

A View from the Ground

Lockdown at Wallaroo Playschool



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Most of the discourse on Covid-19's impact on early childhood education and care has focused on the broad issues. Less attention has been paid to the reality of these services on the ground having to cope with sudden and drastic disruption. This article gives an account of events at one preschool in Cork as they came to terms with the new and challenging reality.

A lot has been written and said about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on early childhood education and care. Public debate and media have focused on broader issues like the (in)ability to provide reliable 'childcare' for working parents, including essential 'frontline workers', or the cost of keeping a broken system afloat in times of crisis and disruption. Less attention has been paid to the reality of early childhood services on the ground having to come to terms with sudden and drastic change, disruption, and existential crises due to lockdown.

This is an account of events unfolding at one preschool, Wallaroo Playschool in Cork, after the announcement of lockdown in March 2020. It is my story; it does not represent anything but my own experience. But perhaps it connects to your story, and to others out there in the real world of working with young children and their families and communities. If it does, maybe the many stories of early childhood educators from this challenging time will come together in a collective memory of how the early childhood community coped with Covid-19. With all our stories woven into the tapestry, it may become one of hope, persistence, and overcoming adversity.

On Thursday 12 March the staff at Wallaroo Playschool sat around a radio brought into the office to hear what the Taoiseach was saying about the lockdown. It felt a bit like waiting to hear news about going to war. Yes, preschools were to close from the 13th – but did that mean we would come in on Friday and then close? After much debate, we decided that when we went home at 6 p.m. we would stay closed until further notice. We did not realise how long that would be. It felt so eerie leaving with a premonition that the world we lived in was about to change, but it was a beautiful day, so it also felt a bit like getting out of school early.

I contacted all parents and staff by email and text and informed them. We had already been sending information to parents about the pandemic and what we were doing to keep it at bay in our setting.

They would hear it on the news, but I wanted them to have a personal message from us.

I felt a strong urge to keep coming in to the office, and that is what I did for the following week. I contacted parents and staff daily. My intentions were to keep the connection opened and to reassure and to let everyone know that while the service was closed down, we as staff were still working and available, though in what shape I was not sure yet. I felt safe coming in to the office, as I was the only person at first, but as the week went on, other team members started dropping in. Perhaps, like me, they felt lost at home and needed the normality of connecting with what we know best – our workplace.

As the messages to the public became clearer that we should not travel more than 2 kilometres unless necessary, I decided to set up office at home. During that first week, before I realised I was stretching the meaning of ‘necessary’, the weather was amazingly sunny, and one of the childcare team and I decided to tackle our bald, over-used garden. We dug and we raked and we sowed grass seed and watered. Over the next few weeks my colleague, who lives close by, came in and kept at it, as whatever seed we put down became a large picnic for the now very unafraid and greedy growing bird population in the locality!

The next stage for us was to set up direct contacts between childcare staff in our three services and the parents and children they worked with. This meant ensuring that each childcare team manager had a smartphone to set up WhatsApp groups with parents who wished to participate. This was easier said than done and required help from the more technically savvy team members. The managers then sent ideas of the daily routines their children had been used to, activities to do with children, and songs and rhymes that the children were used to hearing.

This kind of communication between staff and parents continued for the next few months, only ending at the end of June, when preschool would have finished anyway. The parents also contacted each other through the WhatsApp group, and a side benefit was that people made connections with other parents they may not have known, and they supported each other all the way through. It was interesting for us that the school-age children and parents were less inclined to respond to communications from us, and we assumed this was because the communications with the schools were satisfying enough and maybe just enough.

During this stage, as coordinator I had contact with the parent body about once a week. I sent short communications if there was anything that might reassure or soothe them, for example a message to say that although a local school had reported a case of Covid-19, we had not heard from any of our families that they were being tested. I sent information of events online, meditations, music and blogs from a parenting website that had good advice on coping with lockdown at home.

I was more distant from the parents, as I did not have personal relationships with many of them, but I felt a strong sense of responsibility to keep connected with them. My main contact was with the childcare team to see how they were managing their own communications; to check if there were

issues arising and to see how they themselves were managing to balance work at home and family life. It was different for everyone depending on the stage of life of their children and of those they were caring for and their own health. There were staff members that I knew were living alone and could be quite isolated, and I took special care to contact them more often.

