



‘Hoping for a Better Tomorrow’

A Process Study Evaluation of the Greater Tomorrow Crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool Services, Ballyhaunis, Co. Mayo

Summary Report

BY

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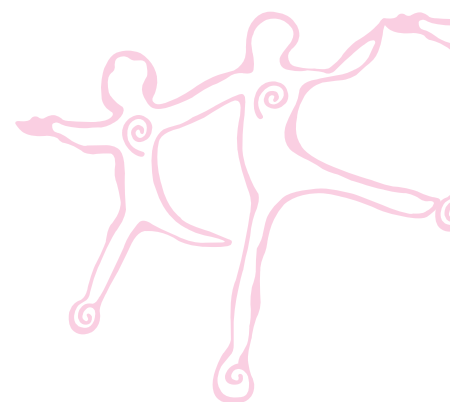
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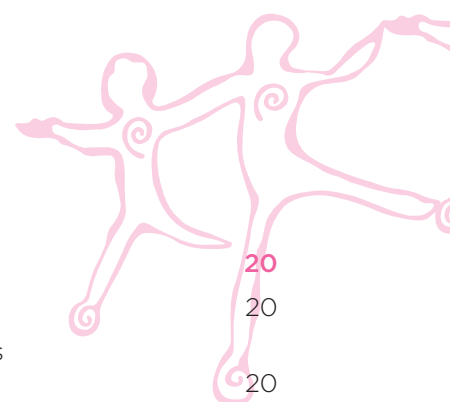
List of Abbreviations



CE	Community Employment
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
CES	Centre for Effective Services
CPD	Continuing and Professional Development
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DOHC	Department of Health and Children
DP	Direct Provision
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
EPPE	Effective Provision of Preschool Education
EOCP	Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme
EU	European Union
FRC	Family Resource Centre
HLE	Home Learning Environment
HSE	Health Service Executive
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCIP	National Childcare Investment Programme
NCS	National Childcare Strategy
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PO	Participant Observation
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
REC	Research Ethics Committee
RIA	Reception and Integration Agency
SES	Socio-economic status
SST	Sustained Shared Thinking
TA	Thematic Analysis
TUSLA	The Child and Family Agency
UCFRC	UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre
WFDP	Workforce Development Plan

Table of Contents

1.0 Introduction	6
1.1 Report Structure	7
2.0 Overview and Context	8
2.1 Introduction	8
2.2 Background and Development of the Greater Tomorrow Crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool Services	8
2.3 Description of the Greater Tomorrow Crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool Services	9
Staff numbers at the Greater Tomorrow crèche and Community Preschool	9
Staff training and development	9
Description of play facilities at the crèche and preschool service	10
2.4 Overview of the Study Area – Population Statistics and Cultural Diversity in the Ballyhaunis area	10
Demographic profile of Ballyhaunis	10
Cultural and ethnic diversity in Ballyhaunis	10
Direct Provision policies in Ireland: Context and overview	11
Direct Provision in Ballyhaunis: An overview	11
2.5 Chapter Summary and Conclusions	12
3.0 Early Childhood Care and Education: Overview of National Policy and Service Context and International Research Evidence	13
3.1 Introduction	13
3.2 Overview of Developments in Early Childhood Care and Education and Irish Policy	13
3.3 Quality Enhancement and Early Learning	14
3.4 International and Irish Research Evidence on Early Years Education and Child Development: An Overview	14
Irish Research on Early Years Education and Child Development	15
ECCE quality indicators	15
3.5 Chapter Summary and Conclusions	16
4.0 Methodology	17
4.1 Introduction	17
4.2 Combining Qualitative Methods to Capture Perspectives about the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow Services	17
Sampling	17
Focus groups and in-depth interviews	18
Field visits and Participant Observation	18
4.3 Data Analysis	19
4.4 Ethical Issues	19
4.5 Chapter Summary and Conclusions	19



5.0 Summary of Main Study Findings	20
5.1 Introduction	20
5.2 The Greater Tomorrow Crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool as Providers of Family Support	20
Informal support for children and families	20
Interculturalism and respect for cultural and ethnic diversity	21
School readiness	22
Quality of Service	23
5.3 Chapter Summary and Conclusions	24
6.0 Discussion	25
6.1 Introduction	25
6.2 Perceived Impacts of the Greater Tomorrow Crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool on Children and Families	25
Care, trust and quality in the crèche and preschool services	25
The crèche and preschool as sources of informal social support	25
Reported impacts of the crèche and preschool on children's aspirations, social skills and linguistic competencies	26
Interculturalism and respect for cultural diversity	26
Sense of belonging among children	26
Relationships between staff members, parents and children	26
Impacts on school readiness	27
Supporting children's cognitive development: Sustained Shared Thinking (SST)	27
6.3 Chapter Summary and Conclusions	27
7.0 Conclusions and Recommendations	28
7.1 Introduction	28
7.2 Aims and Objectives	28
7.3 Overview of Chapters	29
7.4 Research Conclusions and Recommendations	29
Learning and teaching approach: Inclusivity and intercultural learning	29
Sustained Shared Thinking (SST) in teaching and learning	29
Play and learning facilities for children's social, cognitive and emotional development	29
Involving parents in children's early learning experiences: Learning stories	29
Staff training and development	30
Strengthening social support for children and families	30
Sustainability of the crèche and preschool	30
References	32

1.0

Introduction

This summary report synthesises the main findings and recommendations from a qualitative, process study evaluation of the ‘Greater Tomorrow’ crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool services at Ballyhaunis, Co. Mayo, conducted by the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (UCFRC) at NUI, Galway in 2015.

The principal aims and objectives of this evaluation are to:

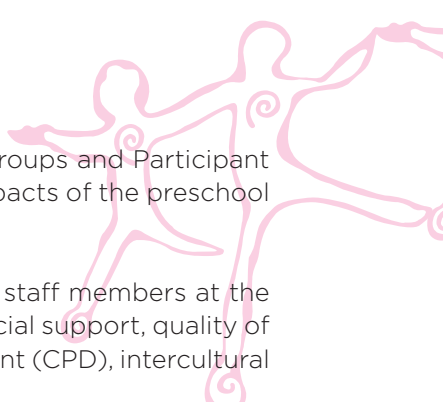
- (a) **Describe the Greater Tomorrow crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool services, the principles that guide ways of working with children and families, the overall ethic that shapes and reflects relationship-building and interactions between children and staff members, and the pedagogical approaches drawn upon in the crèche and preschool services.**
- (b) **Critically analyse the reported effects of the crèche and preschool facilities for improving educational, cognitive and social outcomes for children attending the services, as elucidated by parents, staff members and key informants.**
- (c) **Critically analyse the extent to which the crèche and preschool services foster the principles of inclusivity, social and cultural diversity and participatory ways of working with children and families.**
- (d) **Analyse some of the principal pedagogical approaches drawn upon by staff members in the crèche and preschool facilities and the extent to which they actively support children’s learning and development.**

1.1 Report Structure

This summary report has six subsequent chapters:

Chapter 2 describes the crèche and preschool services and provides an overview of their development. It summarises the socio-demographic profile of the Ballyhaunis area, focusing on its ethnic and cultural diversity in particular. In doing so, we underline the significance of early years services in the Ballyhaunis area that are responsive, inclusive and accessible to all children and families in the region. This is particularly important for families that experience higher levels of social and economic marginalisation (e.g., asylum seekers, Travellers).

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the principal policy developments in the early year’s education sector in Ireland. In particular, it focuses on the themes of quality in early year’s education and respect for diversity and belonging. Chapter 3 also summarises Irish and international research evidence on how quality early years services can enhance the educational and social outcomes of children and families. This is said to be particularly important with children who experience higher levels of economic marginalisation and lower socio-economic status (SES).



Chapter 4 documents the study methodology: how in-depth interviews, focus groups and Participant Observation (PO) were combined to capture a rich store of data on perceived impacts of the preschool and crèche services on children and parents.

