

Title	The changing face of pre-school services: a case study
Authors	Murphy, Rosaleen
Publication date	2005-04
Original Citation	MURPHY, R. 2005. The Changing Face of Preschool Services: A Case Study.In: HAYES, N. (ed.) OMEP (l'Organisation Mondiale pour l'Education Préscolaire Ireland) Ireland: Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood Education and Care. St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin, Ireland:OMEP Ireland.
Type of publication	Conference item
Link to publisher's version	<a href="http://omepireland.ie/publications.html">http://omepireland.ie/publications.html</a>
Download date	2025-01-28 18:31:29
Item downloaded from	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/10468/302">https://hdl.handle.net/10468/302</a>



# UCC

Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh, Éire  
University College Cork, Ireland



Cork Open Research Archive  
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

MURPHY, R. 2005. The Changing Face of Preschool Services: A Case Study. In: HAYES, N. (ed.) *OMEP (l'Organisation Mondiale pour l'Education Préscolaire Ireland) Ireland: Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood Education and Care*. St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin, Ireland: OMEP Ireland.

<http://omepireland.ie/publications.html>

This item is available from <http://hdl.handle.net/10468/302>  
CORA Cork Open Research Archive <http://cora.ucc.ie>

**To cite this paper:**

Murphy, Rosaleen (2005). The Changing Face of Pre-school Services: A Case Study. In *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood Education and Care, Proceedings of the OMEP Ireland Conference, St Patrick's College Drumcondra, 23 April 2005*, pp. 234-244.

**The Changing Face of Preschool Services: A Case Study**

Dr Rosaleen Murphy

IRCHSS Government of Ireland Research Fellow, Dept. of Education, UCC

**Abstract**

There have been major changes in pre-school provision in Ireland in the last ten years. This paper will present a snap-shot of how these changes have impacted on one community pre-school located in a high-priority area of Cork and the consequent effects on the quality of the service provided. The factors influencing its development include the introduction of the Preschool regulations under Section VII of the Child Care Act 1991, the capital and staffing grants it has received, and the changes in the population it serves. The paper also documents how the introduction of the High/Scope curriculum, coupled with an on-going commitment to improving the quality of service, has influenced practice in the pre-school.

**Introduction**

The whole area of early childhood care and education services has undergone major changes in recent years. Some of these changes are related to the provision of services, including a demand for extended hours and more places for children, especially those aged under three. There has also been much debate as to how the quality of services can be improved. A major factor in regard to this latter has been the upgrading of the skills of those who work in early childhood services.

The main factors influencing these changes have been the introduction of legislation setting out basic standards for early childhood services, the setting up of the Childcare Committees at national and local level, and the availability of funding under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) 2000-2006. Coupled with this have been major societal and economic changes: less unemployment, increased labour force participation by women, population changes especially immigration, and changing family structures. As a result of all this, there have been efforts in recent years not

only to increase the number of childcare places available but also to maintain and improve the quality of services. There is a particular concern with the role of early years services in disadvantaged areas, both as a support for parents who wish to re-enter the workforce and as a measure to combat educational disadvantage.

The development of pre-school services has been further influenced by the many discussion documents and papers that have appeared in recent years, most notably the Department of Education White Paper *Ready to Learn* (1999), the National Childcare Strategy (1999) and the National Children's Strategy (2000), the NCCA (2003) discussion document on the early years curriculum *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*, the OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland (2004) and the many documents produced since its inception by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE). Among the most notable of these latter is the National Framework for Quality in early childhood care and education currently being developed by the CECDE in consultation with parents, providers, the national voluntary organisations and other stakeholders. This paper sets out to show how these changes have affected one early years service, located in the Mahon area of Cork.

