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Changing lives through Action Research

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Collaborative Action Research Network

CONTENTS

<u>Introduction</u>	1
<i>Dr Josephine Bleach on behalf of the National College of Ireland Organising Committee</i>	
<u>Conference Papers</u>	
Parenting 365: A family-centred support programme for children with developmental delay and additional needs	3
<i>Jennifer O'Neill, Sonya Goulding & Alexandra Alcalá</i> <i>Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland</i>	
My Place to Play: an interagency approach to creating a dedicated place to play for infants and their families living in emergency accommodation	9
<i>Lána Cummins & Marion Byrne</i> <i>Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland</i>	
Parents' Voices Through the Pandemic – How a Community Action Research Project Shaped a Parent-Child Engagement Programme	14
<i>Kate Darmody & Ramona Mihalka</i> <i>Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland</i>	
Childhood Restored - Anything but Covid, an alphabet of artwork and poems by primary school children in the North-East Inner-City	19
<i>Rhonda Hill</i> <i>Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland</i>	
Oral Storytelling as a Medium for Stimulating Critical Thinking	25
<i>Catherine O'Reilly</i> <i>Trinity College Dublin, School of Education</i>	
COVISION – Children as Innovators: An update and some reflections	31
<i>Harry Shier</i>	
Inquiring Together: Serving Police Officers and Ethnic Minority Communities	37
<i>Kirsty Forrester & Jonathan Mendel</i> <i>Community Learning and Development, Dundee City Council</i>	
Acknowledgements	40

CARN 2022 – a Host’s Perspective

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National College of Ireland (NCI) was delighted to host the CARN (Collaborative Action Research Network) Conference 2022 from 28th- 30th October. Two departments, Centre for Education and Life Long Learning (CELL) and Early Learning Initiative (ELI), collaborated with the CARN organising and international committees to have everything ready to welcome 140+ colleagues from all over the world to discuss how we, collectively and individually, change lives through Action Research.

For many years we have told the story of NCI’s Early Learning Initiative (ELI) at CARN conferences – how we have used Action Research to grow from 400 to 14,000 participants and the impact ELI has had on thousands of children and families across Ireland. We have also listened and learned about the wonderful, interesting work being done across Europe, Africa, America, Asia and Australia. The 2022 conference was no different with lots of opportunities to share experiences and learning. The reflective panel discussion hosted by Dr Mary McAteer on Sunday morning highlighted the importance of the conference in connecting Action Researchers across the world and helping us stay motivated. As one delegate said, *‘It gave me good impulses to continue my work. Most important was the networking and sharing experiences with other Action Researchers during the conference’*.

Action Research is about change – changing your thinking, practice and relationships with others. It means taking responsibility for the ethical change you want to be in the world. The CARN Conference is always a meeting of independent-minded individuals who respect each other’s cultures, views, and work. It is a real positive enjoyable inclusive experience where diverse perspectives are tested respectfully. You are listened to, questioned, and given space to think, discuss and work through your theories and thoughts. There are no right answers, no perfect methods nor easy conclusions. The messiness of Action Research and life is acknowledged and celebrated as an exciting journey of exploring possibilities, examining realities, discovering connections and potential next steps. This was the culture of parity of esteem, respect and safety we sought to continue at CARN 2022 and were delighted to get such positive feedback on providing a *‘warm welcome’*, *‘uplifting supportive experiences’*, open collaborative engagements during the keynotes and presentations, along with the opportunity to engage with our *‘brilliant’* local community here in Dublin’s Inner City.

Action Research in Ireland is diverse and somewhat fragmented. Hosting CARN 2022 was a wonderful opportunity to showcase and connect the many Action Research initiatives across the country. On Friday the Home Visiting Alliance [Home Visiting Alliance – Home Visiting Alliance](http://HomeVisitingAlliance.com) (hva.ie) hosted a pre-conference workshop on the development of a National Standardized Model for Home Visiting as part of the *First 5 | A Government Strategy For Babies & Young Children*. Part of the reflection stage of Ireland’s home visiting Action Research cycle, this workshop was an opportunity for practitioners across the country to shape Irish policy. This was followed by a keynote on translating policy into practice using Action Research. Mary Doyle, a retired General Secretary of Department of Education and Skills talked about the intersection between research, policy and practice with Catherine Hiney from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth [Welcome - WhatWorks](http://Welcome-WhatWorks.com) outlining how her

department supports policy into practice through action learning. Lána Cummins and Marion Byrne gave a practical example of My Place to Play, a local Action Research project that supported by the Irish Government has gone national. On Saturday and Sunday, methodologies issues were highlighted with Dr Catriona McDonagh, Dr Mary Roche, Dr Máirín Glenn, and Dr Bernie Sullivan [Network for Educational Action Research Ireland](#) | ~ Reflective practice in action ~ (eari.ie) discussing how new understandings of Action Research are developed; Dr Yvonne Crotty & Dr Margaret Farren, Dublin City University highlighting ethical dilemmas and Dr Harry Shier, [Research Study | Covision | University College Dublin](#) on involving children in Action Research.

Keynotes were supplemented by presentations and workshops from around the world with many methodological issues, in particular the participation and inclusion of non-academics and minority voices in research processes, highlighted. This fed into multiple discussions on the importance of Action Research networks and communities of practice in supporting knowledge equity, ecologies and democratisation. Covid-19 and its aftermath were never far from our thoughts with many delegates looking at improving their practice in the face of adversity and pandemics. Questions about identity, values, empathy, emotional well-being, creativity and technology were intertwined across all contributions as delegates grabbed with the joys and challenges of doing Action Research in these challenging times.

As with any conference, the social programme is important, and we wanted to give it an Irish flavour. The wine reception on Friday night, kindly sponsored by Routledge and the Educational Action Research Journal, included an opportunity to learn some Irish dancing. The conference dinner on Saturday night concluded with a good old fashion Irish session, where delegates had the opportunity to learn how to play the bodhrán, the native drum of the ancient Celts. Follow-up lessons for those who said they were getting one for Christmas can be found online [Traditional Irish Bodhrán for Beginners | Free Online Course | Alison](#). The Conference ended with a tour of the North East Inner City [North East Inner City of Dublin - NEIC](#) led by Frank Mulville [YPAR – Young People At Risk North Inner City](#), which explored the lived experience of Action Research in the NEIC through significant landmarks before attending a Big Scream Halloween festival event organised by the local community. We were delighted with the feedback that *‘the social aspect and the nighttime entertainment were superb’*.

Changing lives ethically through Action Research is not an easy task. It takes courage, integrity and perseverance on a daily basis. We hope that that everyone who attended found a safe supportive space to reflect on the significance and sustainability of Action Research in these worrying times. A huge thank you to everyone involved, in particular the CARN Coordinating Group who were so helpful to us; the Organising Committee, who put so much work into ensuring that everything went well, the International Committee, who put so much work into peer reviewing the abstracts and the wonderful delegates, who were so positive and enthusiastic. As one delegate said, *‘An inspiring weekend filled with change makers! Thank you!’*

Parenting 365: A family-centred support programme for children with developmental delay and additional needs

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Overview

The [Parenting365](#) programme was developed by the Early Learning Initiative (ELI) to address the gap in support for parents of children living in Dublin's inner city with developmental delays or additional needs. This paper will discuss the use of Community Action Research in the development and evaluation of this project, highlight key findings and conclude with the evolution of the programme.

Early Learning Initiative (ELI) at the National College of Ireland (NCI)

The Early Learning Initiative (ELI) at National College of Ireland (NCI) was developed to address the problem of educational underachievement in marginalised communities. Building upon tried and tested models of early years' intervention, it is the ELI's mission to work with communities in the areas of greatest need, to provide world-class parent and child learning support programmes. Developed in collaboration with the local community, ELI aims to address educational disadvantaged communities through a comprehensive suite of programmes provided to children, their parents, families and educators from early years up to third level. ELI's flagship programme: the ParentChild+ Programme is a literacy-based Home Visiting programme for families with pre-school children.

Literature Review

In the 2020/21 academic year more than one third of children engaging with ELI's Home Visiting programmes nationally were presenting with developmental delays (approximately 32% (n=107) of Parent Child + families nationally and 55% (n=12) of Home From Home families) (ELI, 2021). Many of the parents from this cohort have reported long waiting lists for assessments and therapies for their children. Recent figures cited by the government revealed there are over 32,000 children on waiting lists for Occupational Therapy, Speech and Language Therapy and Child Psychology (Dail Eireann Debate, 2022). This cohort of parents reported significant challenges accessing preschool services and for some that have received a place in a school, they've been placed on reduced hours timetables. Parents also reported that 'typical' play spaces such as play centers, playgrounds or toddler groups were not suitable for their children, particularly those who are neurodiverse or require specialized equipment. Research shows that parents of children with developmental disabilities suffer significantly increased levels of stress (Barroso et al., 2018; Hayes & Watson, 2013). This tends to be heightened with longer wait times in the diagnostic process (Keenan et al., 2009). Connolly and Gersch (2011) note parents describing that their experience begins on the first detection of developmental delays, and that identifying ways in which they can support their child, along with connection and support from other parents can help them on their 'journey'.

