Two important documents to do with the future of early childhood care and education in Ireland were launched in December, which, in the Christmas rush, received little public attention. I am referring firstly to the National Strategic Plan 2011–2013, Early Childhood Care and Education and secondly to the Workforce Development Plan.

The National Strategic Plan provides a framework for the delivery of early childhood care and education programmes which support children and families for the next three years. Included in the Strategy are many actions which Barnardos has been calling for for many years such as the full implementation of Children First in the early years sector, the introduction of regulations for school age childcare, greater efforts to ensure the inclusion of children with additional needs, as well actions to support the quality of school age and early years provision. Barnardos welcomes the National Strategy as it gives direction to the work of the OMCYA, the National Voluntary Childcare organisations, and the City and County Childcare Committees in promoting quality early childhood care and provision in the medium term. At the same time, it is disappointing that the Strategy makes no commitment to the extension of the free pre-school year nor does it provide for the introduction of regulations for childminding, which is the childcare option for the majority of children.

The Workforce Development Plan is welcome in that it provides a focus for ensuring that the early years workforce will have the appropriate training and skills needed to provide quality experiences for children. The Plan addresses important issues such as practitioner access to flexible, affordable, accredited learning opportunities, the importance of recognition of prior learning and the need to ensure consistent quality of courses, all of which can be problematic for practitioners. One criticism of the Plan would be the absence of specific targets and timeframes for the implementation of the Plan. What would help the early years sector to take up the challenges of the Plan would be the provision of a transition training fund to support the upskilling of practitioners. It should be possible to reallocate some of the millions which are currently spent on childcare training towards such a transition fund.

ANNE CONROY Editor
This article is based on the study entitled ‘Professional Development for Early Childhood Professionals: Examining Pedagogy in Early Childhood’ prepared by a research team from Stranmillis University College: a College of Queen’s University Belfast for the Department of Education and Science in the Republic of Ireland. Team members included Glenda Walsh, Colette Gray, Dorothy McMillan, Karen Hanna, Owen McCracken and Sheelagh Carville.

INTRODUCTION
From the 1990s, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Ireland has escalated, at least in rhetoric, to the forefront of the political agenda (Hayes, 2008). Substantial economic, social and demographic changes have resulted in major change in Irish policy regarding the way in which children should be cared for and educated. A suite of policy initiatives at the close of the 20th century not only recognised the importance and value of quality ECCE for young children’s holistic development and the need for improving quality standards and regulations, but also revealed a shift in thinking away from an overly
formal curriculum towards a greater understanding of the
need for a curriculum and pedagogical approach that meets
the needs and interests of young children. Such policy
documentation culminated in the publication of Síolta: the
National Quality Framework for Early Childhood, published
by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and
Education (CECDE) in 2006, and Aistear: the Early
Childhood Curriculum Framework published by the National
Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 2009.
Both frameworks are grounded in research evidence and are
embedded in a pedagogical approach and curricular focus
that is play-based in perspective and integrates both care and
education. Furthermore, from January 2010, as part of the
Irish Government’s ECCE schemes under the National
Development Plan (2007-2013), a part-time free school
place became available for all children aged 3 and 3 months
to 4 years 6 months at the 1st September of each year.

Therefore it could be argued, from a policy perspective, that
much progress has been made in terms of ECCE,
particularly in the last decade. However it would seem that
ECCE in Ireland has still far to go before such rhetoric
becomes reality (Hayes, 2008; Dunphy, 2008). Although
empirical evidence on quality early childhood care and
education in Ireland has been somewhat lacking (Mahoney
and Hayes, 2006), that which does exist has drawn attention
to the overly directive nature of pedagogy in infant classes,
where play tends only to be used as a reward for work
(OECD, 2004; Murphy, 2004). However, beyond infant
classes, it would appear that even in many Irish Early Years
settings where play is the principal pedagogical approach
employed, evidence would suggest that it often takes place in
an educational void, with little recognition of its developmental
potential (Hayes 2007; Kernan 2007).

...successful change starts
from where the educators
are already and builds on
the existing good work
that is being undertaken.

The premise of the study discussed in this article, entitled
‘Professional Development for Early Childhood Professionals:
Examining Pedagogy in Early Childhood’, was based on the
underlying assumption that change in terms of ‘real’ practice
depends on the actions, values and beliefs of individuals (see
for example: Fullan, 2001, 2003; Tubin, 2004; Morrison,
1998; Stoll and Fink, 1996 and Whitaker, 1993). If Early
Years educators/teachers are not ready to embrace the
necessary changes, the whole process can become futile
(Walsh et al, 2006). Drawing on the work of Moyles, Adams
that successful change starts from where the educators are
already and builds on the existing good work that is being
undertaken. They emphasise that individual professionals
should be encouraged to reflect more closely on their own
pedagogy and to effectively become learners in the classroom
themselves. It is on this basis that the study in question,
focusing on the professional development of early childhood
teachers/educators, is more than ever needed in an effort to
ensure that real change in Irish early childhood pedagogy
may be realised in practice.

FOCUS OF THE STUDY
The project entitled ‘Professional Development for Early
Childhood Professionals: Examining Pedagogy in Early
Childhood’, funded by the Department of Education and
Science in the Republic of Ireland, began in January 2009
and spanned a period of approximately 18 months in
duration. The overarching aim of the project was:

‘…to enable early childhood educators/teachers to build a
deeper understanding of pedagogy by identifying the nature
of pedagogy in early childhood settings and by implementing
a development tool for practitioners to enhance the
effectiveness of their own pedagogy.’

In an effort to meet this aim, the following key objectives
informed the course of the project:

1. To identify the nature and effectiveness of pedagogy
   in diverse early childhood education settings in
   Ireland.

2. To develop, implement, evaluate and review a
   professional development model (PDM) to support
   early childhood practitioners to examine and
   enhance their own pedagogy.

METHODOLOGY
The study focused on four main setting types, namely infant
classes, childminders, sessional playgroups and daycares in
a rural (Sligo) and urban (Dublin) locality in Ireland. The research
design was principally multi-method and multi-source in
perspective, where observations, reflective diaries, interviews
and a literature and questionnaire survey were the principal
methods of data collection. Sources from whom the data was
obtained included key stakeholders in the field, Early Years
practitioners, children and settings.
THE NATURE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF PEDAGOGY IN IRELAND

Key Findings from the Stakeholder Interviews
Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with nine stakeholders from organisations such as the Irish Preschool Playgroups Association (IPPA); Childminding Ireland; the National Children’s Nurseries Association (NCNA) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Stakeholders’ feedback emphasised the importance of change, largely at a political level, to ensure effective early childhood pedagogy in practice. While flexibility and diversity were welcomed on their part within the Early Years sector, stakeholders were of the opinion that a fundamental set of principles on quality pedagogy were necessary and that greater value should be attributed to play-based pedagogy as a whole. In order to meet these requirements, the need for effective political leaders to drive the Early Years agenda and enhance the overall status of early years practitioners was brought to the fore and the stakeholders were unanimous in their desire for rigorous and effective training programmes for all Early Years practitioners which allow for the acquisition of knowledge and the capacity for critique and debate.

...stakeholders were of the opinion that a fundamental set of principles on quality pedagogy were necessary and that greater value should be attributed to play-based pedagogy as a whole.

Key Messages to Emerge from the Audit on Early Years Pedagogy
A questionnaire survey was designed to provide an insight into the nature and effectiveness of Early Years Pedagogy across the four setting types throughout Ireland. The response rate of 1271 surveys comprised 706 (55.5%) from infant teachers, 307 (24.2%) from sessional playgroup staff, 131 (10.3%) from childminders and 127 (10.0%) from daycare staff. Some interesting messages emerged about Early Years pedagogy in the different setting types in terms of the amount and nature of play-based learning that was actually taking place. According to the audit, play-based learning sessions are generally available on a daily basis in all Early Years settings in Ireland for at least a short period at some time throughout the day. However formal, structured activities such as literacy and numeracy in the form of letter formation, reading and number concepts appear to characterise the main early learning experiences of children in infant classes in Ireland. Likewise, similar formal learning occurs on a daily basis in all of the other pre-school setting types, although to a lesser extent. The annotated comments at the end of the survey reveal, nevertheless, that in contrast to their practice, it appears that the vast majority of Early Years professionals, as indicated in the focus group interviews, value children’s play and recognise the importance of interacting with children through play.

DEVELOPING AND USING THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT MODEL: THE CASE STUDY EXPERIENCE

Developing the Professional Development Model (PDM)
A major aspect of the Examining Pedagogy in Early Childhood research project was to develop ‘a model to support early childhood educators/teachers to examine and enhance their own pedagogy’. The purpose of the model was to support early childhood educators/teachers in their professional reflection...
and enhancement of their own pedagogy. The theoretical premise of the PDM was based on the socio-cultural learning principle outlined in the Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (SPEEL) (Moyles et al 2002) that effective Early Years practitioners have the ability to:

- be reflective
- be questioning
- be analytical
- be committed to learning and professional development
- welcome and initiate constructive, critical engagement with peers and others.

With this in mind, the research team aimed to provide an integrated package consisting of the PDM document, initial training and ongoing support to enable participants to develop and utilise these professional qualities. The PDM itself was designed to provide culturally appropriate, clear guidance on effective pedagogy for all types of Early Years settings and to contain advice that is age appropriate for the children involved within a user friendly format.

The PDM was based on current ideas of best practice supported by a review of international research and theory in the field of Early Years pedagogy and also drew on original data obtained from the consultation with key stakeholders, the audit and the practitioner focus group discussions. This enabled the identification of five key dimensions of effective pedagogy:

1. Nurturing Relationships with and between Children
2. Playful and Engaging Activities
3. Collaborative Partnerships
4. Skilful Interactions
5. Management and Organisation

The PDM is presented in a ring binder, with a short introduction and a section explaining how to use the model. The five main sections are colour coded and each follows the same format:

- a rationale for the inclusion of this dimension of effective pedagogy;
- a list of quality indicators;
- a cameo of effective practice based on Early Years practice;
- a link to relevant web based video material;
- some questions to help the practitioner reflect on their current practice;
- a list of potential areas for development and numerous practical task examples from which the practitioner may choose one or more on which to focus.

Each section concludes with diary reflection pages with headings to encourage professional reflection through making entries during the implementation of the PDM.

All practitioners attended a training workshop about how to effectively use the PDM and implemented it over a period of 16 weeks in their own setting. The workshop was conducted by two members of the research team with extensive Early Years practice experience. The aim of the training session was to encourage participants to engage in discussion about quality pedagogy and express their perceived strengths and development needs in this area. Video material was used during the training session to reinforce aspects of good practice in Early Years. Additional support was provided throughout the implementation process in terms of telephone and email contact by the same two members of the research team, one taking responsibility for practitioners in the Dublin area and the other for the Sligo group. Further support was provided by a face to face meeting with the designated research team member at the mid-way point of the PDM implementation period.

Using and Evaluating the PDM

The case studies were conducted in six Early Years settings which used the PDM over a six month period. Their main purpose was to highlight the practitioner response to using the PDM and the overall effectiveness of the PDM in terms of the quality of the learning experience. The findings comprise information gleaned from the one-to-one interviews conducted with each of the principal practitioners participating in the study before and after using the PDM, the reflective diaries that each of these practitioners maintained over the 16-week period and detailed observations using an instrument known as the Quality Learning Instrument (QLI) (Walsh and Gardner, 2005), which evaluated the quality of the learning experience before and after using the PDM.

...the quality of an Early Years setting is determined by the way in which the learning and developmental needs of the main stakeholders, i.e. the children themselves, are being met within the affective, cognitive, social and physical context...

