

Research Digest

Standard 16 Community Involvement



Promoting community involvement requires the establishment of networks and connections evidenced by policies, procedures and actions which extend and support all adults' and children's engagement with the wider community.

Introduction

Effective early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings see the child in the context of the family, and the family in the context of the wider community (Conaty, 2002). Community involvement in terms of early childhood provision can be mutually beneficial – while children in the setting benefit from new and broadened learning experiences, changing community needs can also be addressed through quality services (e.g., early intervention programmes, parental support). Whalley (2001:133) believes that a community involvement approach fosters good practice through interaction and consultation, where '*...everyone is learning; children, staff, parents and the wider community*'.

Community involvement can take many forms. It begins with an awareness of what amenities, resources and opportunities are available, and is progressed when a setting establishes links which have the potential to extend and develop its involvement in the wider community. It can be greatly enhanced through the establishment of networks and partnerships with both statutory and voluntary organisations. Liaison with local statutory services, such as health providers, can be immensely beneficial in terms of contact with specialist staff, and can facilitate early intervention strategies. Links to childcare organisations can help to keep services up-to-date on ECCE developments in Ireland and abroad, and allow the exchange of information, concerns and ideas. Similarly, contact with specialist organisations, such as those representing Travellers, refugees or children with special needs, can inform a setting's curriculum/programme of activities, through the provision of relevant information, resources and personnel.

The essence of the relationship between ECCE and community involvement lies in the provision of opportunities to children to become familiar with the wider community (beyond the home and setting), which will later become an integral part of their lives. Furthermore, it broadens their range of experiences in terms of learning and development, expanding the curriculum beyond the walls of the setting.

Recent Research

Linking with the wider community

"The bond between parent and child should be the central pivot of educational activitiesthe community has to perceive a commitment to educational change, not for the benefit of the outsiders, but for itself and its children. Teachers for their part must know the cultural access point in the local community. If they do not, they run the grave risk of failing the child and the community they pretend to address." (Bernard Van Leer Foundation, cited in Conaty, 2002:44)

Cultural practices and traditions tend to have significant influence on the relationship between ECCE settings and community involvement. In Reggio Emilia settings, for example, the pre-school programme is a vital part of the community, a reality reflected in considerable financial support. This tradition of community support for families with young children expands on Italy's cultural view of children as the collective responsibility of the state (Cadwell, 2002). In Ireland, socio-cultural theory, embedded in the belief that learning is an unfolding, evolutionary process, has greatly influenced ECCE. In particular, its advocacy of a more community-focused approach to learning and development has impacted on the expansion of the social context in which learning takes place.

Pence and Ball (2000) outline general guiding principles for this type of cooperative/community approach, within the framework of a setting's curriculum/programme:

- **Support and reinforcement for community initiative**
- **Maintenance of multicultural respect (especially as children may be encountering people from different ethnic backgrounds to themselves, or to those they have already become familiar with in their setting)**
- **Identification of community and individual strengths as the basis for activities and initiatives**

- Ensuring a broad ecological perspective and awareness of the child as part of a family and wider community
- Awareness that while the immediate focus is on ECCE, this type of approach should provide the basis for broader child, youth, family and community training and services

These principles are reflective of what Pence and Ball refer to as '*...culturally grounding curriculum through elders contributions'* (2000:43), where children are introduced to members of the wider community who can bring cultural content, historical knowledge and experience with the community's children and families into the setting. These 'elders' provide links between the setting experience and the community experience, and therefore promote an interactionist approach to learning and development. This type of community representative can be drawn from a wide range of sources; parents or grandparents of children within the setting, local Gardaí, storytellers, local business people, community health care workers, and so forth.

In addition to inviting the community into the setting, it is equally important that the setting provides children with opportunities to experience the wider community first-hand. Organised outings such as nature walks and visits to local amenities (parks, sports facilities, libraries, museums, etc.) and involvement in local initiatives such as 'tidy town' competitions provide children with essential opportunities to participate in new and exciting activities, as well as increasing their comprehension of life beyond the context of the home and setting. As French (2003) points out, such outings should consider health and safety procedures (e.g., adequate adult/child ratios), and facilitate expansion of the child's interest and learning (e.g., allowing sufficient time and space for children to observe their surroundings and comment on them).

Promoting children's citizenship in a community context

As learning and development take place in a social context, the child is socialised by factors beyond immediate family and experiences in the daily setting. Contact with the surrounding community provides a child with a rich and diverse learning environment. Children should, therefore, be encouraged and

supported to be active participants in those communities.

