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## **An informed pedagogy of community, care, and respect for diversity: evidence from a qualitative evaluation of Early Years' services in the West of Ireland**

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### **Abstract**

This paper draws on qualitative evidence from an evaluation of the 'Greater Tomorrow' Crèche and Ballyhaunis Community Preschool in Ballyhaunis, Co Mayo completed by the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (UCFRC) NUI Galway in 2015. The paper focuses upon the approach to practice and the underlying ethos of these two services; an ethos that reflects a clearly articulated respect for diversity, mutuality, and the privileging of relationships with families by the Early Years Practitioners and management team. We argue for the significance of Early Year's services in offsetting risk factors associated with adverse childhood experiences and environments, reflecting international research evidence of the potential benefits of high quality Early Childhood Education and Care. The practice orientation within the settings operationalises the national quality and curriculum frameworks Aistear and Síolta in foregrounding the concepts of identity and belonging, well-being and partnership with families in daily practice.

The services under study were established during a period of rapid social and cultural change in Ireland; heightened economic activity beginning in the mid-1990s was a catalyst for increasing female employment and inward migration. Increasing refugee numbers led to the establishment of the Direct Provision system of housing asylum seekers in the Republic of Ireland. Direct Provision is a system whereby the Irish state provides directly for the basic needs of asylum seekers (e.g. accommodation, food). However, the system is severely criticised for perpetuating human rights abuses against asylum seeking children and families. This paper argues that in the context of rapid social changes, the childcare services analysed in this paper responded to the needs of the uniquely diverse community that it serves, contributed to children's early learning and development, and provided material and emotional supports to children and parents. This further reflects the inclusive approach that underpins both services.

The authors wish to acknowledge the families, staff and management of the Greater Tomorrow Crèche, the Ballyhaunis Community Preschool and the Ballyhaunis Family Resource Centre for facilitating this research; equally, we wish to thank Aidan Waterstone and Tusla: The Child and Family Agency as the funders of this worthwhile research project.

## **Introduction**

The social, cultural and economic dimensions of life in Ireland significantly changed over the past two decades. Improving economic conditions created new employment opportunities, both for women and for the increasing numbers of immigrants to Ireland; this is in contrast to Ireland's history of high unemployment, low maternal employment, and high emigration (Cross & Turner, 2006; Kennedy, 2001). The lack of affordable, regulated childcare was a barrier to maternal employment and therefore, an impediment to economic development of the time, instigating initial State attention to this sector (Langford, 2006). Along with the increase in economically driven immigrants, this period witnessed a significant increase in the number of refugees, seeking asylum in the Republic of Ireland. Over a brief period, Ireland shifted from a largely white, catholic, conservative society, with a traditional bread-winner model of familial economic activity (Kennedy, 2001), to a society characterised by increasing diversity from ethnic, cultural and religious perspectives, wherein families' economic activity and social structure varied from its historical patterns. Along with this increasing diversity of family forms, more families than ever before rely on formal Early Years services for the care, early education and socialisation of young children (Pobal, 2013).

It was during this period that an inter-disciplinary group of professionals in Ballyhaunis, a town in the west of Ireland, came together to consider the needs of local families and children who were impacted by the effects of such rapid social change. They initially focused on addressing significant disadvantages faced by asylum seeking families residing in a local Direct Provision centre. Direct Provision (DP) was introduced in the Republic of Ireland in 1999 as a system where the state provides for the material needs (e.g. food, accommodation), and a small living allowance to asylum seekers. As will be shown later in this paper, DP is severely criticised by academics and in public discourse, with studies indicating resources for children and young people are severely lacking in many DP centres across Ireland. For example, Kane (2008) found children regularly lacked toys and books in DP and childcare provision was sparse across many accommodation centres. This further justifies the rationale for this study which focused on whether the childcare services fostered interculturalism, belonging and respect for diversity among children attending the services in Ballyhaunis.

