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A Problem-Based Learning Approach to Continuing Professional Education for Pre-School Officers in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector in Ireland: Rationale and Curriculum Design

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A PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING APPROACH TO CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION FOR PRE-SCHOOL OFFICERS IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION SECTOR IN IRELAND: RATIONALE AND CURRICULUM DESIGN

by

Maresa Duignan

A thesis submitted to the Dublin Institute of Technology in part fulfilment of the requirements for award of Masters (M.A.) in Third Level Learning and Teaching.

June 2003

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DIT Learning & Teaching Centre, Directorate of Academic Affairs

Declaration

I hereby certify that the material which is submitted in this thesis towards award of the **Masters (M.A.) in Third Level Learning and Teaching** is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for any academic assessment other that part-fulfilment of the award named above.

Signature of candidate..

Date...

ABSTRACT

This study explores the potential of Problem–based Learning (PBL) as a teaching and learning strategy and curriculum design, in a continuing professional education course for a group of Pre-School Officers in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector in Ireland. A rationale for the adoption of PBL is presented. This rationale is based on the symmetry between PBL as a teaching and learning strategy and the professional practice model of the ECCE sector in Ireland. It is also grounded in the correspondence between established criteria for effective continuing professional education and PBL theory and practice.

A qualitative research design is employed to ascertain the continuing professional education needs of the Pre-School officers. Focus group data reveals that Pre-School Officers require continuing professional education that will enable them to meet the challenges of rapid change and development that characterises the ECCE sector in Ireland. The practice narratives of the participants are used to develop a sample Problem-based Learning curriculum to meet their expressed continuing professional education needs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Glossary of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Terms

After-school and Out-of-School Care: this refers to care provided for school-going children outside of school hours, including after-school hours and during school holidays.

Childminders: these are private individuals who provide care for children predominantly in their own [minder's] home, providing full day, part-time and after-school care to children of a wide variety of ages.

Continuing Professional Education (CPE): education and training undertaken post initial professional education.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE): Day-care facilities and services for pre-school children and school-going children out-of-school hours.

ECCE Practitioner: In this study this term refers to adults who work in the Early Childhood Care and Education sector, including Pre-School Officers.

ECCE sector: refers to practitioners, stakeholders, community and voluntary organisations, statutory and non-statutory bodies and support, education and training organisations. *(NCCC 2002:5)*

Early Start Programme: this is a programme aimed at pre-school children in disadvantaged areas aged three to 4 years.

Infant Classes in Primary Schools: these are the first two years of primary school education and are usually comprised of 4, 5 and 6 year olds. This category also includes the small number of special infant classes that cater for children with special learning needs that are attached to some ordinary primary schools. (In Ireland Primary schools are also frequently referred to as National Schools)

Naionrai: these provide pre-school education through the medium of Irish and cater for children aged 3 to 6 years.

Nurseries and Crèches: these typically provide full day services and many cater for children from 2 to 3 months up to school-going age. In addition, many of these provide after-school care for children of school going age.

Parent and Toddler Groups: typically these cater for children from birth to 3 years, are attached to other childcare services such as pre-schools or crèches and offer opportunities for play for children and social interaction and informal support to parents.

Play Groups and Pre-schools: these usually provide sessional services (that is, less than three hours per child per day) for children aged from 3 to 4 or 5 years.

Pre-School for Travellers: these cater for pre-school children from the Traveller Community.

Special Schools: this refers to schools that cater exclusively for children with learning and/or physical disabilities.

Abbreviations

ADM	Area Development Management Ltd
CBS	Certifying Bodies Subgroup
CCC	County Childcare Committee
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
CPE	Continuing Professional Education
CSER	Centre for Social and Educational Research
DES	Department of Education and Science
DHC	Department of Health and Children
DOH	Department of Health
DIT	Dublin Institute of Technology
DJELR	Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
DSFA	Department of Social and Family Affairs
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECTS	European Credit Transfer System
EOCP	Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme
FAS	Foras Áiseanna Saothair
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
IPPA	Irish Pre-School Playgroups Association

ISPCC	Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
NAPS	National Anti-Poverty Strategy
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCCC	National Co-ordinating Childcare Committee
NCNA	National Children's Nurseries Association
NCO	National Children's Office
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
NCVA	National Council for Vocational Awards (now FETAC)
NVCO	National Voluntary Childcare Organisations
UN	United Nations

CHAPTER 1   INTRODUCTION

"To be able to ask a question clearly is two-thirds of the way to getting it answered." –
John Ruskin

1.1   Introduction

This chapter outlines briefly the main factors that influenced my decision to embark on this
particular learning journey:

- Personal motivation including my pedagogical stance

- My view that the professional education of adults working in the early childhood
  care and education (ECCE) sector should model and support effective practice
  with young children.

- The challenges for professional education presented by the rapid pace of change in the
  Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector in Ireland.

- The potential of Problem-based Learning (PBL) to meet the needs of professional
  education of ECCE practitioners.

It also provides a short synopsis of the structure and content of the study.

1.2   Personal motivation

I have spent the vast majority of my life engaged in education. In recent times I have been
fortunate to have been involved in research in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)
sector towards the development of education, training and professional development
programmes. This research spanned a period of over seven years, and was thoroughly embedded
in extensive consultation with all stakeholders in the ECCE sector in Ireland. My role in this
process, combined with my experience as a teacher of young children and adults, has convinced
me of the necessity for methods of teaching and research that promote the active involvement of
the learner in terms of questioning and inquiry. My own personal stance in relation to education
is strongly influenced by the pedagogy of ECCE, which is grounded in constructivism (Piaget,
1952, Vygotsky, 1978, Bruner, 1990). I ascribe to the social constructivist perspective of

education and hold the view that knowledge is created through interaction with our environment. I have been motivated to pursue this study because of the difference I have experienced between the espoused methods in ECCE practice with young children and the methods employed in professional education courses for ECCE practitioners. My view is that in order to implement a constructivist approach to early education we must experience it ourselves in our professional education and training.

1.3 The symmetry between early learning and adult learning theory and practice

Didactic methodologies have long been discredited in the early childhood field. A similar trend is evident in the field of adult and continuing education. In both cases pedagogical approaches are espoused which are learner centred not teacher centred, support the development of independent learning, and critical thinking and which cast the teacher in the role of facilitator of learning rather than instructor. However, both these educational domains are traditionally considered to exist outside the parameters of the so-called 'formal' education system, which has been much slower in realising the benefits of such pedagogies. The challenge is to ensure that there is continuity between these two extremes of the 'lifelong learning' continuum. This study attempts to begin to redress this situation. The ECCE sector in Ireland is a rich seedbed for the cultivation of learner centred approaches to education and training. Discourse and debate on the complex issues of quality in ECCE, which has been in train for many years amongst ECCE practitioners, policymakers, parents and indeed children themselves, has created an environment of critical dialogue characterised by openness to change. Addressing the continuing professional education needs of established, experienced professional practitioners in the ECCE sector such as Pre-School Officers, who are charged with the regulation of Pre-School services, is a key element in ensuring that change will have immediate impact.

1.4 The challenge of change in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland

The ECCE sector in Ireland is in the midst of a process of major change, growth and development. Regulation of Pre-School services was introduced for the first time in the 1991 Childcare Act and commenced in 1997. (DOH, 1997). In my view and in the context of the rapid pace of change in the ECCE sector in Ireland, the relationship between inspection and practice is analogous to that of assessment and learning i.e. the former driving the latter. In such an environment it is imperative that highly trained professional practitioners mediate regulation and inspection and that these practitioners receive continuous professional education and

support to enable them to incorporate the developing discourse on quality provision into their professional practice.

Education, training and professional development has been identified as one of the key pillars which must support the development of the ECCE sector. (DJELR, 1999, DES, 1999, NCCC, 2002). The opportunities offered by the dynamic nature of ECCE in Ireland include a chance to re-evaluate the pedagogical approaches taken to the education, training and professional development of ECCE practitioners. This study has been designed to explore this issue with one small but highly significant group of practitioners within the ECCE sector, namely Pre-School Officers. It examines the potential of Problem-based Learning (PBL) in this regard and offers a theoretical basis for future developments.

1.5 What is Problem-based Learning?

Problem-based Learning has been defined as a '..*total approach to education.*' (Barrows 1985) It is a teaching and learning strategy and a curriculum design. It simultaneously develops higher order thinking and disciplinary knowledge bases and skills. It places students in the active role of problem solvers and confronts them with a situation that reflects the real world. Learners engage with this real world scenario first in the learning process and it is by working through the challenges presented by the scenario that learning occurs. Figure 1 below outlines the difference between subject-based learning and Problem based Learning.

Figure 1: Subject-based Learning vs. Problem-based Learning

Problem-based Learning

START

Apply it

Learn it

Problem posed

Identify what we
need to know

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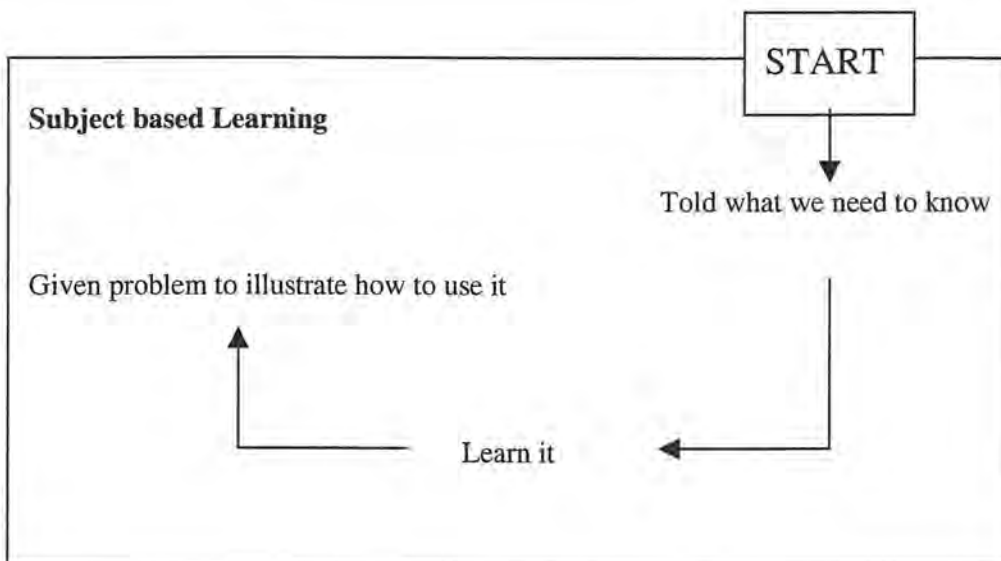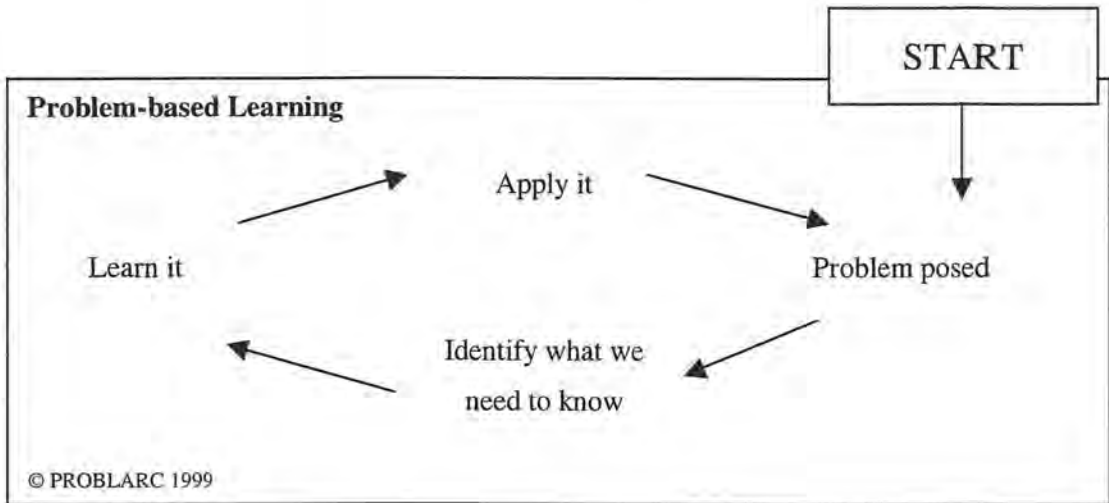
The key characteristics of Problem-based Learning are that it:

- *Is context based using "real-life" situations*
- *Focuses on thinking skills (problem solving, analysis, decision-making, critical thinking.*
- *Requires integration of interdisciplinary knowledge/skills/behaviours.*
- *Is self directed and develops lifelong learning skills*
- *Is shared in small groups.*

(Conway, 2002:5)

The learning process can be portrayed in the PBL activity cycle shown in Figure 2 below.

The argument that is developed in this study is that PBL is an appropriate methodology for the development and delivery of a continuing professional education (CPE) course for Pre-School Officers. Preliminary investigation of PBL literature indicates that there is very little research evidence on PBL in the field of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). This study therefore has been designed to apply PBL to this subject matter and thus begin to address this gap in the research literature. It will contribute to the body of knowledge that underpins both Early Childhood Care and Education and Problem-based Learning.

Figure 2: PBL – A Teaching and Learning Strategy
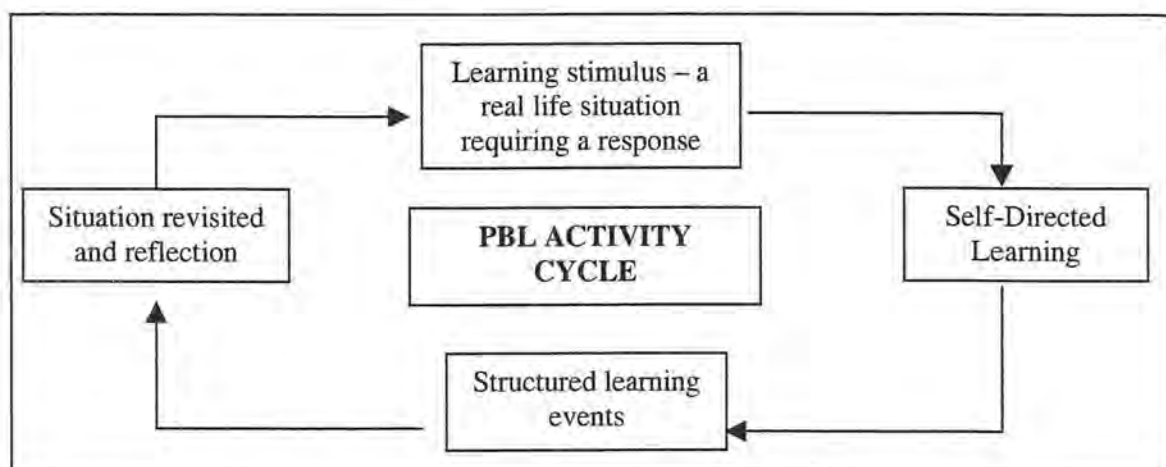
(Source: Conway, 2002) © PROBLARC 2000

1.6   Outline of chapters

Chapter Two details the context and rationale for the study. It outlines the aims, objectives and anticipated outcomes of the study and considers related ethical issues and strategies for dealing with them. Finally it introduces the theoretical perspective, which has informed the study.

Chapter Three incorporates a review of the literature pertinent to the study. From this review, core arguments are proposed as the rationale for PBL in the continuing professional education of Pre-School Officers

Chapter Four considers the research methods employed in this study and considers the methodology in detail. These methods included a focus group with Pre-School Officers to establish continuing professional education needs and also to elicit practice narratives, which would contribute to the development of the problem scenarios that are at the heart of the PBL curriculum. It also outlines the qualitative approach taken to data analysis.

Chapter Five presents the findings of the research. In keeping with the qualitative nature of the study, the findings are presented in a narrative style, foregrounding the voices of the participants.

Chapter Six presents the conclusions and recommendations of the study. A key recommendation is presented in the form of a sample PBL curriculum for a short CPE course for Pre-School Officers. Recommendations are also made regarding further research and development work that have been indicated as a result of this study.

CHAPTER 2   CONTEXT, RATIONALE, AIMS AND OBJECTIVES, THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE RESEARCH ETHICS

2.1   Introduction

This chapter seeks to convey the perspective of this study. To achieve this, the following issues are addressed:

- The context of the study, focusing in particular on the nature of the practice environment of the Pre-School Officers.

- The rationale for the study

- The theoretical perspective

- The ethical perspective

- The chapter will culminate in the statement of aims, objectives and anticipated outcomes of the study.

2.2   What is the domain of practice of Pre-School Officers in Ireland?

This section explores the nature of the practice environment in which the Pre-School Officers are currently working and highlights some of the unique social, historical and cultural influences that have shaped this environment.

2.2.1   What is Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Ireland?

In Ireland it is widely accepted that the age range birth to six years constitutes early childhood. This acceptance is reinforced by the fact that the compulsory age for commencement of primary education is six years. The term 'Early Childhood Care and Education' has emerged in Ireland to describe a broad range of services for children in this age range and their families. Official definitions relating to this term can be found for example in the 'National Childcare Strategy Report of the Expert Working Group on Childcare, which defines childcare as:

> *...day-care facilities and services for pre-school children and school-going children out-of-school hours. It includes services offering care, education and socialisation opportunities for children to the benefit of children, parents, employers and the wider community. Thus, services such as pre-schools,*

naionrai [Irish language pre-schools], day-care services, crèches, play groups,
child minding and after-school groups are included, but schools (primary,
secondary and special) and residential centres for children are excluded."

(DJELR, 1999:xxii)

This definition articulates the inextricable relationship between care and education, which is a central theme in all major policy documents published in relation to ECCE in Ireland in the past decade. It also reflects the scope of practice (except childminders) of the Pre-School Officers whose work is at the centre of this study. Early education provision in schools is regulated and inspected separately by the Department of Education and Science.

Importantly, the above definition was endorsed in *'Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning: Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development of the Early Childhood Care and Education sector in Ireland'* (National Coordinating Childcare Committee (NCCC), (2002). In this publication, the ECCE sector is described as comprising of *'practitioners, stakeholders, community and voluntary organisations, statutory and non-statutory bodies and support, education and training organisations.' (NCCC, 2002 p. 5).*

In Ireland, adults working with young children identify themselves using a broad range of titles e.g. play leader, stiúrthóir, childcare worker, teacher. This diversity reflects the unique historical and cultural influences that have impacted on the ECCE sector in Ireland. In the 'Model Framework' document, cited above, the term practitioner was adopted as an acceptable generic term. This term is used in this report to refer to all those who work within the ECCE sector, including Pre-School Officers.

As the above terms and definitions have been developed as a result of extensive and lengthy consultation with a broad range of stakeholders in the ECCE sector in Ireland (NCCC, 2002, DJELR, 1999) they will be used throughout this report.

2.2.1 Early Childhood Care and Education provision

Ireland is a sovereign nation with a constitution. This constitution provides evidence of the historically strong relationship between the Catholic Church and the State. This relationship has had a direct impact on provision of ECCE because it has undoubtedly influenced the stance taken in the constitution towards the family:

> *The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit*
> *group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and*
> *imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law. The State,*

therefore, guarantees to protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as
the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the
Nation and the State

(Government of Ireland, 1999a, Articles 41.1. and 41.1.2).

This declaration affords the family a degree of privacy and protection that has been interpreted as superseding the rights of its individual members, including children. (DES, 2002)

The significance of these articles to the ECCE sector is that for many decades, they were used by the State to defend its minimalist role in ECCE provision. The traditionally low level of State intervention has heavily influenced the profile of the ECCE sector in Ireland. State intervention has also been, and remains divided between care/welfare and education. Until the late 1990s, support to childcare came mainly from the Department of Health through Health Boards. The majority of this support was provided to a limited number of community-based services catering for children at risk and in need of protection that were referred by the health services. Pre-school education initiatives funded by the Department of Education and Science also tended to be small scale and targeted at mediating educational disadvantage and social exclusion, e.g. Rutland Street Project, the Early Start Project and Traveller Pre-Schools. (DES, 1999)

The majority of provision in the ECCE sector in Ireland has been developed through the effort of parents, families and community and voluntary organisations. In many cases local needs and issues were the impetus for the establishment of a service. This has resulted in huge diversity in the scope and nature of provision. Many services were founded on well-established educational models e.g. Steiner, Montessori and Highscope. Others were developed by parents (primarily mothers) as support mechanisms for themselves and their children e.g. playgroups and Mother and Toddler groups. There were also those developed in response to the needs of working parents e.g. crèches and childminding. All of this development work was accomplished in a depressed economic climate and was largely dependant on the voluntary commitment of practitioners to ensure the growth in both the quantity and quality of service provision. (DJELR, 1999, DES, 1999, NCCC 2002). Organisations, such as the National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA), Irish Pre-School Playgroups Association (IPPA) - the Early Childhood Organisation, Childminding Ireland, An Comhcoiste Reamhscolaiochta Teo, Barnardo's, St. Nicholas' Montessori Teachers Association, The Steiner Association, Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC) and Children in Hospital, effectively acting as advocates for the needs and rights of children and their families and in doing so promoting and

developing both provision and good practice through education, training, policy development and research. (IPPA, 2002, NCNA, 1998, Carswell, 2002, French, 2003)

Service provision in Ireland is difficult to quantify accurately due to the absence of comprehensive national data, (CECDE, forthcoming) however the range of provision generally falls into one of the following categories:

- Centre based full day care
- Centre based sessional (up to 3.5 hours)
- Childminding (either in the child's or childminder's home)
- Special needs provision (both full day and sessional)
- Parent and Toddler groups

The diversity that characterised the ECCE sector in the early days of its formation is still present. In addition to the purpose of the services and their philosophical bases, diversity is manifest in many pragmatic ways. For example the physical settings the services occupy, from the local community hall to state of the art purpose-built facilities. The qualifications of those delivering services also vary widely and include third level graduates and postgraduates as well as those with no formal qualifications.

The diverse nature of ECCE provision in Ireland has many positive benefits to offer not least of which is the availability of a rich pool of expertise in catering for young children's needs. However, this diversity also presents major challenges for those charged with the task of monitoring and regulating the ECCE sector. These challenges must be met with professionalism, openness, sensitivity and understanding. These are skills, which must be continually developed and enhanced through appropriate continuing professional development programs.

2.2.2 Early Childhood Care and Education policy

Tangible evidence of the minimal nature of State involvement in ECCE service provision is apparent when the development of national policy is examined. In 1991, the Childcare Act was passed. This legislation supplanted the 1908 Children's Act, which pre-dated the foundation of the Irish State. Part VII of the Childcare Act (1991), which deals with early childhood care and education services, was the result of a slow but steady growth, during the 1980's, of awareness and understanding of the importance of ECCE. This growth was primarily attributable to the efforts of non-government organisations and community and voluntary organisations that were

motivated by a desire to improve the well-being and education of all children in Ireland. However, it was not until national scandals regarding institutional child abuse came to the fore in the early 1990's and the pace of economic growth stimulated the labour market that a real efflorescence of policy developments occurred.

Even with the advent of legislation, the Government was slow to initiate the necessary and recommended changes in the ECCE sector. This is evidenced particularly well in the case of statutory regulation of the ECCE sector. Although the Childcare Act was passed in 1991, which allowed for the introduction of statutory regulation of the ECCE sector, the regulations themselves (Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, (1996), Child Care (Pre-School Services) (Amendment) Regulations, 1997) were not actually commenced until the very end of 1996. The commencement of these regulations provided for the establishment of the Pre-School Inspectorate.

Increased attention to the ECCE sector in the 1990's, which resulted in major policy documents and related initiatives can be linked to four key factors. The first already alluded to, is the fact that Ireland experienced unprecedented economic growth during this decade. Labour force demands required increased participation by women in the workforce and childcare was recognised as a central pillar to support this (Government of Ireland, 1997). Secondly Ireland was under pressure from the European Union to address gender imbalance in the workforce and again childcare was a key element in achieving equality of opportunity and participation for women. Thirdly, the importance of ECCE for children, especially in preventing educational disadvantage and promoting social inclusion, was being reinforced by national and international literature. (Kellaghan & Greaney, 1992, Woodhead, 1996, Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997). Finally, the international recognition of children's rights was endorsed in Ireland with the ratification in 1992 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. (United Nations, 1989).

All these factors have equality as a common denominator but have driven quite separate agenda in policy development. The first agenda is mainly concerned with economic growth and development and the latter with protection and support for children.

Driven by these separate agendas, a number of fora were established in the late 1990's to develop policy recommendations that would address these issues. (e.g. Expert Working Group on Childcare, 1998, National Forum for Early Education, 1998) They resulted in a raft of publications and stimulated the institutional change, which has led to the current state of ECCE services in Ireland today. It is worth noting here that although the agenda for these

developments did have different foci, the participants were largely drawn from the same pool of expertise. It is arguable that participation in these fora provided a catalyst for the development of a sense of professional identity for ECCE practitioners, through the opportunity they presented for the discussion and debate of key concepts and issues underpinning professional practice. It is certainly apparent that these are common themes that unite all the publications and initiatives, which continue to be debated and inform the 'emergent professionalism' of the ECCE sector.

The major policy documents and initiatives that have emerged from these fora include:

- National Agreements: Partnership 2000 (1997) and Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (1999)
- Strengthening Families for Life: Report of the Commission on the Family. (1998)
- The National Childcare Strategy – Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare. (1999)
- Ready to Learn - White Paper on Early Childhood Education, (1999)
- The National Development Plan, 2000-2006
- Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme
- Our Children – Their Lives: National Children's Strategy. (2000)
- The Programme for Government (2002)
- Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector in Ireland. (NCCC, 2002)

This is not a comprehensive list, however it does represent the key policies, which practitioners in the ECCE sector such as the Pre-School Officers, need to be aware of, implement and/or to which they must respond.

2.2.2.1 The National Childcare Strategy – Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare. (1999)

This group was established as a result of Partnership 2000, and coordinated by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and undertook to systematically review the provision of childcare in Ireland. It gathered together a broad range of stakeholders in the ECCE sector and was the catalyst for wide ranging consultation. The terms of reference of the Expert Working Group were guided by the agenda of economic development and in particular labour force participation by parents. The Expert Working Group reported in 1999 and made twenty-seven

recommendations, which addressed notification and registration, staffing and employment procedures, training and pay, supporting and stimulating both the supply of and demand for childcare, and the structures and procedures necessary to implement and support the overall strategy. In addition to the recommendations, the importance of this report lies in the fact that it represented the first efforts to establish national coordination and cohesion in both policy and practice terms, of the childcare sector. Its relevance to the practice of Pre-School Officers is the fact that it has informed and indeed provided the rationale for many of the development initiatives in the ECCE sector in recent years.

2.2.2.2 Ready to Learn - White Paper on Early Childhood Education, (1999)

The publication of the White paper represented the culmination of a process of debate and consultation, which was initiated by the National Forum on Early Education, which was held over one week in March 1998. The report of this forum, which was published later that same year, represented submissions from thirty-two separate interest groups from the ECCE sector and was the first comprehensive, dedicated account of early education published in Ireland. Recommendations in the White Paper are related to the overall objective to:

> *Support the development and educational achievement of children through high quality early education, with particular focus on the target groups of the disadvantaged and those with special needs*

> *(DES, 1999:14)*

A key significance of this document to Pre-School Officers lies in its identification of the need for a quality framework for the promotion and development of early education provision for all children across all settings in the birth to six years age range. This quality framework includes the development of a Quality in Education (QE) mark that will be applicable to all settings that provide early education services for children in the birth to six years age range. Of particular relevance to the Pre-School Officers is the description of a proposed inspection system that will implement the QE mark. It is recommended that the system build on the existing inspection services established by the Department of Health. However whilst the necessity of expertise in public health is acknowledged, additional expertise in the area of early education will also be required for the implementation of the QE mark. (DES, 1999:121). The White paper recommends a single inspection system, with a single person qualified in both areas of expertise carrying out inspections as the ideal '...*to ensure a rapid and responsive inspection system,*

which in turn would enhance the level of care and protection available for young children'. (Des 1999:122). It is acknowledged that such a system would require consultation between the Health Boards and the Department of Education and that *'the use of a single person system will require the provision of training in both public health and early education.'* (ibid). The role of this new inspection service is also outlined in the White paper and of note is the acknowledgement of the importance of the support and advisory role that it would fulfil. *'Thus in addition to their inspection role, inspectors will be available to support providers and suggest ways of remedying deficiencies.'* (DES, 1999:123). This policy is not envisaged to take place without extensive preparation in the form of consultation at many levels from policy makers to service providers and this is likely to take a significant amount of time to accomplish. However, regardless of how far into the future this policy is realised, it does contain considerable implications for the continuing professional education of Pre-School Officers.

