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# ‘Hoping for a Better Tomorrow’

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

BY

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JUNE 2016

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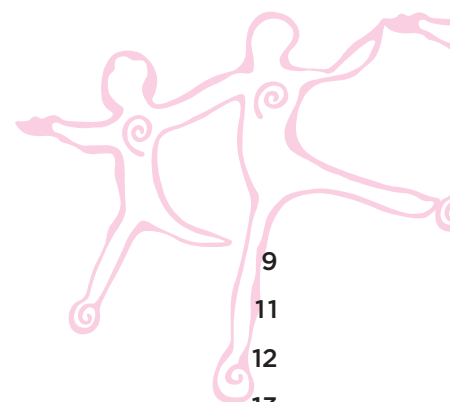
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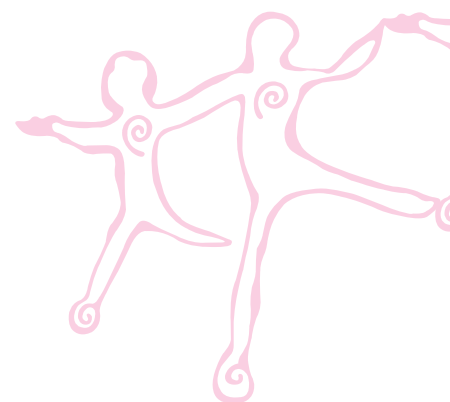
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# Glossary



<b>APPP</b>	American Perry Preschool Project
<b>CCC</b>	County Childcare Committee
<b>CECDE</b>	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
<b>CPD</b>	Continuing and Professional Development
<b>CV</b>	Community and Voluntary sector
<b>DCYA</b>	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
<b>DES</b>	Department of Education and Skills
<b>DA</b>	Discourse Analysis
<b>DJELR</b>	Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
<b>DOHC</b>	Department of Health and Children
<b>DP</b>	Direct Provision
<b>ECCE</b>	Early Childhood Care and Education
<b>ECE</b>	Early Childhood Education
<b>ECEC</b>	Early Childhood Education and Care
<b>ECI</b>	Early Childhood Ireland
<b>EOCP</b>	Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme
<b>EPPE</b>	Effective Provision of Preschool Education
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FRC</b>	Family Resource Centre
<b>FG</b>	Focus Group
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product
<b>GP</b>	General Practitioner
<b>HLE</b>	Home Learning Environment
<b>HSE</b>	Health Service Executive
<b>IEA</b>	International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement
<b>INTERREG</b>	Innovation and Environment Regions of Europe Sharing Solutions
<b>MWR</b>	Mid-West Radio
<b>NCCA</b>	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
<b>NCIP</b>	National Childcare Investment Programme
<b>NCCS</b>	National Childcare Strategy
<b>NFQ</b>	National Framework of Qualifications
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>OMC</b>	Office of the Minister for Children
<b>PHN</b>	Public Health Nurse
<b>PISA</b>	Programme for International Student Assessment

<b>PO</b>	Participant Observation
<b>REC</b>	Research Ethics Committee
<b>RIA</b>	Reception and Integration Agency
<b>ROI</b>	Return on Investment
<b>SAI</b>	Sociological Association of Ireland
<b>SES</b>	Socio-Economic Status
<b>SST</b>	Sustained Shared Thinking
<b>TA</b>	Thematic Analysis
<b>TUSLA</b>	The Child and Family Agency
<b>TY</b>	Transition Year
<b>UCFRC</b>	UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational Social and Cultural Organisation
<b>USA</b>	United States of America
<b>WFDP</b>	Workforce Development Plan
<b>WHB</b>	Western Health Board

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# Executive Summary



This report presents the results of a qualitative, process study evaluation of the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and 'Greater Tomorrow' crèche services, conducted by the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (UCFRC), NUI, Galway in 2015. Currently, the community preschool and the crèche facility are located in the grounds of St Mary's Abbey and the Old Convent grounds respectively, close to Ballyhaunis town centre, Co. Mayo. Together, both services provide childcare spaces for approximately 60 children, employing seven staff in total. In both services, all staff members are qualified to NFQ Level 5 standards or higher. One senior staff member in the crèche is trained to NFQ Level 7, and the manager of both the crèche and preschool services is completing an NFQ Level 8 degree programme in Early Childhood Studies and Practice at NUI, Galway. The Greater Tomorrow crèche caters for children aged between 18 months and 3 years and operates a 4-day service from Monday to Thursday. The preschool caters to children aged 39 months or older and operates a 5-day service per week (Monday to Friday). Both the crèche and preschool services implement aspects of the 'HighScope' curriculum, which emphasises active and participatory approaches to learning and teaching.

The childcare services were established in 2007, as a response to the growing numbers of asylum-seeking children and families who relocated to the Bridgestock Ltd accommodation facility in the Old Convent grounds in Ballyhaunis as part of the introduction of Direct Provision (DP) policies in Ireland. Representatives from the Ballyhaunis Family Resource Centre (FRC) working in partnership with representatives of the Health Service Executive (HSE) observed that parents living in DP were in dire need of enhanced family support services requiring high-quality childcare services for themselves and their children. At their inception, the crèche and preschool were a single service and were located in a prefabricated building that was purchased by Bridgestock on the grounds of the Old Convent. However, in 2010, the services effectively divided in two; the preschool is now located in a larger prefabricated building adjacent to the FRC building at the Abbey premises, while the crèche remains next to the Bridgestock property in the Convent grounds.

Representatives from the Ballyhaunis FRC and the HSE were aware of the various stressors often faced by families living in Direct Provision pertaining to financial constraints, food and diet, racial tensions and cramped living conditions. As will be shown later in this report, international and Irish research literature makes reference to similar challenges frequently encountered by families and children living in DP (see especially Chapter 1). It was thought that the establishment of good-quality preschool services would improve the educational and social outcomes for children, would enhance the lives of parents by simply giving them a break, and could function as an invaluable source of informal social support for children and parents alike. There were also concerns about access to affordable, quality childcare facilities for immigrant families living in the Ballyhaunis area, many of whom relocated in the 1980s for cultural reasons or to access employment in the local industries, such as the meat factory that slaughtered in the traditional Islamic *halal* manner. Similarly, families identified as having low socio-economic status (SES) living in the Ballyhaunis area frequently lacked the transport facilities needed to access affordable childcare services which operated away from the town centre. Working together, the Ballyhaunis FRC and HSE West were central to the founding of the preschool and crèche centres, and to establishing a more integrated and networked relationship between the preschool and crèche facilities with other essential services, including local medical services.

The Ballyhaunis Community Preschool was officially launched by Minister of State Dara Calleary in 2009. At present, all the children attending the crèche service are members of asylum-seeking communities living in the Bridgestock accommodation facility in the Old Convent grounds. A number of children attending the preschool service are from immigrant families living in the wider Ballyhaunis area, while others are members of the local Travelling community (see Chapter 1 for a more comprehensive statistical overview of the socio-economic and demographic profiles of children attending the crèche and preschool services). As will be shown later in this report, the number of children attending the preschool from the wider community around Ballyhaunis is steadily increasing, particularly in more recent times (see Chapter 1). However, due to the changing demographics of persons living in DP, the number of families using the Greater Tomorrow crèche service has decreased significantly. This raises questions about the sustainability of the crèche service which are explored in subsequent chapters of this report (see especially Chapters 8 and 9).

## Aims and Objectives

The principal aims of this evaluation are to:

- (a) Describe the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche 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.**
- (e) Critically appraise how and to what extent the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche 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 the broader community and continue to enhance children's social and cognitive development into the future.**

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, using interviews, focus groups and Participant Observation (PO) to capture stakeholders' views about the crèche and preschool and the extent to which they meet the needs of the local community and service users. A total of 43 parents, six staff members and six key informants participated in the study. This was supplemented by rich PO materials captured by the lead researcher, who completed observational research in the crèche and preschool services on two occasions in May 2015. Recorded PO data captured staff interactions with the children, ways of working with children in the classroom, and the range of activities on offer in both services. More detail on the study methodology is provided in Chapter 4 of this report, and findings are reported in Chapters 5 and 6.

## Overview of Principal Research Findings

The major findings of this report are now summarised:

- **The findings demonstrate that the Greater Tomorrow crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool offer affordable, quality childcare provision to children and families living in Ballyhaunis.**
- **The teaching and learning ethos at the crèche and preschool is informed by principles such as inclusivity, respect for diversity, equality and children's rights.**
- **Staff members at both the crèche and preschool work interactively with children and actively encourage creativity, individuality and self-expression in the classroom.**
- **Both the crèche and preschool provide extensive supports to service users and to migrant, lower-SES and asylum-seeking children and families particularly.**
- **The range of supports offered to children and families go beyond educative ones to encompass material, emotional and financial supports for children and families. These supports offset some of the stressors and risk factors encountered by asylum-seeking children and families living in Direct Provision.**
- **Parents and key informants expressed very positive attitudes towards the crèche and preschool. Participants reported that attending the services impact on social and cognitive outcomes for children, including language development, advancements in pre-reading skills and improved school readiness.**
- **Parents in Direct Provision frequently commented that attending the crèche or preschool services was significant, as it provided children with a sense of normality and freedom which they do not have in DP.**
- **Attending the preschool and crèche services were also thought to facilitate children and young people's transition to life in Ireland. This view was expressed by parents from asylum-seeking communities especially.**
- **Parents regularly reported that attending the preschool and crèche services impacted on children's health and well-being. Relationships that developed between staff members at the crèche and preschool, the FRC and the local public health nurse (PHN) were seen as instrumental in this regard.**
- **Staff members at the crèche and preschool services received requisite training in childcare and actively seek out continuous professional development (CPD) and training opportunities in their discipline to learn additional skills.**
- **Structurally, both the crèche and preschool buildings are well maintained. Both facilities contain stimulating toys and learning materials to aid children's cognitive and social development and learning.**



## Overview of Principal Research Recommendations

Some of the main recommendations of this report are as follows:

- One of the principal strengths of the crèche and preschool services is the ethic of interculturalism which is embodied in the approach to learning and teaching. This emphasis on developing children's intercultural competencies from an early age should be maintained.
- The learning and teaching approach encompasses a good degree of balance in the level of child-led and adult-initiated activities. This must also be developed into the future.
- Staff encourage a degree of parental participation in the crèche and preschool services. This should be instilled to a greater extent in both services going forward.
- Staff members must continue to seek out opportunities for CPD training. Additional training opportunities in the area of developing intercultural competencies of children and youth may be useful, given the emphasis on developing positive, intercultural relationships between children in both services.
- More staff needs to be supported to up-skill to degree level, in line with EU recommendations for 60% of staff in the ECCE sector to become qualified to NFQ Level 8.
- Staff members may benefit by keeping up to date with major international research on enhancing quality in early year's education.
- The provision of a full-time dedicated Family Support Worker in Ballyhaunis would be very beneficial for enhancing informal supports for parents and families in the area.
- An effective promotional strategy needs to be put in place to further promote the preschool services in the Ballyhaunis area.

## Structure of the Report

The following is a synopsis of the main content of subsequent chapters.

**Chapter 1** provides an overview of the genesis of the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche initiatives. It contextualises the data presented in subsequent chapters, providing an in-depth account of the socio-demographic and ethnic profile of children and families living in Ballyhaunis.

Chapter 1 also synthesises policies and research pertaining to asylum-seeking and Direct Provision in Ireland. Chiefly, it summarises some of the principal national and supranational policy developments on asylum-seeking, starting with the Dublin Convention (1999). The chapter focuses on research which documents some of the challenges associated with parenting in DP, an area which has received much critical attention in the Irish and international literature. In doing so, it contextualises qualitative materials provided in Chapters 5 and 6, which focus attention on the educational and social needs of children and families in DP.

**Chapter 2** outlines evidence from major national and international studies on the impacts of effective childcare provision on outcomes for children and families, and documents important policy developments in the community childcare sector and more broadly in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Ireland. This chapter argues that while policies in ECCE in Ireland have developed somewhat incrementally, recent policies emphasise the importance of quality enhancement in ECCE services. Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006) are also alluded to in this chapter, as they have significance for diversity, inclusion, quality and interculturalism in early years education.

**Chapter 3** focuses on the main theoretical perspectives that inform this study, namely those around family support, social support theory, resilience and socio-ecological perspectives. These are applied to contextualise findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6.

**Chapter 4** documents the project methodology in greater detail. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 outline the major findings of the study, presenting interview data from parents, staff members and key informants, and Participant Observation data from observational sessions completed by the lead author in the two childcare facilities in May 2015. The findings presented focus attention on the pedagogical approach of the crèche and preschool, reported impacts of the childcare services on children and families, and matters to do with quality enhancement. These findings are examined in greater depth in Chapter 8, where they are discussed in the context of literature provided in Chapters 1, 2 and 3. Chapter 9 outlines the principal recommendations of this study on how learning and teaching may be better supported in the crèche and preschool into the future.

# 1.0

## Introduction: Overview and Context

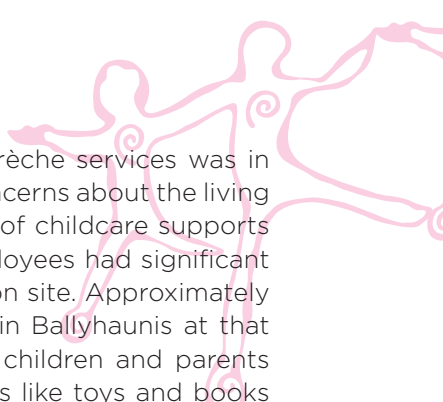
### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a contextual overview of the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche services, and builds a socio-demographic profile of children and families currently accessing the crèche and preschool facilities. It also provides a picture of the demography of the Ballyhaunis area and the socio-economic needs of children and families accessing the crèche and preschool facilities at present. Overall, incorporating this detail is important, as it contextualises the study's major findings which are outlined in Chapters 8 and 9 of this report.

Significantly, the latter sections of this chapter also provide a rich overview of international, Irish and UK literature on the challenges of living in Direct Provision. This is done in order to contextualise the material, social and educational needs of children and families living in DP in Ballyhaunis, and lends further weight to the qualitative materials discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 particularly. An overview of DP policies in Ireland is provided in this chapter, followed by research perspectives on the challenges faced by children and families living in DP. Importantly, research highlights that having adequate family support systems in place, which includes quality childcare facilities that stimulate children's intellectual and cognitive development, can offset some of the risk factors associated with living in DP. This is discussed in greater depth throughout subsequent sections of this report (see Chapters 5, 6 and 7 especially).

### 1.2 Overview of the Development of the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow Crèche Services

The Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche operate an integrated childcare service, located close to Ballyhaunis town centre in east County Mayo. The services are presently situated in two locations. The Greater Tomorrow crèche facility is located in the grounds of the asylum seeker accommodation facility operated by Bridgestock. The Ballyhaunis Community Preschool is located approximately 0.25 km away, near St Mary's Abbey. The Preschool facilities are open to all children and families living in the Ballyhaunis area, while the Greater Tomorrow crèche caters to children from the asylum-seeking community only. Because of their geographical location near to the asylum seeker accommodation facility operated by Bridgestock, children accessing the preschool tend to be from the asylum-seeking community. However, this trend appears to be changing, due in part to the changing demographic profile of people living at the DP accommodation centre. The Ballyhaunis 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 and respecting and celebrating difference.



The genesis of the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche services was in 2003, when representatives from the Western Health Board (WHB) expressed concerns about the living conditions of children and families living in DP. It was thought there was a lack of childcare supports and play areas available to asylum-seeking children and families, and WHB employees had significant concerns about the safety of children living on the asylum seeker accommodation site. Approximately 150–200 children were reported to be living in the DP accommodation centre in Ballyhaunis at that time. A room was provided by Bridgestock in the accommodation centre for children and parents to access a slide for children to play with. However, the facility lacked resources like toys and books that are essential for children’s intellectual stimulation and social development. It was thought that a purpose-built childcare facility located on the site would go further in addressing the educational and childcare needs of children and families, potentially leading to better outcomes for them.

A Parent and Toddler Group were set up in the grounds of the Bridgestock accommodation facility in 2004. However, many parents from asylum-seeking communities felt they could not attend due to financial hardship, as a small entrance fee was charged. In 2005, HSE representatives were awarded a funding grant under the EU Social Inclusion Funds, and a dedicated childcare service was established in a portable building provided in the grounds of the Bridgestock accommodation centre with an adjacent outdoor play area. Originally, one of the principal aims of the services was to provide respite to parents, many of whom struggled to cope with everyday living in Direct Provision. An interrelated aim was to support the development of English language and computer classes for asylum seekers that were on-going in the local FRC. Attendance at these courses was initially sparse, due in part to the lack of childcare facilities provided for these families. Representatives from the HSE worked with mothers in the asylum seeker accommodation complex who had experience working with children in their home nations, and in the early years of the services these women acted as volunteers in the crèche facility, minding children. Interview participants who took part in this study commented on the value of this approach; it ‘legitimised’ the services to members of the asylum-seeking community, while also providing the mothers with a social outlet and opportunities to meet people from the community (lead author’s fieldnote, 17 May 2015).

In the beginning, the crèche and preschool service were targeted mainly at asylum-seeking children and families; however, a childcare facility that catered principally to members of the Travelling community closed in 2007, and many of the children who attended that service subsequently transferred to the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool located at the Abbey building. While the number of children attending the preschool has increased in recent years, the proportion accessing the crèche has decreased significantly. This is also due in part to the changing demographic profile of persons accessing DP in the Ballyhaunis area. Many more single men now reside in the Bridgestock accommodation centre, and this coincides with a subsequent decrease in the numbers of families placed in the facility. A more comprehensive overview of the demographic profile of children accessing the crèche and preschool services is given below in Fig. 1. Figures are correct to July 2015.

Fig. 1: Overview of children using the crèche and community preschool services (as of July 2015)

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

As is evident from the table above, attendance at the crèche facility at July 2015 solely comprises children from the Bridgestock DP centre. More children attended the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool than the crèche in 2015. Issues to do with the sustainability of the crèche facility were raised by key informants, staff and parents interviewed for this study. This will be discussed later, particularly in Chapter 7, which makes recommendations for both the crèche and preschool services.

The figures outlined above should also be interpreted in the context of demographic statistics on the total number of children living in DP in Ballyhaunis. According to figures from the end-of-year report by RIA (2013), 117 children were resident in the asylum seeker accommodation complex at Ballyhaunis in December 2013. A more complete breakdown by age is provided in Fig. 2 below.

Fig. 2: Number of children residing in Bridgestock accommodation centre in Ballyhaunis in 2013.  
Source: RIA (2013: 46).

Age Group	Number of children
<b>0-4 years</b>	41
<b>5-12 years</b>	66
<b>13-17 years</b>	10
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>117</b>

More recent figures from RIA (2014) indicate slight changes in the demographic profile of residents and the age groups of children living in DP in Ballyhaunis. This is precipitated by the increase in the proportion of single men entering the Bridgestock accommodation centre, and by the recent departure of some young families from the Ballyhaunis asylum seeker complex, having acquired naturalisation status in Ireland (see Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Number of children residing in Bridgestock accommodation centre in Ballyhaunis 2014. Source: RIA (2014).

Age Group	Number of children
0-4 years	19
5-12 years	71
13-17 years	13
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>103</b>

RIA (2014) provides statistics on the proportion of persons of different age groups living in asylum seeker accommodation centres nationally. This shows that a significant number of children continue to live in the accommodation centres across Ireland. Nationally, in 2014, a total of 502 children aged 0-4 years lived in accommodation centres. More in-depth statistics on this are outlined below in Fig. 4.

Fig 4: Number of children residing in RIA-operated accommodation centres nationally in 2014. Source: RIA (2014: 47).

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

As is evident from statistics provided by RIA (2014), the proportion of children of preschool age (aged 0-4 years) is very significant in asylum seeker accommodation centres across Ireland. In some centres, such as Ashbourne House and Clonakilty Lodge in Cork, the total percentage of children aged 0-4 years is 25% and 28.2% respectively (see RIA 2014: 13-17). In Ballyhaunis, the figure stands at approximately 13.8% (*ibid.*). These statistics underline the need to provide quality childcare facilities for residents of DP centres in Ireland (see Kane, 2008).

In order to address the aims and objectives of the report, the crèche and preschool services shall now be described. Section 1.3 provides an overview of the staff in the crèche and preschool services, their levels of training and access to CPD, and a description of their play facilities.

### 1.3 Overview of Staff Training and Development at Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow Crèche

As of July 2015, the Greater Tomorrow crèche had two part-time staff members. The preschool has six staff members working directly with children. The preschool staff members include two community childcare assistants working part-time, one Community Employment (CE) worker, one TÚS worker and one community childcare leader. Three temporary relief workers are also used in both services in cases of emergency or when there is a need to relieve staff. One manager presides over the crèche and preschool services, and staff turnover at both is low. All persons employed at the preschool and crèche are female. All staff members working directly with children are Garda vetted.

Staff members at the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche facilities are trained to requisite NFQ Level 5 qualifications in childcare. One staff member at the crèche has a NFQ Level 7 degree, and the manager of the services is trained to NFQ Level 7 (diploma) and is pursuing an honours degree programme at NFQ Level 8. The manager also qualified as a nursery nurse in the UK in the 1980s and had extensive professional experience working with children in severely disadvantaged communities in the north of England, before relocating to Ballyhaunis.

Staff members at both the crèche and preschool services have also engaged in significant Continuing and Professional Development (CPD) opportunities in the area of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). 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. As will be shown later in this study, staff training and development are often given as an indicator of the quality of service in early years education (see Hayes, 2008), and this is explored in greater depth in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

## 1.4 Description of Play Facilities and Staff Members' Interactions with Children

As documented in the methodology chapter (Chapter 4), the lead researcher made multiple visits to the preschool and crèche sites in April and May 2015, completing a significant degree of Participant Observation (PO) in both services. Child and Family Agency Preschool Inspection Reports were also accessed online, to further contextualise the quality of play facilities, the relationships between staff members and children, and other issues pertaining to quality of service.<sup>1</sup>

Structurally, the crèche and preschool buildings are well maintained, and both services contain a wide range of toys and play activities for children to engage with. The preschool contains 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 also readily available to children. It was observed that the preschool curriculum encompasses activities that are led by children and by adults, and there appeared to be an appropriate level of balance in the number of each. Preschool staff members interact with the children in a professional manner; relationships between individual staff members and the children are strong, and staff relate to them one-on-one. A healthy-eating programme is in place in the preschool, and fresh drinking water is readily available to children. Children were also encouraged to exercise cleanliness and personal hygiene and to wash their hands before eating, after doing activities and after they come back from the toilet. Staff attentively worked with the children at low tables, and the atmosphere was relaxed and unhurried at all sessions observed.

The crèche, located at the convent building, is much smaller than the preschool, but it caters to a much smaller number of children. Relationships between members of staff and children appear to be very strong, and children are encouraged to express themselves freely and to be creative. Staff members were on hand to assist children to perform tasks such as playing with bubbles and working with tactile materials like Play-Doh. Children were not permitted to use any potentially dangerous objects like children's scissors, and played happily with a wide array of toys that were provided. Overall, children attending both services appeared to be intellectually stimulated in their play activities. They were well supported by staff members, who maintained a professional approach at all times, even when faced with challenging behaviour by children. These relationships between children and staff members, and their significance for children's educational and social development, are discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of this report especially.

Having described the services in depth, we now provide an economic, social and demographic overview of the Ballyhaunis area, which in many ways is unique in the west of Ireland.

<sup>1</sup> To access these reports, please see: <https://www.pobal.ie/Pages/HSE.aspx>

## 1.5 A Social, Economic and Demographic Profile of Ballyhaunis

Ballyhaunis is a small town located in rural East Mayo,<sup>2</sup> near to the border with County Roscommon. According to the 2011 Census, the total population of County Mayo is 130,638 persons.<sup>3</sup> Ballyhaunis is part of Ireland's Border, Midlands and Western (BMW) region and is incorporated in the INTERREG programme, which aims to promote social and economic cohesion across the EU. The town is located near to main roads to urban hubs, including Galway City and Sligo, and national bus and rail services link the town to major centres, including Dublin. The town is also located near to Ireland-West Airport, and developing air transport links is part of the strategic vision for the town from 2010–2016 (Mayo County Council, 2010). McGreal (2012) suggests that the relocation of the main road from Sligo to Galway in recent years, diverting traffic away from the main streets in Ballyhaunis, impacted negatively on the vibrancy and economic sustainability of the town. However, a substantial number of privately owned and operated businesses are established in the town, which include steel fabrication plants and kitchen, furniture and polymer manufacturing facilities. Due to the presence of the Halal meat factory in the town, food manufacturing is of particular importance to the local economy, for national and international trading (Mayo County Council, 2010). Due to its location, farming is also an important industry in the Ballyhaunis area, although the number of part-time farmers has risen in recent times. Indeed, the 2002 and 2006 Censuses revealed that the majority of employed persons over the age of 15 years were in manufacturing and retail sectors (*ibid.*).

### Migration and socio-demographic change in Ballyhaunis

Census 2011 states that the total population of Ballyhaunis is approximately 2,312, and a sizeable proportion of the town's total population hail from outside Ireland. These 2011 figures are broadly consistent with 2006 statistics on population growth and change. In the 2006 Census, approximately 36.6% of the Ballyhaunis population were classified as non-nationals (i.e., from countries of origin outside of Ireland, including EU member states). Mayo County Council (2010) states that a surge in population took place from 2002 to 2006 in Ballyhaunis and that many non-nationals living in the area were Polish, Lithuanian and UK citizens (Mayo County Council, 2010). The sizeable Asian population living and working in Ballyhaunis over the last three decades is also noteworthy. Many Asian persons were initially drawn to the area to obtain employment in the local meat processing firm located in the town, while others moved for predominantly cultural and religious reasons. Ballyhaunis Mosque was built in 1987 and was Ireland's first purpose-built mosque. This, however, only tells part of the story. Ballyhaunis has a particularly long history of ethnic diversity, with the first migrants arriving in the early 1970s. An accurate depiction of the levels of socio-cultural and ethnic diversity should therefore take into account the presence of second- and third-generation (Irish-born) residents. In the most recent census, 59.6% of the population identified themselves as being ethnically other than 'white Irish'. These levels of ethnic diversity set Ballyhaunis aside from other small towns in Ireland and make it a unique context for service provision. Indeed, Ballyhaunis is further set apart by the heterogeneity of this migrant and minority population. The migrant population of the town can be loosely thought of consisting of four groups, who arrived in the area at different periods and for different reasons (McGarry, 2012).

The longest-established migrant group is the Pakistani community. Ballyhaunis has been home to a Pakistani community since the early 1970s, when a Pakistani entrepreneur purchased a local meat processing plant in order to export meat slaughtered in the *halal*, traditional Islamic, manner to the growing Muslim population in continental Europe. The Muslim community grew slowly in the early years. In the 1970s it consisted of six families; this had increased to 30 families of Pakistani descent by the 1990s. In the early 1980s another meat processing plant, Iman Casings Ltd, was established in the town by a Middle Eastern entrepreneur. The majority of employees of Iman Casings are Muslims who have been mainly recruited from the Middle East (McGarry, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> The CSO categorises small towns as towns with a total population of 1500–4999 persons.

<sup>3</sup> TP lease see CSO (2011a) *Area Profile for County Mayo* (downloaded via <http://census.cso.ie/areaprofiles/PDF/CTY/mayo.pdf>, last accessed 14 December 2015).



Placing Ballyhaunis in context further, it is important to note that County Mayo has a relatively small migrant population compared to other Irish counties. The total number of migrants living in Ireland in 2011 was over half a million. The 2006 Census shows however that Ballyhaunis had the second largest migrant population in Ireland, proportionate to towns of similar size, and was second only to Gort, Co. Galway, whose migrant population accounted for over 40% of the total population of the town (CSO, 2006). In 2011, Ballyhaunis had the largest proportion of non-nationals, at 41.5% of the population (2299 persons in total). This compared to a national average of 14.9% for all other Irish towns (CSO, 2012: 11).<sup>4</sup> Polish was the largest group (175 persons), followed by Pakistani (136 persons). According to the Census (2011a), the majority of persons resident in Co. Mayo were classified as white Irish (112,116 persons), whilst the number of Asian or Asian Irish stood at 1270. The number of white Irish Travellers living in Co. Mayo in 2011 was 1385.<sup>5</sup> A total of 1028 persons spoke a language other than English or Irish at home, and 337 persons reported that they could not speak English well. Urdu<sup>6</sup> was the most popular foreign language spoken at home; a total of 337 persons spoke it regularly, according to Census 2011 (CSO, 2011a).<sup>7</sup>

### Age and local population structure in the Ballyhaunis area

The age profile of Ballyhaunis is broadly in line with population statistics from the rest of the country. The population of children aged 0–14 years was slightly higher than the national average, standing at 21.1% in 2006, and the number of persons aged 25–44 years was approximately 32.4% for the same period, in line with national averages (Mayo County Council, 2010). In 2011, the total number of children of preschool age (0–4 years) in Ballyhaunis was 233, of primary school age (5–12 years) was 300 and of secondary school age (13–18 years) was 158.<sup>8</sup> This further highlights the significance of the age cohort of preschool children to the local area, both socially and economically.

Having attended to the demographic profile of Ballyhaunis, we now discuss policies, practice and research perspectives around Direct Provision in Ireland. Extensive attention is accorded to literature on the challenges of parenting in DP accommodation, and to the importance of adequate childcare supports provided for children and families.

## 1.6 Direct Provision in Ireland: Policies, Practice and Research Perspectives

We now turn to the origins and development of Direct Provision (DP) in Ireland and the research evidence around the childcare needs of children and families living in DP. Particularly in more recent times, DP has attracted substantial attention in the literature (see Arnold, 2012; Dolan and Sherlock, 2010; Breen, 2008), with studies highlighting the various challenges that are often faced by parents and children in these settings (see for example Ogbu et al., 2014; Fanning, 2007). The literature points to the inadequacies of the DP system in terms of income provision, and the difficulties encountered by parents and children to access goods and services, due in part to restrictions placed on labour market access to asylum seekers. Research also shows that DP perpetuates multiple social inequalities, exacerbating conditions that lead to child poverty (Fanning and Veale, 2004). Indeed, Arnold (2012) labels DP as ‘state sanctioned child poverty and exclusion’. These issues are explained in further depth in the subsections which follow.

<sup>4</sup> The CSO categorises small towns as towns with a total population of 1500–4999 persons.

<sup>5</sup> TP lease see CSO (2011a) Area Profile for County Mayo (downloaded via <http://census.cso.ie/areaprofiles/PDF/CTY/mayo.pdf>, last accessed 14 December 2015).

<sup>6</sup> The CSO categorises small towns as towns with a total population of 1500–4999 persons.

<sup>7</sup> TP lease see CSO (2011a) Area Profile for County Mayo (downloaded via <http://census.cso.ie/areaprofiles/PDF/CTY/mayo.pdf>, last accessed 14 December 2015).

<sup>8</sup> See CSO (2011b) *Area Profile for Town Ballyhaunis Co Mayo* (downloaded via [http://census.cso.ie/areaprofiles/areaprofile.aspx?Geog\\_Type=ST&Geog\\_Code=29014](http://census.cso.ie/areaprofiles/areaprofile.aspx?Geog_Type=ST&Geog_Code=29014), last accessed 14 December 2015).



### Context of Direct Provision policies in Ireland

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). Prior to this, asylum seekers had the same entitlements as homeless people to emergency accommodation, supplementary income and rent allowance (Faughnan and Woods, 2000). Since 2000, however, every person who applies for asylum seeker status in Ireland is subject to the DP system (Healy 2004). Its introduction coincided with a dispersal policy by the Irish government, where asylum seekers were relocated to hostel accommodation across the country. Under Direct Provision, the State provides directly for the accommodation of asylum seekers in these hostels while providing them with a small, supplementary allowance (*ibid.*). Currently, the weekly allowance paid to an adult is €19.10 and to a child is €9.60. However, as early as 2006, qualitative research conducted with members of the asylum-seeking community in Waterford documented a number of shortfalls in the DP system regarding income poverty in particular (WAP et al., 2006). This has also been documented in the findings of other studies on asylum-seeking families, which show that DP significantly impedes the quality of life of children and families in DP settings (see Collins, 2002). As Arnold (2012: 7) states:

*The key themes identified by previous reports, media and complaints regarding the system of Direct Provision relate to concerns over the safety and overcrowding of the physical environment, family life, social exclusion, barriers to accessing and participating in education, diet and access to play space. Children in Direct Provision are often alienated as a result of enforced poverty and exclusion.*

### Labour market access and income inequalities

Since 2000, the EU made efforts to harmonise policies on asylum seekers. However, to date, the Irish state has failed to implement the Reception Conditions Directive (Directive 2003/9/EC) which enables asylum seekers to access the labour market and sets out the minimum standards on the reception of applicants for asylum in EU member states.<sup>9</sup> Currently, the Irish state does not permit asylum seekers access to the labour market.

