred ethos that perhaps explained the change in scores. Originally Setting 1 had been quite teacher directed where little emphasis was placed on encouraging the children to interact with one another and develop collaborative working relationships. The post implementation phase observations revealed a greater degree of child agency in the setting, where children were allowed time to engage in more problem-solving activities and to develop these activities according to their own criteria, fully supported by the practitioners involved. In this way the children appeared to have greater ownership of their learning experience and their contributions were highly valued and welcomed. The following cameo helps illustrate this change in approach more fully:

Cameo 1:

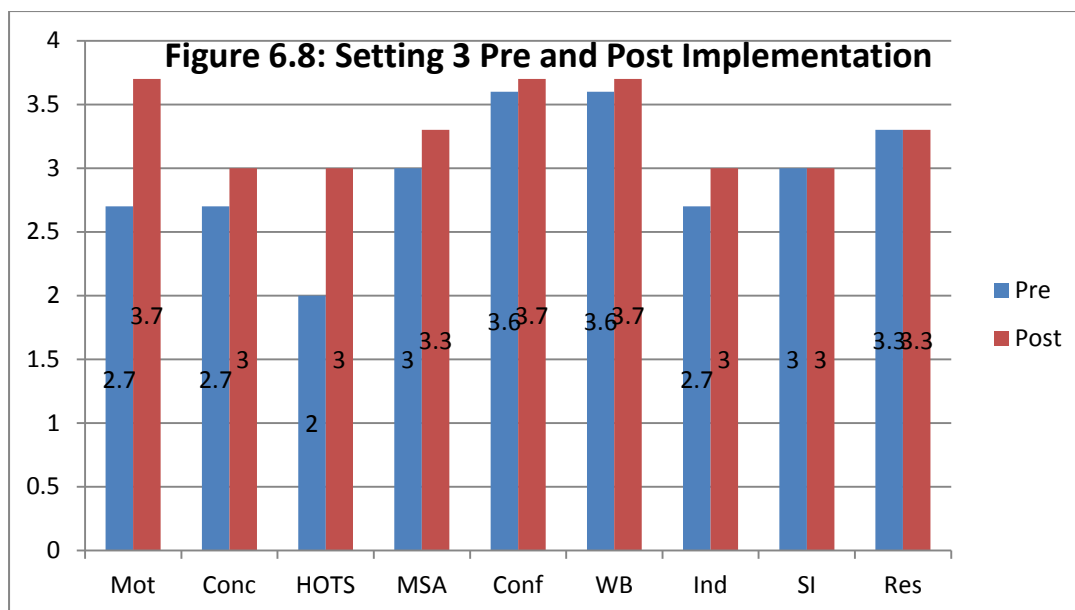
After lunch the children returned to their classroom to engage in a circle time activity. Each child was given the opportunity to express their favourite pastime activity and identify something in particular that makes them feel excited inside. An array of interesting responses were reported included going to the airport, eating out at McDonalds, attending a birthday party and having a sleepover at a friend's house. The teacher then showed the children a picture of a birthday present on the interactive whiteboard and the children were tasked with the opportunity of drawing what might be inside the birthday present. The children were encouraged to work together in small groups and to discuss their pictures with one another. The teacher would tune in appropriately to those individuals who needed additional support and on occasions would scaffold the learning opportunity by offering hints and suggestions as to how the drawings might be made more creative. The end results were of a high standard – much discussion arose and the drawings were intricate and imaginative. The activity culminated in a guessing game involving groups providing clues of what their pictures were and others posing questions until the answers were discovered.



Setting 2, also focusing on 'Nurturing Relationships', particularly between children, improved across all nine indicators, with pronounced improvement on social interaction, increasing by 2.3 points. Marked improvements also took place on 'respect' (1.7 points), and 'HOTS' and 'MSA', both increasing by 1.4 points. Further improvement was visible in 'concentration' and 'confidence', each increasing by one point, with least but still respectable improvement in 'well being', 'motivation' and 'independence' (increasing by 0.7, 0.6 and 0.6 points respectively). The observations suggest that like Setting 1, more responsibility was given to the children to interact with one another in group and pair work but in addition greater emphasis was placed on the adults stepping back and following the children's needs and interests. Cameo 2 provides further clarification of this change in pedagogical approach.

Cameo 2:

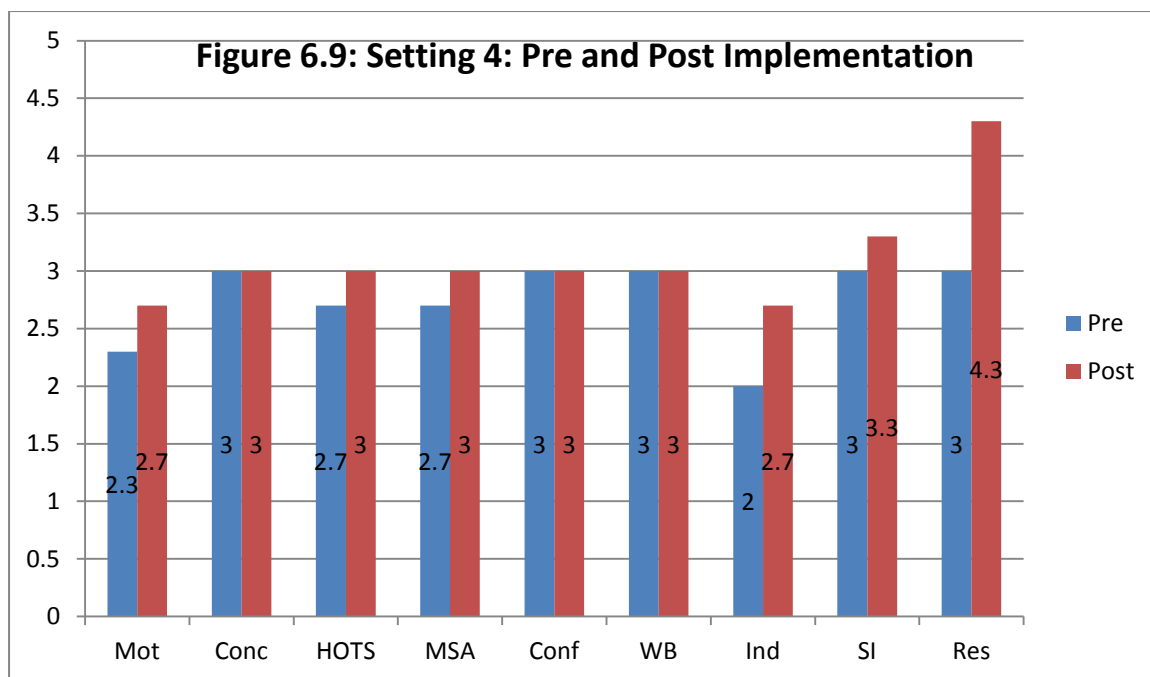
After a brief snack the majority of the children were playing outside. Some were on trikes, some were at the writing table, some on the climbing frame and others engaged in imaginative play. One little girl, Freya, was playing with a friend over in the corner of the play area with construction blocks. Using a wheel barrow the friend would bring blocks to and fro, whilst Freya was engrossed in building a complicated construction. Despite the noise around them and the opportunity to play on the trikes on several occasions, the two girls continued at their play for a period of at least 30 minutes. The playgroup leader, having observed the high quality play that was taking place and tuning into the fact that the children should not be interrupted, allowed the children to continue their play for at least 20 minutes before approaching the girls to ask some open questions about what they were doing. It transpired that the girls were engaged in building a school and inside they had a desk and some children as well as a teacher constructed. The girls were extremely proud of their effort and for this reason were very willing to discuss it more fully and explain to the practitioner what they were doing and why. The practitioner then developed the conversation in terms of their own soon experience of starting primary school and encouraged them to express their emotions about such an experience and to think more fully about what else they might see. After this discussion the girls continued to build for at least a further 10 minutes, adding a caretaker, a secretary and the school principal. They also included an inside and outside play area, perhaps highlighting their optimistic expectations for their future school experience.