2.2.2.3   The National Development Plan 2000-2006 Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme

The National Development Plan (NDP) (Government of Ireland, 1999b) is the Government's strategic blueprint for investment in the period 2000–2006. It has five operational programmes, one of which, the Employment and Human Resources Development Operational Programme (EHRDOP), deals with investment in labour force development and human capital needs. It is under this banner that the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) was established in 2000. This initiative, which is funded both by exchequer and European Social Funds (ESF), committed substantial funds (€ 436.7 million). It has three objectives: to enhance the quality of childcare, to increase the number of childcare facilities and childcare places, and to introduce a co-ordinated approach to the delivery of childcare services. This initiative has made a major impact on the development of the ECCE sector in Ireland and was responsible for the development of a coordinating infrastructure designed to ensure, for the first time in Ireland, the development and implementation of cohesive strategies at local and national levels.

The Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform (DJELR) was assigned responsibility for the EOCP and has established a Childcare Directorate in its Equality division to assume this responsibility. This Directorate in turn represents the Government interest in a number of structures which have been set up to fulfil the objectives of the EOCP (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Structures in the ECCE sector

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                                                                       │
│  ┌──────────────────────────┐         ┌──────────────────────────┐  │
│  │ Department of Justice,    │         │   Interdepartmental      │  │
│  │ Equality and Law Reform – │         │                          │  │
│  │ Childcare Directorate     │         │   Synergies Group        │  │
│  └──────────────────────────┘         └──────────────────────────┘  │
│                                                                       │
│                    ┌──────────────────────────┐                      │
│                    │  National Coordinating    │                     │
│                    │  Childcare Committee       │                     │
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│                    │   County Childcare        │                     │
│                    │   Committees              │                      │
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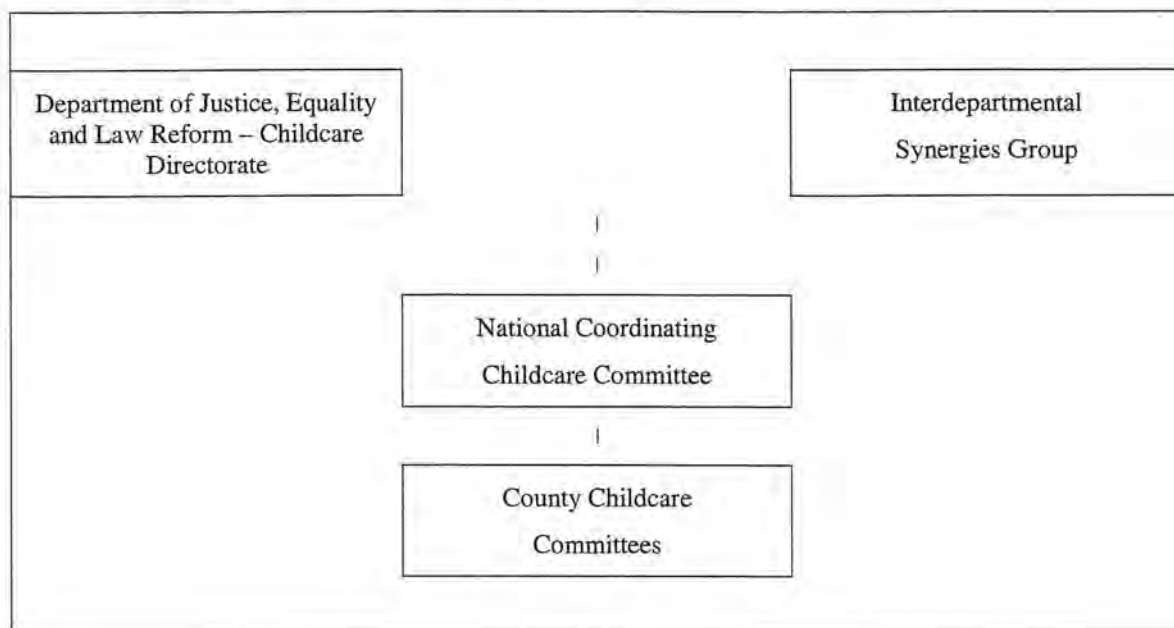
The Interdepartmental Synergies Group is comprised of representatives of the various Government departments and State agencies with an interest in childcare. It is intended that this group will ensure that there is cohesion across policy initiatives with respect to ECCE. The membership of both the national and county committees is made up of representatives of the statutory and non-statutory sectors, the social partners and the nine National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCO). The EOCP now plays a pivotal role in the development of professional practice in the ECCE sector.

2.2.2.4   Our Children – Their Lives: National Children's Strategy. (2000)

This landmark policy document was published in November 2000 after a lengthy and comprehensive consultation process that included stakeholders involved in the welfare and well-being of children and children themselves. It represents Ireland's national response to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and reflects the perspectives of that document in its goals and objectives. A key aspect of the Strategy is the 'whole child perspective', which articulates strongly the need for cohesion and continuity in services for children across the entire span of childhood (0-18 years). In relation to Early Childhood, Objective A, which states that "*Children's early education and development needs will be met through quality childcare services and family-*

friendly employment measures" (p.50) reiterates the interdependent relationship between care and education and exhorts policymakers to place children's needs at the centre of future policy development. This document will play a significant role in the development of policy in respect of children and children's services in the future and as such is of major relevance to the professional education and development of practitioners in the ECCE sector.

2.2.3 Summary

This brief review of policy has been included to highlight the pace of change that has taken place in respect of Early Childhood Care and Education provision in Ireland. The absence of State intervention and provision outside the formal school setting, predicated against the development of infrastructure and expertise necessary to the optimal growth and development of the ECCE sector in Ireland. This has presented particular challenges for the Pre-School Inspectorate, which has effectively had to break new ground since their establishment in 1997.

The common themes that appear in all these policy documents have emerged from partnership, consultation and consensus and therefore represent core issues, which are likely to re-emerge in all future development processes. Examples of these themes are:

- The necessity for increased level of State involvement in supporting the provision of high quality ECCE service for children.

- The importance of a coordinated approach to the provision of services

- The need to take a child-centred perspective to the development of policy initiatives

- Recognition of parents and families as the primary educators of children and essential partners in the provision of services

- The necessity of professional education and training for all those working with children and families

Common themes are also apparent in State funded initiatives, e.g.:

- Emphasis on equality agenda

- Development of labour force

- Focus on alleviating disadvantage

Unquestionable the ECCE sector is engaged in a dynamic process of change. Management of change must include some element of education and training to support and develop the skills and knowledge of those involved in the implementation process. (Betts, 2000).

Continuing professional education (CPE) for all those working in the ECCE sector is the vehicle through which new ideas can be incorporated into the practice arena. It must play a central role in the management of the process of change that is being stimulated by the implementation of new or changing policy.

2.3   Rationale for the study

The changing and dynamic nature of the ECCE sector in Ireland is in itself a strong argument for the development of continuing professional education (CPE) of ECCE practitioners. This study focuses specifically on the CPE of one distinct group of practitioners – Pre-School Officers. This group was chosen because they had already recognised that their role was changing from the initial brief they had received.

2.3.1   The demand for continuing professional education from Pre-School Officers.

From an almost 'standing start' the State's role in developing, supporting and regulating ECCE service provision has increased at a dramatic rate. Whilst necessary and welcome, this has presented many challenges for those charged with implementing these functions, not least of which has been the education, training and professional development of personnel. It is within this context that the current study is taking place. The Pre-School Inspectorate is one of these key groups of practitioners who have been charged with implementing State involvement in the ECCE sector. It is imperative therefore that their practice is informed by a sound understanding of all the challenges of the practice environment and that they are equipped with a broad range of skills and knowledge which will allow them to fulfil the critical role that they will undoubtedly have to play in the future development of this emergent profession.

Eight regional Health Boards carry out the management of health services in Ireland. Each of these operates autonomously and there is very little conjoint working between them. The Pre-School Inspectorate in each of these Health board areas was established independently in 1997/1998. Inspection teams were formed which comprised a Public Health Nurse and Environmental Health Officer. In one case, a steering committee was also established to support the work of the inspection teams, (Mid Western Health Board, 1999), however, very limited

documentary evidence is available to establish if this is mirrored in other Health Board areas. There is little evidence that any specialised training was offered to the newly recruited Pre-School Officers; despite the fact that it is acknowledged by at least one Health Board that continuing education is vital in maintaining professional expertise:

> *The Board is committed to continuing education and lifelong learning, which enables staff to improve their performance and professional competence. In this regard the Board encourages staff to seek opportunities for their own development. In addition the Board provides education and training opportunities for staff on a regional basis. The Boards Education and Training Guidelines sets out the range of support available for staff undertaking further education.*

> *(North Eastern Health Board, 1998)*

In 2001, a group of Pre-School Officers approached the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and requested assistance in developing a continuing professional education (CPE) course to assist them in fulfilling their role. They articulated that the role of Pre-school Officer had in fact developed beyond their initial job expectations and as a result they felt that their existing skills and knowledge were not equipping them adequately to meet the demands of their role. Pre-course consultation between the academic staff and the Pre-School Officers assessed the training needs of the Pre-School Officers at that time and these included; up to date information on issues related to care and education of young children, theories and methods in early education, qualifications in the ECCE sector, funding issues, providing for special needs children, links between child development and educational theory. When asked about their preferred learning styles, the Pre-School Officers cited group work, practical examples and lively discussion, valuing their experience, learning from each other and gathering practical reference material as some of the key criteria.

In September 2001, a short Continuing Professional Development (CPD) course worth 5 European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) credits was validated by the DIT and subsequently delivered between January and June 2001. A course evaluation was administered at the midpoint and end of the course with the intended purpose of further developing CPD courses.

As with the pre-course consultation, this evaluation was not written up or published; however with permission I have accessed the raw feedback from the course participants and have identified the following themes:

- The course was very valuable and worthwhile

- The opportunity for collaboration and networking with other Officers was one of the most valuable aspects of participation especially the opportunity to exchange experiences and discuss problems.

- Active participation was highlighted as an essential element of the delivery of the course.

- Opportunity for further training would be welcomed.

Indicators from both the pre-course and post course evaluation suggest that Problem-based Learning may be congruent with the learning needs of this group of professional practitioners in the ECCE sector. This study has been conducted to explore the potential of PBL as a valid methodology for delivering continuing professional education to this group.

2.3.2 Gap in the research literature

When I initially began to explore the potential of PBL in the development and delivery of continuing professional education in the ECCE sector, I discovered that there was very little documented evidence on the subject either in the PBL or ECCE literature. This study therefore addresses this 'gap' in the research literature in both Problem-based Learning and Early Childhood Care and Education.

2.3.3 Summary

In summary, the rationale for this study is based on:

- The need for continuing professional education for Pre-School Officers to meet the challenges presented by the rapid process of sectoral change and the need to identify a suitable methodology

- To identify the potential of Problem-based Learning as a means of delivering this continuing professional education.

- The fact that the literature reveals that PBL has not been applied to continuing professional education in the Early Childhood Care and Education sector.

2.4 Theoretical perspective

The core theoretical perspective of this study is that which holds that knowledge is derived from a process of construction in which the learner is an active agent. It holds that '*truth or meaning*' *comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world*' (Crotty, 1998: 8).

The ontological perspective that underpins this research and which informs all activities undertaken in the preparation of this thesis can be generally described as conforming to the 'relativist' school. This translates in this instance to encompass a view of the world that recognises the importance of relationships, experience, actions and interactions in the process of learning and indeed of becoming human. It accepts that this process is dynamic and subject to change and therefore that there can be no such thing as 'absolute' truth. The epistemological stance predicts that learning will only take place where the learner is deeply involved in the process and actually consciously invests in the act of learning. It therefore supports the philosophical position that education is a tool for empowerment and/or emancipation. (Freire, 1972).

Figure 4. Theoretical perspective

Relativist ontology	No 'absolute' truths
Transactional epistemology	Constructionist view of education
Hermeneutic and Dialectical Methodology	Interpretive research paradigm

2.5 Ethical perspective

All research especially that conducted within the broad spectrum of the social sciences is required to adhere to a strict code of ethics. This study is informed by the following code of ethics http://www.dit.ie/admin/graduate/ethics/, which have in turn been informed by the Declaration of Helsinki. In addition the ethical guidelines published by the British Educational research Association www.Bera.co.uk were also consulted.

The main ethical considerations that have to be considered in this study have to do with the sensitive nature of the work that is undertaken by the Pre-School Officers who are participating in this study. It is therefore vital that complete anonymity is guaranteed in order to protect the confidential nature of the practice experiences that may be disclosed as part of the research

process. In order to ensure that all participants are fully aware of the scope and nature of the research an explanatory letter outlining the research proposal (appendix A) plus an informed consent form (appendix C) was sent to all prospective participants. In addition a personal ethics statement was included which acknowledges my responsibility to act in an ethical manner at all stages of this research project. (appendix B)

2.6   Aims, objectives and anticipated outcomes

2.6.1   Aim

To develop a rationale and curriculum for a Problem-based Learning (PBL) course for continuing professional education (CPE) course for Pre-school Officers in Ireland.

2.6.2   Research Objectives

- To investigate the domain of practice of Pre-School Officers in Ireland.

- To identify the continuing professional education/training needs of Pre-School Officers

- To develop a theoretical basis for the implementation of a Problem-based Learning Approach to the continuing professional education of Pre-School Officers.

- To make recommendations for further action in relation to the development of CPE courses for PSO.

2.6.3   Anticipated outcomes

It is anticipated that this study will

- Support educators to make an informed decision about the role of Problem-based Learning in the continuing professional education of Pre-School Officers in Ireland.

- Lay the foundations for the development of a CPE course for PSO

- Contribute to the research base on professional education of practitioners in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector in Ireland.

- Contribute to the body of PBL research

CHAPTER 3   A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

3.1   Introduction

The scope of this literature review includes policy, research, theory and practice in those fields pertinent to the study. The chapter is subdivided into five sections, each of which addresses a core learning issue in this study. The first four sections explore the suitability and potential of Problem-based Learning (PBL) to the development and delivery of a continuing professional education (CPE) course for Pre-School Officers in the ECCE sector Ireland. The fifth section explores the nature of curriculum development in PBL. The five learning issues are:

- What is the nature of professional practice in the ECCE sector in Ireland?

- Is Problem-based Learning appropriate for continuing professional education?

- Is there a theoretical basis for the adoption of a PBL approach to continuing professional education of Preschool Officers in the ECCE sector in Ireland?

- Is there precedence in the PBL literature?

- What are the criteria for 'good practice' in curriculum development for PBL?

3.2   The nature of professional practice in ECCE in Ireland

It is generally accepted that education and training of adults working with young children is a key indicator of quality in early childhood settings. The critical importance of education and training of ECCE practitioners' lies in the improvement it can effect on the quality of adult - child relationships and interactions. (Cryer, 1999, Howes, 2000). A wealth of research supports the importance of adult child interactions in the early learning and development of children (Vgotsky, 1986, Rodger et al, 1994, 1990, Pugh, 1998, 1993, Bruner, 1990, Katz, 1996, Hayes, 2002, 2003, NCCC, 2002). Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog (2001) in their analysis of research on this issue conclude that *'There is considerable evidence that specialised training is related to the quality of teachers interactions with children'*. Despite this, ECCE practitioners in Ireland are not legally required to have achieved any level of education and training before commencing practice. The Pre-School Service Regulations do not specify any qualifications, and simply refer to a *'competent adult'* when commenting on staffing in Pre-School services. Within the ECCE

sector in Ireland, however, there is a strong commitment to improving the level and standard of education, training and qualifications for ECCE practitioners. This commitment is manifest in particular in the publication by the National Coordinating Childcare Committee (NCCC) in late 2002 of '*Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning - Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector.*

I have been fortunate to play a role in the development of research and practice in the education and training of ECCE practitioners in Ireland. Since 1997, I have been closely involved in the research and development process that culminated in the publication of 'Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning: Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the ECCE sector in Ireland (NCCC, 2002). As a team member and coordinator of the OMNA Project, I was privileged to have been able to engage in wide ranging consultation with the many different stakeholders in the ECCE sector and to be entrusted with the responsibility of representing their views to policy makers. My experience has allowed me to observe the way in which policy development and more particularly the engagement of ECCE practitioners in the process of research towards policy development, has contributed to the emergence of professional practice and identity in the ECCE sector.

Practice in the ECCE sector has been heavily influenced during in recent times, by developments in education and training for practitioners. The processes, policy and initiatives, outlined below, have exercised an important formative influence on the practice in the ECCE sector, either directly as with the regulations, or indirectly through their impact on the education and training of ECCE practitioners.

3.2.1 Regulation

The most wide-ranging impact on practice has been accomplished by the introduction of statutory regulation. Under part VII of the Childcare Act (1991) the Department of Health and Children (DHC) is given responsibility for the regulation of Pre-school Services. In respect of this responsibility the DHC introduced the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 1996 and Child Care (Pre-School Services) (Amendment) Regulations, 1997. The Regulations *inter alia* place a statutory duty on Health Boards to secure the health, safety and welfare and promote the development of pre-school children attending pre-school services. The introduction of these Regulations marked a significant development in pre-school services in Ireland. Prior to this, childcare provision was unregulated by the State beyond statutory duties relating to health and safety and food safety. These regulations apply to any pre-school, play group, day nursery,

crèche, day-care or other similar service outside of primary schools, which caters for children under the age of six years. They do not apply to DES initiatives such as Early Start and Traveller Pre-Schools or to childminders who are caring for three or less children in their own home. The main areas covered by the regulations are:

Part 1   Citation; Commencement; Interpretation.

Part II   Development of the Child; First Aid; Medical Assistance; Adult/child ratios; corporal punishment.

Part III   Notice to be given by a person carrying on a Pre-School service; notification of change of circumstances; notice to be given by person proposing to carry on a Pre-School service; number of Pre-School children who may be catered for.

Part IV   Register of Pre-School Children; records; information for parents; record of fire procedures; copy of Act and Regulations.

Part V   Premises and facilities; heating; ventilation; lighting; sanitary accommodation; drainage and sewage disposal; waste and storage disposal; equipment and materials; food; safety measures; facilities for rest and play

Part VI   Furnishing of information to health board; insurance; annual fees; inspection; enforcement and execution.

An Explanatory Guide to Requirements and Procedures for Notification and Inspection is also included with the regulations. In this guide, the procedures for inspection are detailed and the domain of inspection is described as covering:

How the children are being cared for and how their development and welfare is promoted;

The suitability and safety of the premises

The standards of the premises in terms of space, heat, lighting, cleanliness, ventilation and repair and maintenance;

The suitability of the person providing the service;

The availability and suitability of toys and equipment.

(Department of Health, 1996)

In the main the guidelines focus on the structural qualities of services, otherwise known as 'static' variables in quality terms. They do not pay much attention to the more dynamic or process variables such as adult/child interaction, curriculum or partnership with parents and

families all of which have been identified as making significant contribution to the quality of the child's experience in a pre-school setting (Hayes, 1999, 2002, IPPA, 2002, French, 2003).

It has already been highlighted that the regulations do not deal with the issue of qualifications for adults working in Pre-School services. This is possibly related to the fact that many experienced ECCE practitioners, at the time of the introduction of the regulations, were unqualified or had qualifications that were not recognised nationally. In these circumstances the State could not suddenly impose a statutory duty to be qualified without the risk of losing the valuable expertise of many ECCE practitioners. The variable levels of qualifications in the ECCE sector arose from the fact that similar to the development of ECCE services, education and training courses have also evolved to meet the needs of service providers. This has resulted in the existence of a wide array of courses and qualifications associated with the ECCE sector. These vary along a continuum from informal, non-accredited short courses, through a broad range of vocational programs, both nationally and internationally accredited, to third level degree and postgraduate qualifications. Since the introduction of regulation, there has been a concentrated effort by ECCE practitioners to improve the level and standard of education, training and qualifications. It may be appropriate therefore that the review of the regulations that is currently underway, addresses this issue.

3.2.2 Early Start

It is arguable that Early Start pilot initiative, which commenced in 1994, under the Department of Education and Science (DES), acted unintentionally as a catalyst for change in the level and nature of qualifications being undertaken by ECCE practitioners. The Early Start project aims to combat educational disadvantage by providing a pre-school year for three year-old children from disadvantaged areas. A qualified primary school teacher and a childcare worker staff these services. Many experienced practitioners were prevented from applying for these positions because they did not possess the required qualification or its equivalent. The required qualification for the childcare worker position at that time was a National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) (now FETAC) Level 2 certificate in Childcare (FAS Level 2 Childcare Certificate was deemed equivalent). The impact of the Early Start project was twofold. Firstly, it raised awareness of the NCVA qualification and subsequently increased demand for and participation in this programme. Secondly and perhaps more importantly, it raised broader questions about the type and nature of qualifications necessary for practice in the ECCE sector in Ireland. The level of participation in the FETAC and FAS Level two courses

has increased dramatically in recent years (OMNA, 2002) and this may have been as a result of the Early Start initiative.

3.2.3   The Dublin Institute of Technology: The OMNA Project

The Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) has had a strong relationship with the ECCE sector going back to the early 1970's when it first began offering a tertiary level certificate course to ECCE practitioners. By the early 1990's the DIT had established itself as a key centre for the education and training of ECCE practitioners. The courses were located in the Applied Arts faculty in the Department of Social Sciences and the head of this department, Ms. Nóirín Hayes, had emerged as a leading activist for the development of quality ECCE provision in Ireland. It was her initiative, in 1994, which resulted in the establishment of the DIT/NOW Early Childhood Research Project. This project, which ultimately became known as the OMNA Project, was funded under the European Union New Opportunities for Women (NOW) programme. This programme aimed to support women to achieve equality in the workplace and the OMNA Project offered a two-pronged approach to achieving this aim. It addressed the issue of increasing the numbers of qualified ECCE practitioners and in doing so supported the development of childcare places an essential requirement for ensuring equality of opportunity for women. (OMNA 2000)

I joined the OMNA Team in 1997 and was closely involved in the development of a pilot initiative on Work Based Training and in the preparation of a wide range of publications (OMNA 2000a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, I, j, k, l, m.)

In these publications we identified the importance of the consultative group to the entire work programme. This consultative group comprised representatives of a broad range of different stakeholders in the ECCE sector, many who would never have had occasion to come together to work collaboratively before. The task that they were set by the OMNA team members was to advise on the development of a national core standard for practice in the ECCE sector in Ireland. Once this had been agreed, it was anticipated that flexible mechanisms and pathways to achieving qualifications could be implemented. These alternate routes included Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), Work Based Training (WBT) and online or e-learning. The desired standard took years of drafting, discussion, consultation, piloting and revising before it was finally published in 2000 as a Guide to Essential Skills and Knowledge for Early Childhood Care and Education (OMNA 2000b). This process spanned the most dynamic phase of development in the ECCE sector in Ireland and the availability of this continuous 'safe' forum

for debate on these developments played a major role in the promotion of a sense of common purpose amongst the diverse representatives on the consultative group. This undoubtedly, provided an excellent basis for the future development of professional identity and standards of practice.

3.2.4   EOCP Funding of voluntary and community organisations

In 2000, the important role of the community and voluntary organisations in the ECCE sector was made concrete when funding was allocated to a number of larger organisations under the EOCP to develop quality ECCE service provision. This funding has facilitated the establishment of a range of quality improvement initiatives. Despite the fact that many of them are still in the early stages of implementation, anecdotal evidence is already emerging to suggest that they are making an important contribution to raising the standards of practice in ECCE services in Ireland. (IPPA 2002, Corbett, 2003)

3.2.5   Éist

This publication warrants note in this brief consideration of influences on ECCE practice, as it represent the first major attempt to address the issue of diversity in early childhood care and education in Ireland. This report details the many issues and challenges related to diversity and equality facing all those involved in the development and delivery of ECCE services and highlights the importance of including diversity education in all initial and continuing professional education for ECCE practitioners.

> *The early years and primary sectors have a responsibility to ensure that the issues of equality, racism and diversity are addressed in a holistic way within pre-service and in-service training courses and included on a daily basis in the approach provided for children.*
>
> *(Murray and O'Doherty, 2001:37)*

It includes

> *'...guidelines for practice and makes recommendations for the future development of diversity education with particular reference to the establishment of an anti-bias training approach.'*
>
> *(Murray and O'Doherty, 2001:9)*

3.2.6 Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector in Ireland (2002)

In 2000 the OMNA Project was appointed as technical assistance to the Certifying Bodies Subgroup of the National Coordinating Childcare Committee (NCCC). (See Figure 3). The role of the Certifying Bodies Subgroup is to address the issue of qualifications for childcare workers in fulfilment of the recommendations of the National Childcare Strategy (1999), in particular recommendation four stated clearly the importance of training as a key ingredient in the provision of high quality childcare.

> *"The future development of the childcare sector should aim to achieve the following target:*
>
> *A minimum of 60% of staff working directly with children in collective services should have a grant eligible basic training of at least three years at a post 18 level, which incorporates both the theory and practice of pedagogy and child development. All training should be modular. All staff in services (both collective and family day care) who are not trained to this level should have right of access to such training including on an in-service basis. (Target 26 of the European commission Network on childcare action programme – Quality targets in Services of Young Children, 1996).*
>
> *(DJELR, 1999: 29)*

The experience and expertise of the OMNA Project team was employed to develop a strategic plan of consultation with the ECCE sector, which would lead to the development of a model framework for qualifications for all practitioners providing care and education for young children.

The context in which this work was carried out had changed dramatically since 1995 when the OMNA Project began their work. In addition to the policy and infrastructure developments outlined in section above, measures to promote lifelong learning had become a key feature of policy commitments in education and training. In particular, The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 stimulated the development of a legislative and institutional framework to realise the achievement of a lifelong learning agenda which is described as a

> *...relatively seamless progression through an educational continuum from cradle to grave, with open boundaries between the worlds of home/work/education and provision for flexibility in learning sources.*
>
> *(DES, 2000:30)*

As a result of these developments, the work of the Certifying Bodies Subgroup focused on producing a model framework for the education and training of ECCE practitioners which could inform the developments of national standards which were to be developed by the new statutory agencies established under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act. These are the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC).

Three key elements were identified as essential to achieving this outcome:

- Establishment of a common set of core values to underpin practice in the ECCE sector in Ireland

- Identification of occupational profiles within the sector

- Development of core standards for each occupational profile

Over a two-year period, extensive consultation and research was carried out to put in place each of the above elements. This process culminated in the publication of '*Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning: Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the ECCE sector in Ireland* (NCCC, 2002). This document provides the foundation for future developments in professional education of ECCE practitioners. It outlines in detail the core standards for practice at all stages of professional development in the ECCE sector in Ireland and therefore is of particular relevance to the development of the CPE course for Pre-School Officers. Specifically the 'Advanced Practitioner Profile' (see appendix H) which recognises that ' *...an individual operating at this stage of professional development may operate with complete autonomy and will have full responsibility for the work of others,' (NCCC, 2002:22)* and details the key tasks and responsibilities at this stage of professional practice. The core areas of skills and knowledge associated with these responsibilities are also outlined. Importantly, the '*Ability to reflect and manage continuing practice and professional development of self and others'* (ibid: 23) is included in the core skills. This practitioner profile has the capacity to act as a benchmark for the development of CPE courses for all ECCE practitioners including Pre-School Officers.

3.2.7   International perspectives

The national developments that are influencing practice in the ECCE sector in Ireland are also contributing to a wider international debate on the nature of professional practice in ECCE. This debate covers a broad spectrum of issues but two in particular are of particular relevance to this

study. The first considers the nature of professionalism in the practice of ECCE and the second considers the issue of quality. The limitations of this study mean that only a very brief examination of these key issues is possible, however it should be noted that they will both play a central role in the future development of practice in the ECCE sector in Ireland and as such are very important elements of any CPE course for ECCE practitioners.

A number of authors and organisations have documented the issues and concerns surrounding the emergence of professionalism within the ECCE sector internationally:

> *Professionalism refers to the utilization of specialized knowledge that its members need to accomplish specific outcomes. It involves a shared set of skills that are used to improve the quality of care giving practices and interactions between professional caregivers and the children and families that they work with in their respective programmes.*

> *(Caulfield, 1997)*

> *Professionalism within ECCE therefore represents a process; a continuing effort where new knowledge is constantly being incorporated into practitioners existing repertoire.*

> *(Feeney and Freeman, 1999)*

International consensus is building with regard to the importance of professional preparation and training of those who care for and educate children (Kipnis & Feeney, 1999, NRC, 2001). Duff, Brown and Van Scoy (1995:81) cite the view of NAEYC'S National Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development *"The most important determinant of the quality of children's experiences are the adults who are responsible for children's care and education".*

In 1998 Abbott and Pugh edited the collective views of many leading thinkers on the education, training and professional development of ECCE practitioners in the UK in *Training to Work in the Early Years: Developing the Climbing Frame* (Abbot & Pugh, 1998). In this publication, a strong consensus emerges on a number of themes including the crucial importance of early childhood, the complex and demanding nature of providing for the care and education of young children and the necessity for qualified practitioners if quality services are to be provided. The need for investment in research, policy development and initial and continuing professional education is clearly highlighted in this publication. Such investment is strongly linked to how society values early childhood per se.

