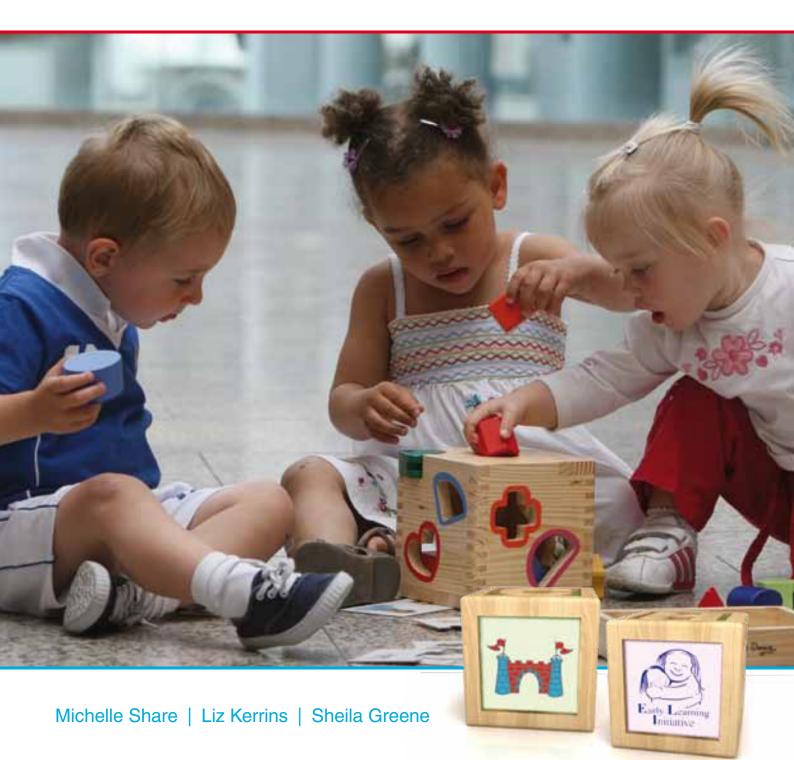# DEVELOPING EARLY YEARS PROFESSIONALISM

Evaluation of the Early Learning
Initiative's Professional Development
Programme in Community Childcare
Centres in the Dublin Docklands

Trinity College Dublin
children's research centre
research for children & young people

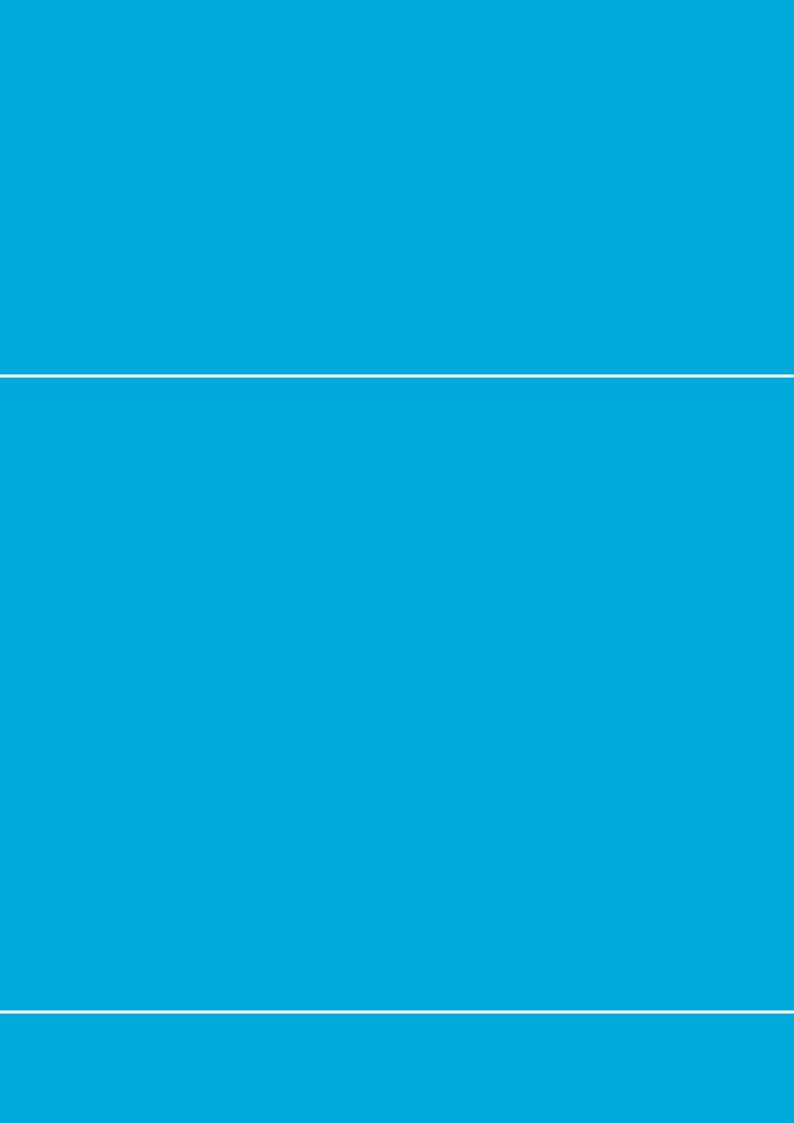Michelle Share | Liz Kerrins | Sheila Greene

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD

The National College of Ireland (NCI) plays an active partnership role in its local community, the Dublin Docklands; and a fundamental component of this active partnership is NCI's Early Learning Initiative (ELI). ELI is a community-based educational initiative aimed at addressing educational disadvantage through the provision of an integrated programme for children, their parents and families, and educators from early years up to third level. This report, conducted by the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College and funded by Pobal Dormant Account Funds – Flagship Projects, examines the implementation of one element of the Early Learning Initiative - Parental Involvement in Children's Learning (PICL) training in community childcare centres in the Docklands.

I'm sure we will all accept the value of reading a bedtime story with our children, but how many of us consider this as part of the role of parent as an early years educator? National policy views the parents as the primary educators of their children, but how many parents feel equipped for that responsibility and how many childcare providers see parents as their educational partners? The introduction of PICL in the Docklands childcare centres is part of ELI's innovative approach to addressing early years literacy and numeracy; an approach that seeks an equal partnership between parents and practitioners. Moreover, the PICL framework views parents not just as educators, but also as learners, learning child development concepts and pedagogic strategies, empowering them to take responsibility for and play an active part in their children's education.

There are important messages in this report for policy makers, particularly in relation to the implementation of Síolta, The Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE 2006), Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA 2009) and the Draft National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools (DES 2010). Our hope is that initiatives such as ELI will become recognised as important mainstream initiatives that empower parents to address childhood literacy and numeracy at a national level.

Without the active engagement and participation of the local community childcare centres, both ELI professional development programmes and this report would not have been possible. We thank the Centres for their friendship, generosity and commitment and acknowledge the quality of the service they provide to both parents and children. We look forward to building on this work and continuing to support them in the implementation of Síolta and Aistear.

The Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland is very appreciative of the funding received from Pobal to enable the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College to do this evaluation and we would like to recognise The Early Years Policy Unit in the Department of Education and Skills for their interest and support throughout the project. We should also like to thank the Pen Green Research and Training Base, Corby, England, who provided the training. The experience of both the training and being at Pen Green made a lasting impact on the participants and inspired them to develop their practice further.

Finally, we at National College of Ireland are extremely proud of the work and of the impact of ELI in the Docklands community, due to the dedication and passion of Dr Josephine Bleach and the NCI ELI Team.

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President
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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SUMMARY

Background

From 2007 to 2010, the Early Learning Initiative (ELI) at the National College of Ireland (NCI) supported 24 early years practitioners from 11 community childcare centres located in Dublin's Docklands to undertake training in Pen Green's methodology to develop partnerships with parents to support their child's learning - Parental Involvement in Children's Learning (PICL). This report describes an evaluation of the implementation of the PICL framework in a sample of five of these childcare centres. Specifically the evaluation sought to identify and analyse:

- What does parental involvement mean in childcare settings where staff have undergone PICL training?

- How have these childcare centres implemented the PICL training?

- To what extent has awareness been raised amongst childcare practitioners about parental involvement in children's learning?

- How do parents who use the centres regard parental involvement in the childcare centres?

- Which elements of the PICL training worked best, and for which groups?

- What are the barriers and facilitators to parental involvement in the early years settings; and

- Are any future training and resources required to encourage parental involvement in the childcare centres?

This report also discusses the sustainability of the use of the Pen Green approach in the Docklands childcare centres and the future role of the ELI in supporting continuous professional development (CPD) and parental involvement.

While this report evaluates PICL implementation in the childcare settings, it must be considered within the context of the ELI's wider childcare CPD programme that includes other training opportunities and workshop activities to support better ECCE practice and parental involvement in early learning in the Docklands area. To decontextualise PICL and exclude the ELI's training in national quality and curriculum frameworks and its play-based activities that encourage parents and practitioners to engage with children would give an incomplete picture of the influences on practice and parental invovlement. Indeed, the wider influence of the ELI's training and activities arose organically during data collection. Therefore, reference is made in the report, when appropriate, to ELI activities that support parental involvement in Docklands early years settings through disseminating and supporting the implementation of national policy frameworks alongside their own initiatives with parents and children.

The structures and procedures of the centres themselves and the quality of provision are not being evaluated: the evaluation aims to provide implementation information to the ELI for programme refinement.

This evaluation is an element of the Children's Research Centre's evaluation of the ELI's child and family programmes that aim to improve educational outcomes amongst children experiencing social and educational disadvantages in the Dublin Docklands. Research (2006) with parents in disadvantaged pockets of the Docklands commissioned by the NCI found that while many parents had high educational aspirations for their children, they were not always sure what to do practically to support them. The ELI approached Pen Green (PG) to train a small group of early years practitioners from the Docklands to increase and improve the involvement of parents in the centres in their children's education. International research suggests that parental involvement in learning activities is associated with better cognitive attainment in the early years.

The research literature on parental involvement in early years settings and early learning illustrates the many and varied activities and roles played by parents, with parental roles ranging from learner, to educator; from volunteer to supporter. The PICL framework offers a specific methodology where practitioners and parents adopt a partnership approach to systematically documenting, planning and extending children's learning through sharing child development concepts. It positions the parental role as learner and educator.The framework promotes a continuous two-way flow of information from early years setting to home and from home to setting.

The community childcare providers in this evaluation are operating in an environment that is constantly placing new demands on them. In the past five years alone, the government has introduced a new community childcare funding framework, quality standards for early years settings (Síolta), revised childcare regulations, an early years curriculum (Aistear), and a free preschool year for 3- to 4- year- olds. These policy frameworks also encourage parental involvement, although not specifically using PICL.

The childcare providers participating in this evaluation are a diverse group, but have some features in common that affect both the extent to which parents engage with the centres and their child's learning and the expectations that they have of the education system. Two of the childcare centres are located in the north inner city in a geographically small and distinct area that is one of the most disadvantaged in the whole inner city, with considerable criminal and anti-social behaviour related to high levels of drug addiction and feuding gangs. Two are located in mixed-income, mixed-tenure inner suburbs, which, while having pockets of disadvantage, have been gentrified. Another is located in an inner city community located on one of Dublin's main throughfares, which is also a mixed community. The providers in the poorer areas tend to be more reliant on national subventions for funding and employment schemes for staffing than those in mixed areas where fees from parents are more forthcoming given the social and economic mix.

A key feature of relevance to this evaluation and to the ELI's CPD programme is that, generally, educational levels are low amongst many of the childcare staff. In common with other community childcare providers in the Docklands, most staff were undertaking childcare training (FETAC levels 5 or 6) whilst working in the centres. This was particularly the case for centres with a large proportion of staff on FÁS employment schemes, as participants tend to arrive to the centres with low educational levels and no childcare training. It then becomes the job of the centre to support them to undertake childcare training.

Methodology

A participatory, multi-stakeholder approach was adopted and involved five childcare centres in the Docklands.

Research questions were examined using a participatory research methodology with a mixed methods approach to data collection that included:

- a review of research and policy literature on parental involvement in early years care and education

- a documentatry review of ELI materials

- familiarisation visits to the childcare centres

- a centre profile questionnaire (5)

- interviews with PICL-trained practitioners, childcare centre managers, the cultural broker and ELI's Early Years Coordinator (13)

- focus groups with childcare practitioners (9) and parents (5)

- a child group research activity (5)

Central to the participatory methodology was a Research Reference Group that comprised representatives from the five childcare centres that agreed to be involved. This group was key to guiding the research, making sure that it was relevant and meaningful to the childcare centres, and providing the research team with access to centres.

Key findings and conclusions

The meaning of parental involvement in the childcare centres

Activities

- Pen Green's PICL methodology sits within a broader continuum of parental involvement roles and activities in the five childcare centres in this evaluation. It ranges from volunteering to participating in outings, and in activities such as children's messy play, and communicating verbally with staff about child rearing, welfare and, to a lesser extent, learning. Centre events, particularly child graduations and St. Patrick's Day celebrations are very well-attended in all centres.

- Parents can engage at whichever level they feel they are most comfortable or that they can give the time to. Right now, it seems that a substantial number of parents do not engage any further than 'a quick

chat', which in some centres represents progress. This kind of engagement is the understanding of parental involvement held by a sizeable number of parents and practitioners in the centres.

- All of the activities, particularly the events, undertaken by the centres themselves and by the ELI in the centres are valuable in getting parents to spend some time in the centres, developing better relationships between parents and services, and encouraging parents to interact with their children through play.

Parental Roles

- National policy views parents as the primary educators of their children and the practitioners in this evaluation do also. However, the parents themselves do not see themselves as educators, leaving this role to the centres, with notable expectations in all centres. The PICL framework views parents not just as educators, but also as learners, learning child development concepts and pedagogic strategies so that they can form equal partnerships with practitioners. However, the childcare centres do not view parents as learners and, indeed, neither do most of the parents.

- Notwithstanding differences in service models and contexts, a key difference between the PICL programme in the UK and in Dublin, is that the Dublin approach does not provide strategies for childcare practitioners to teach parents and embed the key concepts and pedagogic strategies: there are no group or one-on-one training sessions. The staff themselves are learning, and there are not the resources or the skills base to engage in adult education strategies.

- Many of the reasons why parents, and staff, may not see parents as learners or educators relate to factors that are beyond the control of the centres. Parental involvement in early learning, and the role of parent as educator, is new in Ireland. The PICL is an ambitious model to be introducing in this context, although the childcare

centres have all worked to rise to the challenge. The introduction of PICL to these centres is innovative in the Irish context, particularly as it seeks an equal partnership between parents and practitioners.

Changes in early years practice

- Practitioners described a series of 'big changes' in practice that are a direct result of their exposure to PG's values and strategies. These include:

  - encouraging better relationships with parents, providing settling-in periods and strategies for new children

  - the use of a key worker system (with varying success)

  - encouraging children's autonomy (again, with varying success),

  - undertaking written child observations (partly also driven by childcare regulations and quality standards), and

  - a clearer focus on learning through play.

- Practitioners perceive some of the outcomes of these changes as:

  - knowing parents names and encouraging them to enter the centre

  - being more consciously child-centred

  - encouraging more reflective practice

  - changing what is considered important to observe and record about children

  - a better understanding of the importance of play in learning

  - having learning output that can be shared at some point in time with parents and families, mainly due to the introduction of portfolios.

Implementation of PICL in the childcare centres

Child Development Concepts and Pedagogic Strategies

- Of all of the child development concepts associated with PICL, the schemas were the best understood and used by practitioners to identify how children learn and their specific interests. The schema concept and its application is very well understood and applied by those who were trained directly by PG and by more senior staff, but it has filtered down in a patchy fashion to some of the other childcare staff, although levels of understanding differed between childcare centres.

- A strong perception was held by most practitioners that, in general, parents do not understand the theoretical aspects and technical language associated with child development concepts like schemas. Parents' understandings of schema differed from parent to parent and focus group to focus group. The centres have all greatly modified the language, including not using the word 'schema', as they believe that the language intimidates parents.

- The childcare centres are not as advanced in implementing the well-being and involvement concepts and scales as they are in using schemas. The practitioners have developed their own broader understandings of the concepts. The well-being concept is used to record child mood rather than as a way of evaluating provision and structuring learning. Practitioners use words like 'happy', 'having a great time', 'in good form' in describing child mood. Practitioners tend not to use the concepts with parents, referring instead to child mood.

- It is unclear how the well-being and involvement concepts are used to benefit children's learning in the centres. The well-being and involvement concepts have, in most centres, been altered to a point where they do not resemble Laevers' concepts and the dimensions and scales are generally not being used. It was suggested

by some practitioners that the scales are inappropriate as they label children, while others remain concentrated on using the schemas. Some practitioners may not understand their role in the evaluation of settings.

- The centres say that they have not as yet concentrated on disseminating and using the pedagogic strategies. The interviews and focus groups suggest that, without them realising it, the strategies have been very influential on practice. Many practitioners do not like the language of pedagogy and so may believe that as they do not use the language, they are not using the strategies.

Portfolios

- All centres have introduced a portfolio for each child, and this was described as a major change in practice as a result of the PICL training, and one that is very likely to be sustained in the future. The centres are still learning how to develop them. All practitioners were very enthusiastic about this development.

- While there are differences in practice between centres and practitioners, it appears that the main purpose of the portfolios at this point is to record children's activities and development. Practitioners held different understandings of the purpose of the portfolio. For some it was a surprise gift at the end of the child's time in the centre where the parent could observe the developmental path travelled by the child, while others used it as record of their learning and their journey through developmental stages.

- The ownership of the portfolio lies with the centres, and the parents are 'shown' it. It is does not move between the centre and the home for development. The extent to which parents engaged with the portfolios differs between and within centres. It tends to be shared quite informally, through casual chatting. Mostly, parents see the portfolios when the child leaves the centre, although one centre has an annual open day where parents have the opportunity to see it.

- Portfolio content generally comprises child observations, children's artwork and photos of the child undertaking activities within the centre. The depth of the observations and the extent to which they capture the child's learning is evolving over time in centres. Centres are far more likely to use photos than videos to record children's schemas and achievements. There were individual instances of the use of video for sharing children's learning with parents, including the child study which was part of the PICL training.

- There is a question mark over the purpose of the portfolio and its content. Some practitioners regard the portfolio as a static record of child development that is given to parents when their child leaves the centre, but have not taken the next step of seeing the portfolio as a strategy for regular engagement with parents about the child's learning in order to extend it.

- In general, the room leader/key worker and senior staff are responsible for developing and assembling the portfolio, although junior and CE staff also contribute. Some centres invite parents to take them home and input into the portfolio but few parents avail of this opportunity. Practitioners suggested that parents are not necessarily interested in this type or depth of engagement on their child's learning, they do not have the time to engage, or they like the 'surprise' at the end of seeing how their child has developed over time.

- A challenge facing centres is insufficient non-contact time to develop and update the portfolios, although centres are devising strategies to counter this problem.

Planning and Evaluation

- Centres' learning plans operate at room rather than at individual child level, although the use of schemas and child observation has supported practitioners to identify individual childrens' interests and use this information to extend their learning. The Dublin PLOD has not been implemented. Centres say that they have not been ready

to do so as they have been working at ground level on relationships in the centres, on the embedding of the schema concept, and the development of the new practice of portfolio development.

- Overall, the issue of planning and evaluation for learning emerged as one where some practitioners may not have all the required understanding, skills and knowledge However, all the centres, although not all of the practitioners, are involved in workshops being provided by the ELI on the Síolta standard on planning and evaluation.

Awareness amongst childcare practitioners of parental involvement in children's learning

- There are varied understandings of parental involvement in the Docklands childcare centres in this study. Staff are becoming being more deliberate in their approach to involving parents and are being more reflective on their own practice in this regard. When considering practices in the past they now feel that efforts to involve parents could have been better. This increased awareness is partly due to the PICL training, and partly due to the ELI's Síolta training on parental involvement.

- The base on which parental involvement is being built differs from centre to centre. Better relationships are being built with parents, as evidenced by the fact that in some centres parents now come in to the children's rooms and engage with the practitioner, even if it is only for a minute or two, which marks a change in practice in some centres. Staff make an effort to know parents names, which was not always the case.

- Practitioners believe that some parents are just not interested in engaging in the ways suggested by the PG training, eg, taking photos or videos of their child's learning to share with practitioners, writing about their child's learning in portfolios or notebooks, and so on. However, in the absence of training workshops for parents, it may be difficult for parents to know what it is that is being asked of them.

Parents views of parental involvement in the childcare centres

- Parents held different views on what parental involvement meant to them, from communicating with practitioners about their child's daily health and welfare, to participating in the ELI and childcare centre play and reading activities, to talking to practitioners about their child's learning.

- Not all parents seemed to agree that they should be involved. Some believe that it is the role of the professional to teach children, and parents need only know what is going on when something goes wrong. This is not to suggest that they are uninterested in their child's development: far from it. But parental involvement held different meanings for parents.

- The most pressing issue that arose in the focus groups is that of sharing the portfolios with parents. Many parents did not know that they could see the portfolio throughout the child's time in the centre. The perspective of many of the parents participating in this research is they did not engage with the contents of the portfolio as often as they would have liked and were not aware that they could see it at any time. Some parents saw it at the end of the school year, while others did not see it during the time their child was in the centre, but at the end before the child left to go to school.

Factors impacting on parental involvement in the childcare centres

- A series of factors influenced the extent of parental involvement in the centres. Some of these were structural and outside of the control of the centre:

  - the operation of FÁS employment schemes

  - the legal requirement for adults working with children to receive Garda clearance

  - the differences between the Pen Green Centre model and the Irish community childcare sector, and available funding.

- Other factors related to the centres and the communities themselves:

  - the physical environment of the centres

  - levels of staffing; and parental attitudes and understandings towards early years learning

  - Parents time can be restricted by caring for other children or work.

- All of the centres had staff working under FÁS employment schemes, primarily community employment. Some of the centres were very dependent on this kind of staffing. These centres were constantly engaged in training and supporting FÁS staff through national childcare training. After one, two or three years, FÁS staff leave, taking with them their expertise, including what they have learned on parental involvement, to be replaced by more untrained FÁS staff.

- Practitioners were acutely aware of the differences in the Irish community childcare model and the Pen Green model, and the impact that this had on their ability to ever implement PICL in the same way as in Corby, despite the similarities in the social and economic profile of clients.

- The physical environments in the centres were generally not conducive to bringing parents as a group together for activities, although one brand new centre was fortunate in this regard. Indeed some could not even find the space to meet privately with one parent. Without funding and available space, it is beyond the control of the centres to change this situation. Most of the centres were built/extended prior to the current policy direction on parental involvement and having the required space for parents is not a feature of national guidelines on developing childcare centres.

- It appears as though parents in the centres in mixed-income income areas are more likely to participate in activities that relate to early learning than those living in areas of concentrated social and economic disadvantage. Some of the childcare centres in this evaluation are operating within a context where the community is challenged by extreme criminal behaviour, and some parents live very chaotic lives. For practitioners, engaging in basic communication with some parents/grandparents during drop off and collection time is a positive development. In some cases, childcare provision may be providing respite for child and parent.

- Practitioners suggested that some parents do not understand that the centres engage in early learning, and may believe that their child is simply being 'minded'.

Benefits of PICL training and parental involvement

- Perceived benefits to childcare centres and practitioners include:

  - a heightened awareness of the important role played by parents in their children's learning for practitioners

  - the supportive network of centres and practitioners that has emerged as the result of participation in the PICL training

  - new skills and a new language in regard to child development

  - the validation of practice and increased motivation that can occur from engagement with parents

  - increased parental trust in practitioners as they understand more about early years practice; and

  - the good foundation PICL provides for engagement with Síolta and Aistear.

- Some parents explained that they understood aspects of their child's development and learning that they would never have known had they not engaged with practitioners. Those parents taking part in ELI-run activities in the centres, such as messy play, said they enjoyed the experience and continued with some of the activities at home.

- Benefits to children identified included:

  - the positive impact on the child-parent relationship from increased interaction

  - parents learn something new about how to extend their child's learning that they can implement at home

  - the increase in one-to-one time between staff and children due to the practice of observation

  - the positive impact on practitioners' own parenting abilities.

Elements of the PICL training that workedbest and those requiring further consideration

- The addition of the cultural broker was regarded as very helpful in building and supporting relationships between the ELI and the childcare centres, and in supporting implementation and ongoing training.

- Staff who had undergone PICL training spoke of the exhilarating experience of having a first-hand experience of Pen Green. They were particularly impressed by the space and surroundings, the types of risk-adverse play and activities, and of the presence of parents.

- The ongoing training support provided by ELI staff and the cultural broker was identified by practitioners as key to implementation.

- The transmission of learning from Pen Green to their colleagues proved challenging for some practitioners. While having two people from each centre directly trained by Pen Green was found to be beneficial for mutual support, the issue remained of how best to disseminate the training to busy, and sometimes resistant, colleagues back home. Those trained were inventive in how they have brought back the learning, and were supported by the cultural broker and the ELI. However, bringing back the learning requires some skills that not all people have, and they are not dissimilar to teaching skills.

- An element of the training that was found to be not satisfactory was that some practitioners received their PG training in PG with other UK practitioners, and they received it for a much shorter period than other Dublin practitioners.

Further resources and training required to implement PICL

- There were cost implications for the childcare centres in implementing the PICL approach that were not planned for:

  - the costs of paper and toner cartridges for printing pictures of the children

  - the cost of 'buying out' non-contact time for staff to engage in write-up of observation, print pictures and portfolio assembly.

Sustainability of PICL in the centres and the future role of the ELI

- As a result of their involvement in the PICL training, centres would seem to be in an advantageous position in terms of their engagement with the new directions in childcare: Aistear and Síolta. Nevertheless, there is some trepidation amongst practitioners that more and more is being asked of them. While they know that Síolta, PICL and Aistear are not parallel tracks, they are struggling to find ways of bringing them together. Centres have made it clear that in order to sustain the learning in PICL and align it to Síolta and Aistear that they will require ongoing support from the ELI.

- Although the PICL training has the potential to provide a firm foundation for the implementation of Síolta and Aistear, the place of parental involvement in children's early learning using Pen Green strategies and concepts has not been clarified by the ELI. The PICL methodology is very specific. The Docklands childcare centres can implement Aistear, meet the relevant Síolta standard and Regulation 5 of the childcare regulations without ever using anything from the PICL methodology, given how broadly parental involvement is defined in these frameworks.

- The capacity of centres to continue to engage in enhancing the quality of their care and learning environments will benefit from the network of community childcare centres that has arisen as a result of the PICL training and the support of the ELI. Centres that previously would have had little formal contact now communicate and share information on best practice. Nevertheless, they are likely to need ongoing support from the ELI to continue to build their capacity in this area.

- Some centre managers identified that the centres are embedded within a community employment infrastructure that is accompanied by uncertainty about funding and future direction. Clearly while the children may benefit from quality learning experiences this is contingent upon the ability of centres to maintain funding for childcare. At the moment there are many uncertainties around community childcare funding.

- Other sustainability issues relate to the need for the ELI to be able to determine how programmes that support childcare practitioners to involve parents in children's early learning impact on better outcomes for children in these childcare centres. This would require, amongst other things, much more to be known about what sorts of changes are required, for whom and when, details on the children and families that attend the centres, and detail on what happens in terms of parental involvement in these centres.

- Understandably there has been a need to build partnership and trust between the ELI and the childcare centres which takes time. As the ELI does not have any statutory power in terms of its initiatives in the Docklands childcare centres, and largely relies upon the goodwill of those involved, the issue of compliance, data collection and reporting is a difficult one. Also, it is clear from this evaluation that each centre is interpreting and implementing PICL differently from each other. This will become an issue in designing and implementing future monitoring and evaluation strategies, and being able to ascribe potential change to the ELI's intervention.

- The introduction of PICL in the Dublin Docklands was an innovative step and it set the bar high for childcare centres. There is, however, a need to move towards a partnership between the ELI and the community childcare centres in which power and decision-making are held collectively and within a legal framework that can take implementation of parental involvement in children's early learning to a higher level.

Recommendations

Recommendations are made to support the ELI in the further development of its childcare CPD programme. The recommendations are aimed at the ELI and ELI funders primarily, but are also relevant to national policymakers.

Recognising different parental involvement understandings and practices

- Recognise the innovation represented by the introduction and implementation of the Dublin approach to PICL within the Irish childcare and community childcare contexts. The ELI could use its unique knowledge on encouraging parental participation in learning to inform national policymakers on the amendments required to national policy and funding frameworks.

- Engage in activities in the community and in the centres that support parents' and practitioners' understanding of parents' roles as educators and learners.

- ELI activities that have drawn parents into the centres such as messy play and reading have been important and centres should be supported so that these can become centre-led and owned rather than ELI led.

- Observe change in the centres in relation to the different activities that comprise parental engagement and involvement in centres, not just those that relate to the PICL framework, over the medium- and long-term, and develop some shorter-term indicators that reflect gradual changes in parental and practitioner roles and activities.

Implementing PICL

- Give further consideration to what is desirable and achievable within the Dublin approach to the PICL.

- Provide further support to centres in portfolio development.

- Identify and build on the learning achieved in the centres on Pedagogic Strategies.

- Continue to support the practice of learning planning and evaluation using the Síolta standard.

Supporting changes in awareness

- Recognise changes in awareness and attitudes towards parental involvement, and indeed wider practice changes, as valid change for evaluation purposes: without attitudinal change, practice change is more difficult.

- Continue to support the community childcare centres in implementing the Síolta standard on parental involvement, and also Aistear in this regard.

Encouraging parental involvement in early learning

- Encourage the centres to share portfolios with parents regularly throughout the school year.

- Consider how best to work with a small group of parents to try to engage with them at the deeper level on their child's learning.

Enhancing training elements that worked best

- Consider how best to keep the Pen Green approach alive. While study visits to the PG Centre seem transformative for individual practitioners, it may represent better value for money for the ELI to undertake this task in Dublin through its current CPD programme activities.

- Consider how the role of the cultural broker can be further developed to formalise a community of practice of childcare practitioners and centres in the Docklands.

- Consider, using the experiences of the centres, on how best to support PG-trained staff in training centre staff in the PICL methodology.

Addressing challenges in involving parents

- Use the findings of the CRC's evaluations to engage with national policymakers on issues facing children's services, including childcare and wider early years provision.

- Recognise the 'smaller' strategies that the childcare centres are developing to build trust and relationships with parents.

- Develop an information/communications strategy aimed at local parents on the role of childcare services in children's learning, and the importance of their role in early learning.

- Support centres to develop their physical environments to facilitate parental involvement, such as developing meeting room space, space to keep buggies, etc.

- Provide guidance to centres and staff on portfolio development and their purpose as a tool for involving parents in their children's early learning.

- Support childcare centres to consider how they might best meet the costs of parental involvement in their business planning and budgeting. At a broader national policy level, there may be a case for seed funding to encourage innovative and emerging practices.

- Support a short training session for all staff in the use of video and cameras, uploading etc.

- Support the centres to consider how non-contact time can be built into centre costs.

- Support the centres to consider how the pool of local trained ex-FÁS childcare workers could be used to support parental participation.

The future of PICL and the role of the ELI

- Support the childcare centres to meet Síolta and implement Aistear using knowledge gained through PICL training.

- Support the development of a Docklands Community Childcare Practice Network.

- The ELI should continue to support parental involvement and CPD in community childcare settings in the Docklands.

- Consideration should be given to how the community childcare centres in the Docklands can work together as a legal community partnership that involves the ELI. The ELI should be a strategic partner and involved in capacity building activities around the alignment of Síolta, Aistear and PICL rather than hands-on activities within childcare centres.

Abbreviations

CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
CCS	Community Childcare Subvention Scheme
CE	Community Employment
CPD	Continuous professional development
CRC	Children's Research Centre
DES	Department of Education and Science
DOHC	Department of Health and Children
DJELR	Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
EOCP	Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme
ELI	Early Learning Initiative
FPYS	Free Preschool Year Scheme
IPPA	Irish Pre-school Play Association
LIS	Leuven Involvement Scale
NCI	National College of Ireland
OMCYA	Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs
PCHP	Parent Child Home Programme
PG	Pen Green
PICL	Parental Involvement in Children's Learning
TCD	Trinity College Dublin

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION, AIM AND OBJECTIVES

Introduction

From 2007 to 2010, the Early Learning Initiative (ELI) at the National College of Ireland (NCI) supported 24 early years practitioners from 11 community childcare facilities located in Dublin's Docklands to undertake training in Pen Green's methodology to develop partnerships with parents to support their child's learning. Pen Green (PG) is a community-based family centre located in a disadvantaged area of the UK. It has been designated as a centre of excellence by the UK government. Since the mid-1980s, Pen Green has developed a suite of services to support children and families experiencing social and economic disadvantage. These have been designed and delivered using community development and partnership principles. The services include Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) provision and training for early years practitioners. Using an action research approach, Pen Green's Research Unit developed a methodology for encouraging a partnership between parents and early years practitioners to support children's early learning: Parent Involvement in Children's Learning (PICL).

This report describes an evaluation of the implementation of Pen Green's PICL framework in five Dublin Docklands community childcare centres. This evaluation is an element of the Children's Research Centre's (CRC) evaluation of the ELI's child and family programmes that aim to improve educational outcomes amongst children experiencing social and educational disadvantages in the Docklands area of Dublin.

It is important to note that while this report examines the implementation of the PICL training in five childcare centres, the structures and procedures of the centres themselves and the quality of provision are not being evaluated. Rather, this evaluation reports on how the childcare settings have implemented PICL and the factors that impact on its implementation, with a view to providing information to the ELI for programme refinement.

The childcare centres in this report are located within the areas of the inner city that are in and adjacent to Dublin's Docklands, north and south of the River Liffey. The NCI is also located in this area. It is within the context of the regeneration and redevelopment of this area that the ELI's programme for families and children sits.

This evaluation began in December 2009, with a final report submitted to the ELI in January 2011. It was undertaken by Liz Kerrins, Senior Policy Officer; Dr Michelle Share, Senior Research Fellow; and Eimear Boyd, Research Assistant, all from the Children's Research Centre, TCD; with the assistance of Gill Larkin, Work Placement Intern, MSc in Applied Social Research, TCD.

The ELI's rationale for introducing PICL to Dublin

The rationale for the ELI's adoption of the Pen Green approach to parental involvement in children's early learning and its implementation in Dublin lies in international research that suggests that caregiver training/education is one of the strongest predictors of child care quality (Gable & Halliburn, 2003, cited in ELI, 2008) and that family factors are far more important in accounting for students' school success than school input factors (Pen Green, 2005, cited in ELI, 2008). Therefore parents should be encouraged and supported to engage in their child's learning, and childcare practitioners should be trained to support their involvement. To this end, the ELI has made significant investment in up-skilling staff employed in early years centres in the Docklands, including training in the PICL methodology to encourage partnerships between parents and practitioners in community childcare settings in Dublin's Docklands. The ELI considers that implementing well-designed continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities is an essential and powerful means towards the promotion of excellence in education in the Dublin Docklands (ELI, 2008).

Evidence of need for the CPD programme in the Docklands is provided by research commissioned by the National College of Ireland that was undertaken by Axford and Whear (2006) with parents in disadvantaged pockets of the Docklands. That research found that while many parents have high educational aspirations for their children – they want them to succeed where they failed (or feel they were failed) - they are not always sure what to do practically to ensure that this happens. Most parents reported that the information and support that they had received about parenting came through informal channels such as family, friends, books, magazines and television. Just under a quarter had attended a parenting course and they found this to be a positive experience. Moreover, 77 per cent of the 101 parents interviewed said they would attend a course on early learning if one was provided locally.

The ELI approached Pen Green to see if they would work with a small group of early years practitioners from Dublin, to increase and improve the involvement of parents in their children's education as part of their strategy for children and families in the Dublin Docklands area (Arnold, 2008). There are parallels between the 1980s deindustrialisation of Corby, where Pen Green is based, and in Dublin's Docks during the same period, where families in Corby and Dublin experienced social and educational disadvantage.

