

Playful Challenges: Values and Qualities of Early Intervention in Early Childhood Settings

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Introduction

Today, early childhood care and education in Ireland exists in a very new context. In the last decade, the environment in which early childhood pedagogy is practiced is increasingly dominated by a proliferation of images, ideas, cultures, and technologies. As Vásquez (2006: 42) argues, "*Complex, interactive, and far-reaching change ushered in by globalisation processes compels educators, scholars, and policymakers to consider a pedagogy of the future*". In the field of early childhood care and education this means alerting practitioners to the techniques and skills which give them the best chances of meeting the learning needs of all of the diverse range of children under six who presently attend early childhood settings.

Tierney (2006: 78) would suggest that this practitioner "*is someone who develops an understanding of the cultural worlds of [children] and their communities and who has the ability to help improvise within and across these spaces*". My interest in exploring current pedagogy and techniques which heighten communication across cultural worlds leads me to extrapolate from some of our most sensitive examples of teaching and learning, in this case, from the model of early intervention practice.

The recent research project Synergy (Cederman, 2006), undertaken for the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), investigated what might be distinctive about high quality early intervention. The research qualitatively explored how children with special needs were experiencing early intervention in a variety of early childhood settings in North Tipperary. In other words, key characteristics of quality early intervention were identified and there was a focus on how successful outcomes were brought into being by the children, their parents and the North Tipperary Early Intervention team (NTEI).

I argue that key findings from the research have critical application for the education of all very young children. To substantiate this claim, this paper focuses upon two vital qualities of early intervention, which, as Cederman (2006) shows, are greatly valued by parents and early interventionists and have the potential to lead to successful outcomes. These are firstly, the relationship of professionals with parents, and secondly, an approach to child-led pedagogy where learning is embedded in play and where children learn in an environment of 'playful challenge'. Focus upon these qualities enables us to think about the education of the very young in a way which might guarantee, as Singer describes it, "*children's active participation*" (2005: 618).

The Relationship of Parents and Professionals

The relationship between parents and professionals which is described in Synergy can be best introduced by repeating the joy and delight that Elizabeth experiences with her child's progress under the guidance of the early intervention team.

Elizabeth: "My experience has been very well now, delighted with it. The progress like that Rachel has made over the year she has been with the Early Intervention like - so I found it brilliant for her and - yeah. She's learned so much in the year that she couldn't do last year. And in the year that she's been with them she's been, she's become more outgoing and she's starting to vocalise her words now and so she is coming on great now."

The notion of 'high quality' early intervention is also understood in very active terms, in the values, qualities, behaviours and performances of the early intervention team members. The research participants stress that 'high quality' to them means that the NTEI team embodies approachability, openness, helpfulness, thoroughness, interpersonal style, patience, sharing knowledge, and team-work. The values the parents greatly esteem and mention repeatedly are those of communication, information, relationship, attention, security, reassurance, interaction and guidance. These words are all about relationship. As one parent, Bernie, describes it, *"They met us. They spoke. You know what I mean. They didn't mind what questions we asked or what was fired at them. They were - they sat, they listened."*

Pauline below talks about how the team includes her in their practice and indicates too that she feels part of the team, which is one of the core objectives of early intervention practice in North Tipperary.

Pauline: "They're all very nice. The team. They're lovely people. If you have any problems or, you know, you're worried about anything, you can kind of say it. Whereas before you kind of had to make an appointment, you know. Its kind of the team are all working together like. And we assess and go back over everything like. They'll send me a - then a print-out - you know of how I feel he's coming on or not coming on. You know, we'd all kind of discuss Adam, it is very good. Adam has his own carer at the creche and Kathleen (from the NTEI Team) will kind of meet with her and give her some kind of ideas what to do."

It is the sensitivity of members of the NTEI team, their ability to 'step into the parent's shoes' that drives the parent-team relationship in Aine's narrative below. She claims that Carol (the Early Intervention Specialist) really understands that family life does not always pivot around the one child with special needs:

Aine: "I think Carol really, really understands, or seems to understand. And she always sort of asks questions that nobody else seems to ask. She would say something like

- One weekend we were away in Belfast and usually people say "Oh that's a long drive" but she was saying "How does David cope with that drive?" and "How do you manage keep him in his seat?" And she, you know, she kind of knew that it's not just the long drive, there is so much else going on in that four hour drive, you know. Things like that. She really seems to understand that all the focus is not on the child. She asks me questions as well about how we are doing, you know. She's very good that way."

Important too, is that many of the participants used the term 'family' to reflect their relationship with this team. Hannah's feeling is that, "*all of the team we would have to say are excellent, you know. And they are very committed people and very easy to approach. And you know they feel almost like family*". The parents' intense emphasis upon community and shared relationship is especially heightened by Hannah's later phrase, "*kind of like a big family*".

Hannah's feeling about her relationship with the NTEI team complements Linder's (2005) recent argument that in most state-of-the-art intervention models, the role of the professional has shifted to be more involved with the adults in the child's life:

"The professional is becoming a coach, a consultant, and a collaborative partner in the intervention process...This involves on-going discussion with the important adults in the child's life to examine, reflect upon, and refine their knowledge and skills...There is a major shift in philosophy and practice from most disciplines and many professionals will require additional training and supervision to adequately make the transition to this new role" (Linder, 2005: 6-7).