Setting 3 focused on ‘Skilful Interactions’ which might help to explain the greatest increase on ‘HOTS’ and ‘motivation’, both increasing by 1 point. Other improvements were quite marginal, varying between 0.3-0.1 points and on ‘social interaction’ and ‘respect’ there was no increase at all. The observations support the improvements made on the grounds that staff were taking more time to tune into the children’s learning experience and to interact more appropriately with the children, in an effort to provide activities that were more stimulating, challenging and playful as displayed in cameo 3.

Cameo 3:

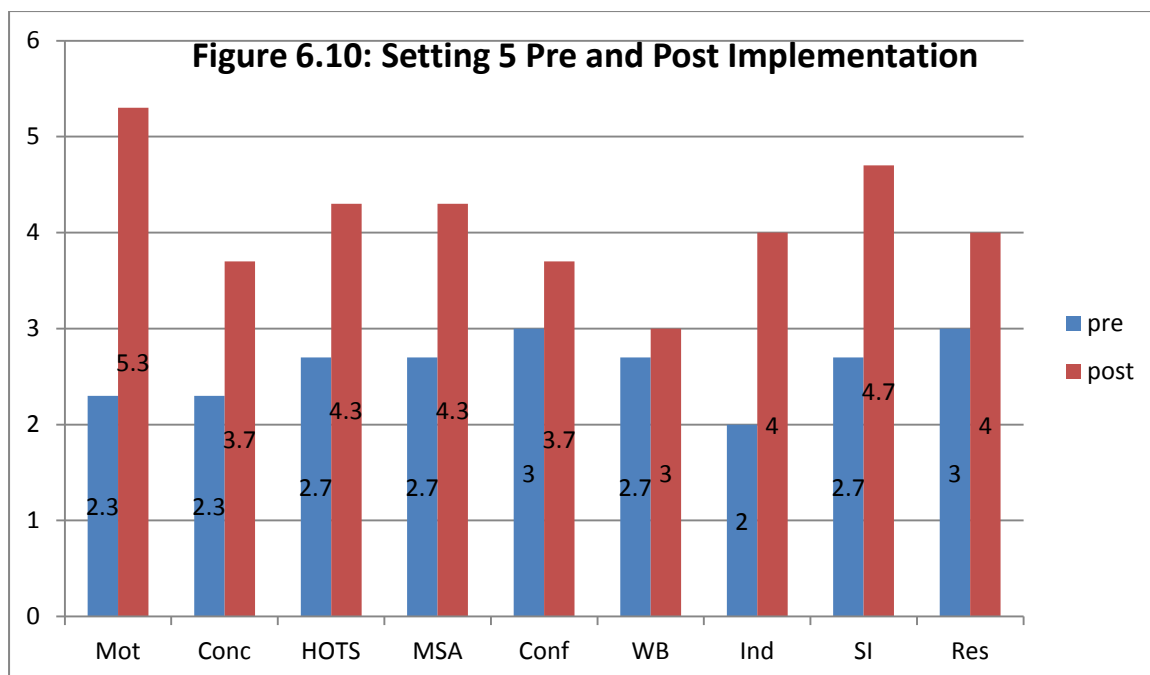
A large group of children were involved in playing a maths game. Each child had a picture of a flower with numbers on each petal and when their numbers were called they had to colour the appropriate petal. The activity was made more stimulating, however, as the practitioner used a large dice and it was a puppet that rolled it and called out the appropriate numbers. The practitioner, through the use of the puppet, provided much support and encouragement throughout the activity and added some digressions to the activity e.g. adding an additional dice to promote addition and discussion around smaller and larger numbers.



Setting 4 was the only setting to have chosen ‘Collaborative Partnerships’, where emphasis was placed on staff interacting more with the wider community and becoming more culturally aware and in turn children learning to respect and celebrate cultural difference. As the chosen area was so focused and particular, it is no surprise that the marked improvement was principally on the indicator ‘respect’ but with slight improvements also on the indicators independence (0.7), motivation (0.4), HOTS (0.3), MSA (0.3) and social interaction (0.3). Cameo 4 provides details of the focus placed on cultural awareness and respecting difference.

Cameo 4:

Using a puppet, named Becola who comes from Africa, the practitioner introduced a group of children to life as a 4 year old child in Africa. The children had already consulted a map of where Africa was as compared to Ireland and they then engaged in conversation about Becola, comparing how he compares with themselves. They discussed his dress and the need to be cool in Africa as the weather is so hot and the colour of his skin. One little girl went on to detail how she had seen African children on TV and how they had little food and water. The conversation then developed into the need to help others who are less fortunate. The practitioner then steered the discussion back to Africa and the food they eat and their way of life. African animals were also touched upon and the activity culminated in the reading of the story ‘Handa’s surprise’. Extension activities included an African family coming to the playgroup in their national dress and cooking an African meal with the children.