The initial childcare service under study, established by the Health Service Executive (HSE) and community actors in Ballyhaunis, managed by the local family resource centre (FRC), provided respite childcare exclusively for families in DP. Realising the lack of affordable

childcare within the locale, this service expanded in 2007 with the development of a second inclusive community preschool, open to all families in the area. Together, the crèche and preschool under study provide an integrated service. This article will focus on the findings of a research project evaluation (Moran et al. 2016) of how these childcare services meet the diverse needs of the families attending them; how they operationalise interculturalism, respect for diversity and belonging through pedagogical practices and staff members' relationships with parents.

To place this article in context, recent societal change, relevant to this study, will be outlined, including economic developments, increasing inward migration of both economic migrants and those seeking asylum in Ireland, the development of the Irish childcare system and the international privileging of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) from a research perspective. Following this, the research study itself will be discussed, including the history of the services, the research methodology, the findings and their implications. The article will close by restating the key messages arising from this study, and highlighting their potential to influence Early Years provision in Ireland.

### **Developing the childcare sector in Ireland**

The economic developments in Ireland beginning in the mid-1990s placed demands on the labour market within the State. To support the expanding economy a series of policy, programme and legislative actions were initiated to encourage greater female and especially, maternal employment. The first inclusion of childcare at a strategic policy level was the *Social Partnership Agreement* of 1996 (Ireland, 1996) wherein childcare was considered from labour support and social inclusion perspectives. That same year saw the first regulations concerning childcare provision, the *Pre-School Services Regulations*, enacted under the Child Care Act, 1991 (DoHC, 1996). The *National Childcare Strategy* (NCS) (DJELR, 1999) outlined a coordinated approach to develop the infrastructure of childcare services. European funding underpinned this development: Ireland accessed €450 million under social inclusion and labour access initiatives (Langford, 2006). Reflecting international research evidence, the State developed measures to enhance provision, improve quality, and expand access to ECEC, though questions remain over the success of this agenda (Barnardos/Start Strong, 2012).

Whereas State attention to ECEC began as labour support (DJELR, 1999) ongoing developments evidenced greater awareness of the potential benefits of ECEC. The Whiate

paper, *Ready to Learn* (Department of Education and Science 1999) explored ECEC in the Irish context, making international comparisons and setting recommendations for the future development of preschool education. The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) addressed quality of provision, with '*Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*' (CECDE, 2006). This practice-based manual provides overarching themes, principles and a set of standards that 'define quality practice' and aid practitioners' understanding of and application of these measures into practice (CECDE, 2006). The revised *Pre-School Regulations (No.2)* offered greater emphasis on the early learning and developmental needs of children attending preschool services (DoHC, 2006).

Through the mid-2000s the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) conducted a series of consultations informing the development of '*Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*' (NCCA, 2009). Aistear is based on twelve principles with four themes considered central to children's early learning and development: well-being; exploring and thinking; identity and belonging; and communicating (*ibid*). Aistear recognises that children are 'competent and confident learners', drawing on contemporary sociological understanding of the child as an active agent, and catalyst for the events, experiences, and relationships in their lives (French, 2007). Aistear (NCCA 2009) promotes a curriculum approach that recognises the child as capable in leading her/his own learning, through play-based exploratory programme planning, constructing the adult as a knowledgeable, skilled professional, extending and supporting the learning experience, as a co-constructor of knowledge alongside the child.

### **International research on Early Childhood Education and Care**

The increasing focus by the Irish State on ECEC is aligned to similar privileging of preschool education in other western states (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2016). Longitudinal studies, primarily emanating from the USA, highlight potential economic benefits arising through high quality ECEC provision, particularly for children who experience a less advantageous start in life. The Perry Preschool Project and the North Carolina Abecedarian study both showed significant long-term benefits including better educational attainment, reduced criminal or anti-social behaviour, greater success in adult employment and improved long-term health in the groups of children exposed to high quality ECEC, compared to control groups (Heckman, 2008; Ramey et al, 2000; Campbell and

Ramey, 1994; Schwienhart and Weikart, 1997; 1993). Recent studies also highlight that childcare settings that promote interculturalism can substantially impact on children's social development, enabling them to internalise an appreciation for social and cultural differences (Ogletree and Larke 2010). Long-term economic analysis of ECEC show return on investment by the state at 10%, described as 'higher than the standard return on stock market equity (5.8%)' (Heckman, 2008: 309). In the UK, the Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE)<sup>1</sup> study examined the ECEC experience of over 3000 children from 1997 to 2004. The following summarises some of the main project findings:

- High quality ECEC experiences impact positively on a range of developmental areas including, social, behavioural and cognitive development;
- The impact is greatest for socially disadvantaged children, children at risk, and children with English as an additional language; outcomes improve in settings with a socio-economic mix of families attending;
- Higher 'quality' settings have the greatest impact; these are characterised by graduate level practitioners, an appropriate curriculum, practice that merges education with care in a nurturing approach;
- The pedagogical approach of such settings combines child-led and adult-led activities that value the notion of 'sustained shared thinking';
- Children fare best where the home learning environment is positively enhanced and supported through strong relationships between services and families (see Sylva et al, 2004).

Internationally, several research studies and policy documents illustrate the prioritisation of ECEC due to its potential to increase maternal employment, improve educational and social outcomes for children and offer long-term economic returns to the state (OECD, 2016; European Commission, 2014; Urban, 2011; Penn, 2011; UNICEF, 2008). Assessment of academic performance of 15 year old students by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) highlighted students who attended pre-primary education outperforming peers, who did not attend a pre-primary school setting (OECD 2011: 1). However, the 'quality' of pre-primary education and how it is delivered significantly impacts on the extent that children benefit from attending such settings (ibid).

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<sup>1</sup> The EPPE study is extremely significant as it was the first major European longitudinal study of how preschool education impacts on children's social and cognitive development between the ages of 3 and 7 years. Please see <http://www.iscfsi.bbk.ac.uk/projects/effective-provision-of-pre-school-education>, for more information on the study.

## **Migration patterns in the Republic of Ireland**

The improving economy of the early 1990s altered the gendered nature of employment patterns and reversed historic migration trends. While Irish society always experienced some degree of inward migration and ethnic diversity (Murray and Urban, 2011), the prevailing pattern had been one of net outward migration. This pattern changed significantly as labour shortage in the late 1990s created employment opportunities for new immigrants, who along with female workers supplemented the demands of the expanding economy. Tracking inward migration illustrates this change over two decades: 17,200 people immigrated to Ireland in 1987, with 44,500 immigrating in 1997 and 151,100 immigrants in 2007 (Central Statistics Office, 2015). The economic recession of the late 2000s returned Ireland to a country of net outward migration though migration to Ireland is still higher than historical levels.

The early to mid-1990s witnessed increasing numbers of asylum seekers, pursuing refuge, and protection. In 1992, 39 refugees applied for asylum in Ireland, rising to 10,325 applications in 2001 (Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner, 2001). The Refugee Status Determination process, linked to the United Nations Human Rights Commission, was the initial process of validating claims in Ireland (*ibid*); however, the Refugee Act of 1996 based responsibility with the Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform (DJELR) for the assessment of refugee claims. From 2000 onwards the management of claimants during their assessment period was carried out through the Direct Provision and Dispersal system (*ibid*), described in more depth in the next section.

### **Direct Provision: an overview**

The Direct Provision system (DP) in Ireland provides for the basic needs of asylum seekers, including accommodation, meals, health care and education for children up to the end of secondary school. DP residents receive a weekly stipend of €19.10 per adult and €15.60 per child to meet additional expenses. The DP system is delivered on behalf of the DJELR through the Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) by several private contracted businesses in the Republic of Ireland. Established originally as a method of managing the increasing numbers of asylum seekers in Ireland, the model offered rudimentary, yet unattractive basic provision, intended to quickly move people through the system (Fanning, 2002). However, DP developed into ‘a totalized institutional space’ in which asylum seekers are ‘largely excluded from meaningful participation in Irish life’ (Luibhéid, 2004: 337) for the duration of their claim period. Critiques of the system have been widespread since its initiation: it is

described as a ‘barbaric system’ (Thornton, 2007 in Ogbu et al, 2014), as ‘citizen based discrimination’ (O’Connor, 2003) and a violation of basic human rights (Breen, 2008). An independent working group, established by the DJELR, called for improvements to the DP system, the living conditions and the supports provided, to show ‘greater respect for the dignity of persons in the system and improving their quality of life’ (DJELR, 2015, pp. 12-13). Research on the impact of life within the DP system (Ogbu et al. 2014) outlines the range of stressors, including communal living arrangements, the lack of privacy, overcrowding and stress of living in confined spaces.