The Quality Learning Instrument (QLI) challenges the existing notion that the quality of learning environments can only be assessed in terms of learning outcomes, context and teaching style and provides a structured assessment of an Early Years
setting based on the quality of children’s learning experiences in general. In this way, the quality of an Early Years setting is determined by the way in which the learning and developmental needs of the main stakeholders, i.e. the children themselves, are being met within the affective, cognitive, social and physical context (Walsh et al., 2006). The QLI can be used in Early Years settings with 3-6-year-old children and has been subjected to considerable validity and reliability analyses (see Walsh and Gardner, 2005 and Walsh et al. 2006 for further information). The quality indicators that the QLI focuses upon are: motivation, concentration, independence, confidence, well being, multiple skill acquisition, higher order thinking skills, social interaction and respect.

Unlike many well-known measures, such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale ECERS (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998) and its later modifications (Sylva et al., 2003), the QLI (Walsh & Gardner, 2005; Walsh et al., 2006) takes into consideration the whole triangle of interaction in the early years setting – the children’s actions, the teaching strategies and the role of the environment. The three aspects – children’s actions, teaching strategies and the environment – are judged in relation to each of the nine quality indicators. Using a best-fit model, each setting is rated against the QLI rubric on a scale of 1 (low) to 6 (high) for each domain (total scores can vary from 9–54).

Overall, the findings from the case studies would suggest that each of the settings involved had found the PDM experience valuable and beneficial. In terms of the practitioners’ perspective, they all expressed a willingness and eagerness to participate in the project. While the implementation process varied across all of the settings and different dimensions of the PDM were focused upon, all in the end found the experience of using the PDM useful, both for the children and their own professional development. Some challenges were raised in terms of time and workload constraints and the difficulty of changing staff mindsets but the advantages of the experiences certainly appeared to outweigh the disadvantages. Although in the main the presentation and format of the PDM were praised, suggestions were offered for improvements in terms of making it live on the web and offering further training opportunites.

As for the learning experience, although all settings varied in terms of quality pre-implementation of the PDM, the quality of the learning experience, according to the QLI, increased to a greater or lesser extent in all of the settings after using the PDM. The greatest improvement occured on the cognitive, dispositional and social indicators of the QLI, in particular for those settings that focused on ‘Skilful Interactions’ and ‘Nurturing Relationships’. Overall the PDM appeared to have greatest impact on the teaching strategies that the practitioners were employing, where, in the main, practice shifted from quite a teacher-directed approach to allowing the children more time to interact with one another in activities that could be decribed as ‘playful’ in orientation, i.e. a blend of play and work.

In some of the settings a marked improvement took place in the quality of the learning experience pre and post PDM implementation and, although all of the success cannot be solely attributed to the PDM, as one of the practitioners stated: ‘The PDM provided me with the mechanism to begin to think about my own practice and to engage in some sound constructive criticism. By so doing I began to see what I wanted to improve on and the PDM provided me with the direction of where I wanted to go by degrees.’

In this way, it could be argued that the PDM injected a form of professionalisation into the practitioners involved, not only providing them with the professional knowledge and understanding of what effective early childhood pedagogy is, but also injecting in them the confidence and capacity to move beyond the acquisition of knowledge and understanding to realising some of these pedagogical changes in practice.
KEY CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE STUDY

The main conclusions that emerged from the study was that the majority of Early Years experts and professionals in Ireland, in general, perceive effective early childhood pedagogy as being play-based in perspective, supported by skilful professionals who know when and where not to intervene in the learning experience. However, the nature and effectiveness of Early Years pedagogy in Ireland, according to the experts and professionals, does not as yet fully embrace this aspiration, where lack of adequate funding, lack of appropriate training and professional development, and lack of cohesion within the sector as a whole act as some of the main constraints to effective pedagogy being realised in practice. The need to change traditional mindsets about the value of play was also clearly articulated.

The PDM experience was welcomed and perceived as valuable by all concerned and its overarching impact appeared, to a greater or lesser extent, to be positive in all involved settings. In this way it could be argued that the time is ripe for professional development programmes to be undertaken to enhance Early Childhood pedagogy within Ireland.

The main recommendations to be identified include:

- The need for funding in the Early Years sector and the overall status of practitioners to be enhanced.
- The Inspectorate should be broadened to include EY professionals.
- There is a need for good quality initial and in-service training opportunities for practitioners.
- A classroom assistance scheme in infant classes and special educational needs support throughout the sector should be provided.
- There should be a focus on play-based pedagogy in Early Years training courses at all levels.
- Copies of the PDM and relevant web-based professional development materials should be disseminated to Early Years settings and organisations throughout Ireland.
- A continuing professional support system e.g. regional field officers and the application of the PDM to existing training courses should be made available.

REFERENCES

Early Childhood Settings as a Locus for the Inclusion of Children with Special Needs

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INTRODUCTION
In 2008, the Curriculum Development Unit, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, in conjunction with the Limerick City Childcare Committee, were awarded a grant by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) to design a Framework for Action for the inclusion of children (birth to four years) with special educational needs (SEN) in early childhood settings. By law in Ireland, children ‘under six years of age, who are not attending a national school or equivalent’ are defined as pre-school children (Department of Health and Children, 2006). The 15 early childhood settings participating in this study, therefore, included pre-schools, play groups, crèches and childminders.

METHODOLOGY
The study was conducted in two distinct research phases, both of which utilised qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The qualitative element comprised target child and free description observations where children, practitioners and pre-school special needs assistants (PSNAs) were observed going about their daily lives within the early childhood setting. These observations enabled those [children with SEN] who ‘cannot, or will not, speak for themselves’ (Opie and Sikes, 2004: 122) to have their voice heard and so become the dominant focus within the study. A series of nine focus group discussions and 50 interviews with parents, practitioners, PSNAs, national disability agencies, the National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative, City and County Childcare Committees and the Border Counties Childcare Network were conducted.

The quantitative element comprised an audit of childcare provision that was undertaken in each of five geographic areas: Limerick City and County, North Tipperary, Clare and Kerry. A total of 471 questionnaires were disseminated to all childcare providers on the Health Services Executive (HSE) notified lists for these five areas. The overall purpose was to gather data in relation to the numbers of children with SEN (birth to four years) accessing ECCE settings, the numbers of PSNAs working with these children, as well as the range and nature of accredited and SEN specific staff training. This article draws upon phase one, undertaken between September 2008 and August 2009 incorporating the audit of provision as well as an exploration of the challenges and issues associated with inclusion in ECCE. (See page 14 for an article relating to the second phase of this study.)
FACTORS THAT SHAPE INCLUSIVE PRACTICE IN THE EARLY YEARS

Today, inclusion and participation are perceived as ‘essential to human dignity and to the enjoyment and exercise of human rights’ (UNESCO, 1994:11). As a result of national and international policy, notably the Salamanca World Statement and Framework for Action (1994) and the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989), recognising and responding to children’s diversity is central to the establishment and implementation of inclusive practice in educational contexts. The UNCRC, ratified by Ireland in 1992, pre-empted a rights-based approach to inclusion, ensuring the right for all children to receive education without discrimination on any grounds.

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2005:12) defines inclusion as ‘a dynamic approach of responding positively to pupil diversity and of seeing individual differences not as problems, but as opportunities for enriching learning’.

Ireland has made considerable progress over the past 12 years with regard to recognising children’s needs and rights. Consequently, children with SEN are increasingly visible within policy and practice. The Department of Education and Science (1999) sets out the rationale for including children with SEN in early childhood settings:

‘A child’s early learning provides the foundations for later learning, so the sooner intervention is begun the greater the opportunity and likelihood for the child to go on and learn more complex skills and have development enhanced…with quality early childhood educational interventions, the handicaps and difficulties of a child with a disability…will be reduced and additional problems will be prevented.’ (pg.83)

Critically, quality early childhood educational intervention is dependent upon a ‘high quality, intensive and clearly articulated programme, delivered by highly skilled and carefully trained personnel in contexts of small groups and individual instruction, and designed to specifically address individual identified needs’ (ibid, pg. 84). Since 1999, various policies and initiatives have been developed to support and facilitate children’s participation within ECCE including the:

- White Paper on Early Childhood Education: Ready to Learn (DES, 1999)
- Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN, 2004)

In terms of practice, the revised Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations, 2006, the National Quality Framework; Siolta (CECDE, 2006), the Early Years Curriculum Framework: Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and the free pre-school year in ECCE (OMCYA, 2010) are pivotal. These initiatives progress policy and practice for children with SEN in the context of overall ECCE provision for children from birth to six years in Ireland.

At the core of these initiatives is recognition of the complex and multifaceted nature of supports required by children with SEN to enable them to participate fully in different contexts including early childhood settings. These supports include help and support to families of a child with SEN (DES, 1999, Dunst et al., 1988), the availability of multi-disciplinary services for children with SEN (Shonkoff and Meisels, 2000), cooperation between multi-disciplinary teams and ECCE practitioners (DES, 1999), and supportive learning environments (DES, 1999; CECDE, 2006; NCCA, 2009; Porter, 2002; Shonkoff et al., 2000). Moreover, it is imperative that children with SEN access an appropriate curriculum in the early years (Cederman, 2006; CECDE, 2006; NCCA, 2009; McGough et al., 2005). Fundamentally, the link between highly trained practitioners and child outcomes is unequivocal (Cederman, 2006; McGough et al., 2005; Schweinhart, 2004; Sylva et al., 2004). Collectively, these elements create optimal environments where ECCE settings become an appropriate locus for the inclusion of children with SEN when the foundations for life long learning are being laid.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Numbers of children with SEN

A total of 174 completed questionnaires representing a 37% response rate were returned. There were 3,633 children (birth to 4 years) accessing these 171 settings, of which 131 children had been diagnosed with a special need (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Number of children with SEN (birth to 4 years) attending Early Childhood Care and Education settings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Number of Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limerick City</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co. Limerick</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nth Tipperary</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerry</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A wide range of special needs was recorded. In line with national and international research, the numbers of children diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) were high, representing 16.6% of the overall numbers of children with a diagnosed special educational need (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Overview of categories of SEN

An additional 38 children attending early childhood settings were awaiting assessment, 18 of whom were suspected of having an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). When added to the overall numbers of children diagnosed with ASD (16.6%), this could mean that up to 46% of the total number of children with SEN attending early childhood settings may have ASD. Other significant categories of SEN were: Speech and Language Disorder – 28, Down Syndrome – 20, General Learning Disability – 19 and Physical Disability – 17.

Allocation of Pre-School Special Needs Assistants
There were 59 pre-school special needs assistants working with children with SEN in ECCE settings across the five geographic areas (Figure 3). This means that only 45% of children with SEN had the support of a PSNA.

Figure 3
Overview of PSNAs by geographic area

The allocation of PSNAs varied from region to region across Ireland. In Kerry, where the highest incidences of SEN were recorded, only 33% of children had this support. In Clare and North Tipperary, 16.6% and 13% respectively had this support. In Limerick city the figure rose to 59% while in County Limerick, 71.4% of children with SEN had the support of a PSNA. Therefore, depending on their geographic location, parents may be fortunate enough to have support or they may struggle to have a PSNA appointed to their child with SEN.

Compounding the issue for children, parents and practitioners was the limited time allocated for PSNA support within individual settings. Parents in particular claimed that allocations were insufficient for their child’s needs:

Parent Voice 1: ‘Two days is not enough.’
Parent Voice 2: ‘She was only given seven hours a week; she needs the SNA for all the hours she can get.’