Similarly, parents often struggle to come to terms with a diagnosis. Post diagnosis it's very common for parents to experience a range of different emotions including those related to bereavement – shock, anger and grief (Kandell and Merrick, 2003). A study by Gallagher and Hannigan (2014) highlight data findings from the Growing Up in Ireland studies which shows the increased prevalence of clinical depression in parents of children with developmental disabilities. A prevalence rate of 8.9% in parenting of typically developing children (n = 7941) compared to a prevalence rate of 14.7% in parents of children with additional needs, such as SD, ADHD, Dyspraxia, Dyslexia (n = 627). Despite the desire to parent well, symptoms of depression (e.g., fatigue, loss of pleasure) can make parenting more challenging (Hammen and Brennan, 2003).

It's imperative for parents to develop support systems including family and friends and professionals such as occupational therapists, speech therapists and early years practitioners. A review conducted by Wong & Shorey (2022) on experiences of peer support amongst parents of children with neurodevelopment disorders concluded that peer support could be a valuable resource for parents while caring for their children with complex needs. Parents may also benefit from engagement with non-profit advocacy organizations such as Aslam or Downs Syndrome Ireland. Parenting children with additional needs whose developmental needs and behaviours may differ from their developmental age may require specific parenting strategies and skills, different to those required for a typically developing child (Durand et al, 2013). For example, parents may need to learn to administer certain types of medication or therapies, becoming an expert on their child's condition. Parent involvement in therapy is associated with positive therapy outcomes (e.g., Auert, Trembath, Arciuli, & Thomas, 2012; Carroll, 2010). For parents of neurodiverse children, they may need to research the condition and understand sensory processing systems and non-verbal forms of communication. While children with disabilities affect families in different ways, it's a common finding that parents of children with additional needs experience more stress than parents of typically developing children (Woodman, 2014). This stress may be linked to the everyday challenges of parenting a child with additional needs but also the wider systems of society such as timely access to the necessary interventions and suitable school places.

Programme Delivery

The Parenting365 Programme involved six weeks of developmentally targeted group play sessions and online parent support groups, which were facilitated by ELI coordinators and facilitators. Throughout the 2021-2022 academic year, 66 families with a total of 69 programme children engaged in the programme across 3 terms. Of these families, 46 parents engaged in the online parenting programme. An overview of the two programme components is included below.

Toddler Play Group Session

Toddler Play Group sessions ran on Saturdays to accommodate for parents with engagements throughout the work week. These sessions were themed to engage the families in a variety of educational and fun activities including sensory play, construction, imaginative play, active play and messy play. As part of the play group parents were also provided with take home resource packs to encourage home learning. Where possible these packs were linked to the topic of the guest speaker at the parent support group or theme of the play group.

Parenting Support Sessions

These sessions aim to provide parents with a safe space to share and reflect on their experiences of parenting children with additional needs, with a view to being positively empowered to increase the quality of life for both them and their families. Parents will develop their knowledge and understanding of how to support both themselves and their children through input from professionals. Approaches for building their resilience, such as mindfulness, and breathing techniques are explored, in addition to understanding challenging behaviours through the lens of sensory and emotional processing and strategies for supporting their regulation. The weekly parenting sessions are also a supportive space in which parents can connect with each other and share their experiences.

Methodology

Community Action Research was the main form of methodology for the development and evaluation of the Parenting365 programme. Ethical approval was received from the National College of Ireland Ethics Committee to conduct this research. Participation in this research was voluntary and was not required to participate in the programme.

Prior to starting the programme parents completed an intake form including their demographic data and information on their child(s) additional need or developmental delay to form the basis of the family's need. Those engaging with the research were sent an online link to complete the pre-programme questionnaire and were asked to rate their level of confidence, belief and ability as a parent on a five-point scale in a number of questions. Parents were also asked to set goals for their child(s) and for themselves. Thirty-one parents responded. At the end of the programme, parents were sent a link to a post-programme questionnaire. They were asked to rate themselves on the three indicators again, measure where they were in relation to meeting their goals, and finally provide insight into their experience on the programme. Eighteen parents responded.

Facilitators completed reflections after each of the toddler and parent sessions and had weekly check-ins with the programme coordinator. Further information and findings are presented and discussed in the next section.

Findings and Discussion

Survey data indicated that there was a total increase in parents reporting higher levels of self-rated confidence, belief and ability post-programme. Of the respondents, 60% reported an increase in their confidence understanding their child's needs, 67% feel they better know how to help their child progress, and 50% have increased their knowledge of using coping mechanisms to help their child.

Parents' goal setting at the start of the programme focused on connecting more with their child; gaining more understanding of their child's needs; and learning skills and techniques to support their child (ELI, 2022). In relation to these goals, 35% stated they had achieved them with a further 24% stating they were close to achieving their goals (ELI, 2022). The goals parents had for their children included improvements of social skills and language and communication skills; and emotion regulation (ELI, 2022). Eighteen percent of respondents felt their child had achieved these goals with a further 35% of parents reporting their child was close to achieving the goals (ELI, 2022). One parent stated "*We feel we have made great progress towards these*

goals. *We understand our child needs certain things to regulate him, his social interaction has come on leaps and bounds - he had said hello to little kids in Funky Monkey play place over the last few weeks which shows he is more confident in these situations now.* Furthermore, all parents reported that the programme greatly benefitted them and 89% felt that it greatly benefitted their child and the remaining 11% reported that it somewhat benefitted their child.

Parents were also given the opportunity to provide suggestions on how the programme could be improved, the majority of the comments focused on extending the length of the programme and offering more sessions. One parent did note that the venue was very warm, however this was in the first group before the location was permanently changed to NCI.

This research had some limitations. Firstly, less than half of the parents took part in the programme evaluation and therefore not all voices were represented in the feedback. Some parents noted having difficulties understanding the questionnaire due to reasons such as having English as a second language. Others noted that they couldn't remember the goals that they had set out for themselves and their child(s).

Programme Adaptations and Future Work

Over the course of the three terms several changes were made in line with facilitator reflections and participant feedback. In term 2, the venue was changed to NCI. This benefited families by offering free parking, as many parents had spoken about the difficulty in using public transport with their children. It also offered parents the use of the sensory room which was helpful as a waiting space when children arrived early or as a calming space for any child who became overwhelmed in the main space. In addition, the age limit of the programme was increased from 4 to 6 years, following demands from parents whose child had no primary school place. A key worker system was also introduced as it became apparent that some children had difficulty forming relationships with unfamiliar adults as well as parents expressing difficulty with explaining their child's condition repeatedly to different professionals. Iterations were also made to the parenting sessions. These included changes to the sequence of the sessions to better complement the learning from the play sessions and to topics and strategies in response to observations and feedback from the parents and facilitators. Lastly, to support data collection parents were provided with a copy of their goals before completing the post-programme questionnaire.

Due to the success of the pilot term and the following two terms in 2021/22 and the ongoing need for support for parents of children with additional needs or developmental delays, this project has evolved and become a part of ELI's Community Service Programme. Since then, one more term has been completed in the 2022/23 academic year while another is currently ongoing.

Parent Quotes

"The programme has been amazing for child, playing with the different toys has helped his gross and fine motor skills. Seeing other children has developed his social skills, he has learnt how to share and take turns. The singing and the interaction with the team has helped his communication, he is doing a lot more babbling. I can't stress enough how important the 6 weeks have been. We can definitely see a change in child. I think the size of the group was

perfect. Having both parents being able to come was amazing. I just hope that another programme is run."

"It helped me realise, I am in fact doing my best and I am on the right track with my child it helped me to realise not to be so hard on myself."

"This programme had helped me, first of all, to connect and interact with parents with similar difficulties in coping with parenting. This programme also helped me understand my child's behaviour, at a different level, through professional guidance and advice. And not the last, throughout this programme I've learned how to better care for myself in order to be able to care for the others."

Conclusion

Feedback indicates that the Parenting365 programme met the needs of the parents and their child(s). Parents noted an improvement in knowledge and understanding of their child's development and how to support them. Parents also noted that their child(s) showed improvement in their developmental skills, including their gross and fine motor skills, and communication skills. Lastly, parents noted feeling supported by other parents and professionals in the group.