Concerns for children and families living in DP are well documented (Barry, 2014; Ogbu et al., 2014; Thornton, 2014). Some children have lived their entire lives exclusively in DP, due to the length of the asylum application process. The McMahon report (DJELR, 2015) states children are unable to grow up in what most would consider ‘a normal family environment’. With communal shared living spaces and meals provided by the institution, children are unlikely to have experienced a traditional family meal time, nor a parent cooking their family meal. The McMahon report (DJELR, 2015) raises concerns for children’s healthy growth and development, due to their institutionalised existence; research highlights where children face ‘adverse childhood environments’ such experiences impact on their quality of life both as children and into adulthood across a range of health, social and economic measures (Heckman, 2008).

### **Description of the study area**

This project draws on qualitative fieldwork conducted in two Early Years services managed by a family resource centre (FRC) in Ballyhaunis, Co Mayo, in the Republic of Ireland. The history of the services is unique: founded in 2005, the initial service offered respite for families’ resident in a DP centre located in the town. Recognising the limited facilities for young children, and the stress under which families were living, several relevant professionals, including representatives from the HSE, the local FRC, public health practitioners, along with DP residents, came together in 2003 concerned about the situation for families. After examining other options, the crèche facility was established on the grounds of and specifically catering for children resident in the DP centre. Due to high demand and large numbers of child-residents, access to the service was limited to two hours per week, per child, during the first years of operation.

The process of establishing this service highlighted the lack of locally available, affordable childcare in the town. In response, a second service, a community preschool, was established on the grounds of and adjacent to the local FRC, serving families resident in the DP centre, the wider community in the town and its surrounding area. The crèche continues to operate as a specialised service, offering respite and support to asylum seeking families and younger children; however, as children reach ‘preschool’ age they join the community preschool with other local children. The crèche and preschool operate an integrated service and are jointly managed by the local FRC.

Due to the uniquely diverse nature of this locality, the preschool caters to families from a broad socio-economic, ethnic, and religious mix, including settled Irish, Irish Travellers, residents of the DP centre, new immigrants as well as second generation immigrants from such countries as Pakistan, Brazil, Poland, Lithuania, amongst others. To fully understand the extent of the local diversity, 41.5% of the town population claim a nationality other than Irish; this is in comparison to the national average of 14.9% in similarly sized Irish towns (CSO, 2011). Uniquely, the town boasts Ireland’s first purpose built mosque, established in the late 1980s, indicating the diversity experienced locally has occurred in waves of immigration to the area.<sup>2</sup>

### **Research Methodology**

This research project was carried out on behalf of the funder, Tusla: The Child and Family Agency. The project took place between early 2015 to the spring of 2016 and focused on how these childcare services meet the diverse needs of the children and families who access their programmes. Among other areas, the study focused on the views of past and present service users about the quality of service offered, their opinions on how the crèche and preschool impacts on children’s wellbeing and self-confidence. Drawing on recent literature on quality of ECEC settings, we focused on participant’s opinions about the pedagogical approach of the childcare professionals, their relationships with children and parents, the extent that a participatory ethos was embedded in ways of working in the services, commitment to training and upskilling amongst staff members and educational resources available to the children. This focus on quality indicators was informed by EPPE (Sylva et al. 2004) and Hayes (2008).

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<sup>2</sup> Ballyhaunis is recognised as one of the most multicultural towns on the island of Ireland. The first wave of immigration to the area took place in the 1970s after Iman Casings, a middle Eastern businessman, established meat processing plants in the area which slaughtered in the Muslim, traditional halal manner. Thus, many people residing in the area claim a Muslim heritage and there are now second and third generation Muslim immigrant families living in the Ballyhaunis area.