> *Until we as a nation recognise the importance of the early years of education and create an integrated service that reflects the rights and needs of children*

and their families, and until we have a common view about what kind of service
we should be creating and why, then we will not be in a position to recruit, train
and support a workforce with the kind of skills we require.

(Pugh, 1998:2.)

In his comparative analysis of staffing issues in early childhood services, Peter Moss (2000) identifies some of the challenges likely to impact on the future professional preparation of ECCE practitioners. He maintains that the education and training of early childhood workers and how the workforce itself is structured cannot be separated from basic questions about the nature of early childhood services and work. Different countries and groups within countries do and will arrive at different answers. History reveals the diversity of ideas about how cultures view the role of early childhood or childhood institutions and the people who work in them. These pictures in turn construct the image that early childhood professionals have of themselves.

> *Teachers or pre-school specialists rooted in public education systems with a*
> *prescribed framework of accountability are more likely to perceive their work*
> *as predominantly child-oriented and educational, whereas the early childhood*
> *pedagogues and the workers with a broader-based, socio-pedagogical training*
> *are more likely to view their profession in a wider context – child-oriented, but*
> *also family and community-oriented.*

(Moss 2000:10)

Such debates are important for the development of professional education programmes for ECCE practitioners. They go towards the development of the conceptual framework of the profession and in turn influence the curriculum for professional education and training.

In the Irish context, these issues are just beginning to be articulated and debated. Changing demographics, for example the increased incidence of family breakdown, growing immigration and increasing numbers of asylum seekers, require that ECCE services respond to an increasing diversity of needs and this in turn is prompting ECCE practitioners to request support and training to respond appropriately. In a policy and research environment which is advocating a 'holistic' approach to the provision of services, practitioners are beginning to challenge the existing education and training programmes in the field of ECCE, to evolve strategies and approaches which will 'fit' with this ethos. An emerging consensus on the nature of professional practice in the ECCE sector is beginning to be articulated, *'Early Childhood Care and Education is a profession which is based on a multidisciplinary approach. Therefore, education and training of practitioners must be multidisciplinary in nature'*. (NCCC, 2002, p. 12).

Furthermore, Fisher (2002) insists that the professional preparation of ECCE practitioners '...*requires not only an initial education that covers the many different kinds of knowledge and understanding in the field of early childhood care and education but also continued professional development, including time to reflect on practice.*' This debate and discourse is signalling the type of dynamic processes that Moss has identified and which may influence the emergence of professional identity for the ECCE sector and practitioner in Ireland.

3.2.8 Summary

The domain of practice in ECCE in Ireland is characterised by change and development. It is apparent that a process of professionalisation is beginning to take place in the ECCE sector in Ireland. This is manifest in the efforts that have been made by ECCE practitioners to agree a set of values and core principles and values to underpin practice. (NCCC, 2002), and is occurring at a time when national policy in respect of lifelong learning is in the process of establishing structures, policies and procedures to facilitate access to lifelong learning for all citizens. (DES, 1999b) It would appear therefore that it is timely to begin to explore Problem-based Learning as a potential approach to the continuing professional education of Pre-School Officers in the ECCE sector.

3.3   Professionalism, professional education and Problem-based Learning. (PBL)

3.3.1   Introduction

The basic thesis in this study proposes that Problem-based Learning is an appropriate approach to the continuing professional education of Pre-school Officers in Ireland. This section considers in more detail the nature of professionalism and professional education. It then examines the potential of Problem-based Learning in this particular field of learning. The following learning issues are explored:

- What is meant by professionalism?
- What is continuing professional education (CPE)?
- What is the relationship between CPE and Professional practice?
- What does this mean for the development of a continuing professional education course for Pre-School Officers
- What is Problem-based Learning and
- Where does Problem-based Learning fit into this picture?

3.3.2 What is professionalism?

Opinions on the definition of the term professional have always caused heated debate due to the apparent lack of consensus. The academic literature also reflects this fact. The opinion of Etzioni (1969) that the old established professions of law and medicine were 'ideal types' and that other, notably less powerful occupations such as teaching and nursing were 'semi-professions is one such example and another is attempt to define professionalism in terms of identifiable traits (Millerson, 1964).

Johnson (1984) has argued that rather than attempting to define professionalism within occupational roles it should be viewed as an ideology and the process that occupations seek to gain status and privilege in accordance with this ideology known as 'professionalisation'. This process depends to a large extent on the 'preparation' professional practitioners. This usually involves structured programs of education and training designed to equip the student with the core knowledge base which informs the unique domain of expertise of the profession and which also begins the students' socialisation into their professional role. (Eraut 1994).

Undoubtedly this is a complex issue, which has been addressed by many eminent academics (e.g. Houle, 1980, Johnson, 1984, Schon, 1987, Cervero, 1988, 2001, Brown & Duiguid 1991, Eraut, 1994, Daley 2000) and which will continue to be debated into the future. In amongst this wealth of discourse however, I discovered the work of Jones & Joss (1995:50) who developed a matrix of professionalism to elucidate their arguments regarding the professional development needs of social care professionals. In this matrix four distinct models of professionalism are identified. These can be characterised by the interpretation of seven different variables including that of professional-client relationship. (see Figure 5 below).

In their own discussion, Jones & Joss have identified the reflective practitioner model of professional practice as that most congruent with the role of the social care practitioner. In this analysis, the practice theory of the professional is described as *"Based on process and interpersonal theories in use. Congruence between espoused theories and theories in use. Constructivist view of the reality of practice. New rules created out of practice to make new sense out of uncertainty or unique and conflict ridden situations'.* (Jones& Joss, 1995, p. 51). There is strong evidence to support the premise that the 'reflective practitioner model of professionalism is that to which the Early Childhood Care and Education profession in Ireland aspires. In the Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the ECCE Sector, the following statement articulates the definition of pedagogy in ECCE:

Figure 5: Models of Professionalism

Model	Self image	Theoretical orientation	Knowledge base	Practice theory	Value base	Relations with client	Professional development	Critique
Practical professional	Crafts(man)	Atheoretical, common sense - denies relevance of theory to practice	Practical knowledge derived from work. No unique established base of esoteric knowledge. Tacit knowledge is predominant form	Implicit expertise. Trial and error 'know-how'	Vocational traditions of culture and practice highly valued - organisation centred.	Exclusive control Demonstration of mastery.	Apprenticeship mode. Can't be learned from books. Learning by doing without explicit reflection and abstraction. Initiation into traditions of practice through coaching.	Skill is intuitive - can't be verbalised or taught. Lacks theory of the process by which knowledge is deepened and refined.
Technical Expert	Expert	Espoused theories derived from systematic knowledge. Theories developed through scientific enquiry	Esoteric knowledge is dominant form. Practitioner is sole possessor of relevant knowledge. Knowledge is that of rational experts.	Explicit and based upon techniques and expertise applied to problems. Rule governed inquiry. Fragmented rather than holistic approach.	Technical rationality 'thinking like a professional'. Encourages differentiation and specialisms which are highly valued. Problem- centred rather than client centred.	Objectivist approach. Expert expects/demands deference. Authority is secured through control; organisational 'needs' rather than client 'wants' are reference point.	Knowledge and academic theory valued, plus rules and guidance. Learning approaches often static and didactic	Relevance of process/interpersonal relations and dialogue denied. Relevance of client's knowledge downplayed or denied. Process skills 'bolted on' as extra dimension

Model	Self image	Theoretical orientation	Knowledge base	Practice theory	Value base	Relations with client	Professional development	Critique
Managerial	Expert	As above plus management theory which may be Populist and not rigorously scientific.	As above. Much knowledge concerned with resource management and issues of efficiency and effectiveness.	As above plus management techniques. May draw opportunistically on range of social psychological theories - e.g. interpersonal skills.	As above, but most managerial professionals not yet as highly valued as established professions (except within own peer group)	As above plus authority relations with 'operative colleagues'.	As above. Increasingly strong emphasis put on academic or at least formal learning and qualifications e.g. MBAs and NCVQs.	Beginning to go way of Technical Experts but uneasily so. Tension exists between different models of professionalism. Problem is that development of practice theories may not keep pace with development of management theory.
	Operative	'De-professionalised by ever more prescriptive rules, regulations and guidance. Limits and boundaries set on professional discretion through managerial impositions, by increasingly hierarchical structure and by non-collaborative modes of decision making. Often result of external requirements on organisation to demonstrate accountability and increase customer satisfaction.						
Reflective Practitioner	Facilitator	Espoused theories, which include theories of social relations. Recognises there is no single 'right' answer to most social problems	Specialist knowledge can be esoteric but need not be. Knowledge becomes manifest in interactions with client. Uses all sources of knowledge available including relevant information from client	Based on process and interpersonal theories in use. Congruence between espoused theories and theories in use. Constructivist view of the reality of practice. New rules created out of practice to make new sense out of uncertainty or unique and conflict ridden situations	Client centred, social constructed and holistic	Collaborative, based on on-going dialogue; surfacing conflict, sharing meanings and a reflective contract with the client. Authority achieved through consensus.	Process of experiential learning by doing, observing, reflecting, conceptualising and experimenting. Knowledge becomes a process and not a product. Abstract conceptualisation leads to new models and principles to be tested and refined.	Schon's model only explicitly seen when experienced practitioners are coaching neophytes - not clear if professionals actually consistently operate in this way. Difficulties with identifying and defining cognitive competencies.

(Jones and Joss, 1995:50)

Pedagogy in ECCE refers not only to an agreed base of shared knowledge but also to practical experience, which incorporates opportunities for reflection and appreciation and understanding of the necessity of collaboration with other stakeholders in the sector including parents and families'

(NCCC, 2002, p.13)

This is entirely compatible with the relationship with client description in the Jones and Joss matrix described as:

Collaborative, based on on-going dialogue; surfacing conflict, sharing meanings and a reflective contract with the client. Authority achieved through consensus.

(Jones and Joss, 1995:50)

Furthermore, the NCCC document proceeds to cite Fisher (2002) in support of the sectors desired approach to professional preparation:

'This requires not only an initial education that covers the many different kinds of knowledge and understanding in the field of early childhood care and education but also continued professional development, including time to reflect on practice.'

(Ibid, p. 13)

Once again a comparison with the Jones and Joss description of professional development of the Reflective Practitioner, the relevance is apparent:

Process of experiential learning by doing, observing, reflecting, conceptualising and experimenting. Knowledge becomes a process and not a product. Abstract conceptualisation leads to new models and principles to be tested.

(ibid: 51)

The strong endorsement of the ECCE sector in Ireland of a professional model based on the concept of the Reflective practitioner should have a direct bearing on the development of professional education programmes for all practitioners working within the ECCE sector especially those engaged exclusively in the development and delivery of ECCE services. On this basis therefore, the definition of professionalism in this study will be informed by the 'Reflective Practitioner model and the dimensions articulated by Jones & Joss will be used as a benchmark for the development of the continuing professional education course for Pre-School Officers.

3.3.3 What is continuing professional education (CPE)?

Once the model of professional practice has been envisioned, the next question is how are practitioners prepared to put the theory into practice? Eraut (1994) describes professional preparation in two distinct phases termed Initial Professional Education (IPE) and continuing professional education (CPE). He argues that initial professional education has a number of guises:

> *A period of pupillage or internship during which the students spend a significant amount of time (up to 5 years) learning their craft from an expert;*
>
> *Enrolment in a 'professional college' outside the higher education system;*
>
> *A qualifying examination normally set by a qualifying association for the occupation*
>
> *A period of relevant study at a college, polytechnic or university leading to a recognised qualification and*
>
> *The collection of evidence of practical competence in the form of a logbook or portfolio.*
>
> *(Eraut 1994, p.6)*

Implicit in all of these approaches is the perspective that the initial acquisition of professional knowledge and skills requires significant commitment on the part of the student and involves rigorous assessment and regulation. This is understandable given the fact that 'until recently, *"… little systematic thought was given to what happens for the following 40 years of professional practice"*. (Cervero, 2001). Once through the hallowed portals of the profession many practitioners were left to their own devices to keep up to date with changes and developments affecting their sphere of professional practice. Indeed the current study offers a prime example of this as professionals from a predominantly nursing background were charged with the fulfilment of an inspection role in the ECCE sector without any structured programme of education and training as preparation.

As a constructivist, I view education as a creative action based process, conducted in a social context, which requires the commitment and involvement of the learner. It is a powerful agent of change and empowerment and engages the learner in a continuous cycle of reflection, dialogue and action towards the goal of becoming *'fully human'*. (Freire, 1972). On the basis of this definition, it is arguable that learning is a lifelong process and indeed the 'Lifelong learning agenda' has been identified as a contributing factor in the rise in continuing professional

education programmes (Cervero 2001) Applied to professional education this perspective makes imperative the need for continuous engagement in education to support and develop good practice.

> *The period of specialised initial education and training – one of the traditional features of professional socialization (Etzioni, 1969, Friedson, 1973, Todd, 1987) – is now regarded as insufficient for continuing professional practice over a working lifetime.*
>
> *(Ennis and Baldwin, 2000:222)*

However, Cervero (2001) in his critical analysis of continuing professional education in transition identifies that CPE only emerged as a distinct area of practice and study in the early 1980's when many professions began to address the need for more streamlined, efficient CPE programs. The rapid development of technology, advances in research, challenges to traditional concepts of knowledge, and social and demographic change are just some of the key factors responsible for this changing aspect. Many professions now operate renewable registration systems, which require their members to engage in or provide evidence of a minimum level of continuing professional education, often on an annual basis (e.g. Accountancy.).

Despite this growing acceptance of the importance and integral nature of CPE in the professional preparation process, Cervero agues that the most common format for CPE is the 'informational update' and paints a grim, but he argues, typical scenario of a hall full of bored participants being lectured to and making notes which will never again see the light of day once the session has ended. This scenario must be depressing given the fact that in 1988 the same author articulated the following vision for continuing professional education: '*The primary goal of continuing education should be to improve professional artistry or the professional's ability to operate in the indeterminate zones of practice*' (Cervero 1988:54).

Cervero's analysis of CPE identifies a number of trends and issues that he claims have exerted a formational influence of the present nature of CPE.

These can be summarised as:

- The dominance of work based programs delivered by profit making organisations in the development and delivery of CPE programs
- The increasing availability of distance education formats (in particular ICT)
- The role of CPE in maintaining 'competitiveness' in terms of the individual professional, the profession and the overall economy

- The corporatisation of education through a combination of partnership between Higher education institutions and industry or the emergence of commercially operated educational institutions.

- The use of CPE to regulate professional practice.

The sum of these trends, argues Cervero is that they are promoting superficiality in CPE programmes which is doing little to achieve the main purpose of CPE which is 'to improve the practice' of professionals. Even the rise in CPE requirements for registration or licensing has been criticised for promoting '*the appearance of accountability but [have done] little or nothing to address the underlying issue of competence*' (Queeney 2000:378).

These criticisms have serious implications for the development of professional expertise. Where are these programmes going wrong and more to the point why? The answers lie in understanding the processes underpinning the development of professional expertise, how professionals transfer their learning into their practice and in particular how adults learn effectively.

3.3.4 What is effective practice in the development of professional expertise?

Theories of professional expertise abound (Hammond, 1980, Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986, Schon, 1987, Schmidt, Norman & Boshuisen, 1990, Eraut, 1995). In general they are concerned with making explicit the thought processes that professional practitioners engage in when fulfilling the various aspects of their chosen profession. They differ from earlier perspective which related professional expertise directly to the prepositional knowledge content of the education programmes – the greater and more complex the knowledge base the greater the expertise! Whilst there is considerable difference amongst the various theories, they are unified in the agreement that professional expertise is a function of both knowledge and experience with iterative processing as the mechanism by which expertise is developed. The differences between the theories lie in the way in which they articulate the iterative mechanisms. Hammond's Cognitive Continuum Theory (1980) proposes that most thinking can be defined within a continuum between intuitive at one pole and analytical at the other with the majority neither a pure version of one or the other. This continuum is reflected in the theories of professional expertise. Dreyfus & Dreyfus (1986) for example describe a model based entirely on the development through practical experience of the ability to act intuitively in the professional role. They argue that: '*an expert generally knows what to do based on mature and practiced understanding.... When things are proceeding normally, experts don't solve problems and don't*

make decisions; they do what normally works' (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1986. p. 30-1) Analytical thinking is therefore reserved for the anomalous or unusual situation. At the opposite end of the continuum, Schon (1983) relates expertise to the development of these self same analytical thinking processes. His argument centres on the concept of 'reflection-in-action'. This concept has three key stages:

i.   The practitioner consciously identifies the dissonance between tacit knowledge and the situation presenting itself.

ii.   The practitioner then reflects on the thought processes that led to that point, including the assumptions, judgements and decisions that have been made.

iii. A new plan of action is formulated and tested on the spot.

Schön's theory elevates the creative ability of professionals to the position of defining characteristic of expertise.

Both these theories have attracted criticism. The Dreyfus model is often accused of investing too heavily in the 'infallibility, of professional judgement (Eraut, 1994) and undervaluing the professional role of knowledge creation. Schön, attracts criticism for being idealistic and immure to the pragmatic issues such as time, workload, lack of resources which influence professional practice and predicate against 'reflection-in-action as he describes it. (Munby & Russell, 1993). This criticism reflects the fact that no one theory has fully explained the complexity of professional expertise.

Daley (2001) provides a useful contribution to understanding how these theories relate to the reality of professional practice. Her study examines how professionals from four different professions made knowledge received in a CPE course meaningful in their practice. Her methodology used an interpretivist approach to interview practitioners from law, medicine, nursing and social work up to one year after they had participated in short CPE sessions. Her findings provide useful insight for those of us concerned with the development of CPE courses as they provide evidence for simple guiding principles, which could improve the effectiveness of such programmes. These findings are summarised as follows:

•   The process of making meaning from the knowledge presented at CPE programmes was framed for each profession by the nature of its professional work.

•   Their client interactions also affected their meaning making processes. Often it was an emotional encounter with a client that changed a professional's practice, particularly if

confronted with client situations that challenged their knowledge, beliefs and assumptions. This challenge triggered a reflective process.

- Professionals across all groups described how their knowledge was constantly changing and that experience, attendance at CPE programmes and dialogue with colleagues all contributed to the continual growth and refinement of meaningful knowledge.

- Professionals indicate that new information had to connect to other concepts before it was meaningful to them, and part of the process of making knowledge meaningful was to use it in practice in some way.

> *'..incorporating new knowledge is a recursive, transforming process, rather than a simple straightforward transfer of information from one context to another'.*

> *(Daley 2001:51– 54)*

This concept of transformation is an important one in the field of adult learning generally. In particular the work of Mezirow (1991) has particular resonance for this study. He has drawn upon the work of Jurgen Habermas to propose a theory of transformative learning

> *'...that can explain how adult learners make sense or meaning of their experiences, the nature of the structures that influence the way they construe experience, the dynamics involved in modifying meanings and the way structures of meaning themselves undergo changes when learners find them to be dysfunctional.'*

> *(Mezirow, 1991:12)*

Mezirow argues that critical reflection is the mechanism by which perspective transformation occurs and that this perspective transformation is central to adult learning. Perspective transformation is described by Mezirow as

> *'...the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating and integrating perspective; and finally making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings.'*

> *(Mezirow, 1991:167)*

Daley (1997) addresses the connections between Transformative Learning Theory and the practice of continuing professional education and concludes that the following three aspects should inform continuing professional education theory and practice.

- Disorienting dilemmas, (emotionally charged situations that create dissonance in terms of existing expectations and understanding) initiate perspective transformation.

- Critical reflection

- Identifying psychic assumptions – (acquired during the developmental process usually as a result of anxiety generated by prohibitions enforced by significant adults and which exercise a strong influence on attitude, beliefs and identity).

3.3.5 What does this mean for the development of the continuing professional education course for Pre-School Officers?

The development of professional expertise involves a complex process of meaning making which is influenced by practice experience. Reflection emerges as an important element of this process as does the need for knowledge to be made relevant in the context of each individual's domain of practice.

Professional education programmes must take account of these complicated meaning making processes. On the basis of the Daley study and drawing on the theories of professional expertise, in particular the work of Schon as it relates to the 'reflective practitioner' model of professional practice, and the Transformative Learning Theory of Mezirow, I have formed the following set for requirements for the continuing professional education course for Pre-School Officers in this study. To be effective it should:

- be embedded in the context of practice

- engage and challenge the personal belief systems of the participant

- stimulate and promote reflection in participants

- integrate new knowledge with practice and recognise discourse as central to learning.

- recognise the need for continuity between old and new through practice.

- acknowledge the significance of the meaning making process and understand the need for time for its achievement.

Pre-School Officers in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector have taken on a challenging and often daunting role. The simple description of *'implementation of the Pre-School service regulations'* (DOH 1997) masks a complex set of tasks, which are affected directly by the emergent nature of the ECCE profession in Ireland. This fact alone would

indicate that some form of CPE programme would be necessary to allow for the development of this new occupational role within the sector and indeed this need has been identified and acted upon by some within the ranks of the Pre-School Officers (DIT 2001). CPE however is not simply appropriate because the Pre-School Officers role is new. The rapid growth in CPE courses in the past two decades indicates that this need is echoed in many other professions and the literature articulates that t is an integral element in developing professional expertise (Houle, 1980, Eraut 1994, Cervero 2001). However the concern that existing approaches to the delivery of CPE programmes are not meeting the needs of practitioners is one that urgently needs to be addressed. (Cervero 2001). Too many CPE courses are designed to deliver chunks of information without reference to the context in which the practitioner might use it. As Daley says the challenge is ..'*to be more creative in employing teaching and learning strategies to foster this complicated meaning making process.*'(Daley, 2001:52) Courses must provide more than the 'informational update' described by Cervero (2001). Practice must be at the heart of all professional development as experience is the conduit for expertise. And in addition we must understand that practice is not always 'rule following' but rule breaking and even rule making. As Schon aptly described:

> '*In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy confusing problems defy technical solution, The irony of the situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individual s or society at large... while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern*'

> *(Schon 1987:3)*

3.3.6 How can Problem-based Learning meet the challenge of continuing professional education?

To return to the opening statement of this section, the thesis of this study proposes that Problem-based Learning (PBL) is an appropriate approach to the delivery of CPE for Pre-School Officers in Ireland. I have based this statement not only on the argument that PBL offers potential for overcoming the deficits of current trends in CPE as outlined above, but also on the argument that PBL is an approach to education which can best serve the profession of ECCE in Ireland. This is a profession which has a unique persona based upon core values and principles which are manifest in the reflective practitioner' model of professionalism. In Problem-based Learning, reflection plays a key role in the tutorial process, requiring the student to draw on

existing knowledge and understanding and to share this with fellow group members in a way that is meaningful and relevant to the problem situation, which is driving their learning.

> *'Put another way, the transitional PBL curriculum helps health professions students progress from information gathering and knowledge warehousing to practitioners who know through reflection-in-action and are therefore wise clinicians rather that master technicians.'*

> *Little & Le Guin, (2001:209)*

At the heart of my argument for the appropriateness of PBL in this context is the proposition that PBL has congruence with educational theory as it relates to adult, professional and continuing education and also as it relates to ECCE and therefore is not only appropriate in the preparation of ECCE professionals but has the potential unite both strands of educational theory to improve the nature of professional education and practice in ECCE.

To develop these arguments further, I now want to look at the nature of PBL and will expand on these arguments by illustrating how PBL connects the various strands of educational theory contributing to adult professional and continuing education and early childhood care and education.

3.3.7   What is Problem-based Learning?

Problem-based Learning (PBL) is a *'total approach to education'*. (Barrows & Kelson, 1995). It was developed and pioneered in the field of medicine by Howard Barrows in the 1970's and 80's and has at its roots the philosophy that students need to acquire, not only a body of knowledge that will relate to their chosen profession, but also become self directed learners equipped with key skills which will allow them to integrate knowledge into their practice. In addition, it holds that education should stimulate and encourage learners to continue the learning process throughout their lives. Cowdroy, (1994) claims, "*PBL is a strategic answer to the contemporary needs of an information society.*" (p.342). The challenge that has been taken up by PBL is that of producing professional practitioners who have at their disposal the skills necessary to continually adapt to change, both within their professional environment and the external environment. (Engel, 1997). These key skills include; communication, decision making, teamwork, and metacognition amongst others. PBL is an approach to education that embraces elements that have been identified as essential to the promotion of learning in adults. It is active, process oriented; it focuses on promotion of understanding and integrates a variety of subject disciplines in the learning process. (Koschmann, 2001, Norman & Schmidt, 1992) It

mirrors real life and encourages the application of knowledge. Barrows (1980) defines Problem-based Learning as' *the learning that results from the process of working towards the understanding or resolution of a problem. The problem is encountered first in the learning process.*' The importance of the latter statement in this definition should not be underestimated. In my own experience of attempting to introduce PBL into an established course, many educators claim to already use problems and problem solving as tools in their teaching. In fact problem solving is arguably the original stimulus for all human learning. The phrase 'necessity is the mother of invention' is an undated, anonymous Latin saying, 'Mater Artium Necessitas', from ancient Rome. The early philosophers such as Socrates and Aristotle used problems and structured questioning to challenge their students attitudes values and knowledge systems and the Socratic method is still much in evidence today. However problem-solving learning is very different from Problem-based Learning. As Savin- Baden says' *The focus in this* [problem solving] *kind of learning is largely on acquiring the answers expected by the lecturer, answers that are rooted in the information supplied in some way to the students.* (2000:2). Problem-based Learning on the other hand utilizes real world problems, not hypothetical case studies with neat, convergent outcomes, to form the basis of the curriculum. The student is presented with the problem scenario before any relevant knowledge input. It is argued that it is in the process of struggling with these real life, ill structured, problems that students learn both subject content and develop key learning skills such as critical thinking. *"Learning begins when students, placed in an authentic problem solving role, meet a scenario or situation containing an ill-structured problem."* (Stephen & Pyke, 1997:381). Rather than uncovering solutions that are predetermined either by the teacher or the content of the course, PBL challenges the student to question thoroughly all premises upon which a possible solution might be based. PBL has several distinct characteristics. These are:

- Reliance on problems to drive the curriculum - the problems do not test skills; they assist in development of the skills themselves.

- The problems are truly ill-structured - there is not meant to be one solution, and as new information is gathered in a reiterative process, perception of the problem, and thus the solution, changes.

- Students solve the problems - teachers are coaches and facilitators.

- Students are only given guidelines for how to approach problems - there is no one formula for student approaches to the problem.

- Authentic, performance based assessment - is a seamless part and end of the instruction.

Adapted from Stephen, W.J. and Gallagher, S.A. (1993). and Barrows, H. (1985)

On the basis of this description it would appear that PBL provides the ideal solution to the development of effective professional education programmes and indeed there is evidence of the rapid spread of PBL within professional education in the past decade. (Savin Baden 1998, 2000, Boud & Feletti, 1997). The explanation of this success is frequently related to the symmetry between the espoused theories of PBL and theories of how to optimise human, and in particular adult learning. As this appears to be such a central platform in support of PBL it is also likely that it will be important for the rationale in this thesis that PBL is a suitable methodology for the development and delivery of a continuing professional education course for Pre-School Officers in Ireland.

3.4 How does Problem-based Learning relate to learning theory?

I was drawn to Problem-based Learning as a methodology for the education and training of ECCE practitioners because I identified immediately the correspondence between PBL and early childhood pedagogy especially in terms of their underpinning constructivist philosophies. In this section I explore the literature to establish if my intuitive feelings are support by research and theory. I have again structured this exploration around specific learning issues:

- How is constructivist philosophy manifest in Problem-based Learning?

- What are the underpinning principles of early childhood pedagogy?

- What is the nature of the symmetry between early childhood pedagogy and PBL?

- What does this all mean for the development of the PBL course for Pre-School Officers?