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My Place to Play: an interagency approach to creating a dedicated place to play for infants and their families living in emergency accommodation

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Introduction

[My Place to Play](#) is an example of how action learning projects can influence Government policy and practices and vice versa. Now a two-part programme for babies and toddlers, the programme started as a National College of Ireland final year Level 8 Early Childhood Education Project for infants under 12 months (Byrne 2018). It aims to enhance parent-baby interactions and children's physical (tummy time), emotional (sense of safety, wellbeing and belonging), and cognitive and language development for young children and their parents living in suboptimum and cramped living conditions. Using evidence-based learning through play materials, the programme harnessed the Government Early Years Curriculum Framework: Aistear in addition to building on the Early Learning Initiative's Action Research cycles.

In 2019, the programme won an Irish Health Care Award and since then the Government is mainstreaming the programme throughout Ireland as one of its responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing refugee, migrant and housing crises (ELI 2020). Building on the successful implementation of the My Place to Play Baby Mat, a Toddler Pack has been developed to support parents and their children from one to three years of age. Overall, this Action Research project explores an interagency response to supporting parents, infants and toddlers living in emergency accommodation and suboptimum living conditions. My Place to Play highlights how innovative ideas are created through practice but require the collective efforts and expertise of multiple stakeholders at local, regional, and national level to improve outcomes for children and families.

Literature Review

Play is the foundation for all learning for young children. Both national and international research and policy highlights the importance of play strategies to be afforded to all children. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 31.3 states that "Parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child" (United Nations 1989:1). In Ireland specifically physical and social development are highlighted as a fundamental factor for healthy development by the national strategy for children and young people, Better Outcomes Brighter Futures 2014-2020. Furthermore, Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework identifies that core components of play enhance children's well-being by being as healthy and fit as they can be and their feelings of identity and belonging.

However, children living in precarious circumstances such as international protection, homelessness and cramped living conditions are at risk for not having adequate access to space and opportunities for play (Chen and Knoll 2022; Castrén et al 2021; Brents 2020). Due to their challenging circumstances, Ardelean 2021 finds that refugee children's foundational need for play can be neglected in lieu of depictions of sorrow and trauma and their positioning of

children is altered to that of the 'norm'. This negates the need for all children to access play facilities that provide opportunities to increase their resilience and well-being (Bolloten and Spafford, n.d.). In Ireland, Raghallaigh et al (2019) found that centres for international protection are inconsistent in their provision of play facilities for children. Similarly, Area Based Childhood programmes found that children living in cramped living conditions such as homeless accommodation were not afforded adequate opportunities to play which impacted their physical, social, and emotional development (ELI 2020).

Kervick et al. (2022) highlights how a community based participatory Action Research approach offers a medium through which community needs can be addressed for families who are refugees and have children with special medical needs by bridging the gap between research and practice. One method to encourage participatory Action Research is through interagency collaboration. Interagency collaboration is a way for organisations to work together to achieve common outcomes. Successful interagency is considered to be based on shared aims and values, having the right people involved, good management alongside strategic and operational commitment. (Tomlisin 2003, Rafferty and Colgan 2009). However, while government policy promotes interagency collaboration, funding and resources are required to make it a successful and meaningful endeavour for the organisations and recipients of services (Tomlisin 2003, Rafferty and Colgan 2009). Owens (2013) finds that financial uncertainty in a climate of consistent organisational change makes achieving the successful outcomes of interagency working difficult.

Methodology

Community Action Research is the methodology employed for My Place to Play. Working to support practitioners to work with families living in vulnerable circumstances requires a method and the capacity to influence change in practices, understanding and the conditions of practice (Kemmis 2009). The approach demands a collaborative effort in all stages of the planning and implementation of the programme and ensures that participant feedback is incorporated into future iterations.

A My Place to Play Coordinator worked with other Coordinators in similar roles across Area Based Childhood programmes in Ireland to enhance the training, resources and research supports developed as part of their undergraduate degree (Byrne 2018). Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework was used as to identify themes that could be integrated into programme development. To complement Aistear, underpinning all elements of the programme is supporting the parent-child relationship. The programme consists of 3 main components to achieve this;

- Interactive briefing session with professionals
- Family participation
- Monitoring, evaluation and follow up

Working through a National Implementation Working Group consisting of local and national representatives of state agencies and local organisations, recruitment of My Place to Play participants was determined based on the funding streams available to support the project at that time. All funding was designated towards families living in homelessness, international protection, and cramped living conditions. Staff working directly with families in these settings were recruited to attend a My Place to Play Briefing Session. Staff were reached through emails sent to the key contact in each agency.

Distribution of materials was based on attendance at the briefing sessions, the number of families with children of the relevant age, 0-11 months and 1-3 years of age, and the availability of resources at the requested time.

Results

Targeted Population	Local and National Partners	Number of families reached	Number of practitioners reached
Cramped living conditions – local distribution	Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland	10	1
Emergency homeless accommodation – regional distribution	5 Area Based Childhood Programmes Dublin Regional Housing Executive Focus Ireland Children and Young Peoples Services Dublin North City	220	80
International Protection Accommodation Service – national distribution	ELI, NCI Katherine Howard Foundation Children’s Rights Alliance Department of Justice	248	52
International Protection Accommodation Services – national distribution	ABC Programmes DCEDIY Children and Young People’s Services Committee Local and National Prevention, Partnership and Family Support, Tusla City and County Child Care Committees	1375	177
Total		1,853	310

Satisfaction rates across all iterations of the programme rollout were high with a consistent rate of over 90% for both practitioners and parents. Parents said they found the MPTP information helpful as they learned about their child’s development, how play can be used to support parent and child bonding and for their child’s learning.

Professional feedback included that MPTP provided parents with more opportunities to play with and understand the importance of play for their children, increased awareness of tummy time. For their professional practice, they highlighted that they were more equipped to encourage play time and understand the importance of play, positive interactions and fun, and for strengthening their relationships with families. One social worker commented:

“In regards to me professionally, it gave me an opportunity to build my relationship with mum from the start and so something positive and beneficial for her the children to do together. In child protection work, families do not always see us as supportive from the start and as a mum I feel less defensive as a result of being to provide this outlet for her and her child.”

The findings of the interagency work highlighted how working collaboratively had positive outcomes for families and children and allowed for positive working relationships for future projects.

Discussion

The project is an example of the impact of interagency work in broadening the reach of effective prevention and early intervention services to reach vulnerable children and families. Weaving the national policy and implementation group context through the project has given the project a weight in terms of providing a set of best practice principles for practitioners working with families in emergency accommodation to reference and engagement for the programme at national level.

My Place to Play had a positive impact on all organisations that participated in the project. The interagency collaboration enabled agencies to work together in a holistic manner towards a common goal and aligns with previous research highlighting this need for successful interagency collaboration.

The programme also ensured that professionals working with vulnerable families have access to evidence-based knowledge and resources to enhance play opportunities for young children, ensure they meet their developmental norms and enhance quality interactions between parents and children. This is particularly poignant for the needs of children living in international protection, homeless accommodation, and cramped living conditions.

Fundamental for all children is the right to access play facilities that allows them to meet their developmental norms and thrive. My Place to Play provides these opportunities by creating a portable play space for families to utilise in even the most confined of conditions.

Conclusion

While My Place to Place promotes a sense of wellbeing, belonging and self-identity for infants, in addition to encouraging tummy time, crawling, and enhancing the parent-child relationship, its overall objective is to ensure that families are strong and healthy even amid adversity. The programme has demonstrated that play opportunities can be provided for children living in international protection, emergency accommodation and cramped living conditions in a way that encourages them to meet their developmental milestones and enhance the parent-child relationship. In addition to this, professionals receive support to engage families in a non-threatening way to build positive relationships using evidence-based resources and expertise.

While the project does not seek to resolve the issue of precarious living situations of young children and their families, more services have been empowered to provide prevention and early intervention resources and knowledge to stem the effects these circumstances can have on young children.

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Parents' Voices Through the Pandemic – How a Community Action Research Project Shaped a Parent-Child Engagement Programme

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The Early Learning Initiative (ELI), National College of Ireland, was developed to address the problem of educational underachievement in marginalized communities. Since 2008 it has been working in partnership with families, schools, and services in local communities in an area of socio-economic disadvantage. Community Action Research is the primary methodology employed in the development and implementation of programmes in ELI. Central to this approach is creating a learning community that works together to 'nurture and sustain a knowledge-creating system', based on valuing each other equally (Senge & Scharmer, 2001, 240). Involving all ELI stakeholders in the Action Research process supports the successful management of change, creating and sustaining the learning community (Bleach, 2013). This process has been in place since the outset, with the voice of the community stakeholders influencing ELI's initial development through a community needs assessment, undertaken by the Dartington Social Research Unit (Axford & Whear, 2006). The voice of community stakeholders continues to influence the development and evolution of ELI's programmes through ongoing use of the Action Research cycle of observe, reflect, act, evaluate and modify (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006).