The study took an ethnographic approach, facilitating periods of time spent within the community, conducting observations within the childcare services, spending time with practitioners and members of the management team within the FRC. Ethnography often involves a range of research methods, characterised by immersion in the field work setting and participant-observation (Alvesson and Skolderberg, 2009). Following in the qualitative tradition, the field work consisted of interviews with parents, past and current, with staff of the services and members of the FRC. Focus group discussions were also conducted with groups of parents and, separately, with the Early Years Practitioners. Telephone interviews were arranged with parents previously resident in the DP centre and involved in the initial establishment of the services but were no longer living locally. In seeking greater understanding of the lived experiences of those involved in the services, data was also gathered through observation of practice within the Early Years settings, focused on the way staff facilitated children's learning, the organisation and delivery of the curriculum, and practitioners' interactions with parents daily. In addition, field notes were taken while in the research environments, including the grounds of the FRC and the two ECEC services. Finally, interviews were held with 'key informants'; this group was made up of the professionals originally involved in the establishment of the services, as well as local professionals who regularly liaised with the services, such as local health and social services representatives. In total 43 parents, both current and past service users, all six members of the Early Years staff (this includes one volunteer member) and six 'key informants' took part in the research project.

Ethical considerations arose due to the vulnerability of several research participants. As the ethnographic nature of the study involved time with young children, though in the controlled environment of the ECEC services, and also involved adults who, due to their personal life circumstances, may be in vulnerable positions, the members of the research team were conscious of their responsibility to 'do no harm' through the period of their field work and in the subsequent reporting of the study. The Research Ethics committee of National University of Ireland Galway reviewed and approved the research plans, and the study was equally guided by the Child Protection Policies of the University and of the UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre, in which this project was based.

The data collected underwent thematic analysis, uniquely conducted by two project researchers. This dual analysis was conducted separately, with results later compared and analysed in tandem. The broad aim of the research project was to achieve an understanding of

the services provided and of the impact of these on all service users, inclusive of current and past parents. The findings of this study are being presented here under the following themes: the pedagogical approach taken within the settings, the professional values which underpin the services, and the role of these services in supporting families within the community.

## **Research Findings**

### *Pedagogical Approach*

Within these childcare services a culture of continuing professional development (CPD) is promoted. Along with accredited training (three staff hold minimal vocational qualifications; two staff hold degrees in ECEC) a range of other training, including anti-bias curriculum planning, working with families in crisis, implementing Síolta and Aistear, have been completed. The extent of CPD is evident in the quality of service delivery and the well thought out approach to practice. The Early Years Practitioners (EYPs) were also trained in the High/Scope approach: this model is reflected in much of the setting's organisation, though it has evolved to a more child-led approach, as the following quotes from EYPs attest:

*'normally we don't stick to the [schedule] rigidly because if the children are finished and they move on... we do it kind of at the child's level.'*

*'...everything is down at their level, the room is laid out, we try and offer as much material so that everyone can do it, we try and follow their leads...'*

As one of the EYPs expressed, their role in the setting is to support the children's learning, through play, building on their interests and extending their learning:

*'So they'll go off then and they'll do the play and they'll play for the work time; the staff are integrating with them all the time. They're supporting their needs, they try and step back.'*

Observations are key to this approach, as the lead practitioner attests:

*'They're observing, seeing what might be done for the next day for the small group time'*

The focus in these settings is not overtly 'educational' in the traditional sense; the EYPs support children to develop the skills they believe provide a strong base for further learning. These skills, as shared at interviews and focus group discussions, include social skills,

problem solving, understanding and acknowledging feelings, developing self-help skills (toileting and hygiene, managing personal belongings, self-feeding), and following direction and routines, while also contributing to planning the routines. This is all understood within the context of the service and how the EYPs respond to the children and families:

*'I suppose school is always seen as academic, it's about learning, it's about writing, reading; I just think for them [parents] to realise and I think they [parents] realise in preschool even though they are learning, it is all pre reading, pre writing the social side of things is a big key area'*

*'It's all progression and it's to see that, that's the learning. That's the learning. Socialising with somebody, talking to somebody, solving a problem; that is learning in its most basic form'*

Working in partnership with parents is another key aspect of their approach. The EYPs work in a respectful manner to explain their intentions and their aims in terms of their pedagogy, seeking to develop meaningful relationships with families, as these quotes highlight:

*'I think the idea of the academic side of it, writing, reading, knowing the numbers, recognising letters that all comes through all the play and it's actually getting parents to realise; this is the base, this is the foundation'*