Although most of my emails and phone calls were to the four childcare team managers, from April onwards, when the Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme came into effect, organisations were requested by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) to contact all staff members and make sure they were using their paid time usefully, and I encouraged all who could to take up the training opportunities that the Department made available on the *First 5* website.

Two of our services are in Direct Provision centres for asylum seekers, where the scale of involvement was much different and the need for contact and other supports became obvious. Many issues here were brought into focus by the lockdown. The pandemic necessitated the closing of the centres' doors and the sudden withdrawal of volunteers and services like ours, leaving residents isolated from community and confined in cramped conditions.

Children were expected to do schoolwork from their home with no devices, poor or no internet, or three or more children sharing the parents' only phone. I was concerned that children would be confined to their rooms by parents who feared the virus and might not know that outside activity was not only good but safer than indoors in terms of the virus. I knew it was hard for people in the community who had children at home all day, but here were children and adults at home all day in one room. I was afraid for their mental and physical well-being.

One voluntary group had set up a phone tree, which I joined. We each contacted three to four residents weekly to find out how they were getting on and to offer phone support. The group also kept in touch with each other if any practical support was needed, such as clothing or other supplies. The group contacted the schools for one centre, and we were able to ascertain whether children were sending in schoolwork.

I contacted all the families to find out what the issues were, and we were able to resolve them by accessing devices on loan from the school or getting donations of laptops or modems. The childcare team manager in the other centre contacted the local school and found out how children were managing their work. The school decided to change their method of communication from email to phone, and to only give book work, as the children had no internet access in their rooms. They arranged for children's school books to be sent to the centre.

Both childcare team managers communicated with the children through closed Facebook pages and WhatsApp, offering activities, projects, songs, and homemade videos. Children sent back messages and photos of their work and art projects. Communication was constant, and we were made aware of the emotional field as well, which, as expected, varied from family to family depending on their resources and situations.

Organisations and groups came forward offering help and support. Donations of arts and care packages came in, which brought joy and relief. We helped to coordinate the distribution of these with various organisations and agencies.

Through it all, the parents and children were amazing and found strength to endure the difficulties they were experiencing. They formed their own shopping group, so only three or four adults went shopping for everyone each week. They cared for each other, they participated remotely in what activities were available online, they studied, and some continued to work. Some have children with serious health problems or additional needs; others had mental health difficulties before all this and miraculously endured.

Another aspect of the pandemic was to deal with the financial situation. As a community organisation we look to break even and to continually improve our services if we have profits. The childcare sector was lucky that we could access the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) and also the Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS). I am lucky to have someone who works with me ten hours a week dealing with the financial aspect of operating a childcare organisation: wages, returns to Revenue, grant applications, financial reports to the board of directors, and a host of other jobs that would be a nightmare for me to tackle.

Once we went into TWSS and TWSCS country, this poor woman was working day and night trying to figure out how to operate these schemes, how they fitted with each other, and how to adapt as the parameters kept changing. Of course I had to keep abreast of it with her, so it was an agonising journey for me with my poor accountancy skills. We are still dealing with all of this, but at least the new Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) is simpler and hopefully will last long enough for us to get the hang of it before it changes again.

I would have been lost without the board of directors, whom I leaned on heavily during this period. Major decisions needed to be made almost every week. So they met with me remotely every week and carried me through some very anxious times. I am also full of admiration for the staff I work with, who took up the baton and ran with it at first call. Feedback from parents and children helped me to see that we were providing a service that was needed and appreciated during the Covid-19 lockdown.

How we came to open up again, with all the new regulations and procedures and fears, is a whole other story, and when I have fully recovered from that I might be ready to tell it.

So many amazing, beautiful things happened because of the lockdown: the robin who used our cloakroom cubbies for a nest and hatched a family, appreciative responses from parents, an art project (Little Bird Babble) that engaged the children in Direct Provision for weeks with wildlife outside their doors, and the incredibly generous response from people wanting to help with children and families in Direct Provision.

What I learned about myself and this childcare sector which I am privileged to be part of is that we are resilient, optimistic, creative, adaptable, and absolutely necessary for the economic and emotional stability of this nation.