The Pen Green model and approach to early learning is well-known to the early years sector in Ireland and the UK, and was well-known to the then NCI Director and the ELI staff who in the 2006/2007 period were considering how to best support children's early learning in the Dublin Docklands. Researchers/facilitators from the Pen Green Research Base, Corby worked with the ELI to develop an initial two-year professional development project on PICL.

Feedback received from childcare practitioners in the evaluation of a Pen Green ELI conference in May 2007 highlighted the importance of involving families in all aspects of education and care and of this becoming a two-way dialogue. This indicated to Pen Green that local childcare practitioners had a desire to improve their practice (Arnold, 2008). After the first group of Docklands practitioners had commenced the PICL training, the NCI surveyed centres[1] listing possible training programmes and asked centres to rank interest in order of preference. PICL was the first order of preference, alongside the early years curriculum, indicating that practitioners continued to view parental involvement as important to their practice.

Evaluation aim and objectives

Following a situational assessment of the ELI programmes, the CRC, the ELI and ELI's research advisors agreed that the CPD evaluation should examine the implementation of the PICL training in a sample of childcare centres, how the PICL training impacted on childcare practitioners' efforts to involve parents in children's learning and, more

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[1] Taken from ELI document, CPD for 2009/10

broadly, its relationship to quality learning environments. Whilst the ELI CPD had involved childcare centres in other continuing professional development training it was considered that the greatest investment of ELI resources for the PDP had been in the Pen Green training and support and therefore evaluation of this aspect of the CPD was deemed to be important.

More specifically, the evaluation seeks to identify and analyse:

• What does parental involvement mean in childcare settings where staff have undergone PICL training?

• How have the childcare centres implemented the PICL training?

• To what extent has awareness been raised amongst childcare practitioners about parental involvement in children's learning?

• How do parents who use the centres regard parental involvement in the childcare centres?

• Which elements of the PICL training worked best, and for which groups?

• What are the barriers and facilitators to parental involvement in the early years settings; and

• Are any future training and resources required to encourage parental involvement in the childcare centres?

This report also discusses the sustainability of the use of the Pen Green approach in the five Docklands childcare centres participating in this research.

While this report evaluates PICL implementation in the childcare settings, the wider context is that the PICL training is an element of the ELI's wider childcare CPD programme that includes other training opportunities and workshop activities to support better ECCE practice and parental involvement in early learning in the Docklands area. To decontextualise PICL and exclude the ELI's training in national quality

and curriculum frameworks and its play-based activities to encourage parents and practitioners to engage with children would give an incomplete picture of the influences on practice and parental invovlement. Indeed, the wider influence of ELI's training and activities arose organically during data collection. Therefore, reference is made in the report, when appropriate, to ELI activities that support parental involvement in Docklands early years settings through disseminating and supporting the implementation of national policy frameworks alongside their own initiatives with parents and children.

While the findings and recommendations of this report are primarily for the attention of the ELI as the facilitators and funders of the PICL framework in Dublin's Docklands and for Pobal as the funders of this evaluation, the findings are also of relevance to national policymakers and a number of recommendations are made in this regard.

Structure of the report

Chapter 2 that follows reviews relevant research literature on parental involvement in early years settings. Chapter 3 describes the national and local context for the implementation of PICL. In Chapter 4 the Pen Green model and the PICL framework are outlined. Chapter 5 sets out the methodology used to conduct this evaluation. The overall findings of the evaluation are presented in Chapter 6. Finally, in Chapter 7 we discuss these findings, draw conclusions and offer some recommendations.

CHAPTER 2

DEFINITIONS AND TYPOLOGIES OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Defining parental involvement

While there is support at policy and practice levels for parental involvement in early years settings, there is no universal agreement on what parental involvement is, or the forms that it can take (Evangelou et al., 2008). Different definitions, models, and traditions underpin practice. The concept of parental involvement can be hazy and its practice comprises a myriad of activities that relate to both early years settings as systems and children as individuals. A series of useful models or frameworks have been developed by researchers to categorise the different roles that can be played by parents in early years learning and settings.

Pugh (1989), a UK researcher, outlined five possible dimensions of parental involvement in pre-school centres:

- *non-participation* - parents have consciously opted to not play an active role within the pre-school service

- *support* - parents help with practical events, eg., fundraising, school trips, sporting events

- *participation* - parents participate in school/centre by taking part in the daily classroom routine, as helpers (eg. helping run a particular group) or as learners (learning about their own child and the centre by attending meetings/ workshops)

- *partnership* - parents are involved in a working relationship defined by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and the willingness to negotiate

- *control* - parents determine and implement decisions and have administrative responsibilities, eg. selecting and employing staff, managing resources.

According to Pugh this framework is useful in evaluating the 'partnership proneness' of a pre-school centre, and in doing so measuring the relationships between workers and parents and where the balance of power lies.

US researcher Epstein's typology recognises three overlapping spheres of influence on children's development and learning - family, school and community (Epstein, 1992) - introducing community as an important element in fostering early learning. Epstein's typology (2002) breaks down the concept of parent involvement and family–school–community partnership into six activities:

- *Parenting* - helping families establish supportive learning environments for children at home, eg. parent education courses, family literacy, offering a lending library that provides educational material

- *Communicating* - designing effective forms of two-way communications eg., notices, newsletters, memos, calendars, face-to-face conferences with parents

- *Volunteering* - recruiting and organising parent help and support, eg., asking parents to help with trips, supervision of children, representatives on parent committees

- *Learning at home* - supporting learning activities at home by providing families with information and ideas on how to help their children at home eg. host family workshops about the importance of learning and play, giving learning tips through the newsletter, encourage parent contributions in the newsletter

- *Decision making* - include parents in school/centre decisions, encouraging and developing parent leaders and representatives eg. co-management of school/centre, parents council/committee; and

- *Collaborating with the community* - identify and integrate resources from the community to strengthen the school/centre practices eg. information on health services advice, community activities, and literacy programmes.

Epstein views this model as a helpful guide for developing comprehensive school- family partnerships and believes that each setting must determine its own course.

Evangelou et al. (2008), in their evaluation of early learning partnerships in the UK, provide two further typologies developed by other researchers on parental involvement in preschool settings. The first focuses on potential parent roles:

- parents as learners (parent education courses, observing children)

- parents as teachers of their own children (taking home toys and books)

- parents as teacher aides and volunteers in the classroom

- parents as supporters (clerical, custodial, maintenance, fund-raising)

- parents as policy makers and partners (board members).

The second typology is slightly different again, with parent activities including:

- working as an 'educator' (blurring the boundaries between 'parent as teacher' of his/her own child, and the 'professional teacher' of a classroom of children)

- working in the group ('doing the chores')

- servicing (fundraising, helping with visits etc)

- involved in management; and

- responding to factors related to the 'openness' or 'ethos' of the setting , i.e., how 'welcoming' or 'open' the preschool centre is to parents staying to settle in their child or dropping in.

Evangelou et al. (2008) outline other models of parental involvement. These include: theoretically-driven models where parents are supported to support their child's early learning through specific methodologies. Such models, according to the authors, include Pen Green and the Incredible Years.

An examination of these typologies supports Evangelou et al.'s (2008) contention that there is a difference between *parental engagement in learning* in support of the individual child, as opposed to *parental involvement in schooling*. This delineation has the benefit of clarifying the objective of getting parents involved with school/childcare centre life and operations (e.g. attending parents' evenings, which is seen as reactive) and the objective of engaging parents with their child's learning (seen as proactive). The previous typologies touch on this differentiation, but Evangelou et al bring it to the fore. All of the typologies include roles for parents as learners and as educators in support of early learning, including Pen Green.

Underpinning the literature on parental involvement is the idea that parents should be equal partners within the childcare setting in their child's early learning. While some (McMillian, 2005) use the term 'involvement' synonymously with 'participation', 'partnership', 'collaboration' or 'cooperation', others

(Wolfendale, 1989) differentiate between 'partnership' and the general term 'parental involvement'. It seems that not all approaches to involving parents in early years settings and early learning are considered to reflect equal partnerships. Pugh's typology mentioned earlier reminds us that there are different levels of involvement, from non-participation to partnership, and on to control. Power relations exist between parents and childcare settings (and indeed between parents), as they do in any social institution.

The elements of the typologies previously described are not mutually exclusive: centres may implement different kinds of strategies to involve parents, and individual practitioners may hold and practice different conceptions of involvement. Indeed, because parents are not participating in the early years service or engage little with early years practitioners does not mean that they are uninterested in their child's learning, or do not share activities with their children in private that support learning. The following section identifies that good parenting in the home is considered the most effective form of parental involvement to encourage early learning and achievement. A dialogue between practitioners and parents that supports and extends children's learning such as that offered by the PICL programme should support good at-home parenting.

Some researchers use the term family involvement rather than parental involvement. The former term is considered to be more appropriate as it embraces the full range of guiding influences in a child's life (fathers, mothers, siblings, grandparents and other care-givers) (Philips and Eustace, n.d.). Pen Green, while using the term parental involvement, also tries to engage the range of care-givers. Equally, this evaluation uses the term parental involvement with the knowledge that other family members and the wider community can be engaged in and influence early learning.

Impacts and benefits of parental involvement in early learning

More research has been carried out internationally on the impact of parental involvement on pupil achievement in primary

and secondary schools than on its impact on children's early learning and development. There appears to be a dearth of Irish research on the impact and effectiveness of parental involvement interventions and programmes in early years settings, particularly in the Irish childcare sector. There is also little Irish empirical research on the benefits of parental involvement to parents and to early years settings.

Impact on child development/ educational attainment

Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) undertook a research review for the UK Department of Education and Skills on the impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment in schools. Their review highlighted that while we can describe the different activities that are within the scope of the catch-all term 'parental involvement' it is difficult to establish if the activity makes any difference to school outcomes. This is because sometimes research is not sufficiently rigorous, and child outcomes are influenced by so many factors and can be difficult to measure. Nevertheless, they review recent robust research and conclude that the most important finding is that parental involvement in the form of 'at-home good parenting' (defined as the provision of a secure and stable environment, intellectual stimulation, parent-child discussion, good models of constructive social and educational values and high aspirations relating to personal fulfillment and good citizenship) had a significant positive effect on children's educational outcomes even after factors like socio-economic status and material deprivation are taken into account.

Much of the research reviewed for this evaluation was conducted in primary and secondary school settings rather than early years settings. The studies reviewed used varying definitions and models of parental involvement (talking to teachers, parental aspirations, involvement in school, discipline regarding homework and television-watching), different measures of involvement (parents/ teachers/ pupil judgements), and different measures of pupil achievement and adjustment

(subjective self-rating, exam results, psychometric tests). However, overall, the research finds that parental involvement has an impact on educational outcomes, and this finding is relevant to early years settings.

More relevant research for this evaluation is also available in Desforges' and Abouchaar's review. Sylva et al (1999, cited in Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003) undertook a longitudinal study of 3,000 children between age 3 and 7 years in more than 100 centres in the UK assessing their development and attainment. They explored the impact of parental involvement, specifically efforts to provide a home learning environment (defined as reading, library visits, playing with letters and numbers, painting and drawing, teaching - through play - the letters of the alphabet, playing with numbers and shapes, teaching nursery rhymes and singing) as a partnership between parents and preschool practitioners. The research found that higher home learning environments were associated with increased levels of cooperation and conformity, peer sociability and confidence, lower anti-social and upset behaviour and higher cognitive development scores in children. After age, the home learning environment was found to be the variable with the strongest effect on cognitive development- even stronger than socio-economic status or mothers' education. While families in higher socio-economic groups tended to provide higher home learning environments, not all did so, and some families in lower socio-economic groups provided high home learning environments.

Follow-up research was conducted in the same settings that aimed to understand the reasons behind the previous findings (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002). This found that when parents and educators have shared aims it is the parental involvement in learning activities in the home that is most closely associated with better cognitive attainment in the early years.

Furthermore, there is evidence that initiatives designed to help parents develop their capabilities as educators, particularly in the pre-school and early primary school period, are effective (Epstein, 1995). Studies have indicated that active parental involvement,

home–school partnerships, and a focus on family-centered programming in elementary and early childhood school settings can lead to positive developmental outcomes for the children, their families, and the schools in which they are enrolled (Epstein, 2002).

Benefits for parents and teachers

It has been suggested that parent participation in early years education programmes seems to result in lower levels of parental stress, enabling parents to be more responsive to their children. Such participation provides environments that can be supportive to cognitive development as parents are enabled to be better early educators for their children (Department of Health and Children, 2002).

According to Fitzgerald (2004) effective partnerships contribute to parents having a more positive attitude towards the setting. A partnership approach, Bruce (1997) believes, will help to empower parents by showing that the different contributions are important in supporting the development of children and practitioners. Parents with higher levels of involvement also devote more time to assisting children at home and this is likely to be beneficial in terms of development and learning (Curtis, 1998; Chaboudy et al, 2001).

Epstein's research (1992) found that benefits for parents include confidence about parenting, feeling support from school and other parents, increased interactions with other parents and the school, increased comfort in the school setting, and leadership in decision making and understanding school programme and policies. Some of the results for teachers include improved parent teacher meetings or home school communication, better understanding of families, awareness of parent perspectives in policy development and decisions. Epstein notes that the results for children, parents and teachers will depend on the particular types of involvement that are implemented as well as on the quality of the implementation.

Barriers to parental involvement

While the research literature highlights the benefits of parental involvement in their children's education, it also acknowledges that there are real barriers to this engagement. Again, some of this material relates to parents interactions with the school system rather than early years settings such as crèches and play groups.

The role of perception and expectation

Research suggests that within early childhood programmes teachers, parents, and administrators can have somewhat different perceptions of, and expectations for, parental involvement and home–school partnerships (McBride & Lin, 1996). These different perceptions and expectations may present barriers to parental engagement. Crozier (1999) interviewed a sample of parents (71% working class) on the experience of home-school relations and found that many working class parents have perceptions of teachers as being superior and distant, and that these perceptions are reinforced by the teachers' stance as teachers engage with parents only on their own terms.

Whalley (2001), in Pen Green, identifies that sometimes childcare workers presume that non-attending parents do not care or do not understand the importance of early education and partnership between parents and centres. Part of the development of PICL involved developing values that reflect a real partnership approach with parents, and changing staff perceptions to help them understand that non-participation by parents is not apathy, but a response to poverty.

Family and work commitments

Research suggests that family and work commitments can hinder parental involvement (DES, 1999). In the US, mothers from two Headstart early intervention programmes identified having a schedule that conflicted with Head Start activities and having a baby or toddler at home as barriers to parental involvement (Lamb-Parker et al, 2001). Also Keating and Taylorson (1996) suggest that a

lack of child-minding facilities, especially for single parents, can restrict their attendance at meetings or events connected with the setting. Pen Green (Whalley, 2001) also found that pressure of work can result in non-participation, as can living on a low income and needing to do part-time work as it becomes available. The lack of crèche facilities for babies and toddlers also acted as a barrier to participation, as did the need to pick up older children from schools.

Confidence and educational experiences

Philips and Eustace (2008) conducted a number of focus groups to identify the needs of parents in preschool settings in Ireland. Parents reported lacking in confidence and having difficulties communicating with preschools as they perceived the school environment to be unwelcoming to them as parents.

Aronson (1996) found that parents' own negative experiences as students make some parents uncomfortable going into school. This may result in fear of getting involved again (Mosley, 1993). These findings were confirmed in other studies (Dauber & Epstein, 1989; Lamb-Parker et al, 2001) which indicated that parents' education, as well as other socioeconomic and demographic factors, predicted their participation in their children's educational experiences. Parents engaging with Pen Green generally have no higher or further education (Arnold, 2001b) and some have had very poor educational experiences and are reluctant to engage as a result.

Communication issues

Kasting (1994) states that parent–staff relationships in early education are 'too often strained and not always meaningful'. This view is echoed by Bruce (1997) when she refers to the tendency of professionals to undermine any parent's self confidence with their 'expertise' which can be a contributory factor in developing partnerships with teachers in early childhood education. Hughes and MacNaughton (2000) refer to the 'othering' of parental knowledge by staff. Early childhood practitioners claim professional status by 'othering' and subordinating parental

knowledge. In this regard there may be a tendency for parents to be viewed as less observant, less perceptive and less intelligent than teachers (Hornby, 2000). Yet, this may not be the case in Ireland. Moloney (2010) reports on the lack of a professional identity experienced by community childcare practitioners and a lack of clarity over their role to the extent that they feel as if they are treated as baby sitters rather than professionals.

School policy and staff attitudes

Schools and centres which do not have a consistent policy on parental involvement is cited as another barrier for low levels of parental involvement. Edwards and Knight (1997) make the point that what determines the nature of the relationship between professional and parents is the mission or aims of the school. Parental involvement is as a consequence harnessed to school policy and is shaped by it (Edwards & Knight, 1997).

The literature also considers teachers' ability to relate well to parents. As Epstein (1995) points out the majority of teachers have had little or no training on working with parents. Therefore many teachers lack the skills and the knowledge required to effectively engage with parents. This has been echoed by Bleach (2010) who believes that parents need to build educational capital so that they know how and what is expected of them in schools but that schools may not be well-placed to achieve this. Rather than relying on schools to inform parents about their rights under the Education Act she considers that there is a need for the establishment of a separate body which will inform parents of their rights.

Whalley (2001) identified that some staff in early years settings may fear that parents will 'take over', want their own way, and that practitioners will lose control of the children. They may also be wary of parents getting into cliques and keeping other parents out. There may be a fear that parents will take up already scarce staff time, that their participation will result in problems with confidentiality, or that having parents in the centre will confuse the children.

Physical spaces

Practical reasons can also militate against parents becoming involved. Literature emphasises that good practice in the promotion of parental involvement involves the provision of an area in which parents could meet such as a parents' room (Batey, 1996) or a space in a setting for meetings, courses, activities or just to relax (Alexander et al, 1995).

Enablers to parental involvement

Evangelou et al. (2008) suggest a series of factors that support involvement in services amongst 'hard to reach' families, including building relationships between parents and providers, and good communication skills amongst staff. Their analysis relates to families who exhibit a 'need' for social and family services such as social work and who do not engage at all. This differs from the families in this evaluation as they are receiving a service (ECCE), and many are paying for it. However the importance of encouraging relationship building and communication between parents and practitioners to encourage participation is still relevant.

Pen Green recognises that the physical environment in the early years setting needs to feel welcoming to parents. Mairs (1997) suggests that there are questions that an early years setting should ask in order to provide what Whalley (2001) terms 'parent-friendly settings':

- Can parents get into building with a buggy?

- Is there wheelchair access?

- If parents want to help, can younger siblings also come?

- Does the entrance appear friendly? e.g., photos

- Is there somewhere where adults can sit, on adult-sized chairs?

- Are there welcome posters in home languages?

- Is there an area for parents to have a hot drink?

- Are toilets signposted, with baby changing for men and women?

- Is there a parent noticeboard?

- Are there flexible settling in periods in the morning so that staff can greet parent and child individually?

Pen Green has developed a range of supports and strategies to try to overcome some of the barriers previously described, from providing childcare to participating parents, to flexible child drop-off times, to inviting parents to choose from different kinds of engagement activities delivered at different times of the day.

Pen Green (Whalley, 2001) has also learned experientially that some parents are sceptical about involvement, and that sometimes they go away and may not come back until their second or third child starts nursery and they have more experience of children. In other words, parents themselves decide if and when they are ready to be involved.

Summary

There is no universal agreement on what parental involvement is, or the forms that it can take. However various typologies of parental involvement indicate that activities can encompass engagement in learning in support of the individual child with the parents as learners and teachers, and parental involvement in the life of early years settings. Research on the impact of learning partnerships between parents and preschools on child outcomes indicates that, after age, the home learning environment has the strongest effect on children's cognitive development, even stronger than socio-economic status. The research suggests that it is the parental involvement in learning activities in the home that is most closely associated with better cognitive attainment in the early years. Research also suggests benefits to parents – better parenting skills and increased confidence – and for schools – better understanding of families. Barriers to parental involvement include parents' own negative educational experiences, lack of confidence in educational settings, and competing time

pressures; and factors relating to the settings themselves such as lack of physical space to meet parents, and practitioners' communication skills and attitudes. Enablers include developing better relationship building and communication skills amongst practitioners, providing a welcoming physical environment, providing childcare to support participation, and providing a range of engagement activities held at different times of the day and delivered in different ways.

CHAPTER 3

NATIONAL AND LOCAL CONTEXT

Changing policy context of early years provision in Ireland

Until the mid-1990s there was virtually no Irish state investment or national policy on the care and education of children in the years before they entered primary school. Since then, the government has introduced separate childcare and early education policies, a childcare funding framework, quality standards for early years settings, an early years curriculum, a subsidisation scheme for community childcare places, and a free preschool year for 3 to 4 year olds. The community childcare providers in this evaluation are operating in an ever-changing environment that is constantly placing new operational and practice demands on them.

A major change faced by community childcare providers was the first legislative minimum standards for childcare facilities enacted in 1996 by the Department of Health and Children (DOHC). These were concerned with regulation, focusing on structural issues - child-staff ratios, space, centre policies, health and safety – rather than quality, or processes like adult-child interaction. Childcare facilities became subject to inspection by the Health Service Executive (HSE) and service providers can be brought to court if they do not comply with regulations. HSE inspection reports were not made public and not available to parents, but the 2006 revised childcare regulations (DOHC, 2006) have changed this. The largest impact arising from the minimum standards for some childcare settings was the requirement to develop new policies and practices, hire more

staff, and to have to alter or extend the physical premises to meet the regulations. Many availed of the large-scale funding stream, the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR), aimed at increasing the supply of private and community childcare places and supporting staffing in community childcare in Ireland.

The 1996 regulations did not set minimum training or educational requirements for staff in early years settings. In 2002, the DJELR published a Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the ECCE sector. This framework was the first to set out occupational profiles and associated qualifications in childcare settings (primary schools were not part of this framework), and sets out a qualifications pathway. Within this framework holding an accredited childcare level 5 training allows for practice as an intermediate practitioner, which is just above the basic practitioner. At this level childcare staff are responsible for their own actions, but under direction from a more senior practitioner. Practitioners with accredited level 6 childcare training are considered experienced practitioners who can operate with full autonomy with broad supervision, but have limited responsibility for the work of others. While increasing occupational coherence, the model framework did not specify any minimum level of training in order to

work in a childcare setting, nor did the revised childcare regulations (DOHC, 2006). Instead the regulations recommend that at least 50 per cent of staff should have 'a qualification appropriate to the care and development of children'. In 2009, the Office for the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) began a consultative process towards the development of a Workforce Development Plan for the ECCE sector on foot of the 2006-2010 Childcare Strategy (DJELR, 2006). Some progress is being made in this regard. It seems that only 12 per cent of people working in childcare have no childcare qualification, although the majority of workers (41 per cent) only hold up to a level 5 qualification (DES, 2009). Services for children are now required to ensure that all staff and volunteers are cleared by the Garda under DOHC child protection regulations.

Childcare providers in Ireland have only very recently begun to operate in an environment of quality standards and a national early years curriculum. The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) developed Síolta (DES, 2006), the first Irish quality standards for all early years settings for children, childcare and primary schools, from birth to 6 years. In 2009, the National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA) published Aistear (DES, 2009), the first curriculum framework for all children from birth to 6 years across the range of early childhood settings in Ireland. Síolta and Aistear implementation is not mandatory, and has not been tied to any inspection, certification or funding processes or frameworks. However, this is changing. A condition of operating the free preschool year scheme for children aged 3 to 4 years is that providers must agree to provide an educational programme that meets Síolta and Aistear standards (Sweeney, 2009). This marks a significant change in Irish ECCE policy. Indeed the revised childcare regulations (DOHC, 2006) now also require childcare providers to 'ensure that each child's learning, development and well-being is facilitated within the daily life of the service through the provision of the appropriate opportunities, experiences, activities, interaction, materials and equipment, having regard to the age and stage of development of the child and the child's cultural context'. This 'regulation

5' requires childcare services to provide, as part of the annual childcare inspection regime, evidence of planning for individual children's learning and development. National Síolta implementation has been unsupportive and unstructured until now. However, from September 2012 the Early Years Unit of the OMCYA will require standard implementation and compliance with Síolta, and regulation 5, and the Unit will also become 'more stringent' on minimum childcare qualifications required for practitioners.[2]

The childcare providers in the Docklands are, at the same time, also coming to terms with operating two major changes to how community childcare is funded and delivered in Ireland: the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme (CCSS) and the Free Preschool Year scheme (FPYS).

The EOCP finished in 2008 and was replaced for community childcare providers by the CCSS. Under the EOCP, providers received a block grant (capital and/or staffing) periodically over a three-year period based on an initial funding application by the service. Under the CCSS the grant is received annually, and is based on the social welfare/work status of the child's parents. Providers are, for the first time, required to introduce tiered fees for parents, with fees being determined by government based on a formula - the difference between the cost of a preschool place and the state subvention. Research on the initial impact of the CCSS on services and parents and children in the Docklands area is described later.

Since January 2010 children aged between 3 years 3 months and 4 years 6 months in both private and community childcare settings are entitled to receive free pre-school provision of 3 hours per day, 5 days each week over a 38-week year. Providers receive an annual grant per child. This scheme is more child-centred than previous attempts in that it, theoretically at least, provides access to ECCE for all children regardless of parents' income or work status. Anecdotally, it seems that not all childcare services are implementing the scheme just yet,

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[2] See www.Síolta.ie information accessed 16 November 2010

and there remain barriers to its implementation, one of which is that it only supports children's attendance for 38 weeks of the year, affecting income for salary payments. One of the criteria for participation in the FPYS is that all staff must be qualified in childcare to at least level 5 in the national qualifications framework. This link between funding and quality is another marked change in policy, and challenges community providers to ensure that staff are trained.

Overall, the role played by community childcare in Ireland has been differentiated from that of private provision, which is viewed primarily as a service for working parents. It is argued that we need to see community childcare as having a family support role, a community development role, a role in supporting parents to return to work, education and training, alongside its primary role in early childhood care and education (Brennan, 2003). The role of community childcare settings in countering educational disadvantage has yet to be given specific support at national level. According to Fallon (2003), the primary school system is where the government has concentrated its investment in educational disadvantage. One of the roles of the now defunct CECDE was to develop further policy and provision in this area for the ECCE sector. However, Brennan (2003) warns that regarding childcare as an intervention intended to compensate for disadvantage in the home is a deficit way of thinking as it fails to recognise the abilities and commitment of their families, and that they are rearing their children in a way that helps them to fit into and cope with their own communities.

Parental involvement in Irish early years policy and services

The implementation of Pen Green's PICL programme in the Docklands is occurring within the context where parental involvement in early years settings has not been strong in Ireland (Fallon, 2004, cited in Phillips and Eustace, nd).

Childcare regulations (DOHC, 1996; 2006) and policy (DJELR, 1999; DJELR; 2006) were not concerned with the issue of parental involvement in early years services. However, *Ready to Learn*, a key policy on early years

education for children from birth to six years published by the DES (1999b), acknowledged the importance of involving parents in consultation and dialogue in relation to the planning of early years services, childcare services and primary school classes for children up to age 6. *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999b) recognised that parents bring with them a vast amount of expertise and different perspectives on the needs of their children, and that parents are the prime educators of their children (DES, 1999b).

The development of quality standards for early years settings for children aged up to six years of age was an action contained in *Ready to Learn*. Síolta (DES, 2006) promotes a partnership approach with parents:

> *Valuing and involving parents and families requires a proactive partnership approach evidenced by a range of clearly stated, accessible and implemented processes, policies and procedures* (CECDE, 2006)

While the Síolta framework endorses parental involvement it does not provide a concrete definition of the term. It suggests making parental involvement a core value in a setting. Síolta identifies that there is no set recipe for building partnership. It suggests that each individual setting must reflect on its current approach and how this can be improved. It advocates for the use of self-reflection and evaluation.

The framework comprises a set of sixteen standards to guide childcare services towards quality. Of particular relevance are standard 3, Parents and Families, where parental involvement policies, meetings, informal chats and integrating parents knowledge into planning and assessment of children's learning are suggested; standard 7, Curriculum, planning a curriculum based on observation and assessment of the child and recording that information through templates, portfolios, photos/videos, and individual education plans; and standard 8, Planning and Evaluation, where practitioners develop review processes to assess success in meeting standards, to include inputs from parents, and reviews of individual education plans for each child.

Parental involvement is a key element within the Aistear curriculum (DES, 2009). Guidelines for good practice focus on play, assessments, interactions and partnerships with parents. The four Aistear themes– exploring and thinking, identity and belonging, communicating and well-being – underpin all of the learning experiences suggested. Indeed, unlike Síolta, Aistear is aimed not just at early years practitioners and services, but also at parents, providing ideas and suggestions to them to understand how their children learn, and extend that learning. Aistear focuses on partnership between settings and parents, and defines partnership as:

> *Partnership involves parents, families and practitioners working together to benefit children. Each recognises, respects and values what the other does and says. Partnership involves responsibility on both sides* (DES, 2009:7)*.

The Aistear framework includes a section on building partnerships between parents and practitioners. While also providing advice for parents to support learning and development in the home, it suggests to early years practitioners that they share information on the child's learning with parents through portfolios, photographs and home/school books, share learning resources with parents, invite parents into the service, and develop information sessions and newsletters.

There is an absence of Irish home-grown service models of parental involvement in early learning. Barnardos Ireland (2003), an extensive provider of early years care and education in disadvantaged areas, has developed a guide for early years services to develop partnerships with parents. They use Epstein's typology of parental involvement detailed earlier as a framework and suggest practices very similar to those recommended by Epstein. They also provide guidance on methods to involve fathers in the service, and settling-in strategies, consisting of information sessions for parents on child development and on the policies of the service itself.

Local context for PICL implementation

Appendix A provides profiles of each of the five childcare centres participating in this evaluation. The centres are located in an area known as the Dublin Docklands. In the past this area had housed docks workers and their families. When Dublin Port went into decline in the 1960s and local industry moved to suburban areas, the Dublin Docklands became very physically run-down. Between 1961 and 1991, the population of the inner city halved (Haase, n.d). As in other waterfront developments of the late 1980s and early 1990s the Dublin's Docklands became subject to government-incentivised physical renewal and redevelopment, and became Ireland's financial district. It became clear that two separate worlds were emerging in the Docklands: the world of educated professionals buying and renting newly-built apartments in the area, and the existing population who were left out of the boom-time and living in the older housing stock. While the high rise gated apartment complexes have led to physical segregation between the existing residents and the new community of professionals working in financial services, the economic benefits of the regeneration have not extended to those who have lived in circumstances of socio-economic marginalisation (Share, 2010). Much of the state supported development of the Docklands favoured a neo-liberal agenda of private rather than public-sector development (Moore, 2008).

The Docklands communities where the childcare centres are located are not homogeneous. Two of the childcare centres participating in this evaluation (Centres B and C) are located in the north inner city in a geographically small and distinct area that stands out as being amongst the most disadvantaged in the whole inner city (Haase, n.d.). The area experiences considerable criminal and anti-social behaviour related to high levels of drug addiction and feuding gangs. The physical environment is bleak. It is in stark contrast with the gleaming buildings and public realm that characterise the adjacent regenerated Docklands streets and gated apartment complexes. Centre D is located in a mixed-income, mixed- tenure inner suburb, which, while having pockets of disadvantage,

has been gentrified, although the crèche is located in a social housing area. Centre E is located in an inner city community located on one of Dublin's main throughfares that includes Trinity College, social housing, new apartments, and various businesses. The fifth centre (Centre A) is located in an area of 1940s ex-local authority housing, new apartment blocks and an industrial area. It is a mixed-income area. All areas experience drug-related crime and anti-social behaviour.

Our knowledge of childcare services in the area comes from a report commissioned by the Dublin Docklands Childcare Forum (2007) on the quality and quantity of childcare in the Docklands area and its immediate hinterland. Twenty-seven childcare centres – private and community – were identified, catering for just over 1,000 children, 600 of whom were in community childcare settings. Twenty-four centres took part in the research. Fourteen were community providers, five were private, and five were non-profit and non-community (workplace crèches in TCD and the DES were included in this research). Some of the Docklands centres taking part in this evaluation and others also receiving the PICL training were included in this research. A number of issues arose from the research in relation to the community childcare sector in the Docklands.

First, the diversity of provision - some community providers are part of wider community provision and so had wider support in terms of premises and administration, while others were less formal, had inadequate physical facilities and had to pack up the facility at the end of each day.

Second, the community childcare settings in the Docklands area provided unique services. They accepted referrals from the HSE, St. Vincent de Paul, social workers and so on, and reported good relationships with public health nurses and family support workers. They provided afterschool care, which no private/ non-profit, non-community did, although community facilities were far less likely than private facilities to cater for babies. Community childcare settings in the Docklands were also, unlike private providers, heavily involved in training childcare staff, and were constantly

supporting FÁS–funded staff in this regard. Overall, the child acceptance criteria differs between the private sector, which does not have criteria other than parents usually live/ work in the area, and the community childcare services whose criteria included children being at risk, parents in education, local parents/staff/ grandparents first accommodated, or children will attend local school.

Third, community childcare in the area provides a service to children and parents at a much lower cost than private facilities. Community childcare fees in the Docklands area in 2007 ranged from €15 to €65 per week part-time, to €25 to €110 per week full-time. This contrasts with private and non-profit, non-community providers where costs were double those of community providers.

A fourth difference that marks out the community childcare sector is the dependence on state subvention to fund childcare staff costs. From a total of 212 staff employed in community childcare settings, the majority (119) were employed under the FÁS Community Employment Scheme (CE), 30 were paid through fees, while the remainder were paid through other forms of public subvention. This situation is reversed in the non-profit, non-community and private sectors where all bar 2 (also CE) of the 78 staff were paid from parents' fees. Staff in the community sector were far more likely to be part-time than full-time, whereas the private sector had very few part-time staff.

The level of training required by providers in the Docklands in order to hire staff also differed between the sectors. The private childcare providers required that practitioners have at least a basic qualification to be employed, but this was not the case in the community sector where most CE staff were employed without childcare training, although core staff tended to have childcare qualifications. However, staff undergo childcare training while in employment, indicating that the community providers are constantly engaged in staff training. The research indicates that the majority of community childcare staff possess or were in training for a range of, primarily, further education qualifications. Only 4 per cent

were practising without having completed or were in the process of undertaking childcare training. Thirty-nine per cent of childcare staff were undertaking FETAC level 5, and these were primarily CE staff.

Research commissioned by the Dublin Inner City Partnership (2008) highlighted that for some community childcare facilities in Dublin's inner city, the introduction of the CCSS described earlier has meant less funding for some services and more for others. The research also found that the operation of the scheme is creating a poverty trap as working parents (often on low pay) may pay more fees than previously. This has a number or repercussions: some children may not receive ECCE as providers no longer have discretionary powers over fees for poorer parents and business planning becomes more difficult for providers as the funding they receive is based on the previous year's enrolment.

Summary

The community childcare providers in this evaluation are operating in an ever-changing environment that is constantly placing new demands on them. In the past five years alone, the government has introduced different childcare funding frameworks, quality standards for early years settings (Síolta), revised childcare regulations, an early years curriculum (Aistear), a subsidisation scheme for community childcare places, and a free preschool year for 3- to 4- year- olds. State subsidy for community childcare providers is, for the first time, being linked with quality standards compliance, the new early years curriculum and minimum childcare training standards. More stringent minimum training thresholds for staff are to come.

The context within which the ELI is supporting CPD in Docklands childcare centres is one where there is a stark physical, social and economic divide between the existing communities which have experienced unemployment and poor educational attainment and the childless professionals that have moved to the area. However, the four communities represented in this evaluation

are not homogeneous and some are mixed-income, mixed- tenure areas. Research on private and community childcare in the inner city areas in and adjacent to the Docklands indicates that the community sector provides not just a service to working parents and children, but plays a wider role in supporting vulnerable children and families, training childcare staff, and providing an afterschool service. It also provides ECCE for half the cost of the private sector. However, it is heavily reliant on part-time staff, partly related to its reliance on FÁS and other state subsidies to pay for staff costs, is less likely to care for babies than the private sector, and tends to employ fewer childcare- trained staff as it trains up FÁS staff in employment. Recent national policy changes are challenging the community nature of childcare in the area and are making business planning more difficult.