Chapter 5 presents the principal research findings from interviews with parents, staff members at the crèche and preschool and key informants, especially on the themes of informal social support, quality of service, pedagogical approach, inclusivity, continuing and professional development (CPD), intercultural learning and school readiness.

Chapter 6 discusses the main findings in the context of literature on the themes outlined in Chapter 5 (e.g., family support, quality of service).

Chapter 7 offers some conclusions and recommendations for both the crèche and preschool services, particularly on service delivery and sustainability.

2.0

Overview and Context

2.1 Introduction

This chapter gives an overview of the background and development of the Greater Tomorrow crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool services from their inception to the present day. It also provides a description of the crèche and preschool services and of staff training and development, and an overview of the numbers of children attending both facilities. This data is placed in the context of Direct Provision (DP) in Ballyhaunis, including statistics on socio-demographic profiles of persons living in DP and in the wider Ballyhaunis community.

2.2 Background and Development of the Greater Tomorrow Crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool Services

The Greater Tomorrow crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool services are located on the grounds of the Old Convent and St. Mary's Augustinian Abbey, respectively, close to Ballyhaunis town centre, in Co. Mayo. The initial childcare service was founded in 2007 as a response to the lack of resources for increasing numbers of asylum-seeking children and families relocating to Ballyhaunis after the introduction of Direct Provision in Ireland after the Dublin Convention (1999).

Representatives from the Ballyhaunis Family Resource Centre (FRC), in partnership with the Health Service Executive (HSE), recognised that families occupying the DP accommodation centre were in severe need of family support services and good-quality childcare facilities. There were concerns for the safety of children living in Direct Provision and their lack of access to stimulating play and educational materials. It was thought that the establishment of a dedicated childcare facility could help to offset some of the risks associated with living in DP and lead to better outcomes for children and families. In 2005, the HSE was awarded a grant under the EU Social Inclusion Funds which assisted greatly in the development of the initial childcare services at the DP accommodation centre.

At the inception of the preschool and crèche, a single childcare service existed in the Old Convent grounds, but this separated into two services in 2010. The community preschool is currently located in a prefabricated building adjacent to the FRC in the Abbey grounds, while the Greater Tomorrow crèche stands approximately 0.25 km away in the grounds of the Convent, adjacent to the accommodation facilities for asylum seekers. Currently, the crèche service operates a four-day-weekly service, while the Community Preschool is operational for five working days, Monday to Friday.

The Community Preschool operates the ECCE scheme, and both the crèche and preschool services implement aspects of Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006). Due to the cultural, racial and ethnic diversity of children attending both services, substantial pedagogic emphasis is placed on intercultural learning, equality, respect and celebrating difference.

At present, all of the children attending the Greater Tomorrow crèche reside in the DP accommodation centre. A number of children attending the Community Preschool are members of the local Travelling communities. Fig. 1 below provides an overview of the socio-demographic profiles of children accessing the crèche and preschool services (as of July 2015).

Fig 1: Socio-demographic profiles of children attending the Greater Tomorrow crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool services.

	Greater Tomorrow crèche	Ballyhaunis Community Preschool
Number of children enrolled (June 2015)	15	20
Number of boys	9	11
Number of girls	6	9
Number of children who reside in Bridgestock asylum seeker hostel	15	3
Number of children who are members of Travelling community	0	6
Number of children from wider Ballyhaunis community	0	11

2.3 Description of the Greater Tomorrow Crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool Services

The following subsections describe the crèche and preschool services in more detail on the following themes: staff numbers, training and development, and play facilities.

Staff numbers at the Greater Tomorrow crèche and Community Preschool

In 2015, the Greater Tomorrow crèche employed two part-time staff members. The preschool has six staff members working directly with children. The preschool staff members encompasses two community childcare assistants working part-time hours, one Community Employment (CE) scheme worker, one TÚS worker and one community childcare leader. Three temporary relief workers are also available to both services. One manager presides over the crèche and preschool services, and staff turnover at both facilities is low.

Staff training and development

Staff members at the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche are trained to the requisite NFQ Level 5 qualifications in childcare. One crèche staff member has an NFQ Level 7 Degree, and the manager of the crèche and preschool services is trained to NFQ Level 7 (Diploma) and is pursuing an honours degree programme in Early Childhood Care and Practice (NFQ Level 8) at NUI, Galway.

Staff members at the crèche and preschool services have completed significant Continuing and Professional Development (CPD) training. Training courses completed by the services' manager include HighScope, Scaffolding Children's Learning in Small Groups, Responding to Women and Children Experiencing Domestic Violence, Anti-Bias training, First Aid, and Making a Difference.

Description of play facilities at the crèche and preschool services

Both the Greater Tomorrow crèche and the preschool contain a wide range of toys and play activities for children. The preschool has a small library with a wide selection of books that are appropriate for the children's level of development. Toys like teddy bears, dolls, aeroplanes, cars and building blocks are available. The crèche has ample play facilities available to children, such as dolls, books, sand boxes, bubbles, model cars and play bricks. Play materials available are deemed appropriate to the levels of development of children attending the crèche and preschool services. The crèche and preschool also have small outdoor play areas. Staff members in both services are warm and attentive to the children and actively engage with them in their play.

2.4 Overview of the Study Area – Population Statistics and Cultural Diversity in the Ballyhaunis area

Demographic profile of Ballyhaunis

Ballyhaunis is a small rural town in south-east Co. Mayo. According to Census 2011 the total population is 2312, a sizeable proportion of whom hail from countries outside Ireland. In Census 2006 (CSO, 2006), 36.6% of the Ballyhaunis population were classified as non-nationals (i.e., from countries of origin outside of Ireland, including EU member states). More details on the ethnic and cultural diversity of Ballyhaunis are outlined below.

The population of children living in Ballyhaunis and the surrounding area is broadly in line with national averages; 21.1% of the total population of the town in Census 2006 was aged 0–14 years (Mayo County Council, 2010). In 2011, 233 children were of preschool age in Ballyhaunis (aged 0–4 years), 300 were of primary school age (5–12 years) and 158 were of secondary school age (13–18 years). These statistics underline the significance of children and young people to the local area, both economically and socially.

Cultural and ethnic diversity in Ballyhaunis

Ballyhaunis has a long history of ethnic and cultural diversity; the first Muslim communities were established in the area in the early 1970s. In Census 2006, 59.6% of the local population identified themselves as being ethnically other than 'white Irish'. These levels of ethnic diversity set Ballyhaunis aside from other small towns in the west of Ireland and make the town a unique context for service provision. Ballyhaunis is further set apart by the heterogeneity of this migrant and minority population (McGarry, 2012). The migrant population of the town can be loosely thought of as consisting of four groups, who arrived in the area at different periods and for different reasons (*ibid.*).

The Pakistani community is the longest established immigrant group in Ballyhaunis. Many arrived in the 1970s due to the establishment of the meat processing plant which slaughtered in the traditional Muslim *halal* manner. In the 1970s the Muslim community consisted of six families; by the 1990s this had increased to 30 families of Pakistani descent. In the early 1980s another meat processing plant, Iman Casings Ltd, was established in the town by a Middle Eastern entrepreneur. Most of its employees are Muslims, who have been mainly recruited from the Middle East.

Significantly, the 2006 Census shows that Ballyhaunis had one of the largest immigrant populations in Ireland, proportionate to towns of similar size. Ballyhaunis was second only to Gort, Co. Galway, which had the highest immigrant population in Ireland at the time (CSO, 2007). In 2011, Ballyhaunis had the largest proportion of non-nationals, at 41.5% of the population (2299 persons). This compared to a national average of 14.9% for all other Irish towns (CSO, 2012: 11).¹ Polish people were the largest immigrant group in Ballyhaunis (175 persons), followed by Pakistani (136).

¹ CSO (2012) contains in-depth, comprehensive statistics on population change, migration and household structure in Ireland as recorded in Census 2011.