From January 2020, Ireland was faced with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 12th the country went into lockdown, and it was no longer possible to continue to deliver the range of supports offered by ELI to the local community. The team were required to quickly adapt to working from home, while developing novel provisions for their programme delivery. Barnardos, in their 2020 Back to School Survey, highlighted the challenges faced by parents nationally with their children home from school, the variations in levels of supports received from their child's school, the discrepancy in access to required technology and parents' anxiety about the return to school in September (Kelly, Fleming, Demirel and O'Hara, 2020). Research has also shown that this time had adverse implications for children and adolescents with higher levels of stress, depression and anxiety being reported (O'Sullivan, McGrane, Clark & Marshall, 2020). ELI recognised from the outset the difficult situation many families were facing. The organisation responded in a myriad of ways with each programme making individual adaptations to continue to reach children and families (ELI, 2021). One challenge ELI acknowledged was ensuring the families' voices influenced our development and evolution through this time. ELI sought to understand the many challenges that families were facing and plan accordingly for future supports.

Thus, ELI began the process of reaching out to previous graduates of the ELI's ParentChild+ home visiting programme, participants of which were families living in an area of socio-economic disadvantage. Through texts, phone calls and letters where necessary ELI checked in to see how the parents and their families were doing and determining what supports they would need going forward. The study aimed to explore parents' perspectives of their family's well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic and their experiences of home-schooling. The study also sought to obtain information on how ELI could support the families throughout the pandemic.

Methodology

Participants

Convenience sampling was used for the current study. Participants were graduates of ELI's ParentChild+ Home Visiting programme. An intensive, two-year programme supporting pre-school aged children and their parents. Participation on the programme ranged over a wide number of years, some graduates engaging as far back as 2008 and others up to 2018. Participants were parents of school going children between the ages of 4 and 13 (N=167). From a pool of 876 families, successful contact was made with 256 between April 2020 and November 2021. Of those that were not reached many had phone numbers that were no longer in service, and others did not answer the phone or respond to text messages. Of the 256 contacted, 167 consented to participate in the study and engaged in a semi-structured interview/questionnaire.

Study Procedure

Trained staff (ELI Programme Coordinators and Home Visitors) first reached out to the family by text message, suggesting to parents a date and time in which they would call and the purpose of this call. When the phone call was made, the researcher followed a set of both open-ended and closed-ended questions, enquiring as to family well-being, how they were coping with the current restrictions and challenges, questions around support and access to technology. As circumstances changed in line with national guidelines the questions asked of the participants evolved to suit the current context. For example, when children began returning to school, parents were no longer asked about home schooling, but questions on how the transition back to school was going and frequency of school absences were introduced. An opportunity was also taken at this point to signpost parents to any resources or services that may be helpful to them based on the conversation. The researcher had a list of available resources (in ELI and elsewhere in the community) to aid this task. Following each call, the researcher entered the data received from the parent onto an online survey through EvaSys survey software. The data was then automatically received by the ELI research team and stored on a secure NCI device.

Ethics

The study is part of ELI's community Action Research approach, which has been approved by the National College of Ireland's Ethics Committee. Researchers adhered to NCI's Ethical Guidelines for Research with Human Participants throughout.

Results

Family Well-being

Results evidenced the mixed experiences of parents during the pandemic with some parents reporting good levels of family wellbeing while others found it difficult, as can be seen in Table 1 below. While more than 60% of families were reported to be doing well overall, this was reduced to 50% during the period when schools were closed. This time, however, was extremely difficult for some, with one parent reporting it to be "*very depressing at the moment*". Some parents noted a lack of adult contact which presented challenges for them, and others were dealing with challenging behaviour from their children.

Table 1. Parents' responses to how the parent and their families are doing at the time of interview.

Response	% Families responding
1 = Very unwell	2.42% (n=4)
2 = Not well	5.45% (n=9)
3 = Moderately well	27.88% (n=46)
4 = Well	30.30% (n=50)
5 = Very well	32.12% (n=53)
No response	1.82% (n=3)

Home Learning & Schooling

The percentage of parents/guardians satisfied with their home schooling was 44.29% (n=31). Parents/guardians reported enjoying the home schooling and having the opportunity to spend more time with their children. One noted surprise in how well they were managing, and another highlighted the support received from other family members. Others noted their focus on the schoolwork and ensure their children knew *"this is not a holiday"*. Parents in this cohort often reported keeping a form of structure or routine and not always keeping the day strictly focused on schoolwork but incorporating life-skills into the learning. Approximately a third (32.86%, n=23) of the families reported having both good and bad days. Some of these parents mentioned having small children. These parents noted the challenges juggling home schooling with working from home and feeling more positive as restrictions lift. The remaining families (15.72%, n=11) are having a challenging time with their children home. Parents noted lack of technology, the mundanity of home schooling and pandemic life as particular challenging. One parent also highlighted that their children found it difficult and overwhelming.

Support

Parents were most likely to make a request for resources, in particular online resources such as links to ELI's website and online learning materials. Activity packs provided by ELI for children were also a popular request. These contained workbooks, pencils and writing materials along with arts and crafts materials. These were particularly popular during the earlier stages of the pandemic and the strict lockdowns as many of the parents engaging in the interviews did not have access to such educational materials for their children. Some parents also noted needing support in the areas of school readiness and school transitions. Parents of children who have additional needs detailed a lack of or a drop in supports for their children, particularly in the areas of Autism Spectrum Disorder and Speech and Language supports. Finally, some parents also indicated a need for parenting support programmes or additional support calls from ELI.

The Stretch Graduate Programme

These findings offered a valuable insight into the real-life experiences of parents of school going children in Ireland living during a global pandemic. Although many families were coping well throughout this time, those in the most vulnerable positions were experiencing significant challenges. For ELI, the project also highlighted a gap in our support and identified a need to support the parents as home educators. Directly after completing an intense, two-year home visiting programme (ParentChild+) there was no direct support available from ELI for families in this age-bracket (4-6 years). Thus, many families, and in particular those with a high level of vulnerability, were unaware of the different supports available to them through ELI at later stages.

Consequently, the initiative was developed into the Stretch Graduate Programme, initially focusing on supporting families with children aged between 4-6 years and aiming to improve children's holistic development by empowering their parents with confidence, skills and knowledge that can support their children's education and wellbeing. The benefits of home visiting programmes have been extensively researched (Olds et al., 2002; Van Doesum et al., 2008; Chen & Chan, 2016). A randomized control trial with Irish participants indicated that those in a disadvantaged community in receipt of a home visiting intervention had a positive impact on the home learning environment (Orri, Côté, Tremblay & Doyle, 2019). Indeed, ELI has long documented the benefits of their existing home visiting programmes for disadvantaged communities (ELI, 2022).

In its first programme year, 2021/22, 44 families engaged. Those families classed as more vulnerable (n=25) engaged in home visits and less vulnerable families (n=19) were contacted termly with a support phone call. In 2022/23 the number of families engaging increased to 68, with 58 of these being new families engaging with the programme. Thirty-four families in this cohort were assigned to a more intensive home visiting schedule and the remaining 34 to termly phone calls.

The programme provides the parent and child with visits, conducted in person or via video/phone call dependent on each family's needs. The key objectives of the programme are to enhance the parents' skills and confidence as their child's primary educators and to encourage and support parental involvement in the children's holistic development. Furthermore, the programme seeks to support the parents in improving and/or maintaining their own wellbeing. Throughout this initial Home Visiting stage, and later as they progress on, the Stretch Graduate Programme serves as a lasting connection between the ELI and the programme families. With the family's consent, ELI will maintain this connection through regular phone calls until the programme child reaches 18 years of age. These calls offer continued support, a space for the parents to have someone to listen to their concerns and guide them to relevant programmes/services within and outside of ELI that the family might need at that time, and to provide them helpful and relevant information.

Conclusion

This work has contributed to the growing body of literature highlighting the challenges children and their families experienced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, already vulnerable families were at a greater risk of the adversities experienced during this time. It is a core belief of ELI that parents are the first and best educators of their own children and play a pivotal role in children's learning from birth. The importance of their role as educators was made plain throughout the pandemic and the Stretch Graduate Programme can support parents by empowering them with confidence, skills and knowledge that can support their children's education and wellbeing.

The study had a number of limitations. As we were unable to contact all previous graduates of the ParentChild+ programme the sample may not be fully representative of the participants. Furthermore, as the parents engaging in the interviews had engaged with ELI previously, and indeed some had continued to engage with ELI in further programmes, there is the potential for response bias.

Future work can evaluate the Stretch Graduate Programme and explore how the programme meets the families' support needs. There is also the potential for future work to monitor and evaluate the trajectory of families engaging with ELI through the Stretch Graduate Programme.