Commentators on Direct Provision frequently state that in this regard, it places extreme pressure on asylum-seeking parents and children, and that rather than alleviating some of the difficulties and challenges faced by asylum seekers, the DP system appears to exacerbate them (Arnold, 2012). Indeed, Fanning (2002: 3) states that Direct Provision was meant as a 'punitive' measure to discourage asylum seekers from entering Ireland and that it imposes 'severe economic inequality' on children and families. Similarly, O'Connor (2003) argues that DP constitutes a form of 'citizenship-based discrimination', calling for its immediate abandonment. Similarly, Breen (2008) contends that Direct Provision violates asylum seekers' rights to an adequate standard of living, particularly in the areas of food and housing, and that these policies undermine human dignity and equality.

Focusing mainly on child poverty among asylum seekers in Ennis, Limerick and Cork, Fanning and Veale (2004) argue that DP results in severe income poverty and high levels of material deprivation for asylum-seeking families, and exacerbates other difficulties to do with language barriers, cultural learning, racism, poverty and social marginalisation (see Smyth and Whyte, 2005; Fanning, 2001). Quoting interviews with young people in DP centres, Fanning and Veale (2004) argue that DP results in accommodation deprivation and child social exclusion:<sup>10</sup>

9 Recent research by Barry (2014) undertaken on behalf of Nasc recommends that Ireland opts in to the Reception Conditions Directive (2013/33/EU), which gives asylum seekers the right to work after 6 months in the country.

10 Please see Nwagwuagwu (2009) for detailed commentary on social exclusion of asylum-seeking adults in Cork City.

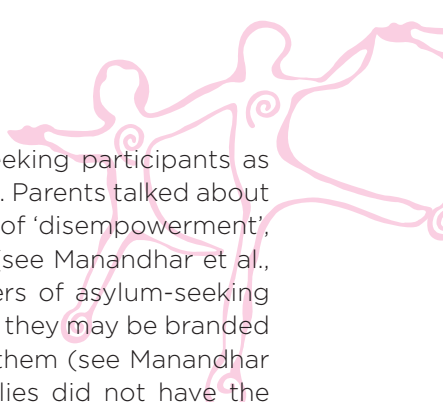
*Material deprivation resulting from the inadequacy of direct provision payments was exacerbated by extreme accommodation deprivation resulting from overcrowding in hostels. Asylum seeker families experienced chronic overcrowding in hostels. Families living in hostel accommodation generally shared a single room irrespective of the age of children. Hostel life was found to have a detrimental impact upon the developmental wellbeing of children in a number of ways. Toilet training of small children was impeded by overcrowding. Adolescent boys and girls experienced enforced dependence and a lack of private space. Generally they had to share rooms with their parents. Children living in hostels found it hard to make friendships with children they met at school. Their parents could not reciprocate invitations to birthday parties or even to come over and play. Children in interviews were all too aware of their marginal status within Irish society.*

Similarly, Vanderhurst (2007) completed an anthropological study of asylum seeker complexes in Galway, stating that the recreational facilities provided for children were wholly inadequate. Significantly, Vanderhurst (2007) found that only two asylum seeker accommodation facilities provided on-site childcare facilities. Smyth and Whyte (2005) also illustrate that young people's experiences of asylum seeker complexes was poor overall; meals were unhealthy and there was a stressful atmosphere, which impacted on children's feelings of security and self-identity. Kane (2008) reveals that inadequate childcare provision is a key feature of DP settings in the west of Ireland.

While the provision of appropriate childcare facilities is not a panacea for child welfare or child protection in DP accommodation centres, it can be reasonably assumed that appropriate childcare facilities can contribute markedly to children's social, emotional and intellectual development in DP. As will be shown in Chapter 2 of this report, large-scale longitudinal research from the UK (the EPPE study) contends that pre-primary education is highly beneficial for children from families with lower SES, and settings which promote intercultural competencies among children have multiple benefits for children (see Siraj-Blatchford, 2004). It can also be assumed that childcare centres in DP could have other benefits for children in DP, constituting a safe space for children to frequent, enabling them to access toys and play materials that they may not have access to at home. These themes are expanded on further throughout Chapter 2.

### **Food, nutrition and parental disempowerment**

A recent report by Nasc (2004) focused on the experiences of asylum seekers in Cork City, specifically in the area of food consumption. Nasc (2004) corroborates Ogbu et al. (2014) and other studies on life in asylum-seeking complexes, thus illustrating that there has been little change over the years in the quality of food provided in DP centres. Citing research undertaken by Aoife Collins (2001) on asylum seeking in Kerry, the Nasc report illustrates that asylum-seeking families mainly find food in DP bland, monotonous and inedible (see Collins, 2002: 61, cited in Nasc, 2004: 8). This is similar to results in research by Manandhar et al. (2006), whose mixed-method study of 76 asylum seekers in the west of Ireland revealed that many asylum seekers live in 'food deserts': they are unable to access ethnic foods due to incomes or lack of transport. In addition, the food provided in asylum-seeking shelters did not reflect the multi-faith religious needs of people living in asylum accommodation, with many respondents in Collins's (2002) study stating that the food provided did not suit their religious beliefs. Some respondents coped by buying their own food and cooking it for themselves, which is in breach of restrictions on cooking laid down by RIA. This impacted severely on their discretionary incomes. In a similar vein, it must be remembered that as well as being necessary for human health, food is a cultural product, and people from different national and cultural backgrounds regularly express their unique identities through food production and consumption (see Almerico, 2014).



In numerous studies, the food provided in DP is often described by asylum-seeking participants as unsuitable for babies and children, and high in salt, fat and sugar (see Kane, 2008). Parents talked about their fears regarding the nutritional needs of their children and their own feelings of 'disempowerment', as they were unable to make decisions about their children's diet and nutrition (see Manandhar et al., 2006). The Nasc (2004) report and Ogbu et al. (2014) also show that members of asylum-seeking communities are reluctant to complain to management about inadequate diets as they may be branded as 'troublemakers' and they fear that punitive sanctions may be imposed upon them (see Manandhar et al., 2006). Comparably, Ogbu et al. (2014) report that asylum-seeking families did not have the discretionary income to purchase foods of higher nutritional value for children even when children skipped meals to avoid eating the foods provided in asylum-seeking complexes. This also impacts on parents' ability to afford good-quality childcare and afterschool facilities for children, particularly in situations where there is a monetary charge for availing of these facilities.

Significantly, a report by Kane (2008) based on qualitative research in reception centres in the west of Ireland, entitled *A Right to Play*, and also documents some of the childcare needs of asylum-seeking communities in County Mayo specifically. Drawing on qualitative research in two hostel sites, Kane (2008) used in-depth interviews with parents, asking them to discuss their levels of access to facilities and supports for children and families and what it meant to care for children in Direct Provision environments. Importantly, children's views were also sought; Kane (2008) asked children to express through drawings, paintings and playing with toys, what they liked about living in Ireland, and the things that they did not like very much. Kane (2008) yielded similar findings around attitudes to food among members of the asylum-seeking community; a small minority of interviewees suggested that they were going without food to supplement their children's diets. Significantly, Kane (2008) also found that culturally diverse diets were not adequately catered for in hostels. Some families expressed concerns about cooking techniques in hostels. Fried foods were regularly cooked together. As Muslim tradition permits the consumption of Halal meats only, some children and families skipped meals due to fears of cross-contamination (i.e., other foods were fried with non-Halal meats and therefore they could not be consumed).

### Asylum seeker health status and family incomes

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as 'a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'.<sup>11</sup> Numerous reports and media coverage highlight that the health status of refugees and asylum seekers is a highly complex issue. In a five-year study of the health status of asylum seekers in a reception centre in Dublin, Boyle et al. (2008) show that asylum seekers frequently present with life-altering illnesses that point to their participation in different cultural rituals and their socio-economic marginalisation in their own countries. Other reports also suggest the potentially poor health status of refugees and asylum seekers in Ireland. The *Irish Examiner* (2003, cited in Nwagwuagwu, 2009: 7) reported that 'refugee and asylum seeker patients visited the GP three or four times as often and had consultations two to three times longer than other patients'. Comparably, Nwagwuagwu (2009) cites a report in the *Irish Times* which states that access to adequate medical care is still a 'big issue' for people seeking asylum (*Irish Times*, 2008). This view is repeated in more recent sources such as O'Shea (2014), who quotes medical professionals saying that Direct Provision exacerbates mental and physical health conditions. This is also echoed in Nwagwuagwu (2009), who states that Ireland pledged to uphold Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which recognises 'the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health', and finds that the policy of dispersal and long-term residence in communal accommodation centres 'exacerbate' asylum seekers' health needs (see IRC, 2002, cited in Nwagwuagwu, 2009: 2).

<sup>11</sup> Please see: <http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story046/en/>

A mixed-method study by Fanning and Veale (2004) of 43 households in Ennis, Cork and Limerick illustrates that whilst asylum seeker children and families are entitled to medical cards under the DP system; it is often very difficult for members of the asylum-seeking community to afford medical goods and services for their children that are not covered by medical cards. Inadequate diets during pregnancy, which were exacerbated by DP, also resulted in problems for new mothers while breastfeeding. Both O'Connor (2003) and WAP et al. (2006) report that mental health problems and feelings of boredom are increasingly common among asylum seekers. Lowdell (2001) for example argues that the biggest issue for refugees and asylum seekers is mental health, ranging from the effects of 'cultural bereavement', to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following experiences of war, torture and flight. Smyth and Whyte (2005) corroborate this; they found that living in asylum-seeking hostels was detrimental to the mental health of lone mothers:

*Arrival in a strange country and having little success in developing a social support network, coupled with the stark reality of parenting without their extended family resulted in the women experiencing a strong sense of isolation. Such isolation could potentially impact negatively on their psychosocial wellbeing (p. 45).*

### **Feelings of social isolation and uncertainty: Parenting in Direct Provision**

A report by Barry (2014) undertaken on behalf of Nasc: The Irish Immigrant Support Centre highlights some of the problems faced by children and families in Direct Provision. Barry (2014) found that the majority of asylum seekers remain 'stuck' in the DP system for prolonged periods of time. A significant number of people remain in the system for up to seven years.<sup>12</sup> This can lead to feelings of mistrust among members of the asylum-seeking community, lack of certainty about their future, and feelings of boredom and 'needing a break'. Barry (2014) also outlines the cramped conditions that many asylum-seeking families live in at DP centres. Shared facilities like bathrooms can lead to lack of privacy for children and families, and it can be very difficult for parents to teach children life skills like walking and toilet training while sharing space with other families. Differences in parenting styles can lead to tensions among people living in asylum hostels, leading to frustration and upset for many children and parents (see Barry, 2014). Comparably, Ogbu et al. (2014) discern that people in DP centres draw upon different parenting styles that are influenced by their unique cultural backgrounds. At times, this led to conflict between parents about sharing toys between children; parents had different understandings about what it meant to give 'moral guidance' to their children, and they saw this as problematic for their children's social development.

Smyth and Whyte (2005) comment on the importance of family support in offsetting some of the challenges for parents in asylum-seeking complexes. They argue that the starkest contrast evident between women in asylum-seeking complexes and their Irish counterparts is the absence of support from extended family, which is often encountered by asylum-seeking women. Participants in Smyth and Whyte's (2005) study commented that in their home nations, women often receive informal supports from family members and friends, who give them a break from the children. Practical supports like having someone to talk to was invaluable for these women for combatting feelings of uncertainty and isolation (see pp. 44-45). In turn, feelings of isolation and loneliness can impact severely on people's morale, self-esteem and mental health. Indeed, mental health difficulties like depression are frequently discussed in the literature on people's experiences of living in DP (see Arnold, 2012). Kane (2008) also found that boredom was a common experience of adults living in the hostels. Participants commented on the lack of public transport and that they could not afford to go to larger towns and cities. One mother interviewed by Kane (2008) stated, 'we just stay here in the centre, nothing happens', while another said that they 'eat, sleep and walk to town sometimes' (p. 13). Kane sums up her findings as follows:

<sup>12</sup> Please see the following website for more details on this point: <http://www.Nascireland.org/campaigns-for-change/direct-provision/>

*All parents without exception, referred to the boredom and monotonous daily routine in which they spend their days. . . . For most, their days consisted of sleeping, attending meal times, watching television and taking a walk around town. . . . Clear feelings of frustration were expressed along with concerns around their own emotional and physical health as a result (p. 13).*

Supports from local and community organisations and people living locally are therefore extremely important for the health and well-being of members of the asylum community in Ireland (*ibid.*). As will be shown in Chapters 5 and 6 in particular, discourses around the need to have a break and desires for greater formal and informal supports emerged frequently in interviews with members of the asylum-seeking community in Ballyhaunis. Most significantly, later chapters show that the preschool and crèche are identified by interviewees as critical sources of informal social support for children and families living in the DP centre. Significantly, Smyth and Whyte (2005) also comment on the status of refugee women who are particularly susceptible to poor employability, survivor guilt and low levels of competency in the native language of so-called host nations. This is evidenced in international literature on the social status of refugee women in countries outside of Ireland also (Chung, 2001, cited in Smyth and Whyte, 2005: 21).

### **Opportunities for play and recreation in Direct Provision**

Lack of access to play facilities to facilitate children's intellectual stimulation and social development are also outlined in the literature on children and families in DP. Parents interviewed for Ogbu et al. (2014) discussed the lack of play facilities available for their children in DP centres. This, coupled with the multiple dangers faced by children in DP such as being exposed to other adults and risky behaviours inappropriate for children to witness, renders asylum-seeking accommodation centres precarious spaces for children and families.

Citing the *Living in Ireland Survey* (ESRI, 1999) Fanning and Veale (2004) reveal that families in asylum-seeking accommodation in Limerick, Ennis and Cork are often unable to afford toys and outings on their children's special occasions, such as birthdays. The survey identified toys and outings as necessities for enhancing children's healthy growth and their development. Comparably, research by Fanning et al. (2001) found that many children in asylum seeker accommodation often had a lack of space to play and study, which has adverse consequences for their social and cognitive development (i.e., motivation to learn, development of 'learning culture' at home, reading skills, etc.) Opportunities for play in DP were also outlined in the Arnold (2012: 24) report:

*Residents and non-governmental organisations have highlighted the lack of play space and social interaction in a variety of accommodation centres. The Irish Refugee Council found in 2001 that the space provided for children to play was inadequate and that communal accommodation centres were not in the best interest of the child. The Daughters of Charity study found that most children were spending large portions of the day sleeping or watching television. This was attributed to the financial constraints on the parents symptomatic of their living situation. The study argued that the abnormal living circumstances of children in Mosney resulted in stunted personal and social development evidenced by observing low level of play and interaction among preschool-aged children.*



Arnold (2012) also draws on *Patching up the System* (Faughnan et al., 2002), which found that play facilities in asylum seeker accommodation centres were inadequate. In particular, the Consultative Group in *Patching up the System* commented on the lack of specially constructed playrooms for children and families. Residents at one asylum seeker centre are recorded by Arnold (2012) as sending correspondence to the United Nations (UN) outlining their concerns about play facilities and the lack of toys available for children to play with. Lack of play facilities is clearly in breach of Article 31.1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which specifically underlines children's rights in the areas of play, recreation and leisure.

Overall, evidence drawn from national and international literature highlights the extreme difficulties that are characteristic of asylum seekers' lives in Ireland and elsewhere. It is well noted that the perpetuation of Direct Provision constitutes direct and indirect violation of human rights, impacting on people's morale, 'felt security' and sense of connectedness to others. As concluded by Arnold (2012), among others, Direct Provision is an ineffective system socially, economically and politically. As President Michael D. Higgins noted:

*The national appropriation of 'human rights' – their entanglement with citizenship – has given rise to new categories of persons without rights, such as refugees, displaced and stateless persons. How are we to conceive of the rights of these people, whose number is in the millions in the world today?*<sup>13</sup>

Recent research highlights the complex emotional landscape navigated by children and families from asylum-seeking communities in everyday life. The road to asylum is long and arduous, complicated by many difficulties. While community childcare services are not a panacea to improving children's futures, it is certainly a factor that can impact markedly on children and families in adversity. As shown in the next chapter, an increasing corpus of research evidence highlights the importance of appropriate childcare provision in the lives of all children and families, especially for those who are in need.

## 1.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter accomplished a number of tasks. Firstly, it provided a contextual overview of the development of the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche services, outlining demographic profiles of the children using the services at present. Secondly, it argued that there is a demonstrable need for good-quality, affordable childcare services in Ballyhaunis, highlighting the prevalence of families and children with lower SES living in the area. Third, it gave background detail on the historical and cultural significance of Ballyhaunis as a research site, thus illustrating the importance of childcare services that cater to children of different ethnic and multi-faith backgrounds.

The second part of the chapter provided an overview of Direct Provision policies and research which highlights that DP is untenable, exposing children and families to multiple dangers and potentially leading to very poor developmental outcomes for children living in these contexts. Research highlights the complexity of problems faced by children and families in DP. These include access to healthcare and the paucity of resources which further advance children's play and recreational needs, and those which potentially lead to better educational outcomes for them. Chapter 2 develops this theme, presenting pivotal international research evidence on the importance of pre-primary education for children living in adversity, and the significance of childcare services that develop intercultural competencies and intercultural sensitivities in children.

<sup>13</sup> Please see Human Rights in Ireland (2014), 'The Rights of Others: Asylum Seeking and Direct Provision in Ireland' (webpage downloaded via <http://humanrights.ie/economic-rights/the-rights-of-others-asylum-seekers-and-direct-provision-in-ireland/>; last accessed 14 December 2015).

# 2.0



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

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter has two principal aims: (1) it offers an overview of the principal policy and service developments in the area of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Ireland, and (2) it outlines comprehensive evidence from international and Irish research on the benefits of early year's education to enhance children's developmental, educational and social outcomes. In so doing, Chapter 2 further contextualises the genesis of the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow services, documented in Chapter 1, and qualitative materials on educational outcomes for children as evidenced by interview participants in Ballyhaunis that are presented in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

In the first part of the chapter, two principal arguments are presented: chiefly that Ireland's approach to early years education is traditionally incremental in its development, and that there is much greater emphasis on quality of service in policy and practice, particularly in more recent times. Qualitative evidence pertaining to the quality of service of the Greater Tomorrow crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool is also documented in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. The second part of this chapter presents evidence on some of the economic and social benefits of early year's education for children and families identified in international and Irish research. It argues that quality of service is a critical factor in shaping better educational and social outcomes for children attending preschool and crèche facilities. Issues such as staff training, attitudes of management to quality enhancement, and relationships of staff members with children are consistently identified in the literature as significant quality markers in early year's education. They are explored to some degree in this chapter and in later chapters.

### 2.2 Principal Developments in Early Childhood Care and Education: An Overview of Irish Policy

Ireland is considered a late starter in the development of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector. The traditional view of childcare as a family responsibility (Hayes, 2008), the low rate of female employment, and a relatively depressed Irish economy up to the mid-1990s, coupled with a lack of state involvement and policy developments in the ECCE field, precipitated minimal demand for non-parental childcare. While childcare services did exist in Ireland prior to the mid-1990s, particularly community childcare initiatives and unregulated private services, these were few and tended to be *ad hoc* in organisation (Hayes, 2008). Duignan and Fallon (2004: 16) describe the Irish State's engagement in childcare as traditionally minimalist and predominantly 'focussed on child welfare'. Policy innovations and legislative developments in the quality of service were typically stagnant up to the mid-1990s.



Increasing economic activity in the mid-1990s and the advent of the 'Celtic Tiger' (1995–2008) instigated greater opportunities for female labour participation (Share et al., 2012). In response to increasing maternal employment, and to provide support to the rapidly expanding economy, the Irish state addressed the area of childcare for the first time at a high governmental level through the social partnership agreements. Childcare was included in the resulting accord in two forms: as a labour support to enhance female employment, and as a mechanism to address childhood disadvantage in designated communities.

Following on from the social partnership agreement, the Irish state launched its *National Childcare Strategy* (NCS) (DJELR, 1999), situating this development in the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, reflecting a political and social agenda motivated by equality of opportunity. In developing the Irish ECCE sector, along the plans outlined in the NCS, the state availed of generous EU funding to develop the *Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000–2006* (EOCP). The main aim of the programme was to expand the number of childcare places in the state and enhance the coordination of the sector. A fund of €50 million fuelled the building or refurbishing of childcare services. It also supported the establishment of a series of non-statutory agencies and local city and county childcare committees (CCC) to implement the NCS locally. For community childcare providers, this signalled a major shift in the move towards enhancing quality in the sector.

Reflecting the secondary policy aim, of addressing 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 as well as staff grants to offset operating costs. Private, for-profit providers were limited to applying for €50,790 in funding through the programme (DJELR, 2003). At the close of the EOCP scheme, the follow-on scheme, the *National Childcare Investment Programme 2006–2010* (NCIP), developed as part of a revised *National Childcare Strategy* (NCS) (OMC, 2007). The NCIP supported capital infrastructural projects as well as various subsidy schemes to reduce childcare fees for particular groups of families. These schemes, including back-to-work initiatives and support for families who qualified for other social welfare benefits, reduced the cost of childcare only where families had access to community, not-for-profit childcare services.

## 2.3 Oversight, Quality Enhancement and Early Learning

As Langford (2006) outlines, whereas initial government focus was on the creation of childcare places, an awareness of parallel issues came into focus as the NCS developed, such as quality of provision and the suitability of the workforce. The first legislative initiative allowing for the inspection of childcare services, which was primarily concerned with structural issues such as health and safety matters, came into effect in 1996 (DoHC, 1996). Greater focus on the holistic development and well-being of the child was the primary alteration to these regulations, revised in 2006. The launch of *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006) also took place that year. *Síolta* was developed as a self-administered tool to support ECCE settings to address and improve the level of quality provision. The aim of *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006) is to improve quality across all aspects of practice in ECCE, including sessional services, full and part-time day care centres and childminders.<sup>14</sup> *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006) comprises 16 standards, including standards around the following themes:

- **Play**
- **The Curriculum**
- **Professional Practice**
- **Identity and Belonging**
- **Community**

<sup>14</sup> See: <http://siolta.ie/about.php>



Given the intercultural focus of the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche services, the themes of identity, diversity and belonging are explored in subsequent sections of this chapter.

In 2010 the Irish State set out an analysis and strategy for development of the ECCE workforce. 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 and knowledge on quality of provision (Hayes, 2008). These developments, amongst others, created a policy-rich space where only minimal policy existed previously; however, there was little support or enticement to implement both early years frameworks, and no facility to enact the recommendations of the WFDP. In contrast to the aim of the WFDP, which was to achieve a 60% graduate level in the ECCE sector, the revised regulations for the sector (DoHC, 2006) failed to set minimum levels of qualifications. Without such a legislative mechanism, the WFDP would remain aspirational. These policy developments have been analysed as failing to have any meaningful impact on the development of the sector (Barnardos/Start Strong, 2012).

The state established a Junior Minister for Children in 2006, later elevated to a full cabinet position, and a full government department in 2011 (DCYA, 2011a). 2010 also saw the launch of the first and only universally available early years programme: the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme. Also referred to as the 'free preschool year', the scheme funds a child's attendance at a local preschool service for the year prior to entry into national school. The ECCE scheme runs for 38 weeks of the year and offers three hours of childcare provision per day, five days per week. According to the DCYA the ECCE scheme 'provide[s] children with their first formal experience of early learning, the starting-point of their educational and social development outside the home' (DCYA, 2013).<sup>15</sup> While there is no cost to families, ECCE providers and other stakeholders have frequently called for increased capitation and improved conditions, as the scheme has undermined the viability of many services, with the quality of provision best described as variable (ECI, 2013; Start Strong, 2011).

## 2.4 Cultural and Ethnic Diversity: Themes of Belonging and Identity in ECCE

There is a strong emphasis in the ECCE sector, particularly in more recent times, on nurturing children's sense of belonging, embracing cultural and ethnic diversity and encouraging children's expression of their own uniqueness. This is linked to the changing socio-cultural and demographic profile of Ireland overall and to an increasing emphasis on quality in early year's education (see French, 2007). On standard 14, entitled 'Identity and Belonging', Síolta (CECDE, 2006) highlights the significance of promoting a strong sense of belonging and self-identity among preschool children:

*Promoting positive identities and a strong sense of belonging requires clearly defined policies, procedures and practice that empower every child and adult to develop a confident self- and group-identity, and to have a positive understanding and regard for the identity and rights of others.*

<sup>15</sup> Please see: [http://www.dcy.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?fn=/documents/childcare/ECCE\\_guideforparents.htm](http://www.dcy.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?fn=/documents/childcare/ECCE_guideforparents.htm)

*Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* was established in 2009 and includes all children from birth to six years of age (NCCA, 2009). The development of Aistear was informed by a dense corpus of research around themes such as play as a context for early learning and development and the relationships between education and care in early childhood (see Hayes, 2008; French, 2007; Kernan, 2007). Aistear is based around four interconnected themes: Identity and Belonging, Well-being, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking. Aistear (NCCA, 2009) contains guidelines for practitioners in the following topics, amongst others:

- **Fostering good interactions with children**
- **Learning through play**
- **How to support children's learning and development through assessment.**

On the theme of identity and belonging, Aistear (NCCA, 2009) also highlights the importance of embracing diversity and nurturing children's sense of uniqueness:

*Giving children messages of respect, love, approval, and encouragement enables them to develop a positive sense of who they are and a feeling that they have an important contribution to make wherever they are. Positive messages about their families, backgrounds, cultures, beliefs, and languages help children to develop pride in which they are. These messages also give them confidence to voice their views and opinions, to make choices, and to help shape their own learning.*

This is echoed in the *National Childcare Strategy 2006–2010: Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers* (2006), which aims to redress social marginalisation, negative stereotyping and labelling of children attending preschool and crèche services who are also members of minority groups in Ireland. This includes, for example, children and families who are asylum seekers, refugees, children who members of the Travelling community, children with disabilities, and children with lesbian or gay parents (OMC, 2006). Significantly, the document aims to facilitate greater reflective practice among practitioners about their own assumptions about the meaning of equality and diversity, and stresses the importance of instilling positive attitudes about children from diverse ethnic, cultural or faith backgrounds among young children:

*Very young children are influenced by societal attitudes and behaviours. Indeed research reveals that children as young as 3 years display signs of prejudice and negative attitudes towards difference. From the earliest years of their interaction with the wider world, children will need to develop the understanding, skills and outlook necessary to ensure that Irish society becomes truly inclusive. A place where difference is valued, where diverse groups interact and where this interaction is underpinned by equality, human rights, mutual respect and understanding (p. viii).*

## 2.5 Critique of the ECCE Sector: An Overview

Following two decades of development, the Irish ECCE sector is far from a well-resourced, cohesive, effective system. Millar and Crosse (2014: 15) summarise the situation well: while progress has been made, 'there is no doubt that Ireland's childcare sector is persistently submerged in new and perpetual problems'. Recent analysis shows that the level of investment in Ireland, at 0.25% of GDP, falls short of the European average of 0.7% of GDP and the UN/OECD recommendations of 1% of GDP (Barnardos/Start Strong, 2012). In spite of the focus on supporting community and voluntary childcare services, there is heavy reliance on private providers to ensure adequate supply of full day care provision to support parental employment, training and education. Most schemes to reduce parent fees are still only accessed through community provision, with Irish parents reportedly paying the highest childcare fees in the EU (*ibid.*).

Minimum qualification requirements for the ECCE scheme have had some impact, with 83% of staff now holding a one-year vocational qualification. Little progress has been made at the higher end of qualifications, with only 14% of practitioners qualified to degree level (POBAL, 2014). This is in contrast to an EU target of 60% of practitioners in early childhood settings qualified at degree level (Urban et al, 2011).

## 2.6 Localised ECCE Development in Ireland

Whereas broader, macro-level attention to ECCE took shape in the late 1990s, Smith (2007) outlines the earlier emergence of community-based provision, which tends to be overlooked. While ECCE policy at a national level had yet to be delineated, at a local level, area health boards funded small-scale services and supported training for practitioners as early as the 1980s. A mix of small EU funds and minor, locally developed schemes supported small-scale childcare provision, enabling education and training aimed at enhancing social inclusion. In other cases, individuals, groups or charitable/religious organisations established childcare provision in response to local needs. Smith (2007) highlights how the development of childcare was often a move to support parental education, rather than the early education of young children. Duignan and Fallon (2004: 13) suggest the early development of ECCE by the community and voluntary sector fell under three broad themes:

- **Child welfare/protection**
- **Family support**
- **Promoting equality of opportunity in terms of parental participation in education, training or employment.**

Greater health board involvement followed the enactment of Part VII of the 1991 Child Care Act. Health Boards formalised many of their previous actions, as matters of family support, child welfare, and the initial mechanism for legislated inspection of childcare provision were ratified.

Arising out of the EOCP, locally based City and County Childcare Committees (CCC), were established across the state in the early 2000s. The rationale for such entities was to bring together a range of stakeholders to identify local need, and support current and potential ECCE service providers to apply for and commit funds to locally based projects. Community childcare services were often established through the support of local CCCs, with services managed by a voluntary board, employing ECCE practitioners to deliver the daily programme and to manage the general operation of the service.

Despite earlier funding privileging the community and voluntary sectors, the percentage of private provision has increased, with recent figures demonstrating 70% private provision compared to 30% in the not-for-profit arena (POBAL, 2014). This is an increase on the earlier ratio of 60% private to 40% community at the outset of the EOCP in 1999 (DJELR, 2003). Despite the enhanced funding available for community childcare services, an evaluation of the EOCP process recognised the complex nature of establishing childcare services. The review deemed it 'unrealistic' to expect voluntary boards, made of well-intended volunteers, to negotiate the necessary system and processes in establishing new services (Duignan and Fallon, 2004).

Whereas challenges existed in establishing large-scale community childcare services, two reports based on community childcare provision in the Dublin region highlighted concerns with on-going operation (Smith, 2007; Southside Partnership, 2005). The studies pointed to issues around staff training, reliance on community employment workers, funding, the complexity of need in the communities served, and the range of responsibilities, well beyond daily provision of ECCE services. Smith (2007: 16) describes how the 'childcare needs of children living in disadvantage environments are likely to be more acute than the normative childcare needs'. Stating that children's needs should be met through holistic understanding, Southside Partnership (2005: 40) points out that 'community childcare should be viewed as a family support'.

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

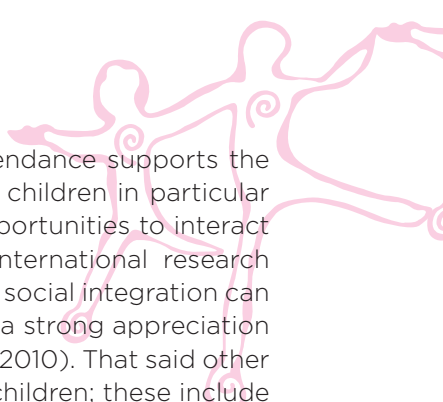
Internationally, a growing body of research indicates that Early Childhood Care and Education often culminates in various social and economic benefits in the areas of child well-being, improved educational outcomes for children and youth, and increased social mobility.<sup>16</sup> The OECD document *PISA in Focus* (OECD, 2011) cites figures from the OECD PISA<sup>17</sup> (OECD, 2009), which shows that 15-year-old students who attended pre-primary school outperformed their peers who did not participate in pre-primary education. This was evident in cross-national data from almost all of OECD countries surveyed as part of the PISA study. In 31 of 34 countries surveyed, students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those from economically advantaged backgrounds benefitted equally from pre-primary education. Significantly, in Ireland, Finland and Canada, pre-primary school attendance is associated with improved reading performance among students from immigrant backgrounds. PISA concludes that 'it is possible that immigrant students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds who attend high-quality preschool services are likely to benefit more from the experience' (OECD 2011: 2).