3.4.1 Constructivism and Problem-based Learning (PBL)

Constructivism is a philosophical stance that explains how we come to understand or know. It proposes that *'truth or meaning comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world'* (Crotty, 1998: 8). Furthermore, this engagement, manifest as our interactions with the complexities of our environment, are unique to each individual and

therefore result in unique perspectives of truth or meaning. It has been argued that constructivism can also be characterised by two more primary propositions:

- *Cognitive conflict or puzzlement is the stimulus for learning and determines the organisation and nature of what is learned.*

- *Understanding is influenced by the processes associated with the social negotiation of meaning.*

(Savery & Duffy, 1994)

A number of key authors have explored the implications of constructivism in human growth and development and have argued that development results from a complex interaction between children and their environments. (Dewey, 1976, Piaget, 1970). Piaget's theory of cognitive development, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model and the works of Maria Montessori, Lev Vgotsky, Paolo Freire and Jerome Bruner are all grounded in this key philosophical perspective. These eminent thinkers have each contributed to expanding our understanding of how best to support and optimise human learning potential.

These contributions have been represented by Gijselaers, (1996) as three fundamental principles of learning and instruction:

- Learning is a constructive not a receptive process
- Knowing about knowing (or Metacognition) affects learning
- Social and contextual factors influence learning

The question here is how does PBL meet the challenges presented by these principles? The first principle challenges traditional didactic approaches to education in which the role of the teacher is to transmit information to the learners. Many metaphors have been used to articulate this activity and my personal favourite is that of Paolo Freire who used a banking analogy. In this metaphor, teachers make *deposits* of information, which students are to receive, memorize, and repeat. '*A transmission of knowledge from the knowledgeable to the know nothings...Subject to object.*'(Freire, 1972) .The process of construction of learning is a function of memory. Human memory possesses unique properties, in particular which must be accounted for in any instructional strategy. In particular the associative structure of human memory where activation of prior knowledge facilitates the subsequent processing of new information (Norman & Schmidt, 1992) requires that instructional strategies acknowledge and attempt to elicit learners prior knowledge as the platform for learning. Problem-based Learning meets this challenge by engaging the learner with the real life; ill structured problems, (which characterise the PBL

curriculum), first before any information or learning resources pertinent to the problem, are given. This is designed to stimulate the learners to address the problem based on their existing knowledge base so activating the memory's associative structures.

The second principle relates to metacognition (Bruer, 1993) or knowing about knowing and states that it affects learning. Metacognition refers to the making conscious by the learner, of his/her own approaches to and strategies for learning. It involves being able to detect when learning has occurred, analysing what helped achieve the new learning and then employ that process as a strategy for learning in another situation. Conversely it also means the learner making explicit the barriers to learning and developing strategies to overcome these barriers. Metacognition is a characteristic of 'good' students and has also been identified as a characteristic of 'expert' practice (Glaser, 1991). This 'higher order thinking' can be supported through instructional strategies, which encourage reflective thinking (Boud, 1997). PBL encourages the development of metacognition through the tutorial process where the tutor carefully questions the processes the learners employ to engage with the problem and invites them to make explicit and reflect on the strategies they are using to solve the problem.

The third principle refers to the importance of the social and contextual factors that influence learning. (Lave and Wenger, 1991) In particular these impact on the learner's ability to transfer knowledge from one situation or context to another. Without this learning would be meaningless and useless except within the context that it was learned and, for example, would mean that theory could not be used in the practice environment. Unfortunately, with traditional methods of teaching, this is too often the case (Boshuizen and Schmidt, 1995). PBL responds to this challenge by incorporating strategies to contextualise learning in its approach. These strategies again draw on constructivist philosophy and have been articulated as '*cognitive apprenticeship*' (Collins, Brown, and Newman, 1989) which emphasises learning in the context of the practice environment the learners are being prepared for, and '*anchored instruction*' (Bransford et al, 1990) which recommends that learners explore concepts in a variety of contexts, developing the ability to use knowledge in different situations whilst retaining the integrity of the original concept. Mandl, Gruber and Renkl (1993) are cited in Gijslaer 1996 as having proposed a fourfold strategy to promote this ability.

*Instruction should be placed in the context of complex and meaningful problem
solving situation; instruction should focus on teaching metacognitive skills and
when to use them; knowledge and shills should be taught from different
perspectives and applied in many different situations so as to confront students
with beliefs held by other students.'*

(Gijselaers, 1996:16)

The small group approach used in PBL facilitates the students to experience concepts from a
variety of differing perspectives. This challenges them to distil the essence of the concept
distinct from the particular context and identify the core properties, which allow for its transfer
across a wide variety of situations and contexts. In addition, the PBL student will encounter the
concept in a variety of different problem scenarios and this too builds the ability to identify and
apply theory in a range of practice contexts.

Lebow, (1993) has summarised the implications of constructivism for education by contrasting
traditional educational approaches with constructivist principles:

*...traditional educational technology values of replicability, reliability,
communication, and control (Heinich 1984) contrast sharply with the seven
primary constructivist values of collaboration, personal autonomy, generativity,
reflectivity, active engagement, personal relevance and pluralism.*

(1993:5)

In conclusion therefore, it is apparent that PBL has the potential to meet these challenges and
provide conditions optimal to maximising learning. These benefits are immediately recognisable
as the precepts of adult learning. Engel, (1997) articulates these clearly and succinctly:

- *active learning through posing own questions and seeking the respective
  answers*

- *integrated learning, learning in a variety of subjects or disciplines concurrently
  through learning in the context in which the learning is to be applied in real-life
  situations.*

- *cumulative learning to achieve growing familiarity through a sequence of
  learning experiences that are relevant to the student's goals, experiences that
  become progressively less straightforward but more complex, as well as less
  non threatening but progressively more challenging;*

- *learning for understanding, rather than for recall of isolated facts, through
  appropriate opportunities to reflect on their educational experiences, and
  through frequent feedback, linked with opportunities to practice the application
  of what has been learned.*

(p.19)

These attributes alone are important recommendations for adopting a PBL approach to the development of the continuing professional education (CPE) course for the Pre-School Officers. However, having established the suitability of PBL for promoting learning in adults, I also want to explore whether adopting a PBL approach to this course can also achieve the aim of modelling effective practice in early childhood learning. To do this I now need to establish whether there is a 'match between the espoused learning theory of early learning and PBL.

3.4.2 Is there symmetry between espoused theories of learning in Early Childhood Care and Education and Problem-based Learning?

Current conceptions of early childhood development and pedagogy are built on a century of research. It is important however to note that the vast bulk of this research has taken place within the context of a western developed society and that whilst for many decades, it was accepted that the knowledge and meaning that was generated by this research was universally applicable, that premise has been strongly challenged in recent times. This challenge it could be argued has emerged from a constructivist perspective and indeed many 'fundamental principles' of child development have been revisited from this perspective and modified. Jean Piaget, one of the most influential theorists in ECCE and himself a proponent of constructivist philosophy, has been challenged on his theory of cognitive development. This theory has had (and continues to have) a great influence over the development of practice in early childhood care and education. (Piaget, 1954) A brief illustration can be observed regarding Piaget's theory that Pre-School children in what he terms the *'pre- operational stage'* of development cannot engage with abstract concepts and need to be able to use 'concrete' materials in order to progress their cognitive development. This theory became practice in ECCE settings through pedagogical practices which provided such concrete experiences and which did not challenge children to engage in abstract thinking. However, subsequent research has demonstrated that when children have a great deal of prior knowledge about a subject or if a challenge is presented in a familiar context they are able to display these 'higher order thinking skills (Borke, 1975, Donaldson, 1978, Gobbo and Chi, 1986, Carey, 1985).

This research does not serve to undermine or discredit Piagetian theory, which has yielded valuable insight into cognitive development processes. Rather it serves to demonstrate that we should not regard knowledge as 'absolute truth'. Even a cursory scan through research into early childhood development and learning demonstrate that there is a vast body of knowledge at the disposal of the ECCE practitioner. These include concepts such as *'cognition in context'*

(Vgotsky, 1978, Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994, Rogoff, 1990), Theories of mind which identify children's metacognitive abilities (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1989) or their development of learning strategies such as problem solving (National Research Council, 1999) and practical observation such as the optimal adult child interaction levels for supporting children's cognitive development (Vgotsky, 1978, Fischer et al, 1993).

The importance of a constructivist framework for the interpretation of this body of knowledge is critical in early childhood care and education if we consider the fact that in this context pedagogy is regarded as '*the interaction of curriculum, teaching methodology and strategies for developing active citizenship*'. (National Research Council, 2001) and is usually mediated to young children through adults.

> *Constructivists – Dewey (1976), Piaget, (1970) suggest that development results from complex interaction between children and their environments. Education is child centred, but the adult takes responsibility for placing the child in environmental circumstances that will provoke active construction of new education.*

(National Research Council, 2001:214)

As a result of the constructivist perspective in early childhood pedagogy the following principles supporting good practice in early childhood learning can be identified in the ECCE literature:

> *Children develop ideas and concepts at very young ages that help them make sense of their worlds. Learning is not the transfer of new information into an empty receptacle; it is the building of new understandings by the child on the foundations of existing understandings. Learning will be cost effective when children's preconceptions are engaged. Curricula can be evaluated on the extent to which they draw out and build on children's existing ideas.*

> *Developing expertise requires both a foundation of factual knowledge and skills <u>and</u> a conceptual understanding that allows facts to become "usable" knowledge. Curricula can be judged on the extent to which they promote the learning of concepts as well as information and skills.*

> *Children can be taught to monitor their thinking in the form of learning strategies. Some children use these 'metacognitive skills' spontaneously. But efforts to help all children learn more deliberatively can be incorporated into curricula.*

(National Research Council, 2000:185)

These three principles are offered to ECCE practitioners as guidelines to inform good practice in supporting children's early learning. On close examination, it is apparent that they mirror those principles that have been articulated above with respect to adult learning, and which I have argued are encapsulated in PBL. This therefore would appear to answer the question posed at the beginning of this section, 'Is there a 'match' between these different pedagogies?' with a straightforward yes. But what does this mean for the development of the CPE course for Pre-School Officers in Ireland?

It has already been established that PBL meets the criteria for 'good' continuing professional education e.g. by virtue of the fact that learning is embedded in practice. The match that has now been established between the pedagogical principles underpinning PBL and early childhood pedagogy yields a further benefit. The context of practice for Pre-School Officers is the ECCE sector in Ireland in general and specifically the range of ECCE service provision that falls under the remit of the Pre-School services regulations. The pedagogical approaches of ECCE practitioners is a core element in service provision and whilst the Pre-School Officers do not have a brief to inspect the practice and pedagogy of early education, their grasp and understanding of sound pedagogical principles will give them a valuable framework within which to observe other aspects of service provision. In addition it is apparent from international literature that adoption of pedagogical principles embedded in social constructivist theory require different approaches to professional education of practitioners (Fleet and Patterson, 1999). Analysis of courses that have made such adjustments have revealed that they all possess

> ...common threads which weave an extremely powerful theoretical framework. These include teacher educators belief in the learner as co-constructor of knowledge, the importance of 'hands on and intellectually engaging learning experiences, the role of inquiry and reflective practice in the development of professionals and the value of contextualising learning in meaningful ways.

(Fleet and Patterson, 1999:8).

In the context of this study there is evidence that debate regarding quality and good practice in ECCE in Ireland and the advent of core standards for professional practice in the ECCE sector (NCCC, 2002) that are also based on constructivist principles, will impact on the professional education of ECCE practitioners in order that they can adopt a constructivist perspective in their pedagogical approach. (NCCC, 2002, Hayes 2003). If this is the case, it follows that those inspecting practice must do so from a compatible professional perspective. Direct experience of PBL will allow Pre-School Officers to observe sound pedagogical principles in action through

their own continuing professional development programmes. This has the potential to be a very effective way of developing this critical understanding.

3.4.3 Summary

In this section of the report it has emerged that there is symmetry between philosophical and pedagogical principles underpinning good practice in both adult learning and early childhood learning. This suggests that adopting a PBL approach to the professional education of practitioners in the ECCE sector has the potential to afford ECCE practitioners first hand experience of sound pedagogical principles in their own experience of being learners. This experience can assist them in identifying good practice in early learning. Undoubtedly this appreciation will be a valuable addition to in the professional expertise of Pre-School Officers who are inspecting the ECCE sector.

3.5 What can we learn from existing Problem-based Learning courses in this field?

The final learning issue that contributes to the formation of a rationale for the development of a Problem-based Learning (PBL) approach to the development of a continuing professional education (CPE) course for Pre-School Officers in Ireland, addresses how PBL has already been used in this and/or related fields of learning. A consideration of the positive and negative experiences of others who have implemented PBL provides the opportunity to identify whether the theoretical arguments, outlined previously, are supported in practice experience. The review of literature relates to the use of PBL in ECCE and related fields of professional practice and also considers how it has been implemented in continuing professional education.

As I have already discussed in the introduction to this study, I was drawn to PBL because my experience as a student, provider, researcher and adult educator in the field of ECCE led me to believe that ECCE practitioner preparation must reflect the practice profile of the successful graduate. Traditional didactic teaching methods with their emphasis on 'chalk and talk' transmission of knowledge, I surmised, could not provide a model of good practice for professionals whose pedagogical approach is grounded in constructivist principles of active, inquiry based collaborative learning. Surprisingly however, when I began to search for literature to inform and support this hypothesis, I discovered that very little was available directly related to the professional education of ECCE practitioners. There is some evidence that there is a developing awareness of the potential of PBL for the preparation of ECCE practitioners, however implementation is very limited and in its initial stages. (Nummenmaa, 2002). I could

find no literature at all regarding the PBL in the education and training of Pre-School officers in any other national jurisdiction. In fact I have been unable to find any literature related directly to the education and training of either Pre-School or any other type of school inspectorate. Anecdotal evidence suggests that an apprenticeship model is employed within the education sector in Ireland. Experienced teachers are recruited into inspection positions and their training consists of accompanying an experienced inspector for a period of time before commencing solo inspection visits.

In the absence of information related to the specific arena of professional practice at the heart of this study, I attempted to uncover evidence from related fields of professional practice. The first and by far most prolific source of information resulted from an investigation of the original domain of expertise of the Pre-School Officers themselves. Nursing education has been experiencing a dynamic process of change in recent times characterised primarily by a move away from work-based training to a more academic structure (Rideout, 2001). It is also a growth area in Problem-based Learning, which has some basis in the fact that PBL originated in the field of medicine. Evaluation of PBL in nurse education is still in its early stages. In the United Kingdom a large scale research program Project on the Effectiveness of Problem-based Learning (PEPBL) project is focusing on nurse education programmes and is due to report in 2003. There are however, many other researchers who have provided evidence for the suitability and benefits of PBL in Nurse education. (Williams, 2002, Rideout, 2001, Glen and Wilkie, 2000. Baker, 2000). Sang, (2001) documents the implementation of a short continuing professional education course for nurse specialists, which provides a useful insight for this study as the course has many parallels to the proposed course for Pre-School Officers in this study. The nurse specialist role was a newly created position within the hospital and the PBL course was designed to support the new recruits fulfil the requirements of this new role. The results of evaluation showed that

> '...nurses felt that PBL
>
> *Helped them more understanding the objectives of the course than traditional method (sic)*
>
> *Could increase their motivation for learning*
>
> *Could increase their ability of critical thinking (sic)*
>
> *Could increase their ability of problem solving*
>
> *Could help them adapt the new role (sic)*
>
> *(Y.Y.Sang, 2001:376)*

Participants also claimed that the PBL experience allowed them to clearly identify their new role and gain confidence in clinical practice. Other studies have posited that PBL can also play an important role in the development of ethical practice in nursing by virtue of the fact that the values of PBL such as learner empowerment, valuing and respecting experience and fostering reflection are those that must underpin the development of ethical practice in nursing. (Cuthbert and Quallington, 2000). This success bodes well for the implementation of a PBL approach to the delivery of a short continuing professional education course for Pre-School Officers who originally come from a nursing background. However, the context in which the Pre-School Officers will practice is not a medical one and therefore it is important to discover how PBL has been employed in other fields of professional education which more accurately reflect the domain of practice that Pre-School Officers will experience. It would appear from the literature that the closer the domain of professional practice gets to teaching the less likely it is that a PBL approach will be implemented. In Ireland for example there is evidence of successful implementation of PBL in Dentistry and Occupational Therapy, but no examples in teacher education. Internationally, PBL has been implemented in Occupational Therapy, (Martin, 2000), Social Work education (Chui, 2001,) and also in related disciplines such as psychology. The uptake in teacher education has been slower, (Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2000). McPhee, (2002) has considered why this is the case in the UK. Whilst he acknowledges that *'PBL sits well within current understandings of the process of effective learning'*, he proposes a number of reasons why it has not found greater popularity in teacher education in the UK. These are primarily related to the nature of PBL itself which is a total approach to education and not simply an 'add on' element which can be integrated into existing course structures. He argues that teacher education at its best, values the same principles as PBL, modeling of good practice, a substantial practicum and reflective practice. Therefore it is the case that many teacher education courses will not identify the added benefits of PBL especially as the 'cost' of change is very high. Despite these reservations however, McPhee documents the implementation of PBL in an initial teacher education programme in the University of Glasgow and concludes that *'PBL seems a feasible methodology for teacher education. It is well proven within professional education, and our research suggests that it has much to offer in terms of student learning and motivation.'* (p.72). This finding is supported by research literature from the United States of America (USA). Barbara Levin has edited a collection of papers whose purpose is to *'provide a variety of field tested examples that use PBL for teacher education in many professional development settings.'* (Levin, 2001:2). This overall message of the book is positive and realistic. Whilst it acknowledges that within teacher education there are particular challenges

associated with the need to give students a broad range of experience in teaching methodologies, it concludes that the benefits justify meeting and overcoming the challenges. As Carol Dean concludes in chapter one:

> *I am convinced that PBL is an excellent way to engage students in materials that might otherwise seem irrelevant. Confronting then with real issues, providing mentors who are practicing educators to help them gain a broader perspective, and giving them the responsibility to teach their classmates are powerful ways to help students begin to explore and take ownership of their future professions.*

> *(Dean, 2001:38)*

The greater of incidence of PBL in teacher education in the USA is undoubtedly related to increased usage of Problem-based Learning or the related Project Based Approach (Katz and Chard, 1989) in teaching practice in elementary and secondary schools (often referred to as K-12). The growing recognition of the benefits of PBL in children's education in the USA has stimulated changes in the practice environment of teachers and this in turn has impacted on providers of teacher education. As I have previously argued, this and other approaches to children's education which are grounded in social constructivist theory and place emphasis on reflective practitioners, require that teachers preparation encompasses the knowledge and skills necessary to support such approaches. In the USA, PBL has been identified as meeting this challenge. In Ireland, the advent of core standards for professional practice in the ECCE sector (NCCC, 2002) that are also based on constructivist principles will undoubtedly impact on professional education for ECCE practitioners in the future. If the pattern, which can be identified from the international literature, emerges, then it is reasonable to predict that PBL may also emerge as an appropriate instructional strategy for ECCE professional preparation programmes.

In addition to exploring literature related to the implementation of PBL in professional areas that are closely related to ECCE, I was also interested to explore how PBL was being applied in continuing professional education or graduate education. The majority of PBL literature relates to initial professional or undergraduate education and as with ECCE I discovered that relevant research evidence was very limited. The consensus however from the research literature is that PBL meets the needs of adult learners (Knowles and Associates, 1984) who are more motivated to learn when their own needs and experience provide the starting point for learning and when the immediate focus of learning is application to relevant practice situations (Kaufman, 1998). This is supported by Fenwick (2002) in a study of mid career professionals from a variety of

disciplines, participating in a Master of Arts in Leadership program. Participants reported that their most valuable learning was related to group process and self-knowledge and that both these areas were valuable to their professional practice over the long term. Fink (2001) concluded that PBL was an obvious solution to the rising demand for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses in engineering and praised the PBL concept which '... *allows the students to develop excellent analytical skills.* (p. 6).

3.5.1 Summary

The objective of this section of the literature review was to seek insight into the possible role of PBL in the development and delivery of a continuing professional education course for Pre-School Officers. In the absence of examples in the same area, I sought to explore related fields of learning and to this end considered Nursing and Teacher education. In addition I also explored the literature related to continuing professional education as distinct from initial or undergraduate education. From this review it is apparent that whilst there are challenges and caveats associated with PBL in each perspective, the overall consensus is that it is an appropriate educational approach to the professional education of experienced practitioners and particularly those who must fulfill a professional role that is characterised by the Reflective Practitioner model of professional practice. (Jones and Joss, 1995). The caveats that are included in the literature mainly refer to the implementation of PBL in terms of resources, time and institutional support. The clear message being that taking a PBL approach to education requires a total change of perspective at all levels, from management and policy making to practice and assessment. (Albanese and Mitchell, 1993, Vernon and Blake, 1993) however the rewards in terms of higher levels of learner satisfaction, participation and enjoyment (Wilkerson and Feletti, 1989), improved long term knowledge retention (Norman and Schmidt, 1992, 2000), increased awareness and ability to deal with ethical issues (Levin, 2001, Little & LeGuin White, 2001) or simply as Dean (1999) put it …*'to make information come alive and have meaning beyond the textbook',* are deemed by many to be well worth the effort.

3.6   Curriculum development in Problem-based Learning.

This study aims to establish not only the rational for a PBL approach to the CPE of Pre-School Officers, but also to explore the PBL curriculum development process and offer a sample curriculum for consideration in the next phase of the implementation process. This section of the study looks at the literature on curriculum development to synthesize the accumulated wisdom on best practice in this process.

3.6.1   What kind of PBL?

Savin-Baden (2000) has proposed that five distinct models of PBL can be identified from practice. Figure 6 outlines the key characteristics of these models.

Figure 6: Models of Problem-based Learning

PBL Model	Epistemological Competence	Professional Action	interdisciplinary understanding	Transdisciplinary learning	Critical Contestablility
Knowledge	Propositional	Practical and performative	Prepositional, performative and practical	The examining and testing out of given knowledge and frameworks	Contingent contextual and constructed.
Learning	The use and management of a prepositional body of knowledge to solve or manage a problem	The outcome focused acquisition of knowledge and skills for the workplace	The synthesis of knowledge with skills across discipline boundaries	Critical thought and de-centering oneself from disciplines in order to understand them	A flexible entity that involves interrogation of frameworks
Problem Scenario	Limited – solutions already known and are designed to promote cognitive understanding	Focused on a real life situation that requires an effective practical solution	Acquiring knowledge to be able to do, therefore centered around knowledge with action	Characterized by resolving and managing dilemmas	Multi dimensional, offering students options for alternative ways of knowing and being
Students	Receivers of knowledge who acquire and understand through problem solving	Pragmatists inducted into professional cultures who can undertake practical action	Integrators across boundaries	Independent thinkers who take up a critical stance towards learning	Explorers of underlying structures and belief systems
Facilitator	A guide to obtaining the solution and to understanding the correct prepositional knowledge	A demonstrator of skills and a guide to 'best practice'	A coordinator of knowledge and skill acquisition across boundaries of both	An orchestrator of opportunities for learning (in its widest sense)	A commentator, a challenger and decoder of of cultures, disciplines and traditions
Assessment	The testing of a body of knowledge to ensure students have developed epistemological competence	The testing of skills and competencies for the work lace supported by a body of knowledge	The examination of skills and knowledge in a context that may have been learned out of context	The opportunity to demonstrate an integrated understanding of skills and personal and prepositional knowledge across disciplines	Open ended and flexible.

(Savin Baden, 2000:126-7)

In this study a combination of the latter two models is the objective outcome because it is only through this approach that the "*..intent of PBL as a critical pedagogy directed to the emancipation of both the learner and the practitioner*" (Conway & Little, 2001) can be achieved. This objective requires that the curriculum is embedded in real world practice that

67

challenges the learner to engage in critical evaluation of all aspects and dimensions of professional practice. The relevance for the CPE course of Pre-School Officers lies in the fact that they are being asked to challenge their existing knowledge and skills to adapt to the new framework of practice in which they are operating.

In addition, evidence suggests that when a PBL course is being developed for a short professional practice course a fully integrated approach to PBL, whereby learners engage with one problem at a time is recommended. The benefits of this approach have been described as follows:

> *It provides a focus for learning; limits the number of problems students have to encounter in a short time; provides for clear integration of concepts within the conceptual framework of the profession and therefore will enhance students' awareness of the interrelationships within their profession.*

(Conway, Jeffries and Chen, 2000)

3.6.2   What is different about PBL curriculum?

Biggs (1999) identifies two general 'meta designs for teaching, the 'traditional' which he claims, " .. *focuses on what teachers do, rather than on what and how students learn*" and 'systems' design, which is learner focused and which takes account of the complex factors which contribute to learning outcomes such as student ability, as well as curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. The latter approach he argues requires alignment between all these elements. In a similar vein, Conway and Little, (2001) argue that for PBL to be effective, the paradigm shift that is necessary in the approach to teaching and learning must also occur in the curriculum development process. In their opinion, the major challenges in implementation of a PBL approach lie in curriculum design rather than with the use of PBL as an instructional strategy (Conway & Little, 2000). They have articulated this paradigm as one that emphasizes:

> *Selection of content from practice*
>
> *Concepts as the organising structure of the curriculum*
>
> *Process as content*
>
> *Graduate outcomes, not subject-based outcomes.*
>
> *Conway & Little (2001, p.1)*

In PBL, the 'problem scenarios' form the basis of the curriculum. Following the criteria suggested above therefore it follows that such problem scenarios must be derived from the

practice experience of the professional. In addition, the problems must relate to the overall graduate profile and furthermore must promote acquisition of the profession's conceptual framework. In his analysis of effective scaffolding in PBL, Tony Greening, (1998) argues that the authenticity or 'fidelity' of problems bears a direct relationship to the success of PBL in that the higher the fidelity the better outcomes. Jayawickramarajah, (1996) investigated the factors contributing to achieving high fidelity in problem scenarios and concluded that the closer to real life practice situation the problems were the better.

Figure 7 represents the process of curriculum design as outlined by Conway and Little (2000)

Figure 7: PBL as a Curriculum Design

Related Real-World Practice	--------------------------------------	Related Inter-Discipline Based Knowledge

Simulated Learning Stimulus
"Real-World Situation"
⇓ ⇓ ⇓ ⇓
Enquiry Process
⇓ ⇓ ⇓ ⇓
Response to Situation
Justified from Related Learning

Related Experiential Knowledge/Skills	Related Values and Professional Behaviours	Related Skill Development
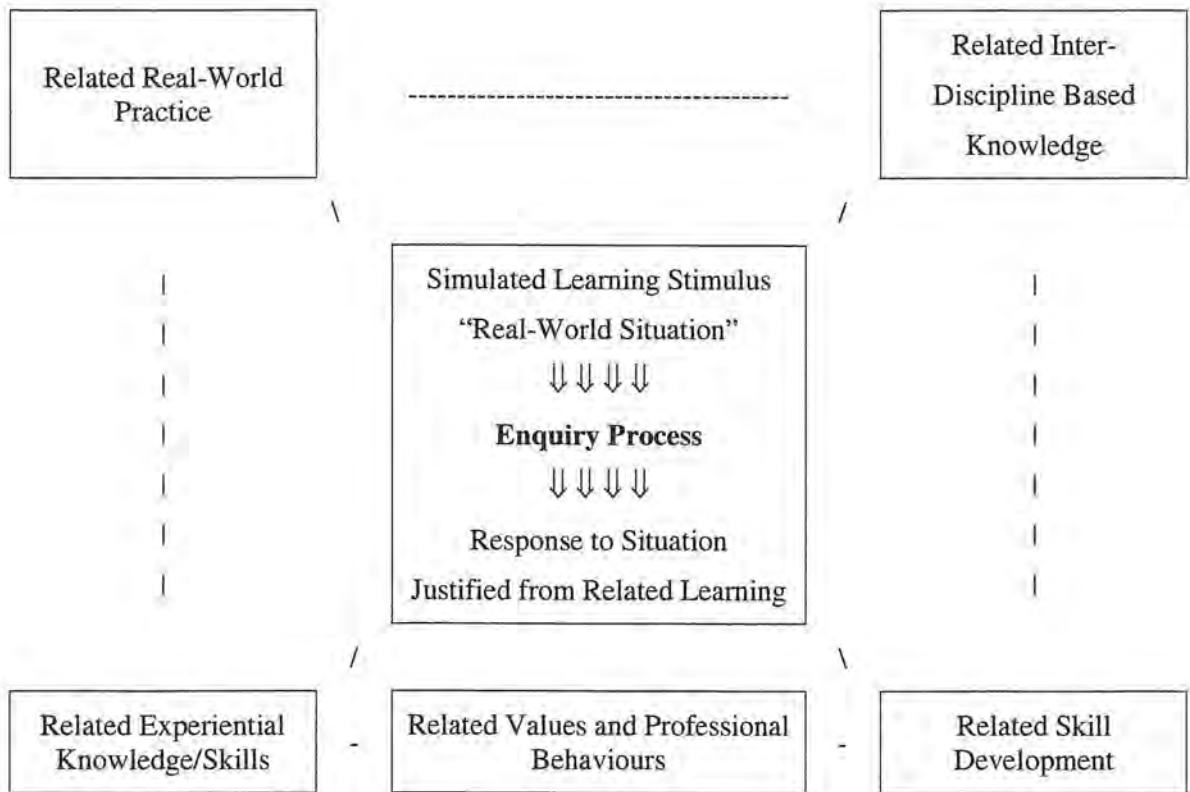
© PROBLARC 2000

They argue that effective design of learning materials in PBL is " *the most significant aspect of facilitation of learning*" (Conway & Little, 2000:2). This design process occurs at two levels; the micro, or instructional level which is the actual PBL problem scenario which drives the learning process, and the macro level which is the overarching curriculum framework for the profession and which is based on "....*predetermined criteria that emerge from the conceptual framework of the discipline and the context in which graduate will practice.*" (ibid). In this

study the model framework for education, training and professional development (NCCC, 2002) provides the conceptual framework for practice in the ECCE sector in Ireland and the practice experience as derived from the practice narratives of the experience Pre-School Officers provides the context.