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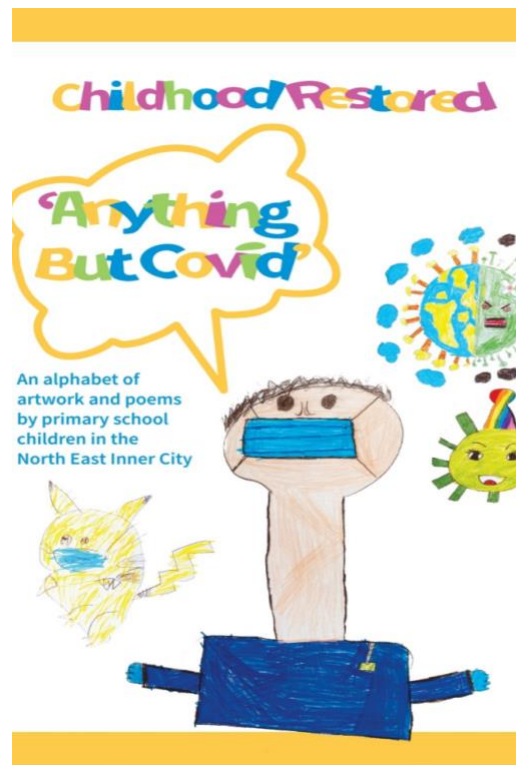
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Childhood Restored - Anything but Covid, an alphabet of artwork and poems by primary school children in the North-East Inner-City

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Introduction

COVID-19 brought about a lot of challenges in various aspects of society, particularly in the education sector. The pandemic had a devastating impact on the lives of children and young people, disrupting their education and social outlets, leading to a disconnection from family and friends. In response to this, the Childhood Restored community art project was launched in Dublin's North-East Inner City (NEIC) in collaboration with the Early Learning Initiative (ELI). Its aim was to provide primary school children in North-East Inner-City with a safe space to express their feelings about the pandemic and its effects on them, through art and creative writing amid an emergence back into society. This paper outlines how this project was developed, its impact on children and learning for future wellbeing initiatives.

Literature Review

'Restorative Practice (RP) is a social science and an approach to building, maintaining, and restoring relationships and community' (Wachtel, 2016)

An inclusive community engagement model, which can support a wide range of organisations and sectors, RP has been shown to strengthen civil society, provide effective opportunities for leadership, repair harm, and restore relationships, while reducing crime, violence, and bullying. Restorative Practice (RP), which is funded by the North- East Inner City (NEIC) Task Force and Government's ABC Programme, is an approach to building and maintaining relationships and resolving conflict in a wide range of community organisations, while complementing other approaches, i.e., coaching, mediation, and restorative justice. For the last nine years, the Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland has been leading a community restorative practice project within Dublin's North-East Inner City. Childhood restoration (Restore Childhood, 2023) is a term used to describe efforts to help individuals who have experienced trauma or adversity in childhood to heal and regain a sense of normalcy and well-being. Childhood restoration is a critical area of focus for mental health professionals, policymakers, and advocates who recognize the long-term impact of childhood trauma on individuals and society as a whole. By promoting healing and resilience in children and families, childhood restoration efforts can help to break the cycle of trauma and create a brighter future for generations to come.

The Irish Department of Education (DE,2023) mission is to enable children and young people to achieve their full potential. It developed a Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice, which outlines the importance of promoting wellbeing in schools (DE, 2023). The policy statement emphasizes the need for a whole-school approach to wellbeing, which includes promoting positive mental health, fostering positive relationships, and providing a safe and supportive learning environment. It is important to note that promoting wellbeing in education is not solely the responsibility of schools. It is a shared community responsibility and requires collaboration between schools, families, communities, and other stakeholders to ensure the wellbeing of our children and young people. Promoting the wellbeing of our children and young people is a shared community responsibility and is everybody's business.

The Early Learning Initiative (ELI), National College of Ireland (NCI), is a community initiative, which partners with local families, services, communities, industries, and the State to improve educational and career outcomes through the life span of a child. Our long-term vision is that ELI will lead the way in providing first class parental support programmes within local communities, upskilling parents, and local organisations to enable children, young people, and their families to develop the dispositions, skills and knowledge needed to thrive.

The NEIC Initiative, which commenced in July 2016, is a major initiative for Dublin's North-East Inner City to oversee the long-term social and economic regeneration of the area (NEIC, 2023). At its core, the NEIC Initiative works towards making the North-East Inner City a safe, attractive, and vibrant living and working environment for the community and its families with opportunities for all to lead full lives.

Both Early Learning Initiative (ELI) and NEIC are examples of how government policy can be implemented through targeted programmes and initiatives aimed at addressing specific social and educational challenges. By providing support and resources to communities in need, ELI and NEIC help to promote inclusive and sustainable growth and improve the quality of life for those communities.

COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures were tough on families with the pandemic having an overwhelming effect on children and young people disrupting relationships with family and friends. In response to this, the Childhood Restored community art project was launched in Dublin's North-East Inner City (NEIC) in collaboration with the Early Learning Initiative (ELI). The projects focus on emotional literacy builds on the Restorative Practices (RP) work already taking place in the NEIC to help reconnect primary school children and their families and re-establish a sense of community.

Methodology

Community Action Research (Bleach, 2016) was the primary methodology used in the development and delivery of Childhood Restored. In the context of the project using community Action Research as the primary methodology ensured that the needs of all children were met and evaluated throughout the project's delivery. This allowed for modifications, evolution, and changes according to the needs of all participants, which lead to more effective and meaningful outcomes. Funded by the NEIC and undertaken by a team within the Early Learning Initiative (ELI), the project ran from March to June 2022. ELI worked in the community to develop an action plan that was implemented with the involvement of seven schools in Dublin's North- East Inner City. Methods used in reviewing and evaluating the project included post-project evaluations with students and educators as well as interviews with the artist, poet, educators, and funder.

Childhood Restored involved art-led workshops facilitated by a community-based artist and poet, which enabled children from local primary schools to create artwork and poetry inspired by their experiences during the pandemic. Students were also asked to share how they felt about the pandemic and lockdowns before the drawing and activities began and how they felt after the drawing and writing activities by choosing as many emotions as applied. The approach to collecting data on students' emotional experiences was a valuable tool for understanding how children were affected by the pandemic and the lockdowns. By allowing students to choose as many emotions as they felt applied, the project encouraged them to express themselves in a nuanced and authentic way, which can help educators and researchers better understand the impact of the pandemic on children's emotional well-being.

Ethical approval was given by National College of Ireland (NCI) and good practice in relation to Action Research was followed. Artists recruited for the project were required to complete an e-vetting process, Tusla Child Protection Training, and ELI Restorative Practice Training prior to its commencement.

Findings

The delivery of the programme involved seven NEIC schools with 164 students from Junior Infants to third Class. The programme was delivered by one artist and one poet through 14 workshops, with two workshops per school, over two weeks. The children's artwork was published in a book and displayed in an exhibition at NCI, which was attended by parents, educators and NEIC Funders.

Children were given the opportunity to provide feedback through a paper evaluation. The majority of students reported enjoying taking part in the art project (87%) and expressed an interest in taking part in more art projects (75%). All teachers (N=10) reported that the project was a valuable learning opportunity for the students and was enjoyable. All teachers also

agreed or strongly agreed that the students were given the opportunity to express their feelings about the pandemic in a safe way and increased their interest in using art to express their feelings.

Students were asked to share how they felt about the pandemic and lockdowns before and after the drawing and writing activities. An increase in positive feelings (14%) and a decrease in negative feelings (21%) were observed after the drawing and writing activities. This suggests that the art project had a positive impact on the emotional well-being of the participating students.

'I loved everything we did, drawing and new stuff'. Student

'What we enjoyed about the project is that we came back to school when the schools reopened and we didn't talk about Covid, and we really didn't give the children a voice. But through this project the children were able to talk about Covid and their experience and what it meant to them and their lives. So from that point of view, it was really excellent, and we really enjoyed it!'
Educator

'I think the most important thing about this project is the way at least I approached is as an artist was to basically not force ideas on the kids. I think that's the only way to make something like this work. We were bringing in a fairly adult theme. It was something in that the kids themselves would never come up with. Vital from a visual artist point of view was to kind of expand beyond that and try to make sure that it wasn't sticking to one specific thing over and over and that it was ok to throw in wacky ideas, just basically have some fun with it even though it's a serious subject. I think the results speak for themselves with lots of strange ideas in there.' Artist

'The Anything but Covid book was just lovely to work on and the range of ages was really interesting, from the really small ones coming on their squatters to the third-class girls and boys who were really kind of more mature and really doing very careful perfect drawings. It was really a pleasure to work with them to make them think about poetry, think about rhymes. I think they got quite a lot of fun out of that. And it made the hard things we had to get through in Covid seem a little bit easier and more fun just to talk with them that way.' Poet/Writer

'We were really happy to sponsor this initiative from the NEIC and I am blown away by the imagination of the students both in their artwork and their couplets' Funder, NEIC

Reflections

Overall, the programme delivery and participant feedback indicate that the art project was a successful and valuable initiative that provided an opportunity for students to express their feelings about the pandemic in a safe and creative way and had a positive impact on their emotional well-being. It highlighted how government policy can be implemented through targeted programmes and initiatives aimed at addressing specific social and educational challenges.

