Early Intervention in Ireland - Where do we go from here?:
National and International Perspectives

A reflection

Introduction
It was a great pleasure to attend this stimulating and important conference and to listen to the various and varied contributions. The Inclusion in Education and Society Research Group at the School of Education, TCD is to be applauded for hosting such a timely conference, which has been both informative and challenging. The presentations and discussion provided a rich synthesis of how we got to where we are and how learning from research and practice can guide us into the future.

Although focusing on early intervention there were many references to the importance of prevention, which I welcomed as there is a danger that in focussing too much attention on early intervention we may loose sight of the value there is to be gained from engaging with and supporting families and children to maximise what is available to them in a way that recognises the strengths as well as the needs of children.

In drafting this reflection I have identified three themes that struck me as useful in framing the impact the conference had on me.

An integrated approach
I attended the conference as a developmental psychologist with a specific interest in mainstream early childhood development and education and was struck by the common threads informing the research agenda for the wide variety of professionals presenting on their work in the field of early intervention. In particular I was struck by the reference, in a number of presentations, to the complexity of the world in which all children are developing and the references to a systems approach to understanding professional practice and intervention programmes. Although not always mentioned this reflects the very powerful influence of Urie Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological model of human development.

Recognising this complexity it came as no surprise that one strong theme in the conference was the need for an integrated approach to working with children and their families. The value, indeed the necessity, of working across professional boundaries was universally acknowledged. While the positive impact of a partnership approach was reflected in a number of the research studies presented the difficulties of such an approach was not underestimated. Interagency and cross professional approaches to practice challenge the more familiar mainstream practice. Such an integrated approach to working with young children requires the ability to listen and take
account of different professional lens to enrich our understanding of important contextual factors which impact on early intervention practices. To be effective such a change in practice requires leadership and commitment at all levels.

Despite recognising the value of an integrated approach to early intervention practices with young children I was struck by the relative absence of references to the potential of engaging with early years professionals. There is widespread acknowledgement of the importance of the early years to children’s lives and many families share the early care and education of their children. All early environments are learning environments and all have the potential to contribute positively to children’s development. However, there is, as yet in Ireland limited recognition of early years professionals as an allied profession. There are moves to professionalise this sector and I look forward to a time when those working in early childhood settings will be recognised by others as valued professionals in the lives of children with a unique professional contribution to make.

In addition to recognising the value of cross profession cooperation many presentations also paid attention to the importance of working effectively with parents who, while not professionals, should be respected as ‘experts of experience’. They bring knowledge, skills and attitudes, which enrich our professional understanding of children and the wider contexts of their lives. They provide a unique perspective on each child, which can assist professionals in recognising and respecting each child as an individual.

**The role of relationships**
The importance of relationships to children and their overall development was also a common theme running through the presentations and highlighted by some of the research studies presented. We know, from many different sources, that the quality of early experience has a profound influence on all children. Bronfenbrenner (2006) goes so far as to suggest that these close interactions between children, adults, place and space, these ‘proximal processes’, are the engines of development. The quality of interactions and relationships in early life strengthens development while also laying the foundations for future learning and social interaction. Emerging evidence from early brain research may provide evidence of the biological context to explain how this works in practice. Given the importance of understanding the whole child there is a case to made for providing and strengthening the level of general child development studied by different professionals working in prevention and early intervention situations. If we are not equipped with a solid understanding of the nature of normal child development in context, recognising the personal and cultural dimension and past experiences every child brings to a situation, there is a danger that we may focus too much on a perceived problem to be remedied rather than on situational and contextual dimensions which might also need attention. If we are too wedded to our
professional instincts and focus too closely on our particular area of interest we may, in fact, problematise the developmentally ‘well’ child.

*The importance of play*

The potential of the process of play and the disposition of playfulness came through in many of the presentations. There is much to be said for locating play as a central strand in prevention and early intervention programmes and practices. Play is a non-threatening space within which to consider children’s development. It is through play that children come to understand their world in the early years, they learn about themselves and their position in the world and they also learn about their own strengths and limitations. For professionals working with children play provides a context within which to connect and engage with children and to model practices and skills that need enhancing. Play is the site of joint attention, of shared interest where children can articulate – verbally and non-verbally – their thinking and understanding. As with a general understanding of child development it would also be very valuable for those working on prevention and early intervention programmes to study a module on play and its place in children’s learning and development.

In conclusion, attending this conference was personally very valuable. It provided me with an insight into the various professional lenses through which children’s learning and development are viewed. It also underlined the very diverse and interacting situations in which children’s early learning and development take place. It highlighted once again the critical role that early childhood experiences, wherever they occur, have in a child’s life. In particular it called attention to the potential of quality prevention and early intervention experiences to child development across the various early years environments contemporary children experience. Maximising this potential will require an integrated, multi-professional approach, which has implications for both initial professional education and continuing professional development. It is also an approach where specific professions and professionals must recognise and value the contribution that parents and the allied professions make in understanding each child in context. It is in working effectively together for the child that we can improve the quality of life of all young children.

Prof. Nóirín Hayes
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