CHAPTER 4

PEN GREEN AND THE PICL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter we describe the Pen Green model of child and family services and the approach to parental involvement in children's early learning known as the PICL framework.

The Pen Green model

The Pen Green Centre was opened in Corby, England in 1983. Corby is a town that experienced serious deindustrialisation and unemployment in the early 1980s. The PG model is that of a 'one-stop-shop' for children and families (Whalley, 2001). PG receives core funding from Northamptonshire County Council and is jointly managed by statutory education and social services departments and the local health authority.

Pen Green is a unique model of provision in the UK. It was designated as a centre of excellence under Labour government policy in the late 1990s. Pen Green offers[3] a wide range of early years services that include: afterschool, family support, provision for children with special educational needs, a mini-bus for nursery and family trips, free adult community education, voluntary work, training for early years practitioners (national, vocational, and CPD); and research and development. Pen Green is also the lead partner for *Corby Sure Start*, a major national initiative to support better outcomes for disadvantaged children in a community-based setting. Both early years practitioners and family support workers work with children and their families.

The physical environment in Pen Green's nursery is also unique. All spaces are set up as workshops aiming to encourage autonomy in children. Internally, there are two nursery areas between which preschool children can move about freely using a bridge in the outdoor area. There is a separate 'nest' for younger children, which is an open plan space that includes an indoor sandpit and water, musical instruments, puzzles etc. There is a science discovery area developed by staff and architects. It includes a sand pit with conveyor belts, pulleys, water chutes, and CCTV for practitioners to record and observe how children are learning. A beach area is provided complete with buckets, spades, diggers, guttering, hosepipes and building blocks and planks . It is surrounded by glass and can be used all year. PG also has extensive gardens designed by staff and landscapers that include cycleways. Facilities available to parents and children include a family room and dining areas.

Early years staff in Pen Green all have higher or further education: NNEB, NVQ, or early years degree courses. All nursery staff are trained in video techniques; staff issues around being video recorded; ethics when interviewing; interview techniques; engaging parents; developing portfolios for learning. Nursery staff have also received training in science and maths to support children in the curriculum. Staff that conduct evening study groups have been trained to work with adults (Whalley, 2001).

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[3] www.pengreen.org

Pen Green's parental involvement framework

Pen Green's ethos is based on social constructivist theory. It places emphasis on child-centred teachers who are trying to become more conscious and more theoretically aware of what is involved in the process of "coming to know" (Whalley and Chandler, 2001). It enables staff and parents to become more aware of what they do so that they can become consciously more competent. PG has found that when teachers do not have a clearly articulated pedgical approach or a deep understanding of child development they find it more difficult to share information with parents and may perceive parents' questions as a challenge to their professionalism (Whalley, 2001).

PICL promotes a continuous two-way flow of information from nursery to home and from home to nursery, called the Pen Green Feedback Loop. It is a process whereby all the important adults in a child's life give each other feedback on what seems to be centrally important to the child, and how and what they are learning in the home and in the nursery (Pen Green, 2007).

The Pen Green framework strives to establish an active and equal relationship with parents in which parents are seen as active learners. The framework offers a way of involving parents in their children's learning through sharing key child development concepts with them: schemas, well-being and involvement. The framework also includes pedagogical strategies that adults use to help children to learn. According to Whalley (2007) this strategy can result in a much deeper discussion about each child's development and learning and better provision to support and extend development and learning both in the early years setting and in the home.

The PICL framework evolved from an in-house research project (Whalley, 2001) in 1995 where parents were encouraged to keep records of child play and development at home using diaries and video. Parents had found it difficult to decide what was noteworthy or they were providing information that was not useful for extending learning. PG then developed the

shared conceptual framework and language for observation, and trained parents in it. They found that this made a difference in what they recorded and its usefulness for extending learning.

Well-being and involvement

The Pen Green framework has been heavily influenced by the work of Laevers in early years education. He argues that the level of children's well-being and involvement reveals the quality of pedagogy in educational settings through its immediate effects on the learner. Laevers developed a framework for the assessment of quality of educational settings using two concepts: the degree of the child's emotional well-being and the level of involvement (Laevers, 1997).

Laevers (1997) argues that an educational context must be constructed that brings children to the highest levels of involvement as this is where deep-level learning takes place (Laevers, 2005). Children with a high level of involvement are highly concentrated and absorbed by their activity and are learning. In order to involve children at the highest level adults must stimulate and engage children through the activities they suggest, the resources they offer, the information they give and questioning they provoke.

Laevers (1994, 1997) developed an involvement measurement scale: the 5-point "Leuven Involvement Scale" (LIS). Early childhood practitioners can judge how involved a child is in any learning situation by watching closely and picking up on body language and signals (Laevers, 1994). At level 1, there is no activity and at level 5 there is total concentration. During the rating process a series of signals are attended to, for example, concentration, energy, complexity and creativity, facial expression and posture, persistence, precision, reaction time, verbal utterances and satisfaction. The scale has been used in the large-scale Effective Early Learning project in the UK, where more than 12,000 adults learned to use the scale to observe more than 60,000 preschool children (Pascal & Bertram, 1995; Pascal et al., 1998).

Emotional well-being is defined as how much the educational environment succeeds in helping the child to feel at ease, allowing the child to act spontaneously and show energy and self-confidence. Laevers believes that interventions that secure the well-being of children make them stronger and keep them in touch with their feelings and emotions (Laevers, 2005). In this regard well-being is a prerequisite for involvement (Laevers, 2000).

Laevers also developed a well-being scale which identifies a number of signals in a child's behaviour in order to assess a child's well-being: enjoyment, openness, energy, self confidence, relaxing and inner peace and being in touch with oneself (Laevers, 2005). This scale also uses a five-point rating scale and at least half of these signals have to be present to indicate positive emotional wellbeing.

The well-being and involvement scales are used to discuss with parents their child's learning and to examine how well the setting is meeting the needs of individual children. They are not used to make judgements on children. The information gained can be used to give clues as to what activity to offer children next. It gives immediate feedback about the effect of the educators' approach and the environment they establish, providing the opportunity to make immediate adjustments (Laevers, 1999).

Schemas

Schemas are patterns of play that children exhibit when they are exploring the world and trying to find out how things work (Athey, 2003). Schemas are part of human development and are constantly adjusting and changing in light of their experiences. This is why they are considered such a powerful learning mechanism (Bruce, 1997). They enable early childhood practitioners to develop a vocabulary of observation to inform curriculum planning and the planning of learning experiences (Bruce, 1997).

Some common schemas that have been observed in young children are:

- trajectory- lines that are moving. Young children often place objects in a line

- transporting- carrying objects or being carried from one place to another

- envelopment-covering themselves or a space with tea-towels or scarves or cardboard boxes; and

- enclosure- enclosing themselves, toys or space. Children surround themselves with cushions or make pens for farm animals.

Schemas can cluster, eventually becoming concepts, for example weight or area.

Bruce (1997) stresses the importance of early childhood workers being able to:

- Observe and identify the child's schema

- Support the child's schema through effective use of the material provision and interactions with people in the environment

- Extend the child's learning from the starting point of what the child can do by enhancing and adding to material provision, the environment and through interaction with people.

Bruce (1997) suggests supporting children's natural explorations and interests by providing resources, stories, trips and language that connect with repeated patterns, e.g. , for transporting and containment, having access to a variety of different containers at home and at nursery. Athey (1980) argues for practitioners to make the shift from random content provision that is "tomorrow we will do frogs" to provision based on a recognition of children's persistent concerns.

Arnold (2001) identified that parents in Pen Green usually pick up technical language, such as schemas, very quickly and can apply it to what their own children are doing. Parents are given a schema booklet. Pen Green use very specific, technical statements with parents to share how children learn, for example, "William really enjoyed building a vertical trajectory with his blocks today, rather than "William had a lovely time playing today", which Arnold (2001) asserts, tells parents little about learning. Pen Green considers that they could choose to simplify the child development language but

opt not to as parents might find it patronising (Arnold, 2001). For Pen Green, partnership means not deciding that language is too difficult for parents. They provide one-to-one training on the key concepts for parents with poor educational backgrounds.

Adult pedagogic strategies

Pen Green developed pedagogic strategies to enhance children's learning. These were developed through a small research project studying adult/child interactions (Whalley and Arnold, 1997). The strategies were developed to be a simple tool which could be used easily in observations of both staff and parents, but they needed to also illustrate the complexity of the adult interactions.

Table 1 below sets out the pedagogical strategies for adults to enhance children's learning at home and in preschool.

Table 1: Pen Green Pedagogic Strategies

Strategy	Aiming for best practice
Subtle intervention	Awareness too much "hands on" approach can inhibit child's learning Waiting and watching before intervening Combining observation, subtle intervention and reflection
Knowledge of the child's embedded context and ability to recall the child's previous experience	Making a connection to the child's recent and relevant experiences Parents have first-hand knowledge of child's experiences Key workers' home visits help gain understanding of home environment and important people in child's life
Affirmation of the child through facial expression and physical closeness	Demonstrating interest in child by facial expression and being physically close to children
Encouraging children to make choices and decisions	Encouraging decision making as key philosophy of nursery Following child's lead and accommodating their interest
Adult supports the child to take appropriate risks	Support children's right to experiment, make mistakes and at times experience failure Being aware of a judicious measure of risk taking and making mistakes
Adults encourages child to go beyond the adults' own knowledge base and accompany them into new experiences	Being open to learning alongside the child and support their new experience
Adult has an awareness of the impact of their own attitudes and beliefs and how these might affect the child's learning	Staff and parents developing their understanding of the possible effects their own values and beliefs can have on child's learning, eg., the over-watched child and being over anxious and how this can inhibit the child's learning
Adult demonstrates learning as a partnership, the adult is committed to their own learning and generates a spirit of enquiry	The adult is committed to their own learning and encourages the child's curiosity

PICL implementation process in Pen Green

Key elements of Pen Green's model to encourage parental involvement

Pen Green's early years model provides strategies and tools that support the building and maintenance of relationships with parents (Pen Green, 2007; Mairs, 1997; Tait, 2001).

Information forms - each family, when their child is allocated a place in the nursery, is asked to fill out a form detailing where their children are during the week and who they spend time with, and parents work patterns. This information helps PG to understand children's experiences so they can respond to them, and they can also consider how best to engage with parents.

Home visiting - at the Pen Green centre, staff visit children and their families on a regular basis. There is an initial visit by the keyworker before a child begins attending the nursery and then two or three times each year after they have started. The keyworker can find out what the child likes and dislikes. The child's context is important in the PG model, and this time is viewed as an opportunity to find out about the child's family context, housing context etc. The keyworkers also use the visits to find out how engaged the parents already are and see what other kinds of services they could offer them. They also find out about parents own educational experiences.

Family worker - when children are allocated a place in nursery, they are also allocated a family worker. Each family worker has 8-10 families. They get to know the whole family and conduct regular home visits.

Keyworking - each child and family has a keyworker in the nursery. The keyworker greets both child and parent individually on arrival to the nursery. Keyworking enables both staff and parents an opportunity to pass on information about home, new interests, concerns or to ask for advice. They also share important information about the child, eg, food and how they slept, or family issues. Keyworkers observe children's play to extend learning and they spend planned time each day with the child on an individual or small group basis. Each child shares their key worker with other children, and they are cared for by other members of staff. If a child falls over, anyone can deal with this, but it is the key worker job to tell the parents.

Settling-in period - all children have at least a two-week settling-in period when they are accompanied by a parent/carer. This is considered an important time when parents and staff can share information and develop a relationship.

Daily chats - these can over time help to build a picture of a child's vital interests and development. If a child is not brought to nursery by a parent or they are in a hurry, a home/nursery book can be used to record short messages on this child that goes back and forth between home or nursery. As the written word may not suit all, audio tapes are also used.

Staggered starts - the Pen Green nursery is open from 8.15am and families arrive from then until about 9.30am. This system enables keyworkers to greet parents and children individually and allows some time for parents to chat to workers or simply to spend time settling their child into nursery.

Portfolios - each child attending Pen Green has a portfolio, a comprehensive record of the learning that is happening at home and school. It is used as a focus for discussion on home visits or meetings in nursery, and is given to parents when a child is leaving the nursery.

Making narrative observations - a picture is built up of what each child is learning through dialogue with their parents, and by making narrative observations of each child in a systematic way. Two children are targeted for close observation in each session. If the children come to the area where a member of staff is anchored, then they have the responsibility to make a written or video observation. At the end of the session, there are likely to be several observations of each target child that can be pulled together to provide the story of that child's experience in the nursery.

Sharing narrative observations - observations are shared with parents informally at the end of the session, on a home visit, or during an open evening or family group meeting. Many parents borrow their child's portfolio, that will include observations, for a weekend so that they can read it and discuss their child's learning journey with other members of the family.

Curriculum planning - each child's learning is planned by making a 'Possible Lines of Direction' chart and an individual learning plan is created. The child's interests are in the centre. These interests are linked with the UK national curriculum.

Photographs and video - Pen Green use photographs and video vignettes to share knowledge with parents, children and each other. Parents can borrow video cameras from PG, and they are offered camcorder lessons.

Pen Green strategies for engaging with parents

Pen Green's PICL programme includes a range of strategies to appeal to as many different nursery parents as possible (Tait, 2006). They include:

Attending initial key concept training sessions: These are run at the beginning of the nursery year and look at the four key concepts. The sessions are run three times a day - morning, afternoon and evening. Parents receive a free crèche to support attendance, and some parents get one-on-one training.

Attending a long-term weekly research PICL group: It runs every week in the morning and afternoon for parents/carers to attend and discuss with nursery workers their child's development both at home and at nursery.

Attending a monthly research group in the evening: This group runs in the same way as the weekly long-term study groups.

Individual sessions: Combining personal support, key concept training and information exchange.

Pen Green recognised that not all parents enjoy being part of a group.

Home/nursery books: This is a way of exchanging information with parents. This book may include photos of the child in nursery explained by the family worker. The family worker may ask for comments from the parents about similar things the child is doing at home.

Home/school video: The family worker films a child in nursery and adds some comments to the film to initiate a dialogue with the parents about the child. This could be sent home for the family to watch. Parents can also borrow the camera and initiate discussion.

Evenings devoted to one issue: These events may focus, for instance, on maths or technology, and they tend to be run as interactive workshops.

Family group meetings: Held each term, this is a chance for parents to talk to the family worker and to other parents whose children share the same worker. The time is used to informally discuss child development and reinforce the key concepts used on a daily basis in the nursery.

Success in involving parents

By 1998, 84 per cent of all families using PG's nursery were involved in PICL, with little attrition. By 1999, 33 per cent of parents had borrowed the PG video camera and brought in movies of their children. Six thousand parents had participated in the PICL programme in PG by 2001. Only a steady 16 per cent of parents do not engage through PICL every year, indicating high rates of parental involvement (Tait, 2001).

Factors encouraging participation included when a family worker led the study sessions; when staff were trained in group work; and the availability of family group meetings (Tait, 2001).

Pen Green initially found it difficult to engage with fathers because of family break-up and mothers censoring information in the home. They are now having more success in encouraging fathers' participation. One-off meetings on specific topics and monthly evening meetings are popular with fathers. PG now sends fathers their own letter of invitation by post and whoever collects the child also

receives an invitation to events, rather than just mothers. PG found that creating different posters for fathers and mothers advertising participation is effective: women prefer an emphasis on a 'tea and a chat', while men respond to achievement-oriented information.

Summary

The Pen Green Centre was established in Corby, England within a context of unemployment and poverty. The model is that of a 'one-stop-shop' for children and families. Services provided include an early years service; family support; adult community education; community regeneration; training for early years practitioners; and research and development. Pen Green is funded by Northamptonshire County Council and is jointly managed by government departments and the local health authority. Its services are free of charge to local families.

Pen Green's nursery is set up as a workshop environment with opportunities for children to use many different materials to encourage autonomous exploration and learning. PG employs both family workers and childcare workers and the families in the nursery work with both. All nursery staff have higher or further education ECCE qualifications.

The PICL framework offers a way of involving parents in their children's learning through sharing key child development concepts with them: schemas, wellbeing and involvement. It also includes pedagogical strategies that adults use to help children to learn. These strategies and concepts are used within a partnership approach between practitioners and parents to plan curriculum for children and extend their learning. The framework promotes a continuous two-way flow of information from nursery to home and from home to nursery.

Only 16 per cent of parents using PG's nursery do not engage in PICL every year. Pen Green considers that its specific family-based model supports the success of the PICL framework in engaging parents in their children's learning, as does the choice of engagement models.

CHAPTER 5

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Overall approach

A participatory, multi-stakeholder approach was adopted in this evaluation. It was agreed by the CRC, the ELI and the ELI's Research Advisors, that the CPD programme required a collaborative approach to research and evaluation that involved all stakeholder groups working together to ensure that the approach taken is meaningful and acceptable to the childcare providers. The ELI endorses community development principles and practices in its work. The CRC is also committed to participatory research methodologies and methods. The evaluation approach taken by the CRC also reflects the PICL training itself, and all of the Irish early years frameworks described earlier. They do not offer an outcomes-focused, standardised model to strengthening practitioner-parent partnerships in early learning, but instead emphasise process and partnership, and suggest that parents and early years practitioners need to develop methods of engagement and goals that make sense to them.

The participatory action research strategy evolved through the following process:

- A meeting was held between the CRC, Dr Josephine Bleach and Ms Catriona Flood on 3 December 2009 to plan the approach to conducting the research.

- It was agreed that the ELI would obtain formal agreement from childcare centres in advance of the Children's Research Centre making contact with the centres.

- The ELI wrote to childcare centres to explain the evaluation of the professional development programme.

- The ELI met with centres to discuss what involvement in the research would entail and answer any queries.

- The CRC explained more about the approach to the evaluation at a meeting related to Síolta training attended by childcare managers/practitioners on 13 January 2010.

- Information and consent forms were provided by the CRC to centres that had verbally indicated interest in being involved.

- Five childcare centres eventually agreed to being involved in the evaluation.

- The CRC visited each childcare centre for the purposes of familiarisation with key staff and settings.

- The CRC developed an information sheet for staff of these centres to advise them about the proposed research.

A research reference group was formed comprising childcare practitioners from the five centres, and the two key CRC researchers. The overall research strategy was driven by the members of the reference group and the researchers.

Ethics

In line with TCD/CRC research best practice, an ethics application was submitted to the Ethics Committee of the TCD School of Social Work and Social Policy in January 2010 and was approved shortly after. All research staff have received Garda clearance to work with children.

To ensure that research participants understood the purpose of the research and could give informed consent, information sheets/leaflets on the evaluation were prepared for those directly participating in the data collection, and for the parents of potential child participants in the child study.

Some of the children in the centres were invited to participate in the research. Their parents gave their written consent to their child's participation. The issue of assent with very young children is a sensitive area. While the children were told the names of the researchers (the warm-up exercise with children involved the researchers developing name badges for themselves, participating staff and children) and that they wanted to know what kinds of things the children did in school and at home, it is difficult to know how much children understood. The children were free to leave the discussion group and engage in another activity in the room, and some did.

Methods

The research objectives were addressed using a mixed methods approach that involved the following elements:

Research reference group

The purpose of the research reference group was to ensure that the evaluation of the PICL programme in each of the childcare centres was informed by local knowledge of each setting and by practitioners' own practice and policy knowledge, and so that the childcare centres themselves could drive and participate in all aspects of the research process. It was also hoped that this approach would support acceptance of the research in each centre, help ensure that the research questions were meaningful and that the research process was practical within the centres. Wadsworth (1997) considers that evaluations can benefit greatly by the establishment of a reference group[4] of key stakeholders who can shape the evaluation. Following Wadsworth, the idea was that the reference group would help to focus the evaluation around the values and interests that are important to those who are meant to be served by the outcomes of the evaluation. The group would also need to have the capacity to respect and identify with the interests of others in the group, as well as the ability to contribute to question raising and problem solving.

Participating childcare centres were invited to nominate a representative to the group. The participants were all senior childcare staff and most had participated in the PICL training. It was agreed between the CRC and the ELI that it would be best to restrict membership to the centres and researchers so that all felt comfortable to speak openly in the meetings. Reference group meetings were held at the NCI.

Six meetings of the research reference group were held. A preliminary meeting was held on 9 December 2009 to discuss the proposed evaluation. The group met next on 18 March 2010 after formal agreement for each centre's involvement had been received. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss the focus for the evaluation. Over the successive meetings, the reference group collaborated on refining questions for a research profile instrument, discussed the methods that would be best suited to the evaluation and access issues, developed a research timetable to best suit the evaluation timescale and the centres, fedback to the researchers their perceptions of the progress of the evaluation, and generally problem-solved. The final reference group meeting was held on July 27 2010 when the researchers presented research findings and themes and the group discussed them and drew conclusions. Service/childcare managers and senior childcare practitioners not sitting on the reference group were also invited to attend this session.

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[4] Wadsworth refers to this as a Critical Reference Group

Overall the reference group was invaluable as members provided constant guidance to the researchers on research questions, the research context, childcare practice issues, access, and methods. The reference group members, and their colleagues, gave a lot of their time to speaking with colleagues and parents, explaining the research and inviting them to participate. They organised rooms in their centres for the researchers to conduct the interviews and focus groups.

Documentary Review

A review of ELI's CPD planning, monitoring and evaluation documents was conducted in order to understand the development and implementation of the Pen Green training in Docklands community childcare centres. A series of familiarisation visits were undertaken in January 2010, after each centre had agreed to participate in the evaluation, and in April 2010.

Centre Profiles

A profile questionnaire was developed and distributed to the five centres. The profile sought information on: management structure; funding; types of childcare services offered; other services offered; hours of operation; physical environment; number of children; fees; curriculum; staffing levels; staff qualifications; profile of parents; and implementation of national policy initiatives.

The purpose of the profile was to gain information on the centres to inform the development of interview and focus group schedules, provide contextual information for the analysis of findings, and to provide information on the centres to help evaluation users contextualise the PICL implementation and evaluation findings.

Focus Groups

A total of 14 focus group discussions were conducted with childcare practitioners and parents in the five childcare centres: 5 with parents, and 9 with childcare staff.

Separate focus groups were conducted for the permanent childcare practitioners employed directly by the centres and those employed fixed-term under FÁS employment programmes as their perspectives and experiences may be influenced by differences in employment conditions and experiences. A focus group with permanent staff was not undertaken in one centre as their staff were primarily employed through FÁS and the permanent staff members were interviewed as they had participated in PICL.

The numbers participating in the staff focus groups ranged from 2 to 9 people. The ideal number of participants should have been 5 to 8 people. However, sometimes it was not clear exactly who would come until the time of the focus group. Also, the numbers participating need to be judged based on overall numbers of permanent staff and FÁS staff. The focus group with 2 FÁS participants was in a centre which had only a handful of FÁS staff, whereas another focus group with 3 CE staff participants took place in a centre with 40 FÁS staff. However, many of these worked with children in the afterschool and drop-in service that the service provides for older children.

None of the staff participating in focus groups had undertaken the PICL training in Pen Green. The staff focus group discussion topics were:

- understandings of and perspectives on parental involvement

- understanding of PICL

- the communication of PICL to their colleagues by those trained in Pen Green

- how easy or difficult it is to involve parents in their centres

- examples of successful parental engagement in their centres; and

- how well their childcare training has prepared them for supporting parents to engage in their children's learning.

There were a number of challenges in setting up the staff focus groups. These included:

the limited availability of staff and their time due to the need to ensure staff:child ratios in the centres (particularly when staff were sick or on holidays), FÁS staff were engaged in training and their time in the crèche was limited, staff generally work part-time and so only a percentage are present at any one time, and because most of the staff are themselves parents and have family commitments. While fifty minutes to an hour was sought to conduct each focus group, in practice it was very difficult to get more than a half an hour as staff had to return to training or work or parental responsibilities.

Five focus groups were held with parents of the children in the five centres. A total of 24 parents took part. The majority was female, although two fathers did take part in one focus group.

In the focus groups with parents we explored:

- the extent of knowledge amongst participants of the ELI

- where parents went for information about their child's learning

- understanding of parental involvement

- what they have learned from the childcare centre about how they can support their child's learning

- barriers to involvement

- the kinds of things they would like to see childcare practitioners do to support parents' involvement in their child's learning.

Involving parents in focus groups was challenging. Childcare staff recruited parents when they arrived or came to collect their children by explaining the research and giving them the information leaflets prepared by the CRC. It became clear that only one focus group per centre was achievable (the researchers had initially planned to conduct two) due to insufficient parent interest. Some parent focus groups took place in the early evenings and others during the day.

It is not unusual for childcare staff in the five centres to have their children or grandchildren in the childcare centre. Four parents and two grandmothers who are also childcare staff took part in the parent focus groups. At times, it was difficult for the staff/parents to separate out their roles, particularly as they are so directly involved in the centre. However, this depended on the individual participant.

All focus groups were digitally audio recorded. Field notes were also written by the researchers immediately after each focus group.

Interviews

Twelve semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with childcare managers, overall service managers (where the childcare was part of a wider community service), senior childcare staff and the Cultural Broker (see later). The majority of interviewees had been trained in PICL by Pen Green except for two service managers.

While some questions were asked of all interview participants, other questions were tailored to the role of the interviewee in the implementation of the PICL programme in the Docklands childcare centres. The purpose of these interviews was to gather information on:

- centre background and context

- the implementation of PICL in their centres

- communication with parents

- perceptions on how staff and parents understand and perceive parental involvement in children's early learning

- views on parental involvement in children's learning in the future

- barriers and facilitators to parental involvement in children's early learning.

Topics discussed in the interview with the Cultural Broker included:

- her role in the ELI's CPD programme

- practice in the Docklands childcare centres pre-and post-PICL

- PICL implementation in the centres

- the future direction of PICL implementation.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour and all were digitally audio recorded. Each interviewee was given a typed, full, verbatim transcript of their interview. They were invited to review it for errors and contact the researchers if they wished to make a change or were unhappy in some way. One interviewee availed of this option and a small number of factual changes were made.

An informal interview was also conducted with the ELI's Early Years Coordinator. The interview was recorded. It was played back later and notes were made on relevant points. The purpose of the interview was to clarify outstanding issues in relation to the implementation of PICL and the future role of the ELI in CPD in the centres.

Child small group activity

The children in the Docklands childcare centres are also partners and active participants in their learning. While not part of the original proposal, the CRC undertook a small-scale research activity with the preschool children aged 4 to 5 years in each of the centres to try to gain an insight into their perceptions of the home-centre partnership.

Research methods and tools for use with preschool children that allow for the 'voice of the child' to be heard is an emerging area. It contrasts with the use of standardised tests on young children as research subjects. Clark and Moss (2005) have pioneered a 'mosaic approach' which brings together traditional and participatory research methods to support children to create a picture of their lives. It has been used in service development and evaluation. Tools include observation, children taking pictures, child-led tours of environments, map-making, and child conferencing (a short structured interview schedule conducted one-to-one or in a group). Some of these methods were discussed as possibilities with

the reference group, and also individually with the centres. Child conferencing conducted while children were undertaking activities was decided upon. It was agreed to conduct research with a group of no more than six children in each of the centres

A tool was required to encourage conversation with the children. Given that the children were used to seeing their portfolios and that the portfolio should reflect the life of the child in the centre and also the home-school partnership to support their learning, it was decided to pilot the use of a child's portfolio in the context of a one-to-one interview with one child. However, it turned out not to be as useful as anticipated. While the child was very motivated to speak about the portfolio itself, indeed his class-mates also joined in, because the portfolio had insufficient content that reflected communication between the home and the centre, it did not provoke conversation in that direction. It was also apparent from the familiarisation visits to the centres that other portfolios were also primarily a reflection of the work of the child in the centre and were not contributed to by parents.

A different approach was then adopted, using a doll called 'Jenny' to try to stimulate conversation. The children were asked to imagine that Jenny was a new child coming to the centre and that she wanted know what it was like being in the centre so that she could tell her mammy and daddy. Open-ended questions were asked:

- Who will bring Jenny to the school in the morning?

- How will she know what to do?

- What kinds of things will she do in the school?

- Who will tell Jenny's mammy what Jenny has been doing all day?

- What do you think Jenny will tell her mammy about what she has been doing all day in the school?

The reference group suggested that the discussion take place while children were engaged in particular activities, like play dough, drawing or circle time. The group interview lasted for about a half hour, and there was a 15 minutes or so ice-breaker activity and a 15 minute wind-down time at the end of each session. The childcare centre staff also engaged in the session, using the interview schedule. It was semi-structured, and practitioners and researchers also engaged in conversation on the topics introduced by the children.

Each session was audio recorded and field notes were written up immediately after the activity. Some reference group members suggested videoing the session for later playback. Two centres recorded it for their own records. These recordings are the property of the individual centres. The activity was most effective when children were engaged in other activities as it kept children's interests and opened up other areas of questioning. A half hour was the maximum time in which the concentration of the group could be held. It would have been better to use different methods over time with children, but it was not in the remit of the evaluation. However, participation in this once-off activity gave the researchers an insight into the relationships between the child, the practitioners and the wider centre that they might not otherwise have achieved.

Data analysis

In keeping with the participatory and dynamic nature of this evaluation data analysis commenced as soon as data was collected. It consisted of processing information, reflecting upon it, discussing it among the research team and feeding back insights and issues for clarification to the Research Reference Group.

After each of the interviews and focus groups reflective memos were written up and shared among the research team before transcription had begun.

In addition, each interviewee was given a typed transcript of their interview and offered the opportunity to change or add information. Only one interviewee did so. This approach adds another layer of rigor to the process of data analysis and the validity of the findings.

Each member of the research team read every transcript and recorded their own insights and notes about the data. The team then met to discuss the key themes that were emerging across the interview and focus group data. The transcripts were then transferred to NVivo qualitative data analysis software where transcripts were coded using the broad themes identified by the research team.

The research team met again and undertook further analysis of the data that had undergone broad category coding in NVivo to look for more insights and patterns in the data and to agree the outcome of the data analyses. Following this the Research Reference Group met with the research team to hear and then discuss the research findings and draw conclusions about the evaluation.

CHAPTER 6

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of how Pen Green's PICL training impacted on childcare practitioners' efforts in Dublin's Docklands to involve parents in children's learning. The findings derive from the data collected by the researchers through the familiarisation visits, interviews, focus groups and child research activity. It describes:

- The types of parental involvement observed in the childcare centres

- How the childcare centres have implemented the PICL training

- Which elements of the PICL training worked best and which require further consideration

- Factors influencing the extent of parental involvement in the early years settings

- Perceptions of the benefits of parental involvement; and

- Any future training and resources required to encourage parental involvement.

This chapter also sets out the perspectives of the five childcare centres on the future sustainability of the use of the Pen Green approach in these centres, and also issues arising in relation of the role of the ELI in childcare settings in the Docklands.

The evaluation findings are discussed using these research questions, rather than by individual centre. This approach provides some privacy to the centres. Also, there were commonalities between centres in their approaches to parental involvement, their implementation of PICL, and the factors that supported and challenged them in involving parents in children's learning. The centres also differ in their PICL implementation, their contexts and their experiences and perspectives in many ways, and these differences are also captured.

Types of parental involvement

The PICL framework aims to develop an equal partnership with parents in support of early learning using a specific methodology of parental and practitioner education in key child development concepts and the use of adult pedagogic strategies to support child learning. As identified in the literature review earlier, Pen Green's approach sits within a broader picture of the many and varied kinds of activities and roles played by parents in their engagement in the operation and life of the childcare centres and in supporting their child's development and learning. While this evaluation particularly explores the extent of PICL implementation in the five Docklands centres, the findings indicate that the five centres define parental involvement very broadly indeed.

Communication

All of the centres in this evaluation put considerable effort into communicating with parents.

The centres send out written communications to parents about subjects such as school fees and reminders about holiday dates, and communicate with parents regarding centre events: parties, the annual graduation, and learning activities such as book reading or messy play or ELI events. The communication methods include notice boards and notices pinned around the centre and letters and notes to parents inviting them to events. Staff also verbally encourage parents to come along. As will be discussed later, centres experience varying degrees of success in encouraging parents to participate in events and activities. Success is related to the parental profile, and to the type of event: graduation events are extremely popular with parents and the extended family in all centres, as are St. Patrick's Day, Halloween events, and so on. Activities aimed at encouraging parents and child to play and learn together are less popular. As a community service, the childcare centres also communicated with parents via their notice boards about community events, other relevant community services and issues of national policy that affect them.

In response to questions about their own understanding of parental involvement in children's learning, practitioners, especially non-managerial and CE staff, spoke about the communication between practitioners and parents on child behaviour and mood, child health, child rearing and children's personal likes and dislikes. Parents, when asked what they understood by parental involvement, spoke of exchanging information on the same subjects. This engagement is quite informal, 'chatting', and generally occurs when children are being dropped off in the morning and collected in the evening. There tends to be only a five- or ten-minute window for discussion. This is the primary type of parent-practitioner engagement in the centres. It tends to take place with most, although not all, parents.

In the focus groups with parents and practitioners considerable attention was given to the issue of children biting and hitting other children, and the need to tell parents about this. The discussion sometimes went in this direction when research participants were asked what they understood by the term parental involvement. A manager of one of the centres questioned the appropriateness of this kind of communication with parents, and the outcome of it. While she ensures that persistent or worrying behaviour exhibited by children is always taken seriously and brought to parents' attention, she was of the opinion that focusing on occasional negative behaviour and communicating with parents about it is counterproductive, closing off opportunities to engage with parents:

> . . everybody thinks their child is great .. I think if you put a positive slant on things as much as possible it makes them feel good. It makes them feel good about the child and it encourages them to ask questions rather than, and this is not being critical of other centres, but I know some of the staff we've got from other centres would say, 'I'll tell her Mam she was hitting today', and we kind of say, 'why?', like, and said, 'well in the other place we always told them', and now they say to us, 'but you only tell the good stuff' - we don't only tell the good stuff but we do put the emphasis on it. Because I don't think you want to go in everyday and hear… (Childcare Manager, Centre A).

Parents and practitioners usually engage in the morning and afternoon/evening on the child's general mood and health: whether they slept well, are feeling ill or coming down with a cold, whether or not the child ate a good breakfast/dinner. Parents seek staff expertise and support in adopting joint strategies in areas like potty training and feeding. Again this was considered to be an example of parental involvement by many parents and staff. Some parents said that they valued the years of experience that practitioners had, and that practitioners understand practical elements of child rearing because they have gone through it with so many children.

Ultimately, while this communication is important to the child's health and well-being, it is not directly related to supporting the child's learning progress:

> And sometimes, now, the parents, if the children are at the back playing and the parent comes along, they would be very interested in what the children are doing. But not actually… it is basically chatting to the staff, chatting to the children, but not at the educational part of what the children are getting out of it (Childcare centre manager, Centre D).

Another childcare centre manager, while understanding that this kind of communication may not be directly related to understanding and supporting children's learning, recognised the importance of keeping communication lines open with parents:

> .. you do have the parent that comes in and say, 'well, you know, you had him walking last week, he's better in his pram', you know, there is: but it's still communication (Childcare centre manager: Centre C).

Yet, there were many individual examples given by childcare practitioners of everyday unplanned interactions between the child, parent and practitioner that support children's learning.

One example given by a parent was where her child came home from the centre singing a song that the parent did not know. The parent spoke with the childcare manager, and asked the manager to teach it to her. The child and parent looked up the words of the song on the internet and now sing the song together. This mother appreciated the support of the manager: she worked and had limited time to spend with her son.

Another example illustrates how the informal communication between parent and practitioner provides valuable information for parents on their child's development and interests:

> Again it's done, it's done kind of very informally. They'd be told like what the child is doing, whether they enjoyed it or not. You know I don't think they really go into, like, they're learning this or their learning that. It'd be more kind of you know 'he spent a half an hour this morning doing that and his concentration was really good and it was great that he sat there for that length of time', because a two year old wouldn't normally sit for half an hour to do something like that . ..

