

'Working Together to Develop the 3Rs' - An Exploration of Roles, Responsibilities and Relationships Between ECCE Students and Teachers in Irish Primary School Infant Classrooms

Deirdre Breathnach and Jennifer Sturley

Introduction

In recent years, several key policy documents have advocated the need for further collaborative working among professionals in the area of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) to provide more cohesive and coordinated provision in this sector. A more streamlined approach to ECCE in Ireland has been recommended by policy statements and reports such as the *National Forum on Early Childhood Education* (Coolahan, 1998), *Ready to Learn - White Paper on Early Childhood Education* (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1999b), *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland* (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2004) and the National Economic and Social Forum [NESF] Report, *Early Childhood Education and Care* (NESF, 2005). *Ready to Learn, White Paper on Early Childhood Education* acknowledged that "other teaching professionals will also have developed skills which may be particularly suited to the needs of infants in primary school." (DES, 1999b: 76). More recently, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2004), has clearly documented the continuum of education from birth to six years of age. The literature also supports the importance of multiprofessional teamworking to comprehensively support and facilitate the education and care of young children from a holistic perspective (Powell, 2005). The NESF advocate a role for ECCE personnel with degree level education within the formal education system (NESF, 2005).

The purpose of this study was to explore the potential for collaborative working in infant classrooms¹ from the perspectives of both teaching staff and ECCE students. These particular students were in their third year of a BA ECCE Degree programme and had previously completed five placements in a variety of early years settings. They had also completed a short placement in the infant classroom, linked with their academic programme. In terms of reviewing their experiences, of key interest for this research was the students' role in the setting, the type and level of responsibility awarded to them and the working relationship with the adults in the environment. The specific objectives of the study therefore were to:

- Document the experience from a student perspective in terms of personal and professional development, identifying their roles and levels of responsibility

Note:

1 In Ireland, over half of all four year-olds and almost all 5 year-olds attend 'infant classes' in Primary level schools (OECD, 2004). Within this paper, the term 'infants' refers to this age group of children.

- Explore the teacher's experiences of and attitudes towards having another adult with an ECCE background in the classroom
- Examine the working relationships of the teachers and students within the classroom and explore the potential for future team working and collaboration in the infant classroom

Methodology

In seeking the appropriate methodology for this particular study, the context and social situation of the research were considered. To this end, it was noted that as the experiences of both the ECCE students and the teachers were the focus of this research and due to the interactive, social and individual nature of infant classroom settings, a qualitative strategy was therefore selected. Two methods in particular were selected:

- Focus group
- Semi-structured interview, consisting of guided questions followed by more open topics. As Hitchcock and Hughes note:

"There must be structure then in an unstructured interview... The researcher does not totally abandon any pre-interview work but consideration is given to the nature of the encounter and the kinds of general areas the researcher wishes to explore. The researcher might work to a rough checklist of ideas or areas she wants to explore in the interview but will be prepared to let the interviewees 'travel' wherever they like."
(Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995: 162)

Data from the students was gathered through focus groups which generated discussion through open-ended questions on their roles, responsibilities and relationships within the classroom. Thirty-four students voluntarily participated in the research, signing a consent form prior to participation. Four focus groups were conducted, each group comprising of five to ten students. The researchers were familiar with the students (through a teaching capacity) and to reduce potential bias (such as the students discussing what they thought the researchers wanted to hear from them) efforts were made to create an informal environment by providing snacks and light refreshments.

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposeful sample of the teachers involved in the experience, drawn from the schools represented by the students who had attended the focus groups. Eleven teachers from a mix of urban and rural schools in the Munster area were interviewed by two researchers. The teachers also signed consent forms and the confidentiality of the material was assured. In order to address the issue of inter-observer reliability, both researchers agreed on the format for the interviews in advance. Six open-ended questions were formulated to allow both researchers to explore similar topics such as the type of activities that the student engaged in; how they felt the student related to the children; the advantages/disadvantages to having the

student in the classrooms and background information as to their working with other professionals in the classroom on previous occasions.

