

Home Visiting as a Grassroots Method of Community Change

Creating a more restorative community in Dublin's inner city

Background

Early childhood home visiting (ECHV) in Dublin's inner city is a prime example of grassroots community development and how prevention and early intervention work for children, families, communities, and government. With support for parents as the primary educators of their children a priority, involving local people as co-constructors of programmes and using community action research (CAR) decision-making processes are key to improved educational outcomes and the creation of open-minded, tolerant, welcoming learning environments in families and on the streets.

This paper outlines the innovative CAR process used since 2008 in Dublin's inner city, and how local home visitors – all of whom are women employed by National College of Ireland (NCI) – provide diverse, inclusive, crucial supports for families through good times and bad, while acting as ambassadors and levers for educational change in their communities. NCI is a third-level learning, teaching, and research institution, whose mission is to 'change lives through education'. Its community outreach, Early Learning Initiative (ELI), delivers an integrated prevention and early intervention programme of activities, training, and support for children, parents, and educators, with ECHV at its core.

CAR was chosen as the most appropriate method to deliver long-term sustainable change, while allowing enough flexibility to respond systematically to emerging issues (Bleach, 2013, 2016, 2024). Acknowledging, respecting, and using local expertise and experience are at the heart of CAR, which incorporates continuous capacity-building, data collection, restorative conversations, shared learning, and innovation. It has evolved from a simple 'plan, do, review' model (Lewin, 1946) into a developmental process of incremental change, informed by data, experience, and judgement,



Dr Josephine Bleach

Director, Early Learning Initiative

Early childhood home visiting in Dublin's inner city is a prime example of grassroots community development and how prevention and early intervention work for children, families, communities, and government. This article describes how involving local people using community action research has improved educational and other outcomes in this area. It outlines the innovative home visiting programmes undertaken and highlights the impact of these initiatives.

leading to significant evolution in its theory, practice, and programmes (Patton, 1994).

For NCI, employing local people as home visitors was critical to local engagement and ownership and the effectiveness of our CAR. Easily recognisable in their distinctive uniforms, the home visitors are ambassadors for children's education on the street and provide an accessible point of contact, information, and referral for families. Since 2007, they have supported families through many challenges: intergenerational poverty, unemployment, social isolation, trauma, mental health issues, educational disadvantage, homelessness, violent feuds, Covid-19, and long waits for disability and other child services (Bleach, 2024). Despite all that goes on in Dublin's inner city, including the November 2023 riots, parents continue to sign up for the programmes, with 5,602 families involved in 2023–24 (ELI, 2024).

Research and innovation

With a mission to 'save the next generation', home visitors are researchers and innovators as well as practitioners. Their voices, informed by their experiences in local homes, have been critical to the identification of gaps in service provision and subsequent innovations. Starting with ParentChild+ in 2007 (a two-year literacy and parenting programme for children aged 16 months to 3 years), they have led the development of a suite of programmes that address emerging local needs.

In 2011, funded by the National Early Years Access Initiative, the home visitors embedded STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) into all ELI programmes. In 2014, seeing the need for parent support from birth, home visitors, in collaboration with the local public health nurses, developed the Area-Based Childhood (ABC) 0–2 Programme; now, through Sláintecare, they have integrated it into the national Community Families programme.

With the increase in families in homeless and emergency accommodation, the programmes Home from Home (adapted from ParentChild+) and My Place to Play (play pack promoting child–parent educational interactions and a safe, hygienic place for babies to play) were developed. At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, home visitors switched to virtual and outdoor visits, developing their pedagogy to ensure quality, fidelity, and consistency in service delivery. The Stretch Graduate programme was also developed and provides differentiated transitional supports to families who have finished our ECHV programmes.

With the growing waiting list for assessments and services for children with a disability, our home visiting team, with support from Late Late Toy Show funding, developed the Parenting365 programme, which supports families with children with additional needs. Since 2016, home visitors are involved with the

With a mission to 'save the next generation', home visitors are researchers and innovators as well as practitioners.