Internationally, studies illustrate that attending pre-primary education can lead to better social outcomes for children also, such as improved self-confidence, enhanced motivation to learn, internalisation of self-regulated behaviours, and school readiness (Bowman et al., 2001). However, the impacts of pre-primary education on children are contested in studies from the UK and the US in particular, which questions the extent to which children's experiences of different childcare settings can potentially lead to behavioural problems later on (see Sammons et al., 2003). Some evidence from the literature, however, suggests that pre-primary school attendance could enhance children's ability to grasp traditionally 'academic' subjects in primary school, including mathematics. In the UK, the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study<sup>18</sup> found that early educational experiences impacts on outcomes for children (see Hayes, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Please see: <http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/earlychildhoodeducationandcare.htm>

<sup>17</sup> PISA denotes the Programme for International Student Assessment.

<sup>18</sup> The EPPE study is the first major European longitudinal study of the impacts of pre-primary education on children's development between three and seven years of age.



Reporting on the results of EPPE, Sylva et al. (2004) found that preschool attendance supports the social, physical and cognitive development of children, and that disadvantaged children in particular benefit from attending preschool services, especially when they are afforded opportunities to interact with children from other social and ethnic backgrounds. This corroborates international research findings which suggest that preschool settings that promote multiculturalism and social integration can substantially impact on children's social development, enabling them to develop a strong appreciation and acceptance of social, cultural and ethnic differences (see Ogletree and Larke, 2010). That said other matters to do with the quality of service provision also impact on outcomes for children; these include the quality of relationships between staff and parents, parental participation in childcare services, staff interactions with children, and the specific types of preschool settings (Sylva et al., 2004).

The effect of preschool attendance on children's social, cognitive and linguistic development is therefore highly complex. The findings of the EPPE study (Sylva et al., 2004) strongly indicate that participating in high-quality early childhood services is likely to improve child outcomes. As the study demonstrates: 'quality indicators include warm interactive relationships with children, having a trained teacher as manager and a good proportion of trained teachers on the staff' (Sylva et al., 2004: 1). It was clear from the EPPE study that 'settings that have staff with higher qualifications have higher quality scores and their children make more progress' (*ibid.*). Further EPPE findings indicate that better-quality provision was characteristic of settings where early education and a caring approach to practice were integrated, leading to the prioritisation of intellectual *and* social development. In addition, EPPE illustrated that significant benefits can be accrued by children who were deemed to be 'at risk' for developing learning difficulties, and with children for whom English is a second language. An earlier start in preschool, before three years of age, also indicated improved intellectual benefits.

### **Economic return on investment and state benefits of enhanced investment in ECCE**

As well as improved educational outcomes for children, research shows that substantial economic benefits might accrue as a result of greater state investment in ECCE. Reflecting a strong research consensus on return on investment (ROI), international and supranational policy actors frequently call for enhanced funding to the sector (OECD, 2012, 2006; UNESCO, 2010, 2007; European Commission, 2011). Arguments based on return on investment are corroborated by the American Perry Preschool Project (APPP), a longitudinal research study which highlights improved academic outcomes, reduced crime and anti-social behaviour, and greater employment stability in adults who experienced quality preschool through the project. Cost-benefit analysis, based on the work of Schweinhart and Weikart (1997), indicates an economic return of 7-10% for every \$1 invested in high-quality early childhood education (Heckman et al., 2013; Heckman, 2011; Heckman et al., 2010). These studies cite a range of benefits to the state, including savings from reductions in spending on special educational interventions, on juvenile judicial and law enforcement services, and by longer engagement with education leading to increased contributions to the state through taxes and spending by former child-participants, later employed adults.



### Irish research on early years education and child development

Irish research carried out with asylum-seeking and low-income families also suggests that attaining early year's education can have significant benefits for children's learning and development. Kane (2008) states that early childhood education can significantly benefit children living in socially and economically marginalised situations such as Direct Provision, as these children 'have an even greater need for access to early childhood education and care than the mainstream population' (Kane, 2008: 20). According to Kane (2008), adequate childcare arrangements are essential for successfully integrating asylum-seeking families and children into new communities and ensure that children are supported in a warm, clean, caring environment by trained professionals (*ibid.*). Gilligan (1995) argues that effective childcare is extremely important for children's development and that participating in playgroups can foster deeper relationships between parents and children. Connolly et al. (2002) identify preschools as significant for building intercultural competencies and intercultural awareness among children from an early age, and research suggests that this could be very significant for creating greater respect for ethnic and racial differences among people later on (see also Dolan and Sherlock, 2010). This is corroborated by Fanning et al. (2001), who suggest that processes of cultural acceptance and belonging are more easily learned in the early years than later on in the school system. In the UK, the 'Right from the Start' report specifically targets preschool children to promote greater intercultural awareness and respect for racial and cultural diversity (Watts, 2007, cited in Dolan and Sherlock, 2010: 152).


Hayes (2008: 10) analyses early childhood education from an anti-poverty perspective to argue that 'a well-supported, high-quality, early childhood care and education system' constitutes an important support mechanism that can impact both directly and indirectly on children and families living in poverty in Ireland. Drawing on international studies of what works best for educational outcomes 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. Drawing on evidence from the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) study, Hayes (2008) argues that staff training is an essential aspect of effective early year's care and education services. IEA showed that children who had more educated teachers at age four had higher language competency at age seven. In addition, children's cognitive scores were improved by age seven when they spent less time doing whole group work and when they had more varied materials to interact with at age four. This implies that what constitutes quality childcare services for children is a complex matter depending on factors like staff training and development, staff relationships and interactions with children in the classroom, and the range and type of activities on offer. These are explored in greater depth in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of this report.

## 2.8 Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the main historical developments that shaped and reflected the development of the ECCE sector and community childcare provision in Ireland. While the origins and development of childcare policy in Ireland were somewhat incremental and interpreted mainly as a support mechanism for women's participation in the growing labour market, there is now much greater emphasis on children's rights to education and on improving educational and social outcomes for them. 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.*





Major policy initiatives arising from the mid-1990s, EU and exchequer funding programmes were discussed, as was the localised development of community, not-for-profit childcare services, the involvement of area health boards, and later, the CCCs. Some of the major initiatives in ECCE sector to be operationalised in recent years were also discussed; Aistear and Síolta have major implications for policy and for supporting education for the development of intercultural learning and respect for diversity. These themes are discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 of this report.

Pointing to a number of longitudinal studies on child outcomes, commentators agree that high-quality early childhood programmes have the potential to alleviate some of the potential stressors posed to children who grow up in situations of poverty and social exclusion. Stressing the crucial understanding of *early intervention*, Hayes (2008: 23) for example highlights that failing to intervene in the lives of children from an early age – particularly those who face adversity – potentially sets them ‘on a trajectory for lower school achievement that is difficult to alter’. Major international research studies illustrate that outcomes for children attending preschool services depend on factors to do with the quality of service, including children’s relationships with staff members, the range and type of activities that are available, and staff training and development. Empirical evidence around these themes is examined in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of this study.

Chapter 3 outlines the main theoretical approaches which inform this study, namely the socio-ecological perspective, social support, resilience and attachment theories. Drawing on the themes and literature identified and discussed in this chapter, we argue that the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche services are very significant in the social ecology of children and families in the Ballyhaunis area and provide critical social supports for families, particularly those who experience economic, social and cultural stigmatisation and marginalisation.

# 3.0

## Theoretical Framework

### 3.1 Introduction

Socio-ecological theory, social support theory, resilience and family support are the principal conceptual frameworks underpinning this research and are introduced in this chapter. A substantial corpus of literature exists around these theoretical areas, and they are frequently applied in evaluations of services for children and families (see Forkan et al., 2015). Social ecological theory draws attention to the various persons, services and interventions that children and families encounter in everyday life. Social support theory identifies the various types of formal and informal supports that assist children and families, especially those who are dealing with adversity. Resilience theory identifies the factors that enable children and families to bounce back from adversity (Gilligan, 2000). There is increasing recognition in Irish social policy that a family support approach offers an effective method of working with families and children, and at times presents an alternative to more intrusive and costly interventions (DCYA, 2015; Pinkerton et al., 2004).

This chapter will begin with a critical analysis of the three aforementioned theories. Section 3.2 outlines social-ecological perspectives which emphasise how interlinking factors at national, international and local levels impact on the lives of children and families. Section 3.3 outlines social support theory, drawing attention to the importance of formal and informal supports for people. Section 3.4 looks at the resilience literature, highlighting the importance of local services to enhancing the resilience of communities, families and young people. Finally, section 3.5 discusses the literature relating to family support as a practice and an ethos. Section 3.6 concludes and closes the chapter.

## 3.2 'Capturing the interplay of social and environmental factors': Socio-Ecological Perspectives on Children's Lives

Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994) socio-ecological theory of human development focuses on how the socio-cultural context and the surrounding environment affect child and youth development and family life (see Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007). Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued that developmental outcomes are dependent on the interplay between four distinct 'systems': the *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *macrosystem* and *exosystem*. The microsystem consists of the spaces that we inhabit in everyday life (i.e., communities), the people that we encounter in these spaces (i.e., family, friends, parents and teachers) and how these relationships shape developmental and social outcomes for young people and families. From this definition, we can say that the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche are part of the microsystem of children and families living in Direct Provision in Ballyhaunis. Bronfenbrenner (1994: 39) defines the microsystem as:

*A pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features. . . . Examples include such settings as family, school, peer group and workplace.<sup>19</sup>*

For Bronfenbrenner (1994), the microsystem comprises the social factors that affect our relationships and interactions with others and the physical spaces wherein these interactions take place. For children and young people, the microsystem encapsulates members of their families, peer group, teachers, friends, parents or caregivers, siblings and extended families that they encounter on a daily basis. The microsystem also refers to places that people frequent daily, including spaces such as schools, preschools and local playgroups. The microsystem is pivotal to ensuring 'good' developmental outcomes for children and young people.

Children who regularly experience 'risk factors' in their microsystem may be in jeopardy of developing poorer developmental outcomes, compared to members of their peer group who do not experience these risk factors. Risk factors are defined as factors that render an individual more likely to develop problems, such as delinquency or poor mental health, in the face of adversity (see Rutter, 2012). Examples of risk factors for children that are often alluded to in the literature include poverty, social disadvantage, housing, social marginalisation, and parental substance misuse and alcoholism. Policies and services that aim to minimise children's risks of encountering these situations at the micro level (i.e., in one's own community), can substantially improve young people's lives, enhancing positive developmental outcomes for families and children. People and services that aim to alleviate children's exposure to risk factors are known as 'positive assets' (see Masten, 2001: 228). In the context of this study, this raises questions about the extent to which parents might interpret the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche as positive assets in their own lives and the lives of their children.

### **The exosystem, social capital and outcomes for children and families**

Bronfenbrenner's (1994) concept of the 'exosystem' includes people and spaces that children and families experience less often, such as neighbours that they do not socialise with or see daily, and other people who reside in their wider communities. The exosystem can be defined as the wider community setting in which children, young people and families live, and it includes businesses, churches and people living in the wider neighbourhood.

<sup>19</sup> Bronfenbrenner (1994) also refers to the microsystem as the 'proximal level of environment' and as a system of 'proximal processes'.

While a child or young person may not have any direct relationships with some of the organisations and persons in the exosystem, the culture and decisions taken in it shape the well-being of children and families residing in that community. Indeed, Bronfenbrenner (1994) stresses that these 'levels' are not mutually exclusive, as the microsystem and exosystem interact with each other and this interaction indelibly shapes children's lives. It also shows that the person's wider social environment, such as neighbours and other community 'actors', indelibly affects young people and their everyday experiences of education, sports and recreation, and relationships with other children. Enhancing social relationships in the exosystem is important for building social capital for children and families, which are frequently accorded importance in the literature (see Pinkerton and Dolan, 2007). Numerous definitions of social capital prevail in the literature; the OECD (2007) defines it as 'networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups'.<sup>20</sup> The OECD further delineates the social capital concept into three distinct headings: *bonds*, *linkages* and *bridges*:

- **Bonds are links to people that emerge from a sense of common identity or community and relationships with others who inhabit that community (family, neighbours, friends).**
- **Links that extend beyond close family and friends to 'distant' relatives, friends and neighbours who we see less often.**
- **Bridges are links to other people in our communities or regions who we interpret as having higher or lower social status than us.**

According to Bronfenbrenner (1994) and other authors, improving the social capital (informal social bonds) between children, youth and families and other members of their communities can substantially enhance the lives of all concerned. This is especially true for migrant and Traveller children and their families, who are potentially vulnerable to risk factors or social harms like poverty, social marginalisation, racism and other types of stigmatisation. For community actors too, building relationships with migrant families is beneficial, potentially leading to deeper intercultural learning and enhanced social cohesion in communities. Enhancing the mesosystem of children and families is therefore critical for sustaining or improving developmental outcomes for children and families.

### **The macrosystem and developmental outcomes for children and youth**

While the micro and mesosystem refer to community actors and institutions that people regularly encounter in their areas, the macrosystem refers to cultural systems, policies, practices and attitudes in wider society. Bronfenbrenner's (1994) model draws attention to how social, political, economic, legal and religious systems impact on children and family life. National early childhood guidelines like Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006) for childcare services are part of the macrosystem, affecting the lives of very young children, their families and service providers. Other examples of macro-level factors affecting families' lives are policies around Direct Provision that shape people's lives daily.

While the macrosystem, mesosystem and microsystems are interconnected, it is important to note that they do not always work in harmony with each other. For example, in some situations, children and families may need greater support from people and organisations in the microsystem (i.e., people and community organisations that they encounter every day); particularly if they do not feel that they are receiving adequate supports from the macro and mesosystem (i.e., people and policies in the wider community). This highlights the importance of systems working together in sync, and how failures in the system at one level can put pressures on support levels provided by other systems.

<sup>20</sup> Please see OECD (2007), OECD Insights: What is social capital? (Downloaded via <http://www.oecd.org/insights/37966934.pdf>, last accessed 16 November 2015).



### Continuity and transformation over time: The bioecological model of human development

While earlier versions of Bronfenbrenner's model assume prominence in the literature, Hayes (2015) notes the importance of the bioecological model for understanding the development of children's services (see Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007). More specifically, the bioecological model addresses the interactions between people and their environments ('proximal processes'), which are viewed as critical to processes of human development. Central to these development processes are the characteristics of the developing person, the environmental contexts and the time periods when the proximal processes take place (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007: 795). The personal characteristics which Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007) say are most important to human development are dispositions, resources, ability, experience, knowledge and skills, and demand characteristics which affect the shape and level of reactions elicited from the social environment (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007: 796). Applying these insights to the context of this study, the bioecological model implies that creating stimulating learning and social environments (i.e., home and school) for children can significantly impact on their development, including positive social dispositions, knowledge and skills. Both the socio-ecological and bio-ecological approaches highlight that positive developmental patterns for children and families emerge and unfold over time. However, the emergence of positive developmental outcomes is contingent on processes at the micro, meso and Meta systems and changes that take place in the individual across the life course (see Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007).

### 3.3 Social Support Theory: The Impacts of Formal and Informal Supports on Children and Family Life

The concept of social support is much debated in the literature. Broadly speaking, it focuses on informal and formal sources of support that shape and reflect outcomes for families and children (see for example Pinkerton and Dolan, 2007). Dunst et al. (1998: 28) define social support as the 'emotional, physical, informational, instrumental, and material aid and assistance provided by others to maintain health and well-being, promote adaptations of life events, and foster development in an adaptive manner'. In the literature, two main categories of hypotheses have been put forward that relate to social support theory: the 'main effect' hypotheses and the 'stress buffering' hypothesis (see Cohen and Wills, 1985). According to the main effect hypotheses, individuals with higher levels of social support typically have stronger feelings of being loved and are more aware that others care about them. Social support networks can have very powerful effects on people's mental health and overall sense of well-being and connectedness to others. Qualitative and quantitative evidence from the literature shows that social support networks increase a person's ability to cope with stressful situations, helping them to become more resilient, improving their capacity to 'bounce back' after traumatic events (see Bal et al., 2003). Improving social supports in the microsystem, mesosystem and macrosystem can have very important influences on people's lives (see TUSLA, 2013).

The 'stress buffering' hypothesis states that social support reduces the amount of stress that people feel, as social support networks are a buffer to stressful events that happen throughout the life course (see Frey and Rothlisberger, 1996). Studies also argue that social support positively affects people's self-confidence, improves social integration (Agneessens et al., 2006), and promotes a sense of being connected to others and feelings of belonging (Andrews and Ben-Arieh, 1999). Lakey et al. (2010) highlight that in some circumstances, people's perceptions about the levels of social support they have in their networks ('perceived social support') may have very positive effects on their lives, as well as 'enacted social support' (the acts of giving or receiving support).

Social supports can take a variety of forms and are both formal and informal (see Dolan and McGrath, 2006). An example of formal support for children and families is funding for local programmes to improve young people's lives. Informal supports include crucial sources of support like family members, friends and members of one's own peer group. Some community-based organisations can also be seen as examples of formal and informal support for children and families. Both informal and formal supports are needed by children and families in everyday life. A myriad of studies argue that informal supports, like simply giving parents a break or offering to do routine tasks for them like picking children up from school or babysitting, are extremely important for supporting children and families (see for example Daro, 2015). Although informal supports are considered more effective and responsive than formal services (Dolan et al., 2006) the literature highlights that close networks of family and friends can equally be a negative influence, adding stress to families that are already facing adversity (Frost and Dolan, 2012). The concepts arising from the review of this theory will be drawn on in the analysis of themes emerging from the research data in following chapter.

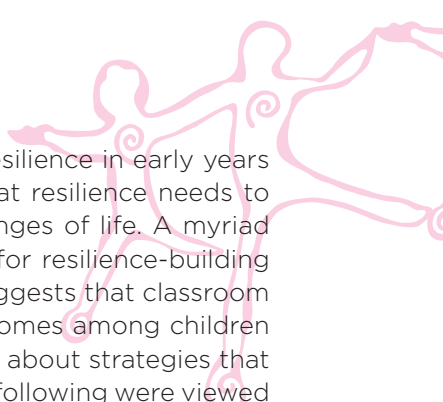
### 3.4 Resilience – Enhancing Children's Abilities to 'Bounce Back' from Adversity

The concept of resilience is accorded extensive attention in the literature on children and young people (see for example Theron and Liebenberg, 2015; Ungar, 2015). Multiple definitions of the term 'resilience' prevail in the literature, and while there is widespread agreement that it relates to a person's coping functions and their abilities to bounce back from adversity, as yet there are no precise definitions of the concept.

Masten (2001: 228) defines resilience as 'good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development' while Olsson et al. (2003) state that resilience implies 'hardiness' and 'invulnerability' exhibited by people when facing adversity. Similarly, Garmezy (1991) conceptualises resilience as 'the ability to recover from negative events' (see Garmezy, 1991, cited in Olsson et al., 2003: 2). Gilligan (2000: 37) defines a 'resilient child' as 'one who . . . continues to function reasonably well despite continued exposure to risk'. A crucial characteristic of resilience as highlighted in the literature is its ability to be enhanced in young people. Resilience can be promoted and enhanced by the manner in which family members and professionals work with a particular child, with this knowledge widely informing family support practice (Dolan et al., 2006).

The literature on resilience notes that people experience multiple stressors and 'risk factors' throughout the life course, from early childhood through to old age (see Di Corcia and Tronick, 2011). Seery (2011) maintains that some people develop higher levels of resilience if they encounter many stressful situations across the life course. That said, however, encountering more stressors does not immediately lead to greater resilience. Learning how to deal with stressful situations is also contingent on the child and their unique family circumstances and levels of access to supports.

Ensuring that appropriate supports are in place to help children and families to deal with stressful situations is critical to building resilience. These are known as 'protective factors'. Zolkoski and Bullock (2012: 2298) define protective factors as 'factors that alter responses to adverse events so that potential negative outcomes can be avoided'. Strengthening these supports or protective factors in the microsystem to help children and families overcome stressful life experiences is important. However, this must be balanced by strengthening supports in the wider community and society (mesosystem and macrosystem) to enhance developmental outcomes and family functioning. As will be shown in Chapters 5 and 6 of this study many parents identified the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche as protective factors in their lives.



The literature on early year's education also focuses on strategies for building resilience in early years settings (see for example Taket et al., 2014). Nolan et al. (2014: 595) argues that resilience needs to be promoted during a child's formative years so they can cope with the challenges of life. A myriad of studies state that schools provide the skills; relationships and opportunities for resilience-building among children (see Ellenbogen et al., 2014). Evidence by Bondy et al. (2007) suggests that classroom environments that promoted resilience tended to foster better educational outcomes among children who struggled academically in school. Investigating preschool teachers' opinions about strategies that promote resilience in the classroom in Australia, Nolan et al. (2014) found that the following were viewed as significant strategies for enhancing resilience among pre-schoolers: fostering a sense of belonging and shared responsibility towards the classroom space, demonstrating acceptance towards children's feelings and emotions, developing self-regulation in children's behaviours, enabling children to learn from their mistakes, and relationship-building between teachers, parents and children. Ellenbogen et al. (2014) explore how Early Childhood Education (ECE) can be interpreted as a community-based resource for building resilience among children who suffered abuse and neglect and for supporting families who are in need. They conclude:

*Early childhood intervention is crucial. At this life stage, children are primed to learn language and socialise with peers, and success in these developmental tasks sets the foundation for success in later tasks. Quality ECE provides maltreated children with a safe environment to acquire these core skills and use them to form healthy relationships with peers and adults and to feel less threatened in social situations. These benefits are salient from a neurodevelopmental perspective. . . . Hence, ECE might help restore damaged stress response, attachment, and cognitive systems (pp. 1366-67).*

### 3.5 Childcare Practice within a Family Support Paradigm

The concept of family support is accorded extensive attention in the literature, particularly in more recent times. This is indicative in the *High Level Policy Statement on Supporting Parents and Families* (DCYA, 2015), the key purpose of which is to 'promote the availability of a coherent continuum of local supports to all parents and families which can be accessed easily and in a timely way' (*ibid.*, p. 2). While numerous definitions of family support exist, it refers to the range of services and activities (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; for normal development in adverse circumstances'. Gilligan (2000) further argues that family support is 'about mobilising that support in all the contexts in which children live their lives including family, school, peer group, sports team, church and so on'. From a socio-ecological perspective, Gilligan (2000) refers to sources of support that are part of a child's microsystem, mesosystem and macrosystem (i.e., the people that the child meets regularly in everyday life, the wider community and policy and government). Pinkerton et al. (2004: 6) illustrate that the UNCRC (1992) also accords special emphasis to supporting the family 'in carrying out its caring and protective functions'.

Frost and Dolan (2012) outline a number of features that help to characterise family support as a style of practice. Family support focuses on early and less intrusive interventions into families' lives, supporting them at times of stress and adversity. In this way it is seen as a preventative intervention which seeks improved outcomes for families and children, with the potential to impact on the long-term functioning of families. Partnering with families is integral to this style of practice, which seeks to actively engage service users in the planning of their preferred support plans. This style of practice is found to offer benefits to broader society, in terms of reduced need for more intensive and costly interventions, with the aim that families who have been supported maintain more effective long-term functioning.



Whereas family support is considered a style of practice, rather than a theory of practice, it is informed by a range of concepts, some of which – resilience, social support, and socio-ecological theory – were previously delineated in this chapter (Dolan et al., 2006). When practitioners draw on theory to underpin their approach, what is crucial is that the theory be one of change (Frost and Dolan, 2012). Therefore, family support should be considered as not only preventative but also transformative, in order to make effective long-term differences in the lives of families and children.

Drawing on Gilligan's (2000) definition and reflecting Frost and Dolan (2012) above, Devaney et al. (2013) argue that family support must be genuinely supportive towards service users and programmes, and that family support initiatives must engage with the lived realities of service users. This means that in order to be effective, local services must adapt to the needs of all people who live in the community, regardless of ethnic, social or cultural differences. Families must also feel that they benefit from the service and that they are supported and respected. Community services must adopt a user-friendly approach to service delivery so that all persons using the services feel included, respected and welcome (Devaney et al., 2013: 12).

The manner in which family support programmes are developed and delivered can vary greatly. Frost and Dolan (2012) provide a helpful continuum, describing programmes developed at a broad, state-wide level ('universal' services) ranging to more targeted interventions that are designed to work in particular communities. Another level of this continuum is the very specific strategies designed to support families in need of more focused types of supports.

### **Family support in the lives of asylum-seeking children and families**

In Ireland and internationally, research on asylum-seeking and refugee families highlights the significance of informal supports in the lives of parents and children. Kane (2008) argues that asylum-seeking women frequently find it more difficult to access support networks and other services when they enter Ireland, due in part to their responsibilities in the home, child-rearing, and language barriers that they often encounter (see Whyte and Byrne, 2005). Qualitative evidence from Ireland and other countries suggests that asylum-seeking families often rely on informal social networks (i.e., neighbours and friends) in everyday life to help them perform essential tasks such as babysitting, seeking advice about legal and employment issues, and finding out about local customs and language. The significance of these social and family support networks to asylum seekers' lives therefore must not be underestimated (see Smyth and Whyte, 2005). Informal social supports also impact positively on the lives of migrant families more generally. Having neighbours, friends and community organisations to assist with language and cultural learning, and other matters such as employment and social welfare, can be very beneficial for migrants entering new communities (see Thornton, 2014 for more commentary on asylum seekers and social welfare systems in Ireland). The significance of these issues is expressed clearly in the findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6 also.



### 3.6 Chapter Summary and Conclusions

Chapter 3 outlined some of the principal theoretical approaches underpinning the analysis of qualitative data materials that are presented in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of this study: namely socio-ecological perspectives, social support theory, resilience, and the concept of family support as a practice paradigm. Firstly, socio-ecological approaches were outlined which call attention to factors at the micro, meso and macro levels and how persons and contexts affect child development and the effective functioning of families. Secondly, social support theories were analysed which call attention to the formal and informal supports that affect developmental outcomes for children and families, minimising children's exposure to risk factors, for example. Resilience theory was also focused upon, particularly the literature on early years education which demonstrates the significance of building resilience among children at an early age. Developing supports for children and families, especially those who are economically or socially vulnerable, is important in helping them to cope with adverse circumstances encountered throughout the life course. Themes and concepts developed in this chapter are applied and extended in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

Chapter 4 outlines the study methodology, arguing that a qualitative research design (interviews, focus groups and participant observation) was effective for this study, yielding a wide diversity of insights on the crèche and preschool services and their impacts on educational and social outcomes for children.

# 4.0

## Methodology

### 4.1 Introduction

This study operationalises a multi-method qualitative research approach, combining focus groups and in-depth interviews with participant observation (PO) to capture perspectives of parents, staff members and key informants on the effectiveness of the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche services. The literature contains a plethora of definitions of multi-method and mixed-method research, but it is defined here as using two or more methodological techniques to study the same research questions in a single study (see Bryman, 2012, for a comparable definition).

The application of qualitative methods (i.e., in-depth interviews, focus groups, participant observation) in this context yielded in-depth data on the significance accorded to the Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche by children and families in the Ballyhaunis area. Data collection, analysis and interpretation were guided by an interpretivist approach to social research, which focuses attention on people's discourses (i.e., what they say about the topic under study), how they talk about the crèche and preschool (e.g., how they describe them) and their practices (see Hajer, 2006). The incorporation of participant observation (PO) materials from the community preschool and crèche services also ensured that the voice of the child was accorded precedence in this study, which corresponds to recent literature on the importance of acknowledging children's rights when conducting research (see Coyne et al., 2006). The analysis of interview materials was guided by the theoretical perspectives presented in Chapters 2 and 3 to facilitate a dynamic interchange between theory and method.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into four principal sections. Section 4.2 focuses on the research design phase and the process of qualitative data collection. Section 4.3 focuses on data analysis and interpretation, while section 4.4 looks at ethical matters, which were accorded the highest precedence throughout this study. Section 4.5 offers a brief chapter summary and some conclusions.

### 4.2 Utilising a Multi-Method Approach to Data Collection: Combining Qualitative Methods to Capture Perspectives about the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow Crèche Service

In the literature on research methods, qualitative research is defined as 'research interested in analysing the subjective meaning or the social production of issues, events or practices' (Flick, 2014). As such, qualitative research methods capture how people interpret and experience the world in everyday life: their routines, knowledge, attitudes practices and behaviours (see Bryman, 2012). Qualitative research methods are also widely used in research on early year's services both in Ireland and internationally (see Salamon and Harrison, 2015) and in studies of access to childcare services among members of asylum-seeking communities (see Ogbu et al., 2014; Smyth and Whyte, 2005). This provides further justification of the application of qualitative approaches in the context of this process study evaluation.

### Benefits of mixed-method research designs

The advantages of multi-method research approaches are frequently discussed in the literature. Multi-method research can substantially enhance the scope and depth of projects, yielding deeper knowledge about the topic under investigation (Bryman, 2012). Using two or more research methods is potentially very important for validating research findings and in the process of research triangulation (Flick, 2014). The research approach adopted in this study corroborates Mason's (2006) approach, which argues for mixing methods in a 'qualitatively driven way' (p. 9). Essentially, Mason (2006) argues that the prioritisation of qualitative approaches can substantially improve the quality of data collected, enabling the researcher to access the participants' emotions, as well as their beliefs and opinions about certain topics.

In addition, the research approach adopted in this study strongly corresponds to Bryman's (2007) work, which states that when utilising two or more methods in a study, they should be 'mutually illuminating'. This means that the data garnered from participant observation (PO) should be analysed and interpreted in the light of findings from interviews and focus groups and vice versa. Data analysis must also be completed in relation to emergent themes from the literature review. At the same time, however, the emergent data simultaneously informs the literature review. This corresponds to an 'inductive' approach to social research. This process of facilitating dynamic interrelationships between the various methodological and theoretical strands of the study adds substantially to the 'robustness' of the research study, contributing to its evidence base. This strategy to methodological combination was pursued throughout this project and emphasises the continuous interrelationships between the datasets and the theoretical framework.

The concept of triangulation is widely referred to in the literature and is one of the principal rationales for combining methods (see Denzin, 2012). Bryman (n.d.) defines triangulation as 'the use of more than one approach to the investigation of a research question in order to enhance confidence in the ensuing findings'.<sup>21</sup> Themes and topics emerging from interviews were triangulated with those that were emergent in the focus group and PO datasets in order to determine linkages between the materials and to identify 'deviant cases'.

To minimise the risk of bias during the analysis and interpretation of findings, the researchers completed an independent analysis of all interview transcripts and did not share information with each other on emerging themes or subthemes until all interviews were analysed comprehensively. The researchers then came together to discuss what they both viewed as the emergent findings and to outline the content of Chapters 5, 6, and 7 thematically. The topics and themes identified as important during the data collection phases were informed by a dense corpus of theoretical and empirical research literature, as outlined previously in Chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>21</sup> Please see Bryman, A. (n.d.) 'Triangulation' (downloaded via <http://www.referenceworld.com/sage/socialscience/triangulation.pdf>, last accessed 15 December 2015).

## 4.3 Lifecycle of the Research Study: An Overview

We now describe the main stages of this research project, from the preparation of the Research Ethics Committee (REC) application to data collection, analysis and writing up.

### Research stage 1: Preparing the Research Ethics Committee (REC) application

Phase 1 of the research project encompassed the preparation of a detailed REC proposal for submission to the NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee (REC) in January 2015. Due to the sensitivity of the data being collected and the risk of instigating emotional distress or harm to research participants who are deemed to be vulnerable groups (i.e., children, members of the asylum seeker and Travelling communities), ethics were accorded extensive attention in this study. In social research, ethics refers to protecting participants from harm (Bryman, 2012). In this context, harm refers to anything that could cause emotional, psychological or physical distress to participants. All research studies completed at NUI, Galway must gain approval from the REC, and a detailed application was prepared as part of this process.