Findings

From the perspective of the students:

Predominantly, the student assumed the role of an assistant with a particular emphasis on working with children on an individual one to one basis. Several students mentioned the importance of '*getting to know the children*' or '*getting down at their level*'. It was evident that certain children required more individual learning support and that the teacher may not have had time to give individual attention. As one student mentioned, "*they needed that individual help while she couldn't do that with all the children*".

This was most notable in classrooms where there were children with special educational needs or children with English as a second language and in multi-grade classroom environments (classes having more than one class level of children in the same room). It was apparent that the students were conscious of the pupil teacher ratio compared to a day care or preschool environment and felt that the teacher was under pressure to deliver the curriculum and "*get it done and get on to what's next and I kind of felt it was totally on time, time, time*".

There was acknowledgement of the difficulties caused by the number of children in the class:

"She said we need someone in the classroom to help us. And I just thought to myself even with her and myself in the room, it was hard at times, so I just don't know how she'd do it on her own."

The students also reported a lack of emphasis on play and activity based learning and observed the predominant use of worksheets, which they attributed to time constraints and lack of resources. It was also noted that the children often could not read the directions on the worksheets; "*You could have easily done it with toys rather than using books*".

Some of the students reported having high levels of responsibility and involvement, particularly in areas such as physical education, stories and art activities, while a small minority felt '*underestimated*'. A recurrent and unexpected issue to emerge from each focus group was the notion of respect and it was highlighted as a significant difference to other placement settings. The students reported feeling valued and respected as professionals in this working environment.

"You know it was different in the primary school compared to how you were treated in the creche. The professionalism was obvious."

"It was a real professional conversation, you could feel like you could contribute to it a lot more and they really welcomed you and your thoughts and your ideas".

Another key issue to emerge was how valuable the experience had been in demonstrating the link between learning in the preschool and the infant classroom and the transition from one to the other:

"I think that it's invaluable to know the next stage and how it's going to work. How their learning will progress and stuff, I just think that's been the best thing, just to see where they go from when they leave pre-school, what's next for them."

A number of students also reported how they had underestimated the abilities of the children in the infant classrooms, commenting on the rapid progression in learning evident within a year in the classroom setting.

Their preconceptions of the infant classroom, based on their own experiences as children were also challenged *"I liked primary school when I was there, I enjoyed it but like, I would much prefer to be there now..."*

From the perspective of the teacher:

Many of the teachers were unfamiliar with the BA ECCE programme as such, they were unsure as to how to incorporate the students into the classroom setting. Most teachers were familiar with student teachers coming to the classroom with a predefined role to take responsibility for the teaching of the children but understood that the role of this ECCE student was different. They appeared to be conscious that they did not engage the students in menial tasks but wanted the experience to benefit the student's professional development. They would have encouraged the use of specific guidelines or a checklist approach outlining the activities that student could or should undertake e.g. *'must read a story'* in order to gauge the appropriate level of responsibility.

The majority of teachers felt that the student was a significant asset to the classroom and facilitated their own working. The contribution of 'an extra pair of hands' was noted in most interviews:

"It was great to have an extra pair of hands, she could relate to them during playtime and also with their writing, go around to the children, that was a big help. She was like a classroom assistant really. Even if I had to leave the classroom for a minute, normally I couldn't do that, even to go to the bathroom."

Reference was particularly made to their contribution to children with special needs and their ability to give them individual attention. The teachers were aware that certain children needed more attention, such as children suspected of having special needs but

still awaiting assessment. A positive response to the student involvement was noted by multi-grade class teachers.

The teachers felt that the experience was useful for the students and for people working at preschool level to see what goes on in the infant classroom so that they can be aware of this at preschool level.

Some teachers, despite speaking positively about the experience, appeared to be happy working independently to satisfy the criteria of the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999a). One teacher found that explaining lesson plans, what she was doing with the children and her rationale to another adult was time consuming. Many also had questions as to the future role of the students:

"I know that the students will not just be classroom assistants with a short course but they will not be teaching in the classroom either so where will they fit in, I wasn't too sure. What exactly will their role be?"