In terms of the diversity of families in the community, the pedagogical focus adopted acknowledges difference as part of their day to day routine, rather than focusing on holidays or religious festivals. The service ensures ethnic, cultural and physical/ability characteristics are reflected in the environment, from books representing different family types and different cultures, to wall displays, paint and paper colours, spontaneous activities taken from where the children's interests are at the time, enhanced by conversations with the children:

*'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, you'd be saying and he's going to be back in six weeks' time which is a long, long time and we'll tell you when he's coming back.'*

*'And I don't think it's about ...when Diwali is or Hanukah is or, you know... I don't think it needs to be a big theme in the school because to me that's not integration.'*

*Integration to me is more on the ground. It's more about the two mums coming in, saying how are you, how are things?'*

'Difference' is part of their everyday planning, activities and interactions; it is taken in stride and discussed as any topic might be. The following quotes by EYPS highlights this:

*'You'd acknowledge, you'd say the difference for that.'*

*'We had a child in here with a physical disability... she would have had a walker and she would have had a PA [personal assistant]. So we would have spoken to the children then about that; they would have said can we have a go?'*

This approach highlights the respect for each member of the community and the benefit of working in partnership and being open to new understandings:

*'We can learn from every single person.'*

Conversations with parents indicate the value placed on their child's educational experiences and the contribution made by the services to their children's learning. At times parents expected a more teacher-led curriculum, however, through conversations with the EYPs, came to understand the intentions and importance of their methods. These quotes from parental focus groups and interviews support this view:

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

*'Because, yes because they learn something different every day. Day by day I see a difference you know?'*

Comments made by parents indicate the impact of the ECEC services on the children, and how the learning that occurs within the services is carried to their home environment, highlighting the connections made:

*'they will ask parents to come in, they will teach you'*

*'I think last week ... when she came into the house she was singing ... She was singing, doing this, Mummy come on let's go and do this you know? I said ok I think you learned this in the crèche now'*

While the initial focus was to provide respite for families in the DP centre, the services evolved in line with recent developments in ECEC in Ireland, focusing on quality of early learning experiences. The ‘key informants’ commented at interview that in their view, the pedagogical approach and the curriculum are of high quality:

*‘...they’ve a small group time which is excellent and the adult child interactions are brilliant and the materials they give the children to explore are well thought out, based on child observations, based on children’s interests and materials’*

*‘...again rather than being adult directed, trying to get a lot of child initiation happening’*

### *Underpinning Values*

A clear sense of the services’ underpinning values arose strongly from the interviews and focus group discussions. Data collected from EYPs and those involved in the management of the two services indicate how the manner of interactions and style of practice with both families and children evolved: care and relationship-building are privileged in the practice orientation in both settings. In addition, the services, and all those associated with them, are described as a ‘community’ wherein people have a sense of belonging and safety. And finally, staff clearly value the variety of cultures and ethnicities present within this community, constructing this as an opportunity to learn about and from each other, through respectful interactions and relationship building. The following data will highlight each of these themes, from different perspectives.

This first set of quotes from EYPS, indicate the caring ethos and the importance of relationship building:

*It’s about people getting on, is actually working together, having fun for the children in here, building relationships, real relationships. Acknowledging difference, accepting it’.*

*‘I think the kind of person that you are and the kind of staff is vital to a service. I think it is huge because the way you address people and that they address you, you can build real relationships instead of just this exchange at the door. ...actually real relationships’*

*'I do think relationships between the staff and the staff with the parents and being on a level and not talking down to them, I think that's probably...key to the whole thing'*

The next quote, from EYPs, highlights the sense of 'community' within the services, followed by a quote emphasising the valuing of diversity within the settings:

*'It needs to be seen that it's about community... It doesn't matter where you're from, you deserve the same education, the same opportunities... We're all human and this place, the preschool, is for all children.'*

*'We were in the playground today and there was an Irish child in with her grandad and it was the Syrian child, the Irish child and the Brazilian girl. They were all playing together.....they accepted her in and she was playing as well.'*

Equally, conversations with parents of the services, both past and present, demonstrate their awareness of these underpinning values. The quotes from parents, set out below, indicate their perspectives of the following:

The caring ethic which pervades the services:

*'I don't know about the others, but I feel like, oh, I am so important like, you know? They welcome parents as well, you know? They like them to feel at home... they didn't make them, like, oh just come and drop your children and just, no, they just open up, like everybody to come in and so I think it's very good'*

*'Yes they are very caring'*

And next, their own characterisation of the services as representing a 'community' for all involved:

*'Each person is on our own ... but as they come together in crèche they get to know each other'*

*'I will tell you because she made us feel as if we were part of it, she made us feel as if we were part of the community. There was no colour, there was no way she'd act different as if she was taking or teaching or running it for Irish children, no, you know'*

*she helped the children to settle in' 'Because there's no prejudice you know? They don't look at our children as asylum seeker children they look at them as children'*

And finally, how they perceive cultural difference is valued in the services:

*'So it's nice when our children can be children, they are not afraid to express themselves and play'*

*'And that difference is good I suppose as well, you know? That actually different nationalities and different people it enhances [the town] and it enhances every place really doesn't it at the end of the day. You know? ... Different ethnic backgrounds, different religious backgrounds perhaps as well'*

The values inherent in the practice approach were also remarked on during interviews with 'key informants'. It was apparent that these values were present from the time these services were envisaged:

*'Some of the parents would I think, when you get talking to them, you'll get a real feel of their satisfaction that they really belong to the service and that their children really belong there'*

*'...even coming in and out, well I'd be there when parents would be dropping off or picking up, they come right into the room, it's like it's their room and the children would show them different things'*

### *Supporting Families*

Through conversations with EYPs and management at the FRC, it was clear that the original services developed with a *family support* orientation. Family support is about 'mobilising support for children's normal development; for normal development in adverse circumstances (Gilligan, 2000, in Moran et al, 2016: 45) with this concept prevalent in the 'style of practice' present in the services. This section will briefly highlight how EYPs demonstrate this orientation in their day to day practice:

*'Sometimes as well I think just to be listened to and respected, just to be acknowledged as a person. That's how I felt that they needed to be treated and then respect their children the same way. I think that's how I felt that it was'*

The support offered through these services, takes on many forms. At times parents need advice from a trusting person, so seek guidance from the EYPs or staff at the FRC; at other times they need emotional support and a brief moment of respite; and then there are times when it is the practical, instrumental act of support that is needed. The following are quotes from EYPs:

*'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. They have a fear of a lot of the community not just the asylum seekers, a lot of the people that we're dealing with have a fear of other agencies...It's about building their knowledge'*

*'...I just think it's listening. Sometimes it's listening to somebody'*

*'Sometimes it's saying go in there and have a cup of tea and then go home, take five minutes. That's it. Sometimes that's all it is. And sometimes that's all the parents need'*

The following statement strongly reflects the strengths-based approach, central to working from a family support orientation. It captures not only how this ethos underpins the services' central philosophy, but is an emotional trigger for the EYP in this interview:

*'I'm trying to give them the support they need without them asking for it because they might feel like a failure or they're not doing their best. Every parent I believe that comes in, every parent, even children that we've had in here that have been through child protection, I really do believe every parent tries to do the best for their kids. Every single parent. They might not see it because they're so stuck in the middle of something; I'm so emotional! They might not see it because they're stuck in the middle of it themselves but I do believe that they are doing the best at that point for their child'*

## **Discussion**

As demonstrated from evidence arising from this study, these Early Years services have a well thought out approach to the curriculum that is offered in the two services. Based on the well-researched High/Scope model, the EYPs have adapted this to better reflect prevailing policy and practice expectations within the Irish context, as well as to respond to the needs of the children and families attending. Aistear's themes of well-being; exploring and thinking; identity and belonging; and communicating (NCCA, 2009) are clearly reflected in the pedagogical approach; EYPs provide a balance of child-led and adult-initiated activities; they

draw on children's interests to extend their learning, offering flexible daily routines that accommodate spontaneous developments. Reflecting many of the findings of the EPPE study (Sylva et al, 2004), in particular there is clearly a privileging of both care and education within these settings, demonstrated in how the EYPs interact with the children and equally extending to the manner in which parents and practitioners interact. Parents report feeling welcomed, respected, being offered support and encouragement, with the services perceived as a source of information and respite to aid them in their parenting role.