Engaging primary schools in the project provided a platform to understand issues, including causes and impact. The project was able to gather diverse perspectives and experiences, which helped identify gaps in knowledge and inform future interventions. It provided teachers and students with an opportunity to have open conversations around the pandemic. It also aligned with the Department of Education guidance on promoting wellbeing in primary schools. It's

important for schools to have resources and programmes that support the wellbeing of their students, especially during difficult times like the COVID-19 pandemic

This project highlights the use of RP as an 'asset based' approach (Darmody, Wheatley and Bleach, 2022). Children, young people, and adults are brought into potentially transformative experiences of being with different others; learning to be at ease; experiencing them speaking about their experiences and hopes; assisting them deal with experiences of loneliness and hurt as well as celebrate times of achievement and living well together. In such learning spaces they experience new ways of being together supportively, they repeat and pattern these ways in subsequent meetings and, over time the experience of expressing their voice and being in relationships that increasingly offer them support and possibilities becomes a new structure, a new base of resilience in their lives.

The exhibition was a truly wonderful way to acknowledge the trauma and resilience of children. The custom-made book of art and stories provides an authentic document of the experience of primary school children in the NEIC during the pandemic. By recording their experiences in this way, future generations will be able to gain an insight into what life was like for children during this challenging time.

Conclusion

Overall, this is a wonderful initiative that highlights the importance of supporting and nurturing children's creativity and imagination. It is a great example of how art and storytelling can be used to capture the experiences of a community during a historic event. It is a valuable contribution to the collective memory of the pandemic and will serve as a reminder of the resilience and creativity of the children in the NEIC. Archiving the exhibition materials and loaning them to local community groups for display is an excellent way to share this important record with a wider audience. It will allow people who were not able to attend the original exhibition to view the materials and gain a better understanding of the experiences of these children. Having their work published in a booklet and available in 20 libraries across Dublin and the NEIC [Search results | Dublin City Library \(spydus.ie\)](#), is a fantastic accomplishment and a source of pride for the young authors. This kind of experience not only boosts children's confidence but also encouraged them to continue pursuing their passions and interests. Additionally, the availability of the booklet in libraries allows adults and children alike to benefit from reading the stories and illustrations, which can inspire and entertain them. Community Action Research, once again, proved to be an invaluable approach to promoting social change and empowerment because it values expertise and insights in all stages of the research process, from problem identification to data collection, analysis, and dissemination.

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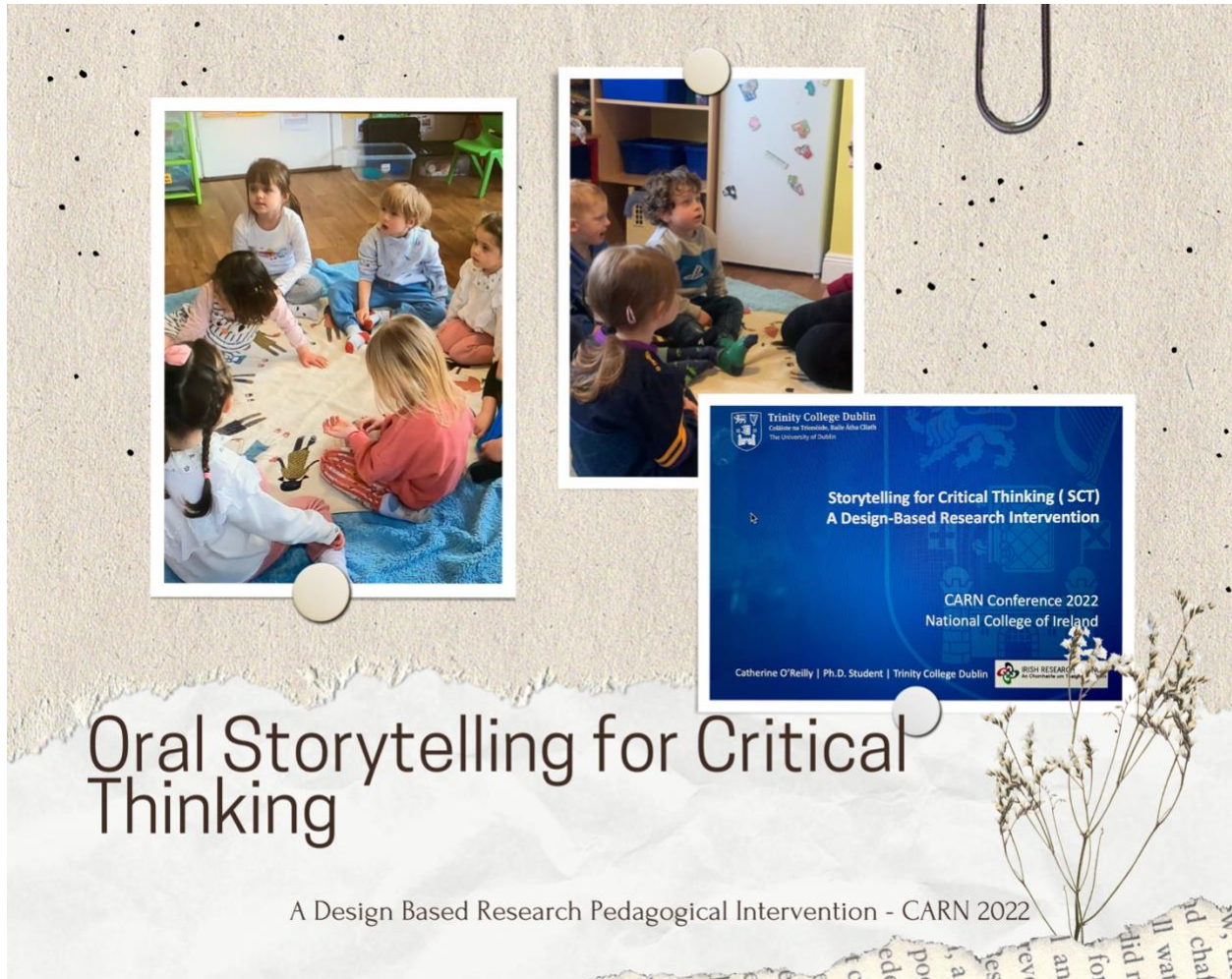
Oral Storytelling as a Medium for Stimulating Critical Thinking

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Oral Storytelling for Critical Thinking

A Design Based Research Pedagogical Intervention - CARN 2022

Summary

This paper outlines the design, implementation and preliminary findings following a Design-Based Research intervention study presented at the CARN 2022 conference in the National College of Ireland, Dublin, followed by a personal account of my experience as a CARN presenter. The Irish Research Council Postgraduate Scholarship Fund funded the research project as part of a 3-year study which commenced in September 2020 and is due to complete in September 2023.

Introduction

Based on an early childhood landscape, the study's overarching aim was to draw out emergent critical thinking in preschool children through a medium of oral storytelling. To this end, there were two areas of investigation (1) critical thinking in preschool children and (2) oral storytelling as pedagogy. To explore this pedagogical idea and guide the study, the following research questions were developed:

1. What characteristics of critical thinking are observed in preschoolers?
2. How can oral storytelling as pedagogy stimulate critical thinking?
3. Under what conditions do preschoolers engage in critical thinking?

Background

Critical thinking has been considered an essential skill the educational system can develop in learners, yet, there is very little research investigating this area of learning at a preschool level (O'Reilly et al., 2021). Although critical thinking has been discussed in education for over 100 years, there are many contrasting definitions of what critical thinking means; for example, see Parson's Research Report titled *Critical Thinking: a Literature Review* (Lia, 2011). In the Paul and Elder (2020) model of critical thinking, the scholars propose that reasoning is a core characteristic of critical thinking and can be measured by examining the accuracy and clarity of learners' communicative interactions. Due to the clarity of the Paul and Elder model and the scholars' supporting work in measuring elements of critical thinking, this study preferred to adopt the Paul/Elder framework for critical thinking as a means to identify and analyse critical thinking in a preschool context. The second focus of the study questioned what pedagogical supports could stimulate critical thinking in children aged 3-5 years. Although it is widely acknowledged that storytelling as pedagogy is a powerful way to teach children about the world they are growing up in, it is widely under-researched (Fisher, 1998, 2013; Philips, 2012). From the hypothesis that storytelling is a universal language that children across the globe are familiar with, therein, the pedagogical aim was to investigate how oral storytelling could be adapted to draw out developing critical thinking in preschoolers.