> So it would be that kind of thing, they'd be kind of more informed about what they're doing and how they're getting on (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre E).

Some parents also ask childcare practitioners about their child's school readiness. Some of the centres work with local primary schools to support children in making the transition to primary school through an open day attended by the centre, the parents and teachers in the school. In one of the centres, the children's portfolios are brought to the open day to support discussion on school readiness and identify the child's accomplishments and support needs. Other centres have yet to develop these kinds of relationships with the schools.

Parental involvement in the life and operation of the childcare centre

A key feature of community childcare settings in the inner city is that they were established by members of the community to meet local needs. This is the case with all of the five childcare centres that participated in this evaluation. Most were established on an informal basis by parents and community activists as playgroups for children or as a means of mothers providing mutual support. Parents volunteered to support the operational aspects of the centre and also worked with the children on a rota basis. At a point in time, parents would have had quite a high level of control in the operation of the centres. As noted by childcare managers over the years due to the rise in female participation in the workforce, the changes in the sector due to national policy and funding, and the professionalisation of the services, parental involvement has decreased, or the parents' role has changed as they were employed as practitioners.

Nevertheless, parents still participate in the life and operation of the centres, although in a less hands-on ways and with less control over the operational aspects, e.g., finance, staff hiring and management, and decision-making. Some parents provide voluntary help around the centre. Two of the centres spoke of parents offering to do odd jobs. Parents also decorated the rooms for Halloween in one centre, and painted murals with the children in another. However, such volunteerism is sporadic, sometimes once-off, and not undertaken on a wide-scale basis. Only one of the centres had regular volunteers who work with the children. Two former CE staff members who are childcare-trained volunteer one morning a week, providing the required cover for staff who are undertaking FETAC training.

Not all of the centres currently include parents on their Board of Management, although the ones that do not are considering it. Three out of the five childcare centres have developed or are in the process of developing written policies on parental involvement. The procedure in two of the centres is that staff explain the content of the policy to parents when their child starts in the centre and the written policy is available from the centre's office should parents wish to view it. One centre gives all parents a copy of the policy. The policies were developed by management and senior staff in all but one of the centres where two parents participated in its development.

As mentioned previously, centre events and celebrations are popular with parents in all centres. Each of the centres has a graduation day for the preschool children held in the centre before they leave to go to 'big school'. There is a high-level of motivation amongst parents, mothers and fathers, and the extended family to attend graduations.

Graduation days are the individual achievements of the children and their families, and they also serve as community celebrations. They also appear positive for staff morale. Considerable effort and substantial expense goes into their organisation, and food and entertainment also tends to be provided. Representatives of other community organisations, for example the local primary

school, also attend. Parents receive their children's portfolio to take away on that day:

Like we would of having, having say the 12 parents of the 12 children, we would of having grandparents, brothers, sisters and uncles, sometimes 2 sets of grandparents have come, and they're just amazed at, you know, and they really get emotional; and when, when each child gets called to get the scroll and you know with their little cap and gown and you get the photograph with them and then the [ ] is giving the portfolio to the child, and they really are amazed like with them, and it's just lovely (Childcare manager, Centre C).

Other popular events with parents and families include St. Patrick's Day celebrations and sports days. Events like the St. Patrick's Day party often attract people in the community that do not have children in the centre. All of the centres have found that graduations and these kinds of fun, celebratory events are an effective way of encouraging parents, and grandparents, siblings and aunts and uncles, to come into the childcare centres and engage with staff.

We thought at the time if we try and do this to get them in for all the fun stuff, you know, and do that and they'll say " ah that was great fun we'll do that again" they will eventually start coming in for the other stuff. We have to make it fun first (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre E).

Parents also participate in outings, to the park, or to the zoo. Staff were positive about these events – they are fun days. Mothers and fathers attend. However, as is the case with so many areas of involvement, it was suggested that the 'same parents' tend to volunteer to participate.

Involvement in child's learning

The implementation of PICL by the five childcare centres as a means of developing a partnership between parents and children to support child learning is described later. However, PICL is not the only programme or activity to engage with parents available in the centres that supports early learning. The ELI runs programmes in the NCI and

in the childcare centres that also provide opportunities to promote learning through play with parents and children.

Fifty-five parents in three childcare centres participated in 2009/2010 in the ELI's programme *Spóirt is Spraoi* Parent and Toddler Group. The majority of participants were from one centre[5]. This programme consists of 15 sessions in each term per year, and a final play session in NCI that involves the ELI, childcare staff and parents. Parents are given a short talk on how they can help develop their children's social, language and thinking skills and promote their well-being and involvement.

Story telling sessions were also offered by the ELI in some of the centres. Again, some of the centres experienced low attendance, or complete non-attendance.

A Learning and Developing through Play programme was run in one of the centres by the ELI. In one of the after work sessions, parents stayed and played with their children and received a talk from the ELI on Aistear and how parents can use it to support their children's development and learning. They also ran four sessions of play activities, such as messy play and a day trip to the local park.

Some of the centres also run their own messy play and reading sessions for parents and children. Parents have also attended circle time in another centre. One childcare centre operates a mother and toddler group. It has a large space in the reception/canteen area which is suited to it. Attendance goes in peaks and troughs, influenced by factors as unrelated as the weather and whether or not mothers are in the workforce.

Both parents and practitioners raised these events themselves as subjects in the interviews and focus groups and they were very positive about these opportunities. One of the parents felt that she learned about how to play with her child. Other parents who had not participated in these sessions – through choice or because they had not heard about it - were interested in what the other parents had to say and wanted to know more.

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5 ELI, Annual Report 2009/2010

One of the centres that runs messy play sessions, found that these sessions were often the best time and venue in which to engage with parents as they had allocated this time to play with their child and did not have to be anywhere else. Another centre found that parents are taking on board what they have learned in the messy play session:

> *I think they have already started to because parents have come after the last session and they have said that they did some stuff at home, messy play stuff… oh I have to paint at home now and I have to stick and glue because the children kind of they have done it here with the parents so the children would be saying now 'Can we do this at home?' and parents have taken that on board so they are actually starting to do some of that stuff at home.* (Childcare service manager, Centre D).

Overall, these events were found to be beneficial to those who had attended. A parent in one of the focus groups commented that she does not like her child playing with paint in the house, so she appreciated the opportunity of the NCI sessions (although this may indicate that she is unlikely to take what she has learned in the session and directly use it at home with her child).

However, it seems that parents in centres with a mixed social and economic profile were more likely to participate. Childcare staff commented that it tends to be the same parents all of the time that engage with the centres and attend these events.

Two more negative issues arose in a number of interviews and focus groups in relation to parental involvement in events in the centre and days out. First, a number of practitioners identified how hard it can be on children when parents do not come to events and they see the other children in the centre with their parents. Second, it identified in one centre that sometimes there can be issues when a child gets upset if they do not accompany their parent when on an outing:

> *I find that a lot of the parents were coming, there was too much, there was too many people and it did not really go well on the*

outings, on the major outings, the big ones, so we just kept it that we just do it with staff, we just bring in all the staff that work here. Well we found that the parents going, didn't really work, well, basically when all the parents turned up. Maybe it was just here in this setting, a lot of the settings let the parents go but here, the kids were really upset and they wouldn't go with anybody else only the parent, and the parent wanted to go with the child: it was really just an emotional day. I felt it didn't work, so we just keep it to the staff and the children (Childcare manager, Centre C).

A parent in a focus group in another centre also expressed a fear that if parents are involved too much with the child in the centre, that the child will not learn to be independent there.

However, different centres have different experiences:

.. in room two [practitioner name] done a lot of, she brought two or three parents in to do artwork with the children and it was amazing because they were, their own children were in the room but they worked with about four or five different children and like, their own children were happy enough with that (Childcare practitioner, Centre E).

Changes in childcare practice attributed to Pen Green training

One of the reasons given by the childcare centres for wanting to be part of the PICL training and ELI's CPD programme was that they were looking for 'fresh ideas' and 'fresh thinking':

And I think the idea of ongoing training too, like, people get stale - and it just refreshes you. And I think too from people, especially when they went to Pen Green, when they come back, you're just sort of full of new ideas. Now they may not all work but it just gives you a wake-up call sometimes (Childcare manager, Centre A).

You know something new, like, because we've been doing this for quite a long time, and sometimes you've old ideas and staff would be here quite a while, and obviously

we're getting new staff all the time as well; but I think if you have old staff for a long time it's nice to motivate each other by taking on totally new ideas and that's, basically, we said 'Yeah this is something new' (Childcare centre manager, Centre E).

While those practitioners who went to Pen Green found upon their return to Dublin that new ideas are not always immediately understood or welcomed (later sections of this report delve into this issue further), the centres have adopted, or at least tried, new practices. All centres are experiencing a learning curve – some more than others, due to PICL, but also implementing Aistear and Síolta, and individual staff require confidence building:

When I came back from Pen Green, they kind of went 'Ah here we go, no'; and I'd come in and I'd have something sorted and say 'ok now the children are allowed climb' - 'Oh my God'. Or 'will you take [ ] for the photographs?' and you're kind of going 'ok, well, we need to find out what your strength is and we can share'. So for a long time it was sharing – someone would take the photograph, someone do a bit of writing, someone maybe talk to the mam and dad and stuff. But now the girls seem to be a little bit more, a lot more, confident in 'I can do this, sure, it's only a couple of lines' (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre D).

Research participants described a series of changes in practice that are a direct result of the exposure that they have had to PG's values and strategies. These changes seem to represent a move in the childcare centres towards not just encouraging parental involvement, but also in being more consciously child-centred. The changes also support the professionalisation of the local ECCE sector. The practices described to the researchers were described as 'big changes' in how the centres practice and operate. These changes have all come about in the last two to three years and relate to building relationships with parents, providing settling in periods for children, use of a key worker system, encouraging children's autonomy, undertaking observations, and a focus on learning through play.

Building better relationships with parents

As a result of the Pen Green training, the childcare centres are more conscious of being friendly and welcoming to all parents. This is demonstrated in a number of ways: ensuring that staff know the names of parents and can address them by their names whenever they meet (this was not previously the case in every centre); making them feel welcome and building a relationship with them; encouraging parents to come into the centre and the children's room in the morning and evening (again, this was not always the case in the past in every centre); having an explicit 'open door' policy and making it clear to parents that they are welcome to come into their child's room at any time; and generally fostering a spirit of openness with parents:

> *it's just like some of the parents would literally leave them at the door and say goodbye - and gone; wouldn't get two words out of them. Now the staff I think myself personally, they feel more comfortable that they could say 'could you hang on a second, could I have a word with you for two minutes, I just wanted to tell you something about what [child's name] done yesterday' And, you know, just to make it, explain it really quickly like what I want to tell you about, and they kind of probably go 'oh yes', and then you go to give us some positive feedback about them, and they go 'oh my God, she's nice, she's nice and friendly' so we try to break the ice on that kind of, that type of thing.* (Childcare manager, Centre B).

Taking the time to speak with the parent and child in the morning and afternoon has been found to be beneficial:

> *So I think it's really, really important the five or ten minutes you give a particular child I think in the morning or in the afternoon when they come in can make ALL the difference; you know I think it makes a difference to the staff as well because you know, they're getting through ..they're getting to know the child, they're getting to know the parents, the parents are feeling more comfortable speaking, they're now sharing information, like, you know, 'can you tell us did you did*

anything the weekend' or, like, if someone's gone to the farm or whatever, and that's another topic of conversation with the child ..'I believe you went to such and such' and [he'll] just say 'who did you go with' or 'what did you like', 'will we do a collage about it?' and you know, it can make for loads of stuff whereas, I have to admit we didn't, we'd always encourage the parent - 'just run while he's crying': it's not fair (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre D).

Remarks made by childcare practitioners indicate that parents spending time in the children's rooms is a new practice in some centres. Some practitioners found it somewhat threatening at first to have parents come into the children's rooms. Staff previously felt like they were being watched by parents, and felt threatened:

> *I was totally ashamed of the way we used to work, in the thing of 'oh God, I wish the parent would go' – you feel like you're being watched; now we don't. We treat everyone as like we're all in here together and that man wants to feed the baby or the child or have a yap with him about the trucks -and it's so much easier.* (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre D).

> *Now but again without the PICL we wouldn't probably have realised why we need to involve the parents is this because before it was, I know years ago the parents used to come in here and the staff, I'd say it myself, 'I wish they'd leave you know they're just in me way', and you think they're watching you. I think that element of it is gone now. They don't think the parents are spying on them and watching what they're doing and stuff. If the parents are in it's great they're in; let's see what they want to do with them, you know* (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre E).

It was observed that in one centre, efforts had to be made to instil the idea of positive engagement with parents:

> *. . [Manager] was trying to get them more involved with the parents, because not everyone has social skills. They are not*

good with approaching the parent, and you know it's like on occasion you'd have parents saying, 'He's very cranky' and that would be a staff member and you'd be looking like saying 'I don't want to hear my child is cranky. You're the childcare worker - make him happy', you know, like. But it was about social skills and it was kind of retraining their attitude. She [the childcare manager] did as far as I'm concerned: every girl that's there is very good with approaching the parent and they have all the confidence in the world in them (Service manager, Centre B).

Practitioners, permanent and CE, in centres for whom the policy is new seem to have adapted very quickly. They cannot quite believe that older practices and ideas existed and they now talk about having an 'open door' policy. Practitioners reminded the researchers that not all parents can or wish to enter the rooms: some do not enter the centre and staff have to collect the children at the gate. The phrase 'drop and go' was used frequently by practitioners to describe the behaviour of some parents who do not engage. To counteract this tendency, one of the centres has adopted the simple strategy of staff having the child's coat and bag with them at collection time, rather than the parent, or grandparent, going to the cloakroom to get it themselves. This way, parent and practitioner get to interact, even for a couple of minutes. Staff aim to tell the parent something positive that the child has done or accomplished that day.

It is important to note that some of the centres pointed out that they already had a tradition of good relationships with parents prior to PICL. One of the centres already had a policy whereby parents were asked to bring the child into their class room, and staff would engage with them, even if only a short period of time was available.

However, it would be incorrect to suggest that a sudden transformation has occurred in centre-parent relationships. A childcare practitioner in a focus group suggested that PICL has formalised existing practice:

I just don't think we had a name for it, d'ya' know. We didn't have a name to say to the parents 'well we're engaging in parental involvement'. Where before we would say 'you're more than welcome to come in to see what your child has been doing today ', and we would be handing them pictures and taking photographs… With Pen Green, they gave it a system (Childcare practitioner, Centre E).

This theme also arose in staff interviews:

I mean, the staff work with the parents on a day-to-day basis. The interesting thing is they don't realise that if you put it under a banner or a heading, you know, and you say to them 'we are going to introduce this', you know, the parent and the child working together and all, I don't think you can do that, but they don't actually realise they have been doing it for a very long time. So it is in there, it is already there (Community service manager, Centre C).

Settling-in period

All of the centres have become more aware of the importance of the settling-in period when a new child starts at the centre as a result of the Pen Green training. Perhaps where the settling-in period strategy differs most between the Docklands childcare centres in this study and Pen Green is that it appears to be determined by the needs of the child, rather than any wider strategy to build a relationship with the parents or carers early on in the child's time in the centre. Whether or not parents stay, and the length of time they remain, is based on whether or not and for how long the child is crying or upset, and the time that is available to parents to spend in the centre.

The centres have adopted different strategies from each other on settling children in. One centre encourages parents to settle a child in over a two-week period. This period helps staff to get to know both parents and children. However the judgement made over the time limit of the settling-in period remains based on how well the child adjusts to being in the centre.

A practitioner in another centre identified that no parent has stayed more than 15 or 20 minutes in the centre settling-in a new child, although it is explained to parents that they can stay for longer if required. Other centres report longer settling-in periods, sometimes days, but, again, the time period relates to how well the child settles in the centre:

> but we would allow the parents, like, to settle them for the hour; and if a child was really distressed we would allow, we would extend their time to a little bit longer because we would be all about the needs of the child and making sure what's best for the child (Childcare manager, Centre B).

Generally, the centres adopt the strategy that should a child have difficulties settling-in, the centre will call the parent if the child is upset. They may also ring the parents to let them know when the child has settled in. They remind parents that the centre door is open to them should they wish to or need to come into to see their child:

> They're encouraged to stay or whatever. Some of the parents leave the room upset and say 'well, I'm gonna go, can you ring me'; and we will. We'll make that phone call and say, 'listen, he's not crying', or be honest 'yeah she is crying' or whatever and that might be a time where you haven't got a bit of information you might say 'listen is there anything you know in particular that he or she likes that we can give them to play with or is there I can talk about at home that might you know?' and yeah, I do understand that a lot of parents now the parents that don't have to run will often sit at the table, maybe feed the breakfast to the child or get a toy out and say 'you want to play with this for a while?' and sometimes that's all it takes. It's not that they're running out the door or, like I said, you have to understand if they're running out the door to work (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre D).

Where centres have an open kitchen area, foyer, or room, parents can remain on hand for a while. One of the centres sometimes videos the child when he/she is settled in so as to reassure the parents that this has happened.

Another centre has more systematised policy for settling a child into the centre. All new parents and children are invited into the centre on the last day of the week in August when the centre closes for summer holidays for an open day.

On the child's first day in the centre the parent is asked to stay with the child in the morning, and they leave at around eleven thirty. For that first week or so, parents are asked to be on hand should their child get upset.

Overall, the PG training has further sensitised practitioners to children's initial experiences when starting crèche.

Key worker system

The Pen Green key worker system has been tried and, to some extent, adopted in the five centres. All staff interact with the children and participate in developing portfolios in all five centres, but not all staff can engage with parents except on a informal basis. All centres introduce the parent to the keyworker or team leader when the child starts in the centre, and to the other staff, and it is made clear to the parent that this keyworker or team leader is their main contact person in the centre. In one centre, the key worker system operates in the baby room, while a team leader system is in operation in the other rooms. The centre has two staff in each room and one is regarded as a room leader. Parents are free to approach either staff in the room, although they usually approach the room leader. This centre has a limited number of FÁS childcare staff and has full-time and part-time staff.

Another centre did try to adopt the keyworker system but found that the turnover in staff due to the ending of their time on the CE scheme meant that children were constantly losing key workers. Now only permanent staff can be keyworkers in this centre. It is policy in this centre that CE workers, of which there are a substantial number, do not communicate with parents for fear of incorrect information being given to parents. CE staff brought this issue up in a focus group. They wished for more contact with parents. This policy made them feel as though they are 'just in the rooms' and are 'just

minding children'. Overall, it appeared that they felt that their contribution was not fully valued. However, they do undertake observations and contribute to children's portfolios.

In another centre, each permanent practitioner is a key worker to five children. Parents can approach any member of staff if they have questions, although it is this key worker that develops the child's portfolio. The majority of the staff there are permanent.

The key worker system was tried in another centre, but it was determined unfeasible because all staff are part-time and so would not be available to parents throughout the day. Also, the centre wants trained staff to communicate with parents, and not all staff are trained. Each room has a team leader who takes responsibility for speaking to parents. Information on the child is not always shared with other staff in the room, and if parents wish to engage about the child's health, development or learning, they are referred to the team leader.

Each keyworker in the final centre is assigned three children that they would work closely with, particularly in relation to the observations and development of portfolio. The keyworkers would communicate with the parents, supported by the childcare manager. This centre has a relatively small number of preschool children.

Encouraging children's autonomy

The way in which the physical environment in Pen Green has been developed to support children's autonomy and desire for exploration was described previously. The Dublin practitioners who attended the Pen Green Centre were very impressed, and influenced, by what the UK centre had to offer children. They have implemented some of these ideas in Dublin.

One of the childcare centres is in new premises. It was being designed while the practitioners were visiting the Pen Green Centre. The staff were in a position to bring back what they learned in PG about how the physical environment can stimulate learning and promote autonomy. They communicated

this to the architects and landscapers of the new premises, which is part of a wider community facility. As a result a jungle garden was created with different levels in an internal courtyard in the childcare centre. It was specifically designed and planted to stimulate children's senses, afford different kinds of play opportunities, and allow for contact with nature. It provides children with an opportunity to do gardening and it is accessible from all of the children's rooms. It permits children's safe and free movement between the inside and outside. The staff observed that this environment will remain a legacy from the Pen Green training.

As described earlier, the Pen Green nursery and nest are both open plan rooms where children are free to roam and to choose their activities. Some of the centres in this evaluation have tried to emulate this approach, where possible, opening up doors between children's rooms to allow them to play freely throughout the rooms and with each other. The staff in the childcare centres agreed that trying this is a major change in practice that came about as a result of engagement with PG.

Implementation varies between centres; for some it is a regular occurrence, while others tried it but are unsure if it is appropriate for them. Much seems to depend on staff attitudes towards the practice, although the physical design and size of the centres was a contributing factor.

One of the centres tried the open door approach twice a week for six weeks with two rooms of older children and thought it successful from the children's point of view: 'the children were delighted'. However staff were very unsure about it on the grounds that the centre was considered too small, they believed it to be dangerous, and they felt unhappy and nervous throughout the activity. On the other hand, in a different centre, while there was initially some staff concern about the potential chaos of so many different activities going on in one enlarged room, when it was tried it was considered successful. Yet, for some CE staff, there remain question marks over the practice and 'giving children too much independence'.

In other centres, the open door practice has been judged a success, and will continue:

The open door thing as well I think would have come from Pen Green because they had all the different ages mixed as well in Pen Green, whereas we didn't before that, we just had separate groups. So that was something that we brought back from Pen Green was that we could mix from room to room and the ages can work well together. So that came, and that has stuck, and that will go on. Kids love it; kids love the freedom of being able to go from room to room. So that was really, that was a big impact on the centre (Childcare centre manager, Centre D).

We have free flow twice a week all the doors are opened. That's the stuff that came, that was one of the first things that we changed, was the open doors for two days a week for an hour each time where the children could go wherever they wanted to go. Different activities would be set up in the rooms and children could just go choose whatever they wanted to do from any of the rooms (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre E).

Despite the positivity towards the open door approach in this centre staff pointed out that a HSE childcare inspector has raised concerns about this practice on health and safety grounds. They wanted the rooms to remain separate at all times. Indeed, differences in risk adversity and levels of fear between Pen Green and the Irish childcare sector arose frequently in conversation with PICL-trained staff. While practitioners stressed that they observe and understand the need for the Irish childcare regulations, they believe that our over-cautiousness is not always helpful in supporting children's learning:

So much outdoor space over there; and they're not worried over the child going into a corner or going climbing under something and, you know. They have little alcoves for them to hide in and they just let the kids do their thing, and really did you know. What I mean - that stuck, and here as well that I'm not afraid of before just like standing up on things you're like, you don't panic you know that kind of way. There's just so much room.

I think with us as well we have so much HSE rules, you know. The parents come in if the child falls; over there if the child falls, ok they have a record of it, but it's no big .. it's their place to run around (Childcare practitioner, Centre D).

There's a lot of things we'd love to do but you're just afraid. Whereas in Pen Green they didn't seem to have that concern at all. Like, there was kids flying down hills on bikes, you know. And it was great (Childcare manager, Centre A).

Written observations

Some practitioners in a number of the childcare centres would have, at some level and for a variety of purposes, undertaken written observations of children prior to the Pen Green training, for example for FETAC childcare training. Since the PICL training, a number of differences can be observed.

First, all of the centres now undertake written observations of individual children, and all practitioners are encouraged to engage in this practice. The manager of one of the childcare centres identified that having to write about children's development and learning is a new development for childcare in Ireland: 'Before you just got on and you did it; you never had to record it'. While this transformation in the inner city childcare centres was initially due to the PICL training, it is also being driven by Síolta and Aistear and regulation 5 of the revised Childcare Regulations. The importance of this change cannot be over-emphasised.

However, writing and recording is not difficult in every centre:

I find the PICL was easy for the girls. It was easy to bring back, easy to implement and it's very easy to keep it going you know because it's easily recorded (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre E).

One of the outcomes from undertaking observations, for some practitioners at least, seems to be the encouragement of self-reflection on practice:

I think as well your little observations helped with that because I think you kind of questioned yourself and say 'am I, am I giving that child what they need?' . .kind of go 'God, maybe I should of done something different' -or maybe I didn't react in the way that was needed. And I think a lot of the staff have looked at how to improve ..like ..I suppose it's so easy to assume you know what you're doing is right or whatever, and I think because we have staff here that are here quite a long time (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre D).

Other similar comments were made by practitioners, primarily senior practitioners. Those supporting the centres in implementing PICL identify that it is a cultural change for centres to have to reflect upon their practice, and that without this reflection, it is difficult to improve practice. So on a number of key levels, having to use their knowledge and skills to write about the child and include the impact of their own practice, is bringing about fundamental changes in practice.

A childcare manager described some of the changes in practice that have come about because of the PG training, that will continue in her centre:

yeah well we would record things more now like and observe more, .. the girls have a better understanding which way they work with children. They have a better understanding of the importance of play with children, how children learn, the different stages that they learn at . . (Childcare manager, Centre B)

Second, for a centre that did previously develop written records of children's learning, there has been a change in what they consider to be important to observe and record:

It wasn't that we weren't doing observations before - we were. We just had them in copy books like you know but you wouldn't have had that chance to …ok the once a year when you bring in parents and sit down on the evenings night and go through each child what they were doing, but that was in like in a notebook form and that would

have been based on more Montessori, like on their reading abilities and their colours and their numbers and their letters; whereas this is you know like 'the child is great at painting'. Every issue comes into the folders, like you're actually looking at the holistic development of the child and not just certain aspects like we were in Montessori - so to me I think that's most important (Childcare centre manager, Centre E).

Third, for most centres, a major change has been that the written observations are developed with a view to being shared at some point in time with parents and families. This change is mainly due to the introduction of portfolios.

Within the Pen Green methodology, observations are undertaken systematically to build up a picture of what each child is learning and how they learn and for parents and practitioners to extend that learning in partnership. The observations go into a child's portfolio to be shared with parents. The extent to which these observations are undertaken, and the purpose of the observations, differs between the childcare centres in this study. Some of the centres aim to undertake observations three times per week, others observe two or three children a day in each room, while others are undertaking observations when the work schedule allows. In another centre, the impetus for observation might come from a concern about the child:

.we can do observations now on the children . . we wouldn't do lot of observations It would be children that we'd be really concerned about that you'd sit back and you would watch them for a while, if you're concerned about something you would sit back and you would note it down, we all have books in the room that we'll note down a few things about the different children but like it wouldn't be everyday that you'd sit down (Childcare manager, Centre A).

In some centres, observation is ongoing, and may be undertaken very quickly in the children's room. Some centres have adopted PG's strategy of having a notebook to hand in each room where staff can jot down their observations of individual children with a view to recording it

and including it in the portfolio at a later time, or recording it to speak with colleagues about how to extend a child's learning.

Another centre has also adopted this practice, mainly as a way of ensuring that information on the child's learning is not lost due a changeover in shift, as most staff work part-time:

> ..so we've notebooks and if anyone notices anything, they'll jot it down for the, say it was me for [name], or whatever. I'll jot it down and say 'look [name] when you were gone he or she yesterday did this: I couldn't believe it so I recorded it for you'. And then she picks up on it and we get a photograph and so that nothing is lost where we never used to have, I mean it's ok if you're saying 'I painted that today' but if you don't have something to go along with it like a photograph, little bit of writing about maybe the first time the child decided 'I don't like the blue paint, can you please give me red paint' or 'no, I really don't like painting'; and it's important (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre D).

Another centre further developed a short form they complete for each child where they monitor and record each child's development year by year. Should a child be experiencing developmental difficulties the senior practitioner will involve the parents and consider additional support for the child. This form goes in the portfolio. Parents complete various administrative forms when a child starts with this centre, and one form includes a section called 'interests of the child'. In this, the parents include information on whether or not the child has a favourite toy, is called by a particular name, or they have an item for comfort.

Photos

All of the centres use photos as a means of engaging both children and parents about their child's activities in the childcare centre. Centres find that displaying these photos in the hallway or in the rooms is a good way of starting a dialogue with practitioners, parents and children, and making parents aware of the activities undertaken by children:

> Yeah, they'd come in and the photographs would be on the notice board and they'd say, "oh what did they do, were they out planting"? Or the children will mostly stand at the notice board with them, with the parents and say, "oh look what we were doing the other day" (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre A).

Home-school books

One of the childcare centres uses the home-school books, although it is at the suggestion of some parents rather than a proactive strategy on behalf the centre. It is unclear if the parents also contribute to the book. However, it illustrates partnership between parents and practitioners in support of children's learning:

> Or another way, another tool is, some of the parents, now it's only who have given us a notebook and asked us to write anything about the child, anything different or anything out of the ordinary. Or even just a new song they've learned during the day, just write it in the notebook, and then when they go home they can sign that song with them or they can read that story or talk about what they've done, so that they feel that they've been involved in their child's stay here; that it's not kind of separate, like coming to crèche and then at home, it's a link for both (Childcare manager, Centre A).

Learning through play

In a previous quotation, a childcare manager noted that practitioners in her centre now have a better understanding of the importance of play to children as a result of the implementation of PG values and approaches. Other research participants also suggested that exposure to PG's values and practices have influenced practice in this regard, which has ultimately had a positive impact on children in the centres:

> And I do think it's helped the children because we didn't, we had a very structured environment, you know we had puzzle time, we had this time, we had that time: now it is play (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre E).

In a group discussion on the sustainability of the Pen Green methodology in Docklands community childcare centres, a centre manager, identified that one the significant changes in her centre that can be attributed to PG is the greater emphasis on the value of learning through play. This is will be one of the legacies arising from PG in her centre, and it seems in other centres.

Implementation of PICL

As identified earlier, three key child development concepts and adult pedagogic strategies are used by PG to understand individual children's interests and how they learn, and for parents and practitioners to work together to extend that learning. They also provide a vocabulary for observation and dialogue between the parents and practitioners. They are the bedrocks of the PICL framework. The PICL framework also comprises tools for recording a child's learning accomplishments, sharing the learning, and developing a plan for extending the learning as a parent/practitioner partnership, particularly portfolios and the PLOD tool. The evaluation explored practitioners' and parents understanding of the concepts and their use in understanding child learning, communication between parents and practitioners and in planning learning opportunities for children.

Schemas

Of all of the child development concepts associated with PICL, the schemas are the most likely to be understood and used by practitioners to identify how children learn, and their specific interests. The schema concept and its application is very well understood and applied by those who were trained directly by PG and by more senior staff, but it has filtered down in a patchy fashion to some of the other childcare staff. Levels of understanding, ability to articulate the concept, and identify its purpose within the PICL framework differed within and between childcare centres. Overall, particularly CE staff, had not always heard of Pen Green and PICL, and did not always associate parental engagement practices with the framework, although they may have an understanding of schemas. One focus group

of CE staff, most of whom had been with the centre for one to two years, said that they had yet to receive any training in PICL.

The depth of understanding may be related to the knowledge base already held by staff:

> Well… schemas are something that everybody has struggled with …you have to realise most of our staff are not trained or are in training ,so it's quite difficult for them to get their head around this, you know. The trained staff that we have, the team leaders in particular are very quick in spotting them and some of the girls are quite good as well. You know they would be running out to me going 'Is this a schema ..how do I do this and how do I do that' (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre E).

A senior practitioner pointed out how individual levels of understanding and confidence can differ within centres, pointing to a senior practitioner in her centre who has embraced schemas as a way of understanding how each child in her preschool room learns and how she communicates this to parents. This room leader has developed charts that are placed on the preschool room wall illustrating each individual child's schema:

> I'd say like…last year's schemas were all over the place in room [number]. You know [name] could have told you every child had a schema and stuff done up on the wall about their schemas and their photographs and how this was helping them. And parents, it was being discussed with the parents and they would say 'On God he does that at home. I didn't realise that's what it was all about'. So it was very good and it was a very good talking point with parents as well and that's coming back around now because …things they notice as well (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre E).

Comprehension is not always the only barrier to implementation. A childcare manager observed that all of the staff in her centre know what schemas are. However, some are not engaging with the PICL as they are doing FETAC level 5 training and: 'haven't got the time to do it; or the space to do it; or the energy to do it'.

A strong perception was held by most practitioners that, in general, parents do not understand the theoretical aspects and, particularly, the technical language associated with child development concepts like schemas. One centre manager believed that parents have 'very little' knowledge of the PG concepts like schema, other than a few of the parents that have undertaken childcare training. Some practitioners also suggested that a number of parents lack the capacity or the interest, and they may not be approached to discuss the concepts. Yet the point was made by one childcare manager that as her centre serves a very mixed population, parents' understanding and capacity is very individual.

Parents' understandings of schema differed from parent to parent and focus group to focus group. In one focus group, participating parents had not heard the word schema before, and, when it was explained as repeated patterns, it was still a new concept to them. In another focus group a parent mentioned that she is familiar with the word schema from talking to staff about the way her child 'lines up' objects.

The centres have adopted a number of ways of talking about schema with parents. First, they have all greatly modified the language, including not using the word 'schema', as they believe that the language intimidates parents:

> *But to be honest, a lot of the language isn't .. a lot of the language is not everyday language for our parents. And when you start using it, it kind of alienates them a bit; so we tend to just say stuff in our own words* (Childcare Manager, Centre A).

It was observed that the practice of communicating with parents about their child's development is a new development in Irish childcare, and that gradually parents get used to engaging with practitioners:

> *the parents would not understand that language and I don't know whether they would want to, but the staff, as long as the staff know and they do record it and with the new curriculum now, that has only been implemented this year so we don't know how*

much more the parents will feel once they start getting more feed back on the actual development of the child because they never really had that before, so all that is quite new to the parents as well (Childcare centre manager, Centre D).

Striking the balance between easing parents gently into understanding what schemas are and helping them apply this learning to their child, and treating them with respect can be challenging:

> *I kind of think sometimes as well that if you start using words like that with parents straight away they kind of get scared. They kind of think 'I don't want to talk to her 'cause I haven't got a clue what she's talking about - she's using these words': so we kind of have to be careful. Like I'd kind of be saying 'don't be too complicated in the beginning - these words can come', without making the parents…without treating the parents as if they are stupid 'cause they're not; so it's a hard balance to kind of, to say well, 'this is a schema and that's a word we can use and this is what it means' - but then we don't want to frighten the parents* (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre E).

It was observed in another centre that some parents do not want to use the schema terminology, such as scattering, and the practitioner was reluctant to 'bombard them'; although she noted that other parents are very comfortable using this kind of language.

A childcare practitioner who underwent training in PG illustrated how parents and practitioners might engage in a conversation about schemas:

Participant: *But parents, when we were saying it to parents when they did come in like 'they're schemas', they were like that [indicates lack of understanding], and they'd say, 'well at home, mind you, he'll take this and put it over there'- and so that's a schema as well; where they wouldn't of known it was, you know that way*

Interviewer: Would that be done just verbally or would you have shown them the portfolio to show them something in it?

Participant: *By talking to them. And then they'd say, like, just say for instance 'what would Adam do at home all the time, would he, say, do building blocks?' and the ma would say, 'he sits there with the building blocks' and we'd say 'well that's a schema; come on I'll show you in the book about building blocks'* (Childcare practitioner, Centre B).

The informal nature of engagement with parents on schemas was also identified by a senior practitioner, with engagement supported by parents' participation in activities with their child.

Practitioners are beginning to use the concept of schemas to extend children's learning. There were examples cited in each centre where practitioners identified a child's schema and provided further learning experiences for the children. The excerpt below is quite indicative of some of the discussions held with practitioners in the centres, except in one area: from the practitioners' accounts, it is unusual for parents to bring in material from home. However, this excerpt does illustrate the potential for the successful implementation of the feedback loop to extend learning:

Participant: *That little fella, his one was like envelopment and like, instead of stopping him doing it, like, we'd introduce more things to him. Like at first he used to just cover up his hands and he'd play with his hands…With flour, sand, shaving foam. His Mam said he used to cover himself from head to toe in the shower with her, you know, body wash and he'd be covered in it with a big thick lather of it on him and, like, she thought he was, 'why is he doing this?', but when we brought him in and showed her the other stuff that he was doing, he was doing it with the*

sand and he was doing it with, she actually went out and bought him a small container for sand at home.