The process of curriculum development therefore involves identifying the core concepts within the practice scenarios as they relate to the conceptual framework of the profession. This concept mapping process (Bourgeois, 1993, Stepien, 1994, Stephen, & Pyke, 1997) allows for the development of curricula which reflects the integrated, interdisciplinary nature of professional knowledge and which promotes the understanding and application of concepts to the depth required by the demands of 'good' practice in the professional arena.

A concept map us a way of organising information or knowledge. They are " *two dimensional representations of cognitive structure showing the hierarchies and the interconnections of concepts involved in a discipline or a sub discipline"* (Martin, 1994:11). In this instance it is being used to develop the curriculum for the proposed CPE course for Pre-School Officers based on their practice narrative. This approach to curriculum development is congruent with the constructivist epistemology of this study in that it uses prior knowledge as a framework to learn new knowledge.

3.6.3   Summary

Problem-based Learning has many manifestations, which are only recently beginning to be identified and named in the research literature. Much of the research has been devoted to uncovering the nature, scope and challenge of PBL as an instructional design. Despite this there is a growing awareness of the critical nature of PBL curriculum development and the central role that it plays in the earning process. Furthermore, the process of curriculum development has been identified as having a unique identity in both its evolution and content. As with the 'whole' of PBL as a pedagogical approach, curriculum a core component 'part' must be congruent with the conceptual framework of the profession domain. It requires that curriculum development promote the integration of core concepts within the problem scenarios (micro level) and the overarching curriculum (macro level.)

3.7   Chapter summary

This chapter has explored the literature on four core learning issues related to the development of a rationale for the adoption of Problem-based Learning (PBL) to the continuing professional

education (CPE) course for Pre-School Officers in the ECCE sector in Ireland. It has identified the domain of practice of the Pre-School Officers and has revealed that this practice environment has only recently come to prominence in terms of policy development and State intervention, regulation and support. It is also characterized by rapid expansion and development over a short period of time, and there is evidence of that an 'emergent profession' of ECCE is acquiring identity and substance.

The nature of this professionalism has been explored and the model of the 'Reflective Practitioner' has been identified as that most compatible with the expressed values of ECCE practitioners in Ireland. The literature on professionalism and professional education has demonstrated that CPE is an essential component part of professional education. However in order to ensure that it meets the needs of experienced professional practitioners it must answer certain criteria. These criteria can be summarized as the capacity to engage participants in reflective discourse that challenges their belief systems in a meaningful practice based context.

These are the criteria that Problem-based Learning must be able to fulfill in order to meet the CPE needs of the Pre-School Officers. A review of the literature on the psychology and theory of PBL highlights a number of important points pertinent to this issue. This review demonstrates that there is a 'fit' between the pedagogical approaches of ECCE and PBL. It also shows how PBL can provide a learning environment conducive to the promotion of reflection and metacognition.

The chapter concludes with a consideration of how PBL has been implemented in similar circumstances to the proposed CPE course for Pre-School Officers. Whilst no direct comparison was discovered, there was evidence to demonstrate that PBL has gained credibility in CPE in related professional practice fields such as Nursing, Social Work and Teaching.

In addition to exploring the core arguments that go towards the theoretical framework for the implementation of PBL in the proposed CPE course for the Pre-School Officers, the particular nature of curriculum development is also examined. This reveals that ensuring congruence between professional practice and curriculum development is essential to promote the success of a PBL approach.

This can be achieved through the identification of core concepts that inform good practice in the professional field through exploration of the graduate professional profile and examination of the nature of professional practice.

CHAPTER 4   METHODOLOGY

4.1   Introduction

This chapter addresses the methodology employed to conduct the primary research in this study. The following issues are addressed:

- What is case study method and why is it appropriate in this research?

- Why Focus Group as a research method?

- What manner of focus group this study employs and why?

- How is this method be used in this study?

- What approach has been taken to data analysis and why?

4.2   Why case study?

In this study an interpretive and subjective research paradigm has been adopted in keeping with the constructivist epistemology previously articulated. In particular a Case Study methodology is followed. The purposes of the case study approach have been described as follows:

> 'To portray, analyse and interpret the uniqueness of real individuals and situations through accessible accounts
>
> To catch the complexity and situatedness of behaviour
>
> To present and represent reality – to give a sense of being there
>
> (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000:79)
>
> Case studies strive to portray what it is like to be in a particular situation, to catch the close up reality and 'thick description (Geertz, 1973) of participants lived experiences of, thoughts about and feeling for, a situation.
>
> (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2000:182-183)

In the context of Problem-based Learning research, it has been argued that, "*The aim of a qualitative case study is not to generalise but to describe and understand the phenomenon in its natural context*" (Poikela & Poikela, 2000:343). It is compatible with the philosophy of PBL as, "*both value the examination of situations in context and are practice oriented.*" (Conway, Chen

& Jeffries, 2001:5). Capturing the real experiences of practitioners is essential to facilitate the development of the curriculum of the Continuing Professional Education (CPE) course for Pre-School Officers in a manner, which accurately reflects their actual experience of their role.

4.2.1 Limitations

The purpose of the case study is to probe deeply and analyse intensely the many phenomena and dimensions that contribute to the nature of the specific instance. In this instance it is the practice experience of a group of experienced Pre-School Officers. However, the focused nature of this study does not allow for claims to be made regarding the wider population to which they belong.

4.3 Why focus group?

The development process for the research design for this dissertation required lengthy reflection on the ontological and epistemological perspectives of both the subject of the study, (i.e. Problem-based Learning) and the researcher. This resulted in the proposal of a research design that is informed by constructivist perspectives. The core theoretical perspective, which acts as the foundation for this study, is that which holds that knowledge is derived from a process of construction in which the learner is an active agent. It holds that *'truth or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world'* (Crotty, 1998:8).

Focus group research is a qualitative research tool based fundamentally on the premise that we can learn from people by listening carefully to them. As Morgan (1998) puts it: *"...focus groups draw on three of the fundamental strengths that are shared by all qualitative methods: 1) exploration and discovery, 2) context and depth, 3) interpretation."* (Morgan 1998:12). In essence, focus groups use group discussion as a way of accessing the thoughts and experiences of participants and in so doing providing insight into the complexity of the issues under study. The key objectives of this study are the development of a rationale and curriculum for a Problem-based Learning (PBL) continuing professional development course for Pre-School officers in Ireland. Problem-based Learning focuses on real world problems, not hypothetical case studies with neat, convergent outcomes, to form the basis of the curriculum.

Focus groups offer an opportunity to gather *'thick description'* (Geertz, 1973), of what it is like to be a Pre-School Officer and, on the basis of this narrative, to develop the ill-structured, real world problems that form the PBL curriculum.

4.4   What type of focus group and why?

Focus groups were developed as a research tool by social scientists in the early part of the twentieth century, however it was not until the late 1950's that the term focus group became associated with this particular research methodology, (Merton & Kendall, 1956). Despite these origins however, the use of focus groups in academic research in the social sciences declined during subsequent decades and became more commonly associated with marketing research.

The use of focus groups as an academic research method has been experiencing a resurgence of interest in recent times. This can be attributed to the success of researchers in field of applied social research such as Evelyn Folch-Lyon (1981), Joseph et al (1984) and John Knodel (1995) who used this approach to yield important insights into key social problems such as population control and AIDS. In addition the publication of systematic statements rationalising the use of focus groups such as those of Richard Krueger (1988) and David Morgan (1997) provided sound theoretical basis for the use of focus groups by academics in the social sciences. Morgan (1998) presents a useful matrix for summarising the ways that focus groups are currently used across a variety of fields.

Figure 8: Four basic uses for focus groups

	Academic Research	Product Marketing	Evaluation research	Quality Improvement
Problem Identification	Generating research questions	Generating new product ideas	Needs assessment	Identifying opportunities
Planning	Research design	Developing new products	Program development	Planning intervention
Implementation	Data collection	Monitoring customer response	Process evaluation	Implementing intervention
Assessment	Data analysis	Refining product or marketing	Outcome evaluation	Assessment and redesign

(Morgan, 1998: 9)

Whilst curriculum development, or indeed educational research, is not identified within this matrix, the generic stages of problem identification, planning, implementation and assessment are transferable to any field of research and can be articulated in similar terms to that of evaluation research. In practice, focus groups have a multitude of actual and potential applications. However, not all uses of the term focus group are appropriate. *"The hallmark of focus groups is their explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group."* (Morgan, 1997: 2)

Discussions of good practice in the use of focus groups have identified three key characteristics, which must be present in order to ensure that the focus group descriptor is valid. *"They are a research method for collecting qualitative data, they are focused efforts at data gathering, and they generate data through group discussions."* (Morgan, 1998:29)

In this study the focus group will used for the planning and development of the aforementioned PBL curriculum. This requires that narrative from experienced practitioners is gathered to identify the continuing professional development needs, plan curriculum content and develop the problem scenarios that form the curriculum.

4.5   The focus group method in this study

Each of the four identified generic uses of focus groups will influence the type of focus group that is conducted. Focus groups vary according to the nature of the formality of structure, questions and role of the moderator. For example, if problem identification is the purpose, (as it is in this instance), then the focus group is likely to be less structured allowing for informality and free flowing discussion that will generate a broad range of ideas and information. However, if planning, implementation or assessment are the objective, then it is likely that the focus group will be more structured around specific questions which are designed to achieve particular outcomes. The role of the moderator will also vary according to the purpose of the focus group ranging from informal, non-directive to more controlling. In this study the focus group has an exploratory purpose. It is designed to discover the nature of practice of the role of Pre-School Officer in Ireland. Therefore the number of questions is limited to allow for more developed discussion to take place.

The key to good planning for a focus group begins with clarity about the desired outcomes. Once these have been identified then the questions, which provide the focus for the focus group, can be developed and these in turn will influence all other elements. For this study the desired outcome is to understand the practice of Pre-School Officers in Ireland. To this end the following core questions were developed:

1. What are the common tasks and/or problems that you as Pre-School Officers encounter in your daily work?

2. Can you elaborate on some of the particularly challenging and difficult problems you face regularly?

3. What are examples of problems, which present particular challenges to your existing professional expertise?

4.6 Recruitment

Pre-School Officers were contacted through the National Forum Group for Pre-School Officers in Ireland and invited to participate in the study. Nine Pre-School Officers responded to the invitation and gave their informed consent to participate in the research.

4.7 Focus group schedule

The schedule below was developed in advance of the focus group.

Figure 9: Focus group schedule

Stage	Duration	Content	Materials
Introduction and icebreaker	10 minutes	Welcome, reiterating the purpose of the study, outline of the schedule of the focus group, including the focus questions.	Tape recorder, name tents, Flip chart, paper, pens. Bottled water, plastic cups.
Question 1	25 minutes		
Question 2	25 minutes		
Question 3	25 minutes		
Closure	5 minutes	Thank participants, assure confidentiality and give details for feedback procedure.	

4.8 Data analysis

Much of the literature regarding the analysis of focus group data deals with the analysis of multiple focus groups. In this study, a single focus group was conducted due to the specific nature of the field of inquiry and the limitations in terms of time and availability of participants.

In keeping with the research design, I have taken an interpretive approach to data analysis and have followed the systematic analysis process as outlined by Krueger (1998).

Krueger describes a five stage process for the analysis of focus groups. These can be summarised as follows:

- Start while in the group: listen for inconsistent, vague or cryptic comments and probe for understanding.

- Immediately after the focus group – draw seating plan, note themes, hunches, ideas any other observations

- Soon after focus group – listen to tape, make transcript (if required) review field notes and read transcript. Prepare a report of the focus group in a question by question format with amplifying quotes, share report for verification.

- Later – within days – analyse the data, look for emerging themes by question and then overall, construct typologies or diagram the analysis, describe findings and use quotes to illustrate.

- Prepare the report

Stage four of the analysis process required in depth consideration of the data generated in the focus group. In this study the purpose of the focus group was to gather narrative from experienced practitioners in order to identify their continuing professional development needs, plan curriculum content and develop the problem scenarios that form the Problem-based Learning (PBL) curriculum. The 'paradigm shift' (Conway and Little, 2000) in curriculum development for PBL that I wish to achieve depends upon the careful analysis of the narrative of the experienced practitioners. This analysis needed to:

- Distil from the narrative, the key issues that the Pre-School Officers identify as the challenges that they are facing in their practice,

- Discern whether these challenges are linked in any way and if so what categories or themes can be developed to reflect these links.

- Discover potential problem scenarios that might form the basis of the PBL curriculum for the short continuing professional education course for Pre-School Officers.

- Ensure that the views, beliefs, expectations, aspirations and opinions of the participants, as articulated in their stories, were accurately expressed throughout the analysis.

In searching for a methodology for analysis that would achieve these aims I encountered a wide array of models and approaches. (Ratcliff, 2002). Ultimately however grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), offered the best 'fit' with the epistemological perspective of the study.

The term grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is used to describe the inductive process of identifying analytical categories as they emerge from the data (developing hypotheses from the ground or research field upwards rather defining them a priori). (Pope et al, 2000:114)

This methodology requires that the researcher becomes totally familiar with the raw data (in this case the transcript of the focus group). In this process of immersion, Krueger (1994) suggests that the following should inform this early stage of analysis:

- Consider the words of the participants

- Consider the context of each comment (is it based on a prompted example, etc.)

- Consider the internal consistency

- Consider the frequency or extensiveness of comments

- Consider the intensity of the comments

- Consider the specificity of responses (give them more weight than vague, impersonal responses)

- Find the big issues

4.9   Chapter summary

This chapter has addressed the issue of method and methodology and how they are applied in this study. It demonstrates the suitability of focus group as a research tool in terms of the theoretical perspective of the study and also the process of curriculum development for Problem-based Learning. It has also considered the method of data analysis and has identified the processes that are employed to achieve the research aims and objectives.

CHAPTER 5   PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

5.1   Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of this study's primary research with Pre-School Officers and takes the following format:

- A brief profile of the participants, drawn from the registration form that participants completed at the focus group.

- Presentation of findings from analysis of focus group transcript (complete transcript included in appendix)

- Presentation of additional findings from the feedback of the Pre-School Officers

In keeping with the research design, an interpretive approach has been taken to analysis of the transcript and the systematic analysis process as outlined by Krueger (1998) has been adopted. He suggests considering analysis as a continuum consisting of raw data (statements made by the participants), descriptives (summary statements of the participant's comments), and interpretation (building on the summary statements and presenting the meaning of the data.) The analysis is further structured around the three key questions presented to the participants during the focus group:

- What are the common tasks and/or problems that you as Pre-School Officer encounter in your daily work?

- Can you elaborate in some of the particularly challenging and difficult problems you face regularly?

- What are examples of problems, which present particular challenges to your existing professional expertise?

The findings are presented in a narrative style, foregrounding the voices of the participants with excerpts from the transcript to ensure that their perspectives, views and opinions are accurately represented. The responses are then summarised after each question is considered. Due to the fact that these core questions are cumulative in nature, the interpretation of the responses to all questions will be presented at the end of the section.

5.2 Profile of participants

Due to unforeseen circumstances, eight Pre-School Officers out of the nine who agreed to participate in the focus group turned up on the day. From the registration form that they filled out before commencement of the session (see appendix E) the following profile has been compiled. All participants were female and were all qualified Public Health Nurses. There was an even split between rural and urban practice settings. Only two of the participants had not been employed in the role of Pre-School Officer since the inception of the role in 1997/98. Both of these participants had been in post for at least two years. All participants had completed the Dublin Institute of Technology short Continuing Professional Development course in Early Childhood Care and Education in 2001. This was a surprising finding as it had not at any time been stipulated as a prerequisite for participation in the research process. It also has significant consequences for the outcomes of the research process as will be discussed later.

5.3 Focus group report

At precisely two minutes to two on a blustery afternoon, the first participants began to arrive. They were in good spirits, joking and laughing over the fact that one of their colleagues had just rung to say that she had got lost en route to the venue despite the fact that she had been previously exhorting them not to be late. They all rejected an offer of tea or coffee as they informed me that they had arranged to meet up for lunch nearby prior to the afternoon's session. The Director of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), who had so generously provided the location for the focus group had asked in return to be able to say a brief hello to the group and extend an invitation for them to visit the centre's new premises after completion of the session. This was a good way of settling the group and getting them to take their seats. By 2.10 pm, the Director took his leave and the main business of the afternoon began. As the lost member of the group had yet to arrive, I asked the participants to fill out a short profile questionnaire explaining that it would give me an opportunity to write a more accurate group narrative profile. I reassured them of the confidentiality and anonymity guarantee and made completion of this form optional, as it had not been included on the original research design. All participants completed the form and just as they were completing them the final member of the group arrived at approximately 2.20pm. This naturally caused a little disruption in the group as she took her seat and I quickly filled her in on what had taken place to date. However the participants were anxious to get started and quickly settled down again. I briefly went through the purpose of the exercise, and gave a brief outline of how I envisaged the

session progressing. I pointed out the recorder and asked them to try to only speak one at a time. I outlined my role as moderator in terms of timekeeping and progressing the discussion. I made it clear that I would not be contributing to the discussion but that I might use questions to clarify my understanding of their contributions. One participant asked me when we would finish as she had a train to catch. I assured them that as per the informed consent form I hoped to finish by 4pm. This gave us 1.5 hours for the focus group. I had written the three questions which I had included in the letter of invitation, on a flip chart to act as a reference point should the discussion drift to far off the subject. At 2.30pm I began the focus group by inviting each participant to respond to the first question. I suggested that we go around the table for this first question and offer all participants the opportunity to contribute. And so it began.

I had the impression that the participants were very eager to impress the importance of their role in the ECCE sector and whilst there was a good variety of opinion, there certainly appeared on first impression to be a general consensus on the core issues they wished to emphasise. The discussion flowed freely and naturally gathering momentum as the participants relaxed into the conversation. I did not at anytime have to stimulate participants to offer contributions however I did have to redirect them on a few occasions when it seemed that a particular issue or experience was sidetracking the main purpose of the focus group. About 15 minutes from the end of the session, I interrupted the conversation to suggest that we summarise and check with everyone that they felt happen that their opinions had been heard. This was welcomed and as a result of this I suggested the addition of an extra question related to their view on the future development of their role. As with the initial question this went round the table and provided a good way to close the discussion. At 4pm exactly I informed the participants that we had reached the end of our agreed time and thanked them for their cooperation. I told them that I would come back to them as soon as the initial transcription had been completed to discuss the next step in the research process. I gave each participant a small box of chocolates as a token of thanks and completed the session.

5.4   Analysis of transcript

5.4.1   Overview

The three guiding questions for the focus group were written up on a flip chart and kept visible throughout the entire session. These questions were designed to move the participants from discussions of general facets of their role as Pre-School Officers to more specific examples of practice experience. Keeping the main questions visible throughout the session did help to keep

the discussion on track, as there was considerable temptation to become sidetracked by issues that were raised by the participants in relation to their practice experience. In the main however, the flow of the focus group was maintained and did result in the movement from general to specific discussion of practice. I prepared the transcript myself and certainly found the process as challenging a task as predicted in the literature (Krueger, 1998, Morgan, 1998). I endeavoured to capture accurately all of the dialogue, however there were sections of the recording where accuracy was hampered by background noise or by many participants speaking together. Where I was unsure of the content, I indicated the missing element by inserting .... instead of attempting to guess at the content. At certain points, I inserted a word or phrase to assist the reader to make sense of the transcript. These insertions are indicated by square brackets [ ]. To aid analysis, I also included comments in the transcript to indicate strong consensus amongst the participants. These are bracketed in italics in the transcript and bracketed in plain script when cited in support of the findings in this chapter.

For ethical reasons, all identities of participants have been protected and all content, which might identify participants, has also been changed e.g. geographical locations, names of Health Boards.

The complete transcript was sent to all participants for a member check. A feedback template was supplied to facilitate this process, (appendix G). Three out of the eight participants returned the template, two responded with telephone calls and three did not respond. The respondents all agreed that the transcript was a fair and accurate representation of the focus group and no changes or amendments were suggested.

5.4.2   Everyday activities of Pre-School Officers

All participants were invited to respond to the initial question, *"What are the common tasks and/or problems that you as Pre-School Officers encounter in your daily work?"*

The general response is reflected in the words of Ann

> *"I suppose the main task that we would have is to carry out inspections. And they would be for all Pre-School services. It would be dealing with complaints that come in, ..can be quite numerous, follow up inspections, and (prompt from other members on advisory) advisory makes up a huge part of it and support of existing services."*

The management of the service and preparation and dissemination of inspection reports were identified as core activities

".....we have responsibility of operating the service and that would be dealing literally with everything that comes into the service." (Ann)

"...all those visits have to be followed up with the report of whatever your observations are and that can take some time to do. If we do the inspections with an environmental health officer then the two reports have to be merged together and that takes time as we are based in different venues. And then when they are put together, you know, to proof read them and check them and get them out to the providers hopefully within the month if we are lucky (general laughter) and then to do the clerical end of you know - your files are maintained..." (Breda)

Additional tasks were identified that related to Pre-School Officers role in the evolving infrastructure of the ECCE sector.

"Another area I think that is quite time consuming is all these committees and other things that you are involved in – those meetings happen regularly, monthly, two or three times a week, about something the Health Board is involved in, or about childcare – it used to be just us and now there's the - what do you call them? (all prompt County Childcare Committees) County Childcare Committees"(Clare)

These also related to their previous role as Public Health Nurses

"And when new things come on stream like immunisation and things like that they want to access - our role in that area is increasing."(Mary)

"Going back to what Mary was talking about the immunisation, we have the same thing about oral hygiene, people would know you, you have the word Pre-Schools marked across your forehead, so say I know a person - the next thing is - can I have a meeting with you? – it does take up a lot of time." (Sarah)

Other activities that were identified in respect of this initial question included networking with colleagues,

"working, belonging to a team within your own, sort of em, health board – you know the way there would be meetings in the evening and then keeping in touch with each other having our own meetings and planning ahead, planning the month and the year." (Breda)

and providing information for a broad range of purposes:

"What other people didn't say was ...we haven't had one for a while - but we've parliamentary questions (lots of noisy agreement) we spent such a lot of time having to trawl through every one of our files because Politician A was asked a question... " (Sarah)

"...there's another wad of people out there who want all these stats (statistics)– they want numbers of visits and you spend so much time as you're going along doing all of that and keeping stuff available for people who are looking for stats.."(Clare)

"...they [Health Boards] tend to want our leaflets and they want our information and then they work from that..."(Mary)

5.4.3   Summary

There was a great deal of clarity and consensus about the daily activities that Pre-School Officers engaged in. These can be summarised as:

- Inspection of services – initial and follow up.

- Investigation of complaints

- Advisory functions – for service providers prior to set up of services and subsequent to inspection.

- Service operation and management – coordination, record keeping, administration.

- Provision of information – for policy makers, management, and research

- Participation in committees.

It also became apparent during the initial responses from participants that identifying these activities prompted them to develop their comments further to identify the challenges that these activities presented. This moved the discussion along to the second question of three. *"Can you elaborate on some of the particularly challenging and difficult problems you face regularly?"*

5.5   The challenges faced regularly by Pre-School Officers.

The overwhelming consensus of the group related to the challenge presented by time management:

"When we first came into the job it was very much just, do the inspections, but now because people identify you as the Pre-School Officer in an area you're asked to join a lot of those committees, maybe childcare networks in the local areas and that type of thing and you give support that way. And that is expanding and growing and takes a fair bit of time and yet it is something we want to support and is an important part of our work "(Mary)

The following interchange is representative of the frustration that the Pre-School Officers expressed on this issue

> *"Whereas that body could ask you to come on one sub committee you could have another two or three sub committees all related to childcare issues and all very mostly quite relevant (Clare)*
>
> *Hugely! (Many voices)*
>
> *Ok, hugely, and they can each take the best part of a half a day - a morning or afternoon - gone". (Clare)*

Ellen actually questions the ability of Pre-School Officers to engage in tasks additional to the inspection role:

> *"I think the first thing that we have to remember is that we have a statutory duty to inspect. And can we wear two caps? – Can we be an inspector and a development person?"*

She and others, especially those from urban settings, cited the heavy case load as the root cause of this dilemma:

> *"...well I tell you we are heavily influenced by the fact that for us in the (name of region) would have about 230 premises so that significantly impacts on – I don't even dream of getting round to each service on an annual basis – that just ain't gonna happen..." (Martina)*
>
> *"....and I think we have so much work, I mean there's no way we are touching what we should be doing at all and that would be my big worry. I have 206 premises and I mean its beyond my control really you know and certainly there should be far more staff in and I think therefore if we had a manageable case load and a certain number of premises that we could concentrate on fully. I think therefore that would lift all tides really and you're talking about quality and everything else then. But as it is its just impossible". (Ann)*

Despite the fact that this was a serious challenge for the participants, they were also anxious to highlight other issues which they regularly encountered in their practice and which presented particular challenges for them. One overwhelming theme was related to their difficulties in communicating with staff, particularly management, in ECCE services that have poor or inadequate levels of training:

> *"And another one for me would be the huge number of people managing facilities with no training and who have no understanding of developmental needs of babies and who when you try to talk to them about it they think you are*

being unfair and that you're getting at them and if you keep coming back they think you're really getting at them."(Ellen)

"I think that there are an awful lot of people managing services that have no training. They don't know how to deal with the parents when they complain so they cause reactions when there's no need for them so this is where a lot of friction comes between the parents and the service providers and that's a huge area"(Mary)

"Like Ellen found out when she did her research, people don't even know what they don't know"(Sarah)

Martina also states her agreement on this issue:

"definitely about the skills and training of staff and particularly if you don't have management to relate to".

A second strong theme, which emerged, is related to the fact that even after almost five years of inspection, some services are still falling short of meeting the regulations.

"...what we are now doing is that we are dealing with ones that are barely ticking over and they are not going to do anything to push that boundary. It's the same issues year after year without actually tackling the issue. You know, without getting stuck in and saying, no, we will have to deal with this. I find that really challenging as well (lots of agreement)"(Clare)

"But overall I would have to say out of the 230 premises you would just have a handful of really bad ones and they are there in your head all the time (lots of sounds of agreement and assent from the group) and they are where you get the continuous complaints and parents ringing in as they have concerns"(Martina)

"You still get the situation of going on an advisory visit and getting told, 'By the way I'm opening next Tuesday – and I'll say, but you can't do that you have to give me 28 days notice and they'll say - ah sure I won't bother with that. It is an absolute disgrace that you can show that they have actually made contact with you, that you have even visited and yet they haven't even notified. I mean if that isn't grounds for a case then I don't know what is. (Mary)

The challenge for the Pre-School Officers is to deal with these cases despite the fact that in their opinion, the Pre-School Services Regulations do not give them sufficient scope to do so effectively.