Practitioners were equally critical of the ‘ridiculous hours’ in terms of PSNA support. One child with complex special needs including lack of mobility, hearing impairment, language delay and sensory issues was allocated a PSNA for a total of eight hours per week. In the words of the practitioner, this ‘allocation is not sufficient really with the combination that he has. You would need somebody full time’ (private childcare provider).

Parents were acutely aware of the limited ‘window of opportunity’ to support a child’s development during early childhood. As commented by one parent, ‘We only have five years to make a difference.’

Levels of practitioner qualifications and training
Against the backdrop of the National Framework of Qualifications (2003) and in common with the DES (2008), the qualification most commonly held by practitioners and PSNAs was FETAC Level 5. There was consensus among stakeholders across the sector that, while useful, FETAC Level 5 did not adequately prepare practitioners for working with a child with SEN. Consequently, of the 27 practitioners and PSNAs interviewed, 22 had undertaken an additional stand-alone FETAC Level 5 module in Special Needs to enhance their knowledge and skills in this area.

It was evident that the special needs specific training benefitted practitioners and PSNAs in terms of raising their awareness of special needs and familiarising them with a broad range of needs and syndromes such as Autism, Down syndrome and Asperger’s syndrome. Special needs specific training, for example, helped one PSNA to realise that a child with SEN is first and foremost ‘a child, not a disabled child but a child with a disability. It would have made me more aware of the child’s needs and the child’s dignity.’ While it helped another PSNA to understand the need to ‘take one step at a time, not to rush; let them [the children] develop at their individual pace’.
It was evident that the special needs specific training benefitted practitioners and PSNAs in terms of raising their awareness of special needs and familiarising them with a broad range of needs and syndromes such as Autism, Down syndrome and Asperger’s syndrome.

Overall, however, short-term training was deemed totally inadequate in terms of equipping practitioners to work effectively with a child who has special needs. FETAC Level 5 did not provide ‘enough information on children with SEN, it only dips into it. More in-depth training is vital if we are to work with children with special needs.’ (Dublin: focus group discussion)

In the absence of more in-depth training; practitioners and PSNAs were at a loss when faced with supporting the inclusion of a child who has unidentified and/or complex special needs. Inclusion calls upon practitioners to recognise a ‘continuum of diverse needs amongst all children and utilise all its available resources to make appropriate provisions to meet their needs’ (Puri et al., 2004: 42). This was the core of the issue for practitioners. Although they had the child’s best interests at heart, practitioners were constrained by their lack of appropriate training. In the context of this study, there was a belief, that although practitioners were ‘interested’ in the concept of inclusion and in facilitating children with SEN in their setting, fundamentally, they did not ‘know enough about how to cater for children with special needs’ (national disability agencies focus group).

Quality of existing provision

There is little doubt that practitioners worked to the best of their ability to support the inclusion of children with SEN. Nevertheless, there were considerable weaknesses with regard to day-to-day practice. This article focuses specifically upon the learning environment, communication and curriculum.

The learning environment

The environment is a ‘powerful teaching tool and the outward and visible sign to families’ that you care about their child’s needs and work towards supporting their learning and overall holistic development (Feeney et al, 2006: 224). The physical environment can be challenging for practitioners and children with SEN alike. From a practitioner perspective, a continuum of difficulties may be present including lack of appropriate toileting facilities for an older child (3-4 years), inadequate storage space for specialised equipment and lack of available circulation space to facilitate mobility and access to materials.

One private practitioner provided insight into the challenges associated with a boy attending the setting who turned four years of age in November, 2009. ‘He’s a strong lad. He cannot walk. He cannot talk. He is not toilet trained.’ It was becoming increasingly ‘difficult to physically change him... two of the staff have to go with the SNA to manage him’. This was by no means an isolated case as four other children with similar needs were also observed during the study.

From the perspective of a child with SEN, the physical environment can be difficult to negotiate due to the inaccessibility of equipment and materials, lack of circulation space, the large numbers of children within an area and, crucially, inappropriate noise levels and sensory overload. This was most noticeable in terms of the acoustics of the environment where children with SEN were overwhelmed by loud music and/or radios playing in the background during activities. The general hustle and bustle within early childhood settings was a particular challenge for children with SEN as indicated through the following commentaries:

Private practitioner: Voice 1: ‘He becomes agitated by the numbers of children and the noise.’
Community practitioner: Voice 2: ‘The room is quite noisy and just to get him to work.’
PSNA: Voice 3: ‘Keeping things calm, she doesn’t like too many people all together.’
Parent: Voice 4: ‘He gets weary of people, different people coming in, like students.’

One practitioner described how a child in her setting with complex needs was simply unable to cope within a larger group... '[He] really didn’t need to be in a room of ten children. Maybe he needed to be in a room of three children.' Clearly pointing to the benefits of PSNA support for a child with SEN, this child’s PSNA articulated how he ‘becomes agitated, I take him out at that stage and I might bring the sensory box with him. Even to put the lights out when I remove him to the other room and he’s really calm then.’

The emotional environment

There was consensus about creating and maintaining a positive environment in the setting. This is achieved through the creation of an emotionally-safe environment where positive relationships prevail. Ultimately, an emotionally safe environment is strongly linked to effective communication.
The importance of communication cannot be over stated. It is an underlying principle of effective inclusion. Notwithstanding its importance, communication was weak and ineffective at multiple levels across the sector. Communication between practitioners and parents was particularly weak. This was directly linked to practitioners’ professional development and to their confidence in bringing concerns to the attention of the parent. Practitioners believed that they were not ‘not qualified to say any more or do anything’ when they were worried about a child. Moreover, they ‘don’t have the language….to describe the problem in a way that makes sense’ (Dublin childcare provider network).

Both practitioners and parents were critical of the nature and extent of communication between the various intervention services and early childhood settings. Parents referred to the absence of any formal link between the two, claiming that, at best, the approach was ‘ad-hoc’. One parent spoke of how she ‘tried to get a coordinated approach but there’s nothing, there’s no proper plan in place’. The absence of communication between the intervention services and early childhood settings had a direct impact on children’s experiences within settings as evidenced by the considerable lapses in developing and reviewing Individual Development Plans (IDPs) for the child with SEN, for example.

There was also compelling evidence of deficiencies in terms of effective team work and communication strategies for the sharing of information about children with SEN within settings. Practitioners and PSNAs were aware of the tokenistic nature of present communication systems and highlighted the need for ‘proper communication between the person that you work with and you’ (private provider). Ineffective communication led to considerable inconsistencies and lack of continuity in the child’s care and education.

There were inordinate delays in terms of Intervention Services developing Individual Development Plans (IDP) for children. Frequently, children were mid-way through their year in the setting before an IDP was issued. There were also instances where IDPs were out of date and had not been reviewed. A PSNA explained the difficulty: ‘When I started in 2007; I got the IDP which covered all of the things she needed to do, sharing, playing, her pincer grasp, a physiotherapy chart.’ This IDP was ‘as old as the hills now, she’s too bright for those things now, she is very good at sharing, she’s brilliant with her numbers, she’s brilliant with her letters, she’s reached all the goals they set for her and passed them.’ For this PSNA and others, they were at a loss in terms of supporting the child’s ongoing development within the early years setting. PSNAs claimed that while waiting for a review of the IDP by the early intervention team or other professionals, ‘We just potter on, we do our own thing basically.’

CONCLUSION

This article looks at early childhood settings as a locus for the inclusion of children with SEN. At the outset, it identifies a range of supports required by children with SEN, to enable them to participate fully within early childhood settings. These include help and support to parents of a child with SEN, the availability of multi-disciplinary services for children with SEN as well as co-operation between multi-disciplinary teams and ECCE practitioners, and supportive learning environments. Critically, children with SEN must be able to access an appropriate early childhood curriculum. These factors which are dependent upon highly trained practitioners create optimal learning environments for children with SEN.

These phase one findings raise serious concerns about the quality of provision for children with SEN in early childhood settings. Clearly, while practitioners were committed to inclusion in the early years they were ill-equipped to effectively support the inclusion of children with SEN in individual setting contexts.
There were considerable weaknesses with regard to the fundamental tenets of inclusion: communication, availability of resources and supports, appropriate curricula, and crucially, professional development.

Phase one of this study culminated in the development of a Draft Framework for Action (DFA) for the inclusion of children with SEN in early childhood settings. Underpinned by five core concepts; Professional Development, Communication, Environment, Assessment for Learning and Accessing the curriculum, the DFA provided practical guidelines and strategies for use by practitioners to support the inclusion of children with special needs within their setting.

The DFA was piloted in 14 early childhood settings between October 2009 and February 2010. Practitioners received mentoring and support throughout the pilot study and engaged in professional development exercises. As the follow up article, ‘Towards Inclusion: the Impact of the Draft Framework for Action for the Inclusion of children with Special Educational Needs in Early Childhood Settings’, demonstrates, with support and professional development, early childhood settings have the potential to become an appropriate locus for the inclusion of children with SEN.
INTRODUCTION
As discussed in the article ‘Early Childhood Settings as a Locus for the Inclusion of Children with Special Needs’ in this issue (see page 8), there were multiple challenges for children with special educational needs (SEN) in terms of their full and active participation in early childhood settings. This article provides an insight into how the piloting of the Draft Framework for Action for the Inclusion of Children with SEN in Early Childhood Settings (DFA) impacted upon practice within settings. Consequently, findings indicate that there was considerable progress in terms of communication, the learning environment and curriculum planning.

PREPARING FOR THE PILOT STUDY
In order to prepare practitioners and pre-school special needs assistants (PSNAs) for the implementation of the DFA, three preparatory workshops were delivered in October 2009, two of which were held in Limerick and one in Tralee. The number and types of settings as well as the numbers of practitioners and PSNAs participating in the pilot study are shown in Table 1.
Table 1
Overview of participating early childhood settings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Practitioners</th>
<th>PSNAs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Private full day care</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Private sessional</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Private sessional</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Private sessional</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Private sessional</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Childminder</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Private sessional</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Community crèche</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Community crèche</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Community sessional</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Community sessional</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Community sessional</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Community crèche</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Community crèche</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As part of their participation in the pilot study, practitioners working directly with children in each participating setting were asked to:

1. Identify and prioritise four actions, one action to be chosen from each area within the DFA: Communication, Environment, Assessment for Learning and Accessing the Curriculum/programme, during the piloting of the DFA between October 27th 2009 and January 29th 2010.

2. Maintain a reflective journal, i.e. complete a reflective exercise at the end of each week considering each action they had implemented from the DFA. Each of the 14 participating settings nominated one practitioner to complete the reflective journal. Thus, a total of 14 completed reflective journals, one from each setting, was submitted.

While parents of children with SEN participating in the study were asked to provide feedback on the piloting of the DFA in their child’s early childhood setting by completing a questionnaire, this article focuses upon practitioner and PSNA feedback.

TRANSFORMING PRACTICE – COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS

Each of the 14 participating settings sought to enhance communication with parents during the pilot study. Six settings used a home/setting notebook which went back and forth between the home and setting, acting as a tool for sharing information about the child with the parent. The following excerpts from these notebooks demonstrate the nature and scope of information shared with parents. The first excerpt, taken from the home/setting notebook of a community setting, was written from the child’s perspective. In each of the other settings, practitioners wrote on behalf of the child when sharing information through the home/setting notebook.

Excerpt 1: Community setting (1)

Hi mom and dad, I had a nice day today. I did painting; I did it by flicking the straw and Susan painted my hand and put it on paper. Maria sang Humpty Dumpty and fell on the floor off the chair. I laughed at Maria; I enjoyed it. I did some symbols today. I ate all my liga and yogurt and most of my milk.

Excerpt 2: Community setting (2)

Today, Sean watched worms wriggling in the wormery. He joined his hands together and wriggled them to indicate worms and tried to say “worm”. He used his index finger to wriggle finger paint down a long sheet of paper. He showed his hand to Lucy and chatted about the worms with her using his joined hands.