### **Mahon Community Pre-school: Background and History**

Mahon Community Pre-school is located in an area about three miles from the city centre. This area is geographically fairly self-contained, bounded on two sides by the river and on a third by a major ring road. Almost all the development here has taken place in the last thirty years. In 2002, the population was around 12,000 people, mainly living in social housing provided either by the local authority or by voluntary housing associations. There is also a limited amount of private housing. The original development plan for the area envisaged a much more balanced mixture of public and private housing, but land allocated for the latter was never fully taken up at the time, although this is now changing. Unemployment rates in the area have traditionally been much higher than in surrounding areas. The area lacks such basic facilities as a post office, bank, or library. A community centre has opened only this year, 2005. Since many of the residents do not have cars, access to services can involve long journeys on foot or by public transport. (Mahon Community Development Project

Annual Report 1998). A major shopping centre has recently opened beside the ring road. However this is designed to be accessed by car and draws customers from farther away, rather than serving the needs of the immediate area.

In the early 1980s, community workers with the Southern Health Board became aware of the need for pre-school provision in various areas of the city. Together with Joan Roberts, then IPPA Cork adviser, they were instrumental in bringing together groups of parents and setting up community playgroups in these areas. The Mahon area was one of those targeted in particular at that time- unemployment rates in the area in 1986 were over 37% and there were (and still are) a large number of families with young children. Mahon Community Pre-school started out in the early 1980s as a community playgroup, and in common with many other groups it has expanded its services in response to the needs of the families it serves. The service that it now offers is perhaps closer to a nursery school model, but it continues to be closely rooted in the community. It is managed by a group of local parents and community members, and has received some funding from the Department of Health through the Southern Health Board (now the Health Service Executive), as well as grants under the EOCP.

A cluster of support services for families with young children in the area now exists. These include a family resource centre, a community crèche for children under three years of age and a *Naíonra* (Irish language playgroup) as well as the Community Pre-school which is the subject of this paper. Schools in the area include separate boys' and girls' primary and secondary schools and a co-educational *Gaelscoil*. In recognition of the number of children at risk of educational disadvantage in the area, three Home-School-Community Liaison (HSCL) coordinators have been allocated to the schools in the area. Both the HSCL scheme and the Family Resource Centre provide crèches for parents attending courses. In 1995 an Early Start unit which caters for 30 pre-school children was set up in one of the primary schools. All of these facilities are located within a short distance of one another. The most recent arrival in the area, a Family Support project sponsored by Barnardos, is also nearby. A specialist early years clinic for children with developmental and other problems is also located nearby, but this serves a much wider population rather than local needs.

These services do not operate in isolation from one another. A number of networks have been formed to enable coordination of services and the sharing of information

and expertise. The Early Years Network brings together services dealing with the pre-school child, while the Networking Group caters for all providers of child, family and educational support. In many cases, families will be using several different services either sequentially or simultaneously, and it is important that service providers are aware of this. Services also support one another- members of one service may serve on a management or advisory board of another, for example. They have recently come together to work towards the provision of a secure outdoor play area for children under six which will be used by all the different groups.

In common with other community groups, the Mahon pre-school depends on a patchwork combination of fund-raising and grants from external bodies to supplement income from fees in order to continue in operation. Increasing fees would mean that the families who now use the centre could no longer afford to do so. While the centre has three core staff, it relies on a combination of voluntary help and Community Employment and other schemes to maintain adult to child ratios and deal with administrative and other tasks. Major changes in the building and staffing structures of the pre-school have come about in the last three years, due principally to grants under the EOCP and support from the Southern Health Board. Capital grants have meant that the building itself has been considerably upgraded. New windows and doors have made the rooms brighter, while for the first time there is a staff room, which can also be used to talk to parents and hold small meetings. Equipment and furniture is also being upgraded.

The pre-school now caters for fifty-five children in all. Forty children attend the first session, from approximately 9.15 to 11.45 a.m. By adding an afternoon session from noon to 3.30 p.m. an extra fifteen places were created. The morning session is divided into two groups by age, the younger group aged from two and a half to three and a half and the older group aged three and a half to four and a half. Many children stay on for a second year and progress to the older group, which has more structured and advanced activities. The Mahon pre-school, unusually, has for many years offered an option for children to stay on for an extra hour, until 1 p.m. This extended opening was in response to a need expressed by some parents, to allow them to work part-time or take training courses. It means that the children can be collected at the same time as older siblings who are in infant classes in the neighbouring schools. The numbers

availing of this option vary from day to day; some families use it regularly, while others find it useful once or twice a week. Core staff now work a full day, from 8.30 a.m. to 3.30 p.m. while those on Community Employment (CE) schemes start and finish earlier or later. The centre now stays open all year round, including the summer holidays.