"The regulations are very limited, that's where our problems lie. When you look at the regulations and [know] that we expect that development of the child should be wonderful and then you see 'an adequate supply of books, toys and materials must be available' (quoting from the Regulations) and there ends everything about the child and development and the whole lot and I mean where do we go with that?"(Ellen)

This theme developed into a discussion about another particular challenge that would appear to be becoming a more regular feature of practice – prosecution and dealing with the courts. Ellen, in particular had strong opinions on this issue:

> *"Then what happens when you've reached the stage where you've gone to court. There've been a few court cases, they have dealt with …….. together, they are out to get you, it becomes a battle of wits and unless you have very good development people and everything else moving quickly along the side, you're stuck. The hours that go into preparing a court case, putting it together, getting advise, seeing the solicitor, going up and standing making a statement, it really wears you out it is very exhausting"*

Clare highlights the need for specific training for this aspect of the Pre-School Officers role:

> *"Personally that is where I would lack the skills in how they do this for I have all the information its just the way its - actually write it down - and what you actually write down and whether it will stand up" [in court]*

5.5.1 Summary

The responses of participants to question two, *"Can you elaborate on some of the particularly challenging and difficult problems you face regularly?"* are united by an undercurrent frustration and feelings of powerlessness. Unmanageable caseloads, lack of time, communication difficulties due to lack of training of service providers, a hard core of problem services, dealing with the unfamiliar environment of the courts and litigation and the inadequacies of the regulations are all cited as key issues.

5.6 Practice narratives illustrating challenges encountered by Pre-School Officers.

The discussion of challenges the participants faced regularly gathered momentum very quickly and all participants engaged in fast and furious discussion. At this stage of the session, it appears that participants were becoming sidetracked into detailed discussion of the specific issues that were being raised and there is evidence from the transcript to demonstrate everyone, myself as moderator included, was guilty of this. The final question, *"What are examples of problems, which present particular challenges to your existing professional expertise?"* however, served to refocus the group and resulted in narrative accounts of a number of very interesting practice vignettes. In general these are too long to present in their entirety here and are instead summarised briefly and the key themes that they represent are identified.

Sarah recounted a particularly challenging experience that she had had with a service provider who was treating her in an *'abusive fashion'*. The service provider, herself a psychiatric nurse, was very resentful of the Pre-School inspections and was confrontational and challenging in her manner. She constantly queried the Pre-School Officer's qualifications to carry out the inspection process. As a result, Sarah admitted that she dreaded and even avoided engaging with this service provider.

This challenge is clearly related to the issue of dealing with conflict as Sarah herself reflected " *...maybe I was caught unaware and was tense and maybe I was angry with her, as well I wasn't managing her properly...*" (transcript, p.22)

Carmel told a story which appeared to resonate with the other participants and which triggered other examples on the same theme. The kernel of the story relates to an accusation of racism, which was made about Carmel and her colleague. A black couple, who were dissatisfied with a critical inspection report, concluded that they had been discriminated against and made allegations of racism on the part of the Pre-School offers in question.

Carmel related with great clarity the deep sense of shock that she and her colleague experienced initially at this accusation. She then went on to describe how they overcame their own sense of hurt and outrage and dealt with the matter by negotiating a withdrawal of the accusation directly with the service providers and thereby avoiding litigation.

This scenario raised the challenge that Pre-School Officers face in dealing with the growing cultural diversity in Irish society. The participants expressed a number of concerns related to this issue, especially in relation to language development of young children.

Given the number of staff employed in the sector for whom English is not their first language, there were concerns expressed as to young children's language acquisition needs –particularly the need to hear grammatically correct spoken English.' *..and even in the baby room there's no language no communication*"(Breda)

Clare revealed her intense frustration " *..I have been tearing my hair out*" in one particular setting where many staff were learning English as a second language. She recalled a particular child in this service. This little girl, she feared, was not receiving the necessary exposure to accurate spoken English. A child from an asylum-seeking family is likely to have experienced considerable trauma, loss and is now facing profound cultural change. Clare was very concerned that hearing disfluent English may be adding to this child's confusion.

The participants were concerned because of the communication barriers that existed between themselves and the non-national staff in Pre-School services, as Ann said,

> *I have one that is causing terrible problems and it isn't because they are foreigners – its language and they are not staying, there is huge turnover of staff and if they come across any difficulties at all they move on.*

Differences in cultural childrearing practices also raised issues

> *.. and the other thing on corporal punishment is that they (children) kick each other round the place and beat each other up, they cheek their parents and that's normal and that is how they operate at home. (Clare)*

The issue of childrearing practices was not restricted to non-national families. Ann shared an interesting example of a challenging experience she had had with an Irish parent.

The problem developed as a result of a series of misunderstandings between Ann and the Pre-School service provider and then between the service provider and a parent. Ann had enquired whether the service has any special needs children attending and was directed to a little boy who was described as having speech problems. *(Ann did not identify the age of the child, but she does recount that the child was receiving speech therapy, and therefore he would have to be at least 3 years old)*. On observing the child, Ann noticed that he was continuously sucking on a feeding bottle and engaged the service provider in a discussion about how this might be affecting the child's speech and made suggestions as to how the child could be weaned off the bottle. The day following this visit, Ann received a very irate phone call from the little boy's mother, who was so outraged that she was considering taking her case to the media. The service provider had told her about Ann's discussion about her child and something in the transmission of the story had caused her to become very upset and angry. Ann told how she eventually managed to calm the mother down and communicated the actual discussion that had taken place whereupon the mother was able to discuss the issue of her son's bottle in a rational manner.

Ellen, who throughout the focus group had raised the issue of litigation and how this was impacting on her role as Pre-School Officer, described another scenario. This was to illustrate her point that the responsibilities of the inspection role were enormous in terms of parent's expectations of services and the implications of this were only beginning to be understood.

She had been subpoenaed to appear in court to give evidence in a case as Ellen recounts her herself, in the words of the solicitor,

"...it is about a child who was in such and such a facility four years ago, you were in the job about one month. He came off the slide, which shouldn't have been inside in the building, and he fractured his skull, and the parents are now suing, so you are to be called."

Ann highlighted the challenge of trying to take an interagency approach to the management of child protection issues. Her story related to a family of three children whom Ann had identified as being at risk of neglect. She was able to take the necessary steps to get the appropriate social care services involved, but was disappointed to discover that the Pre-School service provider, upon being made aware of the situation, had immediately asked the children to be removed from her service. She was not prepared to get involved with the professional support system that was being put in place to support the family in question and in Ann's opinion made the situation worse

5.6.1 Summary

The narratives that the participants shared regarding their individual practice experiences were rich and complex in nature. They revealed the multifaceted nature of the Pre-School Officers role and offer practice based evidence to support the key issues previously identified as major challenges to their professional expertise. These issues are once again highlighting the themes of communication, equality and diversity, and dealing with the legal system. In addition the themes of dealing with parents and parental expectations, working with other professionals, child development and child welfare were identified.

5.7   Additional findings

As the session came to a close, I realised that I could ask an additional question, which could act as a summative tool for the session and also yield additional information about the Continuing Professional Education needs of the Pre-School Officers. Whilst a very short time was available to the discussion of this question, it did yield useful information relevant to the study.

"just to wrap up, we have maybe 5 minutes and This is an extra question not in the brief but I think it is relevant in terms of our discussion, how would you see the role of PSO evolving and how would you like to see the role evolving given the kind of developments that are occurring in the sector? (Moderator)

In the main the responses related to the need for more coordination, structure and support for their role. However, Sarah identified the fact that the White Paper on Early Education provided for the establishment of a new inspectorate to implement the Quality in Education (QE) mark as

a central concern and expressed the hope that a dual inspection system would not be developed as she concluded

> *"The whole idea would be that one person would be going in – to go back to the implicit thing that care and education are just together they're intermingled; they've got to be there…"*

5.7.1 Comments from feedback template for transcript member check.

The feedback template for the transcript member check (appendix G) also offered an opportunity for participants to provide further indication of areas that they felt they would like to see include in continuing professional education courses. Two participants availed of this opportunity and both indicated that some training on the issue of managing change would be valuable.

5.7.2 Interpretation

One participant pinpointed what she considered to be the crux of the problem when she said,

> *"– I think that the Health board never really thought that this would be a big thing, they never did. I think we were just literally – when we were appointed, handed our job description and a list of complaints each and told to get on with it". (transcript, p.33)*

When the Pre-School service regulations began to be implemented in 1997, the Early Childhood Care and Education sector in Ireland had been largely ignored by the State for decades. In addition, as outlined in the literature review, it was also entering into the most dynamic phase of growth and development in its history.

The Pre-School Officers represent the 'front line' of State intervention and many of the challenges that they identify are related to their growing awareness of the inadequacies of the statutory basis of their practice, the lack of resources and also crucially to their strong belief in the importance of the work they are doing to improve the quality of services and thereby improve the well-being of children. Their challenges are also rooted in the inherent mismatch between the Pre-School Officers and the ECCE service providers. This mismatch is evident in a number of ways. The first relates to the difference in professional education of the Pre School Officers and service providers in the ECCE sector. A second relates to the status afforded to each profession. Pre-School Officers are professionally trained Public Health Nurses of many years experience and whilst there are undoubtedly still disputes as to whether the nursing profession is adequately rewarded, it generally commands a high level respect and regard from

society. In contrast, whilst there has been a rapid improvement in the level of professional education and training amongst ECCE practitioners particularly since the late 1990's, many practitioners are still unqualified or inadequately qualified. In addition, the status afforded to those working in the ECCE sector in terms of pay and conditions of employment has traditionally been and remains low. As one participant reported, "*I remember another provider said to me about her daughter. She wasn't good enough for the nursing and the teaching so I put her to childcare!*"(transcript, p.22). She went on to offer this astute observation "*…people are not valuing what they do and then they are not valuing the service they are offering the children either*"(transcript, p.23).

These issues undoubtedly contribute to the challenges that the Pre-School Officers identify in relation to communicating with ECCE practitioners and it was clear from the discussion that the group had identified this themselves. It was also clear that there was a great deal of frustration associated with this particular problem and therefore it certainly indicates an issue that might be addressed and supported by a continuing professional education (CPE) course.

Other issues that emerged as potential CPE issues can be rationalised by the rapid expansion and development of the ECCE sector in Ireland. At the most basic level, national policy under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP), to increase the number of quality childcare places in the State, inevitably increases the workload of the Pre-School Inspectorate. Effective time management therefore becomes exigent to the daily fulfilment of the Pre-School Officers role and it is clearly evident that in the absence of financial resources, which would allow for the recruitment of more staff, continuing professional education in management and administration might provide some support.

The efflorescence of national policy in respect of ECCE coincided with the establishment of the Pre-School Inspectorate and has placed unpredicted demands on the time and expertise of the Pre-School Officers. This was clearly articulated by the participants. They constantly felt that they were engaged in a juggling act in terms of time management as the participants try to balance their inspection role with their advisory and support role. At this point in time, a comprehensive infrastructure has been set in place under the EOCP, at local and national level to support and develop the ECCE sector. This represents an opportunity for the Pre-School Officers to mediate their advisory role through these structures. However their capacity would be greatly enhanced if they had the appropriate skills and knowledge in terms of information management, (e.g. use of Information Technology), which would facilitate such an interface.

There is a dearth of baseline information on the extent and nature of ECCE service provision in Ireland. In my current role in the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, my colleagues and I are conducting research, which highlights the immediate need to address this issue, (CECDE, forthcoming). The demand for information was certainly an issue for the Pre-School Officers. On the one hand they were expected to disseminate Public Health information emanating from the Health boards and on the other to provide information for researchers and policy makers. Improving their expertise in the use of information and communication technology (ICT) offers a potential solution to these demanding and time consuming tasks. For example establishing an email network of service providers would facilitate regular and speedier communication on a broad range of issues. Establishment of a central web site for Pre-School Inspection is another possibility. Amongst other things, this could facilitate the establishment of a "Frequently Asked Questions" (FAQ's) section where service providers could access basic information when they need it. Pre-School Officers could collaborate to provide answers to these questions. This could make more efficient use of their time and expertise by allowing them to focus on more complex and demanding issues.

The emerging multicultural nature of Irish society has clearly raised issues for the Pre-School Officers, which require to be addressed through continuing professional education. This is a pressing issue for all Early Childhood Care and Education practitioners (Murray & O'Doherty, 2000). Furthermore it is clear from the stories told by the Pre-School Officers that any education and training on this key issue must be mediated in the Irish context and grounded in Irish practice and experience.

Throughout the transcript of the focus group, it is evident that this group of professionals are passionately motivated by their concern for the welfare and well being of young children. Their interest in supporting the development of quality ECCE services is also clear. However, a recurring theme throughout the narrative is their frustration at service providers who are not meeting the minimum standards required by the regulations. Whilst they repeatedly acknowledge that these are a minority of the notified services, Pre-School Officers have nevertheless been required to engage with the legal system through court proceedings for non-compliance with the Regulations. This role does not sit well with the Pre-School Officers. They repeatedly cite their lack of expertise in preparing reports that will be suitable for legal proceedings and the time consuming and stressful nature of court cases is also described. Professional training in legal procedure as expert witness would undoubtedly be beneficial in carrying out these difficult tasks.

The final brief interchange about the future development of the Pre-School Officers' role raised a major issue that has the potential to create the necessity for CPE for Pre-School Officers. This is the possibility of the development of the Quality in Education (QE) mark (DES, 1999). As this initiative would apply to all education settings for children in the birth to six years age range, inspectors of services would have to be able to bridge the existing gaps between the two, currently very separate sectors, namely the Early Childhood Care and Education sector and the National school system. Whilst this initiative is still at the stage of policy rhetoric, it is impossible to anticipate the potential education and training implications associated with it. However, it does support the value and rationale for the development of an appropriate model for CPE of experienced professional practitioners.

Despite the fact that just two participants took the opportunity to comment on areas they would like to see included in a CPE course, it is interesting that both referred to management of change. A key concept in change management is that of transformation. If controlled or planned change is the desired objective of the Pre-School Officers then it is highly appropriate that a Problem-based Learning model is adopted as the learning and teaching strategy. As Nickols (2001) outlines

> *'A very useful framework for thinking about the change process is problem solving. Managing change is seen as a matter of moving from one state to another, specifically, from the problem state to the solved state. Diagnosis or problem analysis is generally acknowledged as essential.'*

Development of problem solving, decision-making and communication skills are key learning outcomes of Problem-based Learning and are also essential elements of change management.

5.8   Chapter summary

The purpose of the focus group was to gather narrative from experienced practitioners in order to identify their continuing professional development needs, plan curriculum content and develop the problem scenarios that will form the Problem-based Learning curriculum. Detailed description of the process and proceedings of the focus group are included in the appendices. The analysis of the transcript revealed that the Pre-School Officers were very clear about their role and were able to identify their core functions, which were split between the inspection and advisory functions. Their learning needs emerged as they began to identify the challenges that they faced in the discharge of their duties. These challenges can be summarised as being related to communication, management, and information dissemination, dealing with diversity issues and engaging with the legal system. Narratives from the participants extensive practice

experience supported these themes. As a final comment, it is apparent from the findings that Pre-School Officers practice is taking place in a very dynamic sector and that the only certainty is that change and the management of change will characterise this sector in the foreseeable future.

CHAPTER 6   CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1   Introduction

The overall aim of this study was to develop a rationale and curriculum for a Problem-based Learning (PBL) course for continuing professional education (CPE) course for Pre-school Officers in Ireland. This chapter draws together the evidence from the literature review and the findings of the primary research with the Pre-School Officers to formulate the main conclusions and recommendations of the study. This is presented under the following headings

- The rationale for a Problem-based Learning approach
- The continuing professional education needs of the Pre-School Officers
- A proposed curriculum including sample problems
- Future developments.

6.2   Rationale

From the review of literature the following conclusions are offered as a basis for the development of a rationale for a PBL approach to the continuing professional education course for Pre-School Officers.

1. The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector in Ireland is experiencing an unprecedented phase of change and development. The rapid expansion of policy, unprecedented levels of State involvement in terms of funding and regulation and the emergent professional identity of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) practitioners provides evidence of this process. Change and development within the ECCE sector is a strong indicator of the need for comprehensive continuing education and training programmes for Pre-School Officers whose role in implementation of the Pre-School services regulations places them in the front line of State involvement in the ECCE sector.

2. Continuing professional education (CPE) is an essential prerequisite for sustained expertise and professional practice. However to be effective, continuing professional education must reflect principles underpinning effective practice in adult learning. This means that effective continuing professional education must be

embedded in the context of practice, engage and challenge the personal belief systems of the participant, stimulate and promote reflection in participants, integrate new knowledge with practice, recognise discourse (in particular the opportunity it presents for learners to explore and test theoretical principles, establish shared understanding and take 'ownership' of knowledge), as central to learning, and recognise the need for continuity between old and new through practice. Problem-based Learning meets these core criteria.

3. The domain of practice of Pre-School Officers is the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector in Ireland. The pedagogical principles of early education exercise a strong influence on the nature of practice in ECCE. Understanding of these principles is an essential component of the knowledge of professional practitioners in the ECCE sector including Pre-School Officers. It is apparent from the literature that Problem-based Learning is grounded in the same pedagogical principles as that of early education. These can be summarised briefly as being learner rather than teacher centred, promoting independence and active involvement in the learning process, building on the learner's existing experience and knowledge and taking account of the context of both the learning and practice environment of the learner. On the basis of this correspondence, Problem-based Learning offers an opportunity for Pre-School Officers to experience these pedagogical principles in action in their own professional education and thereby develop their ability to identify them in practice.

4. Problem-based Learning is being adopted by a growing number of professions as a preferred teaching and learning strategy. There is however very limited evidence of Problem–based Learning in the field of Early Childhood Care and Education. Whilst this study did not identify any evidence of PBL being applied to the continuing professional education of Pre-School Officers, evidence from related fields of learning such as nursing, and primary teacher education attests to the suitability of Problem-based learning as a teaching and learning strategy and suggests that many positive benefits accrue to the Problem-based Learning approach.

5. Curriculum development in Problem-based Learning must be congruent with its fundamental philosophical principles and therefore must emerge from the analysis and identification of the conceptual framework of the profession and must be based

on 'real-life' problem scenarios. (Conway, 2002, NCCC, 2002). It is therefore essential that the development of a PBL curriculum for continuing professional education involve consultation with practitioners.

6.3   Training needs of the Pre-School Officers

The group of participants in this study had already engaged in a continuing professional education in early education. Their positive evaluation of this course indicates that it played an important role in filling some of the gaps in their professional expertise and knowledge. The findings of the focus group research clearly indicate that the Pre-School Officers are aware that continuing professional education is a necessary pre-requisite to the development of professional practice. This is in keeping with the literature on professional education, (Cervero, 2001). Analysis of the data in this study suggests a number of areas upon which such continuing professional education might usefully focus:

- Managing change.

- Contributing effectively to policy development at national, regional and local levels

- Communication and ICT skills

- Time and stress management.

- Diversity and racism awareness

- Legal process and procedures concerning their role as expert witnesses.

6.4   Recommendations

Drawing on the findings of this study it is recommended that:

- This study should be replicated with the remaining Irish Pre-School officers that did not participate in the current study in order to ensure an accurate needs assessment.

- A Problem-based Learning approach should be taken to the development and delivery of a continuing professional education course for Pre-School Officers.

- A Problem-based Learning curriculum, based on the findings herein, should be developed, piloted and evaluated

- Further research should be conducted to evaluate the potential of PBL as an appropriate methodology for training of practitioners in the Irish ECCE sector generally.

- Links should be forged with educational institutions engaged in the development and implementation of Problem-based Learning both at national and international levels in this and related professional fields.

6.5 Draft outline course and Problem–based Learning curriculum for a continuing professional education course for Pre-School Officers.

The following draft course outline and Problem-based Learning curriculum matrix represents a possible course and a sample curriculum for a continuing professional education course for Pre-School Officers based upon the findings of this study. It is not within the scope of this study to present a completed PBL curriculum and associated learning package. This work requires further consultation and negotiation of resources with faculty in the DIT and the relevant Health Boards. This will hopefully be accomplished in the near future.

Course Title: Managing Change in the ECCE sector in Ireland: a short CPE course for Pre-School Officers.

Course duration: The course will be conducted over a 12 week period. Participants will attend college one day per week during this time.

Course credits: 5 ECTS credits

Course Aim: To enhance and develop the professional practice skills and knowledge of participants to enable them to engage positively in the process and practice of change in the Early Childhood Care and Education sector in Ireland.

Learning Outcomes

On completion of this course participants will be able to:

- Apply theory and practice of change management in their role as Pre-School Officers.

- Apply a range of Information and communication technology (ICT) to the management and administration of the Pre-School inspectorate.

- Contribute effectively to current and future policy developments in the ECCE sector in Ireland

- Recognise diversity and equality issues that arise in practice, assess provision accordingly, and provide appropriate advice to support equitable provision for all children and families

- Communicate effectively with relevant stakeholders from a broad and diverse range of backgrounds

6.5.1 Draft outline Problem Based Learning Curriculum Matrix.

Figure 8 below represents a draft curriculum matrix for the proposed continuing professional education course for Pre-School Officers.

Figure 10 - Problem-based Learning Curriculum Matrix.

Problem Scenarios ⇒ Learning Outcomes ⇓	Get switched on	Ready to Learn	Your witness
Apply theory and practice of change management in their role as Pre-School Officers.	√	√	
Apply theory and practice of change management in their role as Pre-School Officers.	√	√	√
Apply a range of Information and communication technology (ICT) to the management and administration of the Pre-School inspectorate	√		√
Contribute effectively to current and future policy development in the ECCE sector at all levels.	√	√	√
Recognise diversity and equality issues that arise in practice, assess provision accordingly, and provide appropriate advice to support equitable provision for all children and families		√	
Communicate effectively with relevant stakeholders from a broad and diverse range of backgrounds	√	√	√

6.6   Sample problem scenarios

Problem scenarios have been developed from the practice narratives provided by the Pre-School Officers.

Scenario one   Get switched on

The Health Board has finally responded to repeat requests for increased resources for the Pre-School Inspectorate by requesting that all inspection teams prepare a report on the potential of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to support the role of the Pre-School Inspectorate. They have indicated that funds could be made available immediately if a suitable project was identified. Prepare a response and include a planned implementation strategy. An expert in ICT will be available to advise you on technical issues.

Scenario two   Ready to Learn

At a recent forum group meeting, Clare expressed her concerns about a little girl she met at a recent inspection visit to a day full day care centre. She is concerned that the three year old, is not getting appropriate support for her language development.

".....its crazy, this kid is wanting/ needs to go to school next year, has a had a lot of trauma in her life and she is in to try and learn a little so that she will be fit to go to an ordinary national school. Martina then discovers then that ok, the owner is still there but she is not on the premises all the time, and most of the staff were actually non nationals, she felt with not a lot of English ...so you want these kids to be included and integrated and yet this is the situation."

Scenario three   Your Witness

This scenario is taken from the transcript of a focus group. The Pre-School Officer was illustrating the high level of responsibility that is attached to her role. She has been asked to appear as an expert witness in a court case pertaining to an accident that occurred in a service she had inspected four years previously.

"I had a phone call last week from a solicitor who said, "You're being subpoenaed to court". I said, "Thank you very much." He said, "yes, you have to appear in court next week", and I thought "that's beautiful!" and I said "well what is it about?" and he said, "it is about a child who was in such and such a facility four years ago, you were in the job about one month, he came off the slide, which shouldn't have been inside in the building, and he fractured his skull, and the parents are now suing so you are to be called".

6.7 Summary

This study set out to explore the potential of Problem based Learning for the delivery of continuing professional education for Preschool Officers in Ireland. It has revealed that there are clear indicators both from research literature and from the focus group research with Pre-School Officers that continuing professional education is necessary for the continued development of professional expertise and that Problem-based Learning has much to offer in this regard.

The indicators which form the basis for a rationale for the implementation of Problem-based Learning are: the symmetry between adult learning theory and Problem Based Learning theory, the correspondence between Problem-based Learning and early childhood pedagogy and the opportunity Problem-based Learning offers adult learners in the ECCE sector to experience effective practice in the support of human learning and thereby transfer this experience to their own practice in the Early Childhood Care and Education sector. In addition, the process of curriculum design in Problem-based Learning ensures that the core concepts of the profession are woven into all education, training and professional development programmes. This is a particularly strong argument in favour of Problem based Learning in the Early Childhood Care and Education sector in Ireland where there is evidence of a process of professionalisation beginning to take place.

There are many exciting challenges ahead for the 'emergent' profession of Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland. Problem-based Learning has the potential to make a positive contribution to the education, training and professional development of Pre-School Officers and may also be appropriate in the professional education of other ECCE practitioners. As the development of a highly skilled, well educated workforce is essential to the future development of the Early Childhood Care and Education sector in Ireland, it is to be hoped that policymakers, educational institutions and other supporting organisations pursue this potential and facilitate the implementation and evaluation of Problem –based Learning in the Early Childhood Care and Education sector in Ireland.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Initial letter to contact person towards recruitment of participants for focus group.

<div align="right">

Maresa Duignan
24, Parcnasilla Rise
Loughlinstown
Dublin
December 12th 2002

</div>

Dear ....,

Further to our telephone conversation about the research I propose to do, I would just like to give you a little more detail on exactly what will be involved.

The research is designed to inform the development of a curriculum for a continuing professional education course for Pre-School Officers in Ireland. It is widely accepted by most professional groups that continuing professional development/education is essential in order to keep knowledge and skills fresh and also to gain recognition for learning from experience.

The curriculum that I hope to develop is for a Problem Based Learning approach to the delivery of such a course. Problem Based Learning is an educational strategy that is widely used in professional education for a broad range of disciplines in Ireland e.g. Dentistry, Nursing, Veterinary medicine and Occupational Therapy. It operates from the premise that learning is stimulated through engagement with real life, practice based problems. It mirrors the ultimate professional practice of the graduate and thereby helps to develop key skills such as problem solving, team working, communication etc., which professional practitioners need in addition to their core knowledge base.

I believe that this approach could offer a suitable method for offering continuing professional education courses to professionals working in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector in Ireland. However to propose this theory I need to test this hypothesis and the first step is to develop a sample course.

Pre-School Officers are a unique group operating in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector in Ireland. For over four years you and your colleagues have been gathering first hand experiences of working as a Pre-School Officer in Ireland. I would hope therefore to draw upon that experience to do a number of things which are necessary to the development of the curriculum. These are:

1. To develop the 'graduate profile' the course i.e. to identify the occupational profile of Pre-School Officer in Ireland.

2. To explore and identify the continuing professional development needs of Pre-School Officers

3. To develop the 'problem scenarios' which are at the centre of the Problem Based Learning Curriculum

I believe that the narrative or stories of practical experience of being a Pre-School Officer will yield the information necessary to achieving the above objectives.

I would propose therefore to conduct a discussion group to debate the issue of the development of an occupational profile for Pre-School Officers in Ireland. I would propose to use the model

framework for education, training and professional development for ECCE practitioners in Ireland (book enclosed) as a stimulus for this discussion. In particular the advanced practitioner profile (p. 22).

As we discussed on the phone, I think a group of around 10 participants would be the optimum number but I appreciate that everyone is extremely busy and therefore a minimum number of six would be satisfactory.

This group discussion would require about 1 – 1.5 hours to complete and I would propose to record and transcribe all contributions to the discussions. I would like to stress at this point that no identification of any contribution will be made and that all efforts will be made to respect the confidential nature of any information.

Once this transcript is complete, I will use a qualitative analysis approach to the information to extract the main themes and I will circulate this to the participants of the group process for verification. A template for feedback will be provided. The results of this will then add to the information generated by the group. This information including the narrative of practice experience will then be used to develop a curriculum for the Problem-based Learning course.

As we discussed on the telephone, I believe that high quality education and training at both pre-service and in-service stages is essential for all those working with children and families whether directly or indirectly. This research seeks to identify a model of good practice for the development and delivery of such courses. The next step in the process would be to implement the course and evaluate it in comparison with traditional models of education. However, that might be the PhD thesis never mind the Masters!

I hope that this gives you a little better insight into what I am proposing to do. If you have any queries please let me know and I will be happy to talk to you further. In order to meet the submission deadline of 19th May 2003 for the thesis, I would need to conduct the initial group discussion around the end of January. I hope that you and your colleagues will be able to accommodate me in this and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Regards,

Maresa Duignan

Appendix B

Personal ethics statement

Whilst carrying out this research, I will observe the highest possible ethical standards. I will maintain integrity at all times regarding data gathering. I will only report information that is in the public domain and within the law. I will avoid plagiarism and fully acknowledge the work of others to which I have referred to in my report. I will report my findings honestly. I consider the research project worthwhile and of benefit to a broad range of stakeholders in the Early Childhood Care and Education sector in Ireland. In particular, the community of Pre-School Officers, academic staff engaged in the delivery of education and training courses for professional practitioners in the ECCE sector, and the Problem-based Learning research community.

A formal research proposal has been submitted for approval to my supervisor in the DIT Learning and Teaching centre. The Head of School of the School of Sciences and Legal Studies has also been informed. This proposal has been informed by ethical guidelines for research that have been published by the Dublin Institute of Technology and the British Educational Research Association.