Interviewer: So you were talking with her about and he was talking, she was talking with you about it.

Participant: *Yeah and then with his folder she was bringing in photographs of him doing it at home and then we had in his folder in here of him doing, so then we gave him, he's mad about trains, Thomas the Tank Engine, so we gave him trains and he used to put them through and cover them over and completely paint them with paint and that was his schema. We had a lot of schema, we had a trajectory schema as well.*

Participant: *And this little fella used to line up everything by colour code, so he'd have all the red cars, all the blue cars, all the green cars all together and he would do that and again his Mam thought, 'is there something wrong with him, why is he lining them up colours', you know? But lined them up, everything, all his coloured pencils would be in proper colour order. Another little fella would line up his lunch from smallest to biggest thing and then he would eat the smallest thing and go along.*

Interviewer: Yeah, and what do you do next with them then?

Participant: *Yeah, and how do you bring them on, so that's what I was saying, with that little fella we introduced the trains to him because before we mightn't have let him cover the trains with play dough and, because they'd get ruined or whatever, but they actually didn't - you could just wash them off.* (Childcare practicner, Centre E).

Second, to support parents to understand the schema concept and apply it to their children's learning, some of the centres have developed an information sheet on schemas for staff and parents, which they put into each portfolio. In this way, they are trying to introduce the language of schemas in a supportive way to parents. The quotations below from three separate centres illustrate how they use these sheets:

 . . when we're doing the folders we put an information sheet in explaining what they are and explaining about schemas, like that, so that the parents kind of know how they're linked: and then we can talk. If we're talking about the strategies we're using it makes some sense (Childcare manager, Centre A).

[name] would have done up the list of what schemas are which we could refer to, and we would have also given a list of them to parents because if you're writing in the folder about what a schema is and the parent doesn't know what a schema is they'd be saying 'What are they talking about?', you know. So basically they would have been given a list in easy jargon, not in big complicated words, like, what they mean and as well in our folders we would keep it like that as well (Childcare centre manager, Centre E).

we will put in a schema and we will explain what a schema means and we put a note and we will explain what it means, and we will use the words in it and we have a blank piece of paper at the top of it and we have all the words going down and we will explain underneath what it means to the parents because if they opened the portfolio and they see the word schema they would shut it and say, 'yeah, what are you talking about'. So we do explain, we write it in and we explain. We have a sign up as well which actually explains what it means, so if anybody looks at it and they say 'schema', and they say, 'what do they mean?' So we will explain what it does mean and we explain to the staff as well what it does mean, but some of the staff wouldn't even know about schemas (Childcare manager, Centre C).

An example of how they used the schema information sheet and how they use the schema concept to explain to parents how children learn was given by a practitioner in another centre:

If we start using the words, it doesn't have to be perfect terminology, but if we start using them we need the parents to be able to kind of 'why she using those words ..schemas'. I said there's no point saying to a parent ' I noticed he had blah blah schema' and them going 'is that a good thing or a bad thing?', so we have got them that you know. I spoke to one lady, her little boy's in toddler room, and she was asking me about it – 'I am sick of throwing and throwing'; and I said to her 'do you not maybe think it might be a type of playing', 'no no' and I brought the thing [sheet on schemas] and I said 'do you mind if I have a little look through it' and she said to me 'oh could you photocopy that for me, I'm always giving out hell about him', and so all of a sudden she's now understanding learning and now she going 'he's brilliant -trajectory play you know, he's not throwing, it's trajection' [laughs], and I mean, it makes the difference (Childcare manager, Centre D).

As can be observed from the previous quotation, that where practitioners have been successful in helping parents understand schemas, it seems to provide a window into how their child learns that creates a great impact on parents. Persistent child behaviour, like scattering or trajectories, that previously might have been seen by parents as annoying or pointless behaviour suddenly transforms in the minds of parents, and practitioners.

Learning about schemas and their role in early learning also seemed revelatory to some practitioners:

I wouldn't, I have to be honest, I would of never picked up on a child, I'm not saying doing the one thing all the time, but even with different objects seem to play the same way, like same child out in the playground runs at the bars, you know straight lines again, and you're kind of going 'how did I miss it?'; many of children have gone

through the crèche and I would of never noticed that (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre D).

When asked which part of the PICL training had had the most influence that continues to affect practice, one Pen Green-trained practitioner found that schemas made the most impression:

because even now if I'm looking at a child, just say in the park, and I'm saying so I learnt 'he's doing a schema over there' but people say 'what?'; but I know now in my mind what it is, because I didn't know what it was, I didn't know what it was, yeah (Childcare practitioner B).

Indeed, in discussing the extent to which parents feedback to parents about their child's learning in the home, it was observed that schemas do provide a platform for sharing learning between home and centre, even if it is currently limited:

A lot of them would come in and say, you know, 'they're doing this at home, or they're doing that at home'. But I think they only do that if the staff initiates it. You know I don't see a lot of it happening; just, you know, they don't just come in and say, oh he's doing this or he's doing that. I think if it's initiated, if the conversation is, then they'll come back it's like the schema, it's only just at home I didn't know what it was (Childcare practitioner, Centre E).

A childcare manager believed that practitioners and parents needed more time to interact on schemas, and they also needed a specific strategy:

I think we need to have more time to meet with the parents - a lot more, have more time with them and maybe have more time to record and give the DVD, or maybe sit with them through a DVD and say 'well, you know when I'm talking about schemas, don't be worrying about the word but this is what we're talking about' (Childcare manager, Centre D).

Planning and evaluating learning

These centres use schemas to understand the child's interests and how they learn. These schemas may be documented and recorded in the portfolio, although it seems that this is not always the case. If the information is included in the portfolio, it may or may not be shared with parents depending on whether or not the portfolio is used as a tool to engage with parents. The information tends to be shared verbally with parents, often in a simple manner.

The original intention of the Dublin approach to PICL was that schemas would be central to documenting and planning children's learning using the Dublin Possible Lines of Direction (PLOD) tool. This has not happened as yet in any centre. Centres have been concentrating on introducing and embedding the concept and the language with parents and staff:

The PLODs, we haven't really used them now. I know we were shown them in Pen Green but we haven't got around to using those as such because we feel it's, what we have, what we've taken from it at the moment is enough for us at present (Childcare manager, Centre B).

And because it's new for us as well it's well, I'd say it will be another while, like, we will be slipping, you know, slipping a few terms into it (Childcare practitioner, Centre D).

It seems that individual learning plans for children are some way off in most centres. This is not just because they are concentrating on many other changes brought about from implementing PICL and Síolta, but also because they are trying to improve their practice in evaluation and planning – this is a new area for the childcare centres.

No we have to get to grips with the planning first and the evaluating the planning because although the girls would plan it was never written down. It was kind of 'let's do this week'. Now we have to record it and evaluate it and, you know, the future learning from it. So they're trying to get to grips with that at the moment. So I don't really want to go mad and say an individual learning plan

for each child as well (Senior practitioner, Centre E).

The five centres are all taking part in support provided by the ELI in implementing Síolta, and the Planning and Evaluation standard, alongside Curriculum and Parental Involvement.

A practitioner that attended Pen Green's training identified how challenging she finds planning:

Like there's not a book on the training that's to get it, you know to plan. I think the hardest thing is the planning, to lead it off, you know where it leads to (Childcare practitioner, Centre D).

Some practitioners, possibly the less experienced, do not as yet fully appreciate the importance of planning and evaluation. When discussing the shortage of non-contact time for room leaders to plan, a senior practitioner commented:

Yes, they think "I can't leave the room because the girls in the room will think I'm out here doing nothing". So we're trying to get rid of that mindset at the moment. I'm just telling the girls, 'she's actually not out doing nothing, it's planning, it's evaluating, what we've been doing' (Senior practitioner, Centre E).

Planning is undertaken at room level only in most of the centres. Some of the centres develop weekly or monthly written room plans, although some planning is more informal. Two PICL-trained practitioners described planning in their centres:

but we do do a bit of planning in another way .. We do baking, in our room we do baking with the kids, it's either baking or a messy play, and we'll ask them 'would you like to do baking today'; they love it. So we will have that in our plan, the two, like I said there's two room leaders and we'll talk together, going 'what do you think the kids might want to do tomorrow' and say we'll ask, 'would you like to do baking tomorrow?', they'll go 'yeah', they love, they know when I come in with my red bag that the baking

is getting done. It's seeing things, we will plan in advance. A lot of things you'll plan, it won't go, you know, that way, it'll be just 'I don't want to do that painting again ..' (Childcare practitioner, Centre D).

Yeah. Where in the other rooms now, in room one they're doing, they're teaching colours so they are going to focus on a colour a week, like today they done painting with red paint, yesterday they done play dough, red play dough, they're singing songs all about stuff that's red, so red is the week this week, and that's their plan (Childcare practitioner, Centre E).

In some centres the plans are available to parents, for example on the wall of the children's rooms, while in others they are not. In other centres they are included in the portfolios.

It was suggested that just because the plans are developed at room level, it does not mean that the individual child's interests, as observed by the keyworkers, are not catered for:

so there's weekly and monthly plans wrote out and it's well, if five of them want to go ahead with that theme that we're doing there, that's fine and if the others .. are not happy about something they'd go ahead and start up something themselves. It does help with planning because the girls are now working together, because the key worker thing is in place, it's you know, they can sit and talk and say 'well that wouldn't suit the child because ..' instead of saying 'right, we're all taking out paint, everyone has to do it' .. I mean some of the children won't touch play dough so you're not going to throw a load of play dough out and go, 'ok, off you go' (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre D)

It's looking at do you have a child in the room that needs particular attention". I mean we've one child she's only two and she knows her letters, she knows her numbers, you know and I said that's something we need to work with her because she's going to get bored she's only two and she's fantastic. We can't kind of ignore that, so that type of stuff; or it'd be very the very

quiet child or you know a child that could be struggling with something. They do look at those individual children (Childcare practitioner, Centre E).

Knowing a child's schema also seems to support a more individual approach towards a child as practitioners can identify how the child learns and its concerns, and can then plan to encourage further learning using this knowledge.

One of the centres is to begin developing individual learning plans for children as a response to Regulation 5, not using the PLOD but a tool received from the HSE. The child is observed for an hour and a plan is developed based on the observation. It is very early days for this practice in the centre. At this point at least, parents do not participate in the development of the plan. Each child's portfolio will have a plan in order to meet Regulation 5, and the portfolios will be available for parents to engage with.

Well-being and involvement

In general, the childcare centres are not as far along in implementing the well-being and involvement concepts and scales as they are in using schemas. Overall, the practitioners have developed their own broader understandings of the concepts, and there is limited use of the scales to evaluate the extent to which the setting is supporting learning and to plan learning experiences. Practitioners found it easier to explain and discuss how they use schemas than how they apply the well-being and involvement concepts and scales. In most centres, the well-being concept is used to record child mood or behaviour on a day-to-day basis rather than as a way of evaluating provision and structuring learning. Practitioners tend to say that a child's well-being is high or low, without reference to Laevers' dimensions of well-being. Practitioners use words like 'happy', 'having a great time', 'in good form' in describing child mood:

They (staff) may not always say, like they're a four, they'd say like their well- being is high and I think more so they are inclined to use it if they are concerned about a child, then

they'd say I noticed his well-being is really low the last week or so (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre A).

Similarly, the concept of involvement is used in a more minimal way than anticipated by its originator, i.e., seeing involvement as children 'doing something', rather than a deeper engagement, and considering how that involvement is affecting the child's learning and how can practitioners can create deep involvement for the child more often:

.. and the involvement, yeah. Especially when, the well-being, like, when you're looking at them and you're saying 'well, if they not doing the activity and they're doing something else well they're happier doing the other activity' whereas before we were like 'oh, should they be joining us? ..you know if they're over there and they're playing away they're fine, their well-being is looked after (Childcare practitioner, Centre D).

Like some kids, you know the way some kids don't really want to be, but I notice now that you can see kids that are really involved, you can see it by their face and all, the expressions that they make (Childcare practitioner, Centre B).

Most of the settings are not using the well-being or involvement scales as tools and so do not have the level of information on child learning envisaged in PICL to evaluate the setting.

Nevertheless, one of the centres is working to implement both the well-being and involvement concepts and scales with children and placing the information in portfolios:

Like I've been working in childcare a long time and had the level 5 done and was doing level 6 when we went to Pen Green but when they came they sent us out this questionnaire about well being and involvement and everything and I'm going 'What do they mean by well being and involvement?' like I hadn't heard of it in that context before .. and its actually quite easy, it's quite an easy thing to see in a child. So like when I came back I think we spent a

morning doing training with the girls .. and I used to take the girls for a certain length of time like room by room because you have scales of involvement and well being - they are so easy (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre E).

A 'tick-box' pro-forma is used to support observations of the child's level of well-being and involvement. It was not totally clear how the information gained is used to support learning, although the information is placed in the portfolio, and, certainly, in a broad way, awareness of the concepts influenced practice. A permanent staff member in a focus group from this centre said that prior to the introduction of the scales, she would not have used the concept of well-being, instead using the phrases, 'happy' or 'in good humour', indicating an understanding of the concept that is closer to that of Laevers. Another participant said that she would use the concept of well-being to think about how she could increase the child's well-being on a particular day. She is now: 'more aware that the well-being is so important'. However the practitioners tend not the use the word when communicating with parents, instead asking why the child is not doing so well on a particular day, again indicating a concern with child mood and health.

In another centre, staff have been given a handout on the scales and are encouraged to use them. It was identified by the childcare manager that there are staff changes every year, and she is constantly engaged in training on the well-being and involvement scales and staff are always coming to grips with them (the centre has a large complement of CE staff):

I would have a meeting with the girls and go through those, like the new staff members and I would, they would have a printout of the involvement scales they would be, hopefully they would kind of, when they are doing their observations on the children they will refer to the well-being and involvement scale and write something, a note or two, about them and the child (Childcare manager, Centre B).

Again, how precisely the scales are used and to what purpose, were not made clear. However, given that the children are not provided with individual learning plans, it is difficult to see how learning is extended using the child development concepts and how parents are partners in this process. It seems that the concepts and scales are used in the portfolios descriptively, i.e., 'X's well-being was high that day', or 'X was very involved in this activity'.

A number of possible explanations were posited for these findings.

First, some centres are concentrating on utilising the schema concept to understand and plan learning, and are also concentrating on developing portfolios. They feel that they are not ready to implement the well-being and involvement scales yet.

Second, childcare practitioners, one who had been directly trained by PG and the other not, were both concerned that the use of these scales was inappropriate as they judge and label children in a way that may be negative, indicating some confusion over the purpose of the scales:

Well, I don't, and a couple, most of the girls, have said they feel, like 1 to 5, you're labelling the child, or they just feel very strong about it. So what they've done is, you know, they might say 'he was really involved and then lost interest' or whatever (Childcare manager, Centre D).

I don't like that, I think it's just, my, I had a big issue on it over when we went to the Aistear and thing – I just feel like we can put in a different way; we mightn't have that different way yet but I don't know whether it's to do with labelling the child or you know like it's, I just don't like numbers and stuff like that you know what I mean, like and how we can write it differently rather than using a scale. I just think scales just seem to put a label on the child that they're not able to do it; they can do it, they just need a little bit longer than other children (Childcare practitioner, Centre D).

Indeed, the purpose of evaluating children's learning arose a number of times in the evaluation. The purpose of the planning and evaluation Síolta standard has been questioned by some childcare practitioners as they see it as testing children inappropriately as though they are part of the formal school system. It is understood that the ELI, in its support of the implementation of Síolta in the Dublin Docklands, is supporting practitioners to consider the differences between assessment of learning and assessment for learning, as the ELI has identified this as a training issue from its Síolta training sessions.

Pedagogic strategies

All of the centres, when asked, say that they have not as yet concentrated on disseminating and using the pedagogic strategies. There appear to be a number of reasons for this.

First, there is some discomfort with the word 'pedagogic'. In interviews and focus groups, some staff, both CE and non-CE, struggled with the word 'pedagogic', partly due to pronunciation, but also because they seemed to find the word awkward or embarrassing. A senior practitioner, when asked why this element of the PICL framework seems somewhat problematic said: 'because [staff] they don't like the name, the length of it'.

Second, another PICL trained staff member suggested that there may not have been sufficient time allocated to training and support:

> We didn't actually do an awful lot on those strategies. It was something we did when we came back. We did bring it up, but we did a lot on the involvement, the well-being and the schema; but pedagogic strategies we didn't feel we got a lot of information on that. We do try, like, we kind of try and come up with stuff ourselves. You know 'how are you going to do this' you know, 'are you going to give a child something that you know they are not able to do' …but if they really want to do it how are you going to work with that like to help them. So we kind of do it but ….I don't think it's as…it's as… mmm . it's as set in stone, as the other stuff is very well recorded and, you know, that

> kind of thing. We are still working on that one (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre E).

Third, the previous quotation indicates that for practitioners, schema and involvement and well-being are more concrete concepts used to understand and record behaviour and learning. This makes them more amenable to implementation in a context where some staff are untrained and some are unused to the level of reflexivity that is required of staff to evaluate their own practices and to know where and how they could improve them:

> I think that would of been one of the hard ones. Because I think it took time for the staff to look at how they work with the children; and how they provide for the children ; and how they become aware of what the children need; and what they don't want - their reactions with the children. I think that was probably the hard one because I think we all like to think, 'I'm doing a fine job, I don't need to worry about pedagogic strategies', and then sometimes you kind of, I think as well your little observations helped with that because I think you kind of questioned yourself and say 'am I, am I giving that child what they need?' (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre D).

However, on a more positive note, while senior staff in centres tended to say that they have not really touched on the pedagogic strategies, it did seem in the interviews and focus groups that this element of the PICL framework has had an influence on practitioners' understandings of how children learn, and on their reflection on their own practice and centre policy. They may not always know that they are using the strategies and may not use the PICL terminology. It seems they are not giving themselves credit for what they have learned and the ways in which their practices have changed.

In discussing recent changes in practice, practitioners, permanent and non-CE, those who had been directly trained by PG and those who had not, spoke quite a lot about subtle intervention, supporting appropriate risk, and supporting children to make their own decisions. Some practitioners were somewhat

aware that these ideas are connected with Pen Green, while others were not:

you know in that way so it does make us look around and we'll probably say 'oh we have to try and make them join in'. Now we don't mind if they're on their own, some kids do like to be on their own for a while and they will slowly try to get something to slowly bring them into the group. But there might be a couple of them over the other side that are playing around, they're happy enough if we have our table activity, they're happy enough over there, they're not being interrupted, they're just . and you look at them and go 'they're fine', we don't need to move them, don't need to change them, let them go you know let them play away ..I've learnt that it is child-led as well and that's basically what we've to bring down, it is child-led (Childcare practitioner, Centre D).

that's really what I've learnt is to just you know not to push the child, let the child go and it will learn in its own way and it will, they will approach us, with a little bit of help from us (Childcare practitioner, Centre D).

I mean people before this would come up and say "he's after been sitting there for half an hour now, he's having his lunch and I'm taking it away because he's having his lunch". The child might be in the middle of doing something and it's just whipped away because it's lunch time: it's lunch time and that's it. Ok, it's lunch time but let him finish it. It, now, that was a huge thing that changed – 'it's circle time put that away'. Now it's like 'you don't have to join in circle time', you know if they're busy they're doing something. I mean when you think about the child is at something on the table, lunch-time, it's all swept away because you have to go have your lunch. That was really a biggee that we got back, that is not happening anymore. We did get a bit of resistance about that (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre E).

The development and use of portfolios

Pen Green's approach to building partnerships with parents comprises many different tools and strategies to support the 'feedback loop' between parents and practitioners. The portfolio supports the recording, sharing and extension of children's learning.

All of the childcare centres participating in this evaluation now ensure that each child has a portfolio. This development is considered the single biggest change in practice in the centres to come from the PICL training. Prior to the PICL training, some centres may have had folders into which they put children's artwork, or they may have written some observation notes into notebooks, but none systematically developed a portfolio of each child's learning over their time in the crèche that, at some stage, is shared with parents. All of the staff participating in this evaluation were very enthusiastic about this development.

A series of issues were explored with practitioners and parents in relation to the development of the portfolios and their use to build to partnerships with parents.

First, the issue of the purpose and use of the portfolios: what is the purpose of developing the portfolios? How is the content used to extend the child's learning within a parent/practitioner partnership? Second, issues related to portfolio content: what kinds of material go into the portfolio and which media are used to capture learning? Who contributes to the portfolios?

Purpose and use

While there are differences in practice between centres and practitioners, it appears that the main purpose of the portfolios for the childcare settings in this study is to record children's activities and development. In this task, some centres told us that they are still learning. Their use as a tool to extend children's learning as a partnership with parents, as envisaged in PICL, is some way off.

The practitioners consider the purpose of the portfolios to be recording a child's development and learning over their time in the centre:

Even like the children's work would be a tool for communicating because you can show that the progression, like when they start writing first it's, you know, they'd be using big chubby crayons or whatever;and by the time they leave most of them would be doing letters and numbers (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre A).

Practitioners held different understandings of the purpose of the portfolio. For some it was a surprise gift at the end of the child's time in the centre where the parent could observe the developmental path travelled by the child, while for others it was a record that can be used at various points in time to illustrate how the individual child is learning, what they have learned, and their journey through developmental stages. Overall, the ownership of the portfolio tends to lie with the centres, and the parents are 'shown' it:

The folders to me was like invaluable because you could show the child's learning in that folder and you can bring about the schemas and that what we do; and I think that's invaluable to any parent to be able to show a parent at the end, now we can say 3 years, it was 2. Like when your child started here in September this is what they started, and this is your child's learning plan and this is what they have learnt, and I mean that's invaluable (Childcare centre manager, Centre E).

The extent to which parents engaged with the portfolios differs between and within centres. When it occurs, engagement is generally at the instigation of the practitioner rather than the parent. In some centres there is no system for sharing the portfolio with parents on a regular basis, although two of the centres do hold an annual open evening for parents where they talk about the child's development and learning using the portfolio:

Once a year we would have a parents' night where we bring them in and we actually sit down with them and go through it with them. So they get to see where the child is progressing (Childcare centre manager, Centre E).

Some centres say they try to engage in conversation with parents on the portfolio contents periodically every few months or so. It tends to be done quite informally, through casual chatting, rather than systematically. Sometimes a casual conversation between a practitioner and parent can create an opening for the practitioner to pull out the portfolio to illustrate a child's progress to the parent.

An example of the different practices in a single centre was provided during the focus group discussions with permanent staff where there was some difference of opinion over when the portfolios are 'shown' to the parents there. Several staff members said that parents get the portfolio only when the children are leaving the centre at graduation. Another staff member said that they do show them to parents before graduation but, in her words, only to say 'did you see what Johnny did?', whilst only one staff member said that she offered to show portfolios to parents.

Some centres say that they invite parents to take them home to look at them and add material to it but few parents avail of this opportunity. A number of reasons were given by practitioners as to why portfolios are not going between home and the centre. First, they are afraid that parents would forget to give them back to the centre; second, they believe that parents are not necessarily interested in this type or depth of engagement on their child's learning, or they do not have the time to engage, and third, some practitioners suggested that parents like the surprise at the end of seeing how their child has developed over time:

But we generally feel that parents really just leave it up to ourselves and they are not, they know that their child is being looked after and that they are learning. But they are generally, are not, they are not overly interested in how much the child has developed: they can see it but they don't want to read so much about it. But they do love to get the portfolios at the end of the year. They do love that, because then they can look back and see what way the child has developed. They will also always talk to the room leader and they know that they will

be told about their child day-to-day, they will be told about their child but not that they, they don't want the in-depth discussions. Generally they just want to get the basics, find out did the child eat and drink, they look at the charts on the wall … (Childcare centre manager, Centre D).

In the child activity groups, children themselves told researchers of painting or drawing pictures in the centres and bringing them home to their parents.

The perspective of many of the parents participating in this research is that they did not engage with the contents of the portfolio as often as they would have liked. Depending on how the centre use the portfolios, and the efforts made by parents to engage with them, some parents saw the portfolio at the end of the school year, while others did not see it during the time their child was in the centre but at the end before the child left to go to school.

In one focus group, a parent did not know that a portfolio existed on her child in the centre, and was somewhat shocked that she did not know. Overall, parents expressed regret about this.

A parent who saw the portfolio because one of her children had finished in the particular centre said that she loved seeing it. She particularly enjoyed the staff's observations and comments. She did not know that that the portfolio was being developed during her child's time in the centre and that:

it was brilliant to look at…I would have liked to have had that kind of understanding while she was doing that (Parent).

Parents' experiences may also differ within centres, possibly based on the room their child is in, or the childcare practitioners they deal with. In the same childcare centre as the previous parent, a parent commented that she was told at the beginning that there was a portfolio, but never heard of it again. Another parent said that while children's work is kept together in a file throughout their time in centre, it is not made into a portfolio until the end. The parent wished that staff would assemble

the portfolio more regularly and continually add their comments and observations. Other parents in the focus group agreed, but they appreciate the effort and time that portfolio development takes and that practitioners are already very busy. In contrast, another parent in the same centre said that her child's portfolio was updated regularly, indicating different practices within the same centre.

In contrast, parents in another centre observed in a focus group that practitioners often tell the parents what their child is doing, without prompting. One parent said she asks the staff and they show her the portfolio.

Childcare practitioners with children in the centres are in limbo to some extent. They are trained and understand theory and practice well. But in their role as parents, they may not engage with their colleagues. One parent/ practitioner in a parent focus group identified that she does not ask her colleagues about her child as as she knows what they are doing in her room, but the practitioners also tend not to engage with her about what her child is doing as they think she will know.

Centres have made the portfolios physically accessible to parents. The centres keep the portfolios in the children's rooms. Two centres have placed them at child level in the rooms so that children can take them off the shelves to view and discuss them, and sometimes they do that with staff and parents. One of the centres is putting up a shelf for the portfolios above the children's coats so that when parents collect or drop off their children, they can just take them down themselves and look at them. This contrasts with the situation in one centre pre-PICL:

We would have still done observations like but they would have probably been in a folder in my office and you could have access if you wanted to. But now we have the folders on the shelf and now at any stage a child can take the folder down and draw something into it themselves. The parent can come in and put something into it or students from the DIT, they did observations and they put in their stuff as well. So I think we have everybody on board to be honest (Childcare centre manager, Centre E).

Portfolio content

It was not appropriate to examine the portfolios in the centres and evaluate their content, so the researchers' understandings of content were gained through the interviews and focus groups.

It seems that portfolio content generally comprises child observations, children's artwork and photos of the child undertaking activities within the centre. A centre described undertaking table top activities with children, photographing them, and writing a piece on how they are progressing in the activity. For those centres with babies, content might relate to the first time they are observed crawling in the centre or are able to feed themselves, or start to communicate verbally.

An example of the process of developing content was illustrated by a practitioner:

Yeah, what happens is we normally take photographs of the kids and then we can do up an observation on it where we do the, we have the sheets inside, we do the description of what the activity is or whatever, say we went to the park today, we can have a photograph in it and then what they're learning is out of it, their learning story out of it; and then we can stick that in and then sometimes we just take random photographs, and just write a little thing underneath the photograph like, 'Paul is happy playing with the ball today'. It's normally the team leader and the permanent staff members that do it (Childcare practitioner, Centre E).

The depth of the observations and the extent to which they capture the child's learning is evolving over time in centres:

.. our portfolios have evolved to a major extent, because in the beginning it was, kind of, the paintings, photographs with little words underneath. Now the observations are going in the child's learning is going in (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre E).

In general, the room leader/key worker and senior staff are responsible for developing the

portfolio, although more junior and CE staff also contribute, usually through observations and taking photos. Some non-senior staff required support in developing portfolios:

In the room when I had the older children what we used to do was, the training staff member, she was able to just stick photographs in and write the little things but she wasn't able to put the learning goals in and all because she hadn't trained on that and she didn't know how to do it (Childcare practitioner, Centre E).

Indeed, the reaction of some staff members to developing portfolios was fear because of literacy issues or a lack of confidence in their literacy. In one centre, the reaction of some practitioners was:

'you can't expect me to write in that' or 'I can't spell properly' – that was a big issue (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre D).

As identified previously, having to record child development and learning in writing is a new practice in many childcare centres. Some practitioners fear being judged on their level of literacy, or lack the confidence to know if what they are writing is 'correct'. The latter was considered particularly true of junior and CE staff and those who are not yet trained in childcare in one centre:

it is quite difficult to get them to write everything down because they are a bit reluctant, staff can be a bit reluctant for writing everything because they think that if they are too busy writing everything down they don't have time to play with the children . they are reluctant to do it maybe because they think they are not writing the right things down and it is just .. I don't know what it is really - but they are improving (Childcare manager, Centre D).

For staff who may have literacy issues, management and staff in the childcare centres are trying to support them as sensitively and positively as possible, while still trying to develop their observation and portfolio development skills:

A lot of the girls were in fear of people reading their stuff and going 'she didn't spell it right'. So we've all agreed now, because I'd be bad at certain things and someone else, that if they want to they can write them out and I'll type them up for them and they can sign them ..but I said 'look, no one is perfect at doing everything'; you know you might take a perfect photograph but you might spell a word wrong - it doesn't matter, you've caught it and that's it. But for anyone thats wary, they know it's available to them if they want to and we've also got a copy of all the words they like to use, pin them to the wall, and they're in a box as well for them with the portfolios that if they want to use it (Childcare manager, Centre D).

For staff, obviously, that might have some literacy problems like we would say, like, in relation to the folders and the team leaders is that we would have meetings team leaders and room meetings with the rest of the staff so if somebody did have a problem with the spelling or something like that then they can go and do it in picture form or they can do it on tape you know. They can use the camcorder and stuff like that and then we can show the pictures to the parents (Childcare centre manager, Centre E).

Another challenge facing centres is that most have insufficient non-contact time in order to develop and update the portfolios:

I think that's the huge difference between here and England: it's the amount of staff and the amount of kind of funded staff, like, yeah. Because you're doing the portfolios when you can grab half an hour in the morning before the children come in, then you might have a parent that wants to talk to you then, so, or another member of staff - so it is difficult (Childcare Manager, Centre A).

Now that's a struggle, to be honest that is a really, really bad, hard struggle because the big room inside would probably be the worst for it. Because there's 17 twaddlers, there is 4 staff. But I sat in there one day because it was really, I'm sure the girls won't mind me sharing, it really bothered me that I looked at some of the portfolios and was kind of

going 'girls come on, some of the children have very little, and I said 'well, that was being a bit unfair'. I spoke to a leader and said 'would you mind if I sat in for a couple of hours?', and I realised with the twaddlers - it's kind of crazy. And when they sleep it's your time for reorganising the room for them, getting all the stuff ready out or maybe some of them are going home and you're packing bags (Childcare manager, Centre D)

Different strategies were adopted by centres and individual practitioners to develop the content for the portfolios and assemble them. In one centre, senior practitioners and CE staff members dedicated to supporting the development of portfolios work together to observe children, help staff to write-up observations immediately, and develop the portfolios. A childcare practitioner in another centre applied the strategy of quickly writing the bones of her observation in the centre, taking her photos, and then fleshing it out later that day, sometimes at home. Another centre undertakes portfolio work during room planning meetings.

Overall, the primary visual medium for recording children's learning is photographs. A centre observed how there is a lot of emphasis on recording learning through photos. The centre manager and senior practitioner were philosophical about this, believing that this approach is the first step towards getting staff and parents involved in a dialogue. However, they were also aware that primarily using photos has implications for the areas of child learning that are being recorded, i.e., the ones open to being photographed.

In some of the centres, parents bring in pictures connected with the child's life: pictures of a new baby in the family, family events, holiday snaps and so on. The children like to talk about these events. Sometimes they are displayed on the centre's walls, or they may be placed in the portfolios. When asked if parents contribute to the portfolio, a childcare manager said:

no. . we would ask the parents, sometimes, if they wanted to bring in some family photos of the kids when they were younger, or with

their brothers and sisters if there aren't any, or their family or maybe if they were on holidays because if they're out of the pre-school for a week or so they normally come in and they say, we'll ask the child, well, we'll say, 'did you take lots of photos', and she'll say, 'yeah mammy and daddy took', so we might ask the parent for your portfolio you know 'would you like to add in' and they bring us over a few photos. Or maybe if a party that was going on with one of the other kids at home, and they'll bring in a couple of photos, so we would add that in because we'll put, we have a family photo album also included in our portfolios (Childcare manager, Centre B).

The use of video cameras to record learning is not as common a practice as the use of photographs. This method is used, and the video shared with parents, by the staff in each centre undertaking a child study. The camera is also sometimes used to support staff undertaking FETAC childcare training, although these observations are not shared with parents. In one centre, this is the primary use of video recording:

Again, unfortunately we've only been able to do the children that we have been picked on for the level six that we're studying but we do plan to use it more (Childcare centre manager, Centre E).

The technical skills of the childcare practitioners impacted on portfolio development. Some had to learn how to use digital and video cameras for the first time, and progress is still being made in one centre, at least, in this regard.

The kind of information that should go into a portfolio also arose as an issue in interviews and focus groups. A participant believed that if a child has had 'a bad day' that it should go into the portfolio as parents will want to know this. She observed that as it stands, only 'colourful, happy stuff' makes it into portfolios in her centre. In another centre, a practitioner wrote a piece, but did not include anything visual, about a child who was upset in the morning and afternoon as he was anxious about his parents leaving for quite a period of

time. Staff successfully developed strategies that settled him. There was a discussion with a manager about whether or not such information should go into the portfolio. However, the practitioner felt that having numerous observations of the child over time, and being able to show that he stopped being upset, helped in discussions with the child's father as it could be illustrated that the child's well-being was improved.

Another practitioner commented:

you know some of them mightn't of looked very happy in the picture . . you know we took a picture and said 'didn't look very happy today, may have late night last night' .. They want it in their portfolio, we don't mind, you know it's not all happy and sometimes they mightn't be happy you know they might of been off. And we just put in they want the photograph in it and we put just put in it - they seem to be happy enough (Childcare practitioner, Centre D).

For those supporting the PICL embedding process, this issue of ensuring that observations and photos are truly reflective of the child's level of well-being is important.

Portfolio content is overwhelmingly developed by practitioners. The centre staff have asked some parents to bring in children's work from home to put into the portfolio or take photos of their activities at home to illustrate learning there, but the likelihood of this happening was generally described by most centres as rare:

I would say no, to the best of my knowledge no. I think its all verbal, everything is verbalised, you know there's not, now there could be maybe one parent . . All the good intentions . and it's all working and there's a nurturing environment and all the kids are being well looked after, but we don't have the link there between what a senior team leader is, the information that they're receiving, and what [name] here who is doing the portfolios is putting in - the link can be broken. So I mean there's never a sense, I don't know of anybody coming in saying, 'look at this wonderful picture that they have done' (Service manager, Centre C).

A number of reasons were suggested by practitioners as to why parents may not contribute to the portfolios. First, there was a consensus amongst staff that portfolios are a new practice and, as one practitioner observed: 'it's still a work in progress'. Practitioners are only getting used to doing the portfolios and would like to have sufficient content in them before showing them to parents:

Yes. We have said to the staff to actually show the parents the development of the child, but you would only get a couple of parents who would have the time to spend to look through it, well that is all. We will emphasise it. We were kind of waiting until there was a bit more in the portfolios as well because they were a bit scarce you know because staff were still getting used to them (Childcare service manager, Centre D).

As is the case with other areas of PICL implementation, staff are getting used to new roles and new practices. The same can be said of parents. They may hold ideas on childcare centres that no longer fit with the changing role of these centres. Most parents are not used to being asked to engage with practitioners on issues beyond their child's health and overall well-being. It was suggested that parents may not engage with the portfolio throughout the child's time in the centre as they do not fully understand the role of childcare centres in early learning:

I still think the mindset is they are only over there to play, and I still think we have this thing about childcare that they are just playing (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre E).