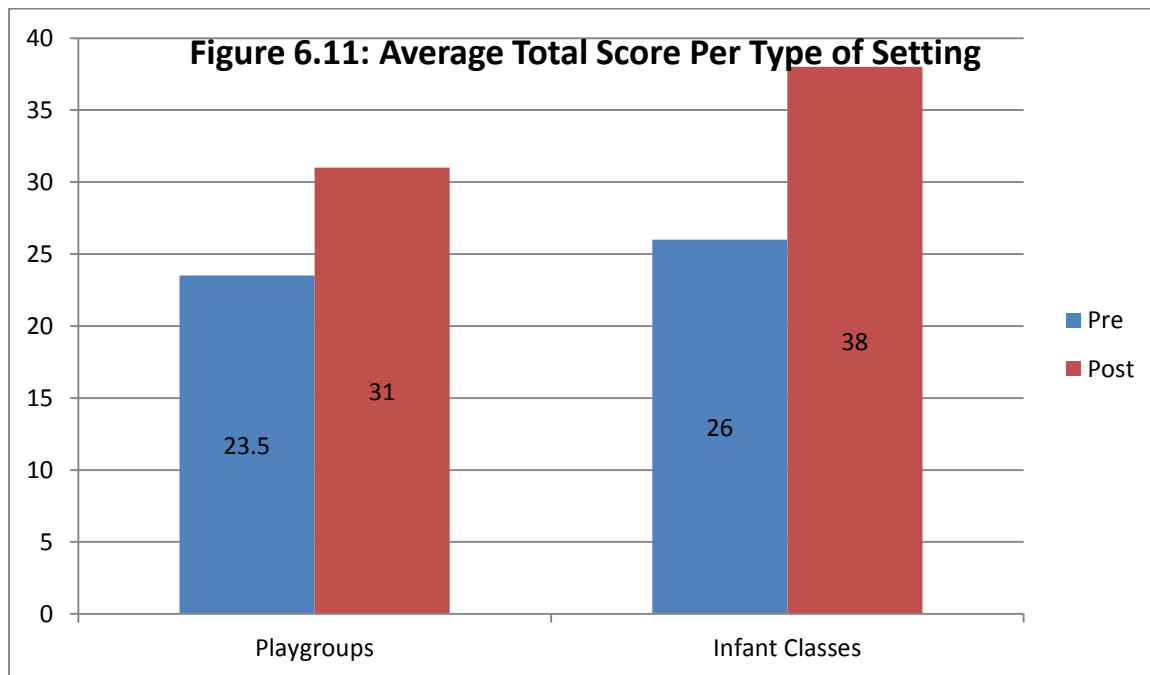


Although setting 5 focused principally on ‘Skilful Interactions’, aspects of ‘Playful and Engaging Activities’ were also apparent, explaining the substantial improvements made on seven out of the nine indicators. The greatest increases were gained on ‘motivation’, ‘independence’ and ‘social interaction’, all increasing by two points, explained by the fact that much more emphasis, according to the observations, was placed on providing more playful group based tasks that were stimulating and collaborative, with much opportunity for children to make their own decisions, use their own initiative and to solve problems. An example of the playful activities the children engaged in throughout the day and the more playful role the practitioner assumed is detailed in cameo 5.

Cameo 5

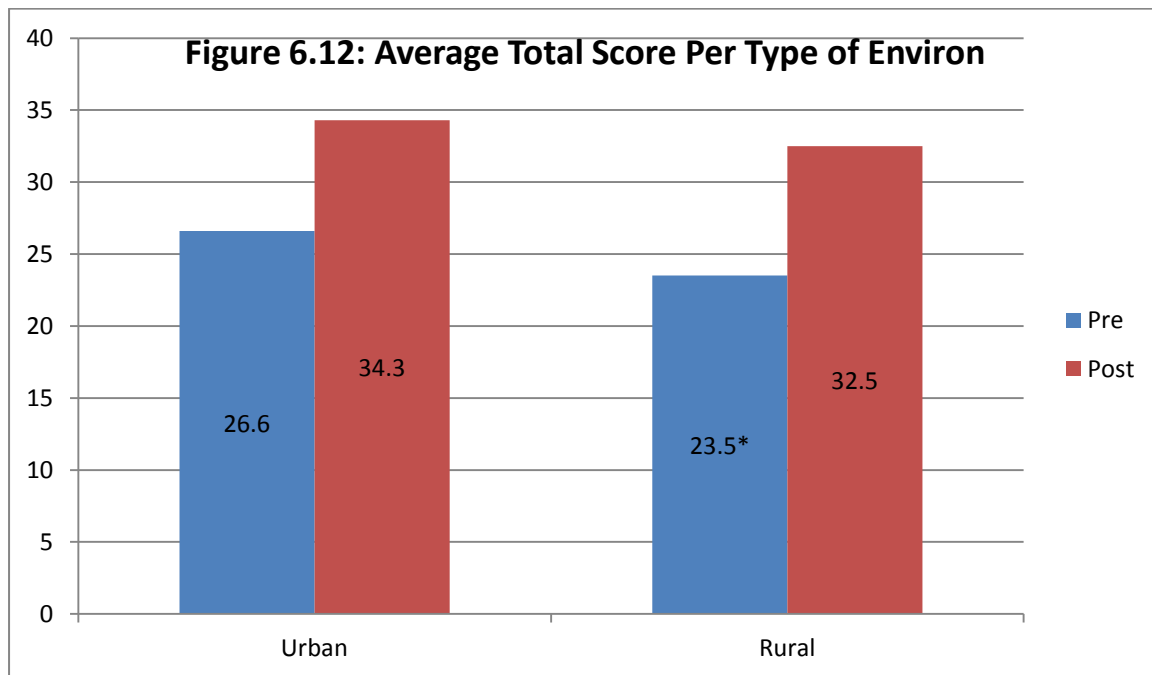
The practitioner returned from lunch dressed as a princess. She explained to the children that she was going for lunch with her friend Mother Goose in London when she discovered that London Bridge had fallen down. The children were encouraged to get into pairs, one as the princess and the other as Mother Goose to discuss how the problem could be rectified. The children were ecstatic and fully engrossed in the learning experience. After some time the children came together to highlight what their ideas were which included hiring a boat, putting on super boots and jumping, using a trampoline, calling upon the Fairy Godmother and building the bridge up again with extra strong cement. The practitioner then reads to them a letter she has received from Mother Goose and what they decided upon as the solution to the problem.

