

Children have the right to be asked to contribute to the dialogue on the provision of Early Childhood Education in Ireland. This article shows that children have much to say on the subject, if we take the time to ask them and listen to what they have to say. It is crucial, however, that while listening to their opinions, we also act on their wishes. It is hoped that this article will go some way towards fulfilling that ambition.

Introduction

A Child Voice project that I conducted sought to elicit the voices of young children on what an ideal setting for Early Childhood Education looks like from their perspective. According to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989), children have a right to express their opinion on matters that affect them. It is hoped that, through publication of their drawings and narratives, the children in this project will be given the opportunity to contribute their opinions on the provision of Early Childhood Education in Ireland.

The project, a small case study, took place in a private, play-based setting in the south-east of Ireland, where the children spend time both indoors and outdoors every day. The children were all four years old and had been involved in the setting for at least one year. For the project, they completed an art piece based on their vision of an ideal Early Childhood Education setting. Narratives of their artworks, transcribed by the teacher, were also recorded.

The consultation with the children was guided by the Lundy model of child participation (Lundy, 2007) and the National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (DCEDIY, 2021). Throughout the project, consideration was given to *space*, *voice*, *audience*, and *influence* to ensure that the children were listened to and fully informed.

The children's drawings

Who (and what) comes to the setting?

In the children's drawings, we see the child him/herself, current and past pupils, siblings, and cousins. There are many children present, sometimes even 'hundreds' or 'millions'. The 'zero mummies and daddies' of the older children reflects their growing independence. For younger children, parents were included, showing how

If Children Designed Early Childhood Education Settings

A Child Voice project based on drawings and narratives by young children



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important an open-door policy for families can be. This policy had been widely removed during the Covid-19 pandemic.

One child's drawing portrayed a visit to the nursery from a farmer, with his tractor and trailer. Other children imagined visits from friendly witches, dinosaurs, and sharks. One child described outings to the local park, while others suggested you could bring 'any toys you like' from home.

Access to settings by families and visitors, outings, and toys from home had been severely curtailed by Covid-19. The frequency of their mention in the children's drawings and narratives indicates that these enriching events are really important to the young children.

Activities in the setting

The predominant activity in the drawings and narratives is play outside. The children engage in vigorous, active play such as sliding, swinging, and slipping. They also mention play outside with toys like bikes and swings. Some mention getting hurt during play, indicating that they see risk as a normal part of play. Children also describe dressing up and costumes, reflecting the value they attribute to sociodramatic play.

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Water is a common theme in the children's play in the drawings. It is associated with the most active outdoor play and correlates with the fun and risk associated with this kind of play, so well described by one child: 'They will slip and hurt themselves. They are laughing.' The children also describe natural elements such as trees, flowers, birds, and animals. As with water, their inclusion indicates how important they are to children. It is worth noting that children have the greatest opportunity to connect freely with such features while spending time outdoors.

What is also noticeable is that the children in the drawings have a lot of agency in what they are doing. They make little reference to rules, instruction, or limits. In fact, what emerges is a sense of great freedom for children in the settings they describe.

The teacher in the setting

A teacher is present in all of the drawings or narratives. They perform traditional roles such as preparing food, guiding children towards activities, taking them on outings, and managing the physical environment. Several children also mention that the teacher is playing with them – sliding down a slide and playing games.

It was interesting that none of the children mentioned learning or teaching in either their drawings or their narratives. In fact, the settings they describe appear more like adventurous play parks than schools, where children are free to play, take risks, and have fun with the support of a co-playing teacher.

Conclusion

It is clear from the drawings and narratives of these young children that they have strong and clear opinions about what Early Childhood Education

settings should look like in Ireland. But it is not enough to ask their opinions. It is crucial that we value children's opinions enough to allow them to influence decision-making. In this way we can empower young children and show them that we value their contributions.

Although the sample size is small, we can draw several clear messages from these children's drawings and narratives about both the curriculum and pedagogy of Early Childhood Education in Ireland.

First, we can see that some of the restrictions that came about due to Covid-19 have deprived young children of many enriching experiences both within and beyond their Early Childhood Education settings. It is imperative that these restrictions be eased as soon as possible so that children can continue to benefit from a broader range of experiences, which they so obviously value.

Second, the children obviously have very clear ideas about the type of activities they would like to do in their ideal Early Childhood Education settings. Active outdoor play predominates. It is often sociodramatic and sometimes risky and includes play with water and a variety of natural elements, as well as outdoor toys. Many settings have moved their practice outdoors due to Covid-19, a move often supported by the Covid-19 capital grant from the DCEDIY. In settings where children are not getting to spend time playing outdoors, we need to examine why, and to support settings to change their practice to meet children's needs and wishes. Some might question the educational strengths of such a setting, but research suggests that both sociodramatic and outdoor play, when supported by a skilled educator, have great educational benefits for young children (Bodrova and Leong, 2007; Waller et al., 2017).

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Finally, the children have portrayed the teacher in the setting as a co-player, and neither teaching nor learning is visible in their drawings and narratives. Research has shown the educational benefit to children of a sensitive teacher, trained in how to support learning through co-play (Fleer, 2015; Gaviria-Loaiza et al., 2017). We can see, through the inclusion of a co-playing teacher in the drawings, that this is something the children value and enjoy. It would be worthwhile to examine how we can further encourage such co-play between teachers and children in Early Childhood Education settings, in order to meet children's wishes in this regard.