Originating as a response to the conditions in the DP centre, the values that pervaded those early days remain evident in the services today. The privileging of care, the valuing of the community created within the services, and the respect that is accorded to all families and children who are involved in the settings, arose strongly out of the shared narratives. These views were expressed by the staff, by parents and by the key informants. It is apparent that the varied and diverse cultural, religious and ethnic make-up of the community is perceived as a strength of the service and an element from which they all benefit.

Many of the parents involved in the research shared the genuineness they sensed the EYPs engaged with them; this was equally discussed by the EYPs themselves. Developing genuine relationships was constructed as a practice imperative, underpinning their ability to work with families in a supportive manner. The establishment of caring relationships opens the door for families to trust the EYPs in matters related to their child's development and well-being, and to their recommendations of accessing additional supportive services. Participants recount a variety of support offered, from advice, to emotional and instrumental support. At times parents need little more than a supportive friend, a place to take some time, a cup of tea, and they feel ready to go on. Such acts of esteem and solidarity can be invaluable for those who feel otherwise isolated in the broader society.

As highlighted in the findings, the EYPs and FRC staff are considered trusted actors by many parents within the community; for some, they may be the only professionals families feel they can turn to at times of distress. The staff often act as a go-between, liaising with other services, taking that first step with families, demystifying what services are available and the manner in which families will interact with them. For families new to Ireland, families with limited English, families who feel marginalised, the importance of this social support role should not be underestimated.

There is a robust corpus of literature related to the long term benefits of quality ECEC experiences for children, and this is particularly striking for disadvantaged children. Work by Heckman (2008) to evaluate the benefits of such services, highlights the impact of ‘adverse childhood environments’ can be life-long if measures are not taken to effect change for such children. The Early Years services evaluated through this research fit within the scope of such preventative measures, offering quality early learning experiences for children, supportive relationships with families, with the learning that occurs within the settings impacting on the home environment, as evidenced by parents’ narratives (Sylva et al, 2008). There is a sense from families that children are well prepared for formal school, with reports from past parents supporting this perspective. The benefits of high quality ECEC are most striking for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and for children with English as an additional language (Sylva et al, 2004; Heckman 2008). These services cater to a highly diverse cohort of families, with many families having little or no English, with some experiencing deprivation and social exclusion, including those families living in Direct Provision. Whereas the scope of the services was such that one could not expect it to ameliorate the structural, systematic and daily challenges posed by a life in DP (Moran et al 2017); however, it demonstrates how an organisation can model good practice and impact on the wellbeing and development of children and families within these difficult circumstances. Many parents perceive the ECEC settings as a safe place, a place that welcomes them in; for the families and children involved in this study, this is a crucial support.

This study and article focused on a locally-based integrated pair of Early Years services situated within a particularly unique locale. Extending this study to examine ECEC provision across a larger number of services has the potential to offer greater insight into the role of ECEC in supporting families, building community and enhancing inclusion. Such extended research may contribute to increased understanding of the potential of Early Years, broader than the prevailing educational and labour-support privileging of ECEC in current State policy.

## **Conclusion**

The messages arising from this research project offer great insight into the Early Childhood Education and Care sector, demonstrating the potential for such settings to meet the needs of children and their families from diverse backgrounds. What has been achieved by these services stands as an exemplar for other ECEC services, particularly those within the

community sector. Situated within a highly diverse context, these services are also working with some of the most economically and socially marginalised families in Irish society. Research evidence highlights that it is these children and families that benefit most from high quality ECEC; therefore, the State should be cognisant of the service model developed in these settings. There are a number of characteristics that can be replicated across the sector, including: a clearly articulated philosophy, valuing diversity, respecting all families and children; this philosophy is 'lived' within the settings, underpinning the approach to practice of staff and management; continuing relevant professional development and a professional approach to practice is promoted; a well-developed and thoughtful pedagogy, privileging care and creating community, adapts to the needs of the children attending; and finally, a strengths based approach to working in partnership with families.

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