Average Total Score per Type of Setting Pre and Post Implementation



As the day cares could not be included, due to the Sligo day care not participating in the final QLI evaluation, a comparison could therefore only be made between the playgroups and infant classes. Although as already suggested, due to the small sample size, any interpretation made must be read with caution, the findings would suggest that the average total score of the infant classes increased more than that of the playgroups after using the PDM. Perhaps such a result might suggest that the professional knowledge and understanding already acquired by the infant teachers was such that they were ready to embrace a form of professional development such as the PDM, allowing them the flexibility to choose a dimension that was most appropriate to their situation. Unlike the playgroups which had a greater number of staff, the infant teachers had only to make the changes themselves and for this reason had no one else to get on board.

Average Total Scores per Type of Environ Pre and Post Implementation



*only two rural settings as third rural setting did not engage in final QLI evaluation.

Like the pre implementation phase, little difference was noted between the average total scores according to type of environ i.e. urban or rural. The fact that only two rural settings fully participated in the project as compared to three urban settings also prevents direct comparisons from being made. However it could be intimated that for the sample participating in this study, where the setting was positioned in terms of urban or rural setting appeared to impact little on the improved quality of the learning experience after using the PDM.

Average Total Score across the Four Settings for each Aspect of the Learning Triangle

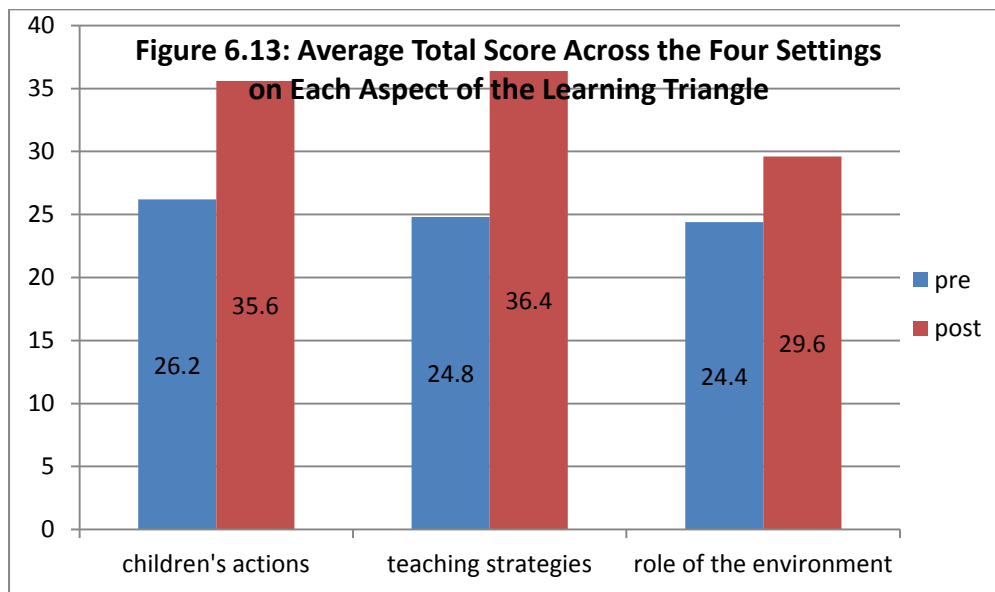


Figure 6.13 illustrates that the PDM seemed to have the greatest impact on the quality of the teaching strategies of the practitioners. The observations would support this finding where the greatest change encountered across most settings post PDM implementation was the role of the practitioners involved. In the settings which focused either on 'Nurturing Relationships' or 'Skilful Interactions' the practitioners appeared to have shifted their teaching style to adopt a more integrated pedagogical approach (to a greater or lesser extent). In the main a better balance between play and work based activities was observed, greater child agency and collaboration was allowed for and practitioners tuned in more appropriately to the learning experience.

Improvement was observed also in the quality of the children's actions but it is important to read this finding tentatively as some natural progression would have taken place as a result of the observations pre and post implementation spanning a period of six months. However the fact that the pedagogical approach had changed favourably to some extent in each of the settings would in turn also have impacted on the quality of the children's actions, supporting the feedback from the practitioners themselves.

It would seem from Figure 6.13 that the PDM had least impact on the learning environment but a marginal improvement was still encountered. The observations would support this finding in terms of the fact that little physical change was noted in each of the environments across the settings. It could be argued, however, that in those settings focusing on 'Nurturing Relationships', the environments had become a little more collaborative to encourage the children to interact with each other more fully.

6.6 SUMMARY OF CASE STUDY FINDINGS

Overall the findings from the case studies would suggest that each of the settings involved had found the PDM experience valuable and beneficial. In terms of the practitioners' perspective, they all expressed a willingness and eagerness to participate in the project and whilst the implementation process varied across all of the settings and different dimensions of the PDM were focussed upon, all in the end found the experience of using the PDM useful, both for the children and their own professional development. Some challenges were raised in terms of time and workload constraints and the difficulty of changing staff mindsets but the advantages of the experiences certainly appeared to outweigh the disadvantages. Although in the main the presentation and format of the PDM was praised, suggestions were offered for improvements in terms of making it live on the web and offering further training opportunities.

As for the learning experience, although all settings varied in terms of quality pre implementation of the PDM, the quality of the learning experience increased to a greater or lesser extent in all of the settings after using the PDM. The greatest improvement occurred on the cognitive, dispositional and social indicators of the QLI, in particular for those settings that focussed on 'Skilful Interactions' and 'Nurturing Relationships'. Overall the PDM appeared to have greatest impact on the teaching strategies that the practitioners were employing, where in the main practice shifted from quite a teacher-directed approach to allowing the children more time to interact with one another in activities that could be described as 'playful' in orientation i.e. a blend of play and work.

In some of the settings a marked improvement took place in the quality of the learning experience pre and post PDM implementation and although all of the success cannot be solely attributed to the PDM³, as one of the practitioners stated:

“The PDM provided me with the mechanism to begin to think about my own practice and to engage in some sound constructive criticism. By so doing I began to see what I wanted to improve on and the PDM provided me with the direction of where I wanted to go by degrees”.

In this way, it could be contended that the PDM injected a form of professionalisation into the practitioners involved, not only providing them with the professional knowledge and understanding of what effective EC pedagogy is, but also injecting in them the confidence and capacity to move beyond the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, to realising some of these pedagogical changes in practice.