Direct Provision policies in Ireland: Context and overview

The Direct Provision system was introduced in Ireland in 2000 after new measures were introduced by the Office of the Minister for Equality, Justice and Law Reform to remove entitlements from asylum seekers to supplementary welfare assistance (Fanning and Veale, 2004). Since 2000, everyone who applies for asylum seeker status in Ireland is subject to the DP system (Healy, 2004). Under Direct Provision, the State provides directly for the accommodation of asylum seekers in hostels while giving them a small supplementary allowance (*ibid.*). The current weekly rate of supplementary allowance paid by the state to an adult is €19.10 and to a child is €9.60.

A substantial corpus of research, however, underlines that Direct Provision perpetuates social inequalities. For example, O'Connor (2003) argues that it constitutes 'citizenship-based discrimination' while Breen (2008) contends that it violates people's rights to an adequate standard of living and undermines human dignity and equality. Focusing on child poverty, Fanning and Veale (2004) argue that Direct Provision results in severe income poverty and material deprivation while exacerbating other difficulties such as language barriers, racism, and social marginalisation (see Smyth and Whyte, 2005). This is corroborated in research evidence documented by Ogbu et al. (2014).

Reports by the Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) (2014) show that approximately 1500 children aged 0-17 years live in asylum seeker accommodation centres in Ireland. As evident in Fig. 2 below, a substantial proportion of these children are around preschool age (i.e., 0-4 years). This underlines the importance of high-quality preschool and crèche services that are accessible to members of asylum-seeking communities. Similar findings are discernible in Kane (2008) and Ogbu et al. (2014).

Fig 2: Number of children living in DP accommodation centres in Ireland at year end 2014 (RIA, 2014: 13-17).

Age Group	Number of children
0-4 years	502
5-12 years	807
13-17 years	143
TOTAL	1452

RIA (2014) states that a significant number of lone parent families reside in DP accommodation centres in Ireland: 34% of persons living in DP are classified as lone parents, 27% are married or have partners, 10% are single females and 29% are single males (RIA, 2014: 18). This further underlines the importance of high-quality childcare provision in accommodation centres across Ireland.

Direct Provision in Ballyhaunis: An overview

The Old Convent accommodation centre has been operational in Ballyhaunis since the early 2000s by Bridgestock Facilities Management Company Ltd. The main reception, refectory and office spaces for Bridgestock are located in the Old Convent building.

Shared housing units for Direct Provision occupants are located immediately to the front, side and rear of the Old Convent building. Fig. 3 below is an overview of the socio-demographic profiles of persons who occupied the Old Convent accommodation centre in Ballyhaunis at year end 2014. Figs. 4 and 5 give an overview of the age profiles of residents of the reception centre at Ballyhaunis and countries of origin at year end 2014.

Fig 3: Gender profiles of residents of DP reception centre, Ballyhaunis at year end 2014

Total number of residents	Total number of males	Total number of females
225	124 (55%)	101 (45%)

Fig. 4: Age profiles of residents in DP reception centre, Ballyhaunis at year end 2014

Age profile of residents
0-4 years: 13.8%
5-12: 32%
13-17: 5.3%
18-25: 5.3%
26-35: 18.2%
36-45: 17.3%
46-55: 5.8%
56-65: 1.3%
66 and over: 0.9%

Fig. 5 Country of origin of residents in DP reception centre, Ballyhaunis at year end 2014

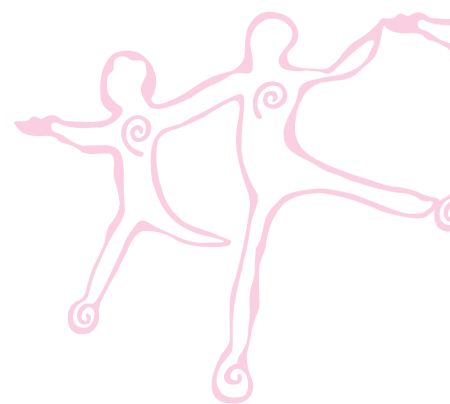
Country of origin of residents
Nigeria: 27.6%
Zimbabwe: 10.2%
Pakistan: 7.6%
South Africa: 6.7%
DR Congo: 4.9%
Other: 43.1%

2.5 Chapter Summary and Conclusions

This chapter provided an overview of the development of the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche, and a profile of children and parents accessing the services at present. It highlighted the cultural significance of Ballyhaunis as a research site, and showed the importance of childcare services that cater to children of different ethnic, cultural and multi-faith backgrounds.

The chapter gave an overview of Direct Provision policies and research, which underlines that the DP system exposes children and families to the risk of poverty, adversely affecting their social development. Chapter 3 provides research evidence on the importance of pre-primary education for children from socially marginalised and lower-SES backgrounds, and of childcare services that foster intercultural learning in children.

3.0



Early Childhood Care and Education: Overview of National Policy and Service Context and International Research Evidence

3.1 Introduction

This chapter has three principal aims. Firstly, it gives an overview of recent policy and service developments in ECCE in Ireland (section 3.2). Secondly, it presents research evidence on the benefits of early year's education in enhancing children's developmental, educational and social outcomes (3.3). Thirdly, it summarises some of the main indicators of quality in early year's education as outlined in the literature (3.4). Section 3.5 then gives a chapter summary and brief conclusion.

3.2 Overview of Developments in Early Childhood Care and Education and Irish Policy

Ireland is considered a late starter in developing the ECCE sector. The traditional view of childcare as a family responsibility (Hayes, 2008) and low rates of female employment meant there was minimal demand for non-parental childcare. Although childcare services existed in Ireland prior to the mid-1990s, community childcare and unregulated private services were sparse and tended to be ad hoc (*ibid.*).

In response to increasing maternal employment during the Celtic Tiger,² and to support the expanding economy, the state addressed childcare for the first time at a high level through the social partnership agreements. Childcare was included to support female employment rates and to address childhood disadvantage.

In 1999, the Irish state launched its *National Childcare Strategy* (NCS) to address equality of opportunity. In developing the Irish ECCE sector, the *Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000–2006* (EOCP) was developed. Its main aim was to expand the number of childcare places and enhance coordination in the sector. It also supported the establishment of city and county childcare committees (CCC) to implement the NCS locally.

In line with EOCP aims to address social inclusion, EOCP funding privileged the community/voluntary (C/V) sector. Services operating on a not-for-profit basis could avail of 100% capital funding up to €1 million and staff grants to offset operating costs. *The National Childcare Investment Programme 2006–2010* (NCIP) supported capital projects and subsidy schemes to reduce childcare fees for families. These schemes reduced the cost of childcare where families had access to not-for-profit community childcare providers.

² The Celtic Tiger era is 1995–2008.

3.3 Quality Enhancement and Early Learning

Initially, government focus was on creating childcare places; however, as the NCS developed, matters like quality and professional standards in the workforce were accorded greater importance. The first legislation allowing for the inspection of childcare services came into effect in 1996 (DoHC, 1996).

Through 2009 a consultation and an analysis of the workforce was conducted, resulting in a formal strategy for the development of the ECCE workforce in 2010. The *Workforce Development Plan* (WFDP) (DES, 2010) highlighted the low level of educational attainment in the ECCE profession. It found that only 12% of practitioners were qualified at degree level, with 46% of practitioners holding no formal qualification or only partially completed vocational qualifications. The WFDP called for a graduate-led workforce, reflecting the growing body of research indicating the impact of practitioner skills on quality (Hayes, 2008). In contrast to the aim of the WFDP to achieve a 60% graduate level in the ECCE sector; the revised regulations for the sector (DoHC, 2006) did not set minimum qualification levels. Without legislation to insist on a basic qualification level, these policy developments are said to have little impact on the development of the sector (Start Strong/Barnardos, 2012).

In 2006, *Siolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006) was launched to enhance quality across all aspects of ECCE practice.³ *Siolta* comprises 16 standards and includes themes such as play, the curriculum, professional practice, identity and community.