Literature review

A systematic literature review was carried out using specific criteria (i.e., see O'Reilly et al. 2021). The criteria included peer-reviewed articles between 2015 and 2021, where research was conducted in early years settings. Papers from across the globe were included in the review, however, only papers available in the English language were reviewed. Findings from the review revealed a total of 25 peer-reviewed articles spanning 15 Countries were conducted with young children in early childhood settings. Of these, the characteristics included inferring, different types of reasoning and problem solving. The review concluded that further research was needed to explore critical thinking at a preschool level. The literature review results provided a substantial research gap for the current study.

Methodology

After considering several methodological options, a Design-Based Research (DBR) in education approach was adopted for this study. McKenney and Reeves (2015) describe DBR in education as a genre of research in which the iterative development of solutions to practical and complex

educational problems provides the context for an empirical investigation that can be used to inform practice. For this research, the following definition was considered most aligned with the philosophical underpinnings framing the study:

Most educational research describes or evaluates education as it currently is. Some educational research analyses education as it was. Design research, however, is about education as it could be or even as it should be" (Bakker, 2018, p.3)

Research Methods

One of the advantages of DBR is its flexibility to incorporate numerous research methods to generate data. The following research methods were used in this study:

Methods

- Video and Audio recording.
- Field notes.
- Collaborative inquiry research meetings between researcher and participating educators(N=4).

Participants

- Two preschool educators as storytellers and seventeen preschool children as story listeners, thinkers and talkers.
- Both educators had BA(Hons) in Early Childhood Education and Care with over 10 years of teaching practice.

Data Analysis

All data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using the Braun and Clarke (2021) Reflective Thematic Analysis. The critical thinking framework developed by Paul and Elder (2020) was used to construct the measurement tool, which was a critical thinking rubric. The rubric contained criteria for critical thinking and a Likert scale used to organize critical thinking incidences in classroom dialogue.



Oral Storytelling



Preliminary Findings

The characteristic of critical thinking observable in the participating preschool children were:

- Describing elements of the story with accuracy and clarity
- Child-led Inquiry
- Constructing ideas as individuals and as a group
- Inferring and Reasoning
- Problem solving

Storytelling as pedagogy was evidenced to:

- Stimulate interest and curiosity
- Children had the opportunity to analysis and evaluated stories
- Social constructivism in action was evidenced

The conditions evidenced to draw out critical thinking were scaffolding in the form of:

- Affective scaffolding
- Cognitive scaffolding
- Language scaffolding

Pedagogical approaches also included:

- Inquiry-based and questions
- The intentional use of thinking language to expose children to active thinking
- Thinking time to allow children time to process what is occurring in the story

Conclusion

The preliminary findings described above have addressed three of three research questions which will be written in a detailed report during 2023. As discussed in the introduction, this study has moved into year 3 of a 3-year project; therefore, the next step in this research story is to discuss the findings and discover the implications for practice, policy and further research. It is proposed that by the end of 2023, an academic paper describing the completed study will be available for interested readers.

It was a pleasure to share the work to date on supporting critical thinking in preschoolers through a medium of oral storytelling with everyone who attended the presentation at the CARN 2022 conference at the National College of Ireland. I would like to share a personal account of my experience as a CARN presenter.

What I gained from being part of CARN 2022

Following my presentation, I received constructive feedback that was interesting and informative. From a research perspective, it can be easy to get lost in your research and focus on specific elements for discussion, however, by bringing together different perspectives on the work, the feedback allowed me to hear what others want to know about the study. To this end, I can reflect on my writing and ensure all the questions will be answered in the final report writing for the study. In addition, as a novice researcher at a Ph.D. level, I found the experience supported my confidence as a presenter. I highly recommend CARN as a welcoming space for researchers to share their research and learn about new and innovative work that aims to make our communities better places for children to grow up in. In addition, talking to people with similar research interests helped me feel part of the research community. I felt a strong sense of inclusion and belonging that I think is an endorsement of both CARN and the National College of Ireland.

In summary, I found being part of the CARN conference an extraordinary experience. I met new people who were welcoming and interested in hearing about my study. In addition, I gained valuable insights into the types of Action Research that are ongoing around the country and the contribution the research community is making to improve society. Moreover, I found CARN to be a great networking opportunity and community support that I will link into as I continue my research journey.

Acknowledgments

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COVISION – Children as Innovators: An update and some reflections

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About COVISION

During the COVID pandemic, there was always a tendency to discuss children as victims, suffering disrupted lives and educational deficit. However, children and young people repeatedly showed themselves to be capable of responding positively and creatively to the challenges presented by COVID-19, helping themselves and others to survive and thrive in taxing times.

COVISION is an international collaborative research project, coordinated from UCD in Dublin, with partners around the world, set up in order to:

- explore the way children’s creative and innovative responses have helped them and their friends and families adjust to changes during and after the pandemic;
- work with children and young people in several countries to develop proposals for new initiatives to support children and young people building long-term resilience in the face of disasters and pandemics;
- enable children and young people to present their ideas in face-to-face dialogue with senior policy makers, and so influence future public strategies.

For the full COVISION project protocol, see McAneney et al (2021).

The COVISION Co-Design Workshop

The culmination of the COVISION project was our COVISION Co-Design Workshop, which aimed to support children and young people:

1. to develop creative new ideas, coming from their own perspective(s), to help build resilience in children and families in times of pandemics and similar crises;
2. to pitch their proposals directly to senior policy-makers (those who have the power to make things happen), and get a commitment to action in response;
3. by implementing this process in parallel in different countries, to share and incorporate the perspectives of children and young people in different contexts, working in solidarity to strengthen each other’s initiatives.

When the CARN conference happened at the end of October last year, the COVISION Co-Design workshops here in Ireland was in full swing. During the previous months I had been working with a team of 15 children and young people, aged 10-17, to identify priorities for change, and develop concrete proposals for what needed to be done. At CARN, I wasn’t able to report outcomes, but instead shared some reflections on the methodological challenges we had faced and how we were tackling them. These challenges included working with children and young people on-line during lock-down, working with children and young people in five countries across four continents, ensuring the trustworthiness and reliability of our findings, and ensuring appropriate recognition and credit was given to the young people involved (Shier 2021). You can see my CARN presentation in full at <https://tinyurl.com/mpm2i8jk>

What happened since CARN?

For this Bulletin, I want to provide an update on what happened next. While I was responsible for co-ordinating the international programme and liaison with partners in the other participating countries, the Irish team is the one I worked with personally and got to know, so I will focus this account on their experience. But as you read what follows, remember that the four sister Co-Design teams were pursuing similar but different processes in parallel, in Mexico, Taiwan, Australia and the USA, with great local facilitation in their own countries, and linking up via internet.

I gave my CARN keynote in Dublin on Sunday 30 October 2022, and just two days later, on 01 November, the Ireland Co-Design team gathered at the Office of the Children's Ombudsman to pitch their ideas to top decision-makers and policy experts.



*COVISION Ireland Pitch Day presentations
(all photos by COVISION, used with informed consent of co-design team members and guests)*

All 15 team members turned up on time, and by lunch-time they had rehearsed and fine-tuned their presentation and were ready to go. The competence and commitment of the children didn't surprise me at all. What was a pleasant surprise, however, was the impressive turn-out of senior policy-makers and government officials who turned up after lunch to listen to the young people's proposals. For me, pulling together this audience to listen to children and young people was one of our biggest achievements, so please bear with me while I tell you who turned up:

- The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth;
- The Children's Ombudsman;
- The Assistant Secretary, Child Policy Division, Dept of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth (DCEDIY);
- Principal Officer, Research and Evaluation, DCEDIY;
- Principal Officer, Parents and Learners Unit, Department of Education;
- Principal Officer, Communications, Department of Education;
- National Clinical Advisor and Group Lead for Children and Young People, Department of Health;
- National General Manager for Prevention, Partnership and Family Support, TUSLA (Government Children's Agency);
- Head of Researcher-Led Grants, Health Research Board.



COVISION Ireland Pitch Day presentations

Facing this audience, the children and young people made an impressive and detailed presentation. First they introduced themselves and outlined their methodological process, in order to emphasise for their audience that the proposals they were about to put forward had not been conjured out of the air in an idle moment. Then they gave detailed proposals for policy initiatives in each of their three priority areas. The full proposals will be published elsewhere, and are too detailed to present here, so I will just give a few headline ideas for each topic:

FIRST IDEA: Making on-line schooling work better

- Train all teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) on how to do online classes.
- Have more active classes (e.g. Educational games).
- Organise student-student interaction and group activities.
- Share a work-plan for the week, with weekly homework.

SECOND IDEA: Keeping children active during lockdowns

- Get the whole community to take on a challenge.
- Post ideas and activities on social media.
- Organise a community fund for equipment.
- Encourage people to share, and lend sports equipment.
- Include pets and nature activities.
- Encourage everyone to join in. Help them if they are shy or nervous.