³ As the implementation process lasted a period of 16 weeks, it is understandable that some natural progression would have taken place. However as the teaching strategies improved greatest over this course of time and as no other form of professional development was taking place during this 16 week period, it can be argued that the PDM must have had some impact on the positive changes occurring.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the evidence presented in this report i.e. both the literature and empirical evidence some general conclusions came to the fore.

7.1. The essence of effective pedagogy is embedded in an integrated model of early childhood education and care, where play and work are fully blended. Key dimensions of this model have been identified as 'playful and instructive activities', 'skilful interactions', 'nurturing relationships', 'structural framing', 'collaborative partnerships', 'professional knowledge and understanding' and 'reflection and evaluation'.

7.2. Early Years experts and professionals in the Republic of Ireland, in the main, perceive effective early childhood pedagogy as being play-based in perspective, supported by skilful professionals who know when and when not to intervene in the learning experience and who can develop warm and secure relationships with the children in their care. The importance of a well educated professional who can engage in critique was also identified as significant.

7.3 The nature and effectiveness of Early Years pedagogy in the Republic of Ireland, according to the experts and professionals, does not as yet fully embrace this aspiration, where lack of adequate funding, lack of recognised professionalism, lack of appropriate training, lack of leadership and cohesion all act as constraints to effective pedagogy being realised in practice. The need to change traditional mindsets about the value of play was also clearly articulated.

7.4 The PDM experience was perceived as valuable by all concerned and its overarching impact appeared, to a greater or lesser extent, to be positive in all involved settings.

7.5 Key recommendations arising from interviews with key stakeholders, focus groups with Early Years practitioners and Early Years audit:

- Enhanced funding for the Early Years sector;
 - Broaden Inspectorate personnel to include professionals from both health and education sectors;
 - Inspection process to encourage open communication about quality pedagogy;
 - Implementation of a minimum qualification for Early Years staff; and
 - Increase quality of working conditions for practitioners – e.g. increase pay, decrease staff turnover, reduce class sizes etc.
-
- Enhance professional status;
 - Early Years settings should be led by qualified professionals;
 - Need for good quality initial and in-service training opportunities for practitioners;
 - Training resources should meet the needs of a developing profession.
-
- Increase support for practitioners working with the younger age group i.e. 0-3 years;
 - Provide classroom assistance scheme in infant classes;
 - Develop system of special educational needs support across the Early Years sector
-
- Maintain and further develop open access to training across the Early Years sector
 - Focus on play-based pedagogy in Early Years training courses at all levels

7.6 Recommendations arising from case studies of settings where the PDM was implemented.

Dissemination of PDM:

- Publication of PDM in user friendly format – e.g. ring binder, laminated cards, colour coded sections etc.;
- Distribution of copies to Early Years settings and organisations throughout Ireland;

Development of web based PDM material:

- Website Construction and Maintenance – ensuring ongoing access to web based sources cited in the PDM;
- Online network / discussion forums;
- Web based seminars;
- Live links to Aistear and Síolta;
- Video cameos of practitioners using the PDM;
- ‘Talking heads’ – professional discussions based on PDM topics;

Training:

- Summer school workshops for practitioners;
- Continuing professional support system – e.g. regional field officers; and
- Application of PDM to existing training courses – e.g. Initial Teacher Training, FETAC, Early Childhood Studies degrees.

8. References

Adams, S.; Alexander, E.; Drummond, M. J. & Moyles, J (2004) *Inside the Foundation Stage: Recreating the Reception Year: Final Report*. The Association of Teachers and Lecturers.

Alexander, R. (2009) *Children, Their World, Their Education: Final Report and Recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*. Oxford: Routledge.

Anning, A., Cullen, J., & Fler, M. (Eds). (2004) *Early Childhood Education: Society and Culture*. London: Sage.

Arnett, J. (1989) Caregivers in Day-care Centres: Does Training Matter?, *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 10, pp. 541-552.

Barnett, W. S. (1995) Long-term Effects of Early Childhood Programs on Cognitive and School Outcomes. *The Future of Children*, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 25-50.

Barnett, W. S., Jung, K., Yarosz, D.J., Thomas, J., Hornbeck, A., Stechuk, R & Burns, S. (2008) Educational Effects of Tools of the Mind Curriculum: A Randomized Trial. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Vol. 23, pp. 299-313.

Becker, W. C and Gersten, R. (1982) A Follow-Up of Follow Through: Meta-Analysis of the Later Effects of the Direct Instruction Model, *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 19, pp. 75-93.

Bennett, J. (2005) Curriculum Issues in National Policy-Making, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, Volume 13, Issue 2, pp. 5 – 23.

Bennett, N., Wood, L., & Rogers, S. (1997) *Teaching through Play: Teachers' Thinking and Classroom Practice*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

BERA (British Educational Research Association Early Years Special Interest Group) (2003) *Early Years Research: Pedagogy, Curriculum and Adult Roles, Training and Professionalism*. Available at <http://www.bera.ac.uk/files/2008/09/beraearlyyearsreview31may03.pdf>, (last accessed Feb, 2010).

Bertram, T. & Pascal, C. (2002) *Early Years Education: An International Perspective*. London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

Birch, S. and Ladd, G. (1997) The Teacher-Child Relationship and Children's Early School Adjustment, *Journal of School Psychology*, Vol. 35, pp. 61-79.

Bodrova, E., & Leong, D. J. (2001) *Tools of the Mind: A Case Study of Implementing the Vygotskian Approach in American Early Childhood and Primary Classrooms*. Geneva, Switzerland: UNESCO International Bureau of Education.

Bowman, B. T., Donovan, M. S., & Burns, M. S. (eds.) (2001) *Eager to learn: Educating our Preschoolers*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Brierley, J. (1994) *Give me a Child until he is Seven: Brain Studies and Early Education*. London: Falmer.

Brock, A. (2009) Curriculum and Pedagogy of Play: a Multitude of Perspectives in Brock, A.; Dodds, S.; Jarvis, P. & Olusoga, Y. (eds.) *Perspectives on Play: Learning for Life*. London: Pearson.

Broström, S. (1995) Education, Motivation for Learning and Social Competence of 6-Year-Olds in Kindergarten in Denmark and the United States, *Child and Youth Care Forum*, Vol. 24, No. 2.

Broström, S. (1998) Kindergarten in Denmark and the USA, *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, Vol. 42, No. 2, pp. 109-122.