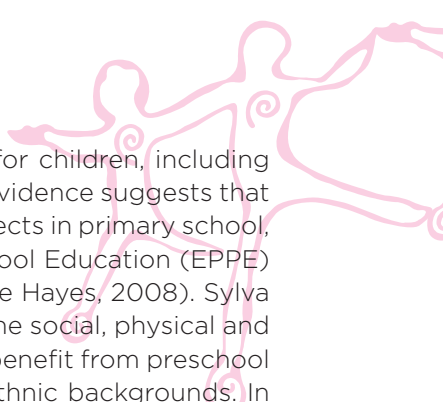
Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework includes all children from birth to six years of age (NCCA, 2009). Like *Siolta*, it is based on interconnected themes like Identity and Belonging, Wellbeing, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking. Reflecting a sustained emphasis on quality, it includes guidelines for practitioners on learning through play and supporting children's learning and development through assessment.

3.4 International and Irish Research Evidence on Early Years Education and Child Development: An Overview

Internationally, a substantial corpus of research indicates that ECCE leads to better outcomes for children in education and social development. *PISA⁴ in Focus* (OECD, 2011) illustrates that 15-year-old students who attended pre-primary school outperformed their peers who did not participate in pre-primary education (see OECD, 2009). In 31 of 34 countries surveyed, students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds benefitted from pre-primary education. In Ireland, Finland and Canada, pre-primary school attendance is associated with improved reading performance among students from immigrant backgrounds especially. PISA (OECD, 2011: 2) concludes, '*it is possible that immigrant students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds who attend high-quality pre-school services are likely to benefit more from the experience*'.

³ ee: <http://siolta.ie/about.php>

⁴ PISA is the Programme for International Student Assessment.



Studies illustrate that attending pre-primary education can improve outcomes for children, including self-confidence, motivation to learn and school readiness (Bowman et al., 2001). Evidence suggests that pre-primary school attendance enhances children's ability to grasp academic subjects in primary school, including mathematics and science. In the UK, the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study⁵ found that early educational experiences affect outcomes for children (see Hayes, 2008). Sylva et al. (2004) found that preschool attendance at high-quality services supports the social, physical and cognitive development of children, and that disadvantaged children in particular benefit from preschool attendance, especially when they interact with children from other social and ethnic backgrounds. In addition, EPPE illustrates that significant benefits can be accrued by children for whom English is a second language. Starting preschool earlier – before three years of age – was also an indicator of improved intellectual benefits for children.

Irish Research on Early Years Education and Child Development

Irish research with asylum-seeking and low-income families also suggests that an early year's education can have significant benefits for children's learning and development. Kane (2008: 20) states that early childhood education can significantly benefit children living in socially and economically marginalised situations like Direct Provision, as children 'have an even greater need for access to early childhood education and care than the mainstream population'. According to Kane (2008), high-quality childcare arrangements are essential for successfully integrating asylum-seeking families and children into communities and for ensuring that children are supported in a warm, clean, caring environment by trained professionals (*ibid.*). Connolly et al. (2002) identify crèches and community preschools as significant for building intercultural competencies and intercultural awareness among children from an early age, which is significant for creating greater respect for people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Dolan and Sherlock, 2010). Significantly, Fanning et al. (2001) argue that children learn much more easily about cultural acceptance and belonging in the early years than later on in the school system (i.e., at primary or secondary school).

ECCE quality indicators

EPPE suggests that quality of service provision impacts significantly on outcomes for children (Sylva et al., 2004). Sylva et al. (2004: 1) state that 'quality indicators include warm interactive relationships with children, having a trained teacher as manager and a good proportion of trained teachers on the staff'. The EPPE study states, '*settings that have staff with higher qualifications have higher quality scores and their children make more progress*' (*ibid.*). Furthermore, EPPE findings indicate that services which prioritise early education and develop a caring approach to practice lead to the prioritisation of intellectual *and* social development.

Hayes (2008: 10) argues that 'a high-quality early childhood care and education system' is an important support mechanism for low-income children and families in Ireland. Drawing on international studies of what works best for children in preschool services, Hayes (2008) identifies five key themes which characterise effective childcare services: the quality of adult-child interactions, adults' skills in supporting children to resolve conflicts, knowledge of the curriculum, knowledge of how young children learn, and support for children's learning in the home. These themes are explored in more depth in Chapter 5, which presents data from the evaluation.

5 The EPPE study is the first major European longitudinal study of the impacts of pre-primary education on children's development between 3 and 7 years of age.

3.5 Chapter Summary and Conclusions

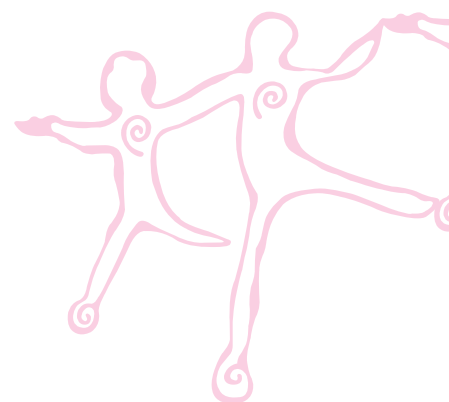
This chapter provided an overview of the main historical developments in the ECCE sector and community childcare provision in Ireland. While the origins and development of childcare policy in Ireland were somewhat incremental, there is now much greater emphasis on children's rights to education and improving educational and social outcomes. *The National Children's Strategy* (DoHC, 2000: 61) states:

Quality childcare and early education services provide lasting cognitive social and emotional benefits for children, particularly those with special needs or who are disadvantaged, and they have the capacity to meet the holistic needs of children as identified in the 'whole child' perspective.

Research underlines that high-quality ECCE potentially alleviates stressors encountered by children who experience poverty and social exclusion. Stressing the crucial understanding of *early intervention*, Hayes (2008: 23) highlights that failing to intervene in the lives of children from an early age potentially sets them 'on a trajectory for lower school achievement that is difficult to alter'. Studies show that outcomes for children attending preschool services depend on quality of service, children's relationships with staff members, the range and type of activities available, and staff training and development. Data from the community preschool and crèche are analysed in relation to these themes in Chapters 5 and 6.

4.0

Methodology



4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 documents how qualitative methods (focus groups, in-depth interviews and Participant Observation) were used to capture views and attitudes about the preschool and crèche. Section 4.2 gives an overview of the methods and the sampling approach. Section 4.3 outlines the process of data analysis and interpretation. Section 4.4 summarises research ethics, and section 4.5 gives a chapter summary and conclusions.

4.2 Combining Qualitative Methods to Capture Perspectives about the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow Services

This study draws upon a mixed-method approach to research design, data collection, analysis and interpretation. Mixed-method research is defined as using two or more methods in a single research project to study the same research questions (Bryman, 2012). Interviewing techniques like focus groups and in-depth interviews are concerned with how people make sense of the world through talk, practices and behaviours (Flick, 2014). The main advantages of mixed-method studies include giving additional depth and breadth to research studies (Bryman, 2007). As part of this study, parents, staff members at the crèche and preschool and key informants were interviewed. The lead author did Participant Observation (PO) at the crèche and preschool sites in 2015.

Sampling

All parents accessing the services in 2015 were invited to participate in the study. The crèche and preschool staff disseminated information about the project to parents in April 2015, and the researchers held four follow-up information sessions in the FRC. The services manager, representatives from the FRC and the HSE also contacted past service users (e.g. parents) by telephone requesting their participation. It was felt that they could give an overview of the development of the services in 2007.

The researchers followed up with past service users who agreed to take part, by e-mail and telephone. In partnership with the services manager, FRC and HSE representatives, the researchers compiled a sampling frame of eight key informants who had detailed knowledge of the preschool and crèche and of Ballyhaunis.

Parents who attended information sessions at the FRC were given details about focus group interviews, including where and when they were being held, and were invited to participate.

Focus groups and in-depth interviews

Focus groups with parents and staff members took place at the Ballyhaunis FRC in June 2015. In total, 36 parents participated. All parents interviewed in focus group discussions are accessing the crèche or preschool services at present. An additional seven parents took part in in-depth telephone interviews with the researchers in August 2015. These parents lived in Direct Provision in Ballyhaunis when the initial service was being developed prior to 2007; however, they since relocated to communities elsewhere in Ireland. Researching with both groups yielded in-depth reflections from parents on perceived impacts of the services on children and adults alike.