French (2003) suggests ways in which this type of 'liaison' can be encouraged:

- As part of their everyday activities, children should be able to avail of the opportunities that their local community has to offer (e.g., shops, businesses, recycling banks)
- Children should be provided with knowledge about local areas of physical or spiritual significance, such as rivers or places of worship
- Exercises to ensure smooth transitions for children should be organised ( Research Digest/Standard 13: Transitions). Bringing children to their intended school, for example, showing them around or inviting the Principal in to the setting encourages a smooth transition to school for young children
- Contacts with other local childcare services in the area could be established
- It is important to have a network of local contacts to consult regularly (e.g., local doctor)
- Venturing out into the community enriches children's experiences, by broadening their perspective, encouraging positive exploration and allowing them to make connections between the service and the outside world

Implementing the Standard

Promoting community involvement begins with an awareness of what resources exist at local, regional and national levels. It is, therefore, up to each setting to have a range of information available on the amenities, services and opportunities available that can be used to support and complement the goals and objectives of the service. These type of resources include:

- Professional support - City/County Childcare Committees, trade unions, Traveller organisations, Barnardos, etc.

- Membership organisations - The National Children's Nurseries Association, IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation, Forbairt Naónraí Teo, Irish Montessori Education Board, Irish National Teacher's Organisation, etc.
- Other early childhood practitioners and services networks – Border Counties Childcare Network, etc.
- Health services – doctors, public health clinic/nurse, preschool officers, therapists, dentists, Early Intervention Team, etc.
- Parent support – parenting programmes, social clubs/societies, support groups for families of a child with a disability, etc.
- Other ECCE services – parent and toddler groups, crèches, primary schools, after school programmes, etc.
- Education/learner support – schools, adult education classes/centres, training organisations, etc.
- Cultural outlets – theatres, music centres, museums, art centres, libraries, etc.
- Social and environmental facilities and services – parks and gardens, sports centres, fire station, Gardaí, open farms, zoos, etc.
- Internet/websites

Making this information available to staff, parents and other adults within the setting should be done through a variety of media; bulletin boards, newsletters, parents booklets, e-mail, information sharing sessions within the setting, outings, participation in community events, and so forth. It is equally important that this awareness raising is a two-way process, and that the local community is made aware of the activities and services that particular settings contribute to supporting children and families. Again, this should be achieved through newsletters, websites, information meetings and connection with the local media.

Including children is an integral part of community involvement and, accordingly, each setting should actively promote children's citizenship in their local, regional and national community. This



involves ensuring that setting activities are regularly coordinated with community agencies and/or local schools (e.g., transitions policy, local Residents' Associations, community initiatives, sports groups). Promoting children's citizenship should also enable babies and young children to be present and to participate in events and activities within the community. This type of participation should be achieved through:

- Outings and field trips
- Participation in community events, such as market days, school fairs, parades and pageants, etc.
- Facilitating visits to the setting by representatives of a variety of community resources, such as a Garda, fire officer, librarian, shopkeeper, etc.
- Involving children in partnerships with other services, such as visiting the local retirement home, fundraising for various local services and charities, ecological projects, etc.
- Integrating local knowledge, environmental and cultural activities into the curriculum/programme

Conclusion

Social partnership has become a defining characteristic of Irish legislative changes and processes in the past few years, stemming primarily from the strength of community development initiatives. This community 'buy-in' comes from the ground, where people with a sense of community belonging and involvement work collaboratively to improve various aspects of their lives (education, health, accommodation, service provision, etc.). Exposing young children to this wider community through ECCE not only provides opportunities for broadening their learning and development experiences, but also introduces them to the concept of community, providing them with a sense of belonging to something bigger than their immediate home or setting environments. In doing so, it introduces them to an extensive social system with the potential to foster both self - and group - identity ( Research Digest Standard 14: Identity and Belonging).

Resources for Community Involvement

- Cadwell, L. (2002). *Bringing Learning to Life: A Reggio Approach to Early Childhood Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Conaty, C. (2002). *Including All: Home, School and Community United in Education*. Dublin: Veritas.
- French, G. (2003). *Supporting Quality: Guidelines for Best Practice in Early Childhood Services* (2nd ed.). Dublin: Barnardos.
- Pence, A. and Ball, J. (2000). Two Sides of an Eagle's Feather: University of Victoria Partnerships with Canadian First Nations (in) Penn, H. (Ed.) (2000). *Early Childhood Services: Theory, Policy and Practice*. Buckingham: Open University Press, pp. 36-47.
- Whalley, M. (2001). Working as a Team (in) Pugh, G. (Ed.) (2001). *Contemporary Issues in the Early Years: Working Collaboratively for Children*. London: Sage Publications, pp. 125-145.

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The National Quality Framework
for Early Childhood Education

