During the Covid-19 closure, the home learning environment (HLE) became the key setting in which children could learn. Digital technology provided a space between the HLE and Early Learning and Care setting, in which relationships for learning could continue. Educators and providers used the Aistear framework to reimagine learning with young children, focusing on building the well-being so necessary for early learning and mental health.

Early Learning and Care Services:

Connecting with Children and Parents during Covid-19

Introduction

On 12 March 2020, the Taoiseach announced that due to Covid-19, Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) services had to close that very day, in order to protect public health (RTÉ, 2020). A sizeable proportion reopened on 29 June, and the remainder by early September, often with reduced capacity. The operational and personal stresses experienced by providers since the onset of Covid-19 are well described by Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) (2020a).

ECI sought and published our members' stories of connection and engagement with children and families during the closure through our *Scéalta* online blog and e-zines, to encourage peer learning in a time of turmoil. Many providers and educators continued to connect despite the pressure and uncertainty they were experiencing, challenging the common construction of the 'childcare' service as primarily a contractual and monetary transaction between parents and providers in the private marketplace.

Settings used commonplace digital technology to maintain relationships during a time of enforced physical distance, learning new skills to do so, showing creativity, and falling back on their profession's tools – reflective practice and the national curriculum – to maintain the relationships that frame high-quality pedagogy. This article recounts three such stories.

As Covid-19 restrictions will continue into 2021, and parents remain physically distant from settings and educators, this article considers what might be learned from these online experiences that could support parental partnership practices and reinforce the connections between the Home Learning Environment (HLE) and ELC settings. It reflects on the opportunities and limitations to engaging and enabling partnership with parents online.

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Stories of connection in a crisis

Aistear (NCCA, 2009, p. 27) affirms that relationships and interactions are at the heart of early learning and development. The depth of the relationships between providers and educators and children and parents meant that the relationships continued beyond the physical ELC setting and into the home: providers and educators felt a kind of grief following the sudden closure of services.

Orlagh Doyle, a provider in County Wexford, explained:

> *The arrival of Covid-19 had left us bereft; and, like everyone else, it really shook us to the core. As the dust settled in the second week of lockdown, we recognised the need to reach out and offer solace to each other, the families and especially our children of Carraig Briste. As adults we felt confused and anxious; it was unimaginable what this might feel like for a child.* (Early Childhood Ireland, 2020b)

Orlagh and staff discussed how to stay connected with children and families through WhatsApp. They began by videoing a short clip of themselves in their home environments:

> As *a shared message of how much we miss them, and us doing a big clap for the children for staying at home too. This was an incredibly simple idea that brought so much happiness and reassurance. As a team, it was a lot of fun. (ibid.)*

The online engagement evolved to include hosting online baking mornings, gardening in the greenhouse, visits out on the farm, and telling bedtime stories. Facebook was used to privately share photos and video with the children and families as a group, and the Child Diary app allowed one-to-one contact with parents.

> **Providers and educators felt a kind of grief following the sudden closure of services.**

Veronique Didi, a provider at Piccolini Play and Learn Preschool in County Wicklow, together with a parent organised a conference call with a large group of children and parents using the GoToMeeting app. Children were asked to tell a story of something they loved that they did or saw during their day. They were encouraged to paint or draw and to keep the artefacts for their scrapbooks in the setting:

> A *few interesting stories emerged, and from that evolved our emergent curriculum, as we do in playschool every day. One child had been in the woods and found a sheep jaw that she showed to everyone on the conference call. (Didi, 2020)*

Veronique linked the sheep jaw with the curriculum on dinosaurs that had been instituted based on children's interests prior to closure, and a new learning programme was born about omnivores and their teeth, which was shared with the children privately online. At the end of the session, the children were asked to make, draw, or paint a monster of their choice with a lot of teeth. They showed their monsters to each other in a later session and were very proud.

A related learning programme on favourite foods emerged through the interactions with the children. The children created a plate of their favourite foods using sand, play dough, paint, and collage. Based on their interests, a science experiment emerged for another online session, with the educators using boiling water, red cabbage, vinegar, sodium bicarbonate, and bleach solutions to make colours from the foodstuffs.