Although six settings used the home/setting notebook, only three parents shared information with settings in this way. As with the practitioners, parents used the notebook to provide practical information about their child. Again, the following excerpts show the range of information shared between home and setting.

Excerpt 1

Leah was tired when she came home but was very happy to tell me about her painting. She even told me that she pulled her own sleeves up.

Excerpt 2

Hi everyone, after school I went to Nana and Granddad’s house, then I went for a sleep with my teddy bear. When I woke up I had great fun with my Nana and Granddad and Uncle Simon. I was writing and drawing with Uncle Simon and drew a picture of Nana and Granddad. Then I gave Dad his birthday card and he loved it.

Four settings also set up a system of ‘progress meetings’ (DFA, section 1) with the parents. One community setting stated that the DFA ‘opened up communication to the whole team. We gained so much confidence in talking to the parents about the child.’ Another community practitioner explained...
how they now had ‘a fantastic relationship with the parents; this was helped by our meetings and home diary’. A private setting reported how the progress meetings resulted in ‘lots more time to chat with the mother in a more formal way...before it was always rushed in the morning’ (private provider/practitioner 7). As a result of these meetings, there was ‘more communication and positive interaction’ with parents than there had been before (Community provider/practitioner 3).

COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN
A particular concern highlighted in Phase One of this research study was the predominant focus on verbal communication within settings. Drawing on the guidelines within the DFA, six settings made picture schedules to encourage and support communication with children who had a speech and language delay. These schedules were used to ‘offer choice’, to ‘explain what’s going to happen next’, to ‘offer another way of expressing himself’, to ‘let other children and staff see that there are other ways to communicate’ (extracts from reflective journals).

Five settings appointed a key worker who had responsibility for the child with special needs in the setting. In addition, practitioners cited a broad range of communication strategies that were implemented during the pilot study:

- We have developed a distinct and slower method of talking to the child during this programme.
- I am so conscious of getting down to the child’s level now to get his attention.
- The draft framework taught us about how important it is to make eye contact with him when we are communicating with him.
- I pause now and wait for a response when I am chatting to her. I didn’t know how to do that before and would always ask too many questions or just keep talking. It never crossed my mind that she didn’t respond...I never noticed.
- We use cards and pictures now as part of circle time especially...he is included more because he can point to things and make choices. Before, we kind of assumed that he wanted to do the things we decided...
- We introduced puppets...we encouraged him to speak through the puppets; he loves them and responds so well.

Not only did these communication strategies support the inclusion of children with SEN, they were a ‘matter of good practice that worked for every child’ (private practitioner 5).

THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT
The following observation of Henry, a four year old with a general learning disability and physical disability, shows how the learning environment can adversely affect the child’s enjoyment of and participation in the activities within the setting.

Narrative observation 4:
Context: There are 24 children, two of whom have special needs: Jack and Henry. All children, with the exception of Jack who is immobile and sitting in a wheelchair, are sitting on story mats around a practitioner who is holding up a story book to show them pictures of Cinderella as the story is relayed on a CD player. Two other practitioners are sitting on the floor with the children, while a PSNA is seated alongside Jack. The volume of the CD player is high so that the story can be heard above the children’s chatter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact of noise on Henry</th>
<th>Practitioner: Listen everybody, listen to the story</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child:</td>
<td>We can’t hear it; it’s too noisy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practitioner:</td>
<td>We must sit quietly and listen to the story. No talking now, shh, shh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry sits rocking back and forth holding both hands over his ears</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult:</td>
<td>Who can tell me what happened to the pumpkin?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The children scream together:</td>
<td>It turned into a carriage.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Didactic practitioner**

| Practitioner: No shouting. What did I say about talking? No talking while the story is on. |
| Two children kneel up to get a better look at the picture as the practitioner holds the book up high so that the children can see Cinderella’s carriage. The children are immediately reprimanded by a 2nd practitioner who says ‘Sit down, sit down you’re blocking the view’. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Henry’s choice versus practitioner agenda</th>
<th>Henry tugs on the 3rd practitioner’s sleeve. She looks at him saying ‘Yes, Henry, what is it?’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Henry:</td>
<td>‘Me colour now.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practitioner:</td>
<td>‘You want to colour, is that what you want?’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This observation demonstrates the predominance of the adult agenda, lack of communication between practitioners, and the absence of choice and freedom within the setting, all of which are important aspects of a positive learning environment.

During the pilot study, 10 settings altered their group size, so that the children can see the pictures. Quite a number of children have lost interest in the story and are shuffling, elbowing and poking each other.

Practitioner threatens to remove privileges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practitioner threatens to remove privileges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The practitioner becomes increasingly irate, correcting the children and threatening to remove privileges from them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practitioner: 'Shh, shh, listen to the story. Shh...if I don’t have silence, you’re not going outside to play at juice time. Shh, no chocolate spread on the toast today...'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry continues to rock, head down, holding both hands to his ears.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This observation demonstrates the predominance of the adult agenda, lack of communication between practitioners, and the absence of choice and freedom within the setting, all of which are important aspects of a positive learning environment.

During the pilot study, 10 settings altered their group size, so that the child with special needs was part of a small group of four to six children rather than being part of a large group of 20 children. Consequently, children were able to ‘form friendships with specific children in a safe environment’ where they were not overwhelmed by the large numbers of children and their ‘voice was heard’ (private practitioner 4 interview). In three settings, practitioners acknowledged that children with SEN may have been ‘intimidated by the numbers and the noise’ (ibid). Practitioners agreed that smaller group sizes resulted in an increase in social networks within the setting for the child with SEN.

ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

In Phase One, practitioners simply waited for the Early Intervention Services to develop an Individual Development Plan (IDP) for the child with SEN. However, there was a significant change in approach during the pilot study where, although practitioners acknowledged ‘the lack of an IDP and suggestions for activities’, they recognised the ‘need to be pro-active and do it ourselves’ (Community practitioner: reflective journal). Practitioners in each of the 14 settings undertook child observations during the pilot study.

Indeed, practitioners in 10 settings claimed that the DFA ‘helped us to decide on a form of assessment that suited the child we are working with at present’ (Community practitioner 4: reflective journal). In four settings for example, Target Child Observations were used, while a community practitioner undertook Event Sampling to ‘determine how [child] is focussing and looking at areas where he might need help’.

One private setting undertook 26 narrative observations of Sam, a child with Down syndrome because ‘everyone, the intervention team, the speech and language people and us...we all seem to give a negative picture to his mum’. These observations were conducted for the sole purposes of building a picture of Sam’s strengths (private setting 4: support visit, November, 2009). It was hoped to move away from a deficit model where practitioners tended to see Sam in terms of what he could not do, to a more positive focus on his abilities. As the key worker became more competent in undertaking the child observations and sharing the information with her co-practitioners, everybody began to see Sam in a ‘more positive way’. Sam’s many strengths were identified from the observations and were subsequently used to highlight particular areas for support that formed the basis of learning objectives within the setting’s overall curriculum.

CURRICULUM

Although practitioners in all 14 settings acknowledged the link between child observations and curriculum planning, this aspect of the DFA was the most daunting for practitioners. Reflective journals bear testimony to the challenges associated with curriculum planning and implementation. A standard entry in relation to curriculum in nine of the 14 reflective journals was ‘the child is included in all areas of the curriculum’. In these settings, practitioners introduced or attempted activities from the DFA including ‘water play’, ‘finger painting’, ‘role playing’, ‘blowing bubbles’ and so on. Consequently, while a series of isolated activities were offered to children, there was no overall plan to extend or integrate activities to support development.

By contrast, the other five settings made a concerted effort to ‘incorporate the guidelines in the framework into our curriculum here in the crèche’.
IDENTIFYING CURRICULUM OBJECTIVES

Earlier, we saw how the key worker used child observations to develop a positive picture of Sam. The challenge lay in how to use the information gathered to plan for Sam’s learning in the setting. With the support of the research team, the following matrix was developed to empower the practitioners to identify key curriculum objectives for Sam:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Implications for Curriculum</th>
<th>Objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tidies up</td>
<td>Eager to help</td>
<td>Give child more responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follows instructions</td>
<td>Eager to please</td>
<td>Support social development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiates school bags when he is the class helper and gives to correct child</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gestures</td>
<td>Current focus on non-verbal communication</td>
<td>Support speech and language development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smiles</td>
<td>Focus on single word use</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hugs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laughs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is beginning to use words more frequently (pull, knock, bang, eyes, nose)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loves to sing</td>
<td>A form of communication</td>
<td>Use music/singing to support speech and language development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunity for speech development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The broad long term goals for Sam during the pilot study were to:

   a) Support his speech and language development

   b) Support his social development

According to the practitioners, the establishment of the key objectives gave them ‘something to work towards…it’s the first time really that we can see where we’re going with him’ (site visit: January, 2010). The next step for practitioners was to translate these goals into practice in the medium and short term.

Achieving the Objectives

Although Sam used single words such as eye, nose, Mammy, dog, it was an infrequent occurrence and was often the result of ‘sheer persistence and determination’ where the key worker ‘kept at him and at him to say a word’. Generally, Sam did not respond to these prompts, rather, his attempts at speech tended to be spontaneous, sudden outbursts that were often not associated with an activity or piece of equipment.

Observations also showed that often there was no need for Sam to speak as practitioners tended to interpret his body language and gesticulation to guess his needs. For example, an observation undertaken during morning juice break demonstrates that Sam simply pointed to the jug of juice or to the plate of toast to indicate a request for more. Practitioners automatically responded by asking ‘do you want more toast, is that what you want?’ while simultaneously handing the toast to him. His immediate needs therefore were being met without him having to verbalise them.

In order to ‘break the cycle of always guessing and interpreting what he wants’, practitioners agreed that they would use juice break time as an opportunity to encourage and support Sam’s speech and language development. A simple strategy was agreed upon by all three practitioners working with Sam. As explained by the key worker ‘when he pointed to the juice, we would say — do you want some juice and then we would wait for his response. If he didn’t respond, we repeated the question — do you want some juice and waited again for his response. We would then say, I don’t understand what you are trying to tell me.’ This strategy was used consistently during the pilot study and extended to all non-verbal requests such as when Sam ‘pointed to a book he wanted, pointed to the jam or the milk, pointed to a puzzle’. The practitioners implemented their agreed response: ‘I don’t understand, can you tell me what you want.’ Initially, Sam either continued to point to the item he wanted or alternatively ‘he used to get out of his chair and walk to the shelf and touch the jug or the book or whatever it was he wanted us to get for him. He had it all sussed and we had to hand it to him because he made it very clear what he wanted’ (key worker; site visit February, 2010). There was a ‘major breakthrough’ at the end of February when ‘out of the blue one morning, we heard this little voice saying “bread”…it was the first time that I ever heard him actually say what he wanted. We were all so excited.’ After this watershed moment, the key worker stated that it was ‘like everything changed….he began to use our names and the children’s names, not all the time now but it was progress’ (site visit: March, 2010).
This strategy was extended to story time with Sam when he was involved in individual work with his key worker. Rather than pointing to the picture of a ‘cat’ for instance and telling Sam ‘it’s a cat, look at the cat’, the key worker decided instead to encourage him to speak by asking him to tell her what was in the picture. Initially Sam remained silent, simply pointing to the pictures and smiling. Occasionally he would imitate the animal depicted in the story saying ‘miaow’ or ‘woof’. Gradually, he began to spontaneously point to the pictures saying ‘woof – dog’ or attempting to say ‘apple or banana…he couldn’t actually say the word sometimes but he tried’ (Site visit: March 2010). Beginning with this basic strategy, Sam began to respond to simple questions during circle time and large group time. For example, he was ‘able to say “red” when we were doing our colours or shout “dog” when we were learning about pets…it was great…’

At the end of the pilot study, Sam’s development had improved in ‘lots of ways…he is using more words, he plays more with the children, he interacts with us, he can make choices, he is able to point to a picture in a book and say “dog” or “cat”’ (site visit: March 2010). While all of this was seen as ‘great progress and so rewarding’, practitioners recognised that it was ‘only the beginning, we know we have a long way to go, but thanks to this study we know how to plan and how to set objectives. We can only get better and everybody has benefitted…’ (ibid).