The centre has also benefited from staffing grants under the EOCP. This meant that the core staff who have been working there for many years have at last received an adequate salary in recompense for their hard work and dedication. However, the scheme under which they receive these grants will finish in August 2005, and they have as yet (April 2005) received no assurance that they will continue to be funded. This makes planning for the future impossible- staff do not know if they will still be employed next September, and they do not know how many children they will be able to enrol. They also continue to rely on fundraising and Community Employment schemes to pay the other staff, with the attendant consequences for continuity and quality. The negative implications of low pay and poor conditions of employment for continuity and quality of staffing have been pointed out many times, most recently in the recent OECD Thematic Review (2004).

While EOCP funding was not intended as a long-term measure but rather to enable services to expand and reach a stage where they were economically viable, it seems obvious that services such as this will continue to need subsidies if they are to serve the target population and fulfil their stated purpose of combating educational disadvantage. It is highly unlikely that parents in this area could pay fees at a rate that would make the preschool viable without reliance on grants. It is also unlikely that support will be completely withdrawn from this service and others like it, given the existing level of investment in expanding and upgrading facilities and the recognition of their value implied by this. A proper system of on-going support and funding by the state for pre-school services such as this is long overdue.

The effects of existing funding are immediately apparent. This paper chronicles some of the changes brought about in the pre-school in recent years by this funding and the on-going commitment of its staff to improving the quality of service. In particular, the

implementation of the High/Scope curriculum has meant a more structured and reflective experience for both children and staff.

Staff and parents together continue to strive to improve the quality of the service they offer. In this process, one can discern the elements necessary to develop a high quality early childhood service:

- Training
- Structures
- Adequate support- funding, advisory
- An identifiable curriculum
- Reflective practice
- Parent and family involvement

## **Training**

Staff members have continually upgraded their professional skills, in spite of the difficulties posed by a reliance on Community Employment schemes to supplement the core staff. The turnover of staff necessitated by this scheme poses problems for continuity; however it means that many local women have had experience of working in the pre-school and have had the opportunity to acquire basic training in childcare. Core staff members have been building up a range of skills and competencies over the years and have completed courses including FETAC Level Two in Childcare and the High Scope Implementation course. Two of them are currently undertaking FETAC Level Three, which includes supervisory skills. All staff are encouraged to acquire and up-grade their qualifications. They also participate regularly in seminars and short training courses. Recently, these have included the Parent and Family Involvement Project (Murphy, 2004), the Watoto *Children from Around the World* course on multi-cultural awareness, the Children First child protection seminars run by the Health Board and a local Transition to School initiative. They have incorporated elements from all of these into their practice, but the greatest change has been the gradual implementation of the High/Scope curriculum.



## Curriculum

Funding was made available three years ago by the Health Board under whose aegis the pre-school was initially set up for three of the staff to take part in a High /Scope curriculum implementation course. The High/Scope preschool educational approach is well established in the United States and it is based on over forty years of longitudinal research (Schweinhart, 2005: Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997; O'Flaherty, 1995). High/Scope was first introduced into Ireland in 1998, and it has been welcomed by the playgroup movement north and south. While it is more structured than the existing play based approach, it is compatible with the general philosophy and emphasises the role of play in the learning process. This combination has been shown to be the most effective way of promoting young children's development (Sylva, 1994; Schweinhart, Weikart and Larner, 1986; INTO, 1995).

The High/Scope approach has now been adopted in the Mahon preschool and staff members speak enthusiastically of the difference it has made. The existing curriculum was a largely unstructured play-based one, and they have found that the High/Scope approach builds on the best aspects of this while improving the children's focus and concentration. They say that the children are now more engaged with learning, that their level of language use has improved and that there are fewer conflicts between children. They have found also that it provides the staff themselves with a framework to plan and reflect on their own practice. It has also helped them to communicate their practice and share it with parents.