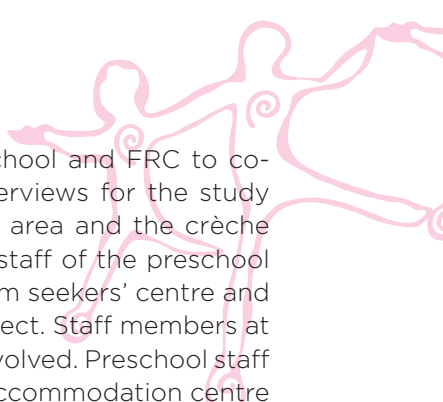
Some of the principal risks identified by the researchers were that participants, particularly from the DP accommodation centre, could experience emotional distress during the study, particularly when they reflected on their lives in DP and on the circumstances that precipitated them leaving their home nations in the first place. To minimise the risk of this occurring, the lead researcher who completed the interviews asked questions in a reflexive manner; the style of interviewing was led mainly by the participants and the topics that they discussed in interviews and focus groups. Participants were probed in a gentle manner to avoid topics that might be emotionally distressing, and to ensure that they did not feel they were under duress (see Wengraf, 2001). The researcher did not discuss any issues that were not mentioned by the participants themselves. This accorded emphasis to the 'agency' of participants. In addition, prior to completing the interviews or focus groups, four information sessions were held in the FRC with parents who were interested in taking part. This was done to allay any fears they may have had about taking part in the research and to enhance participants' sense of agency in shaping the outcomes of the research. These field visits are documented in more depth in the next subsection of this chapter.

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

### Research stage 2: Field visits and participant observation

The data collection for this study was completed over an eight-week period in April and May 2015.

Stage 2 of the research study encompassed three visits by the researchers to the preschool and crèche settings and Family Resource Centre (FRC) in Ballyhaunis in April 2015. The aims of these visits were twofold. Firstly, they gave the researchers the opportunity to engage with staff of the preschool and crèche services and the FRC and to learn more about their genesis and development. Secondly, it allowed for the gathering of contextual data about the Ballyhaunis area and, in particular, about the childcare needs of the asylum-seeking, Traveller and migrant communities.



During this research stage, the researchers also worked with staff at the preschool and FRC to co-develop strategies for recruiting service users (i.e., parents) to take part in interviews for the study and to identify key informants who had detailed knowledge of the Ballyhaunis area and the crèche and preschool services. Most of the project recruitment was carried out by the staff of the preschool services themselves, who designed posters for display in the FRC, the local asylum seekers' centre and the childcare services, to give information to potential participants about the project. Staff members at the crèche and preschool also informed parents directly about what the project involved. Preschool staff contacted parents who left Ballyhaunis but who resided at the Bridgestock Ltd accommodation centre whilst the preschool and crèche were being established. These participants provided invaluable data on the needs of the asylum-seeking community who first arrived in Ballyhaunis after the establishment of DP, and how the preschool and crèche evolved to meet the needs of the community.

Researchers at the UCFRC designed Participant Information Sheets which were circulated to all parents currently using the crèche and preschool services, requesting their participation in the study (Appendix I). This totalled approximately 50 people. In addition, the researchers held four information sessions in the local FRC to talk to parents directly and invite their participation in the study. This was extremely important, as it enabled the parents to ask questions about the project and helped the researchers to paint a fuller picture of the role of the crèche and preschool services in Ballyhaunis.

It should be stated, however, that while all parents using the services were requested to attend these sessions, they were sometimes sparsely attended. The maximum number of parents attending a single Participant Information Session was nine. The lowest number at any one session was two. The literature on doing research with asylum seeker and migrant communities outlines some of the reasons why participation in research by members of these groups is often limited. Temple and Moran (2011) outline that perceived competency in language often affects participation by migrants and refugees in studies. Persons who feel more at ease speaking a language that is not their mother tongue may be more likely to participate than those who perceived themselves as having lower levels of linguistic competencies (*ibid.*). Other factors, such as feelings of mistrust or previous experiences in conflict situations, may similarly impact on participation (see Ní Raghallaigh, 2014). That said, word of mouth may have impacted on recruitment: focus groups were often frequented by persons who did not attend the Participant Information Sessions but who were informed about the study by the staff members and other parents living at the DP reception centre.

### **Research stage 3: Focus groups and in-depth interviews with parents**

In-depth interviews and focus groups were completed with current service users of the preschool services (i.e., parents) in stage 3 of the study. The qualitative interview schedules were designed in March 2015 and were informed by a substantial corpus of theoretical and empirical literature outlined in Chapters 1 and 2. Interview questions centred mainly on opinions about the crèche and preschool services, what participants liked best about them and things they felt worked well, and how the services could be improved. We also asked participants to talk about the types of other supports they need, the extent to which current services meet those needs, and if they feel included in the crèche and preschool and in decisions about their operationalisation. Staff members at the preschool, crèche and FRC were furnished with copies of the interview guidelines prior to the interviews to assess the suitability of the questions and to gauge their opinions about the language used in the interviews. This also strengthened the relationships between the research team and the preschool and crèche staff members.

Focus groups were particularly useful in this study. A focus group is defined as a group interview situation where people (usually a maximum of 10) come together to discuss a particular topic or topics (see Bryman, 2012). Many people who attended the group interviews lived in the asylum seeker accommodation centre and knew each other personally or recognised each other from the accommodation centre or from dropping their children off at the preschool or crèche services. Focus groups generate interesting data on how people respond to one another in group settings; many commentators argue that a particular strength of focus groups is that researchers gain insights into how people communicate with each other. The depth of detail that often emerges in discussion generates deeply seated knowledge of the context in which people live and how they experience services that would remain untapped otherwise (Flick, 2014; Morgan, 1996).

All focus groups completed for this study took place in the Family Resource Centre (FRC) at the Old Friary building. In total, 36 parents participated in the focus groups, and five focus groups took place. Telephone interviews were also completed by the lead researcher with parents who used the crèche and preschool services in the past, many of whom no longer reside in the area (*n*=7). Including past and present service users in interviews yielded a fuller picture of the development of the childcare services in the area, the effectiveness of the services and how they changed and evolved over time. Of the parents who took part (*n*=43), 40 were female and three were male.

A substantial majority of parents who took part in the study were of African ethnicity; many were originally from Nigeria or Zimbabwe. The majority are members of the asylum-seeking community living in the Bridgestock accommodation centre. Other participants in the focus groups were Irish, Indian, Brazilian, Pakistani and Portuguese, the majority of whom were migrants who started new lives in Ireland as a result of the economic prosperity during the Celtic Tiger era.

In-depth interviews were also completed with staff members in the crèche and preschool settings, and with persons who were identified as ‘key informants’ by staff members and the FRC. A focus group was completed with three staff members in the preschool, and two staff members were interviewed together in the crèche. Two staff members who were also parents of children attending the childcare service at the preschool took part in a separate focus group session with parents. One staff member at this session acted as an interpreter for a woman from an immigrant community in Ballyhaunis whose children use the preschool services. Individual, in-depth interviews were also completed with staff of the FRC and the manager of the crèche and preschool services. Seven staff members who worked directly with the children in both services were interviewed. One further staff member was approached to be interviewed but chose not to participate. A comprehensive overview of staff members interviewed is given in Fig. 5 below. Appendix III has a copy of interview guidelines used for staff interviews.

*Fig 5: Overview of crèche and preschool staff interviewed for study*

	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

### Key informant interviews

Seven key informants were identified by staff at the childcare settings as possessing detailed knowledge of the development of the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche and about the Ballyhaunis area. All seven were contacted directly by the UCFRC team by telephone. Five were interviewed in total as two declined.<sup>22</sup> More detail about the key informants who took part is documented in Fig. 6 below. Appendix IV contains copies of the interview schedule for key informants.

*Fig. 6: Key Informants Interviewed for Process Study Evaluation*

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

### Participant observation in community childcare settings

Participant Observation (PO) was also completed in both the preschool and the crèche. The researcher observed two childcare sessions (one in each setting), each about 3 hours in duration. Participant Observation approaches are significant in social research, as they involve observing research participants in their own 'natural' settings (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Guided by the literature review, the lead researcher observed children's interactions with staff members in the crèche and preschool, children's relationships with one another, the pedagogical strategies utilised in both settings, the range of activities that children could engage in and the facilities in which children could play.

To facilitate the process of note taking, a structured observation tool was utilised. This was done in order to provide further insights on the value of children's experiences in the services to their general development. The Quality Learning Instrument (QLI) was developed, drawing on the work of Walsh and Gardner (2005), who applied a participant observation methodology as part of a study with disabled and non-disabled preschool children in Northern Ireland. A Likert scale ranging from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) was used to record the nuanced nature of childhood development, while more detailed observation information was entered into the General Notes section (see Appendix V).

In order to develop a holistic understanding of the value of the services, attention was also paid to: motivation and concentration, independence, confidence and well-being, multiple skill acquisition, and higher-order thinking skills. In cases where child-participants initiated interaction with the researcher on a one-to-one basis, the researcher engaged with them, allowing them to lead the interaction, including the conversation and the activities. During the rest of the session the researcher was unobtrusive, recording information about the atmosphere, environment and activities taking place. While there are risks to children becoming emotionally upset during the PO session, we deemed this risk minimal, given the unobtrusive manner that the researcher adopted in the classroom. In addition, the children at the crèche and preschool became familiar with both researchers when they visited the settings on previous occasions, which may also have allayed any fears the children may have had about the researchers being in the classrooms.

This tool was also deemed appropriate for the age of the children being observed in both settings (3–6 years). It asks questions about the level that children are engaged in their learning, the extent to which children were encouraged to learn independently, children's interaction with each other, and opportunities for skill acquisition. Another factor that influenced the implementation of this observation tool was that comparable points about children's learning in the early years are also outlined in research papers on Aistear. For example, Hayes (2007: 12) notes the interactive nature of early learning and the importance of self-regulated activity and opportunities for interaction with children and adults.

<sup>22</sup> Two persons identified as key informants did not agree to be interviewed for the study.

## 4.4 Qualitative Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim in July 2015. Thematic Analysis (TA) techniques were used to analyse qualitative data (i.e., PO, focus groups and in-depth interviews). In the literature, TA is described by Braun and Clark (2006: 6) as 'an accessible and theoretically flexible' approach to qualitative data analysis, stating that it 'is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, it also often goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998)'. Braun and Clark (2006: 18) offer guidelines on how to conduct TA rigorously, which were adhered to during data analysis. These include working systematically through the dataset, according equal attention to each piece of data, and identifying themes and patterns that recur often in the datasets. Braun and Clark (2006) also advise coding for as many themes/patterns as possible, including surrounding data if relevant and coding as many relevant pieces of data into as many themes as they fit.

Some of the principal thematic areas that emerged as significant during the analysis of parental interviews were as follows:

- **Descriptions of life in Direct Provision systems**
- **Family support**
- **Impacts of the services on children's school readiness**
- **Children's linguistic and social development**
- **Children's cognitive development**
- **Opinions about staff training**
- **Relationships between parents, children and staff members**

The data analysis was completed by two project researchers in July 2015 who each conducted a Thematic Analysis of the datasets. The researchers did not share information with each other about the themes or categories emerging from the data until later in the process, to maximise the empirical rigour of the data and minimise opportunities for bias during the analysis and interpretation phases of the study.

After themes were initially extracted from the data, a second round of data analysis and interpretation was undertaken by the lead author, who used Discourse Analysis (DA) (see Potter, 2012). This was done as Discourse Analysis (DA) is frequently used to analyse practices and participant observation datasets (Bryman, 2012). From this perspective, people create and recreate the world through discourse. In other words, how they speak about events, people and places is indicative of their own life worlds which they produce and reproduce through talk (see Potter and Hepburn, 2008). From this perspective, the qualitative approach was suitable in this setting for understanding how people interpret the meanings of the crèche and preschool facilities in their everyday lives.



## 4.5 Research Ethics

Ethical matters were accorded high importance during this research. Professional codes of conduct for social researchers, including the Sociological Association of Ireland (SAI) ethical guidelines, were adhered to at all times throughout the research (SAI, n.d.). All participants were informed that the research was approved by the NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee (REC), and that if they were unhappy with the study, they could contact the REC directly and the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (UCFRC). The *Guidance for Developing Ethical Research Projects with Children* (DCYA, 2012) was also consulted, particularly on child protection, issues of assent and minimising risk of harm.

The staff and management at the crèche and preschool requested verbal consent from parents to have a researcher present in the classroom at the two sessions. Parents were also informed about the research and what it entailed for them and their children. All parents whose children attend the crèche and preschool were invited to express their opinions about this. If any parent disagreed with the researcher being in the classroom, alternative play activities were to be provided for the children whose parents did not give their consent. Parents were informed about these visits again at the Study Information Meetings, and signs were displayed in the preschool and the crèche to encourage parental discussion about the project and their participation in the study, whilst the fieldwork was on-going. An interpreter was also present at the information sessions to facilitate parental engagement in the study and enable them to ask questions.

All participants (parents, staff members and key informants) were informed that interviews were recorded and that transcripts would be stored securely in line with NUI Galway's Data Retention Policy.<sup>23</sup> All data was treated with anonymity and confidentiality during the research process. Transcripts were stored on the researchers' PC computers in their private offices which were locked at all times when they were not in the room. This was to ensure that confidentiality and anonymity were upheld. Research literature on how to conduct qualitative research with asylum-seeking and migrant communities was also accessed (see Temple and Moran, 2011). Participants were informed of their rights in Participant Information Documentation and verbally by the researcher. They were also asked to sign a consent form prior to being interviewed (Appendix VI).

The researchers were constantly mindful of some of the social and cultural sensitivities of conducting research with this group, and the need to treat participants with respect. We were also conscious of the traumas that they may have witnessed when fleeing their own nations, their experiences of the asylum-seeking process in Ireland, and the desire to be respectful about race, language, ethnicity and religion especially (see Kissoon, 2010). This is another reason why fostering good relationships with the staff members was so critical. As they had in-depth local knowledge of the asylum-seeking, migrant and Traveller communities in Ballyhaunis, they were able to negotiate access for the researchers to the community, and were significant to the process of building up rapport and trust.

<sup>23</sup> See: [http://www.nuigalway.ie/data\\_protection/documents/dataprotpolfinal.pdf](http://www.nuigalway.ie/data_protection/documents/dataprotpolfinal.pdf)

## 4.6 Chapter Summary and Conclusions

This chapter outlined the processes, research design and the collection, analysis and interpretation of qualitative materials. A qualitative mixed-method approach was adopted to elicit rich data on the crèche and preschool services and service users' attitudes towards them. Qualitative data was collected from a range of participants, including parents, key informants and crèche and preschool staff members, to identify what worked well in the childcare services and things that might be improved upon. The adoption of a qualitative approach yielded exceptionally rich materials about the lives of asylum seekers in Ballyhaunis in particular, and how the crèche and preschool provide invaluable sources of informal and formal support in their lives. The qualitative approach was appropriate in the context of this study in eliciting materials around social and educational outcomes for children that parents attribute to their attendance at the preschool and crèche facilities (see Chapters 5, 6 and 7).

This chapter also discussed some of the main ethical issues, including informed consent and minimising risks of emotional harm to participants, especially children and parents. The process of data analysis and the application of Thematic Analysis (TA) and Discourse Analysis (DA) to the qualitative materials were also focused upon in this chapter. Chapter 5 presents the principal findings of this study, and Chapter 6 discusses them in the context of the literature on policy and practice, as elucidated in Chapters 1, 2 and 3.

# 5.0



## Parental Perceptions of the Greater Tomorrow Crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool Services: Evidence from Qualitative Fieldwork

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the principal qualitative findings from interviews conducted by the lead author with parents in May 2015. The chapter is organised as follows. Section 5.2 focuses on parents' interviews, specifically on descriptions of life in Direct Provision, which are intimately linked to narratives on the challenges of parenting in DP. This is done to contextualise parents' perspectives about the crèche and preschool services, which are focused upon in section 5.3, and perceived outcomes of the crèche and preschool on children's social, cognitive and educational development. Marrying with the literature provided earlier in this report, sections 5.2 and 5.3 of this chapter yield qualitative data on parental opinions on several themes, including the relationships between children and teachers, professionalism, inclusivity and interculturalism, and school readiness. These themes are expanded upon in Chapters 6 and 7, which document staff members' and key informants' opinions about the impacts of the crèche and preschool on educational, social and cognitive outcomes for children.

In this chapter and Chapters 6 and 7, it will be shown that themes such as interculturalism and social integration emerged strongly from all four qualitative datasets. These themes both shape and reflect participants' beliefs about the importance of the crèche and preschool to the local community, at least to some extent. Commensurate with previous chapters which emphasised quality enhancement in early year's services, Chapter 5 looks at parents' perspectives on how the crèche and preschool impact on school readiness, opinions about the activities and play materials available to children, and the impacts of the crèche and preschool on children's learning. Incorporating perspectives of service users (i.e. parents) with staff member and key informant interviews in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 is in line with the emphasis on data triangulation as outlined in Chapter 3 of this report. The final section of this chapter, 5.4, offers a chapter summary and some conclusions, which are discussed in greater depth in Chapters 7, 8 and 9.

## 5.2 Challenges of Parenting in Direct Provision: Discourses of Normality, Freedom and Giving Parents a ‘Break’

### Descriptions of life in Direct Provision

Parents from the asylum-seeking community who were interviewed frequently discussed the challenges of living in DP accommodation. When asked to describe their experiences of DP, interviewees regularly used phrases like ‘very difficult’ and ‘terrible’ to define their experiences. Participants regularly commented on the difficulties of making ends meet, stating that their parenting lives and choices were severely restricted in DP. Parents regularly discussed how DP restricts their children’s lives too and their inability to purchase necessities for them such as toys, clothes and shoes on a regular basis. For parents, the crèche and preschool were important services because children were able to access toys, books and other play materials that parents could not afford at home. Accessing these materials was seen as important to enhancing children’s social and cognitive development, enhancing their knowledge of sociability with other children:

*But especially coming to the crèche, she took every toy, played with friends, to hang out with friends even. I think it’s really, really great.*

Significantly, parents also commented on the difficulties of hosting birthday celebrations for their children and celebrating other special occasions due to lack of income, and they felt that this severely restricted their children’s ability to play and socialise with other children outside the asylum seeker community. Parents viewed play as extremely important for their children’s social and cognitive development and for learning about life in Ballyhaunis and in Ireland. The preschool and crèche then were seen as critical forums for developing children’s intercultural competencies and learning about the community (lead author’s fieldnote, 11 May 2015).

### Food and nutrition in Direct Provision

Parents expressed much concern about the nutritional quality of food supplied in DP centres and how this impacted on children’s health. Such findings clearly corroborate Manandhar et al. (2006), who highlight asylum-seeking communities’ worries about children’s health and nutrition and their fears about the low nutritional quality of food in Direct Provision centres.

Interviewees often allude to restrictions in food allowances that were operational in the accommodation centre, with one female interviewee describing it as ‘inhumane . . . it made life miserable’. According to some parents, these restrictions are not enforced now as rigidly as they were in the past. However, with regard to nutrition, some parents alluded to the significance of the crèche and preschool in providing healthy food and snacks for the children, such as milk, cheese and low-sugar fruit juices (lead author’s fieldnote, 11 May 2015). Parents said this was important, as it provided the children with nutritious snacks and also lightened the financial burden on them to some degree. During interviews, children’s nutrition and health were also linked back to improving educational and social outcomes for children. Interviewees viewed children’s health holistically and spoke about the importance of nutrition for children’s educational and social development too. This is evident in the following quotation from Participant Observation (PO) fieldwork:

*If you cannot have the health, then you cannot have them learn. You can’t have one without the other. Here, this place gives them health in mind while the food situation over there, it is doubtful for a health perspective but it is better.*



### Informal social support and giving parents ‘a break’

A very important finding of this research relates to family support. The crèche and preschool were seen as pivotal by parents for providing material, social and emotional supports to parents and children. Partly, this related back to the perceived inclusive and participatory ethos of the services, which participants regularly commented on during interviews. During focus group discussions, parents regularly commented that if they had a problem, be it to do with childcare, finances or social isolation, they identified the crèche and preschool staff as resources they could turn to as a source of informal support. With their children especially, some mothers commented that if their child had a problem at school, they could go to the staff to talk about it, and their opinions would be accorded dignity and respect:

*I can tell you that if I had a problem, I could talk to them and I don't mean just about school, I mean about other things. They are great people and it is a good service.*

These forms of informal support were highly valued by participants. In the following interview extract, for example, a female participant discusses the importance of these supports for herself and her children:

*It is very important for me and very important for him, because if I have a problem, where do I go? Who do I turn to? I talked to them about my rights here in Ireland, and about my son and about what it is like to be here and if I am lonely and they help. You know they really help. And they gave me clothes once or twice for him when I needed them, so that was good.*

Children's attendance at the crèche and preschool was seen as important for parents too; having ‘a break’ emerged very strongly in this regard. Having a safe environment for children to attend daily gave the parents' much-needed time to do domestic chores, like shopping, or do a leisure activity away from the children. Parents talked about the difficulties of being with their children and other families in cramped living space for long periods of time. This indicates the social significance of the crèche and preschool in their everyday lives:

*She goes for two hours. I am able to tidy the room. And take my shower and I'm able to give like a lunch for her, so two hours is not much though but at least I can do a few things that I cannot do when she is around. I can easily tidy up the room. So that when she comes back, it's in a clean environment.*

Parents also commented that mental health problems could develop in adults if they were with their children all day in the confined environment of DP. According to some participants, this could lead to feelings of isolation, depression and loneliness. One woman stated:

*If we were with them all day, I mean we would get nothing done and we would not be able to parent and care for them. Life here is just too hard if we were with them all the time. We would feel bad in ourselves.*

Some parents also commented that they look forward to these activities daily as they are some of the only 'freedoms' that they have in DP. As one woman said, *'it keeps me going'*. In the following interview extract, a female interviewee discusses the importance of the support that the crèche and preschool give her in everyday life, and the significance of having a break:

*Without the services our lives would be horrible. Because when they go out you have time to breathe, time to run around, do shopping, when they come in you know that they have learned different things.*

It is very important to remember that doing seemingly 'routine' activities, like taking a shower, communicating with others via e-mail and taking time for leisure, are extremely important for people living in stressful situations like DP, where instances of mental health problems and experiences of social isolation are high (see Smyth and Whyte, 2005). This is also implicit in the following extract:

*I can get my hair done, take a shower and I can check my e-mails from home. It's important. It makes a difference to me.*


### **Experiences of prejudice and social stigma: Building respect for diversity and learning about equality**

Another discourse that emerged strongly from the interviews was that of prejudice and social stigmatisation. Parents regularly gave examples of situations where they felt that they were socially stigmatised or treated unfairly because of their 'official' status as asylum seekers. This was exacerbated by the geographical location of the accommodation centre, a closed-access community, located on a hill overlooking Ballyhaunis town centre. In the following extract, a female participant discusses how insider/outsider distinctions shape and reflect her interactions with the community and feelings of being 'part' of the place:

*The position itself for the hostel – it's a weird setting up on the hill everyone can spot you. You're not within the community, you're in the community, but you're separated from the place, so they know that different nationalities are from the hostel.*

Participants also spoke about experiences of racism from some sectors of the community in Ballyhaunis town (lead author's fieldnote, 17 June 2015). This ranged from verbal abuse in the street and local shops to instances where interviewees felt they were deliberately excluded from local events because of their asylum seeker status. Participants commented that they were labelled by some persons as 'different' and 'outsiders' by virtue of their skin colour, cultural differences and language (lead author's fieldnote, 20 May 2015). Some said they felt welcome in Ballyhaunis and accepted by the wider community. These findings broadly correspond to other research on racism in Ireland, such as Michael (2015), who argues that persons of African origin in particular frequently experience 'everyday racism'. 'Everyday' racism encompasses 'micro-transgressions', small acts of rejection that are repeated over time, and can include verbal abuse, bullying, discrimination, offensive jokes and discrimination (Michael, 2015: 4). Experiences of racism and stigmatisation are evident in the following extract where a woman speaks about an incident that happened in a local shop:

*Life was really tough and hard, too difficult. It was made worse. There was a woman in a chemist and she left her bag on the table and was walking around looking. She saw me walk to the counter and immediately she ran to get her bag. What comes to her mind is that we are going to steal. And we were taunted with bad language and told we are only a number and not really a person.*



Parents also felt that their children were stigmatised by some members of the wider community in Ballyhaunis and Irish society generally. One parent said she felt that Irish people sometimes label and stereotype her children as ‘*asylum seeker children*’. In the following extracts, focus group participants discuss some of the prejudices that they feel they and their children encounter in everyday life:

*There will always be this inferiority, like these people are more superior than I am. I don't know my status in this place, so I don't know what I will do or the way I will act that would attract this kind of reaction from other people in the community. They don't see me – it's the people up the hill.*

All of the parents agreed that the staff in the preschool and crèche treat the children equally, with some parents saying that the preschool and crèche were very significant in their lives on account of this. Parents commented that the children require a ‘*neutral*’ space where they could be themselves. In the preschool and crèche they were seen as ‘*just children*’, not specifically as ‘*asylum-seeking children from the hill*’. This support for interculturalism was viewed as a major strength of the services:

*There's no prejudice. They don't look at our children as asylum seeker children but as children. And the environment that we live in depends on the people that you live with as well. Your child cannot play, children need to play, they'll be small, they're running up and down, they are making noise so they are just confined, whereas [in] the crèche and the preschool they can run and be free, they enjoy themselves, they play and learn.*

Significantly, parents also stated that the crèche and preschool teach the children to treat others fairly and with equality, and they saw this as essential for improving children's sense of self-worth and instilling good behaviours in them from an early age. This was significant for developing children's resilience later on in life and their abilities to ‘bounce back’; particularly in instances where they felt they might be treated unjustly due to racism or social prejudices:

*It's a good place, I think, because we feel respected and heard by them and so do the children, and the children will learn that they have to respect others and it will teach them that.*

### **Sense of normality and freedom**

Parents from the Reception Centre often commented that they regard their own personal and legal situation as ‘abnormal’, and this emerged very strongly in focus groups. For parents, the preschool and crèche gave their children a semblance of normality: a sense of what it was like to experience a normal childhood. They were seen as places where children could escape their cramped, living conditions, where they could interact with other children, some of whom lived outside the asylum seeker complex. This was seen as particularly important for children's social learning and facilitating their integration into Ireland:

*It's good because it's a place for our children to be normal where we are not normal. I think the situation in the system... We stay in one room with your children with other children. I swear it's not enough for the children to play.*

Freedom also emerged as a significant subject in interviews. Parents commented on the lack of freedoms that children have in DP: *'They have no freedom here, none at all';* and *'It's not natural for children. They should be free to be children.'* The preschool and crèche were interpreted as spaces where children had greater freedom to experiment and to learn about the world around them. This freedom was also viewed as important for the intellectual and social development of children. Creativity and freedom of expression were interpreted by many interviewees as essential to social learning and children's developmental processes. Having the space to 'be yourself' and to experiment through play, through activities like drawing and painting, and through materials like sand was important to developing children's interest in education:

*The children are free, they are not held back.  
In the preschool so they are not held back, there's nothing like you cannot do, even if they wanted to play with water and get muddy and dirty, they can do whatever they want. They are not held back.*

### **Children's safety in asylum seeker complexes**

Safety concerns were also alluded to by some parents who took part in interviews. Participants expressed considerable mistrust and unease about living in close proximity with people they did not know and who could potentially harm their children (author's fieldnote, 11 May 2015). Parents adopted different strategies to cope with this uncertainty. Participants mentioned the importance of having the support of other parents from similar backgrounds and countries of origin, who shared similar cultural knowledge ('cultural repertoires') that encompass ways of doing and language from their home nations. Other participants mentioned the 'social distance' that they maintain away from other people who occupy shared accommodation with them. This is evident in the following quotation with a woman currently living in DP. Ensuring the safety of herself and her daughter is central to how she 'negotiates' her relationships with others:

*There are people that I talk to but it's only greetings, I don't have a friend because we come and go - it's like you'd be there for permanent, and also I don't know who this person is and I have a daughter to care for.*

The 'safety' discourse also emerged very strongly from interviews about the impacts of the crèche and preschool. Parents felt uneasy about some of the persons with whom their children came into contact regularly, and the preschool and crèche functioned as significant services in this regard. This corroborates work by researchers such as Kane (2008) and Ogbu et al. (2014), who make similar contentions about parents' fears for children's safety in DP. Interviewees also revealed that they trust the childcare services to keep their children safe daily, and participants often commented on the importance of having a safe, clean and warm place for them to go:

*Yes, they are safe and that is important that they are safe. Yes, they are secure there and that is important to know. We trust them.*



### 5.3 Perceived Benefits of the Greater Tomorrow Crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool: Impacts on Children's Learning and Development



Parents regularly alluded to the perceived benefits of the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche on children's educational, social and cognitive development. School readiness emerged as a very significant theme in this regard; parents frequently commented on skills that children learnt at the services which prepare them for school. This is explored in greater depth in the following subsections.

#### The crèche and preschool as 'caring' services for children

Parents expressed very supportive attitudes towards the community preschool and crèche services. When asked their opinions about the services, one parent stated: *'without them, sure where would we be?'*, while another said: *'It is a great service, absolutely brilliant. They are a brilliant team.'* Parents often spoke about the care that staff showed their children, and this discourse of care emerged strongly from the interviews when discussing staff members' ways of working with children. Significantly, parents commented that children looked forward to attending the crèche and the preschool every day, which for parents indicated the care and respect towards the children which was embodied by staff members:

*They are very caring towards the children. They are wonderful, good, and all the children, there is no child say: 'I hate this teacher', they love them.*

*It's nice when our children can be children, they are not afraid to express themselves and play, even bring friends over to the hostel, they are free, but the crèche and the preschool, they're really good... that children will have more interaction with community.*

The notion that care and education were equally privileged in the settings was seen as underpinning the pedagogical approach drawn upon by staff in both services. Parents saw this as important to the teaching approach of staff and as highly significant to enhancing children's learning in both services:

*I think children learn better when they know they are cared for. If a child experiences hatred and feels different at school, how can that child learn to do anything else themselves or how can they learn anything about the world with that idea hanging over them?*

#### Professionalism and inclusivity in service delivery

Parents regularly talked about the professionalism of the services, the relationships that they forged with childcare staff since their arrival in Ballyhaunis, and the inclusivity of the services. Parents regularly praised the professionalism that they felt was embodied in staff members' ways of working with children, which they said was visible in how staff members interacted with the children, and also how staff dealt with parents in a respectful manner:

*How they deal with children... they deal in a professional way for each and every kid.*

Inclusivity was often alluded to by interviewees. Parents felt that children were well regarded and treated equally by the staff, and this was seen as significant to professionalism also. Parents felt they were included in the services and could have their say on how the crèche and preschool are operated:

*They welcome parents. They like them to feel at home. They didn't make them come and drop your children. No, they just open up, like everybody to come in, so I think it's very good.*

### Fostering children's creativity and imagination

During the focus groups, parents spoke positively about the importance of creativity for children's education. They regularly discussed many of the creative competencies that children learned by attending the crèche and preschool, such as singing, arts and dancing. The preschool and crèche services were often referred to as 'creative' and 'imaginative' environments by parents, who alluded to the importance of developing children's creative skills and letting them be imaginative. Creative teaching and learning, such as teaching children how to sing and dance, were also seen as important for furthering children's understanding of English. Some parents attributed this to helping improve children's speech:

*So it's really, really good and her speech is different. The way she speaks as well like different thing. Learn that new word from the teacher, so it's very good.*

*It's really good because when my son started going there, that is where he learns how to share toys to play with other children, his speech is clear, he talks and he's doing everything. He's always happy.*

Parents also commented on the significance of having an imaginative learning space for children, where they could be themselves and develop their creative competencies. This was seen as important for alleviating some of the stresses encountered by children living in DP, and as supporting the Home Learning Environment (HLE), which is discussed in greater depth later in this study.