THIRD IDEA: Elected representatives to take children and young people’s ideas directly to those in power

- The system should be set up by the Department of Education, together with the Irish School Students’ Union (ISSU).
- Representatives will be elected by school students, using a fair system to elect the reps.
- Ideas from students would go directly to the elected reps, who meet to discuss them.
- The reps have a guaranteed direct route to the Department of Education.
- Organise a trial in a few schools and see how it works.
- All kinds of schools would be involved (including a similar system for primary schools).



*COVISION Ireland Pitch
Day presentations*

Policy experts' feedback

After the children's presentation, the policy experts – all nine of them – took turns to offer feedback to the young team. I took several pages of notes, and, once again, this is not the space to share these in full, but all the adult experts commented positively on the way the team had worked to develop their proposals and put them forward with assurance and conviction. Here is a taste of what else they said, reconstructed from my notes:

- “It's clear you were involved in a complete process from analysing the issues right through to dissemination.”
- “Impressed with your international work – involving so many different countries.”
- “It's time to revisit the problem of online schooling.”
- “Schools need more input from children and young people in developing their policies.
- “All schools should have a student council.”
- “Closing down community playgrounds during COVID-19 was a big mistake.”
- “Your idea of elected representatives would be wonderful. There could be a regular on-line forum involving government ministers.”
- “We will take your ideas on board and you will see it reflected in future decisions we make.”
- “Our aim is to get ALL of government to think of children first when they respond to a crisis situation.”
- We need to get better at communicating back to children and young people on what we are doing.

As I mentioned earlier, this process was replicated – with adaptations to local context – in four other countries: Taiwan, Mexico, Australia and the USA. Though I have focused on our experiences in Ireland, all the teams generated positive outcomes on their own terms, and all are being written up for publication elsewhere.



*COVISION Ireland
Pitch Day*

What have we achieved?

We have seen the members of the Co-design teams grow in knowledge, skills, confidence, understanding, recognition of their own contribution and capacity, and the importance of their voice; in other words, they have become empowered.

We have embraced the opportunities – and the challenges – of using technology to enable international collaboration. As a result, children and adults in five countries have learnt from one another, exploring and appreciating similarities and differences.

We have seen how listening to children and young people can help government respond more effectively, understand young people’s perspectives, and ensure government services and initiatives meet their needs.

The COVISION project shows how this can go beyond a simple consultation, and become a genuine process of dialogue, deliberation and co-design.

This way, governments can work with children and young people as partners and allies. Children are not just victims of pandemics; they are also active citizens, ready to collaborate to face the challenges.

Finally, a concluding thought from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child:

“If participation is to be effective and meaningful, it needs to be understood as a process, not as an individual one-off event.” (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009)

Presented at CARN in Dublin on behalf of COVISION at the UCD School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Systems www.covision.ie. Harry Shier is now an independent writer, consultant and activist for children’s rights: www.harryshier.net

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Inquiring Together: Serving Police Officers and Ethnic Minority Communities

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This was a research project funded by The Scottish Institute for Policing Research, Police Scotland, and the Scottish Police Authority to support the police to improve engagement with seldom heard communities.

This project, based in Dundee, aimed to find out from Scotland's minority ethnic communities their thoughts on communication, safety and trust in policing. The process involved training six serving police officers and six community workers to undertake participatory Action Research together with ethnic minority community groups based in Glasgow, Dundee and North Aberdeenshire.


The sample populations were:

- Men with refugee or asylum seeking status in Glasgow
- Unaccompanied asylum seeking young people aged 18 – 25 in Glasgow
- Asian men in Dundee
- Asian women in Dundee
- Male and female Eastern Europeans in Banff
- Male and female Eastern Europeans in Fraserburgh

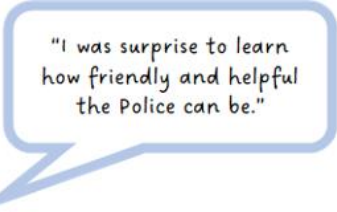
We strongly believe that the Police Officers, Community Workers and Community members involved in this project are best placed to share the project's findings. Dundee City Council made a film about the learning from this project and it is available to view [here](#).

The main findings from this project were:

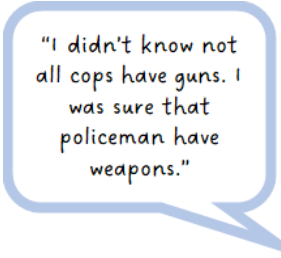
- Police in Scotland are, generally, regarded highly by minority ethnic communities and there is trust in local policing.
- Many ethnic minorities, including those who have been in the UK for a long time, have significant gaps in their knowledge about the police, including how to contact them in an emergency, police powers and the range of tasks which Police carry out to support community safety.
- Most of the people we spoke to were unaware that the Police in Scotland did not carry guns. Receiving this information immediately changed perceptions, improved communication, and allowed relationships to develop.



"Thank you for keeping us safe."



"I was surprise to learn how friendly and helpful the Police can be."



"I didn't know not all cops have guns. I was sure that policeman have weapons."

- Many were unaware of ways to contact the Police, including the emergency number.
- Minority ethnic communities do not understand Police Scotland's role and relationship to other organisations, such as the courts, the home office and Scottish and UK governments.
- Minority ethnic communities felt that when they have had dealings with the Police, communication has been poor. After meeting these groups, the Police Officers involved in our project understood why this was felt and identified ways to improve.
- Community engagement is valued by both communities and police officers and is felt to be an important tool in promoting community safety.

"I wasn't sure that we can to ask translator for any language in the police."

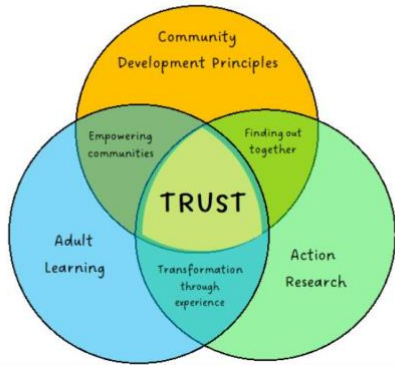
The recommendations of this project are:

- That Police Scotland create accessible information in multiple languages and media providing basic information about Police Scotland to it's communities. The key messages to be communicated by Police Scotland for BAME communities are:
 - - Police do not usually carry guns;
 - - Can be identified by number badge;
 - - It is okay to dial 999;
 - - Police do not determine guilt;
 - - Immigration status not affected by reporting a crime.



These messages were identified by community members and were consistent across the communities represented in the research. Example films and resources were well received by the community groups involved and can be viewed below or to the right.

- Video with police contact information: [English](#)
- Videos about police identification: [Polish](#) [English](#)



- Police Scotland should look at how local officers can be involved in community engagement activity with local communities, using the model developed through this project.
- Interviewing should use a Trauma Informed Approach for victims as it was reported that some BAME people felt, as victims, that they had committed a crime when being interviewed.
- Police Scotland should find a means of making an interpreter service more accessible by phone. Existing phone systems were not considered to be accessible as the numbers are not necessarily known and language in English is required to get past the first stage of the phone call.
- Training on cultural awareness and working with non-native speakers of English and people with literacy issues needs to be a regular part of police CPD. This is not necessarily the same as equality and diversity training but should focus on breaking down barriers and promoting good communication. Such information may run through existing briefings and trainings but must be made explicit.

"We want police engaged with community. To talk to them regularly to get people more confident to talk."

This research was carried out by:

- Kirsty Forrester – Dundee City Council
- Dr Jonathon Mendel – The University of Dundee
- Professor Karen McArdle (Emerita) – The University of Aberdeen

In partnership with Police Scotland, Dundee City Council, Aberdeenshire Council, Govan Community Project and The Scottish Refugee Council

The films referenced in this report were made by Dundee City Council 's Learning and Organisational Development Team: Christopher Kirkwood, Amy Emmott and Niall Reid.

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The organising committee comprised of:

- Annabel Habart (Early Learning Initiative)
- Andy Convery (CARN)
- Charmian Wilby (CARN)
- Deirdre Tinnelly (NCI, CELL)
- Jane O'Toole (CARN)
- Josephine Bleach (Early Learning Initiative)
- Lana Cummins (Early Learning Initiative)
- Mary McAteer (CARN)
- Meera Oke (NCI, CELL)
- Yvonne Emmett (NCI, CELL)

Members of the International Advisory Panel were:

- Yvonne Emmett, NCI, CELL, Dublin, Ireland – Chairperson
- Jane O'Toole, TCD, Dublin, Ireland
- Jonathan Damiani, Le Moyne College, Syracuse, New York, USA
- Mairin Glenn, NEARI, Ireland
- Meera Oke, NCI, CELL, Dublin, Ireland
- Kate Darmody ELI, Dublin, Ireland
- Bhargavi Davar, BAPU, Pune, India
- Louise Hawxwell, Edge Hill University, UK