Broström, S. (2007) Transitions in Children's Thinking. In Dunlop A., & Fabian H. (eds.), *Informing Transitions in the Early Years: Research, Policy and Practice*. (pp. 61-73). Maidenhead, England: Open University Press.

Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2004) *Talking about Quality - a Report of a Consultation Process on Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.

Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2005a) *Insights on Quality - a National Review of Policy, Research and Practice in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland 1990 to present*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.

Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2005b). *Making Connections - a Review of International Policies, Practices and Research relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.

Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) (2006) *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*. Dublin: Centre of Early Childhood Development and Education.

Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education. (2005c) *Early Childhood in Ireland – Evidence and Perspectives*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.

Claxton, G. (2000) The Anatomy of Intuition in Atkinson, T. And Claxton, G. (eds.), *The Intuitive Practitioner*. Buckingham: OUP.

Clouder, C. (2003) The Push for Early Childhood Literacy: a View from Europe, *Research Bulletin*, published by the Research Institute for Waldorf Education, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp 46-52.

Copple, C. & Bredekamp, S. (2009) *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*, 3rd edition. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

Department of Education and Science (1999) *Ready to Learn: The White Paper on Early Childhood Education*. Dublin: the Stationery Office

DeVries, R., Reese-Learned, H. and Morgan, P. (1991) Sociomoral Development in Direct Instruction, Eclectic and Constructivist Kindergartens: A Study of Children's Enacted Interpersonal Understanding, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Vol. 6, pp. 473-517.

Dockett, S., Perry, B. Campbell, H., Hard, L. Kearney, E. & Taffe, R. (2007) *Early Years learning and curriculum: Reconceptualising reception continuity of learning*. Adelaide: Office of Early Childhood and Statewide Service, Department of Education and Children's Services.

Duffy, D., Fitz Gerald, J., Kearney, I. and Smyth, D. (1999) *Medium-Term Review 1999-2005* Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute.

Duignan, M. (2005) Talking about Quality: Report of a Consultation Process on Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland, *Child Care in Practice*, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 211 – 230.

Dunkin, D. & Hanna, P. (2001) *Thinking Together: Quality Child Interactions*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research. ISBN 1-877140-86-4.

Dunphy, L. (2008) Developing Pedagogy in Infant Classes in Primary Schools in Ireland': Learning from Research, *Irish Educational Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 55-70.

Dyson, A. H. (1990) Weaving Possibilities: Rethinking Metaphors for Early Literacy Development, *The Reading Teacher*, Vol. 44, No. 3, pp. 202-213.

Engelmann, S., Becker, W., Carnine, D. and Gersten, R. (1988) The Direct Instruction follow Through Model: Design and Outcomes, *Education and Treatment of Children*, Vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 303-307.

Fallon, J. (2005) Targeting Disadvantage among Young Children in the Republic of Ireland: An Overview, *Child Care in Practice*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 289-311.

Farquhar, S. (2003) *Quality Teaching: Early Foundations Best Evidence Synthesis*. Wellington: Child Forum Research Network. Prepared for the New Zealand Ministry of Education.

Frede, E. and Barnett, W. S. (1992) Developmentally Appropriate Public School Preschool: A Study of Implementation of the High/Scope Curriculum and Its Effects on disadvantaged Children's Skills at First Grade, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Vol. 7, pp. 483-499.

French, G. (2007) *Children's Early Learning and Development: The Framework for Early Learning*, Research paper, NCCA.

Fumoto, H.; Hargreaves, D. J. & Maxwell, S. (2004) The Concept of Teaching: a Reappraisal, *Early Years*, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 179-191.

Goouch, K (2008) Understanding Playful Pedagogies, Play Narratives and Play Spaces. *Early Years*, Vol. 28, No.1, pp. 93-102.

Greenfield, S. (2000) *The Private Life of the Brain*. London: Penguin.

Hadeed, J. and Sylva, K. (1996) The Effects of Educational or Care Orientation in Day Care on Children's Developmental Progress in Bahrain, *ERIC Document*, Washington: EDRS (ED 397 979).

Harms, T. and Clifford, R. (1980) *The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Harms, T, Clifford, R. and Cryer, D. (1998) *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Revised*. London: Teachers College Press.

Hart, C. H., Burts, D. C., Durland, M. A., Charlesworth, R., DeWolf, M. and Fleege, P. O. (1998) Stress Behaviours and Activity Type Participation of Pre-schoolers in More and Less Developmentally Appropriate Classrooms: SES and SES Differences, *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 176-196.

Hayes, N. (2007) *Perspectives on the Relationship between Education and Care in Early childhood. The Framework for Early Learning*, Research paper, NCCA.

Hayes, N. (2008) Teaching Matters in Early Educational Practice: the Case for a Nurturing Pedagogy, *Early Education and Development*, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp 430-440.

Hayes, N. (2010) Childcare? Early Childhood Education and Care? Towards an Integrated Early Years Policy for Young Children in Ireland, *Early Years*, Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 67-78.

Hayes, N. and Kernan, M. (2008) *Engaging Young Children: a Nurturing Pedagogy*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.

Hayes, N. and Bradley, S. (Eds.) (2006) *Early Childhood Education and Care: a Decade of Reflection: 1996-2006*. Proceedings of the CSER Early Childhood Education and Care Seminar DIT, CSER, Dublin.

Hedges, H., & Cullen, J. (2005) Meaningful Teaching and Learning: Children's and Teachers' Content Knowledge. *ACE Papers*, 16, 2009-04-24.

Heckman, J. (2000) Policies to Foster Human Capital, *Research in Economics*, Vol.54, pp. 3-56.

Hedges, H. (2003). Avoiding “Magical” Thinking in Children: The Case for Teachers’ Science Subject Knowledge, *Early Childhood Folio*, Vol. 7, pp. 2-7.

Hennessy, E. and Hayes, N. (1997) Early Childhood Services in Ireland, *International Journal of Early Years Education*, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 211 – 224.

Hirsh-Pasek, K., Hyson, M. C. and Rescorla, L. (1990) Academic Environments in Preschool: Do they Pressure or Challenge Young Children, *Early Education and Development*, Vol. 1, No. 6, pp. 401-423.

Horgan, M. and Douglas, F. (1995) Early Years Education in Germany and Ireland - A Study of Provision and Curricular Implementation in Two Unique Environments, *International Journal of Early Years Education*, Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 51-67.