CONCLUSION
The enthusiasm and commitment of participating practitioners to engage with this study and to examine, reflect upon and alter their practice throughout the study was admirable. The following practitioner commentaries provide compelling evidence in relation to how the DFA positively impacted upon both the children with SEN and the practitioners within settings:

Excerpt 1:
I learned so much from taking part. The best thing was seeing how happy the child was and seeing the big smile on his face every day. Thank you.

Excerpt 2:
The framework is my bible. It is always in my bag. Thank you so much for letting us take part, it was just brilliant and everybody has benefitted especially the child and his mother.

Excerpt 3:
Thanks to the DFA, we learned how to observe children. I am more confident now about doing observations. The suggestions on curriculum were so easy to follow and suitable for any child at any stage of development. We see the benefits of our involvement every day not just for the child with special needs but all the children.

Excerpt 4:
One of the most encouraging insights has been to observe the child respond and develop as the structures fell into place. For the first time we felt that we were doing things right.

Excerpt 5:
We learnt an awful lot from the framework. It was great to see it working on the ground. It was practical and useful; everybody should have a copy and everybody should have the support we had to put it into practice.

This latter point goes to the heart of the issue for practitioners – the need for support and professional development. The critical factor for practitioners appears to have been the initial capacity building workshops and the ongoing support and mentoring throughout the pilot study. As commented by one practitioner ‘More courses should be available to childcare workers that are involved with children with special needs. We need training, training and more training to make it work’ (workshop evaluation sheet).
High quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) confers significant benefits for children (Melhuish, 2004). One of the most important hallmarks of high quality ECCE is its ability to provide continuous experiences for children (Bowes et al., 2003). Continuity of care is particularly pertinent to the delivery of centre-based ECCE, which is among the most popular paid childcare arrangements chosen by parents. This is because the organisational structure of centre-based ECCE typically groups children by age, a model necessitating frequent transitions to new classrooms (Neuman, 2002). These transitions allow children to access new experiences that stimulate learning and foster independence in a developmentally appropriate way. However, moving to a new classroom can also mean leaving familiar friends and practitioners behind, at a time when consistency in these relationships is believed to be critical for children’s development (Essa, Favre, Thweatt, & Waugh, 1999). As well as this, children must also adjust to the new surroundings, demands and routine of a new classroom.
How these challenges and opportunities influence children's adjustment is in part attributable to how sensitively the transition is managed. Indeed, the OECD Starting Strong II report (2006) highlights that while transitions can be a positive stimulus to development, where they occur abruptly and without planning, they carry the risk of regression and failure. Unfortunately, centre-based ECCE transitions often occur suddenly and without preparing children in advance (Cryer et al., 2005). This is most likely because decisions regarding when to move a child are influenced by not only developmental milestones, but also practical demands, such as creating space for a younger child (Cryer, Hurwitz, & Wolery, 2000). Research investigating transitions within ECCE has found that some children find these changes stressful (Cryer et al., 2005; Field, Vega-Lahr, & Jagadish, 1984). Thus, promoting positive transitions is likely to be critical in securing continuous experiences that will in turn promote optimum well-being, identity and belonging for children. These goals are central to both Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, and Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. However, despite this recognition, our understanding of early transitions has only begun to be developed through a knowledge base of indigenous research (O’Kane & Hayes, 2006). Moreover, very little is known about children’s experiences of transitions within ECCE settings and the practices that may facilitate smoother moves for children.

## Transitions: What Aistear and Síolta Say

Transitions impact on both children’s Well-being and their sense of Identity and Belonging, two of Aistear’s four themes. The first aim of the Well-being theme is that children will be strong psychologically and socially. One of the learning goals of this aim sets out that ‘in partnership with the adult, children will be able to handle transitions and changes well’. Aistear advises that ‘the adult should help prepare young children to predict and cope with changes, transitions, and stressful life events’.

Transitions are also one of the 16 quality standards of Síolta. Síolta highlights that: ‘Ensuring continuity of experiences for children requires policies, procedures and practices that promote sensitive management of transitions, consistency in key relationships, liaison within and between settings, the keeping and transfer of relevant information (with parental consent), and the close involvement of parents, and, where appropriate, relevant professionals.’

## The Transitions Study

The Transitions study aimed to address these gaps in knowledge by investigating children’s experiences of ECCE transitions using a mixed-method exploratory study. The first phase of the study involved consultations with eight managers from six centre-based services. Interviews were used to investigate the nature of transitions between classrooms and the practices used to facilitate these changes. Phase two followed seven children from five centre-based services for three weeks prior to, and three weeks following, the move to the last classroom in the centre. Three boys and four girls ranging in age from 32 to 44 months (average age = 36.42 months) took part. A structured observation protocol was used to record children’s interactive, non-interactive and anxiety behaviours. Parents, practitioners and children were interviewed to explore their transition experiences. This article will focus on selected findings from the observation data and interviews with parents and children.

### Impact on Behaviour

Just over half of the children, and all of the boys, exhibited increases in the proportion of their behaviour that was coded as anxious following the move to their new classroom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>% Anxiety Pre-Transition</th>
<th>% Anxiety Post-Transition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.45</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>8.99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here is an example from the field notes of one child’s anxiety behaviour following an unsuccessful approach to a peer in his new room:

*Michael is playing with the shop beside Audrey. He asks her where all the food has gone. She does not answer him. Audrey leaves and begins playing with blocks with a small group of children. A few moments later Michael wanders around the room, lies on the floor, and puts his fingers in his mouth.*
The impact of the transition on children’s behaviour was also evident from parents’ accounts. For all but one of the parents, the morning arrival to the setting was met with resistance from their child following the classroom transition: ‘She didn’t want to go in, and you know even now, even the odd morning she will say “we just go straight home now”’. According to parents, this reluctance ranged in degree from ‘a few tears’ to more marked protests. One parent described: ‘I would go to take him in and he would just go straight for the other room and I would be like “No, no, come on let’s go into the Montessori room, you’re a big boy now” whatever, and he would just get on the floor and start screaming.’

In general, the parents of boys reported a more negative impact on their child’s behaviour. These parents spoke of incidents of withdrawal, negative mood and aggression in their sons’ behaviour following the move to the new classroom: ‘I actually felt quite upset to be honest with you. I thought if he was biting kids, which wasn’t like him you know, there is obviously something going on in his head.’ Parents spoke about finding these changes in their children difficult to observe: ‘He was a bit depressed I think, he would just burst out crying for no reason, which is just horrible to watch.’

On the other hand, several of the parents of daughters referred to a new sense of independence and assertiveness in their children: ‘I noticed a difference in her personality I must say… I kind of noticed more of an independence.’ Similarly, another parent found her daughter was ‘definitely a lot more verbal and assertive’ since moving to her new classroom.

Discontinuity in Relationships
What are the changes involved during the transition that may account for these patterns in behaviour? Transitions were reported as interrupting children’s network of relationships. Many parents spoke of the strong relationships that children formed with practitioners and how these were often disrupted by transitions: ‘He would look angry at them… Like he went into [his new practitioner]’s class the first week, he basically ignored [his old practitioner]. He said “you’re after getting rid of me.”’ Some parents worried about how these separations would affect their child: ‘There was a girl in the first class who she adored and I was thinking “oh how would she ever cope without [her]’’. Children also noticed the changes in their relationships following transitions. One boy commented that his friends lived in different rooms: ‘Helen doesn’t live in [that room]. She lives in [a different practitioner]’s room.’

Preserving some continuity in relationships may have been key in offsetting the amount of change involved for children. One parent spoke of her daughter’s close relationship with the classmate she had transitioned with: ‘Her friend was the only person she talked about when she moved up… It was kind of [her friend] and her against the world for a few days.’ This pre-schooler also alluded to her reliance on her transition buddy: ‘I only play with Charlie.’ Similarly, one parent was delighted that her daughter was able to move to her new classroom with her familiar practitioner: ‘I was delighted really because she wasn’t getting moved to a different teacher. She was very close to the girl in the other room… she was very close to her and kind of found it hard to move from her room.’

Changes in Expectations and Rules
As well as negotiating changing relationships, children must also adjust to the new rules and expectations in their classroom. Several of the parents noted the increased expectations that were held for children in the new room: ‘I wonder if he should have gotten a little more at the start… I think they perhaps assumed you know that he was more advanced than he was… I think they had an expectation beyond his age.’ Another parent reported: ‘They kind of slightly have to learn how to toe the line… just how to get into a classroom atmosphere a little bit more.’ Some of the children also mentioned the different rules in their new classroom: ‘we don’t do fighting here’.

Negotiating a New Peer Group
For nearly all of the children, the transition to their new room meant negotiating a new and often older and larger peer group. One parent attributed her daughter’s assertiveness as a means of coping with the demands of integrating with the older children in her room: ‘She probably has to… the class is probably mixed age and there obviously isn’t a huge amount in it, but, you know, she would fight her corner.’ Similarly, another parent spoke of his son’s experience adjusting to an unfamiliar and older peer group: ‘Obviously because he is that bit younger than the rest of them and doesn’t know them as well. I think maybe the shift of control has maybe changed a bit.’

Shifts in Identity
Moving to a new room may also represent a time of transition in children’s evolving sense of identity. For example, according to some parents, progressing to a new classroom can thrust children from being the expert to becoming the novice again: ‘I think he felt kind of smart in the other room. It’s like now he’s kind of, there’s a lot of kids that are that bit older than him, that know more about the games than he does, and I think he feels a bit like, you know, a rabbit in the headlights.’ At the same time, for some children the transition signaled a shift in maturity in the centre. One of the children spoke frequently about being a ‘big Monty’ in her new Montessori
classroom. She explained to the researcher: ‘We just moved here… cause we are, we are getting big.’

Opportunities for Learning
Some parents also highlighted the opportunities that the transition had brought for new learning. One parent noted that the transition had provided access to new equipment and activities for his son: ‘He is a smart enough little man and I think the new stuff that was in there, especially the computer, he absolutely loved it.’ Another parent reported being taken aback by her daughter’s learning since moving to her new classroom: ‘She is soaking up the learning part of it… One day at the dinner table she started telling us about the Kookaburra bird and we all nearly fell of the chair.’ Several of the children were also eager to point out the new activities in their classroom: ‘[The computer] is for looking at animals. An owl and a seahorse… a big bear.’

These accounts of children’s transition experiences highlight a network of complex changes that may influence shifts in children’s patterns of behaviour, well-being, identity and learning. Consequently, it is imperative that possible strategies for securing positive transitions for children are identified.

SUPPORTING POSITIVE TRANSITIONS
Consultations with service providers revealed several practices that were employed to promote positive transitions for children.

1. The Whole Readiness Approach
Managers highlighted the importance of considering readiness as multifaceted when timing a transition. For example, children could be ‘activity’ ready but lack the social and emotional readiness to adjust successfully in their new room. In these cases, practitioners suggested introducing new activities to maintain stimulation while social and emotional skills continued to develop.