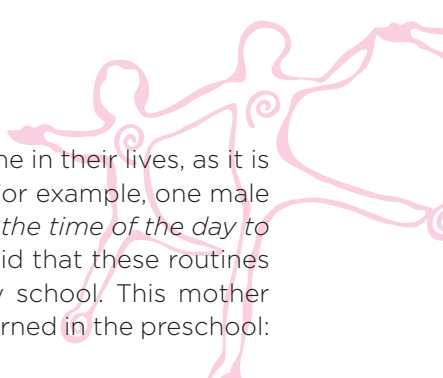
### School readiness: Teaching children about routines

During the interviews, parents commented that effectively preparing children for primary school was the main educative goal of the preschool and crèche. Indeed, some participants called the services 'the foundation to education'. Parents said that the preschool and crèche gave children 'a great start in life' and in their opinion 'would motivate them to learn in future'. Fostering skills such as pre-reading and numerical competencies in preschool was seen as important for giving children a better future. As one woman commented, 'We're just hoping for a better tomorrow, and our children are the biggest part of this dream.'

One of the most significant subthemes which emerged in relation to school readiness was 'routine'. Parents regularly said that attending the preschool and crèche gave the children a sense of routine, which was seen as important for enhancing their transition to primary school. As one female interviewee said:

*They learn that from school. If they didn't go to school, they will not know there is, they just mess around the house.*

Significantly, other research notes the lack of routine in children's and parents' lives in Direct Provision, which is linked to feelings of the temporariness of living arrangements, fear of being deported or moved to other DP centres, and feelings of boredom (see Arnold, 2012; Collins, 2002). In a similar vein, Mooney (2015) states that asylum seekers regularly 'experience the "construction of dependence, institutionalisation, and infantilisation which results in insecurity and powerlessness"' (Mooney 2015: 10). Having a routine or something to do, and the ability to exercise decisions in everyday life, is therefore extremely important to overcoming feelings of powerlessness and low self-esteem, at least to some degree (see Arnold, 2012).



Parents regularly stated that it was important for their own children to learn routine in their lives, as it is an important life skill that would eventually train children for the world of work. For example, one male interviewee said that attending the preschool gave his son ‘*structure... he learned the time of the day to do things, to get up and work and come home again*’. One female interviewee said that these routines helped her daughter to settle into her school work when she reached primary school. This mother attributed her child’s success in school work to the learning routines which she learned in the preschool:

*She had no difficulty in settling down to her schoolwork. She developed intellectually. She was familiar with having a teacher, doing class work, answering questions. They had been introduced to painting, colouring and using their imaginations. I tell you she won the award for art, the competition, you know?*

### **Educational and social outcomes for children**

Interviewees often commented that there were great educational and social differences between children who did not have an on-site childcare service in the early days of DP in Ballyhaunis, and those who attended the preschool and crèche in more recent times. Significantly, they attributed these enhancements in children’s learning to participation at the preschool and crèche:

*It was a world of difference between him and my daughter. The crèche really helped my daughter educationally and socially. She is an introvert who finds it difficult to smile at everybody, but she came back with joy in her heart which helped her too when she started school.*

*My daughter, by the time she went to school and when she started school, she had been going to school already, so she had no difficulty in settling down.*

Many other participants said they perceive that the preschool and crèche services directly and indirectly affected the intellectual development of their children. Parents stated that children learned how to work independently of others, and that the crèche gave them the opportunity to use their imaginations, to read and to study books. Parents also gave examples of how participating in the preschool and crèche inspired their children to learn. In the following extract, for example, a mother says that her child’s interest in learning has improved because of the emphasis on reading skills in the services:

*You know like they develop their brains! You know? They what they learn in the crèche we as the parents, we don’t have that time to sit down and talk a lot that they [are] learning from crèche, because in the morning we have a lot of domestic things to run a house like, when they come out they say, ‘Mummy I want to read a book, let us sit down with the book,’ I say, ‘Oh my God, what happened?’*

Significantly, parents in focus groups whom the researcher encountered during ethnographic investigations in the community commented on the lack of study space for children in asylum seeker accommodation, which was seen as detrimental to children’s learning and development. In this regard, the continuation of the crèche and preschool was seen as vital, as they were interpreted as highly significant arenas for encouraging an ethic of learning in children from an early age.

### Changes to challenging behaviours in the home

Parents commented that the crèche and preschool services provided their children with essential social skills, teaching them about their relationships with others and how to behave at home. Parents said that in their opinions, attending the crèche and preschool services improved children's feelings of self-confidence and their abilities to make friends:

*To create this place for them outside the convent has been great. It helped them to interact with children.*

A number of parents in particular talked about behavioural problems they observed in their own children and in other children who lived in the asylum seeker centre. They attributed positive changes in their children's behaviour to the children's attendance at the preschool and crèche and the strong bonds that developed between parents and staff. For example, one parent said that she felt more confident dealing with the challenging behaviours of her children at home using techniques that she learned from the service staff. In the following interview extract, a mother reflects on how her approach to disciplining her children transformed through what she learned from childcare staff. Her child was repeatedly in trouble at home and in school, but when her own approach to discipline changed in line with advice she received from the preschool staff, she found that her child's behaviour improved:

*She really comes down to their level, you know? I learned this from her. I learn that when you want to play with them you really need to come down to their level. You don't talk to them like adult – you talk to them like a child to child.*

### Improvements in children's practices in the home

Parents commented on other positive changes to children's everyday practices at home. They attributed these changes to their children's learning in the preschool services. Some of the principal changes in children's practices were an observed willingness to help adults in the home, changes in hygiene practices, learning to eat and drink independently, and learning to share:

*It teaches the children to work, help their families, how to tidy up after themselves, like my baby, he had to, when he finished drinking the juice they give him, he has to go and take the placemats.*

*When my two-year-old started going there, he didn't know how to drink juice in a cup and he didn't know how to feed himself yogurt, but now he can do it, they teach him that, it's not me. He can do it by himself.*

*My little girl can use tissue to clean her mouth by herself, and she washes her hands and says before meals, 'My teacher tells me to do it' (laughs).*

*When my son started to going there, that is where he learns how to share toys to play with other children.*



### Social integration and intercultural learning

Many persons who were interviewed said that they wanted their children to integrate well into Irish life, and socialising with children and parents from Ireland would enable children to gain essential social skills in what were considered appropriate behaviours and what were not. While some interviewees commented on the transience and uncertainty of life as an asylum seeker, stating that they wished to move on from Ballyhaunis, a significant number of interviewees (approximately 50%) said they would consider settling in the area. Arenas like the preschool were valued by parents as they provided rare opportunities for children from the accommodation centre to interact with children from Traveller backgrounds and members of the so-called 'settled' community. Parents commented on the friendships that their children forged in the preschool with children from diverse cultural backgrounds. These were seen as valuable for enhancing the transition into primary school and enhancing cultural learning:

*My daughter has gone obviously here, she has made proper bonds with children like to friend's houses; she goes to the Irish families.*

Parents also gave examples of how they felt that the crèche and preschool taught children to value their uniqueness and their own distinctive racial and ethnic identities:

*Nationality, they get to see a different. One day I was in crèche and one little girl came to me and said, 'Oh, I like your colour. Yes, my Mum is white but you are...' I look at her and say, 'You do like my colour; I love your colour as well.' So what they see is what they say, you know? So from that crèche down here they see a lot. It makes them feel like, Wow, this is another world again.*

Participants also commented that the teaching method in the crèche and preschool created better acceptance of difference among children, which was important for their own cultural learning and for enhancing their own self-confidence:

*And they are meeting different people. Not everybody is within that setting, so they know that so and so maybe even they'll learn different countries. Because I remember when I was doing voluntary they will mention the child, say he won't be here maybe for two weeks, he's gone on holiday, he's gone up there on a plane. And so the children are learning different things, it's not just our confined spaces, they are learning different things, different stories, how people live within different homes.*

## 5.4 Chapter Summary and Conclusions

This chapter documented interview materials with parents, capturing their perceptions and narratives about the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche services. Throughout this chapter, it was shown that both the crèche and preschool are greatly valued by parents. In particular, data outlined in this chapter illustrates that the crèche and the preschool services perform important social functions to members of the asylum-seeking community. They especially help to alleviate some of the risks that people typically experience whilst living in DP, including issues to do with children's safety and affording children access to educational necessities like toys and books. Significantly, parental interviews imply that they attribute to the services good developmental outcomes for children attending the crèche and preschool, in learning to share, learning about positive relationships between children and adults, and pre-reading skills. The main points from parents' perceptions about the crèche and preschool as documented in this chapter are summarised as follows:

- **Parents perceive that children attending the crèche and preschool are treated with equality and respect by staff members at the services.**
- **Staff members at the crèche and preschool services are perceived as working in a professional manner with children; they are seen as competent and well-trained.**
- **Parents see the crèche and preschool services as important for fostering children's imaginations, intelligence and creativity.**
- **The crèche and preschool are viewed as significant for enhancing children's feelings of freedom and giving the children a break from everyday routines in the DP reception centre.**
- **The crèche and preschool facilities are seen as important for improving children's school readiness, and enhancing their social and educational outcomes and intercultural learning.**
- **Having documented parents' perceptions of the preschool and crèche, the next chapter focuses on interview data from staff members from the crèche and preschool. Significantly, interviews with staff members broadly corroborate parental interviews with regard to the range of themes identified and their opinions about the impacts of the services on children's lives. Importantly, Chapters 6 and 7 focus on staff members' views about the impacts of the crèche and preschool on improved developmental outcomes for young people, their approaches to learning and teaching, and their perspectives on quality in early year's education.**

# 6.0



## Staff Member Opinions about the Greater Tomorrow Crèche and the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and their Impacts on Children and Families

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the attitudes and opinions of staff members at the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche regarding perceived impacts of the services on the social, cognitive and educational development of children. In interviews, staff members regularly commented on the importance of the crèche and preschool to asylum seekers and members of the Travelling community in particular, and the significance of the services to fostering intercultural learning and social integration between people of different ethnic, social and cultural backgrounds. With regard to outcomes for children and families, there was agreement among all staff members interviewed that attending the crèche and preschool enhances children's school readiness and provides important informal social supports to children and families. Indeed, during interviews, staff members regularly spoke about the crèche and preschool as caring and nurturing environments for children, which corroborates parental perceptions of both services, as outlined in Chapter 5.

The remainder of this chapter is divided as follows. Section 6.2 focuses on staff members' descriptions of the crèche and preschool, particularly their significance in enhancing interculturalism and social integration of children and families. Section 6.3 outlines staff opinions about care for children and parents as embodied in the crèche and preschool services and their importance in providing informal social supports to parents. Section 6.4 discusses school readiness, and section 6.5 focuses on indicators of quality in early year's education, such as staff attitudes to training and development. Section 6.6 looks at issues affecting the sustainability of the crèche and preschool, and section 6.7 offers a chapter summary and some conclusions.

## 6.2 Descriptions of the Preschool and Crèche by Staff Members: Discourses of Interculturalism, Social Integration and Cultural Learning

When describing the crèche and preschool services, staff members regularly alluded to their importance in shaping intercultural learning between children of diverse ethnic, cultural and social backgrounds. In the context of 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. The crèche and preschool were seen as neutral spaces where positive dialogue could take place between parents and where children could mix with each other, socialise and forge friendships. Having a space for children to play in and get to know each other was seen as very important for improving social relationships between families, with one staff member saying: *'It's the future for Ballyhaunis, having those positive interactions'* (author's fieldnote, 16 May 2015).

Staff in both facilities expressed very supportive attitudes towards the intercultural ethos of the crèche and preschool, commenting on the diverse ethnic and cultural identities and nationalities of the children who attended: *'Lots of different nationalities, and lots of cultures with different beliefs'* (author's fieldnote, 30 April 2015). When discussing what the crèche and preschool meant to them personally, some staff members said that it was like *'family'* and like a *'community'*, with one female interviewee from the preschool saying: *'regardless of any differences, we're all the same here'*. The community discourse emerged particularly strongly among staff, and the conviction that the services benefited all the community in Ballyhaunis. Indeed, when talking about community, staff members seemed to adopt a more 'holistic' understanding of what community means which 'goes beyond' social, ethnic and cultural differences:

*I definitely do believe that what set up originally in the Convent is such a benefit to Ballyhaunis here to the community, the whole community.*

Staff in both services commented on the importance of fostering a good education in all children, regardless of ethnic or cultural differences, and on the significance of this approach for nurturing better intercultural understandings among people of different backgrounds in Ballyhaunis:

*I'm passionate about my job. That would upset me now as well. I really do enjoy my job. I look at those kids and I think, 'God, they could be the people that will be doing surgery on me when I'm an old woman.' These are our future. No matter which way I look at it, where they've come from, I've got to give them the best point from where I'm at now with them. Children have to be given the chance to grow and to succeed in life, and that's what we try to do in the crèche, we nurture them.*

### Interculturalism as a way of working with children and families

When discussing their feelings about the role of the crèche and preschool services in building bridges in the community, some staff members said that interculturalism is a way of working with children and parents which encompasses professionalism in service delivery, equality, and treating parents and children with respect. Importantly, staff members in the preschool commented that they instil interculturalism in the services through the pedagogical approach to learning and teaching, how they work with children and interact with parents in everyday life:



*It's about people getting on, is actually working together, having fun together for the children in here, building relationships, real relationships. Acknowledging difference, accepting it; we can learn from everybody. Integration to me is more on the ground. It's society getting on with each other.*

Staff also commented that in their opinions, the crèche and preschool strengthened relationships between people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds in Ballyhaunis. They provided examples in their narratives of instances where strong relationships were forged. One female interviewee from the preschool stated that the service was important for '*building better social networks*' between people from different nations, and she also mentioned the range of countries the children hailed from, such as Syria, China, Afghanistan, Ireland and Pakistan: 'We've had a lot of people here from different countries but it adds to the place.' Another female interviewee from the preschool service said that in her experience as a parent, attending the service laid the foundation for better relationships to develop between children from different backgrounds once they went to primary school, and that attending the services enabled children to appreciate the uniqueness and individuality of others:

*They went to the same playschool, so my child went to school with her little boy and another girl. And they were three Pakistani children and they went to school together, and she is so close with those kids. They're like her – they've had all the diversity and the different mixing, and as they go along the school system that it does start to happen.*

Staff members in both services also welcomed the closer involvement of the Traveller and immigrant communities, because it would signal that people from all sections of the community are welcome to participate. The participation of a woman from an immigrant family and members of the Travelling community who work in the preschool was seen as especially important for strengthening interculturalism:

*And there's learning in it for all of us, and I think actually it even builds the bridges for the Traveller people to come to the preschool. And it encourages relationships I think between us all.*

Preschool staff members also commented that bringing children together from immigrant and asylum-seeking families benefited not only the children but also their parents:

*Not just for the child, because then also if it's good for her it affects the child and the parent because it affects how she feels. So it's an indirect support. It's all helping that integration.*

Equality and treating children equally emerged as a very significant discourse when staff members discussed ways of working with children. The services were seen as neutral spaces that promote the principles of equality, relationship-building and mutuality:

*Here everyone is equal and I think that's the thing about it. It's a neutral place. There's no shouting, there's no disagreements. If an argument breaks out downtown between parents or at home or anywhere else, that's not our business.*

Respondents also provided some examples of how the children learned to accept other children, by playing with them, sharing with them and talking to them. They attributed this directly to the children's attendance at the services. In their professional opinions, children's willingness to accept others stemmed in part from the multicultural focus of the services and that people are welcomed here regardless of ethnic or cultural backgrounds:

*We were in the playground today and there was an Irish child in with her grandad and it was the Syrian child, the Irish, and the Brazilian girl. They were all playing together and they never have before. Never seen her before, but they accepted her in. And she was playing as well.*

### **Challenges working with children and families**

Preschool and crèche staff members commented that working with children of different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds is often difficult due to variations in cultural assumptions about behaviours that are socially permissible in other countries. Language barriers were also alluded to by staff in both services, who commented on the difficulties of communicating effectively with children, particularly when they first attend the services:

*Lots of them, lots of cultures which are quite actually diverse, which is quite hard and challenging to work with. It's the language, language barrier, the language barrier. It's to do with the traditions and cultures and difference.*

Cultural assumptions about disciplining children and what it meant to be a 'good' parent in different nations and cultures were alluded to by staff in both the crèche and the preschool. This was also mentioned in relation to how staff members manage relationships with certain parents:

*I remember talking to a parent and they had a different idea of chastising their child to how we would. They would actually line them up in the middle of the room and they've to stand in the corner of the room. It was very strict, so situations like that are difficult.*


## **6.3 Staff Perceptions of the Benefits of the Crèche and Preschool Services; Discourses of Care and Informal Social Supports for Children and Families**

### **Caring for children and families**

Staff frequently referred to the concept of care when discussing the significance of the crèche and preschool and their impacts on children's lives. Comparable to the parental interviews, the services were viewed as beneficial for giving parents and the children a break: *'It's an outlet for the parents and children, isn't it?'* and it *'gets the children out of their environment'*.

Staff members recognised that many local families in Ballyhaunis suffered financial losses after the recession, and also in interviews acknowledged the importance of supporting parents and children from the wider community:

*Even parents from outside the complex have a hard time. Everyone's been hit by the recession. They need a break as well.*



Care discourses were also alluded to by staff. All staff members interviewed regarded the crèche and preschool as caring environments, and mentioned the importance of caring for the children and listening to them as being at the very core of both services, along with ways of working with children and families:

*It's how I'd treat my own children, you know? And give them a chance, you know, like your own children and to be listened to, because a lot of our children are not listened to. It's my way of working.*

This importance of care and listening to children appeared to be part of the teaching approach in the crèche and preschool, as evidenced in data collected for the participant observation (PO) element of the study. During the fieldwork, staff members interacted one-to-one with children, helping them to do activities like painting, drawing and colouring, and sat side by side with them at small tables. The children appeared to be at ease with crèche and preschool staff members throughout the sessions that were observed in both services (author's fieldnote, 21 May 2015).

Focus group discussions with staff members about individual children and families that accessed the services were often highly emotive. Staff at both services saw their role in the community primarily as early year's educators and as providers of valuable social supports to families in the area (lead author's fieldnote, 27 May 2015). Interviewees in both the crèche and the preschool said that the services were a prime source of informal support for asylum-seeking families in particular. Supporting families was viewed as highly significant for improving educational and social outcomes for children. Indeed, the concept of 'support' seemed to be interpreted in a holistic fashion. Comments about the caring role of the services and the provision of informal social supports for families are embodied in the following:

*I personally think it's very, very effective. I think that sometimes this might be the only place they feel they get some support initially.*

When discussing informal supports, interviewees implied that providing these supports was an important aspect of their work, as they were directly and indirectly supporting the Home Learning Environment (HLE) of children. The trust relationships and knowledge about local families that staff members had built up over time were seen as pivotal for identifying how other local services could potentially respond to families who were in need:

*Parents coming in asking for things or got a problem with this, and you wouldn't get that at school, so they get a lot of support, don't they, parents? About their home life and things that might not even concern their children. They're sick or run down, their car is broken. They'd go away an hour later and be completely happy. Nothing has changed, but somebody listened to them.*

*I think the fact that we know them and we know what happens in these families and we know them individually means a lot, because we know how to support them at home.*

## 6.4 The Roles of the Preschool and Crèche in Enhancing School Readiness

Staff members at the preschool and the crèche spoke regularly about the importance of preparing the children effectively for the transition to primary school. They saw this as being of prime importance to the children's development and as a significant aspect of their own role as educators. Participants talked regularly about children who attended the services and about the importance of learning very basic skills, such as how to sit and how to play, and of teaching children about sharing. The living conditions in DP were often described as militating against children's learning such skills. For example, one female interviewee spoke about a child who did not know how to sit properly on a chair when he started at crèche. She attributed this to the lack of furniture in the DP centre, and the cramped living conditions that the family experienced:

*He'd just come in and sit on the floor. It was like he'd never seen a chair and never sat on one, and he needed to know how to do it before school, so that was important. I don't think they had the furniture, I don't think there were any chairs. To my mind, they were sitting on the floor or using bean bags, so it was difficult. We have children coming in here who don't even have the basics.*


### Cleanliness and personal hygiene

The staff in the preschool and the crèche emphasised the importance of teaching children to wash their hands, to be clean and to tidy up after themselves, which were important skills for school and for the home. They also stated that the children learned tacitly as they moved throughout the preschool and crèche spaces. Pictures displayed in the play and washing areas in the preschool depict children from different national and cultural backgrounds performing tasks such as washing and cleaning. These are accompanied by small pieces of card with words like '*I wash up*' and '*I wash my hands*'. In this way, it was felt that the intercultural aspect of the service was enhanced, and children learned to recognise particular words and phrases associated with doing different tasks, as well as the 'routine' nature of these practices (lead author's fieldnote, 25 April 2015). During the Participant Observation (PO) data collection in the crèche, it was also observed that children went straight to the sink to initiate cleaning up after they played with bubbles, which appears indicative of the learning about hygiene that is imbued in the teaching approach in both the crèche and preschool (lead author's fieldnote, 20 April 2015).

### Children's social, emotional and intellectual development

Both the preschool and crèche facilities were seen as pivotal to enhancing children's social, emotional and intellectual development. Staff members in both services spoke of the importance of teaching children about letters, numbers, colours and sounds in preparation for school. They said they achieved this through the activities they engaged in with children and in the play materials in both the crèche and preschool services. The lead researcher observed that a particular activity in the preschool, teaching children about doing tasks quickly and slowly, also taught children to recognise colours, and children were asked questions about the colours of different items during reading time (lead author's fieldnote, 20 May 2015). Staff at the crèche spoke of the importance of teaching children about colours, letters and numbers before entering primary school:

*I think it's so important that they have a space to learn that and they're supported as well in doing so. Like so many of these kids, they don't have books at home, so having books and toys here is so important.*



Staff at the crèche and preschool said that preschool is important for developing emotional intelligence in children and for teaching children the importance of their own emotions and according significance to the emotions of others:

*So I think that is a big thing that they bring with them, problem solving. And it's OK to be sad. I think that's a big thing as well. It's OK to be angry - 'Yeah, I know you're angry because he's got it, but we'll ask him can you have it in five minutes.' I think that's a major, acknowledging our feelings and knowing that they're all OK, every single one of them. And they're justified.*

### **Routines and school readiness**

Learning routines was an important aspect of school readiness. According to the staff at the preschool and the crèche, attending preschool instilled the children with a sense of importance about observing particular routines to do with work and social time. Routines were observable at both services. During the Participant Observation (PO), children in the preschool knew when it was time to read and play games which had pedagogical elements (lead author's fieldnote, 25 April 2015). On entering the preschool in the morning, children knew from experience that they observed 'free time' to play before the services commenced officially. They also recognise the tasks that came immediately after that, which appeared to have a particular sequence (i.e., reading time, art, and playing with bricks or other toys that were available). Similar observations were made by the lead researcher in the crèche where, some children instigated tidying up after playing with paints. Children in the crèche also followed the directions of the teachers easily and did not challenge them when asked to tidy up (lead author's fieldnote, 25 April 2015). This ability to take direction from teachers is also an important facet of school readiness and is explored in greater depth below.

Other interviewees from the preschool service commented on the difficulties faced by children from the DP centre in learning routines. From their professional experiences, these children tended to struggle more than other children at the services in learning about routines, due to challenges faced by themselves and their families in DP. This corroborates interviews with parents about the significance of routines:

*We would have felt a lot of children from the community would have struggled more with getting the routine and settling in. This child felt particularly, he felt particularly lost. And it took him a little while, but other than that, they have a routine over there.*

### **Taking direction from teachers and independent learning**

Preschool staff members also commented on the importance of teaching children how to take direction from teachers, which was important for the transition to school. Staff in both services spoke of the 'rigidity' of children's lives once they enter primary school, commenting on the many different rules and routines that children learn to follow. Taking direction from teachers was seen as a particular challenge, especially for some children from the accommodation centre. Staff members commented that it was difficult for children from DP particularly, as some of them encountered many different adults with parenting styles that differed greatly. Hence, knowing who to take direction from and learning how to behave appropriately was seen as a particular challenge for children living in DP. However, staff members also acknowledged that it was difficult for all children to transition to primary school, regardless of living arrangements:

*Socialising and [being] able to take a direction from the teacher is really important and get on with something to do. They've got to do it. Listen to the teachers, follow the teachers. Follow the routine instructions. At the small group time and activity time, you have to do this. Their kind of self-care, that they can get wash the hands. Because we had a little girl that won't go to the toilet on her own, and at school they have to go on their own.*

Staff members in the preschool also said that teaching children to be independent learners was significant to school readiness. Teaching children to be independent learners and to take pride in their own learning abilities was seen as an important aspect of preparing children for primary school:

*Yes, we made them independent. Use their brain, what they have to do. Not just the following things. I have to do this just right.*

Staff saw the 'free play' element as important in helping children to become independent learners. Children could move around the room easily to look and feel different materials, play with different shapes, toys and books. Staff commented that this was important for children's learning; they could learn about colours, shapes and words and they would also get a feel for the things they like and dislike. Instilling children with the idea that everyone is different and that they should be free to be themselves was also seen as part of this. Preschool and crèche staff members also provided examples of children who they believed displayed greater independence and school readiness as a result of their preschool experiences:

*I notice a big change in her now. You can just see it. She's not the baby who came in here at the start of the year last September. She's really grown up and she isn't looking for her mother or anything. She'll sit down and she'll play like all the others.*

*They come initially and parents are hanging their coats and taking their coats off and you're saying to them you don't need to do that, they can do it and they end up on the floor. They're fine, they'll pick them up. It's got to go on the floor a few times before it'll stay on the peg. It's the only way.*

The transition from the crèche to the preschool was also mentioned as important for enhancing school readiness. In this regard, the integration of the services was seen as important to facilitating transitions in children's lives. Staff alluded to three main transitions that happen in children's lives: entering the crèche initially, moving on to preschool, and exiting the preschool to enter primary school. These were seen as significant markers for parents, children and teachers. In order to ease children's transition from the crèche to the preschool, staff members in both services work together to introduce children to the preschool by organising visits to the preschool throughout the year. This is also important for enhancing school readiness later on and helping children to cope with transitions overall:

*The two staff there or if there's a third member that sometimes goes over, we might bring them up and we actually bring them up here. So they see the place and they're in and out and they go out in the playground area. Just for ten minutes, fifteen minutes. So they know the building.*



### Building confidence in the classroom

Building children's confidence to perform academically and to develop socially was also seen as important by crèche and preschool staff members. Interviewees from the preschool spoke about pedagogical strategies they use regularly in the classroom that aim to build children's self-confidence. Praising children's efforts was an important aspect of this. To build confidence in their learning, children were asked to do tasks like affix a description of the weather along with the day of the week to a board in the play area. This was done to trigger children's recognition of the word with the weather conditions outside and to teach them to be independent (lead author's fieldnote, 15 May 2015). One crèche staff member commented on the difficulties sometimes encountered by young people to find their own voices and express their own identities in primary and secondary school. Fostering confidence and self-esteem in children from an early age is important for helping them to embrace their own uniqueness and develop their academic abilities across the life course:

*I really do see that as important, that young people are confident in themselves and in their own abilities and who they are. They will be better no matter where they are in life once they acknowledge their own differences and say, 'I'm me and I can face this challenge.'*

Children were encouraged to talk about their differences to each other. In this way, difference was celebrated. Children were taught to be proud of themselves, their achievements and to be happy in their own skin. This was also discussed in focus group discussions on the teaching method:

*We talked about skin colour and things like that always. If something comes up we'll go with it. So 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.'*

### Responsiveness to children in the classroom

Evidence from the qualitative dataset suggests that preschool and crèche staff members are highly responsive to children in the classroom. This was evident from the Participant Observation (PO) element of the study, where the researcher observed warm relationships and very positive interactions between staff members and children. Staff members in both services interacted with children at their levels and actively assisted children with classroom activities. They also sat with the children at small tables and were responsive and helpful when asked questions by other children in the classroom (author's fieldnote, 11 May 2015). In addition, interviews showed that staff in the preschool and crèche is responsive to children's opinions about play facilities in the classroom:

*And I had a little boy yesterday and he said, 'Where is the cow? Where is the sheep?' He wanted a picture, he wanted farm animals, and I thought, 'We don't have any farm animals.' And I thought, 'We must get that.'*

## 6.5 Staff Perceptions about the Preschool and Crèche Services: Quality Enhancement and Service Delivery

During the interviews, preschool and crèche staff mentioned a number of matters to do with the operationalisation of the services that impact on service delivery. They identified the following as important elements for the effective operationalisation of the services: staff turnover and retention, relationships with other services in the area (e.g., PHN), and staff training and development. As will be shown in Chapter 8, these issues are also pivotal to assessing quality in early year's education, and were integral to how staff members in the preschool especially interpreted the concept of 'quality'.

### Staff turnover and retention

Staff turnover in both the crèche and the preschool is low overall. In recent years, staff numbers were increased in the preschool to accord with increased demand for places. Two staff members who were recruited to the initial childcare service provided at the Old Convent is still employed in the crèche. The manager of both services has been employed at the preschool for almost a decade. Preschool staff members viewed this as significant for maintaining consistency and quality in service delivery. Importantly, quality of service was sometimes interpreted by staff members at the preschool as the strength of bonds between children, parents and individual staff members. Consistency in both the teaching approach and in the staff-child interactions was also closely allied to quality:

*It's open Monday to Thursday, every single day. It's consistent. The groups are the same, the children are the same. The staff turnover is really low, which I think is another key element in consistency for children.*

In order to maintain consistency in the services provided to children, the manager of the crèche and preschool visits both services daily and the same relief staff members are employed in the crèche and preschool. This is important for relationship-building with children and parents:

*The manager, she is back and over, so the children know her and they know us, so it works.*

Management expressed positive attitudes about staff members in the crèche and preschool, stating that they are critical to service delivery. This is an example of how interviewees link quality of relationships that staff members have, with parents and other community members, to quality of service and improving outcomes for children and families:

*This is the base, the foundation. I think the kind of person you are and the kind of staff is vital to a service. I think that is huge, because the way you address people and the way that they address you, can build real relationships.*





### Building relationships with community services

Maintaining good relationships with other services in Ballyhaunis was also seen as critical for outcomes for children. The relationships that the crèche and preschool have with the FRC, the HSE and the PHN were valued especially in this regard. These relationships were important for maintaining quality in both services and for strengthening children's social, physical and educational development. This is perhaps indicative of how staff members view outcomes for children as interlinked. Educational outcomes are not seen as independent to children's social and physical development – rather, educational outcomes are intertwined with children's health and social learning. During interviews, staff members implied that children's development should be interpreted holistically as a concept that brings together children's physical, social, personal and educational progression. Maintaining good-quality relationships with the HSE and the PHN was important for recognising when children needed additional help to offset problems associated with learning difficulties, their social development and physical health conditions:

*There are examples where the manager and the staff and the FRC worked together to help families and support them, and it worked and helped people. They identified when things could go wrong and where things were going wrong, and it actually helped the children and families involved.*

Significantly, preschool staff spoke of the mistrust that members of the asylum-seeking community have when dealing with 'officials' at local level like teachers, doctors, nurses and representatives of 'outside' agencies. The preschool staff saw themselves as having an important role in helping families to overcome these fears in dealing with community agencies, which was often essential for improving outcomes for children:

*They have a fear of the community, not just the asylum seekers, a lot of the people that we're dealing with have a fear of other agencies, not so much the public health nurse but maybe speech and language, they feel like it might be a slight on them. It's about building their knowledge – this is what we've got to do. It's what's best for the child. And having somebody to talk to at their level is vital.*

### Staff training and development

Staff members in both the preschool and the crèche demonstrated a clear commitment to training and development, which is a critical marker of quality in early year's education (Hayes, 2008). Interviewees regularly said that continuous training was very important to the professionalization of childcare services in Ireland, and is important for ensuring that children's educational and social needs are met:

*I feel the degree course is important, as it's the only way forward for children.  
That is professional work, and to have the qualification makes other people stand up and take it more professionally.  
The structure is in place to help you get training, and they just need to professionalise it. It's the only way we're going to bring it up. And I know it's come up, it's huge the steps it's taken in Ireland, but still, I still believe that there's that old school of thought: 'Ah sure the kid's in a room playing.'*

One crèche staff member attained a Level 7 Degree, while the manager of the services is completing a Level 8 Degree in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). Furthermore, completion of Level 7 and Level 8 programmes was viewed as important for leadership and professional development in the workplace. Management was also supportive of staff members doing additional training:

*I feel the degree course definitely helps to encourage the staff in a professional manner. If they want to do training, I say, 'Yeah, do it.' Everyone benefits.*

Preschool staff members completed training in the following areas, among others: *Working with Parents, Children's learning in Small Groups and Workshops, Management, First Aid, Responding to Women and Children Experiencing Domestic Violence, Making a Difference, and High Scope*. Despite the complex needs of families accessing the services, preschool and crèche staff members appear well equipped then to meet the needs of children and parents using the services. One interviewee implied that continuous training in different areas ensures that the staff can respond adequately to the educational and social needs of children in the community:

*We're all vulnerable, we can all be hurt, and all families experience something. If it's not domestic violence, it's a learning difficulty. There's always something that impacts on people, on children and families, and it's the children you see it in first.*

## 6.6 Issues Affecting the Sustainability of the Greater Tomorrow Crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool: Changing Demographics and Societal Perceptions

Interviewees at the crèche and the preschool also identified issues pertaining to the sustainability of the two services as very significant. Staff members in both the crèche and preschool commented especially that the crèche may be forced to close in the coming years as the number of children and families from the DP reception centre is currently decreasing:

*We'd two Irish children, three Irish children and other than that none of them. We really would have a trouble trying to get settled Irish children to use the service. That would be one of the areas that we'd need to work on, but it's really hard.*

At present, numbers of children attending the crèche are decreasing due to falling numbers of children and families living in the asylum seeker reception centre. Preschool staff expressed concerns that the closure of the crèche could markedly impede the educational and social development of younger children residing in Direct Provision in Ballyhaunis. Although several childcare providers operate in Ballyhaunis that cater to toddlers, none are as accessible to members of the asylum seeker community as the Greater Tomorrow crèche, due to the families' financial situation, difficulties in transportation, and the depth and strength of trusting bonds between staff members, families and children:

*I can actually see that service closing eventually, which will leave the children under the age of three without any childcare. And it's a vital service. There are a lot of single men moved in. Families have moved on. Families are getting their papers, so I can see a change there. I think the children in Ballyhaunis, the younger children, have nowhere to go and there are a few families that I know... if there was something there for one-and-a-half, two-year-olds that they could go. They don't have the money to do it. Even with subvention they can't, it's impossible.*

Staff at the preschool commented that young children living in DP cannot lose out on an early year's education in the future, should the crèche close in the coming years. They stated that either the crèche should promote itself as a community-wide service and try to attract families from the wider community, or else a community crèche should open that embraces children from different social, ethnic and cultural backgrounds living in Ballyhaunis. This is discussed in more depth in Chapter 9.