Samantha Hallows, a provider at Giddy-Ups Preschool in Dublin, established 'Super Shed' to 'bridge the gap between preschool and home' when her service closed. The concept came from the shed that children were familiar with in the preschool garden:

> *I came up with the idea to contact parents of the children in my setting ... and asked the parents to ask their children what was their favourite story from the preschool. ... I got a list from the parents of the stories that the children wanted to hear. So, I set myself up in the Super Shed and I began recording myself reading the stories, reminding myself and others that this is not about my storytelling abilities or lack of – it's about reconnecting. We care about children and the families that come to our settings. With the help of my son Aaron, we set up a YouTube channel, and the journey began.* (Hallows, 2020a)

Samantha went on to develop a Super Shed gallery as 'a platform to raise children's well-being and promote parental involvement'. As well as continuing to send their story requests, the children were encouraged to send photos of their artwork inspired by the stories. The gallery became a tool to promote creativity, imagination, and conversation at home and to keep the children connected with each other. Samantha wrote:

> **" *I set myself up in the Super Shed and began recording myself reading the stories, reminding myself that this was about reconnecting.***"

> *The Aistear curriculum depicts learning as a 'journey'. The Gallery is a convenient shareable reflection tool; it can be revisited for pleasure or educational curricular planning purposes. Parents are logging on to YouTube and visiting the 'Super Shed Gallery' with their children.* (Hallows, 2020b)

Discussion
The stories in this article exemplify how providers and educators moved quickly with the needs of children and families, connecting with them. These actions speak to Bruckauf and Hayes's (2017, p. 1) assertion that high-quality ELC settings are those that are responsive to the dynamic nature of children's lives, with quality built through partnership across family, parents, and settings, using effective communication channels to and from the child's home learning environment (HLE).

During 2020, with ELC services and public libraries closed, the HLE became the key setting in which young children could learn. Digital technology provided a liminal space between the HLE and the ELC setting in which relationships for learning could continue, and where educators and providers used the Aistear framework to reimagine learning with young children, focusing on building the well-being so necessary for early learning and mental health.

Educators and providers used the emergent curriculum to reflect on their knowledge of the children's interests to continue and extend learning online. They remained active designers of learning environments, attuned observers of children's experiences, and energetic communicators. The outcomes remain unknown, as we do not have the perspectives of parents and children. But we should absolutely take heart from a message embedded in these Covid-19 stories: that Aistear, though only ten years old, is deeply embedded in the beliefs and practices of many educators. In a global pandemic, educators looked to the early years curriculum and their professional knowledge to guide them.

The experiences from March to June 2020 pose questions for the future. Was this digital activity a stopgap measure, or is the online environment a space that can be developed further for child-centred early learning? Can a play-based relational pedagogy really be achieved primarily online? These questions go to the heart of what early education is for, how teaching and learning happen, and what an early educator's role is.

A blog post from an educator in Australia – a country with remote early education for children, due to geographical isolation – asserts that teaching remotely won't be largely beneficial for young children:

> *"Nothing we do remotely will substitute for the pure physicality and intentionality of what we do each day."*

> *Nothing we do remotely will substitute for the pure physicality and intentionality of what we do each day. We can't observe a child using tongs and note that their fine motor skills need developing; we can't see their authentic and deep interest in bugs in the garden bed; we can't theorise together, experiment together, laugh together, hug together or make funny faces at each other from across the classroom. Video chats and emails can only do so much in lieu of the pure physicality that is early childhood; it's about relationships and it's all about play.* (Anastasi, 2020)

These passionate observations about children's experiences in and benefits from participation in early education settings with skilled, confident educators reflect why ECI and our members fight so hard to keep ELC (and SAC) services open to children and families during this pandemic. This is why play-pods as a public health measure are far preferable to requiring educators, babies, and young children to wear masks or asking them to achieve the impossible and remain physically distant in an environment where physical affection and caregiving are intricately connected with teaching and early learning.

Of course, digital technology is already in the Irish early education room, but not as a replacement for in-room teaching and learning. 'Digital documentation' using commercial software is being used by ELC settings to capture learning for assessment through video, audio, and photos, shared with parents through apps. Given that parents will remain physically distant from settings for 2021 at least, a substantial period of early childhood may involve the parent–setting relationship being lived out through technology.

It is therefore important to find innovative ways for the home and ELC settings to partner in the virtual world to support children's learning. We need to use the digital world effectively for children. To do that, providers

and educators will need to be able to integrate technology in everyday practice, and develop the knowledge to select and use digital technologies to share learning with parents that are based on child-centred, play-based learning theory.

Thank you to ECI members for writing their stories and supporting peer learning in the ELC sector.

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