2. Talk to Mum and Dad
Talking to parents/guardians was frequently reported as being the first step in planning a positive transition. Providing ongoing information and feedback was seen as helping to abate any anxieties that may otherwise be passed onto the child. This consultation also allows parents and settings to share information about how transitions may be impacting on children at home as well as in the centre. In some cases, practitioners suggested that offering parents guidance on how to help prepare children was also helpful.

3. Strike a Transition Balance
Several of the service providers felt that scheduling a transition when other changes were going on would be like ‘starting two jobs in the one day’. To avoid this, many of the practitioners reported carefully planning transitions around other changes such as the birth of a sibling or the move to a new house.

4. Share Information
Providing opportunities for practitioners to share information about children ahead of the transition was described by many as essential in promoting continuity. Some stressed that even little details could be of considerable importance to individual children. Getting to know children in this way can help practitioners prepare for the arrival of new children.

5. Involve Children
According to some of the managers, preparing children in advance may offer children greater security in the face of new changes. In certain cases it may be possible to give children choices in how the transition occurs, such as when they would like to visit a new room. Practitioners also described making a fuss of the children as an important means of fostering confidence during transitions.

6. Transition Peers Together
Nearly all of the practitioners said that ideally children would transition with a peer. Having a familiar playmate was reported as making a huge difference in helping children to cope in their new classroom. At the same time, practitioners advised that this might not always be possible if one child was ‘head and shoulders’ ahead of their classmates.

7. Transition Visits
The majority of the service providers emphasised that transitions need to be gradual to afford children time to orientate themselves in their new rooms. Specifically, practitioners advocated giving children opportunities to visit their new room ahead of a transition.

8. Knowing the Child
Although some of the practitioners had designated policies on transitions, providers stressed the importance of using ‘the child as the barometer’. Managers highlighted that while some children breeze through transitions, others might find these changes difficult to manage. Consequently, ‘knowing the child’ was seen as being imperative in managing the transition successfully.

9. Maintaining Relationships
Several of the managers acknowledged the importance of the relationships that children build during their time in a room. Practitioners suggested that one way of easing separations would be to encourage practitioners to accompany children on visits to new classrooms. One service provider also suggested that, where possible, practitioners and children should move together to limit the amount of change involved and maintain key relationships.
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Overall, the findings of the study suggest that transitions bring both opportunities and challenges for children. The practices identified by the service providers are likely to help in promoting positive transitions that capitalise on the opportunities that new beginnings offer. However, it is important to bear in mind that there is no single formula for achieving seamless transitions. Rather, transitions demand careful planning with the needs of individual children guiding the supports that are put in place.

It is also important that these findings are interpreted with caution given the limitations of the research. The small number of children and parents who took part in the study limits our ability to generalise these findings to other groups of children. Furthermore, as all of the transitions studied were planned, it is unlikely that children faced with a sudden transition will encounter similar experiences. Additionally, we do not know how long children’s negative reactions to transitions may last. It is important to make transitions as positive as possible even if the negative reaction to a difficult transition is short lived.

Perhaps the contribution of this research lies as much in the questions it asks as those it attempts to answer. The apparent gender disparity questions whether boys and girls experience transitions differently. Also, are there other individual differences, such as children’s temperament style, that may render certain children more vulnerable or resilient during times of change? Finally, how important is the quality of the ECCE provision in influencing children’s adjustment during transitions? These questions will be addressed as part of a larger Transitions study currently underway in University College Dublin. Further research is also needed to identify the full range of transition practices employed by services, potential barriers to their implementation and their efficacy in promoting positive adjustment for children.

There has never been a more critical time for domestic research to consider transitions. Ireland’s new vision for ECCE (Start Strong, 2010) firmly positions continuous experiences as an essential component of quality ECCE services. Additionally, leading authorities have emphasised that research investigating stressful experiences is critical in the context of universal free pre-school provision (Geoffroy, Côté, Parent & Séguin, 2006). Consequently, continued and concerted attempts to understand the mechanisms that support continuity are likely to be paramount to the realisation of high quality ECCE delivery for all children.

Acknowledgments
The authors would like to thank all of the service providers, practitioners, parents, and children who shared their perspectives and experiences.

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E-mail: christine.ofarrelly@ucd.ie

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INTRODUCTION
The aim of this overall research project was to coordinate, enhance and evaluate educational provision for children aged 3-4 years in a cluster of DEIS1 early childhood settings. The project involved a cluster of two primary schools and twelve feeder pre-schools, and had an emphasis on the transition for children between the pre-school and primary settings. The literature review conducted as part of this project found clear links between disadvantage and risk of difficulties during this important transition (Ramey & Ramey, 1999; Brooker, 2002, 2005). Minimising these risks through continuity at transition can enhance children’s learning experiences and later school success (Ramey & Ramey, 1999; Margetts, 2002). Therefore, an essential element of the project was the development and evaluation of strategies to promote communication and continuity across the settings. This article will outline the development process of one aspect of the project, the Child Snapshot, a form used to transfer information on each child from the Pre-school Practitioner to the Junior Infant Teacher.

1 Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) is an action plan for educational inclusion developed and published by the Department of Education and Science. It includes a particular emphasis on early years education by focusing on the infant classes of primary schools and, most notably, supporting the educational components of pre-school settings feeding into these classes. The importance of ECCE experiences is recognised and the idea that early disadvantage will affect children’s ongoing experiences in formal schooling is acknowledged (DES, 2005).
THE CHILD SNAPSHOT

The Child Snapshot was seen by participating staff from both sectors as having a clear value in supporting children as they made the transition from one educational setting to another. Teachers were in agreement that the tool would be very useful to them in preparing for the new intake of pupils each September. They could see a clear benefit to the children in developing such a tool, and felt it would also be of benefit in terms of their own planning and preparation. The pre-school practitioners saw the Child Snapshot as a way for them to share their vast knowledge base on each child with the primary sector. Staff from both sectors were in agreement that the transfer of information from pre-school to primary level was important but acknowledged that this had not been put into practice in any real way prior to development of the Child Snapshot form. The form was designed to capture the rich knowledge base developed at pre-school level and facilitate its efficient transfer across to the primary sector. Junior Infant teachers who responded to a nationwide questionnaire undertaken as part of the study were also asked if they felt it would be useful to have specific information on children transferred from pre-school to primary school, and 91% felt that this information would be useful (O’Kane & Hayes, forthcoming). These teachers highlighted that these benefits were not only for teaching staff, but important for the children and parents themselves, as the following example highlights:

‘It is very important that the Junior Infant Teacher has as much information regarding the child’s needs, strengths, background and family situation to support the child as best she can during this transition.’ [Junior Infant Teacher O12]

So it was clear that a well-developed tool would have wider application than the settings taking part in the research project alone. The Infant Teachers and Pre-school Managers taking part in the project agreed to work as a team along with the Lead Researcher of the project to develop the Child Snapshot in order to ensure that it was useful to both educational settings, while also remaining supportive of the child and her parents.

Development Process for ‘Child Snapshot’

Earlier research had identified an important issue with relation to communication between pre-school and primary school teachers in terms of the issue of language, and whether there are differences in the use of language within the two educational spheres (O’Kane, 2007). It was decided that in order for a co-construction of the Child Snapshot to take place, there needed to be a mutual clarification of expectations in terms of the skill sets that support children making the transition between the two settings, and a clearer understanding of language used and meanings between the two educational spheres. Therefore it was agreed that an investigation into the professional language used in the pre-school and primary school sectors should be the first step in the process of developing the Child Snapshot. With this in mind, practitioners from the pre-schools involved in the project and the infant teachers were invited to a series of focus group meetings where they discussed the skills that they considered to be most important for the children to possess on arrival at school, and the definitions of these skills. Once skill sets had been agreed upon, all the practitioners from the 12 pre-schools and the four infant teachers completed a form defining each skill, and giving practical examples of these skills. Data from the forms were analysed and formal definitions of the skill sets were agreed by the group.

Once definitions had been agreed, the project participants began work on developing the Child Snapshot itself. It was agreed that the form needed to be user friendly for the pre-school practitioners who would complete the form, and also very clear in terms of readability for the Junior Infant teachers. There was full agreement that the form should be very positive in approach and focus on the achievements of the child rather than work from a deficit model. The language used in the form was debated and time was spent considering the wording in terms of positive approach and parental agreement. See below an example of a section from the form, relating to the area of Independence and Self-Help Skills.

Once the Child Snapshot had been finalised, the group worked on a Letter of Consent for parents that would accompany the form. Again consideration was given to appropriate wording, and language used that would be clear and easy to understand.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>I can finish a task by myself:</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can choose my own activity:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I am happy to try new things:</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I can follow directions:</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I can use the bathroom and wash my hands:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I look after my things:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can manage my lunch well:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I tidy up after myself:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can happily work alone or with friends:</td>
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</table>

Any comments you would like to add on this child’s abilities in these areas: ____________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
Implementation of the Child Snapshot
The pre-school practitioners met with parents to complete the Child Snapshot forms in May-June 2009. All parents asked were happy to sign consent forms and have the information on their child passed to the primary school. It was decided that the most effective way to transfer the information to the Junior Infant teachers was face to face meetings. Therefore, meetings were arranged for each Pre-school Manager to meet with the relevant Junior Infant teacher(s) to pass over the forms and to answer any queries if necessary. These meetings took place during June 2009 in the primary schools, in the hour after the infant classes finished for the day.

Follow-up focus group meetings were then held with Pre-school Managers and Junior Infant Teachers in October 2009 to review the process and to evaluate the usefulness of the development process and the forms in terms of transfer of information.

EVALUATION OF THE PROCESS
The partnership process initiated during the project and worked on while developing the Child Snapshot form was evaluated through focus group meetings, interviews and a formal evaluation sheet. The quantitative data was overwhelmingly positive, with 100% of the respondents reporting satisfaction with the process in terms of their understanding of the importance of the transition from pre-school to primary school. All respondents felt that involvement in the process had helped them support the children in their care through the transition from pre-school to primary school. Generally speaking the respondents were very positive about the Child Snapshot and about the opportunity to meet with the participants from the other sector.

Project participants, whether School Principals, Infant Teachers or Pre-school Managers, also all spoke very positively at focus groups and interviews about the benefits of partnership. During focus groups to evaluate the process, the benefits of the Child Snapshot were spoken of in terms of its use as a tool to transfer information on the child from pre-chool to primary school setting, however it was also noted that the process in itself had been very worthwhile in terms of relationship building and developing a shared conceptual framework. During these focus groups, the discussion often returned to the importance of the two groups having worked together on developing the document. The importance of working on the language used and reaching agreement on definitions for skills was also noted.

During the evaluation, the issue of how to transfer the information included in the Child Snapshot was also discussed. There was agreement that passing of information at a face to face meeting had been an important part of the process. Some of the Pre-school Managers also noted that, although they may have met the Shool Principals in the past, they did not know the Infant Teachers in the schools. As outlined in the examples below, it was noted by some of the practitioners that this relationship with the Infant Teacher compared to the Home School Liaison Teacher or the Shoool Principal is important. However, from the perspective of the Infant Teachers, not only the relationship building but also the information on children was found to be of great value. Some of the reasons for this are highlighted below:

'It's all about early intervention, for each child to reach their own potential. For understanding them and accepting them for who they are. It helps you zone in on what you need to do for an individual child.'
[Infant Teacher, Focus Group, 15-10-09]

'And in terms of what worked with a particular child, whatever that has been used already that works with the individual child, that is important.'
[Infant Teacher, Focus Group, 15-10-09]

'Really it has been communication working at its best, and working at its best for everybody at both levels and the children themselves.'
[School Principal, Interview 18-02-10].