However, centres' experience of parental involvement using portfolios is not uniform:

A lot of them will bring stuff in from home for their portfolios – say at Christmas time or Easter, some of the parents would bring in a drawing that they did or a picture of Christmas that they did. One child she went to the local park and she was planting, she must have got talking to the local gardener or something, and she was planting and actually helping the gardener plant, so the

mother took a photograph of this, of the child helping the man plant. So she actually brought it in to put it into her portfolio. Just to say 'this is what I did with my family', and I thought this was really nice. A lot of the parents would bring in a lot of information from home (Childcare manager, Centre C).

Despite all of these challenges, there was a strong sense amongst managers and practitioners that the portfolios are worthwhile for staff, children and parents, and all strongly indicated a commitment to continuing with this practice in the future:

I think what keeps us on our toes is the portfolios going through the rooms, that'll keep it all in our minds on doing our records; and so because you'll be able to look back at your portfolios and say 'did I need to do this or do I need to do that', I think

[portfolios] is going to be a big issue going through the rooms and it will keep the PICL issue in it (Childcare practitioner, Centre D).

Elements of the PICL training that worked and elements that require consideration

Credibility

A series of issues were found to support the credibility of the PG training and of the ELI among the childcare centres that were helpful in creating an openness to PICL. Without this openness and goodwill, it would have been difficult for the ELI to engage with centres to support quality practice.

A key element of the PICL training that made a huge impression on the Dublin participants was the opportunity to visit the Pen Green centre itself. They were amazed by and respected the physical environment there, the research base, the child-centredness of practice, and the family-based, integrated model underpinning provision. It provided practitioners with a sense of what is possible in early years provision. This may have supported enthusiasm for the PICL training. Practitioners, both group 1 and group 2 participants, spoke passionately about PG provision. They believed that other staff in

their centres need to see PG to support the implementation of PICL in the centres:

The only thing is I would love, if we're to continue with the Pen Green, I think it is necessary for people to go and see it (Childcare manager, Centre A).

When my manager first went to it [Pen Green], to be honest I hadn't got much interest, she was talking on and saying… but it was only when I went to see it for myself that I realised that there is a real way, it is a great way for involvement for the parents and it is a great way for the children's development and that, but I think the rest of the staff need to see it, before they can actually, you can actually come in and tell them about it, but to me personally they don't have much interest (Childcare manager, Centre C).

Yet, as identified previously, the stark differences between Pen Green and community childcare in the Docklands in terms of its model and resources were very apparent to the practitioners. While fired up with passion from their exposure, the Irish practitioners also experienced some frustration and demoralisation upon their return. One childcare centre manager spoke of 'almost crying' when she saw the space that PG had and the range of provision that was available, how well the family centre model worked and how services were integrated and available from pre-birth.

For a centre manager, the practitioner research basis to the development of PICL and the ground-up, community development origin of the Pen Green Centre itself gave it credibility:

I would definitely recommend it – 'cause there is lots of other things out there, like, all other programmes. And I think it's so well-researched, and it's been so well researched, like, it's been there for over 20 years like and we would have met like the people who would have started it off and they would have said like us they would have done fun days and pub crawls and night time dressing up and stuff like that so you kind of felt that you could relate to them; and they felt normal they weren't

people like were up there with loads of degrees. I don't mean that in a bad way or anything but it's people that started from the bottom and worked their way up so that they could appreciate other people that they were going to be meeting along the way (Childcare centre manager, Centre E).

Building relationships

The careful way in which the ELI and the Cultural Broker developed their relationships with the centres and introduced the CPD programme was also positively received. A childcare manager noted that from their first contact with the centres, the ELI had the right approach in encouraging participation in CPD courses and in the activities they run in the centres and the NCI. While there may have been some scepticism at first, she identified that the ELI had 'a good approach to centres'.

The role of the Cultural Broker was also acknowledged as important in helping the ELI to understand the context in the childcare centres and the community childcare sector as a whole in the inner city. Initially, the ELI had more experience of working with primary and secondary schools than the childcare centres. As she was a trusted individual within the childcare settings, she could, in line with her role, act as a bridge between the centres and the ELI. The ELI knew that it could not parachute into the centres and tell them what they wanted to do. There was a period of relationship building between the centres, the ELI, and Pen Green that, it seems, did require a broker.

Experience of the training

Overall, the strategy of training two staff members in PG's methodologies seemed to all of those receiving the training to be more successful than sending just one staff member. Sending the second practitioner to Pen Green to support the first was part of the ELI's strategy to sustain the implementation of PICL in the Docklands childcare centres. Group 1 participants felt that they required the support from group 2 participants as they found it easier to transmit the PICL programme to colleagues and work to embed it in practice

in their centres when the group 2 participant came on board. Having two people trained directly by PG was described by managers and PICL-trained staff as being very important for its dissemination and implementation in the centres. Initially, when only one staff member was trained, coming back to Dublin and trying to transmit the enthusiasm that they felt as well as the PICL information was described as a lonely experience. While some practitioners were enthusiastic from the beginning about the new practices resulting from the PG training, others were reluctant to change. In one of the centres, the senior staff member who went on the first round of PICL training left the centre shortly afterwards, leaving its dissemination to a part-time childcare practitioner when she came back from PG. This resulted in slower dissemination in the centre.

Practitioners directly trained by PG believed that sending just two people to PG is still insufficient. It was suggested that until practitioners visit the PG centre and observe their methodologies in action, they will never be as enthusiastic about implementing them in the Dublin context. Nonetheless, the cost implications for the ELI of sending more than two people to PG were understood and acknowledged by the centres.

Group 2 practitioners received only two days training in Pen Green compared with almost one weeks training for group 1. Group 2 also received the training alongside UK childcare practitioners, rather than as a single group. There was agreement that both of these factors affected the extent to which group 2 connected with the training relative to group 1 and the extent to which they could engage with it:

I think it is difficult for groups who had the experience of the full week and then there are parts of them who went for the second week and the second group did not gel. We arrived late one night, you did your training the next day and then you went home. So there was no personal connection of saying 'Hi, who are you? Where do you live? ..' and there was that kind of stuff, and so I really felt that the second group fell far short of what it could have been, and also about the supports that they needed (Cultural broker).

A group 1 participant also observed:

So I think they kinda lost and they didn't go for the week, they went, I think they went one day and came back the next day. So they didn't get the full impact of it and I think that was a shame because, I mean money, funding, I know it's difficult, but I just think, like, I don't think [name] came back with the same enthusiasm that I had because they didn't get the same experience. They didn't get the same kind of, they didn't gel as well as the first group because they were only there for the night and there was other centres involved from England, and their way of working in England is so different from the way we work here that I think they kind of lost it a little bit. (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre E).

Strategies to disseminate PICL

The childcare centres adopted different strategies to disseminate PICL to the other staff in the centres. In this task, they were supported by materials provided by PG, although they also had to be resourceful and creative themselves in thinking about which approaches worked best in their individual centres. The Cultural Broker also went to the centres and spoke with staff so that they would understand that the new practices were not something that were being imposed by one or two people, but rather were part of a desire to develop better practice in the inner city.

Strategies included:

- Wall displays on the child development concepts put up in childcare rooms

- Information sheets placed in rooms or in portfolios giving the key PICL terms and their meaning

- Information sessions during staff meetings

- Group work and one-to-one sessions from the trained staff member

- Adoption of PICL in training into staff induction in the centre

- Part of annual staff training

- Implemented via portfolios and observations of children, supported by PICL-trained staff

- A DVD from Pen Green

- Handouts from Pen Green

- A simple handout developed by PICL-trained staff.

The ELI did plan that PG would provide a 'Training the Trainers' course to support PICL-trained staff to disseminate their learning in the centres. However, financial constraints meant that this was not to be, and an Irish national voluntary childcare organisation provided a series of sessions on leadership. It is understood that while centres were interested in this course, there were issues with releasing staff to attend: there was nil attendance at one of the sessions.

Sometimes staff struggled to disseminate PICL as they may not have had all of the skills required, or just did not have the confidence for the substantial changes in practice, although the skills and capacities of the PICL-trained staff differed in this regard. A practitioner was unsure whether she had the skills to bring the PICL training back to Dublin, although, ultimately, the experience has been a positive one:

> It was very hard, very hard, in the beginning because there was only myself like that was on the initial training for Pen Green. And when I came back I think the girls thought I was speaking in a foreign language. It was very hard and I felt very much under pressure because I was questioning my abilities - whether I was able to deliver this back you know. And, I thank God, like, I sat down with my own managers and my own supervisors like they reassured me, like, that's why I was chosen to go for this, so it really boosted my confidence (Childcare manager, Centre B).

Embedding PICL

The PICL support sessions provided by the ELI and the Cultural Broker in the NCI, supplemented by support visits to the centres, were found by participants to be very helpful. Staff also supported each other, telling each other about their challenges in their child study and in disseminating PICL in the centres. The ELI and the Cultural Broker supported staff in finding practical ways around hurdles that the childcare staff faced. That the support was continual was recognised as key to its sucess. As one PICL-trained practitioner identified, the ELI did not say 'Ah there's that training course, now off you go, see you later'. Practitioners felt strongly motivated to attend these sessions.

Nevertheless the challenge of releasing staff to attend not just the PICL support sessions, and indeed the wider CPD programmes being offered by ELI, arose in interviews with staff and managers. The issue is not just related to ensuring that child staff ratios are observed in the centres, but also of ensuring that there are always sufficient trained, experienced staff in the centres.

Undertaking the child study was a positive experience for the practitioners. Sometimes, when staff gave examples of how they used schemas to understand and extend a child's learning and engage parents in the process, they were referring to their child study. The study allowed them to implement their learning and encouraged reflection on practice:

> yeah and I looked at it and went 'oh God, and I've to share this with a parent'. But I did share it and said 'I probably didn't work as well as I could of there, I didn't meet what she needed and stuff' I said 'but that's a learning for me' and you know the other DVDs turned out quite well and there was one I did a few years ago and the same thing (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre D).

Training and capacity issues

Already having relevant training provided a more firm basis for understanding the theoretical and practice aspects of the PICL training. It was noted by childcare practitioners that those already familiar with the concept of schemas found the PG training less complex. This familiarity came from previous training, although the extent to which the FETAC childcare training level 5 provided a basis for the PG training seems debateable. Some staff in group 1 were still undertaking level 6 when they went to PG.

A practitioner trained directly by Pen Green, talking about how challenging she initially found learning about schemas, remarked:

> Yeah the concept of it. Because schemas we would have touched on, like, anyone who did level five touched on it, but you wouldn't really do anything, like, you know, there wasn't a lot of information until I went to Pen Green and came back, and said this is what it is (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre E).

Overall, educational bases and learning capacities differed amongst practitioners undertaking the PICL training in Pen Green. It seems these differences in capacities were unanticipated by the ELI and Pen Green prior to the training.

A childcare manager in one centre had previously undertaken High Scope training. As it emphasises parental involvement in early learning, she found this training to be very helpful in encouraging parental involvement in her centre pre -PICL, and in reinforcing her understanding of parental involvement after PICL. Another manager is trained in Montessori and has years of practice experience, and said she found this to be a good base on which to build her understanding of the Pen Green approach to early learning.

All of the staff undertaking the PICL training directly with PG and many of those implementing it in the centres have previously undertaken FETAC childcare level 5 and 6 training, or are in the process of undertaking level 5. There were mixed views as to whether

or not FETAC and PICL/Pen Green are mutually supportive. Some practitioners believed that FETAC training supports PICL indirectly as staff develop the required knowledge and confidence to engage with parents on child development. A CE staff member gave an example where she was able to advise and reassure a father who was worried about his child's behaviour that the behaviour was age appropriate because she had recently learned about the age at which children can understand right from wrong in her FETAC training. She observed that CE staff: 'now have a range of theories they can now draw on from their training' that can be used to engage with parents about their child.

There were mixed views amongst childcare staff on whether or not PICL and FETAC childcare training dovetail. CE staff in one centre said that childcare FETAC courses emphasise parental involvement and connect well with Pen Green literature and training – they were generally referring to FETAC childcare level 5 as most of the staff were at least trained to that level or were undertaking this course. CE staff in another focus group believed that FETAC level 5, in which they were currently being trained, does not support the practice of parental involvement as the training is concerned more with the child and child development than the parents or wider family context.

Benefits of parental involvement training and practice

From the perspectives of the managers, practitioners and parents, there are benefits to the children, the staff, the childcare centre and the parents from the participation in the PICL training itself, and from encouraging the practice of parental involvement in early learning.

Benefits to childcare centres and practitioners

The PICL training has generated a heightened awareness of the important role played by parents in their children's learning. Staff, permanent and CE, talked about the importance of being aware, and the effect of awareness on practice. As previously

identified, childcare training may not always cover the issue of parental contribution to early learning, and this is particularly true for staff that completed their training some time ago:

> *I think if the staff are aware of how important parental involvement is in children's lives that is the most important. That comes from us as managers, like, that they are aware from the beginning. And we do always say that from the beginning that we wouldn't be here in our jobs if we didn't have the parents and the children .. unfortunately, years ago, when we started off in childcare, you weren't told that. In college you weren't told that. You were told 'learn your theories' .. you thought you knew it all and that you knew more than parents did. And it's all until recently and, like, the Pen Green training where you are taught that the parent is the most important thing and without their input you really can't do your job* (Childcare centre manager, Centre E).

The senior staff and managers in the centres were positive about the supportive network that has emerged as the result of participation in the PICL training. Some of the staff that went to Pen Green together did not know each other beforehand. Personal and professional relationships began or were strengthened during the training, and afterwards in the ELI support sessions. These relationships have been beneficial not only to mutual support in undertaking child studies and implementing parental involvement in the centres, but also in terms of seeking information and advice from colleagues in other centres on wider practice issues, and the impact of national policy change on the operation of the centres. Yet for one centre, competition between it and other community childcare centres in the locality for children, exacerbated by falling demand and the effects of national policy on childcare funding, affects their relationship with the other centres, although the relationship is still a positive one.

Centres also experienced individual benefits from participation. One of the childcare centres was in the process of expansion. This centre felt supported by colleagues in other centres and could learn from their experiences. The management of the centre also commented

that participation in the ELI's CPD programme reduced the feelings of isolation that this centre experienced as, apart from periodic IPPA training, the centre was not engaged in external activities:

> *.. so it was great. [childcare manager] could ring some of the other girls and ask them, like, how the, what were they doing, how did they cope; and we got great support from some of the centres. And then when I was doing my training as well some of the girls that worked in childcare that were working full day care, like, we all got great ideas from each other and I think that all worked:that helped, yeah, definitely* (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre A).

CE staff in one focus group identified that implementing PICL has been positive for their professional development. They are learning new skills and a new language in regard to child development.

Engagement with parents also validated practice for some staff. A CE staff member in one centre found it valuable for: 'getting some feedback as a worker that you are doing the right thing'. Some staff gained motivation from positive feedback coming from parents. Some practitioners expressed the view that having the training – both in childcare and in engaging with parents - supports the professionalisation of childcare staff. Parents can, through engagement, observe good practice. They then may realise that being a childcare practitioner goes beyond the childminding role. A parent echoed this observation. She believed that the kind of feedback that practitioners give parents illustrates to parents that practitioners are not 'just childminders'.

One practitioner, not directly trained by PG, identified that parents need to understand that early education is 'not just colouring or painting', and believes that parents in her centre are starting to understand this.

It was also suggested that the advent of Síolta and Aistear are encouraging to practitioners as: 'now the government recognises what we do, and we're not just glorified babysitters' (Childcare practitioner).

Indeed, having the experience of PICL training and implementing it in the centres was identified by many senior practitioners and managers as providing these centres with a good foundation to engage with Síolta and Aistear:

And that is now part of the Síolta curriculum that every child has to have their own plan and we feel like we're kind of a little bit ahead of everybody else because of the Pen Green because we already have our folders in action. We already have been doing our observations our evaluations and assessment and how to carry on the children's learning so they are able to do a four piece jigsaw you need to bring them on to the six piece and go on to the ten piece or whatever or you take them to the library and that you know that you're implementing this all the time. I do feel that we didn't do that as much before we did the PICL (Childcare centre manager, Centre E).

Benefits to children

Childcare staff, childcare managers and parents identified a number of benefits for children from parental involvement in the childcare settings.

First, some practitioners suggested that parental involvement has a positive impact on the child-parent relationship:

They love showing their parents what they're doing: "and outside playing" and "with me friends", or whatever they're doing (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre A).

A staff member in another centre also believes that the child notices that the parent is interested, this is turn increases the interaction between the parent and child, having a positive impact on their relationship. In general, staff in this focus group saw the benefits of parental involvement as being for the child rather than the parent. When parents learn something new about how to extend their child's learning and can implement it at home, the benefit rests with the child. A parent said that she had learned from practitioners about learning through play, and as a result, she is listening more to her

child and realises that her child did not want her attention just to play but rather to learn.

A CE staff member in one centre commented that the changes in practice, particularly the opportunity to observe children, has meant that staff have more one-to-one time with the children and can give more attention to children individually. Indeed, permanent staff in one focus group agreed that they understood more now that they need to spend time with children.

The impact of PG stretched beyond the children in the centres into the family lives of the practitioners:

Like, when I think back to my two, 17 and 13 like, I used to read to the 13- year- old, but I never really read to [child's name], the other fella. But now I think working with the children and all, I'd say if I could only turn back the clock, I would have been more involved with them (Childcare practitioner, Centre B).

This theme of how PICL knowledge would have changed their own parenting was raised by other practitioners in relation to the wisdom of the settling-in period:

I know it's horrible to say and looking back on it now because I was a parent, I sent my children here and I was told come to the door and 'oh God he's crying – just go, just go and leave him, he's fine, he's fine'. And I'd walk up the road crying saying 'soon as I go, is he going to settle or is he going to be left sitting there crying, what's going to happen?' (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre D).

I've reared my kids, and I know now that if I had a small child I would be really getting involved, and when my kids was in [crèche name] years ago for me to go and do college, like I went back to school. I used to put my child in [crèche name] and I literally was at the door, and go, and collect her. No involvement: just basically under-paid babysitters - that's what they were (Service manager, Centre B).

Benefits to parents

The issue of parental trust in practitioners arose a number of times in focus groups with parents and staff, specifically how both good staff-parent relationships and good practitioner knowledge about individual children encourages trust. A number of parents in the focus groups commented positively on how well the staff know their children and their interests. A parent in one of the focus groups commented that staff in the centre are 'really in tune with the kids and know them really well', and parents ask them how the children are doing in the centres. A parent in another focus group was impressed that even the staff that do not work directly with her child on a day-to-day basis know a lot about the child and her interests. The relationships that childcare practitioners build up not just with the parents but with the children engender a sense of trust in staff, which encourages parents to ask questions about their child's learning.

Some parents suggested that engagement with practitioners about their child's interests and learning can provide new knowledge to them. A parent who had participated in the NCI messy play activity commented that parents already know a lot about how to encourage learning through play as there is so much information around. However, the engagement with the childcare practitioners reinforces their ideas and learning. A parent in another focus group suggested that as parents have acquired new knowledge such as schema, they can now see aspects of their child's learning when they are at home that they might not otherwise have done. Another parent said that she realised from speaking with staff and looking at the child's work in the crèche that her child liked puzzles and liked to paint.

Specifically on the issue of parental-practitioner partnership, a parent believed it important to engage with children at home so that they can see and understand for themselves the learning that has been achieved in the centre. She believed that there are things that her daughter can do that she would not know about if she did not continue on with the centre activities at home. However, it also seemed to be a double-edged sword for this parent as when her child

learned at home, she could feel satisfaction with knowing that they as parents had taught her, but when she came home from preschool and did something that her mother had not taught her, her mother said she felt sad.

Some parents commented that having children in the childcare centres and participating in centre events and ELI activities makes them feel more a part of the community. They got to know new people; this was particularly important where families were new to the area.

Factors affecting parental involvement and PICL implementation

A series of factors, positive and negative, affecting the extent of parental involvement in the life of the childcare centres and in children's learning were identified by research participants. Some of the challenges were structural and to a large extent out of the control of the centres. Other challenges lie closer to home and are more amenable to action by the centres. However, some of the enablers to parental involvement are inherent to the centres, and to their community basis.

Structural issues

Perhaps the most significant factor affecting the extent to which staff can engage with the PICL training, and further develop their practice more broadly, is that of the dependence of centres on short-term staffing through FÁS employment schemes like Community Employment. However, this issue is multi-faceted.

The first issue is that FÁS employees arrive, usually, untrained in childcare, undertake FETAC training while in post, and then leave because their allotted time in the post has expired. One interviewee whose centre has a substantial FÁS staff complement encapsulated the problem well:

> I think where it can get quite difficult is when, when it has, when it's filtered down to the community employment, because community employment as you know by its very nature is for one year -if we are very lucky we get somebody up to three years, or certainly that has been the case. So

you're all the time, you're training somebody and then they're going to go off and they complement the likes of Giraffe and that with their skills. And that's a permanent job, and that's exactly what we are supposed to do. But for the centre here it can be challenging and it can be, I think, disheartening for the senior staff because they have spent, they have invested two years, you know, putting, giving to the CE person what they have learned and I think that's where it gets difficult. I think that's where it can be difficult (Community service manager, Centre C).

A similar problem is being experienced by other centres, and it affects the capacity of the centres to implement PICL, and their capacity to ensure that they are meeting quality standards:

You have to keep retraining, it is all around retraining and planning and it is just time and then staff leave, as you know, and you have to reintroduce more staff and train them up again and it is just like you are constantly explaining, explaining, explaining but as long as it is working I will keep putting people on training and will keep trying to get it out there (Childcare manager, Centre C).

But as I said, because the majority of our staff is CE workers, community employment, they get between 1, 2 and 3 years each time so I deliver the same kind of ..what's the word I'm looking for ..when I deliver kind of when I set up a meeting with the staff and deliver all the Pen Green stuff as best I can. Sometimes the girls is really only starting to pick up on the first maybe one of the concepts and then it's time for them to move on (Childcare manager, Centre B).

A permanent staff member in one focus group observed that childcare staff in the UK undertaking PICL training tend to already be trained in early years and understand the importance of interacting with children. She contrasted this situation with the one she observes in her own centre where new staff arrive who are not trained and they 'tend to sit back'. She described it as a 'big job' when new staff come into the centre, particularly people on CE schemes, because they tend to have no previous childcare training or experience.

Some of the childcare centres reported that the statutory requirement that all adults that have contact with children in the centre require Garda clearance is a barrier to parental involvement. This is partly because the clearance process is very slow – it can take months – and the event will have passed by the time that clearance has been sorted:

Also you have the Garda clearance as well. That is a huge hindrance as well because everybody who works, anybody who comes in to work with the children is supposed to have Garda clearance and it is not always… it takes that long to get it. It is not like ringing up and saying 'I have somebody coming in, can you just do a check' and they are 'ok' and whatever, but it takes months to get Garda clearance (Childcare centre manager, Centre D).

Also, it may seem over-the-top and off-putting to parents to ask for their personal details to complete the Garda clearance form, just so that parents can go on an outing to the park with the children and the practitioners, or volunteer periodically. It does not allow for any spontaneity:

. . . now with legislation and child protection it's a bit different. You can't just say to somebody, you know, 'do you want to help out today', so, you'd have to look at that, but, like, parents would come in for special activities or birthday parties or if we're doing trips or fundraising, you know (Childcare centre manager, Centre A).

Differences in the childcare model in Ireland and the family-based model in Pen Green were also identified as a factor affecting the extent to which the PICL model can be adopted in the inner city childcare centres. It was noted that in PG the parents are in the centre participating in activities themselves such as training or availing of the canteen, meeting in the family room etc. and so it is considered easier for the centre to engage them in early learning. The Pen Green model involves engaging with the family, not just primarily with the child as is the case of the Irish childcare model. Family Workers work intensively with the parents, and make regular visits to the family home. The

practitioners in Dublin were very impressed by this model, identifying how it encourages parental participation as the service goes to the family.

As identified earlier, while practitioners were positive about the impact that training and government policy have on parents' perceptions of the value of ECCE and the role of childcare practitioners, it was observed that more perception change is required in order help parents understand the role of childcare centres in early learning. This issue was identified as sectoral and not just particular to inner city Dublin:

> But how to do that is difficult because I do think, I think it's because we're not seen as professionals, you know, we mind the kids, you know some parents see us, " ah for God's sake you're only minding them there" or, that's the kind of general attitude to childcare workers because it's the way it has been for so many years (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre E).

Centre-based issues

The financial resources of the centres mean that they require support to implement PICL. While some of the technology, for example the video cameras, required were purchased by the ELI for the centres, there are ongoing costs associated with PICL implementation - folders, special paper for printing photos - that it seems were not taken account of in the initial development of the programme. It was identified that sometimes staff were paying for these items from their own pockets. Centre funds may not always have been available to pay for implementation. Indeed, it was identified by those supporting the centres that the understanding and support of the Board of Management and service managers is vital to implement changes in practice and to release required resources.

The physical differences between the childcare centres in Dublin's inner city and Pen Green arose frequently in interviews as influencing the extent to which they facilitate not just parental participation but also freedom and play opportunities for children:

> and the drop in room [in PG] for the parents, and then they've another room you can go in and look through at the kids playing, yeah it's great. So we need space; if we could get a bigger building I'd say we might be able to grow on it [parental involvement] a bit (Childcare practitioner, Centre B).

As the centre descriptions at Appendix A illustrate, the five centres differ in terms of their physical environment. Two of the centres have adequate physical space to hold events and activities with parents and children, although these centres were also envious of what the Pen Green Centre had to offer. The other centres were built or extended some time ago using EOCP funding. The centres' requirements have changed over this period, as have the demands of the national childcare regulations, and they were built prior to the policy emphasis on parental involvement. They do not have sufficient space for a substantial group of parents and children to participate in activities like messy play. One does not have indoor space for children's buggies. While all centres have an office space and can meet individually with parents, some of the offices are very small indeed. Invariably, staff end up speaking with parents in the corridors. Staff identify that this is uncomfortable and also makes it difficult to have a private conversation with parents.

It was also believed that the differences in work conditions for Pen Green staff and for childcare staff in Ireland also meant that implementing PICL is more difficult in Ireland:

> Conditions for the staff are so much better, you know? I think their staff are really valued and it's hard to do that without money and when you're putting them under pressure, like I know our staff are under pressure and it's not really fair a lot of the time; but then it's the reality of the thing (Childcare Manager, Centre A).

Some of the centres employ the majority of their permanent childcare staff on a part-time basis. The implication of this for parental involvement is that sometimes keyworkers and room leaders may meet the parents only in the morning or in the afternoon, depending on their shift. This was identified as a factor affecting parental

involvement in children's learning:

If you have staff doing - if you have a full day centre here doing five days and they are doing five mornings, they are there when the child comes in, they are not there when the child goes home, granny drops the child in, in the morning, mammy collects the child home in the evening. How are you going to share what that child is learning? How are you going to build up a relationship? (Cultural broker).

Parental issues

In general, the childcare practitioners consider that most parents are interested in their child's developmental and learning progress. However, this does not in itself lead to engagement with practitioners around learning or wider engagement in the centres.

Parents may choose not to be involved. As a parent in one focus group suggested, parents are different and want different things. The childcare centres are also aware that each parent and family is unique, and the centre's responses to parents also have to be individual and respectful:

I think that would be very much up to the individual parent. We have a very mixed centre here, like, some of the parents are professionals, some parents are unemployed .. so it really depends on the parents' level of understanding. Some parents would have read every book going and would know more then we do about the early years care and education like; others would have a very basic knowledge, would be going more by their intuition and gut feelings. So you have to respect that, and it's kind of, it's different for everybody. Some people's knowledge would be a lot more than others and I think sometimes the gut feeling maybe is as strong and as good as what you get out of the book - they just need words to explain it, you know (Childcare Manager, Centre A).

There is also a perception amongst some staff that some parents lack interest in their child's learning:

Some of the parents don't actually work; they would have time to stand and chat for half an hour, but they're just rushing off, to do other things (Childcare Practitioner, Centre C).

It was identified that some parents see the time the children are in the crèche as 'their time'.

Permanent staff in one focus group found that engaging with parents, even in terms of the most basic communication, is 'not easy'. They say that the majority of parents do not even stop to ask a basic welfare question: how was [name of child] today? did he eat dinner today? They suggest that it is because parents do not have enough time due to work commitments. When asked for suggestions on how to draw these people in, the staff believed that it was easier to let them go. When asked the same question in another focus group, a parent suggested that staff can only do so much to involve parents and that it is the responsibility of the parent to want to be involved in their child's learning. The phrase 'drop and go' childcare arose frequently in interviews and focus groups. However, some staff and parents suggested ways of encouraging parental involvement; the most common being drawing/painting together, displaying children's artwork in the centre, events/days out, and an annual open day where parents and practitioners can use the portfolios to discuss children's learning.

When asked about the kinds of factors that influence the extent to which parents can engage with practitioners and their children, parents and practitioners all cited the many demands on parents' time: work, other children, caring for elderly relatives, domestic chores. However, a parent said that even though she does not communicate with the staff about her child's learning or development because she is rushing to and from work, she does a lot of work at home with her child, although she does not tell the staff what goes on at home.

Another viewpoint on the 'drop and go' childcare observations was provided by a parent who suggested that once a parent wants to send their child to preschool, that is showing an interest in their early learning. She suggested that some parents are not interested

in sending their children to childcare, so making the effort to do so is indicative in itself of an interest in their child's learning. Another parent could not understand why parents would not be interested enough to ask staff about their child's work:

> how could you not know that your child is developing there, and how could you not ask questions; and most staff with questions, they are more than willing to tell you – they will tell you even if you don't ask what your kids been doing that day. So I think there's no excuse for not being involved (Parent).

However having a 'drop and go' mentality is not particular to community childcare and is not necessarily indicative of poverty or personal problems. A parent in one of the focus groups previously worked as childcare practitioner in a private crèche which is part of a well-known childcare chain. She remarked that there was very little parental involvement there because parents were working.

Parental capacity also arose in staff and parent focus groups and interviews as a barrier to their involvement. The chaotic lives lived by some parents and families impacts on the extent to which parents can engage with centres and with their child's learning. It was identified that sometimes the crèche provides a break for both child and parent in difficult circumstances:

> I do believe it's down to some of these people can have their own problems that really and truly would be too big for this centre, but they would have their own problems and taking the child away from that is a respite for the child and for the parent as well; so sometimes connecting them during that time isn't always wise either (Service manager, Centre C).

Two parents in separate focus groups observed that as staff are trained to work with children and 'know what they are doing'; parents put their trust in them and may not ask many questions of practitioners. Another parent 'didn't see the point of involvement', and she assumes that if there is an issue with her child that she will be told by the centre.

Many practitioners pointed to parents' lack of understanding of the role of the centres in early learning as a barrier to their participation. According to some staff, some parents still hold the view that it is the centre's role to 'look after' children. They send their children to the crèche and do not see why they should have a role. While they may understand the importance of parental involvement in primary and secondary school they may not fully understand its importance in the early years:

> You know, I think they, I really don't, and I'm not talking about all the parents, I think a lot of parents don't realise how important it is at this stage to be involved. I think they think once they go to primary school Oh yeah, that we'll sit and help with home work and sit and do this and sit and do that. I don't think they realise the importance here, so really it's information (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre E).

Three parents in one focus group agreed that parental involvement in primary school level is more important than at pre-primary level. In the same parent focus group, a participant commented that her child was in the centre 'just to play and have fun'.

Fear is also a factor that can prevent parents from interacting with childcare practitioners. Past associations with 'being called to the principal's office' influence parental reactions when childcare practitioners or managers invited them into their office to chat about their child. There can sometimes be a presumption that the child has done something wrong and the parent is about to hear bad news:

> parents think if we ask them to come in, if I say to a parent can I see you for a second, the parent goes white, I mean, honestly, I just and they're looking at the staff member and they're thinking, 'oh my god, what have I done?' But I might want to say something, just, you know, the child has been absolutely tremendous or great or whatever, you know (Childcare centre manager, Centre C).

For permanent staff in one of the focus groups the age of the child was regarded as a factor affecting the extent of engagement between

parent and practitioner: the younger the child, the more likely parents were to communicate.

One centre also finds that low levels of literacy among parents/caregivers, means that their reading abilities are poor. However, the service manager identified that this is not a barrier to participation in all activities.

Community issues

The relationship between the childcare centres, staff and local people is very intertwined and porous. The staff tend to live in the immediate locality of the centre. Local women (including those with children in the centre) may previously have worked and trained in the centre given the reliance on CE or may have been instrumental in establishing the centre, and local people may be employed in the same building where the centre is part of a wider community service. Staff identified that these close relationships can both enable and create barriers to parental involvement. Staff noted that it makes communication easier, as practitioners, parents and children are not strangers to each other. It was also apparent to the researchers whilst undertaking the child activity that practitioners know a lot about the children's family, their parents' friends and partners, and family events and activities. Some of this information comes from the child and parent, but also comes from the fact that the practitioner lives in the community, and some of the communities are very small:

> I think again, I think it's down to relationships in the centre. I think because, you know, no matter who you talk to in the centre they're related to somebody, everyone in this centre is related to somebody; so I think by just, just by itself that, that involves parents again at some level (Service manager, Centre C).

The down-side of being a childcare practitioner and being part of the community also arose in interviews and focus groups. One participant mentioned that up until a couple of years ago she would have been reluctant to speak with parents about their child's learning because she lives in the area and she was afraid they would think that she was speaking out of place:

> For a long time I think there was a stigma around if anybody started asking you questions about your children and that they were just being nosey, and but hopefully that stigma has been lifted (Childcare manager, Centre B).

There was a fear of breaches of confidentiality, but this fear seems to have subsided as parent-centre relationships have improved due to the conscious relationship-building that has taken place post-PICL:

> Before Pen Green, parents were not allowed on the premises. That's the way we seen it because they were coming in and upsetting the kids; they were being nosey, you know. I think generally just because we're a small community there was a lot of them and everybody knows each other, so we're very familiar. So we didn't, we stopped… nobody was allowed past the front door. The child was taken at the front door. But then obviously because of the Pen Green then we had to start looking at getting like opening the doors being more friendly, parent-friendly because we weren't parent-friendly (Service manager, Centre B).

A CE staff member believed that parents knowing that staff are trained has helped because they are then seen as professionals rather than a local. At one point, she said, the attitude of parents to communicating about children in the centre would have been: 'you take a look at your child before you say anything about mine'!

The community nature of the childcare settings supports the families and community in different ways. It was pointed out that the childcare staff that participate in centres on the CE scheme end up as positive role models for their communities. Local practitioners can also engage with parents in a way that people from outside the community may not:

> The support that we offer these women has implications for the way they work with children as well, and with parents. Because they are coming from the same background, they have the same understanding, they have the same subjective-ness as well. They

are not always maybe quite as objective as you would like, but they also understand totally where these parents are coming from. Particularly when we are dealing with parents who have been referred by social workers or are have drug problems or addiction problems, it is really useful to have people who know them in the community and who can work with them (Cultural broker).

Views on the sustainability of Pen Green implementation and the future of parental involvement in the centres

Managers and practitioners were asked in interviews and in the final reference group meeting to give their views on the sustainability of PICL implementation in the five inner city childcare centres in this evaluation, their plans to encourage parental involvement in the future, and the future role of the ELI in these areas.

Sustainability

A strong view was held by centre managers and practitioners that the PICL methodology needed to be adapted to suit the Irish childcare context and the particular context in each centre. A childcare manager identified that PICL cannot be implemented in Dublin's inner city as envisaged in the PG framework, and that there is a need for a 'reality check' in this regard. It was agreed that the centres need to engage with it in a different way than that developed by PG.

Interviewees and focus group participants were asked which practices and elements of PICL would definitely continue in the centres. The use of portfolios to record development and learning and share it with parents was overwhelmingly considered to be a practice that is embedded in the centres' practice and would remain so even without any further intervention. The schema concept has also had an impact on the centres given that it can be comprehended (in its Dublin version) and used in understanding and identifying individual learning patterns and sharing them with parents. PG practices that support children's learning and autonomy have radically changed the way that some centres support

children's learning, and have supported others in encouraging learning through play.