Most of the parents who participated were from African nations, particularly Nigeria and Zimbabwe. They were also members of the asylum-seeking community living in the Bridgestock accommodation centre. Other nationalities represented in the focus groups include Irish, Indian, Brazilian, Pakistan and Portuguese. Members of the Travelling community and persons from the wider 'settled' community in Ballyhaunis also took part.

Five key informants and six staff members at the crèche and preschool services also participated in in-depth interviews; see Figs. 6 and 7 below for more details.

Fig. 6: Overview of crèche and preschool staff interviewed

	Female	Male
Crèche staff		
Childcare Leader	1	0
Childcare Assistant	1	0
Preschool staff		
Manager	1	0
Childcare Assistant(s)	2	0
Childcare Leader(s)	1	0

Fig. 7: Key informants interviewed

Organisation	Female	Male
TUSLA	1	0
Ballyhaunis Family Resource Centre (FRC)	1	2
Public Health Nurse	1	0

Field visits and Participant Observation

The researchers completed a number of field visits to the crèche, preschool and FRC in 2015. The lead author completed Participant Observation (PO) in the crèche and preschool in May 2015. A structured observation tool, the Quality Learning Instrument (QLI) as developed by Walsh and Gardner (2005), was utilised to generate data on children's learning and relationships.

4.3 Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim in July 2015. Interview transcripts and the observational tools were analysed using Thematic Analysis (TA), which is described as an accessible and flexible approach to qualitative data analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006). In TA, prevalent themes and subthemes are extracted from the data and subsequently linked to the research questions. Some of the most significant themes and subthemes emerging from the analysis phase include descriptions of life in DP; family support; school readiness; relationships between staff members, children and parents; and trust.

4.4 Ethical Issues

This research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) at NUI, Galway in January 2015. All participants were informed of their rights and about risks to taking part in the study, both verbally and in consent documents.

Due to the sensitivity of the data being collected and the risk of instigating emotional distress to research participants who are deemed to be vulnerable groups (i.e. children, members of the asylum seeker and Travelling communities), ethics were accorded great attention. One of the main risks identified by the researchers was that participants could experience emotional distress during interviews. To minimise this risk, questions were asked in a reflexive manner, participants were probed gently, and questions focused mainly on their feelings about the crèche and preschool.

Safeguarding children was accorded the utmost importance. Both researchers were vetted by Gardai prior to the initial visits to the crèche and preschool. We were also cognisant of our responsibilities to report any potential disclosures of child abuse or neglect during the study, in line with *Children First Guidelines* (DCYA, 2011).

4.5 Chapter Summary and Conclusions

This chapter outlined the study methodology: how qualitative interviews, focus groups and Participant Observation were combined to capture attitudes and opinions about the crèche and preschool. Interviewing a range of participants (parents, staff members and key informants) yielded diverse opinions on the crèche and preschool and their significance to children and families. Chapter 5 summarises the main findings on themes such as family support, interculturalism, school readiness and quality of service.

5.0

Summary of Main Study Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises the principal research findings from interviews with parents, key informants and staff members and observational research data from the preschool and crèche services. The findings are clustered around a number of pertinent themes that emerged from the three datasets: family support, interculturalism and respect for diversity, school readiness, and quality of service.

Some of the principal areas that the crèche and preschool contribute to, as documented in the main evaluation report, are as follows:

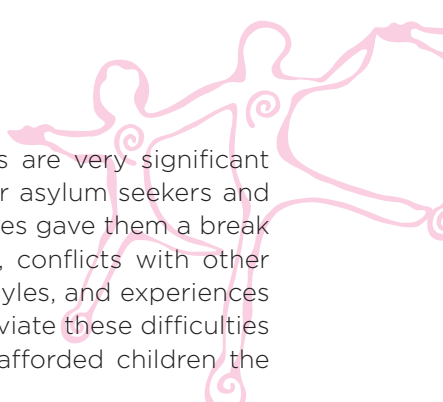
- **Development of intercultural learning and intercultural knowledge**
- **Improvements in linguistic competencies**
- **Improved feelings of belonging among children**
- **Enhanced acculturation experiences of children, young people and adults**
- **Enhanced pre-literacy and pre-mathematical abilities for children**
- **Internalisation of routines**
- **Improved motivation to learn**
- **School readiness**
- **Experiences of normality and freedom**
- **Emotional and material supports for families that positively affect the Home Learning Environment (HLE) and children's wellbeing.**

The most prevalent themes to emerge from the data are discussed in this chapter: informal social supports, interculturalism, school readiness and quality of service. These are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6.

5.2 The Greater Tomorrow Crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool as Providers of Family Support

Informal support for children and families

Broadly speaking, 'family support' refers to the services and activities (both formal and informal) that help to facilitate effective family functioning, supporting good developmental outcomes for children and families (see Devaney and Dolan, 2014; Dolan et al., 2006). Gilligan (2000) states that 'family support is about mobilising support for children's normal development' and about 'mobilising that support in all the contexts in which children live their lives – family, school, peer group, sports team, church and so on'. The Southside Partnership (2005: 40) states that 'community childcare should be viewed as a family support'.



There was ample evidence to suggest that the crèche and preschool services are very significant sources of family support to children and families in Ballyhaunis, particularly for asylum seekers and families with lower SES. Parents living in DP regularly commented that the services gave them a break from parenting in challenging circumstances, including cramped living spaces, conflicts with other residents and staff members over food, lack of privacy, clashes over parenting styles, and experiences of ‘everyday racism’ (see Michael, 2015). The crèche and preschool helped to alleviate these difficulties for parents and children alike; it gave parents a break from parenting and it afforded children the opportunity to access stimulating learning materials and a different environment.

Some evidence suggested that parents experienced mental health difficulties, so having some leisure time to go for a walk and meet other adults was extremely significant for them. The difficulties of doing seemingly routine tasks whilst living in Direct Provision should not be underestimated either. Some parents commented that time away from their children gave them the opportunity to do things that they found more challenging when their children were around, such as washing clothes, completing official paperwork as part of their asylum applications, and attending to personal hygiene. Parents commented that doing these tasks gave them a sense of normality and freedom from the difficulties of living in Direct Provision.

Parents and key informants recalled numerous incidents where crèche and preschool staff members provided emotional supports to families in need. For example, parents reported needing someone to turn to, to share their frustrations at living in Direct Provision and their feelings of missing friends and relatives at home. Even after the children left the crèche or preschool services, staff members continued to provide emotional supports to children and families. This was noted in a few instances where a mother asked the preschool and crèche manager for advice on how to help her son who was in trouble in primary school.

As well as informal emotional supports, staff members at the crèche and preschool provided material supports to families in need, such as clothes, shoes and foodstuffs. This was done in a manner respectful to parents and children, mindful of the sense of economic marginalisation and social stigma frequently experienced by families living in Direct Provision particularly. Parents regarded this as extremely important for themselves and for the children. As one mother remarked:

It shows they care. They care about us and what happens to us and where we live and what our circumstances are.

Interculturalism and respect for cultural and ethnic diversity

The pedagogical approaches at both the crèche and preschool are grounded in interculturalism and respect for diversity. This was evident in the observational data recorded in the two services. In interviews too, staff members reiterated the importance of fostering good relationships between children of diverse cultural backgrounds, regardless of linguistic or social differences.

Interculturalism goes beyond social integration, as the notion of integration sometimes implies that children and families (e.g., asylum seekers) who come to so-called host countries (e.g., Ireland) should adopt the predominant cultural norms of that country. However, this is part of a ‘deficit’ understanding of the knowledge and belief-systems traditionally associated with so-called developing nations. The concept of integration often implies that in order to succeed, children and families should abandon the cultural practices associated with their home countries in favour of westernised practices and understandings.