### **Sustainability of the preschool services: Staff training and development and promotion of the preschool service**

Staff members in the preschool identified a number of issues that will affect the sustainability of the preschool service into the future. In particular, they spoke about the importance of continued training and development opportunities and the significance of developing a promotional strategy for the preschool. Staff members in the preschool especially were positive about seeking out new CPD opportunities, and management expressed very supportive attitudes towards enhanced training for staff members.

Preschool staff members also spoke of the importance of developing an effective promotional strategy for the preschool for attracting children and families from the wider Ballyhaunis community. According to preschool staff members, this should emphasise the level of staff training and development to date, their commitment to seeking out further training, and the community aspects of the services (lead author's fieldnote, 15 May 2015).

### **Transforming cultural perceptions about the crèche and preschool**

Staff at the crèche and preschool felt that having more children from Irish families attending the preschool would help to change societal perceptions about the service as targeted primarily at asylum-seeking and immigrant communities. They saw this as a major stumbling block for encouraging the participation of more children from the wider Ballyhaunis community at the preschool. According to staff members at both the preschool and crèche services, social perceptions about the preschool as targeted principally at members of the asylum-seeking community impact on attendance from the wider community, which is evident in the following quotation:

*I think that is a massive, massive impact on how it's seen in the community. I think for parents to see, Well it's OK for children from the wider community to come, so it's going to be OK. I think that's going to have a really good impact.*

Preschool staff felt that changing these perceptions of the preschool as targeted mainly or solely at asylum seekers is important for perpetuating the sustainability of the service. Building an effective and targeted promotional strategy for the preschool services was seen as critical by staff members in this regard also; however, they identified a number of barriers to promoting the preschool in Ballyhaunis:

*It's what we should be doing more of, but I would find that difficult, I'd say.  
It's difficult to know how to use Facebook or the media or what we should be using to do that.  
I know the radio station is here, but it's difficult to go on there and speak about what we do.  
It's just intuitive.*

Staff members in the preschool commented that a more proactive approach to promotion should be sought, and that more Irish children at the preschool would be *'better for the services'*, *'it would really add to it'*, and implying that the intercultural learning for children would be much improved. When asked how greater promotion could happen, staff members alluded to word of mouth and social media as potential avenues (lead author's fieldnote, 20 May 2015). One female interviewee implied that new perceptions about the preschool and crèche need to be created which are rooted in a more holistic understanding of community that is clearly embedded in the pedagogical ethos of both services:

*It needs to be seen that it's about community, it's about place. It doesn't matter where you're from, you deserve the same education, the same opportunities, but that these people and all of us, we're all singing from the same hymn sheet and doing the same thing. We're all human and this place, the preschool is for all the children.*

## 6.7 Chapter Summary and Conclusions

As shown in this chapter, interviews with staff members reveal positive attitudes towards the preschool and crèche services; their impacts on young people's social, cognitive and intellectual development; and their importance to local families. Significantly, focus group discussions about the pedagogical approach of the crèche and preschool services yielded very interesting insights around equality, intercultural learning and the importance of care towards children and families. Staff members in both the crèche and preschool facilities provided ample examples of how attending the services impact positively on children's development, including their motivation to learn, their ability to take direction from teachers, and learning routines. All these are thought to impact positively on children's transition to primary school. In addition, data illustrated in this chapter also implies that staff at the crèche and preschool operationalises many of the markers of quality of service, as outlined in literature presented in Chapter 2. Some of the main issues identified in the present chapter from staff members' interviews are summarised as follows:

- **Staff members at both services often described the crèche and preschool as caring and as important for intercultural learning between children of diverse ethnic, cultural and social backgrounds.**
- **Intercultural learning was seen as important for promoting positive relationships between children and adults living in Ballyhaunis into the future.**
- **The crèche and preschool were viewed as neutral spaces for promoting positive interactions between adults and children.**
- **Staff members at the preschool aim to promote children's school readiness, including their hygiene practices, relationships with other children and interactions with adults.**
- **Interview data and materials from participant observation (PO) imply that staff members in both services are encouraging and supportive towards children's learning.**
- **The sustainability of the crèche and preschool were also raised by staff members. The main challenge for the preschool was identified as building a more effective promotional strategy to attract new children and families to the preschool.**
- **The sustainability of the crèche was discussed in detail. The decreasing numbers of families and children living in DP in Ballyhaunis may precipitate the closure of the crèche in the coming years.**
- **However, it is important that all children living in DP are able to access high-quality, affordable childcare facilities in the future. A significant degree of planning needs to be undertaken so that the educational needs of younger children are attended to in the future.**

Chapter 7 presents the main findings from interviews with key informants about the crèche and preschool, their impacts on children and families, their importance in providing informal social supports, educational and social outcomes, and intercultural learning and positive acculturation experiences. Other themes like safety and access to educational resources (e.g., toys, books) also emerged from the key informant dataset. Chapter 7 shows that the key informant data broadly supports the thematic areas identified in preceding chapters of this report, notably the interviews with parents and staff members around the impacts of the crèche and preschool on children's learning and social development.



# 7.0

## Key Informant Opinions on the Greater Tomorrow Crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Their Importance in Children's Lives

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter documents the main findings from interviews with key informants completed as part of this study, highlighting the significance of the crèche and preschool for children and families accessing the services. Data presented in this chapter shows that the crèche and preschool are perceived to provide high-quality early years education for children and families, to impact on children's language development, intercultural learning and school readiness, and to improve relationships between parents. Key informants also discussed the importance of the crèche and preschool in enhancing children's safety and affording children living in DP greater access to play and learning materials. As evident throughout this chapter, there is a high degree of overlap in themes and topics generated in key informant interviews and the opinions of staff members and parents, as outlined in previous chapters. Section 7.2 outlines key informant opinions about the crèche and preschool services as providers of high-quality childcare, enhancing language development, interculturalism and children's safety. Section 7.3 focuses on key informants' attitudes towards staff training and development, ways of working with children, and perceived educational and social outcomes for children. Section 7.4 discusses issues affecting the sustainability of the crèche and preschool as outlined by key informants. Finally, section 7.5 provides a summary of the chapter and some conclusions.

## 7.2 Key Informant Opinions about the Greater Tomorrow Crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool: Intercultural Learning, School Readiness and Access to Play and Learning Materials

In interviews, key informants frequently commented on the importance of providing high-quality childcare services to children and families in the Ballyhaunis area, especially to families living in DP and to low-income families. Significantly, some key informants stated that attending the crèche and preschool services instilled in young people willingness and motivation to learn from an early age, and for this reason they supported the continuation of both services into the future. Staff members' ways of working with children and families were often mentioned specifically in relation to this:

*I think it improves things. It creates a willingness to learn from an early age, and that stays for life definitely. The way they work with the children makes a difference too, I think.*

Key informant participants commented on the lack of community childcare facilities available in Ballyhaunis for asylum-seeking families, and the problems accessing childcare services often encountered by low-income families more generally. The community preschool and the crèche facilities were seen as important resources for these families too, and the continuation of the Free Preschool Year was generally supported:

*Low-income families who live in the town without transport are denied access to childcare. They couldn't access childcare because there wasn't anything within reach.*

### Intercultural learning and language development

Good-quality childcare was seen as important for enhancing children's educational, social and intellectual development. When talking about the services, key informants implied that the social, cognitive and educational development of children are interlinked, with many commenting that the services contributed markedly to all three domains. Key informants implied that improving educational provision from an early age is important to breaking cycles of poverty for low-income families, and that the preschool and crèche impact positively on young people's lives (author's fieldnote, 23 April 2015):

*It is important, definitely. If it wasn't here, sure where else would they go?*

Key informants gave ample examples in interviews of how the social development of children was enhanced through their attendance at the preschool and crèche services. In the following extract, for example, a female interviewee discusses the significance of the services to the linguistic development of one child, who did not speak any English initially on entering the preschool. According to this interviewee and other participants, attending the preschool has assisted the child to acquire competency in English. This was mentioned by a number of key informants, who provided many examples of children from migrant families whose English was improved through the services:

*The child now is in school, she's six and has a full conversation in English. Mammy has not moved on one bit: 'Little girl,' she said to me today, actually, 'nice scarf.' The other day I sat beside her just because she wanted to show me the dog, and she was saying 'doggie'. I said, 'What does the doggie do?' And to see her, I just think if she didn't come to the preschool, where would she be going in September? Into school, no English, because the schools don't have the time; they've got a lot more children.*

The key-informant interviews also yielded evidence to suggest that participating in the crèche and preschool services led to intercultural knowledge sharing and enhanced language learning among children. The participant observation (PO) fieldwork corroborated that friendships emerged between children of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, who played freely with each other in the preschool and crèche. According to key informants, these friendships significantly aid children's transitions to primary school and lead to an increased understanding and acceptance of intercultural differences. Once again, this highlights the importance of the intercultural dimension of the crèche and preschool services to various participants in this research (i.e., parents, staff members, children, key informants). The intercultural dimension of the services is further discernible in examples of friendships between children who attend the preschool:

*The amazing thing is, that child can converse in English now, and a little boy who she plays with can converse in Portuguese with her somewhat. And it's lovely to see.*

### **Impacts on school readiness**

Key informants who were interviewed spoke of the many educational benefits for children utilising the crèche and preschool. In particular, they commented that the majority of children in the preschool had knowledge of numbers, colours and letters before entering primary school, which facilitated school readiness (lead author's fieldnote, 11 May 2015). Examples were given of children who progressed well in primary school, and key informants attributed this progression to the children's attendance at the preschool and crèche. In particular, they attributed school readiness to the prioritisation of care and feelings of acceptance embedded in the teaching approach in the crèche and preschool (lead author's fieldnote, 25 May 2015).

### **Acculturation experiences of migrant and asylum-seeking families**

The crèche and preschool were viewed as important forums for enhancing children's social integration from an early age and for enhancing acculturation experiences of children and adults in Ballyhaunis. Key informants were supportive of the principles of intercultural learning that they saw as embodied in the crèche and preschool. They also commented that the Ballyhaunis area requires a childcare service that reflects the multicultural ethos of the community and that teaches children to respect and appreciate people's differences, be they to do with race, ethnicity or religion. This was seen as very important for children's learning in the early years and as an important message to be perpetuated across the life course:

*We have a huge ethnic group living in the town. Ballyhaunis is unique; I think there's something like over thirty nationalities in the national school, which is for a town of two thousand, people it's unbelievable. Preschool is very, very important to the child, and especially I think in a town like Ballyhaunis that has such an ethnic group living in it, that it is very important that these kids have met each other and are... that they're intertwined.*

Immigration and changing demographics in Ireland as a whole were also commented upon by interviewees. The key informants who took part in this study were very supportive of further immigration to Ireland, and expressed positive attitudes towards members of the asylum-seeking community in Ballyhaunis. They saw the continuation of the crèche and preschool as important for children's learning about cultural change in Ballyhaunis, as enabling them to learn about other places and people, and to prepare them with life skills to forge friendships with people from different backgrounds throughout their lives:



*Now the kids when they start in preschool and they've so many different people from all different nationalities, they don't bat an eyelid at it anymore, and I think that's done from day one. I think that's very, very important to Ireland as a whole. You even see in the news, meeting Prince Charles in Sligo and there was every coloured kid and nationality there and they in the school uniforms, and that's just the way it is. It's very important.*

### **Intercultural learning and parental relationships**

Significantly, the crèche and preschool services were seen as very important for forging and improving relationships between parents also, and especially for enhancing relationships between Irish people, migrant families, and asylum seekers. Relationship building was seen as an important aspect of family support and essential to people's social, educational and cultural development. This was mentioned by all of the key informants who took part in the study. Relationships that developed informally between parents in everyday spaces – at the school gate, in the FRC and elsewhere in the community – were seen as very important for helping migrant and asylum-seeking families to settle into life in Ballyhaunis, to learn more about the local area, and to help improve the English language competency of parents. As a key meeting point for people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the FRC, preschool and crèche were viewed as important spaces in this regard:

*Preschool is very good for ensuring that socially and the parents as well. It's good for their parents as well to mix.*

*They all made relationships outside of the asylum centre; they're not going in that they're kind of labelled asylum seekers; they've got other friends outside the asylum centre, which is really positive.*

Two key informants referred to the preschool and crèche as 'neutral' spaces; parents met in a more relaxed atmosphere compared to the asylum seeker complex, where relationships are sometimes strained and the atmosphere is highly charged (lead author's fieldnote, 20 June 2015). The crèche and preschool were mentioned frequently by interviewees as significant for alleviating tensions between residents of the accommodation centre, who were under considerable stresses and strains living in DP. Giving parents a break every day and affording them some time alone was seen as an important element in healing tensions between residents and staff in the DP accommodation centre also:

*It was hard, it was, and you didn't realise how horrendous it was for them initially. Things I think have changed a lot over there. Sometimes as well I think just to be listened to and respected, just to be acknowledged as a person.*

In this regard, the staff members at the preschool and crèche services were warmly regarded by key informants. They were seen as important for building relationships between various persons living in the community:

*They talk to people with equality, and there aren't any differences. There's none of this 'Oh, you're the asylum-seeking parent', or 'You're the parent of such and such'. Everyone is equal and we're all just parents, and I think they appreciate that, to be honest. I think that makes things easier for them and it spills over into their lives in other ways.*

### Sense of normality and independent decision-making

Interviewees alluded to the many difficulties encountered by people living in asylum seeker accommodation, especially the lack of facilities and things for children and teenagers to do in the area. The crèche and preschool were seen as giving the younger children a sense of normality and routine, which corroborates the findings from staff and parents, who raised similar points as highlighted in Chapters 5 and 6. It was often commented that parents had very few choices and lacked the freedom to make decisions about their children's education because of financial stresses, language and cultural differences. The integrated and intercultural character of the preschool and crèche services was also commented upon as potentially enhancing children's decision-making and independent thinking:

*They talk to people with equality, and there aren't any differences. There's none of this 'Oh, you're the asylum-seeking parent', or 'You're the parent of such and such'. Everyone is equal and we're all just parents, and I think they appreciate that, to be honest. I think that makes things easier for them and it spills over into their lives in other ways.*

Key informants also stated that attending the crèche and preschool gave the children the opportunity to have some freedom in their lives and experience some semblance of 'normal' childhood:

*There's a bit of normality for them, a bit of freedom, and it's one of the only freedoms that they have.*

*The impact of the service on the children and the families is that it provides a structure and a framework which was absent. In terms of routines first of all I suppose. No family life, no routines, no space that you could call your home. It provided something normal and positive for children.*

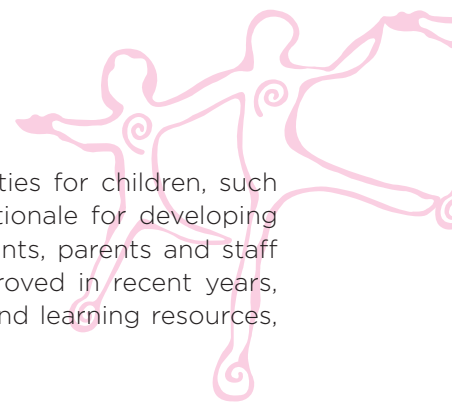
### Enhancing children's safety

Ensuring that the children had a safe place to go was also implicit in key informant interviews. Many interviewees alluded to problems to do with children's safety which were encountered in Ballyhaunis, particularly in the early days of Direct Provision. The crèche and preschool were seen as offsetting some of the problems to do with lack of safety in these settings to some degree, while also providing children with greater opportunities to socialise and learn from one another:

*The units outside weren't there, so you had huge communal living, families living in bedrooms and not a lot of security around the building coming and going. The gates weren't there; there was none of that. There was fencing that was very unsafe on to a railway track, absolutely no recreational facilities.*

Significantly, participants also discussed the challenges of parenting that sometimes arise in DP centres. Keeping children safe and ensuring that they developed healthy and secure interactions with adults were seen as especially important. Key informants recounted instances where they felt that children's safety was compromised, particularly in the early days of Direct Provision in Ballyhaunis. They felt that the founding of the crèche and preschool contributed markedly to improving the safety of children in the area:

*I remember one day standing waiting to see somebody in the hallway of the hostel, and a man just walking through and he was a bit intoxicated and he just walked into the canteen and sat down. And I asked the receptionist, 'Is he a resident?' and she said, 'No, he's just waiting for a bus.' But this is these children's home – you can't have somebody like that in a state walking through. I would be hugely concerned that anybody can walk through this door into somebody's home.*



### Access to play equipment and learning resources

Lack of adequate living space for asylum-seeking families, and lack of amenities for children, such as play and recreational equipment were also mentioned as an important rationale for developing the childcare services initially. While the majority of interviewees (key informants, parents and staff members) commented that facilities for children and families in DP had improved in recent years, the services were seen as significant for promoting children's access to play and learning resources, including books and toys:

*There was one room, I remember, it was one of the front rooms, it's been renovated a lot since, a room with the television up high and a slide, and that was it, and that was the area for all... about having a space in the service that children could actually have a play or an outdoor space that would be safe.*

Living conditions in the asylum-seeking centre were also commented upon. Key informants describe the living conditions as 'small', 'basic' and 'cramped'. This corroborates the interviews with parents about their living conditions, and also the Irish literature on living conditions in DP centres (see Ogbu et al., 2014; Kane, 2008).

*Childcare was a concern and an issue. And the amount of living space was much smaller - keeping the child in a small room and not letting them outside.*

Lack of space was also frequently mentioned in interviews as impacting on parenting practices and children's behaviours, particularly in the early days of DP:

*The facilities were different, they were all limited to the old house, the old building, which meant children of school-going age, would walk into the corridor and then join friends and they'd be running round causing problems for some of the parents with younger children - the noise - and there was nothing at all for the children. The lack of facilities.*

One interviewee said the rationale for focusing on childcare services in the area was to help meet the needs of asylum-seeking families was underpinned by a belief in investing in children's lives and a commitment to children's well-being. One key informant said that all children living in Ballyhaunis are 'the future of the area'. Strengthening the educational attainments of children from the early years was important for breaking the cycle of poverty, social marginalisation and disadvantage:

*We'd focus on the well-being of the child. That particular community had a whole range of needs, but you can't always deal with them in one go. Begin with the children. I can't imagine that to have left them would have led to anything positive in the future... people who'd feel alienated or resented and how they had been treated.*

### Informal social support to children and families

Key informant interviews yielded ample evidence that the crèche and preschool services provide significant informal social support for parents and families in DP:

*You know that's the only family support we have in the Ballyhaunis area at the minute is the crèche for the, you know the four two-hour sessions for the children in the asylum seeker centre; like, that's fantastic for the mums and dads there.*

Interviewees also spoke of the importance of the crèche and preschool in giving parents a break from the daily routines of parenting, which was viewed as very significant to their lives. In this regard, the services were seen as valuable sources of informal social support:

*When we spoke to the parents about what they would like and want, they said its things for the child to be involved in. If the child is involved in something, then that gives me a rest or a chance to look after the younger child, the baby. What the parents were telling us, while we'd like to do some activities ourselves, its things for the children.*

Key informants also discussed the importance of material supports for children and families provided by staff at the crèche and preschool. Two female key informants said that in some situations where the staff recognised that families were in extreme financial hardship, they offered the parents clothes and shoes for the children. This was seen as an important source of financial support for unemployed and asylum-seeking parents in particular:

*They'd recognise that there was a problem and they'd say to the parent, 'There are leftover shoes in here or leftover clothes and we need to clear them out. We'd be grateful if you could take them.' And it helps the families out, because you are dealing with a very vulnerable group of people and they need it.*

### **Lone parents and social isolation**

The crèche and preschool were viewed as especially valuable sources of support for lone parents in the DP hostel, for building supportive networks among parents and for creating friendships and feelings of community among children and adults:

*These children and these families were in their own situation of being parented alone in 90% of the cases, and most of the children were being schooled out of the town on buses. So in terms of having school friends in the town, all those things seemed to be absent.*

The preschool and crèche services were seen as especially important in the lives of lone parents living in the asylum seeker accommodation centre. The plight of lone parent families was often commented on during interviews (lead author's fieldnote, 16 June 2015). Having the support of the services and the FRC was seen as very beneficial for parents, some of whom suffered from social isolation and mental health problems:

*I think it's very important that a person doesn't feel that they're isolated, that they're the only person in that boat. It's very important for them to know that there are people who have gone through it and come out the other end and that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. They don't really have to suffer alone.*

### Emotional supports to children and families

Significantly, the crèche and preschool were seen as important sources of emotional support for children and families. Key informants also commented on the high levels of care that they believed to be inherent in the crèche and preschool services. The care provided by the crèche and preschool staff members to parents and children was viewed as very important. As one woman stated, *'It was more like a respite initially; that's how it was, but it's definitely evolved to be more of a care and education kind of programme'* (female interviewee, 5 April 2015).

Two key informants spoke about a particular woman living in the area whose children used to attend the services and who suffered from bouts of depression. According to these participants, some staff members at the preschool and the FRC provided her with important emotional supports. They were someone to talk to when she came to pick up her children, as she felt socially isolated. They also commented that she trusted the staff members at the services that she could tell them about her life, knowing that it would not be shared with others in the community (author's fieldnote, 10 May 2015). The integration of the services with the local FRC was seen as instrumental in this regard. The plight of families and changes in children and adult behaviours were discussed by the staff confidentially at meetings, so that actions for supports could be put in place when and if required:

*The childcare service, when dealing with the children, is also with the parents and sometimes would be social workers or the doctor. A child was using the service and the mum had a new baby but had severe postnatal depression, and the child was out of sync because she was distraught. And the dad, it was like there was a cloud over him. I said one day, 'The little boy is just not the same.' They've got good bridges built with our public health nurses; I said, 'I've got this family, I have concern', and she phoned the Department of Justice because the professionals are heard a lot quicker. And she actually got moved. And the family couldn't thank us enough. And the children were so excited.*

### Advice on effective parenting

The crèche and preschool were very important as sources of advice for asylum seekers around parenting practices. Parents could seek advice from qualified professionals if they had concerns about their own children and their behaviours. The services were seen as participatory and responsive to the needs of parents:

*The thing is that you've got another avenue to have a discussion with the staff if you had a concern about your child or just to get feedback. There would be benefit to it.*  
*The fact is that they know the community they're operating in and they know the families and it stems from there.*

Two key informants mentioned that parents whose children were now in primary school and who exited the preschool a few years previously gleaned advice from staff at the preschool about their children's behaviours. A young boy from an immigrant community recently entered primary school in Ballyhaunis and acted aggressively towards other children in the school yard. One key informant said that his parents had come to the preschool to seek advice from the staff on how to help the child manage his behaviours at school and in the home. According to two key informants, the advice of the service staff was invaluable to the parent, and also supported interventions implemented in the primary school to help the child regulate his behaviours (author's fieldnote, 15 May 2015).

### Improving outcomes for families: Social interactions, self-regulation and relationship building

Key informants documented some of the main impacts of the services on families. One interviewee who was involved with the services since the beginning commented that crèche and preschool staff members along with other supports have contributed to better behaviour among children and adults. This respondent stated that lack of routine, feelings of hopelessness and anxiety about their legal situation perpetuated negative and aggressive behaviours among some parents towards each other and staff at the accommodation centre (lead author's fieldnote, 20 May 2015). However, according to this interviewee, since supports have improved for persons living at the accommodation centre, incidents of aggressiveness towards staff members have decreased:

*There was a lot more aggression by the adults towards the staff and towards the system. Frustrations at how things were with their kids and a lot more arguments, and children were witnessing all of these arguments. There was a range of bad influences around the children, but you see people having an argument and ten minutes later I saw it being re-played by children in the car park. And the children would have been in a position where they could have had very little pride in their parents as a result.*

## 7.3 Key Informant Views about the Crèche and Preschool: Staff Training, Ways of Working with Children and Outcomes for Children and Families

This section outlines key informant views about staff members at the crèche and preschool, the extent to which the services are responsive to local children and families, parental involvement, and factors affecting the quality of the services, including training and professional development. These themes are explored in the following subsections.

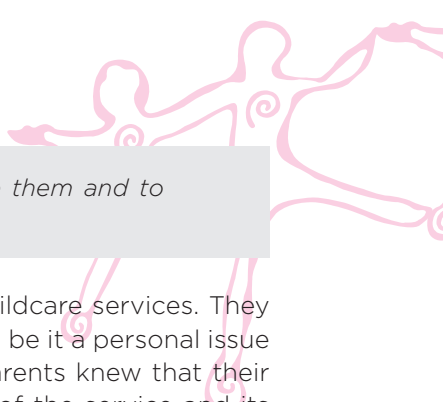
### Attitudes towards crèche and preschool staff members

Key informants expressed a great deal of support for the crèche and preschool staff members. They were seen as important strengths of the services and significant to building an inclusive learning environment for the children:

*The staff and the service we have here, and the emphasis on being inclusive and sensitive to the needs of different people within the community – that's allowed it to gain credibility and has sustained it. We've got a very good team.*

### Teambuilding, trust and responsiveness to children's needs

When discussing the crèche and preschool, key informants frequently alluded to words like *team-building*, *collaborative* and *creative* to describe individual staff members and how they work with the children. The staff members at the crèche and preschool were seen as proactive and professional in their dealings with parents and children and how they worked with other services in the area (i.e., the FRC and the PHN). Their responsiveness to the families and commitment to children's learning were also commented upon by key informants. The services were seen as accessible to asylum seekers and other socially marginalised families, partly because of their geographical location near to the asylum seeker accommodation complex and because they were seen as participatory and responsive to people's needs. The staff members were seen as instrumental to this; staff turnover was low, which enabled them to build up a stock of knowledge about social conditions in the area and about individual families and their needs. This also enabled them to build up trust relationships with families:



*The families know them and they trust them with the children, to educate them and to guide them.*

Key informants commented that a participatory ethic lies at the heart of the childcare services. They commented that parents were able to come to the services if they had a problem, be it a personal issue or one that relates to children's needs specifically. Participants also said that parents knew that their opinions would be welcomed. This was seen as important to the effectiveness of the service and its responsiveness to local children and families:

*They know they can come to the services and talk about anything, and that's important.*

### **Perspectives on quality of services in the crèche and preschool**

Generally speaking, key informants viewed the crèche and preschool as providers of high-quality early years education for a number of reasons. All staff was qualified to the requisite level, and staff members were praised for seeking out additional training opportunities. In addition, there was much support for one crèche staff member who was trained to undergraduate degree level. This was seen as especially important for the professionalization of the crèche and preschool services and for enhanced service delivery:

*The fact that they have the degree adds to it for sure, because it makes it more professional and more knowledge is built up over time.*

Key informants commented on a number of other factors that seemed indicative of their own understandings of quality in early years education, such as the quality of relationships built up with local families, the supportive atmosphere between individual staff members and parents, and the positive reactions of the children and parents to the services overall. The manager was seen as particularly instrumental in this regard; interviewees implied that an open and inclusive approach to service delivery was one of the hallmarks of the crèche and preschool, and this approach filtered down to the rest of the staff from management (author's fieldnote, 22 May 2015).

When alluding to why the services were seen as effective, participants mentioned the staff's way of working with the children, which was seen as dynamic, interactive and at the level of the child. As one man said, '*They go down to the level of the child and really enter their space.*' This way of working with children, which was participatory and inclusive, was also important to quality of service, according to interviewees (author's fieldnote, 25 May 2015).



### Children's learning and social and cognitive development

Some key informants commented on the life skills that children learned in the services, which they needed to know before they went to school, and which would enable them to effectively function in the world. Teaching children how to self-regulate their behaviours was mentioned by participants, along with things like sharing, developing better relationships with other children, and pre-reading skills (author's fieldnote, 20 May 2015). This corroborates the interviews with staff and parents presented in Chapters 5 and 6:

*The girls do huge work with the kids. Some kids go in there and they eat with their fingers, they're not used to drinking out of cups, different things like that and it just does everything, you know.*

*You'd have kids going in there that will start off in a crèche that might never have played with blocks, starting blocks, and that's one of the things we do every time a child comes in here: can they build blocks? Can they do a puzzle, can they open doors, all those kind of things. Can they turn the pages of a book? And in crèche they'll get the opportunity to do that, whereas if they were just in the house possibly with the parents, with no access to toys or books and things, that wouldn't be learned.*

Preparing children for school and teaching them about positive social relationships were mentioned as important impacts of the services, particularly for children in the asylum seeker hostel, who encountered many different adults with many different parenting practices:

*It prepares people for school. It also prepared or provided some social framework for how to interact with each other, how to behave, what was acceptable, what wasn't acceptable, what to do if people bullied, pushed, broken rules.*

## 7.4 Sustainability of the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow Crèche

A number of factors affecting the sustainability of the crèche and preschool were commented on by key informants. These are discussed in greater depth in the following subsections, and include the following:

- **Changing predominant social perceptions about the crèche and preschool as targeted primarily at asylum seeking communities;**
- **Strengthening relationships between staff at the preschool and crèche and other local services;**
- **The need for effective promotional strategies to be developed.**

### Social perceptions about the crèche and preschool services

Key informants commented that the crèche and preschool and the FRC are viewed by members of the wider community in Ballyhaunis as targeted primarily at members of the asylum-seeking community. They also commented that these perceptions contribute to the sparse numbers of children from the wider community who attended the preschool service until recently. Having lower numbers of Irish children accessing the preschool was seen as potentially impacting on service delivery and on the continuation of the preschool into the future:

*If it becomes a little ghettoised or identified with just one or two groups, that then has a, can have a knock-on effect.*



Promoting the preschool to the wider Ballyhaunis community was further identified as a priority issue for the future sustainability of the services for local families:

*We're identified as an organisation exclusively for the asylum seeker community. The local community won't come to us, because they think we're an asylum seeker group. That's nothing really to do with childcare - its perceptions.*

### **Creating new perceptions about the crèche and preschool in Ballyhaunis**

Some key informants commented on the importance of the relationships between the crèche and preschool and other projects run by the FRC to improve the number of children attending the childcare services. As evident from the quotation below, interviewees spoke about the importance of creating new perceptions about the crèche and preschool informally, through word of mouth. Persons attending other services run by the FRC, such as the Men's Shed and the Crochet Group, are aware of the preschool and that it is open to all members of community. This seems to be having a positive effect with regard to promoting the preschool, according to some key informants:

*When things like the Men's Shed and the crochet, the community garden - when you do things like that that's how you kind of counteract it and say, 'Listen.' And then you'd have people in the Men's Shed would say to their daughter, who might have a child, and say, 'You should have a look up there, they've beautiful facilities up there.' And we found that. We're getting more and more.*

### **Strengthening relationships between the crèche and preschool and other local services**

Key informants commented on the positive relationships between staff members at the crèche and preschool and other services in the area, including the local PHN, the FRC, Bridgestock and the HSE. These relationships were viewed as essential for building family support networks for children and families and for identifying the needs of asylum-seeking families and enhancing a preventative approach:

*They monitor their behaviour and their development as well, just like all of them; if they have any issues or concerns they'll get in touch with us and we can get in touch with the other services.*

*It has a huge role to play, definitely. We'd refer on then to speech and language therapy and then we could refer on to psychology, whatever the need would be coming from that. The girls are great; they would ask me to review a child.*

These relationships between the crèche and preschool, the FRC and the PHN were also seen as important for strengthening the outcomes for families and children, in terms of improving the educational, intellectual and social development of people in the area. The health status of children was interpreted as very significant for achieving better educational outcomes for them. Key informants who were also involved with the FRC frequently commented on the importance of continually fostering these relationships into the future. These relationships were viewed as essential for improving the services offered as part of the FRC:

*It's all very important for the FRC for sure, yes. Those relationships, they need to be fostered.*

### Building effective promotional strategies

The importance of building an effective promotional strategy for the preschool was commented upon by key informants. Participants stated that all stakeholders in the preschool should be involved in this process. This includes parents, staff members at the crèche and preschool, FRC representatives and members of the wider community. Promotion is accorded greater emphasis in Chapters 8 and 9 of this study.