Her claim is that the attainment of quality outcomes demands quality programmes, skilled professionals, coordinated and integrated programmes, as well as the monitoring and support needed to sustain ongoing improvements in the field.

Linder's (2005) term '*collaborative partner*' reflects the sensitive familial type of relationship between parents and professionals described in Synergy. If the research highlights the value of the collaborative relationship between parents and those who work with their children, it also stresses the value of embedding learning in naturalistic play. This describes how every child with special needs, and, I would argue, every child in care and education settings, learns to lead play through following what they are spontaneously interested in.

Child-directed Play

Greenspan and Weider (1997; 1998) base their emphasis on play upon a developmental model that enables the child with '*biological challenges*' to progress through the techniques upon which language, intelligence and interactions with the world are based (1998: 46). They stress that the foundations of communication and thought are found in Floortime, a method of interaction and play designed to develop the focus and calm needed to survive in a stimulating world. The basics of interaction are also found in intimacy, two-way communication, intentionality, the awareness of emotions and emotional thinking. The goals of '*Floortime*' are to help the child engage with their parents, become more intentional and respond when their parents respond to what they did, in short, the parent needs to learn to interact and get the child involved with them.

Linder (2005) also prioritises child-directed play. Her model of Transdisciplinary Play-based Assessment is used by the NTEI as an assessment tool and play is also the key method of intervention she advocates. The research describes the involvement of the team as they play with the child and family, and how the parents recognise the emotional thrill and pleasure felt by their child involved in play. For example, Maura's claim is that "*[w]e have our full team, totally involved, shoes off, on all fours, totally involved with the kids. My child can be clapped on the back by the team and he's thrilled you know*".

It can be argued that the team has changed how Roisin below understands her daughter through their child-directed play with her. The team has helped this whole family communicate and understand Rachel's need for support and how it feels from the child's perspective to have to struggle to achieve. The child herself, her feelings and needs, are at the very hub of this extract as she begins to develop language and play-skills. The skills this family has learnt from the team mean that mother and child can both be 'happier' and more sociable.

Roisin: "*Yeah - I've really brilliant time for the NTEI team. Dave and all of them get into, you know, they sit down and actually be kids with them, whereas other people, when we were in [another town], it was like, "I'm the grownup, you're just a child", you know. But in the team here it's a group thing and everybody gets involved. I've great respect for them now. I'm quite happy to go there and its great benefit for all my family like, coz it shows us what to do like with Rachel. And how to bring her on. Like Rachel, before you'd be saying - she couldn't speak or - and she couldn't do anything and it was very, at times it would get very frustrating for you. But now they've shown you that, they've shown how Rachel feels as well as you feels. And how frustrating it is for Rachel and that makes you think well she needs support and the way she's getting it like - it shows you how to communicate with her properly and help her achieve her goals. Now I can bring her places and she can play and she can make friends like and I can - I can do more because before she didn't want to do anything and she just sort of sat confined and you'd be there and the other kids would*

be there and they couldn't understand - and then they didn't want her there because they couldn't play with her. But now she is starting to play with them, so that's happier for me. Coz then you can go places and she's quite happy to be there."

Playful challenge can also be extended by Kristeva's notion of 'revolt' (2002). For Kristeva, 'revolt' means acquiring the habit of ongoing inquiry in the endeavour to harness what is most alive and promising. For children with special needs, and I would argue, all children, this means really questioning how we best relate to children. It means perceptively following the child's lead and challenging them just enough so that they have the opportunity to acquire a sense of well-being about what they do and who they are. Not the well-being gained through pleasing an adult, although this will happen, but that of internalising their own motivation for learning. Our role here is to watch, wait, and listen in silence, alert to following the child's lead. In watching children undertake 'playful challenge', what is 'most alive and promising' is watching the tiniest voices being able to be heard, the smallest actions prioritised and the slightest gestures reciprocated.

In terms of pedagogy, this means educators really understanding the ambivalence of play. Setting up spaces where there is an exchange between the children's bodily surfaces and the world immediately beyond that. By allowing children to be challenged while they lead us into play, practitioners can allow children's actions to encapsulate wonder, decision-making and information-sharing.

Rousseau (1966: 12) argued that *"the first languages were singable and passionate before they became simple and methodical"*. I am arguing that in the setting of 'playful challenge' there is the potential for all children to experience the language of song and delight, and a sense of wholeness, pleasure and belonging, regardless of their level of development. The secret for childcare and education settings is to re-imagine our places of learning and care and to be conscious of nurturing a sense of relationship and challenge and connecting children holistically to the makings of their emotional, physical and cognitive selves, their intellect, memory and imagination.

In conclusion, by embedding learning in the warmest of relationships and child-directed naturalistic play we reconnect young children to the vocabulary and vitality of real sensations, and the challenges of today's world, of complex, interactive, and far-reaching change (Vásquez, 2006). To my mind, what underpins this way of thinking about our interactions with children is an ongoing quality of uncertainty. This means that there is no one ideal 'meaning' given to play and learning but that children get the opportunity to learn through a myriad of sensations in settings that prioritise relationships and playful challenge.

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