In this study, interculturalism is defined as processes of learning and knowledge-exchange that foster positive interactions between people of different social, ethnic and religious identities. Some parents, especially those from asylum-seeking and Traveller communities, commented on racist and discriminatory incidents that happened to them in Ballyhaunis. Many others spoke of feeling marginalised in the community. This was evident in the following quotation from a woman living in DP:

There will always be this inferiority, like these people are more superior than I am. They don't see me - it's the people up the hill.

Parents frequently commented on the importance of having accessible childcare services where they feel respected and where their children are treated like equals:

It makes me feel better for whom I am when I know that people accept me and my daughter.

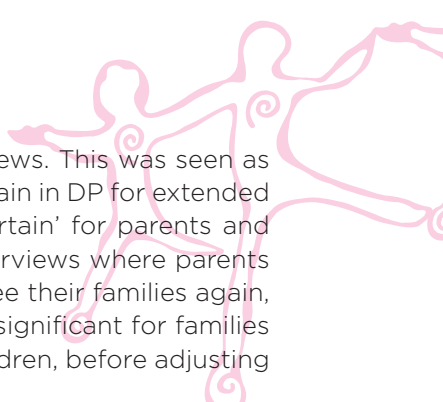
Evidence from the literature suggests that children become aware of ethnic and racial differences in people from around the age of three years (Derman-Sparks et al., 2011). This underlines that early year's education is critical for instilling principles such as social justice, respect for diversity and social inclusion in children and young people. In the preschool and crèche, children were taught about embracing differences in language, cultural beliefs and skin colour. Posters exhibited in the preschool showed children from different nations and cultures engaged in activities like washing and tidying up. Books in the preschool library showed children of different skin colours. Children spoke openly about the countries their parents came from and about animals that lived there. The crèche and preschool staff emphasised celebrating differences, rather than tolerating them:

We talked about skin colour and things like that always. Skin would be a big thing, and we would have books about different colour skin, different colour hair. One of the children went to Pakistan for about six weeks: 'Where is he gone?' 'Oh, he's gone home to see his family, because that's where they came from.' You'd be talking about it and 'He's going to be back in six weeks, which is a long time.'

School readiness

There was significant evidence from the evaluation that attending the preschool and crèche impacted on school readiness among children. Doyle and Timmins (2007: 1) state that school readiness embodies 'more than academic skills'. It includes literacy skills, physical well-being, motor skills, language skills and cognitive development. In this way, school readiness encompasses different aspects of children's development: their social, physical and intellectual development.

Data from parents, key informants and staff members underlines that children learned skills in pre-reading and numerical competencies at the preschool. Children at the crèche and preschool learned about shapes and colours. Observational data recorded in the preschool highlighted that some children knew the full alphabet, and all except the very young had some knowledge of numbers and letters.



The importance of instilling routines in children's lives was emphasised in interviews. This was seen as especially important for children living in Direct Provision. While people often remain in DP for extended time periods, many interviewees commented that DP was 'transient' and 'uncertain' for parents and children. This uncertainty and lack of control in people's lives was evident in interviews where parents recalled not knowing how long they would be in Ballyhaunis, when they would see their families again, and where they would live when they left Ballyhaunis. Routine was seen as very significant for families in DP, and instilling routines in young children's lives was seen as critical to all children, before adjusting to life at primary school.

Significantly, evidence from the study suggests that the crèche and preschool contributed to children's linguistic development, especially where children acquired English as a second language. Parents also reported improvements in children's speech development. The evaluation underlined that children learned many other skills associated with school readiness at the crèche and preschool, including personal hygiene and tidying up. Interviewees also stated that the crèche and preschool instilled children with a deeper motivation to learn, self-confidence in their own abilities, and a sense of normality and freedom.

Quality of Service

All key informants and parents who participated in the study implied that the preschool and crèche provide high-quality service to parents and children. In focus groups, for example, parents commented that the crèche and preschool are *'really great services'*. Parents interpreted a quality preschool or crèche service as one which was caring to the children, helped them to develop skills in reading and numeracy, and encouraged them to use their imaginations. The professionalism and pedagogical approach of both services was also commented on by key informants and parents as conducive to quality service. Interviews and observational data gathered in the crèche and preschool underline that staff members are responsive to children in the classrooms. This corroborates Hayes (2007: 5), who states that *'effective early learning environments are nurturing. Caring is educational; education is caring and both are effective when responsive to the child.'*

The evaluation findings showed that both the preschool and crèche services correspond strongly to a number of characteristics of quality ECCE provision as outlined by Hayes (2008) and in the EPPE study, summarised in Chapter 3 of this report. Staff members at both services showed warmth and care towards the children, and there was a good degree of balance in the proportion of adult- and child-led activities. Observational data collected in both services revealed instances of Sustained Shared Thinking (SST), particularly in the preschool. This is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 6.

Staff members at both the crèche and preschool are well trained in ECCE and were responsive to children at both sessions. There was ample evidence that attending the crèche and preschool instilled children with a strong motivation to learn. There was also ample evidence from interviews with staff members, key informants and parents that staff members at both services are responsive to the needs and wishes of parents. This was an important finding of the study and was significant for building trust with members of socially marginalised communities.

Parental participation is a hallmark of quality ECCE service provision. Staff members made efforts to involve parents more widely in the services. However, most parents were satisfied with minimal involvement in areas like curriculum design, and preschool staff members respected their wishes. Ní Raghallaigh (2014) underlines that encouraging greater participation among members of asylum-seeking communities is often difficult due to distrust, memories of traumas, fears of violence and uncertainty about the future.

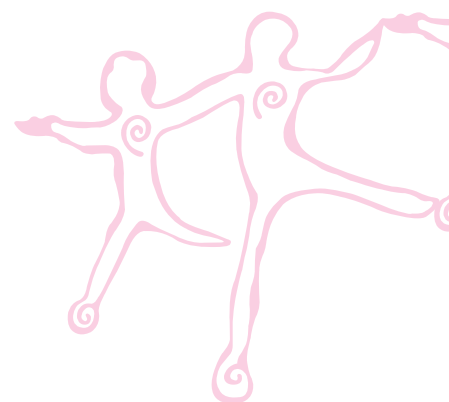
5.3 Chapter Summary and Conclusions

Data presented in this chapter implies that the crèche and preschool impact significantly on children and parents, especially those who live in Direct Provision. Parents reported that the services give them a break from the routines of parenting in difficult circumstances, giving them a sense of freedom and normality. Parents, key informants and staff members reported improvements in children's school readiness, language competencies and intercultural learning. Other impacts reported were on children's abilities to forge friendships and learn routines, an improved sense of belonging, and a motivation to learn.

Chapter 6 discusses the data presented here in the context of literature on family support, impacts on children's aspirations, their cognitive development and sense of belonging.

6.0

Discussion



6.1 Introduction

Chapter 6 discusses the main study findings on the perceived impacts of the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche on children and families. The three major themes highlighted in Chapter 5 are similarly focused upon in this chapter: family support, intercultural learning and quality of service. These are discussed in section 6.2. Section 6.3 provides a brief chapter summary and conclusions.

6.2 Perceived Impacts of the Greater Tomorrow Crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool on Children and Families

Care, trust and quality in the crèche and preschool services

The findings suggest there was a broad consensus among interviewees on the positive impacts of the crèche and preschool services on children's educational and social development. Staff and key informants commented that the quality of service at the crèche and preschool is of a high standard overall, and parents were satisfied with the services provided.

Parents characterised a quality service in relation to the following elements: relationships between staff at the crèche and preschool and the children, parents' own relationships with staff members and management, professionalism of service, and the emotional supports provided to them by staff at the crèche and preschool services. This shows a strong correspondence between perceptions of quality elucidated by interviewees and in the literature (cf. Hayes, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford, 2004).

The crèche and preschool as sources of informal social support

As shown in Chapter 5, there was ample evidence to suggest that the Greater Tomorrow Crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool were prime sources of informal social supports for children and families. The main evaluation report documented the lack of supports for families in the area, especially for members of asylum-seeking communities and other low-income families. A dedicated Family Support Worker for children and families is extremely important for the Ballyhaunis area, given the socio-economic profile of families living in the area and their complex needs. This is discussed in more depth in Chapter 7.