These last two points emphasise the importance of play to young children in Early Childhood Education settings. They also illustrate how important it is that we protect children's right to play, as recognised by the UNCRC (UN, 1989), when planning for their early education. While children have rights to both education and play, we need to be careful that, as adults who value education, we do not allow children's right to education to dominate their right to play, but instead plan for both to be achieved simultaneously. As outlined above, research has shown that this is possible.

As we continue to plan for children's Early Childhood Education in Ireland, it is vital that we take the time to listen to children's voices. We have much to learn from children, if we only take the time to seek out their voice.

(Children's names have been changed to protect their identities.)



Ethan

Do the hay bale trailer. Do the hitch. Do the person in it. It's an outside nursery. That's Alfie [brother] and Mum. That's Nicola [the teacher] and that's me.

That one is Mark [friend in nursery]. That is Billy the farmer and he comes to visit in the nursery in his new red tractor – it's a Claas tractor. At the minute he has a new tractor. He used to have an old tractor, but now he has a new one. It's a massive tractor. It has really long steps to the cab.

The steps are black. Nicola is under the steps. The steps are so long going up. It has big black wheels, and the inside of the wheels is grey. Tractors have to have cabs. There are hay bales on the bale trailer wrapped up in red wrappers. Some days there's a trampoline for the kids to use there.

There's a swing with a tree holding the swing. Now there's a dinosaur bulldozer. Bulldozers always have cabs. They have tracks wheels. They're yellow. Now I need to do the pusher. There's a plough at the back. Mark is beside it and he's looking at it. It has no door or windows. It's a old one.



Mark

There's a swing outside and it's raining. A storm is there and there's a door, so the storm can't break it. That's a roundabout, a massive superfast one. He fell off and broke his collarbone, like me. This school is a big one, so big - look! [Gives a long list of names of children in the nursery, his cousins, his siblings] and Mammy and I forgot Dad, hundreds of kids. There are circle beds for all the children to sleep in the night-time. Some kids sleep in their bed in the tent. All the children are playing in the night-time. That's the teacher in there. His name is Mr Dinosaur, name is T-Rex, Mr T-Rex, sometimes Mr Hydrasaurus. He tells them they need to play in the night-time and put themselves to bed. It's open when it's a sunny day, and in stormy days it's closed. Some kids play and some kids sleep. That's green grass kids can stand on and a door for a boy to go out, and that's a massive sandpit, a round one. That's a bell to ring so kids can come in. There's a cannon that have water shooter spoons in it, and it splashes onto a baddie with buttons. That's a boy pushing another boy on a swing. That's a classroom to get things from. The costumes box to dress up for dress-up day - Spider-Man, Iron Man, a boy with lightning cannons, Ninjago, Elsa, Batman. That's the waterslide with a slide and a pool at the end, and there's Mark on the top and he's falling down into the pool, down and under the water with the friendly dinosaurs - Hydrosaurus and Pyrasaurus and shark and a swimming backwards from Dinosaur Train to play with. The name of the school is Dinosaur Train. The children don't play in the classroom. They make pictures of dinosaurs and cut them out and play with them. A huge one to play around. A Hydrosaurus to go down the waterslide.



Lucy

That's a big giant swimming pool in the garden with a bumblebee who is friends with the witch - it's a friendly one. There's a big flower with seeds and pollen and that's bigger than the other. Elsa is the teacher. She's going on the Kilkenny waterslide with the kids. They're all going in the pool in their clothes. The water in the pool turns a different colour from food colouring. That's a dinosaur slide. There's a camera to watch the children in case they're being naughty, in case they hurt someone else. There's a bird that's getting dead 'cause a magpie is attacking it. That's Mark [friend in nursery] dressed up as a lion. There are loads of dressing-up clothes in that dressing-up box - flower dresses, wedding dresses, tiger, lion, some superheroes like Wonder Woman and Supergirl and a backpack to play. Twirly pools and whirling pools. An Elsa toy in the school that's all covered. Anna ones and Elsa ones and a flower toy with seeds inside it and pollen and a bee. That's a whacking ball that's going to whack the school. That's a witch that's flying over the school with a cape. She's a bad witch that can't come in 'cause the door is shut by teacher Elsa. There's a lock on it. Only she can open the lock. The witch isn't able. One of my cousins is allowed go, and my sisters can go into it. Zero mummies and daddies - just for kids. Apples and bananas and the teacher makes smoothies. The kids can bring toys from home, any toys you like. It's far away from big school and it's a nursery next door together so they can go into each other's school. One door for big girls and one door for little ones. The kids live there. They have a sleepover with their teacher. There's lots of animals in the nursery.



Jack

It's raining on the waterslide and there's a spider on the slide. Sam [younger brother] is climbing up the waterslide and sliding down into a pool. There's a tree with a tyre that's a swing. It's raining everywhere. They will slip and hurt themselves. They are laughing and the rain is making them laugh. That's me and I'm going to big school and I'm slipping in the rain and kicking my head. That's a tree with a tyre swing. Sam is in the nursery with me. Nicola is in the nursery and she is playing rainbow games with us in the rain. There is flowers and a tree there.

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