The central element of the High/Scope approach is active learning- that children learn best from activities that they themselves plan, carry out and reflect on. Around that central idea are the four elements that allow this to happen-

- a daily routine including Plan-Do-Review, small and large group times
- a learning environment which is organised in such a way as to allow children to be as independent as possible,
- an adult-child interaction which supports the development of trust, autonomy, initiative, empathy and self-confidence and
- an assessment process based on observation of the children and staff working as a team.

The daily routine is predictable in outline but flexible in operation. Children know that when they arrive, they go first to their key worker to begin planning the day, then comes work time, followed by clean-up, recall time, large group time and so on. Each of these times will be signalled by aural and visual cues – sounds, flipping over to the next picture, moving a pointer on a chart - so that they know when each segment is coming to an end. The pictures are often photographs of the children themselves, thereby increasing their relevance. The routine gives children a sense of security- they can predict what is likely to happen next and prepare for it. At the same time, they have many opportunities to make choices within this overall structure.

At first glance, the activities the children engage in do not look very different from a traditional playgroup- they play with sand and water, dress up, play in the home corner, paint, make playdough, do jigsaws and other games. The difference lies in the Plan-Do-Review cycle, which is central to the High/Scope approach. The children are helped to think about what they would like to do in the course of the morning, to make a written plan with the aid of their key worker and to carry it out, and then to come back, remember and record what they have done. This encourages reflective thinking as well as language use, while “writing” their plan helps to make the written word more meaningful. Visual aids also help with planning- children can see photographs of themselves at work in the various areas. These also help children whose language skills are less well developed or who do not have English as a home language to communicate. Thus, with the support of a trusted adult, children are helped to make thoughtful decisions about their own behaviour, thereby developing thinking skills (Epstein, 2003, Sylva, 1994).

The environment is also important. The rooms are organised into “Interest Areas” where the children can find and use the materials they want, and storage is clearly marked so that they can return them after use, thus encouraging autonomy and responsibility. There are areas for block play, art, a book corner with comfortable seating, a dressing-up area with clothes on hangars and a mirror, a home corner and so on. Boxes and shelves are labelled with the names and pictures so that the children know exactly where things should go. They quickly begin to associate the written label with the picture and the object itself.

The High/Scope implementation process has encouraged the further development of the reflective practice that has always been a feature of this pre-school service. Staff have always worked as a team, with regular meetings to plan the curriculum. It has been noticeable with more training has meant an increased ability to analyse their practice and greater skill at documenting and explaining it to parents and others. Staff themselves participate in the Plan-Do-Review cycle, planning activities while building on the children's own current interests and needs. The High/Scope approach means that activities are planned to provide key learning experiences. These Key Experiences are grouped under ten headings: Creative representation, Language and literacy, Initiative and social relations, Movement, Music, Classification, Seriation, Number, Space and Time. An activity may provide experiences under several of these headings- working together on an art project provides children with language and social experiences and experience of spatial relationships as well as creative representation.

Staff are also developing skills in dealing with the occasional conflicts that arise among the children. The High/Scope training uses a problem-solving approach which includes the children themselves in finding a resolution. Children's feelings are acknowledged, the problem restated, the children themselves are asked to suggest solutions and the adult provides support (Norris, 2005). This helps the children to develop social skills. Over time they become adept at finding their own solutions and fewer conflicts occur between them. The High/Scope trainer support staff in acquiring these skills, and there are regular "cluster group" meetings where staff from different services can share experiences and support one another.

The process of implementing the High/Scope curriculum is by no means complete. The rooms and equipment are gradually being adapted and organised, and the staff continue to participate in High /Scope workshops and cluster groups. In common with many other Irish pre-school services, they need to develop their area for outdoor play in order to make it usable all the year round.