Discussion

This placement experience was a valuable experience, not only in terms of the personal and professional development of the student, but also in providing an insight into the working of a modern day infant classroom. The role and level of responsibility given to the student varied, as did the value the teachers placed on having personnel with a background in ECCE in the classroom. It was not evident that the teachers specifically felt ECCE professionals would be an asset to their working. It was evident that the teachers were used to assuming a dominant role, some had experience of working with classroom or special need 'assistants' and appreciated the 'assistance'. The ability to work collaboratively in a partnership approach may require education in the area of multiprofessional perspectives (Powell, 2005).

The majority of students reported very positive working relationships. They strongly emphasized how they felt respected and valued as professionals within the school environment. For some, this was a novel experience, despite completing five previous placements in a variety of settings. This aspect of the research requires further investigation and raises issues around the professionalisation of the ECCE sector. Further exploration of the attitudes of early years practitioners to students in the field and further training should be undertaken.

The experience also facilitated a sharing of pedagogical practice for both ECCE student and teacher, highlighting the potential for further collaborative working and greater knowledge sharing between early years practitioners and teachers in order to facilitate the transition from preschool to the classroom.

Based on the perspectives of the students and the teachers, it is evident that there are many challenges facing the infant class teacher. Trying to celebrate 'the uniqueness of the child' (DES, 1999a) through activity-based learning may be overshadowed by the pupil-teacher ratio, multi-grade classes, the inclusion of children with special educational needs and the increase in the number of children with English as their second language. The students observed a lack of emphasis on play and activity-based learning which they attributed to time constraints and lack of resources, concurring with recent literature (Murphy, 2004; OECD, 2004) and with earlier research based on the 1971 Curriculum (Horgan, 1995). It would appear that in order to meet the holistic needs of each child in the contemporary infant classroom, further adult participation is required and key policy documents have recommended the participation of ECCE professionals (DES, 1999b) (NESF, 2005). The potential benefits or otherwise of having ECCE professionals in the classroom on child development should be investigated. Further exploration of the potential contributory role of ECCE professionals and ECCE initiatives such as *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006) and the forthcoming *Framework for Early Learning* (NCCA, forthcoming) within the infant classrooms is also needed.

The findings presented in this paper have been exploratory in nature; however, these preliminary findings have implications for future policy and practice within the ECCE sector in Ireland. This small-scale study indicates the need for a deeper understanding on a number of issues affecting early years provision. The emerging data from the perspectives of both the ECCE students and the infant teachers suggest that collaborative inter-professional working arrangements within the infant classroom could be beneficial for all parties and should have a particularly positive effect on the learning and development of the young child.

References

- Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2006). *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.
- Coolahan, J. (Ed.) (1998). *Report on The National Forum on Early Childhood*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Department of Education and Science (1999a). *Primary School Curriculum*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Department of Education and Science (1999b). *Ready to Learn - A White Paper on Early Childhood Education*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Hitchcock, G. and D. Hughes (1995). *Research and the Teacher: a Qualitative Introduction to School-Based Research*. London: Routledge.

Horgan, M.A. (1995). Management of the Junior Infant Curriculum in Irish Primary Schools - Rhetoric Versus Reality. *Compare*, Vol. 25, No. 3, pp. 253-261.

Murphy, B. (2004). Practice in Irish Infant Classrooms in the Context of the Irish Primary School Curriculum (1999). *International Journal of Early Years Education*, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 245-257.

National Children's Office (2000). *The National Children's Strategy: Our Children - Their Lives*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2004). *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*. Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (Forthcoming). *The Framework for Early Learning*. Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

National Economic and Social Forum (2005). *Early Childhood Care and Education*. Dublin: National Economic and Social Forum.

OECD (2004). *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland*. Paris: OECD.

Powell, J. (2005). Multiprofessional Perspectives (in) Jones, L., Holmes, R. and Powell, J. (Eds.) *Early Childhood Studies: A Multiprofessional Perspective* Berkshire: Open University.