North East Inner City (NEIC) Initiative, its critical incident group, and other relevant local networks. As conflict, trauma, and violence increased in the area, they incorporated restorative practice, trauma-informed practice, and infant mental health into their work. Through the Home Visiting Alliance, they are involved in the development of the national approach to home visiting as part of the First 5 strategy (DCEDIY, 2018), which will inform the government's vision for home visiting, shaping its delivery for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

Evaluations, both internal and external, continually highlight the positive impact of ELI's home visiting programmes, with parents learning a different and more enjoyable approach to relating, talking, reading, and playing with their children. The children are developing on a par with their peers, and the benefits extend to siblings and extended family. Professionals notice the gains made: teachers see these children entering school ready to learn.

Professionals notice the gains made: teachers see children entering school ready to learn.

Successful change is complex. While positive change in one family is always welcome, it is the collective impact on local communities and Irish society that is important. Parents tell us repeatedly: 'I love my child. I want them to do well, but I don't know how. I never had it as a child.' Community action research enables us to collectively figure out how in an ever-changing context. It supports reflection on experience and practice, and the collection of data to measure progress, assess impact, and develop theories and innovations to address emerging needs. Together with government and local partners, home visitors are creating a more restorative community in Dublin's inner city that is responsive to its youngest, most vulnerable population.

REFERENCES

- Bleach, J. (2013) 'Improving educational aspirations and outcomes through community action research', *Educational Action Research*, 21(2), 253–266. DOI: 10.1080/09650792.2013.789726
- Bleach, J. (2016) 'Community action research in Ireland: Improving educational outcomes through collaboration in the Dublin docklands'. In: L. Rowell, C. Bruce, J. Shosh, and M. Riel (Eds.), *The Palgrave International Handbook of Action Research*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: 10.1057/978-1-137-40523-4_11
- Bleach, J. (2024) 'Early childhood home visiting: A critical lifeline for families in Dublin's inner city'. Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, 4 June. www.jcfj.ie/article/early-childhood-home-visiting-a-critical-lifeline-for-families-in-dublins-inner-city/.
- Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) (2018) *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028*. Dublin: Government publications. www.gov.ie/en/publication/f7ca04-first-5-a-whole-of-government-strategy-for-babies-young-children-and/.

Early Learning Initiative (ELI) (2024) *End-of-Year Report 2023–24*. Unpublished report, National College of Ireland.

Lewin, K. (1946) 'Action research and minority problems', *Journal of Social Issues*, 2(4), 34–46.

Patton, M.Q. (1994) 'Developmental evaluation', *Evaluation Practice*, 15(3), 311–319. DOI: 10.1177/109821409401500312

Schön, D. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. Temple Smith.

National College of Ireland's Early Learning Initiative contributes at 12th ARNA Annual Conference



Dr Josephine Bleach, Director of the Early Learning Initiative at NCI, receiving the inaugural Paul McNaughton Award from basis.point in May, 2024.

"CAR in Community: Transformative Possibilities" was the theme of the 12th ARNA Conference which took place in June 2024 in Eastern Michigan University.

Community Action Research (CAR) is an alternative research method that gathers data from members of the community. It is especially significant because it gathers crucial information from real people who are being impacted by the issues being studied. It follows therefore that the results of CAR can be used to find solutions to issues being faced by people in local communities.

In preparation for the ARNA Conference 2024, seven Early Childhood Education scholars from across Europe met in August 2023 to discuss the possible development of a small-scale collaborative project to share at ARNA 2024.

Dr Josephine Bleach, Director of the Early Learning Initiative at NCI, and Dr Meera Oke, Associate Professor in Early Childhood Education and Care at NCI, were members of this hybrid party of seven.

Group members participated in online sessions throughout the year to develop a critical theme that would reflect their action research project. They decided on the topic of teacher burnout and poor work-life conditions in three countries. While teacher burnout is not a new point of discussion, it has become notably more serious post-pandemic, and is worsening worldwide.

The theme of the 12th ARNA Conference, based at Eastern Michigan University 7-8 June 2024, was 'Community Action Research (CAR) in Community: Transformative Possibilities'. Presenters (including Dr Josephine Bleach and Dr Meera Oke) shared a rich and varied program with papers, presentations, workshops, and panels.