Finally, In order to make clear the responsibilities and obligations I undertake as the author of this research, I have developed a statement of informed consent, which will be sent to each participant to inform her/him of the aim of the research study and his/her rights as participants. It also considers privacy issues, through offering confidentiality and anonymity.

Signed:_____

Maresa Duignan

Date: December 12th 2002.

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

I, _____, agree to participant in the research project on "Problem-based Learning Curriculum Development for Continuing Professional Development for Pre-School Officers in Ireland" being conducted by Maresa Duignan from the Dublin Institute of Technology.

I understand that

> the aim of the research is to develop a rationale and curriculum for a Problem-based Learning course for continuing professional education (CPE) course for Pre-school Officers in Ireland;

> the study involves participating in a focus group which will last for approximately 1.5 hours and will be recorded. I will also be required to complete a short feedback template on the analysis of the focus group data;

> all the information I give will be kept confidential and every effort will be made to ensure anonymity of all participants in the research;

I have an obligation to respect the privacy of the other members of the group by not disclosing any personal information that they share during our discussion.

I may not receive any direct benefit from participating in this study but that my participation will help others in the future.

The researcher has offered to answer any questions I may have about the study and what I am expected to do; and,

The findings of the research will be published.

I have read and understand this information and I agree to take part in the study.

Date   Signature

If you have any questions about this study, please contact:

Maresa Duignan   maresa.duignan@spd.dcu.ie

Appendix D

Confirmation letter to participants

25 February, 2002

Dear   ,

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in my research study. Due to the fact that the meeting room in DIT Mount Street was double booked, I have confirmed the arrangements in the St. Patrick's College location. The details are as follows:

Location: Parlour 1, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin 9. Time: 2pm – 4pm

The College is located on Drumcondra Road on the same side of the road as a Renault garage and the Skylon Hotel. There are two entrances. Approaching from the City, the first gate is beside the bus stop. This lower gate is the main entrance to the College and as you come in through it you will see the Gate Lodge, home to the CECDE, on your right hand side. The second gate is just before the Renault garage and if you come in this gate you need to follow the road around to the front of the old building to get to the main college entrance. There is parking available in the college grounds, although you may have to drive around a little before finding a spot. The college entrance is located beside the entrance to the church. If you follow the road straight on from the lower entrance gate you will come to a parking area right outside the college entrance. I have drawn a very rough map (attached) in the hope that it might help you to find your way! When you enter the college, there are double doors to your left and just beyond this you will find the porters office. Someone there will direct you to our meeting room. If you are coming by bus, the following numbers pass right by the College and there is a bus stop just below the main entrance on both sides of the road. Nos 3, 11, 16, 16A, 41.

Heino Schonfeld, Director of the CECDE has requested an opportunity to meet up with you for a brief chat and I have told him that I would pass this request on. If you agree I can ask him to join us immediately after the conclusion of the focus group.

If you have any further queries on any aspect of the arrangements please do not hesitate to contact me on 01 8842106 or 087 2323586.

I look forward to meeting up with you on Thursday.

Best regards

Maresa Duignan

Appendix E

Participant Profile

Name_____

Location of practice: Urban_____ Rural_____

How long have you been working as a Pre-School Officer?_____

Initial Professional Education (please tick all those applicable)

Environmental Health	☐
Education	☐
Early Childhood Care and Education	☐
Nursing	☐
Social Work	☐

Other (please specify)_____

Have you participated in any in-service training related to your role as Pre-School Officer?

If yes, can you give brief details (e.g. location, duration, focus)

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Thank you for your co-operation

Appendix F

Transcript of Focus Group- February 27th 2003.

Moderator - To just guide us I have put the three questions up on the flip chart. So the first one is 'What are the common tasks that you as a Pre-School Officer encounter in your daily work?'

If you just want to for the first round we can do a round robin and just go around the table and see and then I will probably leave it to you to develop it. What I might do is, if I keep an eye on the time and if we need to move on I'll just move us on to the next question. But really, as I say it is up to yourselves. So where would you like to start? Maybe ANN we could start with you up at the top. So what are the common tasks that you would encounter?

ANN – I suppose the main task that we would have is to carry out inspections. And they would be for all Pre-School services. It would be dealing with complaints that come in, can be quite numerous, follow up inspections, and (*prompt from other members on advisory*) advisory makes up a huge part of it and support of existing services. Those probably would be the main types of visits that we would be involved in the Pre-School services. Set along with the running of the service itself because we are almost individual in our different areas so that we have responsibility of operating the service and that would be dealing literally with everything that comes into the service. And em I mean our day can vary greatly - it doesn't always pan out the way we plan it. And it doesn't sort of always pan out the way what our diary says, so very often it is dictated to on a day-to-day basis, you know. And what arises- and if something urgent comes in it would have to be dealt with and …..other things you know put aside for that particular time – is that what you are looking for?

Moderator - Yes and I mean we can move on to more concrete examples but its really just to try and identify you know, literally what you do every day literally as you have said. So BREDA whatever you think you can add to that in terms of the daily tasks and what your experience of them is really.

BREDA – Well I suppose following on from ANN that all those visits have to be followed up with the report of whatever your observations are and that can take some time to do. If we do the inspections with an environmental health officer then the two reports have to be merged together and that takes time as we are based in different venues. And then when they are put together, you know, to proof read them and check them and get them out to the providers hopefully within the month if we are lucky (general laughter) and then to do the clerical end of you know - your files are maintained and apart from that, its probably you know sort of

working out the ones that need to be done - first the practical issues. So the whole planning and then working, belonging to a team within your own, sort of em, health board – you know the way there would be meetings in the evening and then keeping in touch with each other having our own meetings and planning ahead, planning the month and the year.

(few seconds pause)

Moderator - Feel free to jump in anyone – If you want to take it around the table keep going but this is your opportunity to literally tell what it is like to be a Pre-School Officer in Ireland and so feel free to ….

DEIRDRE- Just about, in villages like me, inspection visits are generally not planned you don't have appointments whereas the advisory visits generally are and most of the follow ups wouldn't have appointments either so because they are not planned we can be flexible with their work then if say something else comes in like a complaint visit. We can swap about having our priority the inspections.

CLARE – not forgetting about the coordinating when somebody mentioned about an inspection carried out with the EHO, that has to be coordinated, you need to set that up you need to contact them you have to arrange the meeting, time, space, places and that can run very often up and including an hour and so that is something which needs forward planning and preparing the crèche for those visits.

Another area I think that is quite time consuming is all these committees and other things that you are involved in – those meetings happen regularly, monthly, two or three times a week about something the health board is involved in or about childcare – it used to be just us and now there's the what do you call them? (*all prompt County Childcare Committees*) County Childcare Committees you know there is some mention of those on the ?????? Whereas for that body could ask you to come on one sub committee you could have another two or three sub committees all related to childcare issues and all very mostly quite relevant

(Many voices) – Hugely

Ok hugely and they can each take the best part of a half a day a morning or afternoon - gone

BREDA – we had to actually do a list yesterday for MW and I couldn't believe there was eight that CLARE and I actually attend in the year. You know you never really count them and when I listed them there was eight.

CLARE – that's a lot and on top of the doing the visits then filing the reports and there's another wad of people out there who want all these stats –they want numbers of visits and you spend so much time as your going along doing all of that and keeping stuff available for people who are looking for stats yesterday usually and things like that so managing it, the complete service - its like, its kind of like you're managing the service through all the community and that can be difficult enough at times because your spread throughout the whole radius

MARY - and that happens cos the work has grown an awful lot since we started when we first came into the job it was very much just do the inspections but now because people identify you as the Pre-School Officer in an area you're asked to join a lot of those committees maybe childcare networks in the local areas and that type of thing and you give support that way. And that is expanding and growing and takes a fair bit of time and yet it is something we want to support and is an important part of our work

MARY -And when new things come on stream like immunisation and things like that they want to access - our role in that areas is increasing – they tend to want our leaflets and they want our information and then they work from that and it's the same with Children First training and really what they expect is for us to follow up what they have started and again that would make the role miles too cumbersome and big and you just couldn't reach on move it over and that you would then become the link person between the Pre-Schools and children first, nutrition and immunisation.

You know if we worked in and out all the time   you for every child and could say who has or who hasn't got their immunisation- that's another (coming from the health board)

ANN – and it was - another one that is current at the moment is they want representation in every area of special needs you know cos there still is cases interview drive on and funding so this is again another thing that will add to the involvement as well.

BREDA – it seems at the moment more parent led doesn't it? But the ....

ANN –at the moment it is yes there are no structures really in place with any health board and that can no longer be the case as there must and well they are trying to combine education as well you know there is a little bit of toing and froing there at the moment who is responsible for what but still I think the health board em you know its obliged now to do something about it you know and take that on board.

ELLEN – I think the first thing that we have to remember is that we have a statutory duty to inspect. And can we wear two caps? – Can we be an inspector and a development person? Up to

date we have been inspecting and developing now we can't do... I mean in the ideal world you'd like to see that all Pre-School facilities were visited at least once a year and when we find at the end of the year that perhaps they haven't all been visited even though they have paid their annual fee, you just have to question that. And take a look at what are we doing and how much time is taken up with meetings and different things and if - decide well what are the most important tasks for the next three months. Now I have found, twice a year they will ask you how are inspections being carried out and I find that fascinating because I can go into a sessional service and get through perhaps in a morning whereas I can go to a full day care service with 200 children and it takes almost a week. We are not comparing like with like. And what I find in full day-care facilities and the types of problems I find in full day care facilities are totally different to what I find in sessional services. Because the needs of those are very very different. I suppose the only thing I have to say about full day care facilities – you are looking at 0-1's and 1-3's and 3-6's and if I find the needs and caring are very different and looking we have huge numbers of complaints and in my area the complaints are mostly from parents who don't want to be named because of the shortage of Pre-School places they don't want to lose their Pre-School place. Now what they are saying is- please go and do something about it but don't give my lad's name. Now this is what we've been doing and a lot of complaints are completely anonymous and the question is why do you follow up and investigate an anonymous complaint – we follow up on all complaints because of the child - to make sure that the needs of the children are being met, right? And if you have given us a lot of time we would have found that most of the complaints that we would hear about are substantiated so it is very important that we follow up on complaints and the types of complaints in the full day care facilities are: children not being- babies not being fed on demand, at 10am, 1, 4, and 7 and in between you know - just being left - the other would be nappy changing - one nappy change per period that's a huge one that keeps coming all the time - then when the staff are asked what the child has had to eat neither the proprietor nor the one in charge being clear on what exactly the food and fluid intake was for that baby for that day. So I would really look at … we have huge overcrowding still in many of the buildings because in the ideal world they would assign so many days before they open and then the idea is they have had advice and they can move on but the because of the shortage of places they are opening in very short time with large numbers and they are very crowded and there are so many things that need to be put right quickly that it takes an awful lot of time but it is because of the shortage of spaces that this is happening.

ELLEN - When the structure of the building is wrong it is impossible to get the rest right, the structure has to be right, and once you get that right it is much easier to move on with the rest but literally if it is wrong from the beginning I think that you are fighting a losing battle because a small room that can take 6 kids and two staff and they can't afford to have two staff - that type of thing you know. So em I find that as it goes on it is becoming more and more difficult you know really because for me it is because of the huge shortage of places, premises. And another one for me would be the huge number of people managing facilities with no training and who have no understanding of developmental needs of babies and who when you try to talk to them about it they think you are being unfair and that you're getting at them and if you keep coming back they think you're really getting at them. It is a pity in a way that they don't demand standards like – you have to have this level of training before you can manage a full day-care service. I mean that's the ideal and you should have staff with a mixture of training there to meet the needs of the children with disability. And there should be cleared staff, medical cleared and *something* cleared even yesterday somebody was talking - one of my class members hadn't had her Rubella vaccine and the child in the facility had German measles can she sue me? And the fact I think that we are nurses we would love to delve into telling her about immunisation and telling her about the diet for the 0-1's and hygiene and we could do wonderful work but you have to remember inspect, put on your hat and inspect and that huge amount of knowledge we have we haven't time to deliver it – do you know?

Moderator - I hear what you are saying

ELLEN It's a frustrating thing in one way – as a nurse you normally give and you care but to inspect is quite different

Moderator – I can see that this is striking a chord with a lot of you ….I can see that ….

MARY – I think that there are an awful lot of people managing services that have no training. They don't know how to deal with the parents when they complain so they cause reactions when there's no need for them so this is where a lot of friction comes between the parents and the service providers and that's a huge area and then that's why they are paying for a service that they have rights in. Now we would find, I would find in my areas that there would be a lot more places available than there were but the places that are full are cheap

ELLEN – I've read a survey that says that professionals look for cheap childcare – the judges and the doctors and the lawyers, they want cheap childcare

Moderator   -Indeed it sound like there are lots of complex issues that you are having to face and SARAH you know your experience of this the tasks that you find confronting you

SARAH – just people valuing early childhood – this is just an aside really – my sister is pregnant and I was saying how important for her to take maternity leave, she actually teaches infants strangely, but just that she values the time to put her feet up that this is good for you – to take the four weeks off you know its valuing children, childhood I think that's the important thing that we have to get across. I know if I get annoyed or upset with people in the course of my work, I try not to be, but it does happen but I will always say and it will be the one thing that people will agree with me on provider, line manager whatever, the focus is not on us or on the inspection process or whatever, the focus is on the child's health, safety, welfare of the child and if we can just use that rule in common in any situation that we are in that will keep us fairly straight anyway. No matter what kind of a hole we dig either it is dug for us or we dig ourselves but em just I think a lot of the points that I have written down about the information - my day is, I suppose I'm kind of …we only have 80 notified services (*lots of incredulous comments from others*) and I work all the time with an environmental health officer, from day one the same team have worked together that's 4.5 years so and the other thing about the fact that we are in a border areas also helps because there has been European money there from the start and at least we had were a lot of people just had to wait until JELR arrived, we've been very lucky that SL was able to do what she did. Because it mightn't have happened otherwise. There was money available through P&R money and Interreg money there's all these farming bits of money that was available to people in the rural areas that there just isn't available either in (name of county) cos its seen to be a rich county. Ellen and I have worked for the XYZ Health board and its amazing how different the set up is because in (names of three counties)   …funding is available……., (another county name) is seen to be the rich counties so they have no way of accessing European funding and that has been …we've been able to at least to when we've gone in and done the inspections said well that's not right, that's not right, but I know a place where you can access a bit of money be it a private provider or a community provider so that has added kind of to our work as well in that initially you would have advised ourselves because we do have a county childcare committee I was involved in the establishment of both the ABC and DEF CCC and we're still on them. I'd say were like yourselves but I think between myself and my EHO colleague were involved in about 8 sub committees and we are also involved in the management of the Childminding advisory officer. We put a lot of effort into that and as I say we are lucky in a funny kind of way that we have such a low number of notifications that we are

able to do the performance indicator - as Ellen was saying the only performance indicator we have is the number of inspections of the notified services that we do, which doesn't tell the story at all and that's all that goes into the department of health statistics. What other people didn't say was …we haven't had one for a while…. but we've parliamentary questions (*lots of noisy agreement*) we spent such a lot of time having to trawl through every one of our files because Politician A was asked a question, scoring points of Politician B – so one of our EHO colleagues kindly set up a database for us, took all the parliamentary questions looked at them and set the thing up so out of that and out of all the work that was done in the County we all put all our databases together and what was actually going to cost quite a lot of money ended up being done by ourselves which was good and actually helped saved a lot of work and I find that very good. So time spent maybe that we think O God you know this is not our core objective/role but still is relevant and I would also feel that we would do a lot of advising – we feel that if you get the house right that you might get the housekeeping right eventually so we spend a lot of time and were on a few advisory groups as well and were also involved in the (name of local childcare network) and we have been involved in that from the very beginning now we it got a bit out of hand and we withdraw for a while but we are reengaging as a group My childcare manager put me on the management committee when I started but that s just the way it happened I happened to be the person available . That has been a help to us and I know that any information we've had available from them we've tried to disseminate through our network. We've been able to give other people information that has come from there.

SARAH Going back to what Mary was talking about the immunisation, we have the same thing about oral hygiene, people would know you cant have the word Pre-Schools marked across your forehead so say I know a person the next thing is can I have a meeting with you – it does take up a lot of time just as I say go back to idea of quality initiatives we've seen that I suppose I know Ellen and Laura work very tightly as a team and that's kind of it's a once off in the Health board. Amazingly enough I think that two quite separate professions are working together very closely and we would be seen as a model within the health board that it can be done because they tried it a few times out in other kinds of initiatives when I was working as a public health nurse and it didn't work – it works with us because there is give and take and I think there is a basic understanding because most of them are involved in public health as well or their background training is in public health as well so you have an understanding and a respect for each other's background and for each other so that has worked. I've worked with the same person for 4.5 years and it has been beneficial to both of us – we have heated discussions about

things but – the other thing that I wanted to say about going back to the idea of the untrained manager – we're involved in research – that's time consuming as well – the one thing that upsets me – it struck a chord in me the last couple of weeks – is that we went into a crèche and we've always – it just misses every time – you think Oh were going to go into this and really we'll bring this person to court or you nearly go in with a question has she got any better? Or will we really have to throw the book at her this time – you know – and this particular person just does about enough to keep herself right she offers you the basics but nothing – the minimum requirements she will to a certain extent give you but there's nothing to show she understands quality – the only training she ever did was the IPPA foundation course so her attitude is - I'm a trained childcare worker. She did a first aid course three or four years ago so she doesn't go to any of the workshops either the IPPA or anyone else offers. She just doesn't move on from there. Herself and her mother work and basically they don't have anything above the basic. Her mother is quite a motherly woman but the provider herself is not a warm person. She does the organisation and the mother does the mothering and it kind of maybe works, I don't know. Anyway I went in this day and she was off sick and her mother actually spoke and spoke very honestly and what she said to us was that she was the mother of eight and she said to us – I was talking to her about – I didn't say curriculum but I was talking about the toys and the equipment and the toys and the equipment are there the children don't use them they don't know how to use them they are not shown how to use them – she said that the provider actually sends her son to playgroup up the road so she was talking about the little guy and she said oh, we sent Davidan because we don't do that type of thing – basically she was saying I'm only here as a babysitter – she said I keep them safe, I keep them clean I keep them warm and I'll keep them fed but that's as far as we see ourselves and that's the service we offer and that's the service that the parents know that we offer. *(agreement from others)* I think that's the other thing, I was looking at the programme of care and actually they had a programme of care but basically I was just thinking you are offering all the basics and you are offering it at a cheap rate and its successful and there's parking and there's a whole lot of other factors that go to why people use it. One of my nursing colleagues uses it and she is very happy cos she knows she'll get junior out at 4 o clock fed and clean and to me that's not enough…

(lots of others ready to join in here however Sarah continues).

SARAH That provider didn't even know what she didn't know. I go into other place and I come out to my colleague and I say why can't everybody be like that? We have actually had very good response at the moment we're doing the information officer is doing the duty to care

training with the providers and actually we've got quite a very good response perhaps because we've put the fear of God into them and even people who weren't there have contacted us. You know that type of thinking they don't even though its explained to them when you send out a letter that says its so important and then a lot of people come back and say but sure that's in the regulations anyway the duty of care stuff in the regulations but they don't sort of see it really really really - how it addresses what they are doing in their daily lives you know like we had a situation there recently about a child protection issue in another place and she didn't understand that because she didn't recruit her assistant appropriately that they had no education, it had a bearing down the line and basically somebody, the parents could possibly have sued. And its only now when we have actually part of the deal when we went to do the complaint was that you must do the duty to care and actually it was very educational for other providers because she said yes its so important that I came here today because I – actually she may even be at this stage the worker – she sacked the worker for doing something wrong – this worker didn't even know she was doing something wrong so – the whole thing – there could be an issue around it and possibly will because I think the worker actually is quite a good – she actually has quite a good case but em she just sacked her because she just didn't like the look of her – that was the kind of thing. Like Ellen found out when she did her research, people don't even know what they don't know – some people and then there are such marvellous people that are nearly out at training every day of the week and they are actually putting it into the children are getting the value of it and maybe they are actually gaining money even from if money is some peoples only focus these people – I don't know how they are existing – I really don't know how they are existing so you have you know have the two ends of the spectrum.

Moderator - Martina, perhaps you have something to add or contribute in that regard

MARTINA –well I tell you we are heavily influenced by the fact that for us in the (name of region) would have about 230 premises so that significantly impacts on – I don't even dream of getting round to each service on an annual basis – that just ain't gonna happen and I particularly think if you look at sessional services that are running alongside school years, the year is so short, the academic year and by the time you allow for all the different holidays and the holy days and the mid term breaks you cannot physically get around to them all. So I do like the balance of having other outlets and having other ways of kind of getting the message across. I don't agree entirely with Ellen that the building has to be right, I think that we are too hung up about the buildings all together in early years services but definitely about the skills and training of staff and particularly if you don't have management to relate to. You know when you

actually go out there and ask who is in charge there is no-one in charge and they will tell you no-one we're all the same and well - who actually is taking responsibility and they kinda say well so and so now is – the supervisor perhaps of the CE scheme or there's an owner but she just comes on a Friday, every third Friday to collect the money and there is no-one to engage with so even to have a discussion abut good practice and advisory stuff and you start talking to this girl and she says well I'm leaving on Friday cos this place is awful – you know and em I can think of a place that I am involved in the moment and you write the inspection report and you write the letter you ask to meet with the service provide r you are fobbed off she makes the appointment and she then cancels it and this goes on and on and it is never quite that bad that you are convinced that if you took her to court you would get the case because she is just about to do this tweak here and a little twitch there so yes she might respond to one issue but she created another twenty more. And that for me is frustrating. But overall I would have to say out of the 230 premises you would just have a handful of really bad ones and they are there in your head all the time (lots of sounds of agreement and assent from the group) and they are where you get the continuous complaints and parents ringing in as they have concerns 'I'm worried about the programme my little one is in the Montessori and they don't seem to be doing much Montessori and you know there is nobody trained Montessori – silence is written on the wall on a piece of paper written on the wall and was spelled SLIENCE and the paper was PAPPER and you know that there probably isn't an awful lot of Montessori going on. They are the difficult ones.

Moderator – I think that we have moved on from our basic question into the more specific examples of the kind of challenging issues that you encounter. *(Question 2)* Think of those coming after you who need to be prepared and I know that when you were starting off that no-one knew what you were going to find and it has evolved and it has developed so maybe just to throw it back to say what are the examples of your own experiences and how you can illustrate those kind of issues and challenges that you have faced.

CLARE - One of the things I would see – and I am not in it as long as some other people – but the fact that the regulations that we have been visiting for the 4 years now or whatever and again its not us just roaring and shouting – there is a certain amount of what I am doing that I am actually learning about – but also a certain amount (of services) that are just about ticking over but its in terms of how far forward we've come in terms of getting into the quality issues and we really do understand that there is a weaning in and a period of review, but what we are now doing is that we are dealing with ones that are barely ticking over and they are not going to do

anything to push that boundary. It's the same issues year after year without actually tackling the issue you know without getting stuck in and saying no we will have to deal with this – I find that really challenging as well

(lots of agreement) yes

ANN – and what particularly at the very start we took the approach, a very very gentle approach because this was something new to them and there was major resistance to it. I think we bent over backwards really to work with them and to meet them, we set up information nights and certainly all over the DEF health board as it was at the time and I am sure in every other area as well. We set about meeting everybody and explaining everything to them and I mean we did inspect but in a huge lot of our inspections at that time was really based on working with them and helping them to change and facilitating them to change but like there has been… we're still stuck there I agree with that. We are finding it very difficult, speaking for myself to move out of that or em as I say we get a step forward and then again we're back where we leave it, not see a premises for a year and back again and you know its not as it should be – where do you go? It's very difficult actually.

ELLEN – The regulations are very limited, that's where our problems lie, the other thing that strikes me about what you are saying how can you move forward – if you have gone back in 1 year, 2,3 and 4 and you're accepting the things in each year, I wouldn't presume our fault in doing that, especially if you are aware of the needs of the children are not being met and when you look at the regulations and that we expect that development of the child should be wonderful and then you see 'an adequate supply of books, toys and materials must be available' and there ends everything about the child and development and the whole lot and I mean where do we go with that? We can go nowhere with that unless you go in under the Act, and start looking about heath, safety and welfare of the child and looking at welfare in the *something* – you can do a good bit there but when you come to year three and four you're going to end up in court because there are thirty something regulations and your not complying with 18 of them you have to go somewhere and that is why I suppose those of us that have smaller areas, have done three or four (inspections of) facilities and see that they are not compliant with half of the regulations I mean they need to be compliant with all the regulations to meet basic minimum standards and that's not law that's where it falls through the net, so we've got to go to court. Then what happens when you've reached the stage where you've gone to court, there've been a few court cases they have dealt with *something* together, they are out to get you it becomes a

battle of wits and unless you have very good development people and everything else moving quickly along the side, you're stuck – does that make sense?

(general assent from group- lots of voices together at once)

ELLEN I'm probably one of these who seems as though I am happy in court – I am not and we have been very lucky so far in that we proved that the observations held up – but we needed to prove it and the hours that go into preparing a court case putting it together, getting advise, seeing the solicitor, going up and standing making a statement, it really wears you out it is very exhausting and yet you know that there are problems – but they remain unconvinced that there is neglect happening there s neglect and it isn't picked up in those facilities and I am talking about as qualified nurses looking at the neglect with the knowledge and training to do something about neglect and if you are looking a premises where there is overcrowding and you look at a period of three or four weeks and you find out that there have been 20 or 25 entries in the accident book of biting and one child has been bitten a few times in one day you've got to do something about it but you have to have the knowledge to recognise neglect and to know what is neglect and so it is a picture that you build up over a certain period and you have to be prepared to run with it and prove it – and you move into child protection or if there are loads of other obstacles take them to court and insist for after that they need a lot of professional help on how to separate the two and how to move them along its about relationships and bringing in the other areas and moving into safety without giving away information that you have picked up as an inspector, as you inspect your private Pre-School provider – I think that is where I am stuck.

Moderator – that is an interesting issue that is your experience since you came into this role – am I right in saying that most of you came from a Public health nursing background

ANN – yes

Moderator - well obviously since you've been in the job for 4 years you have found yourself facing challenges but maybe as Ellen has said require that you get some other support or training or advise from another field be it law or whatever and maybe that would be interesting to look at because those who are going to be availing of training to work in this role that will be invaluable to know because that kind of thing then can be built in to the training courses so given this would any of you have examples of situations that would have presented challenges in terms of or be outside your traditional professional expertise where you felt that maybe you needed extra support or extra advise or training even

ELLEN - yes our health board would say that there is a solicitor there that we can take advise and get support from we would have found that in the last 18 months we have worked full time with a solicitor.

SARAH - although within the board as well they do run training courses in different information what's the one about the courtroom skills?

CLARE - again that isn't specific to our area unfortunately that will only deal with inspections and report writing and the language how to gather a body of evidence that you are going to need down the line -showing how there is probably an easier way to gather information that you are getting and how to set it down in such a way that it is actually going to prove the case. Personally that is where I would lack the skills in how they do this for I have all the information its just the way its actually write it down and what you actually write down and whether it will stand up and that is important you've to go in looking for the things you know you're going to get otherwise its very frustrating and the whole thing won't hold up because its not right, its not the right sort of information gathered, and it wont stand up –

ANN – and I think we have so much work, I mean there's no way we are touching what we should be doing at all and that would be my big worry and I have 206 premises and I mean its beyond my control really you know and certainly there should be far more staff in and I think therefore if we had a manageable case load and a certain number of premises that we could concentrate on fully I think therefore that would lift all tides really and you're talking about quality and everything else then but as it is its just impossible.

SARAH – but even the whole thing about we haven't – we don't have any one of – there's nobody from the National Forum on the review board for example. Yeah yeah (strong agreement from the group) We tried very hard and we were told that it wasn't appropriate and anyway that's water under the bridge and maybe in the long run maybe it's the right place to be I don't know because if there's only a tweaking of the regulations we get very frustrated and upset about it so we don't talk about it much now because I feel unless there is registration......