The Pre-school Managers noted an additional benefit in going through the forms with the parents. There was general agreement that the form had been useful in highlighting the strengths of the children with parents, and also highlighting the areas where the child could benefit from some extra support before starting school. Many of the Managers reported that parents often send their child to school aged four without really considering properly if the child has the necessary skills to succeed at school. It was also suggested that parents don’t properly understand the skills that are necessary for their children to have to succeed at primary school. It was noted that the form was a useful tool in this regard, as it made parents consider the skills that the Pre-school Practitioners and the Infant Teachers actually value:

‘Even in terms of talking to the parents, it made them focus too on the things that we are looking at to see if the child is really ready for school. If you sit with the parent while doing it, it helps them to focus on what they [the children] are capable of. It might also be useful to go through the form with the parent very early, so that they can help the child in any areas that are “still developing.”
[Pre-school Practitioner, Focus Group, 20-10-09]

RECOMMENDATIONS RELATION TO THE CHILD SNAPSHOT
The Principals and Infant Teachers of the two participating schools were keen to continue working with the form, as were the Pre-school Practitioners, and both sectors stressed the importance of meeting face to face to facilitate the transfer of information.
Professional Development (CPD), which was designed and overall project also involved a pilot programme of Continuing Continuing...
Revisiting and rethinking provision for outdoor play in early years services in Ireland

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INTRODUCTION

In the past five to ten years, there has been a resurgence of interest in the need and right of young children to access and explore the physical environment outdoors through play. This is largely in response to a concern about the general health and well-being of children worldwide given that more and more of their time is being ‘pulled’ indoors by video and computer screens, parental anxiety about stranger danger, and the dangers of car traffic and other hazards in the environment such as pollution.

Given the increasing amount of time that young children are spending in early childhood care and education (ECCE) and after-school settings, it is not surprising that children’s actual experience of the outdoors is also commanding increasing attention. Much agreement is evident with regard to attributes of rich outdoor environments that facilitate learning and development. The following are highlighted:

- Variety (in space, relief/levels, vegetation)
- Availability of loose parts (e.g. blocks, pipes, fabric, pebbles, plant material)
- Action oriented equipment which provides challenge
- Manipulability of natural materials such as sand, water, earth; integrated or linked indoor-outdoor environments
- The presence of knowledgeable and enthusiastic adults (Ryder Richardson, 2006; Maxwell et al, 2008; Ouvry, 2003)

A nationwide survey of ECCE providers conducted in 2005 indicated that 11 per cent had no access to an outdoor space. Where outdoor space was provided, it was often characterised by a predominance of grass and safety surfaces, which precluded the varied and risk-rich experiences. A more indepth study of a smaller number of providers indicated that perceptions of weather, risk and safety were limiting children’s outdoor play experiences (Kernan and Devine, 2010).

Since this first study took place, two significant national documents in relation to the content and quality of ECCE pedagogy have been published: Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009). Both highlight the importance of access to high quality learning environments outdoors for young children’s development and learning. While neither document is mandatory and the scale of implementation has been affected by government budget cuts, interest among practitioners in both frameworks is high1.

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1 The free pre-school year (Early Years Care and Education Scheme) requires participating services to provide an educational programme which is guided by the principles of Síolta.
The second author presented a paper on the original survey at the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) Conference in Strasbourg in 2009. Following discussion with National Children’s Nurseries Association (NCNA), it was decided to carry out a small scale study to identify any changes in outdoor provision and practitioners’ attitudes to outdoor play. This article describes the resultant study.

RESEARCH AIMS AND METHODOLOGY
The overall aim of this study was to identify any changes or trends in outdoor provision in ECCE settings between 2005 and 2010. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Identify any changes or trends in outdoor provision in relation to time outdoors and features of outdoor spaces available to children.
2. Survey providers regarding play opportunities outdoors.
3. Explore providers’ attitudes regarding weather, risk and safety.
4. Identify areas requiring further attention and analysis.

Data sources
Two approaches were used: first, an analysis of findings from the earlier study (2005-2007) and second, a more in-depth survey of a smaller number of practitioners in South West region of Ireland.

In 2005, POBAL agreed to include a small number of questions in their Annual Beneficiary Questionnaire regarding attitudes and access to outdoor learning environments. This represents approximately 1,500 providers, both full day care and sessional, private and community services, rural and urban settings in all 26 counties. These questions were also included in the 2006 and 2007 questionnaires. By reviewing data in relation to outdoor provision from all three years (POBAL, 2006, 2007, 2008), we were able to identify trends in relation to provision over a longer period and compare it to the situation in 2010.

The second source of data was a more in-depth survey of the National Children’s Nurseries Association membership in the South West (counties Clare, Limerick, Tipperary, Kerry and Cork). This represented 119 NCNA members operating in rural and urban settings. The 2010 survey was designed to include the same questions posed in the POBAL questionnaires about access to time and space outdoors. A number of new items relating to play opportunities outdoors and to attitudes were added. Some questions provided the opportunity for additional comments.

Administering the survey
An explanatory letter and a copy of the survey entitled: ‘Exploring Outdoor Play in Childcare Services in the South West’ were emailed to all 119 members in March 2010. Participants were informed about the purposes of the research, its outcomes and dissemination. While absolute anonymity could not be guaranteed as we used email, respondents were assured that the findings would be presented in an anonymous way. In total, 65 completed questionnaires were received representing a response rate of 55 per cent.

TRENDS IN OUTDOORS IN ECCE 2005–2007
Review of the EOCP Annual Beneficiaries Questionnaire findings 2005 to 2007 administered by POBAL
The percentage of services (full day care and sessional) with an outdoor space increased in that period. In 2005, 89 per cent respondents noted that that their service had an outdoor space, by 2007, this had increased to 93 per cent.

One of the means of assessing the level of interest, challenge and sensory stimulation in an outdoor play space is the type and variation in surface layout, including different types of surface, provision of different levels in the terrain and vegetation and plant material. The percentage of services with grass remained consistent at 62 per cent, with an increase in the numbers of services with manufactured safety service. In 2005, 43 per cent of providers had safety surfacing. By 2007, this had increased to 93 per cent.

The findings indicate that outdoor spaces were gradually becoming physically diverse, with a small increase in provision of elements such as seating, different levels, slopes and steps, sand, water, and other nature elements such as shrubs and trees. Interestingly, of all elements, wheeled toys were consistently most prevalent. In 2007, more than two thirds (68 per cent) services provided wheeled toys outdoors.

...outdoor spaces were gradually becoming physically diverse, with a small increase in provision of elements such as seating, different levels, slopes and steps, sand, water, and other nature elements such as shrubs and trees.

[1] Membership figures fluctuate slightly from year to year. In 2010 at time of data collection, there were 119 members in the region.
Table 1: Features of outdoor play space listed in order of prevalence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>2005 (n=1,223)</th>
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<th>2007 (n=1,408)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wheeled toys</td>
<td>63 (%3)</td>
<td>64 (%3)</td>
<td>68 (%3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sand</td>
<td>52 (%5)</td>
<td>54 (%4)</td>
<td>57 (%4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fixed play equipment</td>
<td>39 (%3)</td>
<td>40 (%3)</td>
<td>46 (%3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>water</td>
<td>37 (%3)</td>
<td>43 (%3)</td>
<td>44 (%3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flowers</td>
<td>38 (%3)</td>
<td>40 (%3)</td>
<td>44 (%3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shrubs</td>
<td>38 (%3)</td>
<td>38 (%3)</td>
<td>42 (%3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seating</td>
<td>35 (%3)</td>
<td>38 (%3)</td>
<td>42 (%3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trees</td>
<td>38 (%3)</td>
<td>36 (%3)</td>
<td>39 (%3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pathways</td>
<td>27 (%2)</td>
<td>24 (%2)</td>
<td>28 (%2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sheltered area</td>
<td>19 (%1)</td>
<td>24 (%2)</td>
<td>25 (%2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>areas for different age groups</td>
<td>18 (%1)</td>
<td>17 (%1)</td>
<td>24 (%2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>different levels (e.g. slopes, steps)</td>
<td>19 (%1)</td>
<td>19 (%1)</td>
<td>21 (%1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of children’s access to time outdoors, a similar gradual increase was also evident. In 2005, 24 per cent of services replied that children had access to the outdoors all day, all year round. In 2007, this figure had increased to 25 per cent. The most common time outdoors category in all three years was access to outdoors ‘during scheduled times daily, all year round’. In 2005, this was the situation for 44 per cent of services. By 2007, this had increased to 53 per cent. By surveying providers again in 2010, albeit among a smaller sample, we could assess whether trends had continued.

Outdoor Provision in the South West of Ireland in 2010

Respondent and service background information

Sixty-five service providers in the South West Region responded to the survey (not all respondents answered all questions). Most of the respondents (42) were the managers of the service. The remainder were either owners, senior staff or assistant manager. The education and qualifications of respondents varied. Thirty-four respondents identified FETAC Level 5 or 6 as their highest qualification, seven had Early Years Degrees and three indicated that they had no formal qualification (two of these were owners). Just under half of the services were in a rural area, 17 were city based and 20 based in a town. The number of children catered for varied also (see details of services in Table 2).

Table 2: Service background information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of service</th>
<th>Community based</th>
<th>Privately operated creche</th>
<th>Workplace operated creche</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Missing/No response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rural or urban location</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban town</th>
<th>Urban city</th>
<th>Missing/No response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of service</th>
<th>&lt;30 children</th>
<th>30-50 children</th>
<th>50-70 children</th>
<th>70-100 children</th>
<th>&gt;100 children</th>
<th>Missing/No response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age range of children</th>
<th>U 12 months</th>
<th>1 – 3 year-olds</th>
<th>3 – 5 year-olds</th>
<th>School age (4 – 10 year olds)</th>
<th>Missing/No response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Features of outdoor play area

All respondents noted that their service had an outdoor area. Forty-five or 69 per cent of these accommodated all children at the same time. Of the remaining services, in all but one service, all children, including children aged under one year, are scheduled to have daily access to the outdoors.

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3 Other qualifications such as certificates and diplomas in Montessori education, Social Studies degrees, nursing qualification and NCNA Diploma in Nursery Management were mentioned by 17 other respondents.
**Surface types and nature elements**

The growing trend towards safety surface was evident. An overwhelming 88 per cent of providers noted that the outdoor area had a manufactured safety surface. The next most common surface was grass (54 per cent) followed by tarmac (26 per cent), concrete (23 per cent) and paving (15 per cent). Very few services had pebbles and gravel or bark chip as a surface (five services and three services respectively). Other surface types mentioned were decking (four services); artificial grass (two services); all weather tiles (one service).

Providers were asked what was the predominant surface in the outdoor area and the response to this question is outlined in Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of surface</th>
<th>Number of services (percentage of valid responses)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>manufactured safety surface</td>
<td>27 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grass</td>
<td>4 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>decking</td>
<td>4 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grass/safety surface</td>
<td>5 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grass/tarmac</td>
<td>5 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grass/concrete</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other combinations</td>
<td>7 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing/no response</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Less than half (44 per cent) of the respondents noted that the outdoor area had different levels (slopes and steps). Fifty five per cent of services noted they had trees in their outdoor area, 49 per cent had shrubs and 63 per cent had flowers. It is not possible to say whether these ‘nature’ features were intentionally or unintentionally incorporated into the outdoor area. However, just over half of the services ticked digging and planting as one of the play opportunities available. Other nature features mentioned by a tiny minority of services were vegetable/herb areas (five services), pond (one service), willow tunnel/wild corner/grassy hill (one service).