Howard, J. and Westcott, M. (2007) Research into Practice. Creating a Playful Classroom Environment, *Psychology of Education Review*, Vol. 31, No. 1, pp. 27-33.

Howes, C. and Smith, E. (1995) Children and their Childcare Teachers: Profile of Relationships, *Social Development*, Vol. 4, pp. 44-61.

Howes, C., Phillipsen, L. and Peisner-Feinberg, E. (2000) The Consistency of Perceived Teacher-Child Relationships between Pre-school and Kindergarten, *Journal of School Psychology*, Vol. 38, No. 2, pp. 113-132.

Ireland (2000) *Our Children – Our Lives: The National Children’s Strategy*. Dublin: Government Stationery Office.

Katz, L. (1995) *Talks with Teachers of Young Children*. New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Co operation.

Kernan M. (2007) *Play as a Context for Early Learning and Development. The Framework for Early Learning*, Research paper. Dublin, NCCA.

Kernan, M. and O’Kane, M. (2006) Pre-school Regulation in Ireland: Learning from the Past to Improve Young Children’s Everyday Lives in Early Childhood Care and Education Services. *Irish Educational Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 171-185.

Kessler, S., & Hauser, M. (2000) Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Play, in Soto L. (ed.), *The Politics of Early Childhood Education* (pp. 59–71). New York: Peter Lang.

Kiernan, G. and Walsh, T. (2004) *The Changing Nature of Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland*. *Irish Educational Studies*, Vol. 23, No.2, 1 -18.

Kilderry, A. (2004) Critical Pedagogy: a Useful Framework for Thinking about Early Childhood Curriculum, *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, Vol. 29, No. 4, pp. 33-37.

Laevers F. (1993) Deep Level Learning: An Exemplary Application on the Area of Physical

Knowledge, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp 53-68.

Laevers, F. (2000) Forward to Basics! Deep-level Learning and the Experiential Approach, *Early Years*, Vol. 20, 20-29.

Lazar, I. and Darlington, R. (1982) Lasting Effects of Early Education: A Report from the Consortium for Longitudinal Studies, *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, Vol. 4, pp. 2-3.

Mahony, K. and Hayes, N. (2006) *In Search of Quality: Multiple Perspectives*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.

Marcon, R. A. (1992) Differential Effects of Three Preschool Models on Inner-City 4-Year Olds, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Vol. 7, pp. 517-530.

Marcon, R.A. (2002) Moving up the Grades: Relationship between Preschool Model and Later School Success, *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, Vol. 14, No. 4.

Mashburn, A. and Pianta, R. (2006) Social Relationships and School Readiness. *Early Education and Development*, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 151-176.

McMillan D.J. (2008) *Education and Care: Implications for Educare Training in Northern Ireland*. Queen's University, Belfast: Unpublished PhD Thesis.

McGuinness, C.; Sproule, L.; Trew, K. & Walsh, G. (2009) *The Early Years Enriched Curriculum Evaluation Project (EYECEP). End of Phase 2, Report 1: Overview: Evaluation Strategy and Curriculum Implementation*. Report produced for Northern Ireland Council for Curriculum Assessment and Examinations. Belfast: CCEA.

McGuinness, C., Sproule, L., Walsh, G. & Trew, K (2010) *EYECEP: Report 2. Inside EC Classrooms and Schools: Children, Teachers and School Principals*. Belfast: CCEA.

Melhuish, E.C. (2004) *A Literature Review of the Impact of Early Years Provision on Young Children, with Emphasis given to Children from Disadvantaged Backgrounds*. London: the National Audit Office.

Melhuish, E.C.; Quinn, L.; Hanna, K.; Sylva, K.; Sammons, P.; Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Taggart, B. (2006) *Effective Preschool Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) Summary Report No. 41*. Belfast: DENI.

Meyer, L. (1984) Long Term Academic Effects of the Direct Instruction Project Follow Through, *Elementary School Journal*, Vol. 84, pp. 380-394.

Miller, L. B. and Dyer, J. L. (1975) Four Preschool Programmes: their Dimensions and Effects, *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, Vol., 40, pp. 1-164.

Moyles, J. Adams, S & Musgrave, J (2002) Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning. London: DfES. Available on-line: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/> (last accessed Feb, 2010).

Murphy, B. (2004) *Practice in Irish Infant Classrooms in the Context of the Irish Primary School curriculum (1999): Insights from a Study of Curriculum Implementation*, *International Journal of Early Years Education*, Vol. 12, No.3, 245 -257.

Nabuco, M. and Sylva, K. (1995) Comparisons between ECERS Ratings of Individual Preschool Centres and the Results of Target Child Observations: Do They Match or Do They Differ?, *Paper presented to the 5th European Conference on Quality in Education*, Paris.

NAEYC (2009) *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*. National Association for the Education of Young Children position statement. Available at <http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/PSDAP.pdf> (last accessed, June 2010).

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2004) *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*. Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009) *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, Dublin — <http://www.ncca.ie/earlylearning> (last accessed June 2010).

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development - OECD (2001) *Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD Publications.

OECD (2004) *OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland*. Dublin: the Stationery Office.

OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD Publications.

Osborn, A. F. and Milbank J. E. (1987) *The Effects of Early Education* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Osborn, A., Butler, N. and Morris, A., (1984) *The Social Life of Britain's Five-Year- Olds*. London: Routledge and Kagan Paul.

Pinkerton, D. (1990) Four-Year-Olds in Primary Schools in Northern Ireland, *Oideas*, Vol. 36, pp. 42-47.

POST (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology) (2000) POST Report 140, *Early Years Learning*. London: www.parliament.uk/post/pn140.pdf, (last accessed Jan 2010).

Ramey, S. L. & Ramey, C.T. (2004) *Early Learning and School Readiness: Can Early Intervention Make a Difference?*, Merrill-Palmer Quarterly - Volume 50, Number 4, October 2004, pp. 471-491.

Riley, J. (2007) The Child, the Context and Early Childhood Education in Riley, J. (ed.) *Learning in the Early Years 3-7*. London: Sage.

Rolfe, H. (2005) Building a Stable Workforce: Recruitment and Retention in the Childcare and Early Years Sector, *Children & Society*, Vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 1-17.

Rolfe, H. (2006) Where are the Men? Gender Segregation in the Childcare and Early Years Sector. London: *National Institute Economic Review*.

Schweinhart, L. J., & Weikart, D. P. (1997) The High/Scope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study through age 23. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 12, 117-143.