Research from Ireland and internationally highlights the emotional, economic and social challenges that migrants and asylum seekers face in everyday life, including racism, language barriers and transitioning to new ways of life (see Ní Raghallaigh, 2014). The present report adds to this literature, highlighting the importance of community-based spaces like the crèche and preschool services for enhancing the transition of immigrant families in rural areas. Furthermore, this report underlines the importance of informal social support in the daily lives of children and families living in DP. Devaney et al. (2013: 19) state that 'social support is a central feature of life and generally refers to the acts we perform in order to give or get help'. Pinkerton and Dolan (2007) underline that children who can access practical, emotional supports and advice from others are likely to be more resilient (Pinkerton and Dolan, 2007, cited in Devaney et al., 2013: 19).

Reported impacts of the crèche and preschool on children's aspirations, social skills and linguistic competencies

Hayes (2007) discerns the main areas of learning that should develop through preschool attendance. These include building aspirations, developing social skills and increasing task commitment. Evidence from this evaluation suggests that children's social skills improved through attending the crèche and preschool services. This was evident across a wide spectrum of practices, including personal hygiene, ability to forge friendships, and tidying up. Evidence from parental interviews shows potential improvements in children's motivation to learn and their commitment to completing work at primary school to a high standard. Notably, parents who were interviewed attributed this in part to their children's prior experiences at the crèche or preschool, which were said to instil children with a deeper motivation to learn. That said more comprehensive results on motivation to learn and academic achievement could be garnered by applying a quantitative tool administered to children over time.

Importantly, parents reported improvements to the children's linguistic competencies and speech development, which they attributed in part to attending the preschool and crèche. People learn words tacitly, through reading and talking and listening in public places. While other factors (e.g., exposure to television and radio programmes, and relationships with people in the community and in Direct Provision) affect children's language learning, evidence from interviews implies that the crèche and preschool also contribute markedly to children's linguistic competencies.

Interculturalism and respect for cultural diversity

Qualitative evidence presented in this report implies that the preschool and crèche contribute to positive intercultural experiences between children and adults in Ballyhaunis and instil a culture of respect and appreciation for diversity. The Centre for Effective Services (CES) (2013) states that enhancing children's appreciation of ethnic and cultural diversity is essential for successful acculturation and improving educational outcomes for children:

Encouraging children to view difference as a positive and to include others from a variety of backgrounds should form part of policy strategies that promote integration in a growing multicultural society. Initiatives . . . that affirm diverse identities and promote positive attitudes to diversity are vital for the successful integration of children and adults from minority ethnic groups. . . . The potential impacts on a child who is a victim of discrimination or exclusion are anxiety, isolation and low academic achievement.

Sense of belonging among children

Evidence gathered for this evaluation showed that children feel relaxed in both the preschool and crèche facilities. This was evident from the interviews and PO completed as part of the research. Creating a learning environment where children feel that they belong is seen as critical for developing their feelings of self-confidence, improving their critical thinking skills and increasing their propensity to ask questions (Bucholz and Sheffler, 2009). Evidence from the Participant Observation data implies that children felt able to express themselves and regularly asked questions in both services.

Relationships between staff members, parents and children

The study yielded important findings on relationships between children, staff members and parents. Staff members at both services are very responsive to children and to parents, and strong trusting bonds developed between parents and staff members. The intercultural aspect of the services and the emphasis on respecting cultural diversity were central to this. The importance of relationships is also outlined in *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006), which emphasises 'fostering constructive interactions' between adults and children 'based on mutual respect, equal partnership and sensitivity'.⁶ The EPPE study contends that relationships between children and staff members are critical to developing children's self-confidence, and for enhancing children's critical thinking skills (see Sylva et al., 2004).

⁶ Please see: http://siolta.ie/siolta_infant.php

Impacts on school readiness

As shown in Chapter 5, evidence suggests that the preschool and crèche contribute to school readiness. In particular, the findings demonstrate that attending the crèche and preschool instil a daily routine in children's lives, which is especially valuable for children living in DP. Other skills, such as learning how to eat using play cutlery, how to sit at a table and how to play with other children, are exceptionally important for transitioning into primary school. This evaluation highlights that DP sometimes militates against parents teaching these skills to children due to cramped living conditions, differences in parenting styles, disagreements between residents, and lack of income. The UK Millennium Cohort Study found that children from lower-SES backgrounds are frequently at a disadvantage in school readiness compared to children from higher-SES backgrounds due to poor nutrition and inability to access stimulating learning environments.⁷

Supporting children's cognitive development: Sustained Shared Thinking (SST)

The ECCE literature outlines that supporting children's cognitive development is an important aspect of quality. Expanding children's questioning is particularly important for enhancing children's cognitive development (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004). This is closely aligned with the concept of Sustained Shared Thinking (SST), which develops critical thinking skills and was found to be a feature of ECCE services in the UK deemed as 'excellent'. Purdon (2014) defines SST as:

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 the understanding. (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002: 8, cited in Purdon, 2014: 3)

Sustained Shared Thinking also means that adults show interest in the child's conversation and attempt to extend their questioning and their understanding in the classroom (Siraj-Blatchford and Smith, 2010). In SST, practitioners do not lead children to the 'right' answer. Instead, the emphasis is on educators and children co-constructing the problem, fostering deeper thinking in children about their activities and what they mean to them.

Elements of SST were observed especially during the PO session in the preschool. This report recommends that SST activities be extended in the preschool and the crèche to encompass a greater emphasis on extending children's critical thinking skills. Preschool staff members completed training in SST, which should greatly help them plan curriculum activities into the future.

6.3 Chapter Summary and Conclusions

Evidence presented in Chapters 5 and 6 suggest that the Greater Tomorrow crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool are high-quality ECCE childcare services. It highlights in particular that staff members at both services provide important informal supports to parents and children, both materially and emotionally. Findings from the evaluation imply that attending the services impacts positively on children's language skills and social development, instilling them with routines and improved school readiness. Chapter 7 offers some conclusions and recommendations, based on research data, on how the services might be improved, and issues facing the preschool and crèche services into the future.

⁷ The Millennium Cohort Study (UK) is a prospective study of 18,819 babies who were born in the UK from 2000–2002. For more information, please see: <http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/page.aspx?siteid=851>

7.0

Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Introduction

This report comprises a summary of the process study evaluation of the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche services. The study yielded in-depth data from interviews with parents, staff members and key informants about the perceived impacts of the services on children and families and about the quality of service provision. Highly significant findings were generated on matters like informal social supports for children and families in Ballyhaunis; the importance of interculturalism as a pedagogical ethos, and for strengthening relationships between immigrant families and the wider Ballyhaunis community; and the learning and other aspects of the pedagogical approach of both services.

7.2 Aims and Objectives

The principal aims of this study are to:

- (a) Describe the Greater Tomorrow crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool services; the principles that guide ways of working with children and families, the overall ethic that shapes and reflects interactions between children and staff members, and the pedagogical approaches drawn upon in the crèche and preschool services.
- (b) Critically analyse the reported effects of the Greater Tomorrow crèche and preschool facilities for improving educational, cognitive and social outcomes for children attending the services, as elucidated by parents, staff members and key informants.
- (c) Critically analyse the extent to which the Greater Tomorrow crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool services foster the principles of inclusivity, social and cultural diversity and participatory ways of working with children and families.
- (d) Analyse some of the principal pedagogical approaches drawn upon by staff members in the crèche and preschool facilities and the extent to which they actively support children's learning and development.
- (e) Critically appraise how and to what extent the crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool operationalise particular markers of quality of services for pre-primary educational facilities, as documented in academic literature.
- (f) Provide recommendations on how the crèche and preschool services might better meet the needs of service users and continue to enhance children's social and cognitive development into the future.

7.3 Overview of Chapters

This summary report comprises seven chapters. Chapter 1 summarised the aims and objectives of the report (as above). Chapter 2 described the crèche and community preschool in detail. It gave socio-demographic profiles of children and families currently accessing the services, and a brief economic and social profile of the Ballyhaunis area.