(Lots of agreement on this)

MARY- its going nowhere, absolutely I agree with you on this and that's one of the moves that would have been a natural progression with the review of the regulations in 1999,

SARAH - The other thing is that I went to the IPPA conference HS was part of the ....I went to the Sunday morning one and it was very interesting because SL, and I am a great admirer of SL, got up and said, we have quality services because they've been inspected you know and I

actually stood up and I said no we have quality.. We have people that are meeting the minimum requirements – they are anything you know, anything but that – there are people who are trying – a million times above it - its very frustrating for people that aren't sort of saying we don't ..our reports and I say justifiable under the present legislation our reports are just statements of facts we don't do any pluses or minuses we just…this is what we found in our reports and I know different people write reports in different ways but …I firmly believe unless you have registration because…funny I heard a colleague of mine said that she was going to go to the North, her childcare manager was British and or Northern Ireland based and he was going to show them what a good service in the North and I said that's fine and that's dandy but not to say we're not under the same rules and regulations and no matter how much you want to get them to learn for what may be ..I don't know a good bad or indifferent service in the North, it could be a marvellous facility but I don't know its still a different jurisdiction they have registration you get minimum requirements before the doors open to the children and that's the way it should be here and its not. I think we are very ….I don't know what were doing at this stage and if we look years down the road I don't understand why its not…I suppose as well you know the resource issue as well

MARY - I always think we are going to come at it the wrong way and I thinks it's all down the fact that JELR - they welcomed it (*all speaking together about the funding programmes under JELR*)

MARY - and I heard today that they are not going to fund sessional services anymore I mean because its full day care, part time care will be abominable They have refused …

SARAH - In terms of …it seems to me or it strikes me that for a lot of providers we are the only source of information there has been and there are others now but we have been the only source of information and probably still would be a point of contact for a lot of information

Moderator …how have you managed to fill that kind of role in addition to the inspection role how did you manage and in what way have you all managed to equip yourself to be able to deliver that role

ELLEN - I would have found that when I go out to evaluate we have taken. What we found was that we were falling behind in inspections when we were asked for our help and by prioritising inspections because if you don't inspect …… so you couldn't do the advice role and to me that was …even though I think the advisory is necessary not necessarily by me .. but I believed that somebody who knew exactly what you were looking for who knows what you were talking

about getting the latest information and moving on along the quality route and working in partnership with them and giving time to go to meetings, like the county childcare committee and to bring in parents and providers and get that message across. The fact that we are not doing that I think really missing out badly the fact that the work is not being done and now your question to me was how have you managed to fill this role... when we have the time to do it I felt that that worked very well but I felt that providers needed to open up to tell parents what to expect and by withdrawing from that circle I feel there is a gap and that is where there needs to be the training that may not be what everybody feels

MARTINA - The national voluntary give great support for them to push them forward...

Moderator - and what kind of issues do you get asked for advice on?

MARY - Well what really is a lot of the time people who are thinking of setting up Pre-School services – thy want to know about the childcare Pre-School service regulations, now I think we have a huge problem about lack of information out there a lot of people really take on the information even down to the thing of still premises opening without notification.

2962 – you still get the situation of going on an advisory visit and getting told by the way I'm opening next Tuesday – and I'll say but you can't do that you have to give me 28 days notice and they'll say ah sure I won't bother with that and you then spend maybe three quarters of an hour on the phone at least to get them backtracked and then you'll discover when you relay get down to the nitty gritty that they haven't even bought the regulations and yet they have a building up and running I mean it's the most frustrating thing at times about how blasé people are and again it another thing that I'd love to be able to prosecute them instantaneously – it is an absolute disgrace that you can show that they have actually made contact with you, that you have even visited and yet they haven't even notified. I mean if that isn't ground for a case then I don't know what is.

ANN - I can think of a case its just one that comes to mind because it was brought to my attention there during the week, and I'd say it was about. this girl .. she was a young girl and I met her...rang looking for advice, she wanted to set up a service and em I went and I met her and I told her what the requirements were under the regulations and gave her all the details and she had this wooden structure going up in her back garden and em. So she says I was thinking of running it there, well I said I will tell you straight away now that ...it won't even built...that wouldn't be acceptable. The first thing you need to do is planning permission, I said that is outside my remit but I can advise you that that is the first thing you will need to do. And then it

will have to comply with all the regulations plus the food hygiene regulations as well. Oh she says yeh I'll take all that on board and I says I've given you a lot of information and you are to go away and think about all that and please come back when you decide what you are going to do. Now I got a complaint in from a parent, last week to say that her child was attending this service and she said…I said what is the complaint? And she said my child is 3.5 years she is not allowed walk around freely, walk around the playroom and I said Why not? And she said because there are 6 babies on the floor. So now the girl I met was not even interested in running the service herself she was going to get a couple of people in to run it which she obviously has done now I have had to write to her immediately and say you know put her in the picture that she should have …. but em that kind of thing is happening, but I find less and less myself now that if you meet them [*service providers]*and you give them the time and they are planning to come back that hopefully they are going the right way about it and that they will have things in place before they start off

MARY - But there are other examples of this I know one in my area – she's opened a new premises in my area two years ago and she has two premises in another area and it was discovered she's been for the last 10 years before she ever notified – the owner of the premises didn't want it but em

ANN– I am sure it was a fire trap this place I'm horrified to think about it and all I could remember was that which I never saw before, was that she has animals in the back garden and she had pot bellied pigs which I never *(general laughter)* maybe its fine and very valuable for the kids and all of that but I think that they [the pigs]are probably better off now than the poor children.

Moderator – on that sort of aspect in terms of the regulations I mean I know myself that they encourage compliance with minimum standards you obviously from listening to you now have gone beyond that in terms of your understanding of what represents good quality. Would that come from your background in terms of the public health nursing is it a combination of your experience of just seeing what is good and then saying what not so good has that been developed or enhanced in any way e.g. I know some of you have done courses and training etc. Maybe you could give me some idea of any insight into how you've developed that expertise or how that has worked?

SARAH - yes well I suppose our PHN training would be involved with child development because were the specialist people within the health board. I'm not too sure about the DES but

within the HB we are the ones that are on a daily basis working as within child development and that's one of our core jobs as a district nurse for an area. That's a daily thing so its implicit within our being and I think most of us are fairly experience PHN before we got into this as well but I know the whole idea of being involved with the national voluntary – you try to engage both on a local basis and at a national basis as well and try and keep in contact with regional organisations – like I said were quite involved with the County childcare network and are quite involved in their new initiatives – we were very involved with the legislative part og the first manual, information book for the 3-6 year olds – the next job of work was actually was to do similar for the 0-3 although Ger French's book I would use very often and have photocopied it and have given it to people and advised people to read it to use it as a resource so I have informed myself that way as well but just by the experience of doing the inspections on an ongoing basis as well that you do, you recognise what's quality even just on your day to day work you know what's good and what is not good it is as basic as that as well apart from doing reading and doing research I think all of us have done bits of training even from the point of view as well of the Children First guidelines has been another thing we've all had to do workshops and one of the things I did this year we has five briefing sessions for the providers so I went to all of the five because I felt that it was so important and so implicit in the safety and welfare of the children so again that to me was a quality initiative for the providers as well because there wasn't the training wasn't available really or formal training wasn't – we used to do some of that actually Ellen was the trainer on the recognising child abuse and neglect course for a number of years and the duty to care training

ELLEN – if you look at the public health training you're looking at the developmental needs of the children 0-1's 1-3's, 3-5's right through to 12 because you are going into the national schools and you go through the programme there and you are looking at particular groups so you have special training for each of that....what I wonder about that is though and I have done extra training in the area of child health and sexual abuse and that there so if I came across a relevant issue I would be able to deal with it...now what I'm wondering is when we go into facilities where they have absolutely no knowledge and we are coming from a level where you think and know that from 0-3 months you give them this, you start a solid diet from 3 months to 7 months chunkier food from 7 months to 10 months potty training toilet training stuff like that its quite high powered and high pitched what are our expectations? When you match the two– there is a problem with the huge gap if you want to meet the needs of the child it would be wonderful that those people ...and people say to me I don't have to know anything about potty

training - its got nothing to do with me – I expect those parents to take those kids home and take a weeks holiday and train them and give them back to me and if they don't I wont have potties, I'll put on the nappies and I'll send them home – and I'll say if they have come this far why can't you work with the child and the parents and see it through? And so we have the problem there that her and our expectations are not matching.

MARY - I think our problem…our training that we have..our big input is because we care and we would never separate care from the development of the child and I that's a huge bonus of coming from public health and I think that is probably why we were picked and I think that's what I like about it here is that it is called care and education and I think that we must also remember that because more than anything else if you have a good foundation in care, education will come anyway. You know the children are just empty vessels waiting to be filled, which isn't the worst thing that is out there in the sense that bad care could ruin you for life and I don't think that we should ever forget that

Moderator – we are at half three now and so I am thinking that we have already had a good discussion and I have identified at least 10 different areas that I can see could be learning point for people who are doing in service – but maybe to complete the picture you could think of specific situations that might have been challenging in your own experience. Even one each it might have been dealing with a difficult parent or dealing with a difficult practitioner or it might be dealing with a difficult colleague – but sometimes as I listen to you account I am learning so much that I was unaware of – perhaps in this last half hour you might like to share some particular experiences?…

SARAH -I have a one, when I was working in district there was one monthly visit that I had to do cos it was the only complaint that there was that I wasn't visiting often enough and it was a lady with multiple sclerosis and I used to say the rosary before I went in cos I was petrified of her it was the only way of calming myself – but a provider actually did that to me and I hadn't felt like that for a very long time as I am usually quite reflective and I usually try and see the two sides of the one story but she was actually a psychiatric nurse trained and actually still practicing on a part time basis in that field, and she worked with children with disabilities part time and she ran the playgroup part time but for …I remember her asking me …she really resent ed us coming in to inspect ..she says ..we sent her a not very good report because that's the way we found her and she was not please to see us a second time and so she said… I remember she asked me…I had worked with the health board at that stage for 23 years and she said how long have you been working for the health board? I said 23 years …she looked at my colleague and

she said and how long have you been working as an EHO? Deirdre said 12 years ...she came a bit unstuck at that stage but I have never been so frightened of anybody in my career. I really was taken aback. As a PHN I never had ....I met manys a different situation as you do when you work in the country and nothing basically surprises you as a PHN. This concerned me so much that I approached the Childcare Manager and I said that she is treating me in such an abusive fashion and I don't know the woman, she doesn't know anything apart from the fact that I worked for the health board for 23 years and you know ...what way is she treating the children? From what I can gather, because actually the childcare manager's child had just been enrolled in this particular facility! But from what we could gather is that she has a very controlling nature and our visit interfered with her controlling and who better to control that a three year old? They are very open to being controlled they love routine and they love... and actually the funny thing was that she was quite a good person for coming to training and that and now she is becoming more relaxed and because I am present at lot of the training and she is seeing me more as a person ....It has concerned me ..but I have never been able to kind of do anything about it because I had no ...apart from my own gut reaction to her like why are you doing this to me? And maybe I was caught unaware and was tense and I was maybe angry with her, as well I wasn't mebbe managing her properly as she was not obviously ..that's my feeling so I always and I said it within a CCC structures is that one of the first things that I feel that should be ....and it's a thing that's totally not done at the moment.... Would be that there would be ...well there is a bit of capacity training for community groups but both for private providers and particularly I know .... the girl who has done the .... childminding project, that she would have said that initially what she did with the childminders was to give them the courage to say yes I am a childminder, it was a years work to give them the courage to say yes I do actually run a childcare facility. That they are phased ...there is a lot of fear out there and maybe to do a bit of personal development to say yes I value myself so I am going to value what I do so I am going to charge the right price so I am going to do a this and its not ....I remember another provider said to me about her daughter..she wasn't good enough for the nursing and the teaching so I put her to childcare! They used to say that about nurses years ago! She was a nurse herself and she said well, she wasn't good enough so I sent her off on a childcare course and she has a lovely homely little day-care and actually is very good about coming to training and that but I know that that would be...people not nearly valuing themselves, valuing what they do, valuing what we do – there's a lot of it. The person that actually initially came into my head, PMc has worked this out, people are not valuing what they do and then they are not valuing the service they are offering the children either.

Moderator – 3976 thank you for that Sarah – anybody else think of a particular scenario that might be ….?

CLARE - I can think of one very quickly that and it might be something that will develop with the changing …you know all the non nationals or whatever that are come in into the country now. A non-national with two premises, we inspected both, sent a report on both and after the second one …the reports were not joined but they might have been on the same track…nothing really specific, but they took exception to the reports and wrote back and the first long letter, very strong language calling both myself and my EHO colleague racist. I can't remember the exact words but the bones of this very well written letter was saying that we were racist. We were absolutely…taken aback was putting it mildly…when we actually came down from the walls …and interestingly after both visits we sat down with it was a husband and wife, we sat down with him on the first visit and went through why we were saying what we were saying, having done an advisory visit in the first place and they tell us that they weren't planning on opening a full day care, they go and open two full day care so we came back and we say based on our observations that this is why we have aid what we did and we went through it very nicely and said these are our finding. The second time we sat down the wife went through things… and in between all of this in between the reports we had had a complaint as well and so we had to go out again and deal with this issue. I suppose it looked like we were hounding them but anyway this strong letter came back and we were racist of course and that had to be dealt with but to make a long story short, we had to go and sit down with the general manager and go through all this. We wrote back and I can't remember the details I think it was in terms of we just wrote and said it was a standard report and that nothing more or less than anybody else gets …these were the specific areas that are particular to his place and that basically we wanted them to withdraw all the remarks or we would seek legal advice and they had 14 days to respond and that they withdrew the remarks and basically it was very you know it was kind of like a real…wow this id you know they are very articulate couple and it is just something that is out there and it is a big challenge for us and …what they were saying was I suppose they read the report and decided we were saying what we were saying because they were black and that we were biased and they actually mentioned the health board and that the actual health board was biased and its officers and we were the officers . It was quite a very well put together letter, very well written but anyway it did all get sorted…My EHO colleague was all gung ho straight down to our solicitor... 'Let's go' and I was like wow if we can get them to withdraw …I didn't want to be up in court having to defend what I said on a racist basis every journalist in this country would

be there and it would have been a tea party for everybody and I don't need that kind of notoriety at all. They put it up to us…. But as soon as they were challenged with the legal stuff it was , you know, it was very serious business and all that and there wasn't a question of them taking it any further – they were treated the same a others….

Moderator – is this an issue the changing dynamics of the population?

MARY-Well what would come up a good bit maybe about childcare practices – a lot of it to do with corporal punishment that we wouldn't agree with but that they would consider normal to their culture. This could be causing a lot of concern,

BREDA-And if there was trained people in each room and they were working alongside they could learn our culture and our ways of doing things but that doesn't happen – they are there in isolation and they are only ….we find, locally there is a lot of Lithuanians used in one particular premises and language is a huge problem.

DEIRDRE – you are trying to explain something and you know that it is not getting through the way you are intending it…

BREDA– there is no learning in it for themselves (a lot of people speak at once)

Moderator – is there a large increase in non-nationals on the staff of services?

Yes there is yeah yeah

ANN – some of them totally run. I have one that is causing terrible problems and it isn't because they are foreigners – its language and they are not staying, there is huge turnover of staff and if they come across any difficulties at all they move on and

CLARE - I thinks that employers, I believe have to be sat down and given a bit of a …. apparently they have an awful lot of non nationals staff now and interestingly people who the health boards are …not really knowing and recruiting in somebody who is a non national with no English to learn English and yet I have now discovered according to how they do it that most of the staff in there have actually got a language problem and I have been tearing my hair out …..its crazy, this kid is wanting/ needs to go to school next year has a had a lot of trauma in her life and she is in to try and learn a little so that she will be fit to go to an ordinary national school and Martina then discovers then that ok the owner is still there and she not on the premises all the time but most of the staff were actually non nationals she felt with not a lot of English …so you want these kids to be included and integrated and yet this is….

BREDA – and even in the baby room there's no language no communication you know when in that situation at all

CLARE – and the other thing on corporal punishment is that they kick each other round the place and beat each other up, they cheek their parents and that's normal and that is how they operate at home and

DEIRDRE - And you have to try and get through to them that … it's very hard to get that through as well

Moderator - and do you find that you have to accept that because they are saying that it the case

CLARE - O h we're not - we're all against corporal punishment – I think you are here now and I don't think we can just sit back and say nothing –I mean certainly respect people's food and you know all of the stuff they celebrate and we don't and they eat this and don't eat that – no issues around any of that but child protection and that kind of stuff is very likely to come under our remit – it takes a lot more work to get through to .., what you would do in one minute might take three minutes

ELLEN – getting back to the original question – there is one thing about this job and I wasn't aware of it in year one, this job is a huge responsibility and I think you are not aware of it until you have done a few years but the thing that strikes me – parents expectations, they say to me all the time I was worried about the place I didn't like it, I thought it was an awful kip, but once you were inspecting I decided it was alright. And that's an interesting one. Take that a step further I had a phone call last week form a solicitor who said your being subpoenaed to court I said thank you very much he said yes you have to appear in court next week and I thought that's beautiful, and I said well what is it about and he said it is about a child who was in such and such a facility four years ago, you were in the job about one month … he came off the slide, which shouldn't have been inside in the building, and he fractured his skull, and the parents are now suing so you are to be called and its four years later, so we will be coming …and we will be asked to do ……. If you haven't inspected you're grand but if you have inspected it had better be right.

ANN - And the other side of it then is ok the parents then would say …the inspection should do this that and the other, parents will also take the approach …'Well I have my child in there, its my child and I going to decide if it is good enough for my child … you don't have that right so they also can take that approach,

MARY - Yeah I want my child to have a bottle no matter what you way....

(all talking together)

ANN. That actually came up a week or so ago .... It came to my mind because you (other member of group) had given me some information about it the other day, it is about two or three years ago, I was in a sessional service and the EHO was with me and one of the questions I asked when talking to the service provider was do you have any children with special needs and she just said one, and I said what is it and she said a bad speech problem, that fella there she said, and there was that fella there with a bottle dangling out of his mouth for the whole time I was there with a bottle of milk . I asked does he ever take the bottle out?...oh no no she said. So I spoke to her and I said would you ever think of maybe distracting him and maybe getting him involved in something he likes and ...oh she said he likes to drink all the time ....well I said maybe the child likes to drink but you could take off the top of the bottle and pour it into a nice beaker or something like that and work with the parents and that and I said is he going to speech therapy and she said he is, and I said you know speak to the speech therapists as well and he or she will advise you on that. So I spoke to her at length and I went off about my business and the next morning I had a call and it as from the mother and she said you're number was the third one she said the first was Pat Kenny the second one was Gerry Ryan and I couldn't get through to either of them (*loud laughter*) and so I finally got you. She said what did you say about my child yesterday? So anyway I told her what I did say and she took a deep breath and she said he is the youngest of 6 and he is my baby and he has a bottle and she ...of course she said what you are saying is right ...and I never thought of it like that ...she was told that this one came in from the health board and said that her child shouldn't have a bottle – she was never told about the conversation we had about the or the suggestions or anything – but the mother had a little bit of insight herself because if she didn't what had started that particular day could have still gone on – she was very upset

BREDA -I remember bringing the same instance up and it was one of those CE workers and the child I identified was her own. So they take it personally –' would you have a problem with that?' (*imitating a challenging voice*) I just couldn't, there was no way of developing it at that stage, I did in the report and with the manager... about a year later

ELLEN – when you look at the regulations and they talk about a suitable person ...with appropriate training and we're supposed to decide on that ...and I something something a suitable person or even a definition of a suitable person and that means that we have a huge

responsibility when you are concerned or worried and you know they are not receiving, if you go in and say in my opinion this is not a suitable person and they will say ha ha! here we go (lots of assent) but what happens when we're called back that's bad, yeah

ANN – you mentioned there about child protection and that was very very hot thing in relation to service providers they are not comfortable to handle the role and I have found that at the information nights, you know when we were starting off first, they certainly did not want to think about it or have anything to do with it and one experience that I have had with because of a child.. was neglect. Of there were two or three children and I referred it on to the social work department and it was dealt with. But that service provider insisted those children were removed from the service instead of working with everybody involved, all of us then, which caused terrible hardship and awkwardness for the parents, it was very difficult then for the parents finding a place for three young children. But see they (*service providers*) are not prepared I find, they don't want to know.

ELLEN– I have gone into a facility that has room for thirty children and they have sixty ad you work with them and say you must do something about this and they are really not listening and you may be told along the way – I end up in court and maybe fined a thousand pounds, a summons, if I am talking to you about 140 euro per week multiplied by 30 or multiplied by 60 there quite a considerable difference and a letter from you telling me to drop by thirty and you think I will, its just not that easy and we need help along the way to make that happen.

Lots of general assent and talking at once about the weakness of the sanctions under the regulations

DEIRDRE – they get enough publicity though that will close them

MARY – NO NO they move to a different area and its not big news anymore

Moderator – just to wrap up, we have maybe 5 minutes and This is an extra question not in the brief but I think it is relevant in terms of our discussion, how would you see the role of PSO evolving and how would you like to see the role evolving given the kind of developments that are occurring in the sector?

5033 SARAH– if you look at the work that HS's crowd that you are involved in and also just looking at the white paper I don't know, I've read the white paper – I think I have read it all and It could end up as I think Heino said at the IPPA conference, that are you going to end up like they have in the North that the OFSTED inspector, I think that it has changed a bit there was sort of social worker coming in to do what we actually were doing and I'm making a

comparison between here and the North and then you have the OFSTED inspector to come in and do the educational bit of it and that if and when the resources are available to me not very much of the white paper has been put into action. Yourselves (CECDE) is one part of it and there's a wee bit of stuff going on I think at the moment about children with special needs that's kind of on a regional and personal basis but in my opinion on the White Paper is that it's a bit of cherry picking going on that they take the issue bits out of it and its like I don't know like with PHN there is always someone left with the long term chronic geriatrics. The whole idea would be that one person would be going in – to go back to the implicit thing that care and education are just together they're intermingled; they've got to be there…

MARY if we had some structure …even if you mention …

SARAH I know just from doing inspections I've kina got round saying you know what are your activities because if I mention curriculum in some places you can almost see a physical reaction 'what would I be doing with a curriculum?' but if you say well what are your activities and there can actually be quite good activities, you know if you go into High scope or a Montessori, if it's a good one of either type or ones that that do learning through play, depending on what the approach is … on top of it the ones that sort of the non moved on ones where sometimes you go into them and say what is your activity, have you a program of activities? I try and do I have to change the language a bit in the different service but going back to your question about the whole moving on and I don't know what the outcome as even I've spoken to a school inspector in our own region and he was saying well they don't have the resources either the DES so its not the stuff that the PhD students are coming out – sort of taken aback by that because I understand from the very beginning that the DOH were the only people willing to take on the inspecting of the Pre-Schools …you know and that's been very very difficult for us cos we really don't ..its confusing

ELLEN - I feel that the needs of the 0-3 are not being met I really feel that their emotional needs I would stick my neck out on the fact that the emotional needs of those babies and positively the care needs of the babies –

MARY – Should they be in group care at all? In a controlled environment – no furniture….. you go into the room and there's no equipment….

Ellen and you go back and ask for a table and the next time you get the chair……

CLARE…or they say they break everything…

DEIRDRE… they are babies and they climb….

Lots of fast and furious discussion follows on the inadequacy of provision for the 1-3 year olds – the lack of materials, rooms without any furniture because the providers are afraid and the fact that there is a need to focus on the needs of this age group as the 3-6 year olds a generally well cared for.

MARY – it really worries me…..and a lot of the time depending on that….children spend more time in a constrained environment, tied into the chair, tied into the buggy, tied into anything… it leads to a lot more behavioural problems and at times I question whether the needs are being met at all?

ELLEN – I went into a service the other morning where they said they had cooked chicken nuggets at about half seven in the morning to feed the kids at 12, so I went out to the car and got the bottle of Parazol and poured it over them and said now go and get something fresh for the lunch. (*general shock at this!*)

MARTINA - I think that there needs to be more structure within the service and I think the DOH needs to take a greater lead on the way things are going I mean people aren't very optimistic with the current review of the regulations as we said the old ones are really thought to be just a starting point and we all thought things would have moved on so much more. And that there would have been far more developed in terms of the care and development of the child, not limited to the way that it is at present and that within our own service we need a bit of structure that we perhaps don't have senior management who barely relate to what we are doing or give us the support at that level or in terms of the borderline cases that you could bring to some group to help you decide that no no this is reached the point of prosecution, you've done this you've gone back and forth – a structure that we don't have, because you are doing the running yourself I mean my manager asked me at one stage Have we any cases going to court? And I felt like saying well you would ***well know if we did! You would know all about it! But like they are that hands off, they don't know what you are doing.

ELLEN – but you go and try to tell them that the workload is huge and you say we are not managing the service we are not getting through it we need advice we are worried about the children, their needs are not being met what do we do? We have an audit going on for the last 6 months – by an independent person coming in to do an audit – now we have made the point that we are not addressing the needs, we are getting through there is a need for more staff on the ground.

BREDA - There is no money….. (lots of talking at once about the lack of staff and resources and support)

ANN – I think that the Health board never really thought that this would be a big thing, they never did. I think we were just literally – when we were appointed – handed our job description and a list of complaints each and told to get on with it.

Moderator - And here we are now over 4.5 years on ……. Well ladies, it is now 4pm and our time is up, thank you so much for you time and I hope that you feel that you have had the chance to get your point across, that you have had a chance to let us know what it is like to be a Pre-School officer and I will be transcribing this word for word and I will then us a qualitative analysis method – and write a narrative for the group and let your words tell the story. I am going to report it as it is. I will then circulate this back to you and you can tell me if you feel that it accurately reflects what you said. .

Moderator - Thank you once again and safe journey home.

Appendix G

Transcript feedback template

Page Number, paragraph	Comment

Are there any issues or subjects that you would like included in a continuing professional education course?

_____

_____

_____

Signature of participant_____

Appendix H

Advanced Practitioner Profile (NCCC, 2002:22)

It is understood that an individual operating at this stage of professional development may operate with complete autonomy and will have full responsibility for the work of others.

KEY TASKS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

- Manage overall operation and maintenance of an ECCE service, e.g. Resource Manager, Finance/Administration, Personnel

- Formulate, implement and evaluate philosophy, policies and procedures

- Develop and evaluate programmes and activities

- Develop quality improvement strategies within a service to enhance the quality of experience for all children and staff

- Establish and maintain effective working relationships with all staff

- Mentoring and support of practitioners engaged in professional development

- Engage in learning opportunities to improve knowledge and skills at a personal and professional level

- Establish and maintain relationship with parents, families and guardians

- Liase with outside agencies e.g. County Committees, Regulatory Organisations, National Government Organisations

- Facilitate pre-service and in-service education and training of ECCE practitioners

- Recognise and deal with discriminatory policies, procedures, practices and incidents

SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

Child Development

- In-depth knowledge and understanding of child development theories

- Ability to describe in detail patterns in the holistic development of children

- Ability to apply theory of an area of knowledge in a professional practice context

- Ability to communicate and demonstrate the links between ECCE theory and practice

- In-depth understanding of the role of adults in the holistic development of the child

- Ability to use recorded observations and reflection on practice to develop long-term and short-term objectives and plans for the holistic development of individual children

Education and Play

- Ability to plan, implement and evaluate a curriculum for babies and children (0-8)

- In-depth knowledge and understanding of a wide range of different models/systems in use in ECCE

- Critical awareness of the value of research in ECCE

- Ability to co-ordinate the development, implementation and evaluation of an appropriate curriculum for babies and children (0-8)

Social Environment

- Ability to liase and maintain relationships in the wider environment including other professionals, management committees, local community and voluntary organisations and statutory bodies

- Knowledge of a range of methods available for improving adverse social environmental factors for babies and young children, including knowledge of the public services available locally and nationally and the ability to use these appropriately for the benefit of children

- Ability to develop, implement and evaluate initiatives to support the inclusion of all children and families in ECCE services

HEALTH HYGIENE NUTRITION AND SAFETY

- Ability to ensure the safety of children and adults in an ECCE environment

- Ability to take responsibility for the welfare and well-being of all children and adults in an ECCE service

- Knowledge and skill in the process o* development, implementation and evaluation of policies and procedures in a* ECCE service

PERSONAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Ability to reflect and critically evaluate self in relation to personal and professional development

- Ability to promote and support professional development of ECCE practitioners

- Critical awareness of the value of research in ECCE

COMMUNICATION, MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION

- Knowledge and understanding of financial, administrative and personnel management theory and practice necessary-for the effective operation of an ECCE service

- Ability to plan for and resource flexible ECCE services for children and families

- Ability to implement organisational structures ensuring that lines of authority and accountability are understood by all staff members

- Ability to supervise staff and support their development (including induction of new staff)

- Ability to put in place and maintain admission procedures and record-keeping: systems relating to children, their families and the staff of the ECCE service

- Ability to identify and solve problems related to the effective operation of an ECCE service

SUPERVISED PRACTICE

- Supervised practical experience as appropriate

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