There was also agreement that centres are still learning and still evolving in relation to their practices, particularly on parental involvement. Overall, the view was expressed by managers and staff in all of the centres that further developing quality practice in the childcare centres and encouraging parental involvement in early learning are long term processes. But the message was that PICL, while greatly admired, is a model developed within a different policy, practice and cultural context and the Dublin childcare centres feel they need to take from it what will work in their context.

It was also suggested that progress made to date needs to be sustained and further developed. It was felt that the ELI could continue to play a positive role in this regard.

The role of the ELI

It was agreed by research participants in the childcare centres that the ELI still has an important role to play in supporting quality early years practice in Dublin's inner city.

First, it was identified that the ELI plays a valuable role in the centres that is beyond the CPD programme. The centres value the activities that the ELI offers in the childcare centres and in the NCI:

> *Just to say that NCI have been a big help. They really have and they have a programme that they come in and do a story telling as well and we have invited the parents to that, the story telling but because it is in the morning and lots of them work, we have only had a small amount of parents who would have come to that* (Childcare centre manager, Centre D).

As previously identified, while not all centres participate in these activities in the same way and parent attendance may not always be what is desired, the activities have been found to be effective in bringing parents into the centre, and also sometimes in providing the first step in engaging them directly in activities that support early learning. A childcare centre manager

suggested that having the ELI involved in activities in the centres validates the work of centres. She observed that practitioners in her centre could say for years that children do not need a fancy toy, but when the ELI say it, parents believe it.

Indeed, some of the parents in the focus groups were aware of the ELI through their involvement in other ELI programmes and activities. Some parents in the centres have children involved in the Parent Child Home Programme (PCHP). Staff also observed that there are wider connections between the communities where the centres are and the ELI, for example ELI provides tuition support in youth clubs, which are seen as very beneficial to young people. The various programmes offered in communities for the different age groups are mutually supportive.

The 'hands-on', demonstrative approach adopted by the ELI was commented on favourably by a manager:

> we always find that what they put on is worthwhile. They don't like…I've often gone to IPPA and, right, it's a lecture about this, but it's not practical, you know. What these, the college seem to be doing is bringing you in and showing you these areas, actual things that kids love. They are showing you them, they're not telling about them but showing you, and get involved and do it. That is the major thing that is making things work between us and them because anything they offer we will be involved in (Service manager, Centre B).

The second area suggested by participants is to support the centres in implementing Aistear and meeting the Síolta quality standards. While practitioners support the introduction of the curriculum and standards, a lot of change has been thrown at them in a short space of time:

> but I can understand why it's being done. It's being done in the best interests of the children obviously; but it's hard because I did level 3; I did level 5; and then I did level 6 - and then Pen Green and whatever, and you know sometimes I don't whether any of us, you feel like sitting back and going

> 'every time I think I'm there, something else comes on'. But I do understand the thing of the curriculum being important and stuff like that for the children because it gives us something to work for (Childcare manager, Centre D).

The senior staff and management consider that a key role right now for the ELI is to support the implementation of Síolta and Aistear in the centres. As previously identified, there was a strong feeling amongst staff and managers that the PICL training and changes in childcare practice resulting from the exposure to Pen Green's values and methods have developed the capacity and confidence of the childcare practitioners to implement Síolta and Aistear. It seemed to participants that the next step is for the learning achieved through PICL to be amalgamated with the Síolta and Aistear, for example including developmental milestones in Aistear into portfolios and also into individual learning plans. This would also allow for the further embedding of PICL into practice:

> Well, we want to try and link them all in together and as we were saying, we are kind of trying, we're forgetting about the PICL, kind of, because we're trying to concentrate now on the new curriculum. So they are, at the last meeting I was at there, the last PICL meeting, they said they're going to try and do a course for us that links the three of them in together, you know. Because we are all in the same boat, like it's all only new, you know. And we are trying to concentrate on the new curriculum but you still don't want to forget about the PICL at the same time (Senior Childcare Practitioner, Centre A).

> Now at the moment we are struggling a little bit because we have Síolta and Aistear as well. So we're trying to put the three together you know . . We have been given a lot of information from different areas and you are kind of going we need to be able to put these together. That's something now when we were in the college, we were looking for some way of merging them all. Rather than 'Is this PICL? , Is this Aistear, Is this Síolta?' So that's quite difficult because there is no training for Aistear (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre E).

From the ELI's perspective, they also see the need to incorporate PICL into the Irish quality framework to support the sustainability of PICL. A fear was expressed by the Cultural Broker that the PICL training may end up being another, of many, pilot projects in the community.

The ELI also provides individual support to centres alongside group support sessions. This was mentioned in one centre as being of particular value to them, and they feel more comfortable taking on the Aistear and Síolta training knowing that this support is available:

> .. there's great support from the NCI, like, with it, like, you know. If there's one or two strands in particular that we've been working on, somebody from the NCI will come out, and do it's like a one to one meeting with our team. And they will go into more detail, which I asked for, because sometimes I feel, like, when you're going, you're listening to somebody delivering something, and it's 50 people. It's hard, like. Some of us don't feel comfortable there to put their hands up and ask a question, so whatever's been told to them their not really grasping it. So sometimes I ask Josephine or Catriona from the NCI, will they come around and do, like, a condensed version (Childcare manager, Centre B).

Thirdly, some centre staff were of the opinion that the connection between the ELI and the centres should keep going for a while longer in order to embed the learning from the PICL training and the PG experience. There was also a suggestion that the ELI should consider directly supporting practice in the centres:

> I think we need a lot more mentoring on the ground. It is not enough for us to have a talk shop once a month where we say 'How are you getting on, how are you doing?' there has to be something, a support thing, where we can say: 'Oh that looks great there, that sand tray, but would you not… I find it really hard when there is somebody in the water, as the water goes in the sand.' Do you know that kind of way? Some kind of advisory support thing that can actually help people can feel that they are doing a good job, but

> they can do an even better job. I'd really like to see that happening and I think PICL was a way for going forward with that, and I think it would give people a real sense of value and pride in what they are doing (Cultural broker).

Future of parental involvement in the centres

All centre staff and practitioners were asked what the future held in their centres on parental involvement in early learning. All believed that parental involvement in the centres and in early learning will continue, now that awareness has been raised and there has been some practice change. For some, portfolios were the key tool in this regard. Centres also mentioned a number of activities that they hoped to pursue in the future: open days every few months or once a year where the portfolios are used to discuss learning progress, more fun activities to draw parents into the centres, continuing with reading and messy play activities.

Centres tended not to have a strategy around how they were to move forward. However, they all suggested that the process is not quick, and it has to meet parents where they are at. Fun activities and celebrations are often the first step:

> The parental involvement in this centre I think will work if we do it, if we target, you know, three, four, five at a time .. I think it will fall on its face if we decide, 'okay we have eighty six kids here and we're going to involve the parents in doing something'- that's a disaster, that's a non- runner straight away, if we say, 'okay we have a room there and, just say for example the Toddlers, there's nine kids there, now let's look at doing something with', I think we do something, you know, staged and staggered. I think it will be more successful but it would be extremely ambitious. I think it's something that has to be worked on. I think it has to be sold very, very softly to the parents (Service manager, Centre C).

Encouraging the involvement of fathers in early learning and, as a first step, communicating more and better with fathers is an objective in

the centres. One of the centres is encouraging more men to become involved in trips with children, particularly for its afterschool group. Some of the centres expressed a desire for more family engagement in early learning, particularly grandparents. They recognise that parents are under time pressure, and believe that grandparents have an important role in this regard. One of the centres would also like to encourage siblings to come into the centre to play, which would also have the advantage of removing a childcare barrier for parents. However, centre staff identified that a lack of space prevented them from encouraging too many family members inside.

It was suggested that it should be easier to engage with parents in the future as, unlike now where parents are not used to engaging, future parents will consider their involvement to be standard practice. It will be important for the centres to develop their relationship with parents early on in the child's time in the centre and get them involved in their children's learning from the start.

Childcare practitioners and managers were asked what kinds of changes they would like to see for children and parents as a result of their centre's parental involvement work. Most of the practitioners said that they would like to see greater communication and interaction between the child and parent:

I think by coming in here and they see what their children do, to keep that up at home kind of, for them to sit down maybe in the evening and sit and talk to their children like .. I think it is nice for the children themselves if the parents sit down to and say, 'did you have a good day and what did you do?', you know. And I think when they come in here and they see that the children, the way they talk to us and that, like, if they can carry that on at home, just talking (Senior childcare practitioner, Centre A).

.. some parents down here have a lot troubles and a lot of problems and I feel sorry for the kids and that if we try to get them more involved in that child's learning maybe it can be a good way for the parent and the child to communicate a bit more.

Because I feel in some ways that the parent would not be involved with the, not only in their actual learning overall. But I feel if we can just focus on that for the children that need it most with their parents, and it would just be my way of getting the child to communicate more with the parents (Childcare manager, Centre C).

Summary

Pen Green's PICL methodology sits within a broader continuum of parental involvement roles and activities in the five childcare centres in this evaluation. Parents participated in management committees, sporadically volunteered in providing practical support in the centres and in outings with children, participated in play-based events offered by the ELI and some centres themselves, and in celebratory events in the centres. Child graduations and St. Patrick's Day celebrations were very well attended in all centres and they were identified by practitioners as an effective way of encouraging parents, and the wider family, to come into the childcare centres and meet with staff and children. However, the most common kind of 'parental involvement' activity in all centres is informal 'chats' between staff and parents about, primarily, their child's mood, health and welfare, although also, to a lesser extent, about their children's development and learning. This kind of engagement is the understanding of parental involvement held by a sizeable number of parents and practitioners in the centres.

Not all parents seemed to agree that they should be involved. Some believe that it is the role of the professional to teach children, and parents need only know what is going on when something goes wrong. Nevertheless, the centres are still trying to reach out to some parents: 'drop-and-go' childcare remains a phenomenon in some centres amongst some parents. The importance of opening communication channels with parents and keeping them open through whatever means available was identified by practitioners as very important in creating windows of opportunity for engagement.

Practitioners also described a series of 'big changes' in practice that are a direct result of the exposure that they have had to PG's values and strategies. They include: consciously building better relationships with parents, providing settling-in periods and strategies for new children, the use of a key worker system (with varying success), encouraging children's autonomy (again, with varying success), undertaking written child observations (partly also driven by childcare regulations and quality standards), and a clearer focus on learning through play. Practitioners perceive some of the outcomes of these changes as: knowing parents' names and encouraging them to enter the centre; being more consciously child-centred; encouraging more reflective practice; changing what is considered important to observe and record about children; a better understanding of the importance of play in learning; having learning output that can be shared at some point in time with parents and families, mainly due to the introduction of portfolios.

All centres have introduced a portfolio for each child, and this was described as a major change in practice as a result of the PICL training, and one that is very likely to be sustained in the future. All practitioners were very enthusiastic about this development. While there are differences in practice between centres and practitioners, it appears that the main purpose of the portfolios at this point is to record children's activities and development. The centres are still learning how to develop them. Practitioners held different understandings of the purpose of the portfolio. For some it was a surprise gift at the end of the child's time in the centre where the parent could observe the developmental path travelled by the child, while others used it as a record that can be used at various points in time to illustrate how the individual child is learning, what they have learned, and their journey through developmental stages.

The ownership of the portfolio lies with the centres, and the parents are 'shown' it. The extent to which parents engaged with the portfolios differs between and within centres. When it occurs, engagement is generally at the instigation of the practitioner rather than the

parent. In most centres there is no system for sharing the portfolio with parents on a regular basis. It tends to be shared quite informally, through casual chatting. Some centres invite parents to take them home so that they can make a contribution to it, but few parents avail of this opportunity. Practitioners suggested that parents are not necessarily interested in this type or depth of engagement on their child's learning, they do not have the time to engage, or they like the 'surprise' at the end of seeing how their child has developed over time. The perspective of many of the parents participating in this research is they did not engage with the contents of the portfolio as often as they would have liked and were not aware that they could see it at any time. Some parents saw it at the end of the school year, while others did not see it during the time their child was in the centre but at the end before the child left to go to primary school.

Portfolio content generally comprises child observations, children's artwork and photos of the child undertaking activities within the centre. The depth of the observations and the extent to which they capture the child's learning is evolving over time in centres. In general, the room leader/key worker and senior staff are responsible for developing the portfolio, although more junior and CE staff also contribute. A challenge facing centres is insufficient non-contact time to develop and update the portfolios, although centres are devising strategies to counter this problem.

Of all of the child development concepts associated with PICL, the schemas were the most understood and used by practitioners to identify how children learn and their specific interests. The schema concept and its application is very well understood and applied by those who were trained directly by PG and by more senior staff, but it has filtered down in a patchy fashion to some of the other childcare staff, although levels of understanding differed between childcare centres. A strong perception was held by most practitioners that, in general, parents did not understand the theoretical aspects and technical language associated with child development concepts like schemas. The centres have all greatly modified the language, including not using the word

'schema', as they believe that the language intimidates parents. To support its use, some of the centres have developed an information sheet on schemas for staff and parents, which they put into each portfolio or on centre walls. Where practitioners have been successful in helping parents understand schemas, it seems to provide a window into how their child learns that creates a great impact on parents. Persistent child behaviour that previously might have been seen by parents as annoying or pointless behaviour suddenly transforms in the minds of parents, and practitioners. Learning about schemas and their role in early learning also seemed revelatory to some practitioners. They are an element of the PICL training that has made the most impression on practitioners.

The childcare centres are not as far along in implementing the well-being and involvement concepts and scales as they are in using schemas. The practitioners have developed their own broader understandings of the concepts. The well-being concept is used to record child mood or behaviour on a day-to-day basis rather than as a way of evaluating provision and structuring learning. The concept of involvement is used in a more minimal way than in PICL, seeing involvement as children 'doing something', rather than considering how that involvement is affecting the child's learning and how practitioners can create deep involvement for the child.

All of the centres say that they have not as yet concentrated on disseminating and using the pedagogic strategies. There is some discomfort with the word 'pedagogic'. However, practitioners may not always know that they are using the strategies and may not use the PICL terminology.

Perceived benefits from PICL training for practitioners and from the practice of parental involvement include a heightened awareness of the important role played by parents in their children's learning; the supportive network of centres and practitioners that has emerged as the result of participation in the PICL training; new skills and a new language in regard to child development; the validation of practice and increased motivation for some staff that can occur from engagement with parents;

increased parental trust in practitioners as they understand more about early years practice; and the good foundation it provides for engagement with Síolta and Aistear. Benefits to children identified included: the positive impact on the child-parent relationship from increased interaction; parents learn something new about how to extend their child's learning that they can implement at home; the increase in one-to-one time between staff and children due to the practice of observation; and the positive impact on practitioners' own parenting abilities.

A series of factors, positive and negative, affecting the extent of parental involvement in life of the childcare centres and in children's learning were identified by research participants. Perhaps the most significant factor affecting the extent to which staff can engage with the PICL and further develop their practice is that of the dependence of centres on short-term staffing through FÁS employment schemes. There is a frequent turnover of FÁS employees many of whom arrive untrained in childcare. Also, differences in the childcare model in Ireland and the family-based model in Pen Green were identified as a factor affecting the extent to which the PICL model can be adopted in Dublin. In PG the parents are already in the centre participating in training, availing of the canteen, meeting in the family room etc. and so it is considered easier for the centre to engage them. While some of the technology, for example the video cameras, required were purchased by the ELI for the centres, there are ongoing costs associated with PICL implementation that it seems were not taken account of in the initial development of the programme. The physical differences between the childcare centres in Dublin's inner city and Pen Green arose frequently in interviews as influencing the extent to which they facilitate not just parental participation but also play opportunities for children.

Parental factors also affect the extent to which centres can engage in partnerships with practitioners: time constraints due to work and other children, parents' fears of engaging in education; their own lack of understanding of early learning; and the chaotic lives lived by some.

In relation to the future sustainability of PICL implementation in the centres a strong view was held by centre managers and practitioners that the PICL methodology needs to be adapted to suit the Irish childcare context and the particular context of each centre. PICL, while greatly admired, is a model developed within a different policy, practice and cultural context and the Docklands childcare centres in this evaluation felt that they needed to take from it what will work in their context.

It was agreed by the childcare centres that the ELI still has an important role to play in supporting quality early years practice in Dublin's inner city by: embedding learning achieved to date into practice; continuing with the play-based activities it provides in the centres; and supporting the centres in implementing Aistear and meeting the Síolta quality standards.

All centre staff and practitioners were asked what the future held in their centres on parental involvement in early learning. All believed that parental involvement in the centres and in early learning will continue now that awareness has been raised and there has been some practice change. For some, portfolios were the key tool in supporting parental involvement in the future. Centres tended not to have a strategy for how they were to progress in this area, but all expressed a desire to be more proactive. However, they suggested that the process is not quick, and it has to meet parents where they are at. It was suggested that it should be easier to engage with parents in the future as, unlike now where parents are not accustomed to engaging, future parents will consider their involvement to be standard practice.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This report has examined the implementation of the Early Learning Initiative's Professional Development Programme for community childcare centres in the Dublin Docklands, with a specific focus on the implementation of the Pen Green methodology for involving parents in their children's early learning (PICL). Using a participatory research methodology this evaluation set out to broadly understand how the PICL training programme was implemented in five childcare centres with a view to informing the future direction of the ELI's CPD for childcare centres in the Docklands. The evaluation had the following research questions:

- What does parental involvement mean in childcare settings where staff have undergone PICL training?

- How have the childcare centres implemented the PICL training?

- To what extent has awareness on parental involvement been raised amongst childcare practitioners?

- What are parents' perspectives on parental involvement in their children's early learning?

- Which elements of PICL worked best and for which groups?

- What are the barriers and facilitators to parental involvement in early years settings?

- What resources are required to continue to support parental involvement in children's early learning in Docklands childcare centres?

These research questions were examined using a participatory research methodology with a mixed methods approach to data collection that included secondary documentation, a centre profile questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and a child group activity. Central to the participatory methodology was the research reference group that comprised representatives from the five childcare centres that agreed to be involved, and the research team. This group was key to guiding the research, making sure that it was relevant and meaningful to the childcare centres, and in providing the research team with access to centres. In addition, this group supported a reflective process during the set up, data collection and analysis phases of the research. It is important to note that this evaluation *is not* an evaluation of the practices within these centres, rather it is an evaluation of the implementation of the PICL programme within these centres.

This chapter discusses the findings presented in Chapter 6 and draws conclusions based on these and where relevant with reference to the research literature. Recommendations are made to support the ELI in the further development of its childcare PDP programme. The recommendations are aimed at the ELI and its funders primarily, but are also relevant to national policymakers.

The meaning of parental involvement in the childcare settings

As previously described parental involvement in early learning and in childcare settings exists along a continuum, from choosing not to be involved, to partnership, to having a high level of control in settings. There are many different activities in which parents can get involved to engage in the life of childcare centres and with practitioners in support of their child's learning, and they can play multiple roles in support of their child's early learning. The activities and roles in the childcare centres in this evaluation reflect that posited in the literature (Evangelou et al., 2008; Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Epstein, 2002; Pugh, 1989). Perhaps the most common kind of activity is informal 'chats' between staff and parents about, primarily their child's health and welfare, although also, to a lesser extent, about their children's development and learning. This is the understanding of parental involvement held by a sizeable number of parents and practitioners in the centres, particularly those that were not directly trained by Pen Green.

In terms of parental role, national policy views parents as the primary educators of their children and the practitioners in this evaluation do also. However, the parents do not see themselves as educators, leaving this role to the centres, with notable expectations in all centres. To some extent this finding echoes that of Bleach (2010) in her analysis of parental involvement in Irish primary schools. Although parents were found to be educators in the home environment, they were described either as 'supporters, consumers and welfare recipients' in terms of their involvement with the school (Bleach, 2010: 285). Communication was mainly one-way written communication from school to home and centred on organisational issues rather than an engagement with parents about their child's learning (Bleach, 2010).

The PICL framework views parents not just as educators, but also as learners, learning child development concepts and pedagogic strategies, so that they can form partnerships with practitioners in support of their children's learning. However, the childcare centres do

not view parents as learners and, indeed, neither do most of the parents. A key difference between the PICL programme in Corby and in Dublin, leaving service models and context aside, is that the Dublin approach does not provide strategies for childcare practitioners to train parents in and continually embed the key concepts and pedagogic strategies: there are no group or one-on-one training sessions in Dublin, for example. Because of the fear of intimidating parents, staff have simplified the PICL language and concepts when using them to communicate with many parents. While there are many reasons for this, educational levels and parental pressure for example, but it may be that parents themselves are not confident in the roles of learner and educator, or believe these roles are more appropriately held by other people and institutions. This difference in parental role makes implementing PICL a different enterprise in the UK than it does in Dublin. Parent as learner is not a role that has been really grappled with in the Docklands childcare centres in this evaluation. The staff themselves are learning, and there are not the resources or the skill base to engage in adult education strategies. Many of the reasons why parents, and staff, may not see parents as learners or educators relate to factors that are to a large extent beyond the control of the centres. Parental involvement in early learning, and the role of parent as educator, is new in Ireland. It will take time for these ideas to become common place. The PICL is an ambitious model to implement in this context, although the childcare centres have all worked to rise to the challenge. The introduction of PICL to these centres is innovative in the Irish context, particularly as it seeks an equal partnership between parents and practitioners. The centres and parents in this evaluation have a road to travel in order to reach partnership.

Understanding of parental roles in early education will take time to change in Ireland but attention to this in the early years may have the benefit of bolstering home school partnerships and parental involvement later on at primary level. As noted in Bleach's case studies of five North Dublin primary schools, partnership between home and school was not at a level in which parents were involved in decision-making and planning with the

school about their children's education. Moreover, they were involved as 'spectators' (Bleach, 2010: 287). Working with parents and childcare centres in the early years of children's learning has the potential to enhance parents' educational capital such that engagement in the primary years can move beyond the typical one-way communication to the home school partnership model envisaged in Irish policy.

Overall, 'parental involvement' is a broad concept and practice in the centres. It ranges from volunteering to participation in outings and in activities such as messy play with children, and verbal communication with staff about child welfare and learning. Parents can engage at whichever level they feel they are most comfortable or that they can give the time to. Right now, it seems that a substantial number of parents do not engage any further than 'a quick chat', which in some centres represents progress. But all of the other activities undertaken by the centres, and by the ELI in the centres, are extremely valuable in physically getting parents to spend some time in the centres, developing better relationships between parents and services, and encouraging parents to interact with their children through play. A key question for the ELI is whether or not these activities ultimately in the longer term feed into ELI's overall objective of better educational outcomes in the Docklands area.

Recommendations

- Recognise the innovation represented by the introduction and implementation of the Dublin approach to PICL within the Irish childcare and community childcare contexts.

- Engage in activities in the community and in the centres that support parents' and practitioners' understanding of parents' roles as educators and learners.

- ELI activities that have drawn parents into the centres such as messy play and reading have been important and centres should be supported so that these can become centre-led and owned rather than ELI led.

- Observe change in the centres in relation to the different activities that comprise parental engagement and involvement in centres, not just those that relate to the PICL framework, over the medium- and long-term, and develop some shorter-term indicators that reflect gradual changes in parental and practitioner roles and activities.

The implementation of PICL in the childcare centres

Some adaptation has occurred in the childcare centres' implementation of PICL: in the language used to explain the PICL key concepts to parents and practitioners, the meaning and use of the well-being and involvement concepts, and how practitioners and parents engage with each other. Whalley (2001) has identified that PG does not change the PICL language or level of understanding required for parents as they see it as disrespectful to do so and not in keeping with the spirit of partnership. She also suggests that parents in the UK grasp the language and concepts quite easily, and can apply them to their child's learning and development, and can share this vocabulary with other parents when working together to extend the learning. This does not seem to be the case in Dublin. It is not clear why this is the case. It may not be a parental educational disadvantage issue as both locations have similar social and economic contexts. It may be related to the lack of adult learning opportunities for parents within the Dublin approach to PICL. This difference is due to the different service models underlying Pen Green and Dublin childcare, and the resources that are available to them. It may be due to differences in the early years sector: the UK sector has been professionalised for some time relative to the Irish sector. UK parents' expectations of services may differ from Irish parents.

The PICL language also seems to make some staff uncomfortable, although the PICL-trained practitioners have been inventive and supportive in explaining and embedding the PICL language and concepts to staff and into practice. In common with the ECCE sector generally there is a diverse range of skills and qualifications within these childcare settings

and the education and training bases amongst some staff may be a barrier to the use of the PICL concepts and strategies. Moloney (2010: 172) in her analysis of professional identity in the ECCE sector in Ireland found that despite policy makers' attention to the sector over the last 10-15 years, professional identity is 'obscure' and suffers as a result of the use of diverse terminology to describe the sector and the roles of those within it. The sector comprises a varied workforce in terms of education and qualifications, there is a lack of mandatory training requirements and those who work within it have perceptions of low status.

Nonetheless, it is clear that the schema concept has made a strong impression on staff and there is a high level of comfort with its meaning and application, and also amongst some parents. Practitioners are beginning to understand its potential as a way of planning early learning and of communicating with parents about learning. The concept is used to identify learning, which may be recorded in the portfolio, and these schemas are primarily shared with some parents informally during chats at drop-off and collection times.

The well-being and involvement concepts have, in most centres, been altered to a point where they do not resemble the Laevers' dimensions, and the scales are generally not being used. The concepts have been taken to describe child mood and behaviour. Some practitioners may not understand their role in the evaluation of settings, and further training may be required in this regard. There is a question mark over whether or not all of the PICL concepts and strategies will be used in tandem in the Docklands childcare centres that have been involved with PICL, as there is still some reluctance around the Laevers' strategies. It raises questions for consideration by the ELI: How much of this framework should be incorporated into the Dublin approach? What is the Dublin approach?

One of the key elements of the Dublin approach to PICL was the development of the Dublin PLOD. This has not been implemented. Centres have not been ready to do so as they have been working at ground level on

relationships in the centres, on the embedding of the schema concept, and the new practice of portfolio development. To a large extent the PLOD has been superseded by Aistear and Síolta and centres are moving towards using these and other tools for planning learning at a centre level rather than individualised learning plans. The implementation of the Dublin PLOD as it was originally conceived by PG and the ELI depends partly on the extent to which the centres are going to implement the PICL framework, particularly Laevers' scales, and whether or not they feel that they have the skills and knowledge to undertake learning planning and evaluation. Centres use their adapted well-being and involvement concepts, but who benefits from knowing about the child's well-being and involvement? At the moment, it is unclear whether the way that these concepts are used benefits children's learning in the centres. Practitioners say that they sometimes describe child 'well-being' or mood in portfolios, but are unclear how this supports child learning.

The development of portfolios is a practice that is embedded in the centres. That centres have implemented this practice for every child, and with such enthusiasm, in three short years speaks to their commitment to developing quality practices. All centres agree that they are still on a learning curve in this regard, and this is probably where they should be within such a short time period. While the potential for these portfolios as tools for partnership with parents to support child learning during the time the child is in the centre is grasped by some practitioners, particularly those who have undertaken PICL, it is not understood by all. Some practitioners regard the portfolio as a record of child development - which it is – that is given to parents when their child leaves the centre as a record of development after the fact, but have not taken the next step of seeing the portfolio as strategy for regular engagement with parents about the child's learning. The portfolio is regarded by some practitioners as a more static object. As noted previously, the centres are not yet engaged in a partnership with parents. The Feedback Loop envisaged in the PICL is some way off. Of course, this is not always the case, as there were individual examples of parents and

practitioners extending a child's learning in this way. At this stage the benefit of the portfolio is to parents, not to children because it has yet to be used in a widespread and systematic way in partnership with parents and staff to plan and assess children's learning. Overall, the purpose and benefit of the portfolio requires some further consideration in the centres.

Portfolio content varies between centres, and there is debate in some centres about what is considered appropriate content. This may be because the portfolio practice is still in development, and the portfolios have yet to reach their full potential as a means of both recording and extending learning. There is a focus on photographs and child art, which is understandable. Some schemas and activities are harder to capture than others, particularly when the medium used is a photograph rather than a video. Centres are far more likely to use photos than videos to record schemas and children's achievements. It should be acknowledged that there are individual instances of the use of video, but it is generally not used in the way envisaged in PICL. The methodology for this evaluation did not include an analysis of the portfolios, but from the information gleaned in the interviews and focus groups it seems that firstly, there is very little content from parents in the portfolio, which makes sense if they do not see it very often. When parents do bring in content, it tends to relate to the child's family and social life, which may not be as valuable in supporting children's learning. Secondly, there is a question mark over the purpose of some of the content, if the purpose of the portfolios is to not just record learning but also to extend it. These kinds of issues, with support, should begin to be ironed out when the centres start to systematically develop learning plans and evaluate these plans, as the portfolios will have to become more purposeful.

A key message of this report is that the training provided by Pen Green has resulted in changes and advances in practice that include and go beyond efforts to engage more with parents of children in community childcare in the Dublin Docklands. These changes relate to quality practices which ultimately benefit the children that attend these childcare centres.

Practitioners suggested that an increased focus on encouraging learning through play is a PG legacy in all of the centres and the centres' use of schemas in observation and learning encouraged through play. While centres differ on the extent to which they engage in the child observations and on the purpose of the information gained, they appear to be supporting practitioners to be more reflective on their practice and their impact on children's learning: this will take time. Although centres say that they are not implementing PICL's pedagogic strategies, the interviews and focus groups suggest that, without them realising it, the strategies have been very influential on practice. Overall the examination of the implementation of PICL in the five childcare centres indicates that involvement in the PICL programme has resulted in capacity building within these centres. Capacities have been built in terms of knowledge, skills, resources and networks and in the enhancement of a professional identity among childcare practitioners.

Recommendations

- Give further consideration to what is desirable and achievable within the Dublin Approach to the PICL.

- Provide further support to centres in portfolio development.

- Identify and build on the learning achieved in the centres on Pedagogic Strategies.

- Continue to support the practice of learning planning and evaluation using Síolta and Aistear.

Awareness amongst childcare practitioners of parental involvement in children's learning

As discussed in Chapter 6, there are varied understandings of parental involvement among the participants in this study. It was also identified that practitioners do view parents as their child's educator. Staff are becoming more deliberate in their approach to involving parents and are being more reflective on their own practice in this regard. When considering

practices in the past they now feel that efforts to involve parents could have been better. This increased awareness is partly due to the PICL training, and partly due to the ELI's Síolta training: they are mutually reinforcing. Centres have developed activities to implement the parental involvement Síolta standard.

Recommendations

- Recognise changes in awareness and attitudes towards parental involvement, and indeed wider practice changes, as valid change for evaluation purposes: without attitudinal change, practice change is difficult.

- Continue to support the community childcare centres in implementing the Síolta standard on parental involvement, and also the Aistear in this regard.

Parents' views of parental involvement in the childcare centres

There were fewer parents involved in the evaluation than was desired, and those who participated were either self-selecting or selected by centre staff. In some ways, the difficulties that staff had in encouraging parents to participate in the research may reflect their wider challenges in encouraging parents' participation in other events and activities. But overall, the parents participating in the focus groups may have been more motivated to be involved in the centres and in their child's learning than those who did not participate.

Parents held different views on what parental involvement meant to them, from communicating with practitioners about their child's daily health and welfare, to participating in the ELI and childcare centre play and reading activities, to talking to practitioners about their child's learning. Not all parents seemed to agree that they should be involved. Some believe that it is the role of the professional to teach children, and parents need only know what is going on when something goes wrong. This is not to suggest that they are uninterested in their child's development: far from it. It is difficult to know if this perspective is because they may have had little exposure to practice

beyond quick communications and, in some centres, participation in activities, or if it reflects a deeper attitude.

Practitioners believe that some parents are not interested in engaging in the ways suggested by the PG training, (eg, taking photos or videos of their child's learning to share with practitioners, writing about their child's learning in portfolios or notebooks). In the absence of training workshops for parents, it may be difficult for parents to know what it is that is being asked of them. How do they know what to record? Do they always know that what they are observing at home is learning? Given the revelation that schemas have been to some staff and parents, it seems that they do not always know. This is why PG developed the framework. It took Pen Green almost 20 years to get to where they are now in encouraging involvement and developing a methodology to do this. It may take some time to develop a Dublin approach and involve parents in early learning. Starting modestly might be the key. A 'next' stage for the centres, supported by the ELI, might be to develop strategies with a small number of willing parents and share the child development concepts with parents alongside Síolta and Aistear, using the portfolios, cameras and video camera as tools to explore children's learning. Such an approach reflects that taken by Pen Green in developing PICL initially (Whalley, 2001).

There are issues here that will need to be ironed out, a key one being the use of child development language and concepts with parents and also training them in the use of Laevers' scales. Whalley (2001) believes that, within the Pen Green approach, equal partnership with parents means using the PICL language with parents. Practitioners in this evaluation believed this to be almost impossible with most parents in their centres. It may be that a more intensive approach with motivated willing parents might allow for some experimentation in this regard.

But the most pressing issue that arose in the focus groups is that of sharing the portfolios with parents. Many parents did not know that they could see the portfolio throughout the child's time in the centre. They expressed a wish to engage with the portfolios regularly.

Recommendations

- Encourage the centres to share portfolios with parents regularly throughout the school year.

- Consider how best to work with a small group of parents to try to engage with them at the deeper level on their child's learning.

Elements of the PICL training that worked best and those requiring further consideration

There were a number of key elements within the ELI's strategy of working with childcare centres that were considered by participants to be very supportive of the approach to the PICL training. These included, the cultural broker, visits to Pen Green in Corby, training two people in each centre and further post-training support.

The addition of the cultural broker was regarded as very helpful in building and supporting relationships between the ELI and the childcare centres, and in supporting implementation and ongoing training.

Staff who had undergone PICL training spoke of the exhilarating experience of having a first hand experience of Pen Green. Many suggested that it was a case of 'seeing is believing' and of how what they had seen had made a lasting impact on them. They were particularly impressed by the space and surroundings, the types of risk-adverse play and activities, and of the presence of parents. They were also very aware of the differences between the material conditions of their centres and that of Pen Green. Nevertheless, the experience of being at Pen Green has had a marked impression on the women that attended the training such that their vision of what is possible in childcare has gone to greater heights.

The ongoing support and the strategy of training two people within each centre were considered useful. Nevertheless, staff feel that the visit to Pen Green has such an impact that it would be beneficial for other staff to attend and this would help with implementation. Two people in each centre is not considered to be adequate.

Bringing back the learning from Pen Green and transmitting it to colleagues proved challenging for some practitioners. While having another colleague alongside who was fired up by their visit to PG was an advantage, the issue remained of how best to disseminate the PG training to busy colleagues back home. Pen Green trained staff are also having to constantly train new staff in PICL. Those trained have been inventive in how they have brought back the learning: from information sessions to developing less complex information sheets that are placed on centre walls or in portfolios. They were supported by the cultural broker and the ELI, and by the frequent support sessions. However, bringing back the learning requires some skills that not all people have, and they are not disimiliar to teaching skills. It may be that some PG-trained practitioners would have felt more supported if they had received some further training in this area.

Recommendations

- Consider how best to keep the Pen Green approach alive. While study visits to the PG Centre seem transformative for individual practitioners, it may represent better value for money for the ELI to undertake this task in Dublin through its current CPD programme activities.

- Consider how the cultural broker role can be further developed to formalise a community of practice of childcare practicioners and centres in the Docklands. Rather than a reliance on a single leader/cultural broker there is a need for a wider pool of leaders. This could be achieved by having leaders in each setting.

- Consider using the experiences of the centres on how best to support PG-trained staff in training centre staff in the PICL methodology.