**What children can do outdoors: play opportunities provided**

In addition to physical features of the outdoor play area, we were interested in the play opportunities provided. The type of play most comprehensively provided for was physically active, gross-motor play. Almost all respondents noted that their service provided opportunities to run, to play with balls, to play with wheeled toys (97 per cent, 98 per cent and 100 per cent respectively). Three-quarters (75 per cent) of services noted the presence of fixed play equipment. This may have been a single slide or a large multi-stationed play structure. Fifty nine per cent noted that opportunities for balancing were available.

We also sought information regarding the extent to which the outdoor area facilitated construction, exploration and creative play, and pretend and socio-dramatic play. The provision of sand and water was very common. In 86 per cent of services, sand was available as a play material and water was available in 79 per cent of services. A third of providers specified that flowing water was provided. Two-thirds of respondents noted that creative opportunities were provided and just over half of services have enclosures. Other specific play equipment materials mentioned by one or two services were Safe-Cross Code areas (road safety), playhouses, log cabin and tyres (see Table 4).

Eighty-six per cent of services provided ‘opportunity for exploration and safe risk’. Nine services noted they did not provide this. Fifty-one per cent of respondents noted that their outdoor area had separate areas for different age groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Play opportunities provided outdoors</th>
<th>Number of services (Percentage of valid responses)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wheeled toys</td>
<td>63 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ball play</td>
<td>62 (98%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>running</td>
<td>61 (97%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>balancing</td>
<td>37 (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fixed equipment</td>
<td>47 (75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sand</td>
<td>54 (86%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>water</td>
<td>50 (79%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flowing water</td>
<td>21 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>digging and planting</td>
<td>37 (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>creative opportunities</td>
<td>40 (65%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enclosures</td>
<td>33 (51%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Seating and other features supporting functionality of outdoor space

The provision of seating for adults and children has been identified as being important both for comfort and for facilitating social interaction between adults and children and between children. Nearly a third of services replied that they did not have seating for adults and children outdoors. Other features that contribute to the comfort and functionality of an outdoor space are sheltered areas for protection against rain, strong winds or strong sun, storage areas for equipment and accessible toilets. Thirty-seven per cent of services had a covered area. Sixty six per cent had a storage area outdoors. Almost all respondents said children had easy access to a toilet/bathroom while outdoors.

Time outdoors

The majority of services indicated that the children accessed outdoors on a daily basis, all year round. Sixty-five per cent of services noted this was during scheduled times and 22 per cent indicated that children can initiate access to the outdoor area throughout the day and all year round.

The findings also show, however, that in a small number of the services surveyed, children had very little access to the outdoors. Three of the services indicated that children access the outdoors three to five times weekly in spring and summer only (April to September).

BARRIERS TO OUTDOOR PLAY

In the introduction to this paper we noted the important influence adult attitudes have in determining the kinds of experiences children have outdoors. We surveyed providers regarding six possible limiting factors: weather, physical environment, health and safety concerns, Pre-school Services Regulations, parental concerns and staff reluctance. We wished to assess the degree to which these were perceived as limiting outdoor play in everyday practice.

The findings indicate that among the providers surveyed, weather was perceived as the strongest limiting factor by far with 41 respondents either strongly agreeing or somewhat agreeing with the statement ‘Weather limits outdoor play in my service’. Just five respondents strongly disagreed with that statement. We also asked providers to indicate (from a list provided) which in weather conditions they would not bring children outdoors. Forty-two respondents (two-thirds) said they would not bring children out in rain, 27 said no to playing in frost, 15 to drizzle, 12 to snow, eight to damp, six to wind, and two to a breeze.

Some respondents provided additional comments about outdoor play and weather:

Once children are appropriately dressed I feel the weather should not prohibit outdoor play.

I would like to encourage children to go out in all weather types even for a short while.

If it was raining, snowing etc the children can play in protective clothing and they love it.

Seventeen providers either strongly agreed (five) or somewhat agreed (12) with the statement that ‘Physical environment limits outdoor play’. However, many more somewhat disagreed (seven) or strongly disagreed (36) with this statement.

Fewer providers perceived parental concerns, staff reluctance, Pre-school Services Regulations and health and safety concerns as limiting factors. Indeed 42 (out of 60) respondents strongly disagreed with the statement that ‘Health and safety concerns limits outdoor play in my service’; 39 (out of 61) respondents strongly disagreed with the statement that ‘Pre-school Regulations limit outdoor play in my service’; 38 (out of 61) respondents strongly disagreed with the statement that ‘Parental concerns limit outdoor play in my service’ and 38 (out of 59) respondents strongly disagreed with the statement that ‘Staff reluctance limits outdoor play in my service’ (see Table 5).

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived limitations to outdoor play in services</th>
<th>Strongly agree (No. of respondents)</th>
<th>Somewhat agree (No. of respondents)</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree (No. of respondents)</th>
<th>Strongly disagree (No. of respondents)</th>
<th>No response (No. of respondents)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>weather</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>physical environment</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>health and safety concerns</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pre-school services regulations</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parental concerns</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>staff reluctance</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION AND AREAS NEEDING FURTHER ATTENTION

The overall improvement in children’s access to outdoor play in ECCE services in Ireland is heartening. This reflects the growing belief that children need regular opportunities to play outdoors. Aistear supports this, saying ‘Some children will take part in activities more enthusiastically, and show greater confidence in the outdoor environment than inside.’ (NCCA, 2009)

Allied with the increase in access to the outdoors, it is also important to develop further the variety of activities on offer to children in the outdoor area. Gross motor activity is vital for children but they also need opportunities to be creative. Providing dens and enclosures, loose parts, painting and construction opportunities supports creativity outdoors. This need not be expensive and indeed is probably less expensive than safety surfacing.
The attractions of safety surfacing are understandable: these include safety issues (less likely serious injury after fall), quick drying after rain, and it may be cleaner. However, safety surface is very expensive and an outdoor area that is dominated by safety surface does not provide children with opportunities to engage with nature and climate and is much less likely to stimulate all the senses. Siolta refers to the need for the outdoor environment to ‘provide a range of developmentally appropriate, challenging, diverse, creative and enriching experiences for all children’. Natural materials such as grass, trees, plants, sand, willow tunnels provide for this diversity and challenge in the outdoor area. It is evident from the survey that some providers are aware of this.

Other research (in Australia, United Kingdom, Canada and Ireland) suggests that safety, avoidance of risk, weather and (adult) discomforts associated with weather have tended to be overriding concerns and are typically cited as barriers to outdoor play and learning (Factor, 2004; Maynard and Waters, 2007; Kernan and Devine, 2010; Van Zandvoort et al. 2010). Our study points to weather as the main barrier, although the response to the weather question may have been influenced by the unusually severe winter in 2010. In the responses, the issue of parents bringing suitable clothes also arose. Ideally services should have outdoor clothes that are the property of the service so that clothing is not a barrier to outdoor play. It is concerning that some children are not experiencing climate in their childcare setting. Childcare providers need to realise that, once the child is suitable clothed, the experience of rain, wind and snow is a rich learning experience for children. Parents need to be encouraged to believe that rain and cold do not cause illness and services also need to have a child illness policy ensuring that children who are sick do not attend the service.

In conclusion, young children need all the adults around them to understand why outdoor play provision is essential for them. They also need adults who are committed and able to make its potential available to them (Ryder Richardson, 2006). Siolta and Aistear have become the recognised reference points for the future growth and development of early years care and education sector in Ireland. They provide useful guidelines and suggestions for practitioners to work positively with the outdoors so that young children will thrive and, as stated in Aistear, be ‘confident and competent learners through fun, interesting and challenging experiences’ (NCCA, 2009).

As an organisation, NCNA strongly supports children accessing the outdoors every day. We organise regular study trips to Ireland’s first Outdoor School. See www.ncna.ie for details. You can ensure you do not miss any of these dates by registering for the NCNA eZine and webtexts through the website.

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Unit 12c, Bluebell Business Park,
Old Naas Road,
Bluebell,
Dublin 12
Telephone: +353 01 460 1138
Fax: +353 01 460 1185

REFERENCES
- Ryder Richardson, G. 2006. Creating a space to grow: developing your outdoor learning environment: David Fulton.
Useful Resources on Topics Covered in this Issue

You can search Barnardos’ Training and Resource Service library catalogue on www.barnardos.ie/library

The following resources are available to borrow from Barnardos’ Training and Resource Service

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PEDAGOGY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Critical Issues in Early Childhood Professional Development
Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 2006

Reflective Practice and Early Years Professionalism: Linking Theory and Practice.
Hodder Education. 2010

Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Languages of Evaluation.
Routledge. 2007

Pedagogy and Practice: Culture and Identities.
Sage.2008

The Power of Pedagogy
Sage.2008

Going Beyond the Theory/Practice Divide in Early Childhood Education: Introducing an Intra-Active Pedagogy
Routledge. 2010

EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS AS A LOCUS FOR THE INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

The Daycare Needs of Disabled Young Children in Northern Ireland.
National Children’s Bureau, 2007

Designing for Disabled Children and Children With Special Educational Needs: Guidance for Mainstream and Special Schools.
TSO. 2008

The Social Child: Understanding and Enabling Children’s Social, Emotional and Behavioural Development in Early Years Settings
Pre-school Learning Alliance. 2007

TRANSITIONS

Children Starting School: a Guide to Successful Transitions and Transfers for Teachers and Assistants
David Fulton Publishers Ltd, 2002


Informing Transitions in the Early Years: Research, Policy and Practice.
Open University Press. 2007

Supporting Transition in the Early Years.
Open University Press, 2008

Transitions in the Early Years: Debating Continuity and Progression for Children in Early Education.
Routledge Falmer. 2002

The Transition to School in Ireland: Views of Preschool and Primary School Teachers
O’Kane, Mary; Hayes, Norin

OUTDOOR PLAY IN EARLY YEARS SERVICES IN IRELAND

Nurture Through Nature: Promoting Outdoor Play for Young Children
Irish Pre-school Playgroups Association, 2006

Ready, Steady, Play! A National Play Policy
Stationery Office, 2004
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ALCOHOL
"If They’re getting Loaded, Why Can’t I?"

Taking the Lid Off. For People Living with Someone’s Alcohol and Drug Misuse.
Taking the Lid Off Partnership and The Hope Centre, 2010

CHILD DEVELOPMENT
Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2010

First-Year Maternal Employment and Child Development in the First 7 Years
Wiley-Blackwell, 2010

CHILDREN’S RIGHTS
Voices of Children: Report on Initial Research with Children of LGBT Parents
Marriage Equality, 2010

COMMUNITIES
Effective Community Development Programmes. A Review of the International Evidence Base
Centre for Effective Services, 2010

Write Up my Street: A Collection of Short Stories from Young People all over Ireland
ADM Londis plc, 2010

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION (ECCE)
Planning for Early Years
Start Strong, 2010

Community Childcare Subvention Scheme (CCSS) and the New Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) Scheme
Dublin City Childcare Committee, 2010

EDUCATION
A Guide to Irish-Medium Education
Gaelscoileanna; Comhairle na Scolaíochta, 2010

MENTAL HEALTH
Hear My Voice: Challenging Mental Prejudice and Discrimination
Amnesty International (Irish Section), 2010

PLAY
Last Child in the Woods. Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder
Atlantic Books, 2010

SCHOOL-AGE CHILDCARE
School-Age Childcare. A Guide to Good Practice
Dublin City Childcare Committee, 2010

SEPARATION
My Daddy’s Going Away...
Giddy Mangoes Limited, 2009

SUBSTANCE ABUSE
Risk and Protection Factors for Substance Use Among Young People: A Comparative Study of Early School-Leavers and School-Attending Students
The Stationery Office, 2010

All photos in this issue have been posed by models