Schweinhart, L., Weikart, D. and Larner, M. (1986) Consequences of Three Preschool Curriculum Models through Age 15, *Early Education Research Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 15-36.

Sharp, C. (2002) School Starting Age: European Policy and Recent Research. Paper presented at the LGA Seminar 'When Should Our Children Start School', <http://www.nfer.co.uk/nfer/publications/44410/44410.pdf> (last accessed Jan 2010).

Sheridan, S. (2007) Dimensions of Pedagogical Quality in Preschool, *International Journal of Early Years Education*, Volume 15, Issue 2 June 2007, pages 197 - 217.

Shulman, L. (1999) Taking Learning Seriously, *Change*, Vol. 31, NO. 4, pp. 11-17.

Sims, M & Hutchins, T (2001) Transition to Child Care for Children from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds, *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, Vol. 26, No. 3, pp 7 – 11.

Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Manni, L. (2007) *Effective Leadership in the Early Years Sector (ELEYS) Study*. University of London: Institute of Education.

Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Sylva, K. (2004) Researching Pedagogy in English Preschools. *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 5, pp. 713-730.

Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Muttock, S., Gilden, R. & Bell, D. (2002) *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY)*. Research Report Number 356, Department of Education and Skills. London: HMSO. Available on-line: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR356.pdf> (last accessed June 2010).

Stephen, C. (2006) *Early Years Education: Perspectives from a Review of the International Literature*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive Education Department.

Stephen, C. (2010) Pedagogy: the Silent Partner in Early Years Learning. *Early Years*, Vol. 30 No. 1, pp. 1-14.

Stipek, D., Feiler, R. Daniels, D. and Milburn, S. (1995) Effects of Different Instructional Approaches on Young Children's Achievement and Motivation, *Child Development*, Vol. 66, pp. 209-223.

Sylva, K and Nabuco, M. E. (1996) Children's Learning in Day Care: How Shall We Study It?, *Paper Presented at the ISSBD International Conference of Behavioural Development, XIVth Biennial Meeting*, Quebec City, Canada.

Sylva, K., Melhuish, E. C., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Taggart, B. (2004) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Technical Paper 12 - The Final Report: Effective Pre-School Education*. London: DfES / Institute of Education, University of London.

Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P. and Siraj-Blatchford, I. (1997) Effective Provision of Preschool Education, *Unpublished Paper*, London: Institute of Education, University of London.

Sylwester, R. (1995) *A Celebration of Neurons*. Alexander, VA: ASCD.

Tietze, W., Cryer, D., Bairrao, J., Palacios, J. and Wetzel, G. (1996) Comparisons of Observed Process Quality in Early Childcare and Education Programs in Five Countries, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Vol. 11, pp. 447-475.

Van Horn, L. M & Ramey, S. L. (2003) The Effects of Developmentally Appropriate Practices on Academic Outcomes Among Former Head Start Students and Classmates, Grades 1–3, *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, pp. 961-990.

Van Oers, B. (1996) Are You Sure? The Promotion of Mathematical Thinking in the Play Activities of Young Children, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, Vol. 4, pp. 71-89.

Van Oers, B. (2003) Learning Resources in the Context of Play: Promoting Effective Learning in Early Childhood. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 7-26.

Walsh, G. & Gardner, J. (2005) Assessing the quality of Early Years learning environments, *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, Vol. 7, No. 1. Available online at: <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v7n1/walsh.html> (accessed 12 May 2009).

Walsh, G. (2000) *The Play versus Formal Debate: a Study of Early Years Provision in Northern Ireland and Denmark*. QUB: Unpublished Thesis.

Walsh, G., McGuinness, C., Sproule, L., Trew, K. (2010) Implementing a Play-based and Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum in Northern Ireland Primary Schools: What Lessons have we Learned?, *Early Years*, Vol. 30, No. 1, pp53-66.

Walsh, G., Sproule, L., McGuinness, C., Trew, K. (in press) *Playful Structure: Six Pillars of Developmentally Appropriate Practice*. Belfast: CCEA.

Walsh, G. & Gardner, J. (2006) Teachers' Readiness to Embrace Change in the Early Years of Schooling, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp 127-140.

Walsh, G., Sproule, L., McGuinness, C., Trew, K., Rafferty, H., & Sheehy, N. (2006) An Appropriate Curriculum for 4-5-year-old Children in Northern Ireland: Comparing Play-based and Formal Approaches. *Early Years*, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 201-221.

Walsh, G.; Murphy, P.; Dunbar, C. (2007) *Thinking Skills in the Early Years: a Guide for Practitioners*. Belfast: CCEA.

Walsh, T. (2005) *Constructions of Childhood in Ireland in the Twentieth Century: A View from the Primary School Curriculum 1900-1999*, *Child Care in Practice*, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 253 – 269.

Watkins, C and Mortimore, P (1999) Pedagogy: What Do We Know? in Mortimore, P. (ed.) *Understanding Pedagogy and its Impact on Learning*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing, pp. 1-19.

Weikart, D. (2000) *Early Childhood Education: Needs and Opportunity*, Paris, UNESCO: International Institute for Educational Planning.

Weisberg, P. (1988) Direct Instruction in the Preschool, *Education and Treatment of Children*, Vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 349-363.

Wood, E. (2007a) Reconceptualising Child-Centred Education: Contemporary Directions in Policy, Theory and Practice in Early Childhood. *Forum*, Vol. 49, No. 1, pp. 119-133.

Wood, E. (2007b) New Directions in Play: Consensus or Collision? *International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education 3-13*, Vol. 35, No. 4, pp. 309-320.

Wood, E. (2004) Developing a Pedagogy of Play. In A. Anning, J. Cullen & M. Flear (Eds.) *Early Childhood Education: Society and Culture* (pp. 19-30). London: Sage Publications.

Wylie, C., Thompson, J., & Lythe, C. (1999) *Competent Children at 8, Families, Early Education and Schools*, Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER).

Wylie, C. & Hodgen, E. (2007) *The Continuing Contribution of Early Childhood Education to Young People's Competency Levels*. Wellington: NZCER.

Wylie, C. (2001) *Ten Year Old and Competent – the Fourth Stage of the Competent Children Project: a Summary of the Findings*. Wellington: NZCER.

Wylie, C.; Hodgen, E.; Hipkins, R. & Vaughan, K. (2009) *Competent Learners on the Edge of Adulthood: A Summary of Key Findings from the Competent Learners @ 16 Project*. Wellington: NZCER.