Chapter 3 focused on major policy developments in ECCE. In particular, it looked at Aistear and Síolta, which emphasise social and ethnic diversity and belonging. It also provided Irish and international evidence on how quality ECCE affects educational outcomes for children. Chapter 4 documented the study methodology. Chapter 5 presented the main findings. Chapter 6 discussed these findings in the light of literature on quality in ECCE provision, school readiness and informal social support.

7.4 Research Conclusions and Recommendations

The main conclusions and recommendations of this study are now discussed thematically.

Learning and teaching approach: Inclusivity and intercultural learning

The pedagogical approach in both the crèche and preschool is grounded in concepts of care, equality, inclusivity, and the valuing of familial involvement in service provision. This is extremely important given the sociocultural profile of Ballyhaunis and the socioeconomic profile of children and families accessing the services. The inclusive aspect of the preschool and crèche services should be maintained into the future. Inclusivity and equality should remain embedded in the pedagogical approach and in relationships between staff members, children and parents.

Sustained Shared Thinking (SST) in teaching and learning

Evidence from this evaluation suggests that there is a good degree of balance in child-led and adult-initiated activities, especially in the preschool. There was also evidence of Sustained Shared Thinking (SST) in the preschool curriculum. A key recommendation of this study is that SST continues to be developed in the preschool teaching method and that it is incorporated to a greater degree in the teaching method of the crèche.

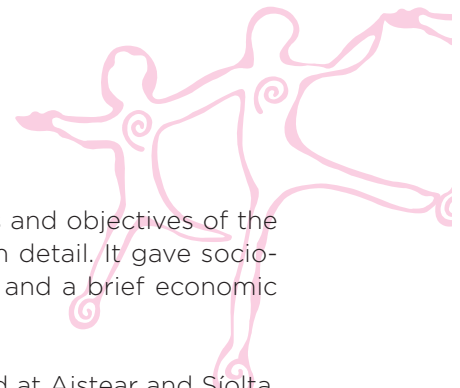
Play and learning facilities for children's social, cognitive and emotional development

A wide range of play and learning activities are easily accessible to children in the crèche and preschool. Children exhibited a high level of confidence and sense of belonging in both services; they were at ease when playing with each other and interacting with teachers. Staff and management in both the crèche and preschool should continue to seek out high-quality play and learning facilities that enhance children's cognitive and social development.

Involving parents in children's early learning experiences: Learning stories

A key recommendation of this report pertains to children's cognitive development. The preschool emphasises skills in child-led exploration and learning, which is in keeping with sectoral developments, particularly the *Síolta–Aistear Practice Guide*. This is an area of practice that should be promoted more strongly in the crèche, drawing on contemporary knowledge and current resources being developed through the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

Documenting children's learning through *Learning Stories* is an effective method for involving parents in children's early learning experiences and in highlighting children's active role in their own learning. Such a method demonstrates the depth of early learning that occurs through a well-resourced play environment when supported by knowledgeable and competent early childhood practitioners. This is a method of observation and documentation, leading to effective planning of future learning that is promoted through the *Better Start* mentoring service.



Staff training and development

Staff members at the crèche and preschool are well trained and understand the challenges experienced by children in DP which could impact negatively on their learning. The supportive attitudes of management towards staff engaging in additional training are significant for quality enhancement also.

Research highlighted in Chapter 2 indicates strong links between staff qualifications and quality provision, and as such, the service should maintain a minimum level of staff training at NFQ Level 6 in keeping with the ECCE scheme minimum requirements. EU policy on ECCE qualification levels advocates for 60% of practitioners at graduate level.⁸ Staff members should continue to accord emphasis to developing their training profiles through accredited continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities. This report recommends that accredited training be targeted at increasing staff qualifications where feasible, to enhance the number holding NFQ Level 7 or Level 8 major awards.

Strengthening social support for children and families

The findings yielded data on how the crèche and preschool provide social support for children and parents, especially those living in DP. Data indicates that high levels of instrumental, emotional, advice and esteem support are offered to children and families accessing the crèche and preschool. As outlined in Chapter 6, a dedicated Family Support Worker for the Ballyhaunis area could significantly improve social and educational outcomes for children and parents, by supporting the work of the FRC, the PHN and the crèche and preschool. This is a very significant finding of this report and should be dealt with as a matter of urgency.

This report also highlights that more supportive systems need to be put in place to assist children and families living in DP especially. These families and children require high levels of family support, given the levels of economic and social marginalisation that they encounter in everyday life. More effective systems need to be put in place locally, in the wider Ballyhaunis community, and by government, to improve the acculturation experiences of children and families and support interculturalism in the community.


Sustainability of the crèche and preschool

Significantly, this study identified factors that will affect the sustainability of the crèche and preschool facilities. Themes such as staff training and development, parental involvement and participation, and the effectiveness of the teaching and learning approach will affect the services going forward.

The number of children attending the crèche is a pressing issue that must be given precedence. As this service uniquely supports only families and children residing in the DP accommodation centre, its current structure and possibly location are a barrier to families in the wider Ballyhaunis community and therefore to increasing the number of children attending. Though the preschool is not affected by such limited enrolment, recent national policy changes to the ECCE scheme (free preschool year) have the potential to increase demand for the preschool service, by extending the age range of eligible children and the duration of each child's attendance.

It is important that management and staff members at the crèche and preschool services engage with representatives of TUSLA, the Mayo County Childcare Committee, the FRC and Bridgestock Ltd to plan effectively for the future. It is extremely important that preschool education is available for children residing in the Old Convent accommodation centre in the future.

⁸ Please see: http://www.startstrong.ie/files/Start_Strong_submission_to_DPER_on_Partnership_Agreement_with_E.pdf

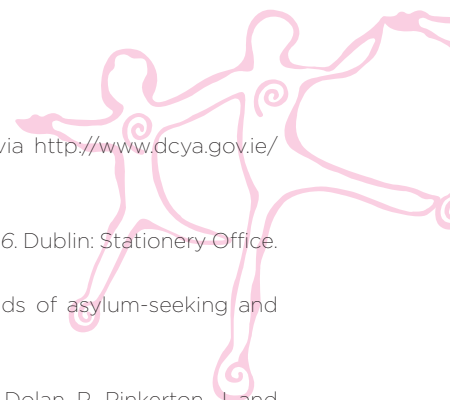


This report recommends that stakeholders explore the possibility of the crèche service extending enrolment to children in the wider Ballyhaunis community where families wish to access a community childcare service. Currently there is no such service in the town that is accessible and affordable to families with children under three years. Such an extension of the service will provide much-needed opportunities to local families and give greater certainty about the future of the crèche service than currently exists. The current location of the crèche on the grounds of the accommodation centre may need to be reconsidered if this is a barrier to extended enrolment.

Recent expansion of the ECCE scheme by the current government, and the age of commencement in the scheme being lowered to three years, will have a real impact on the preschool, its current hours of operation, and the duration children may now. Key stakeholders will need to review these policy changes and assess and plan for any changes that may be necessary. As the preschool is the only community-based service in Ballyhaunis, it is imperative that its ethos, approach and values are maintained, as they are the strength of the service and a benefit to families. Continued access to the preschool by asylum-seeking families, Travellers and low-SES families should be maintained. Additionally, these families should be consulted, if not involved, in implementing any resultant changes to the childcare services. This may also be an important avenue for encouraging greater parental participation in service planning.

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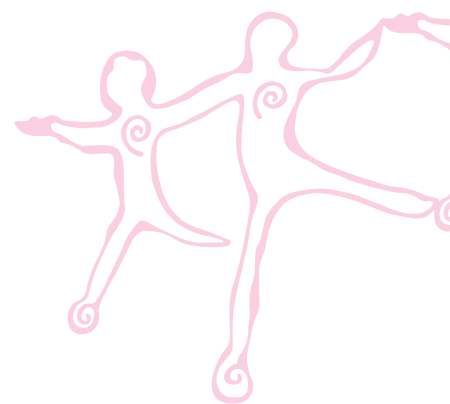
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