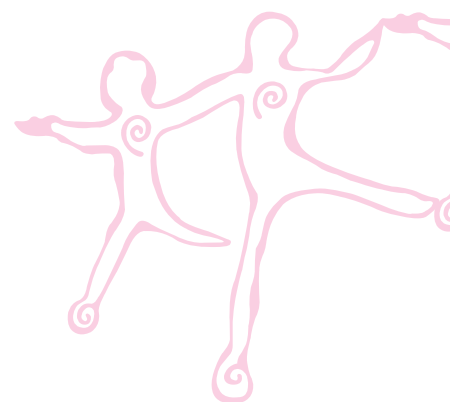
## 7.5 Chapter Summary and Conclusions

This chapter distils the principal findings from interviews with key informants on the impacts of the crèche and preschool on the lives of children and families in Ballyhaunis. Qualitative materials outlined in this chapter illustrate that there is a high level of consensus among interviewees (parents, staff members, key informants) about the impacts of the crèche and preschool and indicators to do with quality of service, such as staff training and development, relationships between staff members, relationships between children and parents, and the role of the crèche and preschool in enhancing informal social supports. Interviews presented in this chapter reveal that there is also much support among key informants for the learning and teaching method in both services, which appears to be imbued with a high level of care for children. Significantly, qualitative materials revealed in this chapter illustrate key informant support for the quality of play facilities and learning materials (books, toys, etc.) available to children in both the crèche and preschool, and for the notions of equality and interculturalism which are said to be hallmarks of both facilities. Some of the main findings from key informant interviews are as follows:

- **Key informants are very supportive towards the learning and teaching approach of the crèche and preschool facilities.**
- **Key informants contend that preschool and crèche staff demonstrates high levels of care towards children who attend both services.**
- **The crèche and preschool are seen as effective for improving intercultural learning among children and enhancing relationships between parents.**
- **The crèche and preschool are viewed as providing high-quality services to children and families accessing the services.**
- **Staff at the crèche and preschool provides invaluable social supports to children and families living in DP.**
- **The crèche and preschool are sometimes interpreted as mainly serving members of the asylum-seeking community in Ballyhaunis. New social perceptions about the crèche and preschool must be created. This is important for the effective promotion of the crèche and preschool services.**

# 8.0

## Discussion



### 8.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the data presented in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 in the context of the Irish and international literature outlined in Chapters 1, 2 and 3. Its aim is to discuss the report's main findings on the impacts of the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche on children and families, and to highlight how the data collected for this project contributes to existing literature in the fields of (1) early years education, (2) family support, and (3) the lives of asylum-seeking children and families in Ireland.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 suggest that the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and the crèche have significant educational, social and cultural benefits for children. Attitudes among key stakeholders (parents, staff and key informants) were largely positive. Interviews with parents and key informants largely corroborate the opinions of staff members and some of the lead researcher's observations on indicators of quality of service that are operationalised in both the crèche and preschool. This is discussed in greater depth here. As shown in Chapter 2, some indicators of quality of early years education identified in the literature include parental participation in childcare services and in curriculum development, the degree of balance in the amount of teacher-led and freely chosen activities for children, the quality of child-adult interactions, and positive responses from adults in the classroom to children's emotional and learning needs (see Mathers et al., 2012; Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004). The extent to which these principles are operationalised in the preschool and crèche are discussed in this chapter.

Reflecting on the theoretical perspectives as outlined in Chapter 4 (Resilience, Social Support and Social Ecological approaches), the data presented in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 implies that the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche services are very significant in the social ecology of children and families, particularly for low-income families and members of the asylum-seeking and travelling communities. The data implies that the informal and formal supportive networks that emerged between the crèche, preschool and other services in the locality (e.g., the PHN) are very significant for promoting children's well-being. This suggests the importance of informal social networks or social capital and family in the locality for improving the lives of children and families (see Healy, 2004). In addition, findings imply that the preschool and crèche act as buffers or protective factors for vulnerable children and families, impacting on people's resilience and social support in positive ways.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into three principal sections. Section 8.2 analyses findings on perceived impacts of the crèche and preschool on outcomes for children and families in the context of the literature presented in Chapters 1, 2 and 3. Section 8.3 discusses findings on informal social support, and section 8.4 offers a chapter summary and some conclusions.

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

The findings presented in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 show that the crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool provide valuable services to children and families. These are discussed in greater detail in the following subsections.

### Care, trust and quality in the crèche and preschool services

The findings suggest a broad consensus on the positive impacts of the crèche and preschool services on children's educational and social development, respectively. Staff and key informants perceived that the quality of service at the crèche and the preschool is of a high standard overall, and parents were satisfied with the services offered in both.

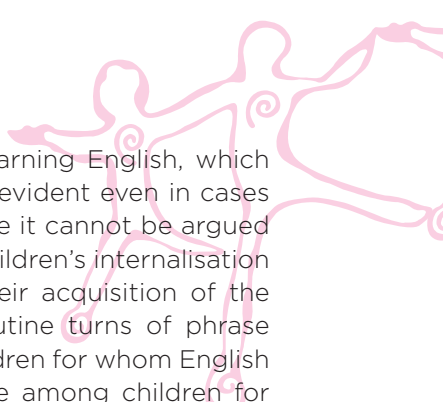
While the concept of quality of service was not commented upon specifically in interviews, the data implies that parents saw the crèche and preschool as good-quality services. Their perceptions about quality of service broadly concur with some of the markers of quality in early year's education as outlined by Siraj-Blatchford (2004) and Hayes (2008). Parents distinguished a quality service in relation to the following elements: the strength of relationships between staff at the crèche and preschool and the children; their own relationships with individual staff members and management; the professionalism of service; and the emotional supports provided to them by staff at both the crèche and preschool services. This shows a strong correspondence between perceptions of quality elucidated by interviewees and the research literature on quality in early year's education.

### Informal social and emotional supports for parents

The commitment to caring for children was seen as a hallmark of both the crèche and preschool services by parents, staff members and key informants. When discussing the impacts of the services on children's lives, interviewees frequently commented on the importance of care. The significance of care in early year's education is also noted in the early year's literature, including 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 findings presented in previous chapters imply that the pedagogical approach is founded on fostering better educational and social outcomes for children, and the concept of care.

### Reported improvements in children's aspirations, social skills and linguistic competencies

Research such as Hayes (2007) discerns the main areas of learning for children that should develop through preschool attendance. These include building aspirations, development of social skills and increased task commitment. As shown in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, interviewees reported strong changes in children's aspirations, suggesting that attending the preschool incited children's thinking about future aspirations. Findings on the impacts of the services on children's social skills, and on improving children's relationships with family members and their ability to make new friends, seem to correspond with Hayes (2007). Findings on the impacts of the crèche and preschool on children's development was very significant overall in this study.



A very significant aspect of the study relates to children's competencies in learning English, which appeared to be strengthened by attending the preschool and crèche. This was evident even in cases where children had relatively low levels of English on entering the services. While it cannot be argued that attendance at the crèche and preschool services solely contributed to the children's internalisation of the English language, it appears to be an important factor in affecting their acquisition of the language. After all, people's language-learning happens tacitly; they learn routine turns of phrase through everyday interactions with others. Interacting on a regular basis with children for whom English is their first language seems pivotal for advancing knowledge of the language among children for whom English is their second or even third language. In the academic literature on acculturation and cultural integration, acquisition of the language of a host nation is a critical factor in determining better acculturation outcomes for persons who relocate to new nations and ethnic and cultural communities (see Berry et al., 2010). Evidence presented in this report further suggests that acquiring English positively affects children's ability to bond and form friendships with classmates of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

### Improvements in intercultural learning

Evidence from the international literature suggests that children become aware of people's ethnic, racial and cultural differences at a very young age (see Derman-Sparks et al., 2011). Childcare services which promote positive relationships between very young children of different cultural backgrounds and racial identities are seen as critical for enhancing children's self-esteem, their sense of belonging and social development, as evidenced in the EPPE study. Qualitative evidence presented in this report implies that the preschool and crèche contributed to the development of self-esteem, confidence and intercultural learning in young people; this was reported by many parents and staff.

The fact that the preschool and crèche services facilitate a better cultural mix of children from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds facilitates intercultural learning. Preschool and crèche services like those studied here are important for improving relationships with people of different ethnic backgrounds and instilling a culture of respect and appreciation for diversity which can be perpetuated into the future. In the Irish context, McGuirk and Kehoe (2013) argues for enhancing children's appreciation of people from different countries, which they say is essential for successfully integrating children and adults from minority groups into Irish society and improving educational outcomes for children:

*To be a target of prejudice or discrimination has a negative impact on the individual (Dion, 2002). Likely outcomes include negative emotional, behavioural and relational effects on children and adults.... emotional responses may include intrusive and self-defeating thoughts, depression and anxiety; behavioural effects... increased conduct disorders... Include isolation and distrust of others. In the case of children from ethnic minority groups, the potential negative impacts of being a victim/target of prejudice and discrimination include low academic achievement, social exclusion, low self-esteem and low self-efficacy*

### Enhanced sense of belonging for children

Evidence presented in previous chapters implies that the children feel relaxed in both the preschool and crèche facilities. The importance of creating a learning environment where children feel that they belong and can be themselves is recognised internationally as critical for developing feelings of self-confidence in children, and for fostering their abilities to ask questions and express their thoughts and emotions (Bucholz and Sheffler, 2009). Evidence from the Participant Observation (PO) data implies that children were able to express themselves and ask questions in both the crèche and preschool, which potentially contributes to their feelings of belonging in both services.

### **Strengthening relationships through equality, interculturalism and shared learning**

The fact that the proportion of children from Irish backgrounds attending the preschool service is currently increasing is important for further strengthening relationships between adults and children of different cultural backgrounds and improving the social integration of children in the community. The services may also be seen as improving relationships between members of the Travelling and the so-called settled communities in Ballyhaunis. This emphasis on the principles of equality, interculturalism and shared learning are extremely important aspects of the crèche and preschool that must be perpetuated into the future.

Significantly, there is much support among parents for activities that enhance young people's appreciation of the uniqueness of others and that respect people's individual faith backgrounds. This is an important finding of this study, as it indicates high levels of parental support for activities that are at the heart of the curriculum at present. Respect for people of different faiths, cultures and nations was central to how staff members planned activities in the classroom, and the process of planning was informed by a deep knowledge of the children who attended the services and their families. Some activities seemed to awaken children's interest in learning about other countries and about people from different cultural backgrounds. Talking to the children about the different places their families come from, and encouraging them to interact with other children and talk about themselves and their families, seemed to expand children's questioning to some degree. This is very encouraging given that longitudinal studies like EPPE concur that expanding children's thinking and questioning about the world around them was part of the daily routines of staff in childcare services that were classified as excellent services across the UK (Sylva et al., 2004). Activities around expanding the questioning of children should be included in other aspects of the curriculum at the crèche and preschool.

### **Relationships between staff members, parents and children**

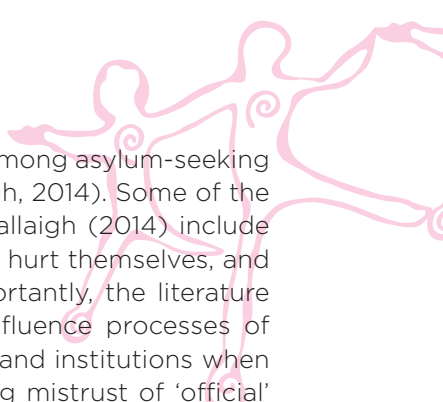
The data implies that staff members at the crèche and preschool are well equipped to interact effectively with parents and children. Interviews and Participant Observation (PO) data documents that staff members deal effectively with issues that arise, including parents' religious belief systems that shape and reflect their ideas about toys, dietary requirements and books that are made available to the children attending the services.

The research suggests that staff and management are very responsive towards children in the classroom too. Significantly, this approach is commensurate with *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006), which emphasises 'fostering constructive interactions' between adults and children 'that emphasise the value of process and are based on mutual respect, equal partnership and sensitivity'.<sup>24</sup> Comparably, the EPPE study maintains that relationships between children and staff members are critical to developing children's self-confidence and to enhancing their critical thinking skills. Drawing on EPPE, Sylva et al. (2004) state that children display much greater progress in their cognitive and social development when adults display warmth and foster positive interactions with them. Similarly, Nutbrown (2011) argues that practitioners must be responsive to children's thinking, open to their ideas and 'their ever active minds'. Devising play and learning activities that emphasise cognitive development and problem-solving would be very worthwhile for both services.

### **Parental participation in the crèche and preschool facilities**

Data collected as part of this study shows that staff and management at the crèche and preschool encourage parental participation in the services, facilitating parental volunteering initiatives and regularly asking for parents' opinions about the services. Parental participation is alluded to as an indicator of quality in the literature (Hayes, 2008). However, qualitative data shows that it is often difficult to encourage parents to participate in the crèche and preschool services under study in Ballyhaunis.

<sup>24</sup> Please see: [http://siolta.ie/siolta\\_infant.php](http://siolta.ie/siolta_infant.php)



In the Ballyhaunis case, this seems to be attributable, at least in part, to mistrust among asylum-seeking children and adults, which are often alluded to in the literature (see Ní Raghallaigh, 2014). Some of the reasons for this mistrust as delineated from international literature by Ní Raghallaigh (2014) include witnessing traumas such as violence and killings, living in fear of being killed and hurt themselves, and fear of deportation (see Mitchell, 1990, cited in Ní Raghallaigh, 2014: 85). Importantly, the literature shows that emotion, traumas and experiences in one's own home country influence processes of relationship building and the creation or re-creation of trusting bonds in people and institutions when asylum seekers enter other countries (*ibid.*). Comparable observations regarding mistrust of 'official' bodies is further discernible in the literature on the Travelling community in Ireland, who often choose not to access 'official' services in areas like education and healthcare because of a deep sense of mistrust that is borne out through experiences of social prejudice (see Parry et al., 2004) and everyday racism (Michael, 2015).

Given the emphasis on parental participation in the literature, it seems important for the preschool and crèche to continue to encourage parental involvement in the services, especially in curriculum development. For service delivery and curriculum development, it is important that parents continue to feel valued by staff members and that the crèche and preschool continue to be responsive to their needs.

### **Impacts of the preschool and crèche on school readiness**

There was ample evidence to suggest that attending the preschool and crèche enhanced children's school readiness, particularly on motivation to learn and on pre-reading skills. In the literature, school readiness is accorded much importance. Doyle and Timmins (2007) approach the concept of school readiness as encompassing 'more than academic skills'. School readiness includes literacy skills, physical well-being, motor skills, language skills and cognitive development (p. 1). In this way, school readiness encompasses different aspects of children's development: social, physical and intellectual. Large-scale research studies such as the UK Millennium Cohort Study found that school readiness can be an important predictor of future academic success, employment opportunities and behaviour. Furthermore, children from lower socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds are frequently disadvantaged in terms of school readiness, compared to their peers in higher socioeconomic classes, due to poorer levels of nutrition and inability to access stimulating learning environments (*ibid.*).<sup>25</sup> Joshi (2010) comments in Budge (2010) that differences in levels of school readiness are especially discernible between children who are above and below the poverty line: sons and daughters of university graduates are said to be approximately eight months ahead in terms of vocabulary and nine months ahead in school readiness compared to peers from lower SES households, based on findings from the UK Millennium Cohort Study.<sup>26</sup> The findings presented in this study imply that the crèche and preschool impact positively on children's social, physical and intellectual development. Activities aimed at these three domains should continue to be prioritised for the future.

### **Food, nutrition and school readiness**

Qualitative data in previous chapters suggests that children living in Direct Provision are at much greater risk of poor nutrition and in their level of access to stimulating learning environments compared to children from higher SES backgrounds. Studies of food poverty among asylum seekers, such as Manandhar et al. (2006) and the recent report by Arnold (2012) as discussed in Chapter 2 highlight how access to high-quality nutrition is contested in DP accommodation centres. Food is a very powerful cultural symbol and is a resource necessary for human well-being. Yet cultural and religious factors affecting food preparation and consumption appear to be overlooked in DP centres across Ireland. This is attested in findings presented in previous chapters of this study also.

<sup>25</sup> The Millennium Cohort Study (UK) is a prospective study of 18,819 babies that were born in the UK from 2000–2002. For more information on this study, please see: <http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/page.aspx?sitesectionid=851>

<sup>26</sup> Please see: <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/46043.html>



Children attending the crèche and preschool facilities are given snacks during break times, including cheese, water and fruit juice, and this is done specifically with the nutritional needs of children in mind. It was observed during the PO session in the preschool, however, that the sugar content in the fruit juice is quite high, and the preschool staff may need to reconsider the juice product in the future. Providing foods which are generally considered to be of high nutritional benefit to children (e.g. cheese, water) can be seen as directly and indirectly contributing to school readiness, at least to some extent. Increasing parents' and children's access to high-quality nutritious foods in DP must be prioritised by national government.

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

The literature on early years services from the UK notes particularly that supporting children's cognitive development is an important aspect of quality in early year's services. Expanding children's questioning was observed to be particularly important for enhancing children's cognitive development (see Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2004). In the literature, this is closely aligned with the concept of Sustained Shared Thinking (SST), a learning and teaching strategy for the development of critical thinking skills which was found to be a feature of early years services in the UK that were deemed '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).*

Siraj-Blatchford and Smith (2010) contend that SST means that adults show interest in the child's conversation and interests, and they help to develop the child's critical thinking skills by extending the child's questioning and understanding. SST practitioners do not try too hard to lead children to the 'right' answer. Instead, the emphasis is on educators and children co-constructing the problem, fostering a deeper line of thinking in children about what they are painting, drawing, reading or discussing, and what it means to them. Robson (2012) maintains that educators must foster learning environments which facilitate greater reflection about what it means to think critically, where children are supported to reflect on their own thinking processes (i.e., what they think about people, places and other phenomena that they identify as important, and how they think about them). The EPPE study also showed positive learning outcomes for children when their thinking was actively supported by adults around them through SST, compared to children who developed their thinking skills in the company of peers or who were left alone to develop their own critical thinking skills (see Sylva et al., 2004).

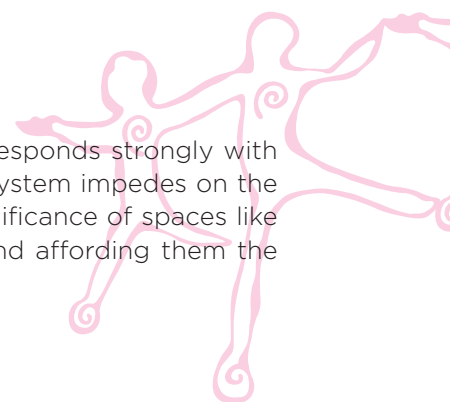
In addition, SST can be used with groups or one-to-one with individual children. As a technique, it can be drawn upon when teaching children about a range of issues, including factual information, about creativity and how to be creative, about cause and effect, and about social interactions. Elements of SST were observed especially during the PO session in the preschool. A recommendation of this report is that SST activities be extended into as many areas as possible in the preschool and the crèche to place even greater emphasis on extending children's critical thinking skills. Preschool staff members completed training in SST, which should greatly assist them when planning activities in future.

### **Children's participation in education in Direct Provision**

As also noted in the Arnold (2012) report, Direct Provision centres are not conducive to learning and are wholly inadequate as Home Learning Environments (HLEs) for children. The Arnold (2012) report in particular notes a plethora of barriers to children's play, education and development in DP. This includes, for example, difficulties affording school books and school uniforms due to lack of finances, and lack of access to school trips or outings with friends.



As evidenced in previous chapters of this report, the data presented here corresponds strongly with the findings of other studies such as Arnold (2012), which details how the DP system impedes on the educational and social development of children. This further underlines the significance of spaces like the preschool and crèche for improving children's experiences of education and affording them the opportunity to access toys, books and adequate play facilities.



### 8.3 Informal Social Support for Children and Families

There is significant evidence to suggest that the crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool constitute major sources of informal family support for immigrant and asylum-seeking children and families in Ballyhaunis. This is a very significant finding of this study, and for understanding how formal and informal supports impact on low-income and asylum-seeking families in rural communities. The data is especially relevant for understanding how community-based organisations positively affect families who are often considered vulnerable and socially marginalised in Irish society (e.g., asylum seekers, migrants, Travellers). Comparable findings are also discernible in Kane (2008), Arnold (2012) and Ogbu et al. (2014).

Applying the literature on family support, defined as 'mobilising support for children in adverse circumstances' (see Dolan et al., 2006; Gilligan, 2000), we can say that the preschool and crèche offer much by way of material, social and emotional supports to children and families, and that staff members at the crèche and preschool view material, social and emotional supports as central to improving children's educational outcomes. This way of working seems comparable to the TUSLA (n.d.) definition of family support as 'a style of work and a range of activities that strengthen positive informal social networks'.<sup>27</sup>

As highlighted in Chapter 2, international and Irish research highlight the emotional, economic and social challenges that migrants and asylum seekers face in everyday life, including racism, language barriers and the difficulties of transitioning to new ways of life (see Ní Raghallaigh, 2014). This report adds to this literature, showing that community enterprises like the crèche, FRC and preschool services significantly enhance this process of transitioning for many migrant and asylum-seeking families in Ballyhaunis, through the provision of informal social supports.

Other forms of community-based supports for migrant and asylum-seeking families to facilitate their integration to Ballyhaunis are warranted, and must encompass both formal and informal supports. These supports must be planned with children and families in mind and how to accomplish better outcomes for them – socially, culturally, and in the area of education specifically. Significantly, the data presented in this report indicates that despite the complex social and cultural needs of the Ballyhaunis community, the area lacks many types of supports to assist local families, such as a dedicated Family Support Worker to give practical advice and emotional supports to families in need. This was highlighted as a critical issue in the interviews by key informants particularly, and would be a very significant resource for the area. This issue is explored in Chapter 9.

<sup>27</sup> Please see: <http://www.tusla.ie/services/family-community-support/family-support>

## 8.4 Conclusions and Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined how some of the main findings of this study corroborate literature on early year's education, family support, and the lives of asylum-seeking children and families in Ireland. Findings presented in previous chapters imply that the crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool impact positively on children and families in the study region, with regard to children's social and educational development and in providing social supports for parents. Improvements reported by parents include children's competencies in speaking English, their abilities to make friends with other children and to forge relationships with adults, and their pre-reading skills. Importantly, this study finds that the crèche and preschool assist in the areas of school readiness and help children and families to transition to a new life in Ballyhaunis. These are very significant findings emanating from this report.

Focusing on the literature, the data presented in this report highlights that services provided in the crèche and preschool correspond strongly to indicators of quality. This includes, for example, the strength of relationships between parents, children and staff members, staff training and development, and the embedding of intercultural learning in the teaching approach. Evidence which shows that preschool staff members' operationalised sustained shared thinking (SST) approaches is also important, given its prioritisation in the literature on quality enhancement and developing children's critical thinking skills. Emphasis should be placed on SST in both services.

The crèche and preschool operationalise aspects of *Síolta* and *Aistear*, and this should also continue, given the emphasis placed in these documents on belonging, identity, creativity and multiculturalism especially. The significance accorded to pre-reading skills and improving children's competencies in English is important, and this was discernible in the preschool curriculum especially. Developing children's competencies in numerical reasoning is also an important aspect of school readiness and is an area that could be accorded greater emphasis in both services (see Doig et al. 2003).<sup>28</sup> Chapter 9 expands on the themes and topics outlined in this chapter and offer some more detailed conclusions and recommendations for the crèche and preschool services.

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<sup>28</sup> Please see: <http://learning.gov.wales/resources/learningpacks/mep/numeracy/learning-and-teaching-numeracy/creating-numeracy-learning-environments/?lang=en>

# 9.0



## Conclusions and Recommendations

### 9.1 Introduction

This report encapsulates a process study evaluation of the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and Greater Tomorrow crèche which yielded in-depth qualitative data on the socio-cultural and educational impacts of the services on children and families. Using a qualitative, mixed-method research design, this study documents evidence from key informants, parents and children which implies that attending the services contributes to language acquisition, peer learning, school readiness and intercultural competencies among parents and children. Importantly, the study documents ample evidence of how the crèche and preschool constitute valuable sources of informal social support for parents and children, especially for persons living in Direct Provision (DP). This is a very important finding. Critical insights were also offered on matters to do with quality enhancement. Findings from qualitative data collected with service users, key informants and staff members were married with themes and concepts from research to generate insights on quality of service provision in the crèche and preschool. Conclusions and recommendations around these issues are explored in subsequent sections of this chapter, especially sections 9.4, 9.5 and 9.6.

### 9.2 Aims and Objectives

As documented in the Executive Summary, the principal aims of this evaluation are as follows:

- (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 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.**

- (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.**

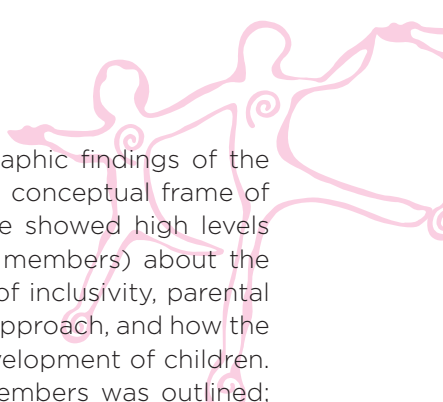
## 9.3 Overview of Chapters

In accordance with the main aims and objectives outlined above, the principal content of Chapters 1–8 is documented below.

**Chapter 1** described the Greater Tomorrow crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool in detail, including their locations; the teaching methods operationalised in the services; relationships between staff members, children and parents; and the range of play facilities available for children in both services. Significantly, this chapter also contextualised the study further, providing rich detail on the socio-demographic profile of Ballyhaunis, policies around asylum-seeking, and research data on Direct Provision (DP) in Ireland. Aspects of the teaching and learning approach were also documented, including the prioritisation of care for children, staff members' relationships with children and parents, staff training and development, and staff turnover.

**In Chapter 2**, major policy developments in the area of ECCE and the community childcare sector in Ireland were synthesised. Quality enhancement in early year's services provision was also highlighted, with particular attention accorded to *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) with regard to quality of service and themes such as inclusivity and belonging. These themes were explored in greater depth in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, as they were important concepts to the overall teaching and learning approach in both services. Importantly, Chapter two provided evidence from large-scale studies of early year's education in the UK, Europe and the US to document indicators of quality in ECCE provision that are discussed in the literature and provide evidence of how quality ECCE services are shown to impact markedly on educational and social outcomes for children and young people. This literature was subsequently applied to data from the crèche and preschool, as outlined in Chapters 5–8 of this study.

**Chapter 3** synthesised the main conceptual framework of the study that is grounded in socio-ecological approaches, social support theory and the concept of family support. These frameworks were explored in some depth in Chapter 5. Chapter 4 outlined the principal methodological framework for the study, arguing that the combination of interviews, focus groups and participant observation (PO) was appropriate for garnering comprehensive data on how the crèche and preschool fosters positive or negative outcomes for children and families, and for generating information on how service delivery may be enhanced in both services.



**Chapters 5, 6 and 7** presented primary data from the qualitative and ethnographic findings of the study. These findings were presented thematically, guided by the literature and conceptual frame of the study presented in Chapters 1, 2 and 3. Qualitative materials revealed here showed high levels of convergence in opinions of respondents (parents, key informants and staff members) about the pedagogical approach of the crèche and preschool, the extent to which ethics of inclusivity, parental engagement and concepts of belonging are imbued in the learning and teaching approach, and how the services appear to impact positively on the social, cognitive and educational development of children. Importantly, the quality of relationships between parents, children and staff members was outlined; the services were often characterised as ‘caring’ and ‘creative’ by interviewees, and as contributing to a sense of freedom among children living in asylum-seeking accommodation. In Chapter 8, these findings were discussed in the context of the literature on factors that impact on the educational and social achievements of children in asylum-seeking accommodation in Ireland and internationally, factors affecting the quality of early year’s education provision, and how quality preschool services shape and reflect better educational outcomes for children and young people. Chapter 8 discussed some of the principal aspects of these findings in the context of literature.

## 9.4 Perceived Impacts of the Greater Tomorrow Crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool on Educational and Social Outcomes for Children

As outlined in Chapters 5 and 6, there was ample qualitative evidence to suggest that the Greater Tomorrow crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool contribute to positive educational and social outcomes for children. Some of the principal areas to which the crèche and preschool appear to contribute 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 HLE and children’s well-being**

Overall, the crèche and preschool facilitate access to good-quality pre-primary education services for children and families. Both facilities appear to be characterised by emphasis on intercultural learning, inclusivity and care. They are operated by well-trained staff and facilitate greater access to quality play and educational materials. This is exceptionally important for families of lower socio-economic status and families living in asylum-seeking accommodation who frequently experience barriers to quality play and educational experiences, as evidenced in literature (see especially Chapters 5, 6 and 7).

## 9.5 Principal Conclusions and Recommendations

The following constitute the principal conclusions and recommendations for the crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool, which are presented thematically and are in line with the aims and objectives outlined previously:

### **Learning and teaching approach: Inclusivity and intercultural learning**

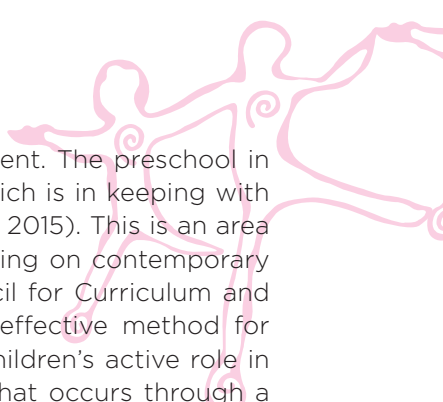
The learning and teaching approach in both the crèche and preschool is grounded in an equal privileging of care and education for children, a spirit of equality and inclusivity and a genuine valuing of familial involvement in the service provision. Given the socio-cultural profile of Ballyhaunis and the socio-economic profile of children and families accessing the services, this is extremely important. The socially inclusive aspect of the services should be maintained; it should remain embedded in the pedagogical approach and in relationships between staff members, children and parents. Staff members should be supported to seek out training and continuing professional development opportunities to keep abreast of developments in best practice to enhance inclusivity and intercultural learning in early years care and education. In addition, staff members should continue to source quality materials for play and 'props' for classrooms to build on the intercultural and participatory ethos of the services. These include posters which emphasise and celebrate intercultural, social and ethnic diversity, books, role-play resources and other play materials.