Factors that impact on parental involvement in the childcare centres

A series of factors influenced the implementation of the PICL framework in the centres. These factors reflect those found in other research (Crozier, 1999; Lamb-Parker et al, 2001; Philips and Eustace; 2008) from the physical environment to feelings of comfort in educational settings. Some of these were structural and outside of the control of the centre, for example the operation of FÁS employment schemes and the differences between the Pen Green Centre model and the Irish community childcare sector. Other factors relate to the centres, for example, funding, the physical and environment and staffing. Parental and community attitudes and understandings also impact on the extent to which parental involvement is feasible.

Some of these factors are more amenable to local action than others. Issues related to the reliance on FÁS or the restrictions resulting from the requirement for those working with children to be Garda cleared are beyond local control. In relation to FÁS staff, this evaluation again highlights the double-edged sword that this form of staffing represents for the community childcare sector. On the one hand it makes childcare affordable and upskills and builds the capacity of local women and communities, while on the other it can impact on quality and create additional work for the community sector that the private sector does not have to deal with. The training efforts undertaken in the community childcare centre facilities make a positive contribution to the local community. The findings support Brennan's (2001) assertion that community childcare has many different roles that include but are beyond early learning – family support, community development and training. However, some of these roles may be conflictual. The reliance on FÁS staff impacts negatively on efforts to professionalise and change practice in the community childcare centres in the Docklands. This is a wider issue on which the ELI may be well-placed to engage with national policymakers.

The practitioners were acutely aware of the differences in the Irish community childcare model and in Pen Green, and the impact that this had on their ability to ever implement PICL in the same way as in Corby, despite the similiarities in the social and economic profile of clients. Community childcare facilities do not/cannot provide a family-based service, and so parents have no other reason to gravitate towards their centres, other than for childcare, and for some parents this means 'drop and go'.

Yet, even if centres could encourage parents to engage regularly and systematically on their child's learning, the physicial environments in the centres were generally not conducive to parent group activities. Indeed some could not even find the space to meet privately with just one parent. Centre A is one exception. This is another difference between PG and the Docklands centres. Without funding and available space, it is beyond the control of the centres to change this situation. Most of the centres were built/extended prior to the current policy direction. Furthermore, having the required space for parents is not a feature of national guidelines on developing childcare centres. The ELI could use its unique knowledge on encouraging parental participation in learning to inform national policymakers on the amendments required to national policy and funding frameworks.

The extent of parental participation in early learning is uneven between the five centres. Some possible reasons why this is the case were given by parents and practitioners and they reflect much. However, it appears as though parents in the centres in mixed-income areas of the Docklands are more likely to participate than those living in areas of concentrated social and economic disadvantage. Some of the childcare centres in this evaluation are operating within a context where the community is constantly challenged by extreme criminal behaviour, and some parents live very chaotic lives. For practitioners, in the case of some parents, to have the most basic communication with parents/grandparents during drop off and collection time constitutes good progress. To move beyond that into child development education and ask parents that experience personal

chaos to regularly contribute to portfolios and come to events may be too much. This is not to suggest any kind of failure. Indeed, in some cases, the centres may be providing for basic child needs and family respite that might not otherwise be met. Centres in this evaluation recognise that some parents do not want to engage, for whatever reason that might be. While Pen Green experiences 84 per cent parental engagement (Whalley, 2001), this may not be realistic for the centres in this evaluation; and at this point, it may not be appropriate to set involvement targets.

It will take time to build up the trust of a wide pool of parents in the centres. However, it does seem that the centres are on their way to building it. Staff are consciously trying to change attitudes and practice, which is where change may come from. The 'smaller' strategies adopted by the centres, encouraging parents to come into the centres and into the children's rooms, even for 5 minutes, may build trusting relationships, or indeed may be as far as some parents wish to go. Yet, as identified earlier, it may be that parents do not understand their role in early learning, and do not know what they can do to work with practitioners. As practitioners identified, they may not understand what goes on in the centres, and may believe that their child is simply being 'minded'. Public education is therefore required in this area.

Recommendations

- Use the findings of the CRC's evaluation to engage with national policymakers on issues facing children's services, including childcare and wider early years provision.

- Recognise the 'smaller' strategies that the childcare centres are developing to build trust and relationships with parents.

- Support the centres to undertake activities with a small group of parents.

- Develop an information/communications strategy aimed at local parents on the role of childcare services in children's learning, and the importance of their role in early learning

- Centres need to have support to develop their physical environments to facilitate parental involvement, such as developing meeting room space, space to keep buggies.

Further resources and training required to implement PICL

As noted above the development of and enthusiasm for portfolios have been a tangible outcome from centres' involvement in the PICL training. Yet approach to portfolio development and use varies across centres and the potential of these as a tool for involving parents in their children's learning has, so far, been limited. Further training on the development of portfolios and communication with parents about their purpose should enhance the impact of portfolios as a tool for parental involvement.

As noted previously, there are cost implications for the childcare centres in implementing the PICL approach. The ELI could consider funding the costs of paper and toner cartridges for printing pictures of the children. There is also the cost of 'buying out' non-contact time for staff to engage in the write-up of observation, print pictures, portfolio assembly, and so on. In some of these communities, there is a pool of former CE childcare staff, many of whom are FETAC level 5 trained who could fulfil this role as paid employees or as volunteers. Where caring responsibilities are a barrier to parental participation in early learning events in the centres, this pool of staff might also prove useful to provide childcare to both children attending the childcare centre and those older or younger not in attendance while parents attend events in the centres.

It seems that not enough resources were aimed at PICL implementation: buying a photograph printer, paying for photographic paper and budgeting for non-contact time. In order for planning and evaluation and portfolio development to be sustainable in the long term, centres themselves need to think about how they can build these non-contact time costs into their budgets. These issues also start to impinge on how costs are calculated for participation in the FSYS and the community subsidisation programme.

Recommendations

- Provide guidance to centres and staff on portfolio development and their purpose as a tool for involving parents in their children's early learning.

- Support childcare centres to consider how they might best meet the costs of parental involvement in their business planning and budgeting. At a broader national policy level, there may be a case for seed funding to encourage innovative and emerging practices.

- Support a short training session for all staff in the use of video and cameras, uploading etc.

- Support the centres to consider how non-contact time can be built into centre costs.

- Support the centres to consider how local trained childcare workers could be used to support parental participation, on a voluntary or paid basis.

Building on emerging capacities

It is clear that the PICL training has had an impact on building capacity amongst community childcare centres to provide quality learning environments for children through the knowledge, skills and resources derived from the training. This augurs well for the future sustainability of parental involvement in these centres. As a result of their involvement in the PICL training, centres would seem to be in an advantageous position in terms of their engagement with the new directions in childcare: Aistear and Síolta. However, there is some trepidation amongst practitioners that more and more is being asked of them. While they know that Síolta, PICL and Aistear are not parallel tracks, they are struggling somewhat to find ways of bringing them together. Centres have made it clear that in order to sustain the learning in PICL and align it to Síolta and Aistear that they will require ongoing support from the ELI to achieve this.

The capacity of centres to continue to engage in enhancing the quality of their care and learning environments will benefit from the network of community childcare centres that has arisen as a result of the PICL training and the support of the ELI. Centres, that previously would have had little formal contact now communicate and share information on best practice. There is the potential for this network to be further developed such that it can constitute a community of practice, which according to Moloney (2010) is important to developing the professional identity of childcare practitioners. There is already a Docklands Childcare Forum which operates at a policy level. Some of the centres are members of this Forum. The suggestion here is for a more practice-based network. The seeds have already been sown in the PICL support sessions provided by the ELI.

This evaluation of the implementation of PICL in a sample of childcare centres in the Dublin Docklands highlights that the centres have built their capacity to involve parents in children's early learning and enhanced their awareness about key child development concepts. That the practice of parental involvement, in its varied forms in the centres, will continue is clear: the practitioners want it. It was apparent in the interviews with senior staff particularly that there is a desire for better practice.

Nevertheless, it is important to reflect on the fact that these centres are embedded within a community employment infrastructure that is accompanied by uncertainty about funding and future direction. Clearly while the children may benefit from quality learning learning experiences this is contingent upon the ability of centres to maintain funding for childcare. At the moment, as indicated in the earlier review of national and local policy (Chapter 4) there are many uncertainties in relation to community childcare funding. Not least of these is the lack of capital funding alongside changes to subvention schemes.

Recommendations

- Support the centres to meet Síolta standards and implement Aistear using knowledge gained through PICL application.

- Support the development of a Docklands Community Childcare Practice Network.

The future of PICL in the context of Aistear and Síolta

PICL training came to the Docklands community childcare centres when there was a national void in frameworks and toolkits for encouraging better practice in early years settings and for the encouragement of parental involvement in the settings themselves and in children's learning. Síolta was very new and not widely implemented– and indeed, there was much disarray at national policy level creating uncertainty about its implementation – and the Aistear had yet to be published.

In terms of future direction the ELI's annual report 2009/2010 to its Review Board indicates that the focus has moved to the implementation of the Síolta and Aistear frameworks, with no work with Pen Green planned by the ELI for the coming year.

The training provided by the ELI on Síolta and Aistear and the work that is being undertaken by the centres themselves to implement these frameworks, should have the effect of embedding much of what has been learned in the PICL training: observation, development of portfolios, ensuring that parents are communicated with, even if only informally. Yet, over the past three years, centres, with the support of the ELI, have been working hard to build parental involvement readiness in the centres. The base on which they are building differed from centre to centre. They are building better relationships with parents, as evidenced by the fact that in some centres parents now come in to the children's rooms and engage with the practitioner, even if it is only for a minute or two, which marks a change in practice in some centres. Staff make an effort to know parents' names, which was not always the case. They are responding and giving time to parents who seek them out, and are being resourceful in trying to reach out to parents who have to or want to 'drop and go'.

Although the PICL training has the potential to provide a firm foundation for the implementation of Síolta and Aistear, the place of parental involvement in children's early learning using Pen Green strategies and concepts has not been foregrounded by the

ELI. This is important considering that the ELI has made a considerable investment of time and resources in this methodology and has engaged community childcare centres in its implementation.

In terms of the sustainability of the PICL training there is a need to be explicit about the strategy for parental involvement in children's early learning and where this aligns with the ELI's role in Síolta and Aistear. The PICL methodology is very specific, with practitioners and parents using child development concepts – schemas, well-being and involvement – and adult pedagogic strategies to systematically document, plan and extend children's learning using tools such as portfolios, videos, and the PLOD. The Docklands childcare centres can implement Aistear, meet the relevant Síolta standard and Regulation 5 of the childcare regulations without ever using anything from the PICL methodology, given how broadly parental involvement is defined in these frameworks. Furthermore, in these strategies settings can develop methods of engagement and goals that make sense to them rather than anything specific. An earlier recommendation was for the ELI to give further consideration to what is desirable and achievable within the Dublin approach to PICL. What is the point of using schemas to understand learning unless it is to extend learning through individualised plans? Can the well-being and involvement concepts and scales be unyoked from the PICL for Dublin? If schemas and involvement scales are not being used for planning and evaluation, what is left from the PICL framework, other than the tools, like portfolios? Consideration must be given to where the specific PICL methodology is positioned in the context of the ELI's professional development programme in the Docklands community childcare centres.

Other sustainability issues relate to the need for the ELI to be able to determine how programmes that support childcare practitioners to involve parents in childrens' early learning impact on better outcomes for children in these childcare centres. This would require, amongst other things, much more to be known about what sorts of changes are required, for whom and when, details on the children and families that attend the centres,

and detail on what happens in terms of parental involvement in these centres. Understandably there has been a need to build partnership and trust between the ELI and the childcare centres and this takes time. As the ELI does not have any statutory power in terms of its initiatives in the Docklands childcare centres, and largely relies upon the goodwill of those involved, the issue of compliance, data collection and reporting is a difficult one. It also requires that all centres come on board for future monitoring and evaluation in order to inform a more comprehensive picture of the impact of the ELI's childcare initiatives on educational outcomes in the Docklands. Furthermore, it is clear from this evaluation that each centre interprets and implements PICL differently from each other. This will become an issue in designing and implementing future monitoring and evaluation strategies, and being able to ascribe potential change to the PICL framework.

Finally, the introduction of PICL in the Dublin Docklands was an innovative step and it set the bar high for childcare centres. There is, however, a need to move towards a partnership between the ELI and the community childcare centres in which power and decision-making are held collectively and within a legal framework. This has the potential to take implementation of parental involvement in children's early learning to a higher level.

Recommendations

- The ELI should continue to support parental involvement in community childcare settings in inner city Dublin.

- Consideration should be given to how the community childcare centres in the Docklands can work together as a legal community partnership that involves the ELI.

- Support the centres to use PICL to meet Síolta standards and the Aistear curriculum.

- The ELI should be a strategic partner and involved in capacity building activities around the alignment of Síolta, Aistear and PICL rather than hands-on activities within childcare centres.

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APPENDIX A: CHILDCARE CENTRE PROFILES

Centre A

Location

Centre A is located in an inner suburb on the northside of Dublin city, adjacent to Dublin Port. This is mainly a residential area comprising houses built in the mid-19th century to house railway and port workers and houses built by Dublin Corporation in the 1940s to accommodate, primarily, Dublin Port workers. Over the years much of this housing was purchased by tenants. The regeneration of the Dublin Docklands has resulted in the area becoming more socially mixed with the arrival of new residents that have either purchased housing or live in private rented apartments. However, many families have lived in this inner suburb for generations.

Background to establishment

Centre A is located in a purpose-built community centre officially opened in early 2009. The new centre provides services for children and older people as well as meeting rooms, adult education class rooms, a private gym, a theatre, a multi-purpose sports hall, pottery/art room, office space, and an all-weather outdoor soccer pitch. The community centre was funded by the HSE, Pobal, the DDDA and a Sports Council Grant

Centre A evolved from a community playgroup that had been operating in the old community centre for 30 years. The staff and management felt that there was a need in the area for full-time childcare. The Centre provides full-time, part-time and sessional childcare to 62 children aged between 6 months and 5 years. Fifty-six parents, 5 non-Irish, use the Centre. Almost all, 90 per cent at least, of the families live locally. It appears that the families availing of the Centre reflect the social mix of the area.

Physical environment

Centre A is enhanced by the architectural design of the community centre in which it is located. The design benefited from Centre A's visit to Pen Green. Design ideas were transferred from Pen Green that allowed for different types of play opportunities, such as creative and imaginative play and interaction with insects and plants, and includes trees, grasses, mounding and pathways.

Thirty-two of the children are in the preschool year, although only 15 children are availing of the free school year as the remainder did not come into the age range for the scheme, even though some of the children are shortly starting school. Centre A did not avail of the government's childcare subvention scheme, and parents pay fees privately, although they will avail of it in 2011. The Centre opens daily from 8.30 am to 5.30 pm and it remains open during school holidays.

The Centre has one room for babies, two for preschoolers, one for wobblers, one for toddlers, a kitchen/canteen/reception area, one office and one resource room. Alongside the outdoor garden described earlier which is accessible from the children's rooms, there is also a separate play area with soft surfacing off the reception/canteen area.

Funding

The Dublin Port Company provided funding for furniture and equipment when the Centre moved to the new premises. Other requirements are met through fundraising efforts, although staff have less time for this since they began full-time day care. Centre A has four FÁS-funded CE staff, three full-time staff and six part-time staff. For non-CE staff, pay costs are met through parents' fees and the funding received for participation in the free school year. Staff training costs are met by FÁS for CE staff, and the Inner City Trust has part- funded full- and part-time staff to receive FETAC childcare training. Training is also financed by Centre fundraising efforts and staff contributions. Three staff have completed FETAC childcare level 4, four have completed childcare level 5, and 2 childcare level 6. Three staff were undertaking FETAC childcare level 5 and 1 level 6.

Management

Centre A is governed by a Board of Management that includes Directors of the community centre, parents and local business people and 4 staff from the Centre. They meet

every 3 months, and membership turns over every 2 years.

Programmes

Centre A is implementing Aistear and Síolta. Some staff participate in the Síolta training provided by the ELI. The Centre also provides Gymboree and recently engaged a Fitness Instructor to work with preschoolers once a week

Challenges and opportunities

The Centre's operation is challenged by factors affecting many community childcare facilities, including the other centres in this evaluation: government policy changes on how childcare is funded and offered to families, and increasing unemployment rates affecting families' capacity to pay childcare fees and reducing their need for the service. On the other hand, there are many factors supporting Centre A's sustainability. It is not as reliant on CE staff as some other community childcare facilities, and so does not face staff retention and staff rostering issues to the same extent as other centres. It retains experienced, trained staff. It is located in a new purpose-built facility, designed to meet the current obligatory statutory regulations. It has a large, well-used reception area, which includes the canteen and seats, which is used as a social space for parents, and allows the Centre to run activities such as parent and toddler groups. It has sufficient space also for buggies.

Centre B

Location

Centre B is located in Dublin's north inner city in an area close to Dublin's Docks and the newly regenerated Docklands area and the IFSC. This Centre is in an area comprising primarily social housing. This area has experienced significant depopulation due to the demolition of social housing. There are low levels of owner occupation in the area, even by inner city standards, and the areas near Centre B house some of the most disadvantaged households in the north east inner city (Haase, n.d.). The housing in the area is a mix of new own-social housing built to re-house those vacating Dublin corporation flat complexes, older Victorian red-

brick houses (some of which are now private rental) and older artisan cottages. Centre B – is located near a national school which is a feeder school for many of Centre B's children, a Catholic Church, and various counselling and addiction services reflecting the prevalence of drug addiction in the area. Centre B is located close to two other community childcare centres.

Centre B is located in an area where lone parents are the dominant family type. Although Centre B is close to the newly regenerated Docklands area that comprises high specification apartments, retail units and the International Financial Service Sector (IFSC) the local population continue to experience low levels of educational attainment. The redevelopment of the Docklands did appear to bring some employment to local people, however, much of this was in the building and services sector.

Background to establishment

Centre B opened in 1999. It was established by local mothers who wanted a childcare and after school facility. A preschool serving 16 children was first established with an initial grant from the Drugs Task Force and FÁS. FÁS also provided funding for 11 staff: 6 preschool staff and 5 training in readiness for the establishment of an after schools service - through the Community Employment initiative.

Part of the philosophy behind Centre B's establishment was to break the cycle of educational disadvantage for local women by training them in areas such as childcare and youth work. Centre B began taking in afterschool children from September 1999. At that time, Centre B was located in larger premises in the local primary school. Centre B moved to alternative local accommodation when the primary school was being renovated, and the school then began to use the former childcare premises for initiatives to counter the cycle of educational disadvantage amongst students. Given the reduction in size of premises, Centre B had to reduce the number of children it could take, from 18 to 14. They received funding from Pobal and FÁS for extensions and alterations to the building.

Centre B provides part-time and sessional childcare and an after school service. The after school service consists of homework support and supervision. Its opening hours are 9 am to 5.30 pm, and it remains open during the summer holidays. While a total of 65 children attend Centre B, there are still only 14 pre-school children attending the service. Centre B accepts children aged between 3 and 6 years of age.

While a small outdoor play area is available at Centre B a much larger play area is available in a nearby community premises. This play area is much larger and it includes soft surfacing, colourful murals and equipment. This premises also holds Centre B's offices and a canteen. Centre B also bring the preschool children to a small local park.

Staffing

There are now 38 staff in Centre B: 31 CE childcare staff, 1 JI childcare, 2 full-time staff and 4 part-time. Some of the Centre B staff, including the overall manager and the childcare coordinator, were originally CE childcare staff, applying for jobs in Centre B as they became available when funding opportunities arose. The core staff of the crèche emerged in this way. For example, the HSE fund the childcare coordinator post. Core staff are paid using parents' fees, statutory funding from the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme, and Pobal staffing grants.

Qualifications and training

Fifty-three per cent of Centre B staff either left school after primary level, or their highest level of secondary school attainment is Intermediate/Junior Certificate. Training for CE/JI staff is paid by FÁS, while core staff must find their own training budget.

Service users

Centre B implements the government's Community Childcare Subvention Scheme, and the vast majority of children (52 out of 65) are subsidised at the highest level in the scheme as their parents are unemployed and in receipt of social welfare payments. The remainder are in low-paid employment requiring subvention at the B and C band rates. Almost all parents live locally.

Programmes

Centre B has not implemented the free preschool year as they are unsure of the criteria for inclusion in the scheme. However, they hope to implement it in the future.

Centre B is implementing Síolta and participates in the ELI's Síolta training. They also use Montessori methods, and for the past seven years have implemented Bubbles, a resource pack for preschool children.

Management

Centre B is governed by a Board of Management. Members include centre directors, the principal of the local national school, and a representative from Dublin City Council. They meet monthly, and membership turns over every two to five years.

Challenges and opportunities

A key challenge to Centre B's sustainability is that there are fewer children being born in the area, families continue to move out, or are sending their children to crèches and primary schools outside of the area. There is competition amongst crèches in the area for preschool children, although one of the crèches accepts babies and children up to age three only, in contrast with Centre B which takes toilet trained children only. On the other hand, given a lack of suitable rooms, Centre B can only take 14 preschool children.

Another challenge is Centre B's reliance on FÁS's CE programme to provide the majority of staffing for the centre. This means constant staff turnover, losing staff when they are trained and having to support staff new to the area of childcare, and staff requiring frequent release for training. Centre B is vulnerable to changes in national policy on Community Employment eligibility and length of employment, such as recent changes to limit the length of time that people can be on the scheme from three years to one or two years.

Centre B also has strengths that support its role in community childcare provision in the north inner city. Many of the core staff have been with Centre B since its establishment, and are committed to the services provided there. Centre B has also built up a cooperative

working relationship with the local national school, supporting children's transition from preschool to primary school, and provides educational supports to young primary school children. Given the prevalence of CE staff in Centre B, it seems that the centre supports local women in their desire to break from social and educational disadvantage. Overall, Centre B provides a service to the community that is beyond an early learning service for children.

Centre C

Location

Centre C is located in Dublin's north inner city in an area close to Dublin's Docks and the newly regenerated Docklands area and the IFSC. This Centre is in an area comprising primarily social housing. Close by are a grocery shop, a pub, a FÁS Training Centre, and National School. Centre C is located close to two other community preschools.

Background to establishment

Centre C is part of a Community Development Project (CDP). The CDP grew from the Women's Centre which was established in 1985 by local women as a drop-in centre and provided a safe place for local women for emotional support and childminding. The Women's Centre operated from one of the now demolished flat complexes, but as demand grew the service became overcrowded. Funding was granted by ADM, now referred to as Pobal. In the early 1990's an application was made to Dublin Corporation for relocation of the service, which was approved and the service moved to the current purpose built facility. In the past few years funding was secured from the Department of Community Rural and Gaelteach Affairs which expanded the service to the wider community both male and female. The childminding element evolved over time into a more professional structured childcare service. Centre C is staffed by childcare practitioners whose salaries are paid from Pobal, parental fees and the national childcare funding framework, FÁS Community Employment (CE) and Jobs Initiative (JI) staff.

The CDP continues to operate as a drop-in centre and point of information for referral to other services. It provides activities and training ranging from community arts to childcare training to personal development. The CDP is the only childcare centre in this evaluation that is FETAC-accredited, although there are other accredited centres in the inner city, such as the Larkin Centre in the North Strand. *Centre C* staff attend training which is accredited to FETAC ~Level 5 in Childcare Studies. The training takes place on-site during working hours. The Childcare Co-ordinator, a position currently job shared, is qualified to Level 6 in Childcare Studies. Three current Senior Childcare Leaders are attending the Level 6 Training in the Larkin Centre. Local parents also attend training through the CDP for example Junior Cert English, Basic Maths, Basic English, Communications, Gardening in the Community, Food and Nutrition, Women's Wellbeing. Some of these courses are funded by the Equality for Women Measures Programme via Pobal.

Centre C provides a range of childcare services for children aged from 3 months to 7 years of age: sessional, part-time, full-time and after-school care. There are a total of 79 children availing of the childcare service: 31 pre-school, 21 toddlers, 12 babies and 15 after school children. The centre's opening hours are from 9 am to 5 pm, and it remains open during school holidays.

Of the 79 children only 1 child (1%) is liable for the full weekly fee while the remaining 78 children (99%) qualify for subvention. The majority of the children on subvention are categorised as Band A which means the parent(s) are in receipt of a state payment for example lone parents, disability benefit and social welfare. The majority (87%) of parents whose children avail of the centre are from the immediate area and are described as Irish, although some fathers are non-Irish.

Staffing

Centre C is currently staffed by one full-time Childcare Co-ordinator (Job Share), eleven part-time senior staff leaders, and fourteen CE staff. There is additional support in the kitchen area and on-going volunteer support. There has been a high staff retention rate amongst senior staff of which a high percentage of staff have worked with the Centre since the 1990s

when it was the Women's Centre. The majority, although not all, of the staff are from the local community, and some of the parents whose children attend the Centre previously worked in the centre as CE staff. The service is managed by the General Manager of the CDP.

Qualifications and training

Ninety per cent (10 staff) of Centre C's senior team leaders were early school leavers having left post-primary education without any formal qualifications. Nevertheless staff have continued with their education by undertaking FETAC Level 5 and other educational courses. Amongst the total staff complement, 10 have completed FETAC level 5 training, two have completed FETAC level 6 Childcare Studies with a further three currently undertaking this course. The General Manager is educated to Level 9. Thirteen are currently undertaking FETAC Level 5 childcare training. Fifty per cent of senior team leaders have special needs training. Staff training is funded by FÁS for Community Employment and Jobs Initiative staff. The Larkin Centre train senior staff to Level 6 free of charge.

Programmes

Centre C is currently working towards implementing the Síolta quality standards, and it participates in the Síolta training provided by the ELI.

Physical environment

The indoor environment of Centre C comprises four childcare rooms (for babies, wobblers, toddlers, preschool), a room for children with additional needs, and a small office. Staff and children also benefit from the rooms available in the CDP building: a canteen, a resource room and meeting room. The outdoor play environment is a small backyard with a felt surface, with murals painted on the wall, slides and a play house. The centre also has the use of a garden in another community centre adjacent to the building, where children can do gardening and grow vegetables.

Funding

The Centre's sources of funding include Pobal under the NDP Plan to 2013, parental fees, the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and FÁS. The Centre staff also fundraise

for activities not covered under the current funding structure. Currently there are eleven children availing of the government's free preschool year which is an increase of seven on the previous year.

Management

Centre C's key governance structure is Childcare Co-ordinator, General Manager and Voluntary Board of Management that includes local representatives, local business people, ISPCC, HSE, and the Peter McVerry Trust. The Board meet every 6 weeks and fills its legal obligations by holding an AGM every 15 months. At the AGM new nominees are elected onto the Board.

Challenges and opportunities

Some challenges face Centre C. It is located in an area that has suffered significant depopulation due to the demolition of the flat complexes, with some residents relocated to new suburban social housing estates in Finglas, Coolock-Darndale and Ballymun (Haase, n.d.). Centre C is widening its catchment area to facilitate parents who want to return to training/education or community employment. As previously noted, Centre C is located in a small distinct geographical area where some, although not all, residents experience multiple social and economic disadvantages that for some results in disordered lifestyles. The area is high in criminality and poverty. In this context encouraging parental involvement in the CDP, in the crèche itself, and early learning more broadly is challenging. As is the case with many community childcare facilities, Centre C faces funding challenges brought about by economic recession and national policy changes.

On the other hand, the CDP and Centre C are in a position to provide learning opportunities for children, training and support to individuals and capacity building at community and individual levels. The CDP appears to remain a place to which local people gravitate and view as somewhere to go when they are having difficulties in their lives. While it seems that many people in the area still think of the CDP as the Women's Centre, they are increasingly involving men and young men as parents and as volunteers both in the wider CDP and the childcare centre. Centre C is

further advantaged by having core staff that have been working there for a long-time, are experienced practitioners, and are known to locals and trusted by them.

Centre D

Location

Centre D is located in an inner suburb on the southside of the River Liffey, close to the Grand Canal Dock. It is an area with a long maritime history, and many of the cottages in the area originally housed dockworkers. While Centre D is located in an area that primarily comprises social housing, it is now a mixed income area owing to the impact of regeneration and the recent construction of apartment complexes. The area has undergone gentrification, with younger families and professionals moving into the area given its prime location in the city.

The proportion of older people living in the area is higher than the national average (DDDA, n.d.) and for many households in the area this has been their home place for several generations of their families. The area in the vicinity of Centre D also includes some retail and business units.

Background to establishment

Centre D is located within a community centre that was established in 1989. A variety of services and support groups use the Centre that range across youth, health services for retired people, employment training and creative arts projects. It also provides rooms for hire, an internet cafe where locals can use the internet for a low fee, and a community garden.

Centre D opened in 1970. It started life as a community playgroup, operating four days a week from 9.30 to 12.30 for children aged between three and five years. It was staffed primarily by the local mothers that established the playgroup. The current manager participated initially on a voluntary basis when it opened, she had children in the playgroup, and later became an employee. As the playgroup evolved, it increased its provision from four to five days changed premises a number of times, increased its paid staff complement to two people, and served 20 children. It had 10 FÁS

Community Employment (CE) staff. However, it still retained its community, voluntary nature, with parents continuing to participate in the playgroup using a rota system in order to ensure that sufficient child:adult ratios were observed.

Funding

Government funding for childcare began to come on stream in the mid-1990s and this provided the playgroup with the opportunity to expand. The playgroup had already rented one room in the Community Centre. With some national funding, they rented another room, began to provide playschool for children aged two years and up, and extended their opening hours. The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme administered by what is now Pobal provided part funding for the development of a purpose-built childcare centre. This is a leasehold premises connected to the Community Centre but it has its own entrance. This facility was opened in 2001. This funding allowed the childcare centre to expand their provision again, taking children from babies of six months to five years of age, providing full-time care from 8.15am to 5.30pm, alongside continuing with the playgroup. Dublin Docklands Development Authority also provided some capital funding to the centre.

Staffing

Centre D has 7 full-time and 18 part-time childcare staff; 5 CE and 1 Jobs Initiative childcare staff, and also a kitchen/catering manager. The crèche was heavily reliant on CE in its early years. However, as the CE staff has trained in childcare over the years, the crèche has employed them as part-time and full-time staff. Staff costs are funded through FÁS, for CE and JI staff, parents' fees, the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme, and the HSE funds 1 part-time childcare worker.

Qualifications and training

In relation to the highest level of secondary school education attained by staff, 4 left school after primary school, 3 after completion of the Group Certificate, 21 after the Intermediate/Junior Certificate and 4 upon completion of the Leaving/Senior Certificate. Eleven staff members have completed FETAC level 5 childcare training, and 3 staff have completed level 6. Four staff are currently undertaking

FETAC level 5 childcare training and 1 is undertaking level 6. Staff training is paid through FÁS for the CE/JI staff, and the crèche for others.

Service users

Centre D provides full-time care to 55 children in the following categories: babies, twobblers, playgroup and pre-schoolers. Sixteen children are in preschool year. It remains the only community childcare centre in the area and it has a waiting list.

Of the 55 families using the centre, 7 have come to Ireland from other countries. The vast majority (over 90 per cent) of the families live locally. Centre D implements the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme, and a social mix is evident in the crèche. Twenty-five parents are unemployed and in receipt of social welfare; 32 parents are on low-incomes; while 21 are middle- and higher-income earners.

Physical environment

Internally, the Centre has one room for each of the age ranges, one kitchen, and one small office. Externally there is a small fenced in play area, with a soft colourful play surface. The children also use the local public park.

Programmes

Centre D operates the government's free pre-school year but most of the children are not eligible as they are already on a subvention scheme. It is currently implementing Síolta, and participates in the ELI's Síolta training.

Management

Centre D is governed by a Board of Directors. The Board meets every two months and membership changes every year.

Challenges and opportunities

A key challenge facing Centre D is the lack of internal space. It does not have any rooms beyond the four childcare rooms, a kitchen and a very small office. Its reception area is also small: parents leave children's buggies outside the premises. This has implications for the ability of the Centre to meet changing regulatory and quality requirements.

Nevertheless, the Centre's sustainability is supported by the social and income mix of the parents, and that it can retain trained staff as it is not as reliant on FÁS staff as other community childcare centres.

Centre E

Location

Centre E is located in Dublin's south inner city on one of Dublin's main throughfares that runs from Tara St, close to College Green, to Grand Canal Quay. Centre E is located in an area of historical and architectural interest, comprising Georgian period houses, older social and private housing, and new apartments, which Haase (n.d.) notes are primarily private rental, pubs, a library and archive, and retail outlets. The National Drug Treatment Centre is also located in this area and indicates that like other areas of inner city Dublin that there are problems with drug abuse. The electoral area within which Centre E sits has, due to the Docklands regeneration and the in-migration since the early 1990s, experienced population growth, declining unemployment, and increasing numbers of residents with higher education. However, this area also has the highest proportion of lone parents in the inner city (almost 2/3 of families with dependent children are headed by lone parents) and 23.9 per cent of the population still had low levels of education in 2006 (Haase, n.d.).

Background to establishment

Centre E is located in a building that dates from 1895 which provides a range of community services. These include services to older people such as meals on wheels, an employment service, a full-day care crèche, a youth work service, adult education, and welfare rights advice. Rooms in the Community Centre are available to hire. The centre also runs education sessions for people in the locality on issues such as health. The Centre employs over 220 people on a full and part time basis. Centre E was purpose-built in 1999 with funding from Pobal through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme. Prior to its establishment, the current crèche manager ran a Montessori preschool in rooms upstairs in the Centre, while a separate playschool session operated in another part of the building.

Centre E provides full and part-time childcare and an afterschool service to 46 children – 12 preschoolers, 10 afterschool, and 22 babies and wobblers – aged between one and nine-years-old. Ninety-two parents avail of the service. The majority (over 90%) live locally. Seventeen parents are non-Irish. Its opening hours are 8.45 am to 5.45 pm, and it remains open during school holidays.

Staffing, training and qualifications

Centre E employs three full-time and eight part-time childcare staff. It also has nine childcare staff funded through Community Employment (CE) and 3 childcare staff funded under Jobs Initiative (JI). There are also four CE staff and two JI staff undertaking other roles in the crèche. Three DIT students also work with the crèche as part of their study placement. For 20 of the childcare staff, their highest level of educational attainment is the Intermediate/Junior Certificate. However, in relation to childcare training, 20 staff members have completed FETAC level 4, 15 FETAC level 5, and 4 FETAC level 6. A further five staff are currently undertaking childcare FETAC level 5, and 3 FETAC level 6.

Funding

Funding to pay for staff costs comes from a variety of sources: Pobal, FÁS (for CE and JI staff), fees paid by parents, and staff's own fundraising efforts. Funding is provided by FÁS for training for both CE and JI staff, and for staff employed directly by the crèche. Any other requirements are met through local fundraising efforts by the staff. Crèche staff receive FETAC childcare training outside of the Community Centre.

Centre E operates the Government's childcare subvention scheme. In September 2010 they commenced the Government's free school year scheme.

Programmes

The Centre is working to implement Aistear and Síolta, and it participates in the Síolta training provided by the ELI.

Physical environment

The centre has four rooms for children (babies, wobblers, preschool, afterschool), a kitchen, office, resource room, and five meeting rooms. Outdoor play space consists of a play area with rubber surfacing, and space for a play house and children's cars and bikes.

Management

Centre E is governed by a Board of Management. Board members include parents and the managers of the Community Centre. The Board meets monthly, and membership turns over every five years.

Challenges and opportunities

Alongside their colleagues in other community childcare centres, a series of challenges face Centre E. Most of those moving into the area as a result of regeneration are childless households renting apartments in the gated communities built during the economic boom (Haase, n.d.), and have no need for childcare services. Crèche management has also noticed a drop-off in parent numbers over the past year or two, as parents lose employment and cannot afford the service. To meet the short-fall in children and income, at the time of evaluation, Centre E was in its first year of providing services to babies.

Centre E has the advantage of having access to the wider facilities of the Community Centre such as a large hall which it uses to allow children the opportunity to play in an indoor space, and where it also holds events to engage with families and the wider community. Overall, the Community Centre and its services are embedded in its immediate locality, and within the wider south inner city. It has retained core experienced practitioners that demonstrate a passion for their work.

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