### **Sustained Shared Thinking (SST) in teaching and learning**

Evidence from the preschool and crèche suggest there is a good degree of balance in the levels of child-led and adult-initiated activities, which is part of the learning and teaching approaches. There was also evidence of Sustained Shared Thinking (SST), particularly in the preschool curriculum. A key recommendation of this study is that SST continues to be adopted and developed in the preschool teaching method, and that it is incorporated more in the teaching method of the crèche. This recommendation is in keeping with the recommendation on the learning and teaching approach, and should be another area enhanced through accessing continuing professional development opportunities. As SST is highlighted as a marker of quality teaching and learning approaches in the literature, this is an important recommendation.

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

A wide range of play and learning facilities are easily accessible to children in both 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. The concept of multiple intelligences seems appropriate in this context: play materials should engage children's emotional, social and cognitive development. Play materials should teach children about their feelings and other people's emotions, about the 'feel' of different materials ('tactile learning'), and about practices that are important for home and school. There is already evidence to suggest that the preschool and crèche focus on developing these competencies, and they should continue to do so.



A key recommendation of this report pertains to children's cognitive development. The preschool in particular emphasises skills in the area of child-led exploration and learning, which is in keeping with the sectoral developments, particularly the *Síolta-Aistear Practice Guide* (NCCA, 2015). This is an area of practice that should be promoted more strongly in the crèche setting, drawing on contemporary knowledge and current resources being developed through the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Documenting children's learning through *Learning Stories* is an effective method for involving parents in children's early learning experiences and for 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. It is a method of observation and documentation leading to effective planning of future learning that is promoted through the *Better Start* mentoring service. This report recommends that practitioners in both settings be supported through additional training opportunities, to implement this method of observation, documentation and planning into their current approach, as it is in keeping with the underpinning ethos and pedagogy that are already in place in both settings.

### **Staff training and development**

Staff members in both the crèche and preschool facilities are well trained and well equipped to deal with challenges experienced by children at school and in the home which could impact negatively on their learning. As evidenced in previous chapters, staff members at the crèche and preschool have attended ample training on topics like first aid and domestic violence. It is especially noteworthy that the manager of both services and a crèche staff member are educated to NFQ Level 7. The supportive attitudes of management towards staff engaging in additional training are significant for quality enhancement also. Research cited earlier indicates strong links between staff qualifications and higher levels of 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 ECEC qualification levels advocates for 60% of practitioners at graduate level.<sup>29</sup> Staff members should continue to focus on developing their training profiles through both accredited training and 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 8 major awards. CPD training should be targeted at the needs of individual children and families accessing the services, as well as enhancing the individual professional profiles of staff members. This report has highlighted specific areas of training which it recommends be prioritised.

### **Parental involvement and participation**

Both the crèche and preschool settings operate with an imbued ethic of parental involvement through a strengths-based approach to developing relationships and working with families. Staff members appear responsive to the needs of parents and children accessing the services. Parents expressed high levels of satisfaction with the degree of parental involvement offered. In the literature, involvement and consultation denote much lower levels of staff-parent engagement than participation (Checkoway, 2011). As shown in Chapters 5 and 6, increased parental participation is a hallmark of quality in ECCE provision. That said, parents interviewed said they were happy with the level of involvement and most did not require deeper consultation or participation in the curriculum. Staff members in both services should continue to emphasise parental engagement in the curriculum, with the implementation of *Learning Stories*, an effective method of increasing parental involvement. The degree of participation should be guided by the needs and wishes of parents about how much parental involvement is warranted. Overall, staff and management should continue to emphasise the importance of parental engagement in the curriculum and for the future development of the services, as this is mentioned in the literature as a quality marker. Furthermore, the importance of parental engagement was seen in this study as significant for building trusting relationships between staff members, parents and children. These relationships should continue to be maintained, as they contribute positively to children and parents accessing the services and to their sense of belonging and esteem.

29 Please see: [http://www.startstrong.ie/files/Start\\_Strong\\_submission\\_to\\_DPER\\_on\\_Partnership\\_Agreement\\_with\\_E.pdf](http://www.startstrong.ie/files/Start_Strong_submission_to_DPER_on_Partnership_Agreement_with_E.pdf)



### **Informal social support to families and children**

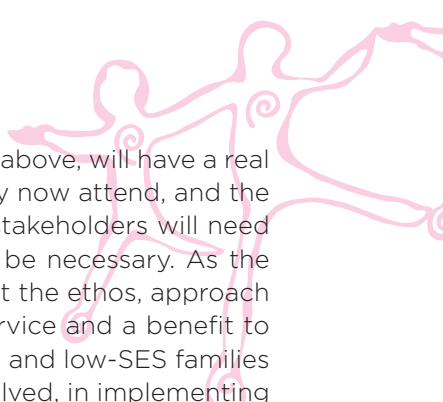
The findings in Chapters 5 and 6 yielded a plethora of data on how the crèche and preschool function as providers of social support for children and parents, especially for those living in the DP reception centre. Data shared through this report indicates high levels of instrumental, emotional, advice and esteem support offered to families who use the crèche and preschool, along with the care and education provision afforded to children. As outlined in Chapter 6, a dedicated Family Support Worker for the Ballyhaunis area could significantly impact on creating and recreating positive social and educational outcomes for children and parents, by supporting the work of the FRC and the crèche and preschool and encouraging Home Learning Environments (HLEs) that are more conducive to children's learning. This was highlighted by a number of key informants who were interviewed, and should be dealt with as a matter of urgency. Significantly, 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 a great deal of family support, given their living conditions. 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 to support the work of the FRC and the crèche and preschool in this regard. The provision of greater supports for children and families, both nationally and locally, might also ensure that the crèche, preschool and PHN experience significantly less pressure to offer the current range of supports, particularly emotional and instrumental supports, to children and families in Ballyhaunis.

### **Sustainability of the crèche and preschool services**

Significantly, this study identified a number of factors that will potentially affect the future sustainability of the crèche and preschool facilities, with these situated in an evolving national policy context. Themes identified previously in this chapter will indelibly affect the services going forward (e.g., staff training and development, parental involvement and participation, embeddedness of effective teaching and learning approach). As shown in previous chapters, however, the number of children attending the crèche is a pressing issue that should be considered for the service into the future. 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. Whereas 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's service, by extending the age range of eligible children and the duration of each child's attendance.

That said, it is important that 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 asylum-seeking accommodation in the future. As part of this planning process, representatives should focus upon the socio-demographic profile of the Bridgestock reception centre at the present time and should engage with RIA about future projections. It should be stated, of course, that the future demographic profile of the RIA reception centre cannot be predicted in full; however, the process of planning for the future educational provision of children in Ballyhaunis, particularly those under three years, resident in asylum-seeking accommodation, should be prioritised. This report recommends that key 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, enhance the intercultural approach in the crèche that is already in place in the preschool, and provide greater stability to the crèche service than currently exists. The current location of the crèche on the grounds of the DP centre may need to be reconsidered if this is itself a barrier to extended enrolment.





Recent expansion of the ECCE scheme by the current government, as mentioned above, will have a real impact on the preschool, its current hours of operation, the duration children may now attend, and the age of commencement in the ECCE scheme being lowered to three years. 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 the ethos, approach and values embedded in it are maintained, as they are a true 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 planning the services.

### **Promotion of the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and 'Greater Tomorrow' crèche**

The need to promote the crèche and preschool was identified as very significant among key informants and staff members. This is also a critical part of the sustainability of the crèche and preschool services. Interviewees frequently mentioned that the multicultural aspects of the services perpetuated a widespread social belief in Ballyhaunis that the services are targeted principally at the asylum-seeking community. This perception ran contra to definitions of community that were espoused by staff members, which were more holistic and encompassing of all people living in Ballyhaunis.

Staff, management and the FRC should engage in a more widespread campaign to promote the work of the services. In this regard, the intercultural elements of the services could be promoted as beneficial for children's learning, and staff members can draw on the literature offered in previous chapters of this report to leverage the campaign. They should work together with key stakeholders, cited above, to devise an effective and unique promotional strategy for each setting. To do this, they should work out who they wish to reach, the messages they wish to transfer about the learning and development opportunities for children attending the crèche and preschool, and how they can reach parents and families through a host of local media (e.g., local radio, newspapers, newsletters, word of mouth and social media).

### **Formal and informal promotion strategies**

Given the primacy in Ballyhaunis of the local radio station, Mid-West Radio (MWR), and its high levels of listenership throughout County Mayo, local radio seems a significant medium for communicating with parents and families living in the area. The findings of this research project could also be leveraged in this regard. Another strategy that might be important would be to host an informal Open Day for parents and children to give them the opportunity to view the services for themselves and meet the teachers face to face. The local FRC could be instrumental in this regard. As the FRC is sometimes perceived as a service for asylum-seeking families, a more interactive family fun day that encompasses an Open Day element could be important for changing perceptions about the FRC, crèche and preschool. Instead, a new understanding of the role of the preschool, crèche and FRC should be created where they are viewed as working on behalf of the entire community. As shown in previous chapters, relationships between staff members, parents and children attending the services can be characterised as strong, caring and trusting. Inviting parents from the wider community into the crèche and preschool, and affording them the opportunity to meet the teachers and experience the personal and relational aspects of the services may be an extremely important promotional strategy for the services going forward.

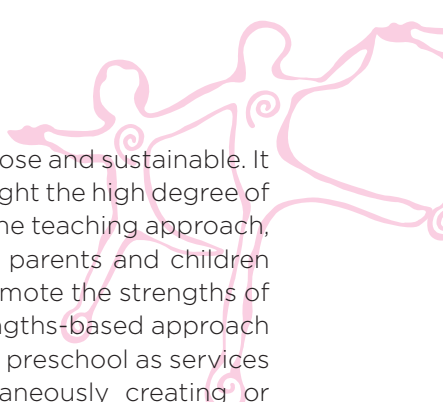
Some key informants also commented on the importance of word of mouth in improving numbers attending the preschool, particularly in more recent times. In particular, the services were promoted informally by people using other services run by the FRC, including the Men's Shed initiative and gardening courses. It seems important for this promotional element to be pursued; it is easy and cost-effective. Moreover, key informants commented that it is having a positive impact on the number of children and parents accessing the services, in their opinion. That said promotion using word of mouth alone can take significant amounts of time before it pays off. To increase interest in the preschool, other methods should also be devised. The recent policy changes to the ECCE scheme could be the catalyst needed to coordinate greater promotion of that service, as would any decision to extend enrolment to the crèche for the wider community. Importantly, the promotional materials and media need to engage children and parents currently accessing the services and those who access other services at present, or who are making decisions about which crèche and preschool to access in future.

### **Guidance for devising an effective and sustainable promotional strategy**

The following questions should be considered when devising an effective promotional strategy. That said, all staff members at the crèche and preschool should engage in devising and conceptualising the types of promotional tools that they feel are accessible and fit for purpose. The questions given below are not designed as an exhaustive list of issues for consideration. Staff members and the FRC should channel their own expert knowledge as practitioners in the field and their knowledge of the community when deliberating on questions and issues for consideration.

### **Questions offered in this report for consideration include:**

1. What is the current level of ECEC provision in Ballyhaunis?
2. How do the crèche and preschool fill a gap in provision that would otherwise exist?
3. How will recent policy changes impact on the preschool?
4. What is the most effective method for enhancing the sustainability of the crèche?
5. Who do we want to target to promote both services? (i.e., age, socio-demographic profile, location)
6. What particular media are regularly accessed by persons of the profile above?
7. What are the strengths and weaknesses of using these promotional tools? (i.e., cost in terms of time and money, accessibility, ease of use)
8. How cost-effective are the media types identified as important by staff?
9. How can these media be operationalised so that a continuous and dynamic promotional strategy is rolled out over time? (This relates to ease of use: how easily the media sources are updated by users to reflect changes in the services over time.)
10. What opportunities currently exist for parents and children from the wider Ballyhaunis community to visit the services at first hand?
11. What are the key messages about the crèche and preschool and the impacts for parents and children that we wish to convey?



Overall, the promotional strategy that is devised should be appropriate, fit for purpose and sustainable. It should focus on the educational, social and learning benefits for children, and highlight the high degree of staff training and development, the inclusive and intercultural learning aspects of the teaching approach, and the ethic of care for children that are imbued in teachers' interactions with parents and children alike. In short, promotional tools and planning decisions going forward should promote the strengths of the services, and work on improving them for future generations. Adopting a strengths-based approach might also contribute to changing societal perceptions about the FRC, crèche and preschool as services targeted solely (or principally) at asylum-seeking communities, whilst simultaneously creating or recreating new understandings of community and belonging, and thereby contribute to more positive acculturation experiences for migrants and asylum seekers in Ballyhaunis overall.

## 9.6 Final report overview and summary of main findings

Overall, the findings documented in this study show that the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and 'Greater Tomorrow' crèche services offer high quality childcare to children and families living in the Ballyhaunis area. In particular, this evaluation documents that the crèche and preschool services contribute markedly to children's education; in developing pre-reading skills, children's motivation to learn, and school readiness. The pedagogical approach of the services which is grounded in mutuality, respect for diversity and cultural inclusiveness is very significant in this regard, for facilitating access to persons living in Direct Provision especially. Staff members at the crèche and preschool are well trained and the services at the crèche and preschool correspond strongly to many 'markers' of quality of service that appear regularly in the literature on early year's education. The report recommends that CPD continues to be prioritised by staff members at the crèche and preschool as this is important for the future development of the services, and maintaining quality. Significantly, the report raised a number of questions about the sustainability of the crèche. This is a very significant issue that requires immediate attention as the educational attainments of children in Direct Provision must continue to be a priority.

Importantly, this study illustrates the significance of the crèche and preschool services in providing informal social supports to children and families living in Direct Provision, and lower income families in Ballyhaunis. The report strongly corroborates research literature which highlights the significance of formal and informal social supports for children and families in asylum seeking accommodation centres. As a result, this report recommends that more formal and informal supports are made available to persons living in Direct Provision in Ireland. These supports must continue to foster children's educational achievements and their emotional, social and physical development from infancy into adulthood, whilst also providing valuable emotional, cultural and material supports to children and parents.

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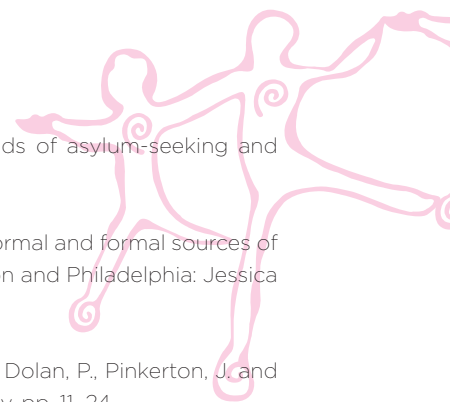
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## Appendix I

# Participant Information Sheet – Evaluation of Early Years Services in Ballyhaunis

The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre at NUI, Galway is conducting a study on community-based childcare services available for children and families in Ballyhaunis. We are hoping to achieve an understanding of the services on offer and the impact of these services on families. We invite you and your child/children to take part in this research.

What is really important for us is that this study reflects the views and experiences of the children attending the Ballyhaunis Community Pre-School and the Old Convent crèche and those of their parents/caregivers. After all, you are the people who know most about these services, so your point of view is important to us.

We want this study to reflect **your views** on the value of these services and to capture **your experiences** using these services. This study will be used by Tusla, the organisation responsible for the interests of children and families in Ireland, and will contribute to the continued development of early years services in Ballyhaunis and throughout Ireland.

### What will the study involve?

All parents/caregivers of children attending the Ballyhaunis Community Pre-School and Old Convent crèche are invited to take part in a focus group discussion in Friary House in April/May 2015. Focus group sessions will last about 2 hours and there will be 5-10 people in each group. You will be given a chance to express **your views**, to tell us about **your experiences** of using these services and to let us know how these services **affect you and your family**.

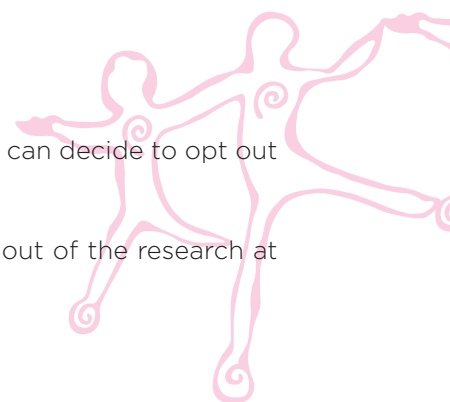
We would also like you to tell us what other types of services would be helpful for you. To make sure that everybody is given a fair chance to express themselves, an interpreter (from outside the Ballyhaunis area) who speaks your language shall be present. Focus group discussions shall be audio recorded to ensure that we capture your views accurately. Telephone interviews shall last approx. 35 minutes.

We are also inviting your child/children to take part in **participant observation** in the preschool and crèche. A researcher shall visit the crèche and the preschool to observe the services provided for your children and how the children engage with these services. The researcher may interact with the children and will take some written notes. This will occur during the regular session; at all times the researcher will be in the presence of the services staff. We invite all children attending the crèche and the preschool to take part in this observation. Taking part is optional, and there will be no adverse consequences for you and your child/children if you choose not to take part. Alternative activities will be provided at the childcare service for children for whom consent has not been granted.

It is important that you are aware of exactly what the study involves. This research takes place in the Old Convent and Friary facilities in April/May 2015. The research is confidential, and your names or other identifying details shall not be used in reports or other work published about this study. Participants shall be referred to by a code name so that they cannot be recognised. Any data collected will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to it.

It is up to you whether you take part or not. You don't have to take part, and you can decide to opt out of the project at any time if you wish.

Even if you agree to take part in the study, you can change your mind and opt out of the research at any time. Deciding not to take part won't affect your rights in any way.



## Why should you take part?

This is a chance to take part in an interesting study. It gives you a chance to think and talk about your experiences accessing services in Ballyhaunis and the impact of these services on you and your family. The study is commissioned by Tusla, and your contribution will help the development of early childhood services in Ballyhaunis and elsewhere in Ireland.

**If you want to find out more you can ring me, Dr. Lisa Moran, at 091 495743 or email me at [lisa.moran@nuigalway.ie](mailto:lisa.moran@nuigalway.ie).**

## Appendix II

### Focus group schedule (Parental Interviews)

#### Opinions about the crèche/preschool facility

1. Tell me a little about how you first heard about the crèche/preschool and why you first came here?
2. Can you tell me some detail about your family, how many of your children attend the preschool/crèche?
3. Can you tell me some detail about when you first visited the crèche/preschool and how that all happened?
4. Can you tell me something about Ballyhaunis, maybe something that you like or dislike about the place?
5. Would you say that this crèche/preschool impacts on your family life, and can you give me an example of that?
6. Can you tell me some detail about your experiences of using the crèche/preschool facility?
7. Do you think that the preschool/crèche provides a valuable service in the Ballyhaunis area?
8. Can you give me an example of a time when you felt that this service was valuable for you and your family in particular?
9. Do you think that the preschool/crèche provides a valuable resource for children?

#### Opinions about the crèche/preschool and children's development

10. Do you believe that the preschool/crèche offers children a chance to learn skills that are helpful in their daily lives?
11. What is the impact of the service on your child's learning experiences?
12. Do you believe that the preschool/crèche offers children a chance to develop socially?
13. Do you think the service impacts on your child's social development? If so, can you give me an example of a particular time or event when you felt that this was the case?
14. Can you think of a particular time or event when you felt that your child learned an important lesson which might help them in other areas of their lives?
15. Can you summarise for me, in just a few words, the importance of this service for your child's development?



## Opinions about the crèche/preschool facility: space and intercultural learning

16. What do you think about the space itself, in terms of its layout, the facilities offered, the opportunities for play, etc.?
17. Does the preschool/crèche offer children a chance to get to know children of different backgrounds?
18. Has your child made new friends at the service?
19. Were any of these children from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds?
20. Do you feel that it is valuable for your child to meet and get to know children from other backgrounds, such as children who may have different religious beliefs or languages?

## The crèche/preschool as a source of family support

21. Do you think that the preschool/crèche provides a valuable resource for parents/caregivers and families in the Ballyhaunis area?
22. How does this service impact on your own family life?
23. Do you feel that this service is a source of support for you and your family?
24. If so, can you give me an example of a particular time or event when you felt that this service was a source of support to you and/or your family?

## Staff interactions and ways of working with children

25. Does the facility help you to interact in a more positive way with your child, do you think?
26. In your opinion, how well do staff at this facility work with the children?
27. Can you give me an example of a particular time or event when you felt that the staff or a particular staff member worked particularly well with your child?
28. How does your child speak about the service when they are at home, and how do they describe the staff?
29. Do you think that the experience of having a child/children attend the preschool/crèche has influenced the way that you interact with people from other countries and ethnic groups in Ballyhaunis?

## Parental involvement and participation

30. To what extent are you as parents/caregivers involved in the preschool/crèche on a day-to-day basis?
31. Do you speak with the people working in the preschool/crèche often?
32. How often?
33. Do you feel that you have enough opportunities to speak with the people running the preschool/crèche?
34. Would you like to have more involvement or less involvement with the preschool/crèche?
35. Does the staff of the preschool/crèche encourage parental/caregiver involvement or participation in how the service is run? In what ways?
36. Can you think of other ways that you would like to be involved in the preschool/crèche?
37. If so, can you describe how you would like to be involved?

## Main strengths and weaknesses of crèche/preschool facility

38. What do you believe are the main strengths of the preschool/crèche facilities?
39. Why do you believe that this aspect of the service is beneficial?
40. What do you believe are the main shortcomings of the preschool/crèche facilities?
41. Why do you believe that this aspect of the service is challenging?
42. How do you believe the delivery of these services to children could be improved on a day-to-day basis? (Resources, ways of dealing with the people running the crèche/preschool, time, access to additional services, etc.)
43. Are there any changes you would make to the existing services to enhance their suitability for services users in the Ballyhaunis area?
44. What additional services do you think would be useful for families in the Ballyhaunis area?
45. Are there any other issues or topics that you would like to discuss?

## Appendix III

# Consent form to participate in focus groups (staff members)



Dear Parent/Caregiver,

I am a researcher in the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre in National University of Ireland, Galway. I am currently conducting research on the experiences of parents/caregivers who accessed the Ballyhaunis Asylum Seeker Project integrated early years family support service and in the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool. We are also asking for the participation of staff members in this study. We are asking for your participation in a focus group in April/May 2015 – we want to find out what works well in the crèche and preschool services, what you would like to improve, and how the crèche and preschool can better assist families and improve outcomes for children.

Participation will involve attending a focus group for approximately 1 hour in Friary House in Ballyhaunis. During these focus groups you will be given an opportunity to express your views of these services, share your experiences of using the facilities, and identify any additional services that may be of use to you and to your family in the Ballyhaunis area. Focus groups will be attended by other staff members.

The research is confidential and your name will not be used in any work published on the study. Any individuals in the study will be referred to by a code name so that they cannot be recognised. Any data collected will be stored securely and only I will have access to it. Participation is optional; there will be no negative consequences for you or for your son/daughter if you do not consent to take part in the study. If you do give your consent, you may withdraw from the research at any stage without adverse consequences. Full details on this study are given in the *Participant Information Sheet* on the next page.

If you require any further information or clarification, please feel free to contact me at +353 (0)91 49 5735 or by email at [lisa.moran@nuigalway.ie](mailto:lisa.moran@nuigalway.ie)

**N.B. Please read the attached *Participant Information Sheet* overleaf before completing this form.**

Many Thanks

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Dr. Lisa Moran

**Please complete this form if you wish to take part in the study.**

*Please return completed forms to the Ballyhaunis Asylum Seeker Project early years family support service and in the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool by 24/02/2014*

- I fully understand all the information on the Participant Information Sheet ☐
- I understand that this study is an confidential one and that all my identity will be protected in all publications relating to this study ☐
- I understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time and that my decision to participate or to not participate will not affect my rights in any way. ☐

PLEASE TICK THE ABOVE BOXES TO INDICATE YOUR WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE

I, \_\_\_\_\_ wish \_\_\_\_\_ to take part in the focus groups conducted as part of the 'Evaluation of Early Years Services in Ballyhaunis Co. Mayo' study.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix IV

### Interview schedule (Key Informants)



1. What is your experience of working in/with the early years family support service?
  - a. How long have you worked here?
  - b. In what capacity do you work in/with the early years family support service?
  - c. Have your experiences working here been positive or negative?
2. What do you believe the impact of the early years family support service has been on the Ballyhaunis area?
3. What do you feel is the impact of the early years family support service on the children who attend?
  - a. Do you believe the experience of attending the early years family support service has impacted on the children's developmental opportunities? In what ways?
  - b. What do you believe is the impact of participating in the services on the child's educational opportunities?
  - c. There is clearly a diverse mix of backgrounds amongst the children who attend the early years family support service; can you describe how these children socialise?
  - d. How do you think this experience affects children's social development?
4. From your perspective, how does involvement in the early year's family support service impact on the parenting experience of families in the Ballyhaunis area?
  - a. How does the involvement of families in the early years family support service impact on the relationships between parents/caregivers and children?
  - b. To what extent are parents/caregivers involved in the early years family support service on a day-to-day basis?
    - b.i. Do you find this level of parental/caregiver involvement challenging or beneficial?
    - b.ii. What actions does staff take to involve parents/caregivers in the service?
    - b.iii. Do you believe that more effective mechanisms for engaging with and communicating with parents/caregivers are necessary?
5. What do you believe are the main strengths of the early year's family support service facilities?
  - a. Why do you believe that this aspect of the services is beneficial?
6. What do you believe are the main shortcomings of the early year's family support service facilities?
  - a. Why do you believe that this aspect of the services is challenging?
7. How do you believe the delivery of services to children could be enhanced on a day-to-day basis? (E.g. resources, protocols for dealing with parents, additional hours of paid work, access to additional services, etc.)

# Appendix V

## Participant Observation Tool

(Adapted from Gardner and Walsh 2005)

### 1. Motivation and concentration:

Do children appear actively interested and engaged in their learning?

1	2	3	4	5
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General notes:

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### 2. Independence:

Do the children appear to have a measure of control over their own learning?

1	2	3	4	5
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General notes:

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1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

[illegible]

#### 4. Social interaction

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

[illegible]

5. Respect

Do the children exhibit respect for each other (and for the teachers)?

1	2	3	4	5
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General notes:

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6. Multiple skill acquisition

Are the children’s learning opportunities holistic (covering a variety of skills and knowledge)?

1	2	3	4	5
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General notes:

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7. Higher-order thinking skills

Are children’s reasoning and thinking skills harnessed through activities?

1	2	3	4	5
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General notes:

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## Appendix VI

# Parental Consent Form to participate in focus groups



Dear Parent/Caregiver,

I am a researcher in the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre in National University of Ireland, Galway. I am currently conducting research on the experiences of parents/caregivers and children who have attended the Ballyhaunis Asylum Seeker Project integrated early years family support service and in the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool. We would like to invite you to participate in a focus group session about your experiences and your son's/daughter's experiences of these services in February 2015.

Participation will involve attending a focus group for approximately 1 hour in the Friary House in Ballyhaunis. During these focus groups you will be given an opportunity to express your views of these services, share your experiences of using the facilities, and identify any additional services that may be of use to you and to your family in the Ballyhaunis area. Focus groups will be attended by 5-10 participants of a similar cultural and linguistic background. An interpreter will be provided to ensure that you are facilitated in having your point of view heard throughout the research.

Participating in this study will not affect your rights or your status here in Ireland in any way. The research is confidential and your name will not be used in any work published on the study. Any individuals in the study will be referred to by a code name so that they cannot be recognised. Any data collected will be stored securely and only I will have access to it. Participation is optional; there will be no negative consequences for you or for your son/daughter if you do not consent to take part in the study. If you do give your consent, you may withdraw from the research at any stage without adverse consequences. Full details on this study are given in the *Participant Information Sheet* on the next page.

If you require any further information or clarification, please feel free to contact me at +353 (0)91 49 5735 or by email at [lisa.moran@nuigalway.ie](mailto:lisa.moran@nuigalway.ie)

**N.B. Please read the attached *Participant Information Sheet* overleaf before completing this form**

Many Thanks

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Dr. Lisa Moran

**Please complete this form if you wish to take part in the study.**

*Please return completed forms to the Ballyhaunis Asylum Seeker Project early years family support service and in the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool by 24/02/2014*

- I fully understand all the information on the Participant Information Sheet ☐
- I understand that this study is an confidential one and that all my identity will be protected in all publications relating to this study ☐
- I understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time and that my decision to participate or to not participate will not affect my rights in any way. ☐

PLEASE TICK THE ABOVE BOXES TO INDICATE YOUR WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE

I, \_\_\_\_\_ wish \_\_\_\_\_ to take part in the focus groups conducted as part of the 'Evaluation of Early Years Services in Ballyhaunis Co. Mayo' study.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix VII

# Parental/Caregiver Consent Form for Children to participate in Participant Observation



Dear Parent/Caregiver,

I am a researcher in the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre in the National University of Ireland, Galway. I am currently conducting research on the experiences of parents/caregivers and children who use the Ballyhaunis Asylum Seeker Project early years family support service and in the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool. We would like to invite your child/children to participate in an observation session in the preschool/crèche in February 2015.

Participation in this aspect of the study will take place during normal crèche/preschool hours and will involve me, as a researcher, attending a crèche/preschool session. During the session I will observe how the children interact with, and benefit from, the services, and may involve interactions between myself and the children attending. Observation notes will be taken during this process, and the regular staff of the service will be present at all times.

The research is confidential and your son's/daughter's name will not be used in any work published on the study. Any individuals in the study will be referred to by a code name so that they cannot be recognised. Any data collected will be stored securely and only I will have access to it. Taking part in this research will not affect your rights or your child's rights in any way. Participation in this study is optional; there will be no negative consequences for you or for your son/daughter if you do not consent to their taking part in the study. Alternative activities will be provided for your child at the childcare service, should consent not be provided. If you do give your consent, your son/daughter may withdraw from the research at any stage without adverse consequences. Full details on this study are given in the Participant Information Sheet on the next page.

If you require any further information or clarification, please feel free to contact me at +353 (0)91 49 5735 or by email at [lisa.moran@nuigalway.ie](mailto:lisa.moran@nuigalway.ie)

**N.B. Please read the attached *Participant Information Sheet* overleaf before completing this form.**

Many Thanks

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Dr. Lisa Moran

**Please complete this form if you wish to take part in the study.**

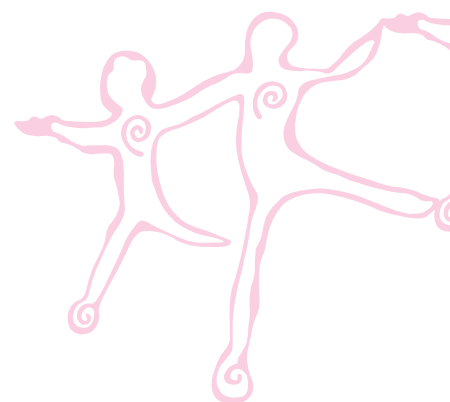
*Please return completed forms to the Ballyhaunis Asylum Seeker Project early years family support service and in the Ballyhaunis Community Pre-School by 24/02/2014*

- I fully understand all the information on the Participant Information Sheet ☐
- I understand that this study is a confidential one and that all my identity will be protected in all publications relating to this study ☐
- I understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time and that my decision to participate or to not participate will not affect my rights in any way. ☐

PLEASE TICK THE ABOVE BOXES IF YOU WISH YOUR SON/DAUGHTER TO PARTICIPATE

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (please print name) wish my son/daughter,  
\_\_\_\_\_ (please print name) to take part in the participant  
observation conducted as part of the 'Evaluation of Early Years Services in Ballyhaunis Co. Mayo' study.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_





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