## **Parent Involvement**

In the early years, the playgroup used to operate a rota of parent helpers but no longer does so, since they now have sufficient staff. As an interim measure, parents were offered the opportunity to come in voluntarily on one day a week, but not many availed of this. Parents continue to help with administration, maintenance, fund-raising and they are invited to participate in regular events throughout the year. They are also welcome to come into the classroom when bringing and collecting the children. Some parents who no longer have children of pre-school age continue to be involved, especially those who live in the immediate area. Staff are very appreciative of the help given by those parents who are involved, and say that it would be impossible to run the pre-school without them. The majority of parents help with fund-raising and once-off events, but are less willing to make an on-going commitment such as involvement in management.

The effect of training on the ability of staff to share with parents their children's learning is noticeable. As the core staff members completed the FETAC Level 2 qualification in childcare, they become more accustomed to analysing their practice, and more skilled at documenting and explaining it to parents and others. Their commitment to working with parents was reflected in their participation in the Parent and Family Involvement Project (Murphy, 2004). High/Scope has furthered their skills in this area- they use photographs of the children at work, posters, and to share aspects of the children's learning with parents and carers. The hallway is bright and welcoming, with examples of the children's work, notices about events and courses of interest to parents, and information on the programme that the children are following.

## **Conclusion**

The Mahon Community Pre-school is by no means unique. Many other groups are also endeavouring to provide young children and their families with an excellent service that is responsive to local needs and that is based on the most recent research into what is most developmentally and culturally appropriate. The Mahon case study presents a snapshot of one such service at a particular moment in time. They continue to build on their pre-existing strengths: closeness to parents and the local community, links with other services in the area, an on-going commitment to improving the

qualifications and skills of staff and a team-work ethos which includes parents as partners. The importance of training can be seen in the changes they have made in their environment and everyday practice. These changes are informed by the knowledge and skills which they have gleaned from the various training courses that staff have attended, which have enabled them to adopt those practices which are most appropriate to the children and families who use the pre-school. They acknowledge also the support they receive from local networks, the Cork City Childcare Company and its Childcare Coordinator, the Cork City Partnership and the health board.

The effect of EOCP and Health Board funding is visible in the improved physical and working conditions that now exist, but the short-term nature of funding for staffing in particular makes it impossible to plan affectively for the future, even a few months ahead. Funding for this pre-school and others like it urgently needs to be put on a more adequate and permanent basis. It is undeniably the responsibility of the state to support this essential service for our youngest citizens, if indeed all the children of the nation are to be given equal opportunities to grow and develop to their fullest potential.

### **Acknowledgements**

This paper was written while Dr. Rosaleen Murphy was the holder of a Government of Ireland Post-Doctoral Fellowship at the Department of Education, UCC. The Fellowship was awarded in 2003 by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

The author would also like to thank the staff, parents and children of Mahon Community Preschool for their willingness to share their experiences and to cooperate in the writing of this article.

### **References:**

Dept. of Education (1999). *Ready to Learn. White Paper on Early Childhood Education*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Epstein, Ann S. (2003). How Planning and Reflection Develop Young Children's Thinking Skills. *Young Children*, September 2003, pp. 28-36.

INTO (1995). *Early Childhood Education: Issues and Concerns*. Dublin: Irish National Teachers' Organisation. [www.into.ie](http://www.into.ie)

Murphy, Rosaleen (2004). The Parent and Family Involvement Project: Skills for Early Years Educators. *Children of the Global Village*. Proceedings of the OMEP Ireland Conference, DIT, Dublin: 24 April 2004.

*National Childcare Strategy: Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare* (1999). Dublin: The Stationery Office.

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

NCCA (2004) *Towards A Framework for Early Learning*. National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 24 Merrion Sq. Dublin 2.

Norris, Joan (2005). The High/Scope Approach. *Early Years Educator*, January 2005, i-viii.

O'Flaherty, Julie (1995). *Intervention in the Early Years. An Evaluation of the High/Scope Curriculum*. London: National Children's Bureau.

Schweinhart, L. J. (2005). *The High/Scope Perry preschool Study through Age 40*. <http://www.highscope.org/Research/PerryProject/PerryAge40SumWeb.pdf>

Schweinhart, L. J., & Weikart, D. P. (1997). *Lasting differences: The High/Scope Preschool Curriculum Comparison study through age 23* (Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 12). Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press.

Schweinhart, L. J., Weikart, D. P., & Larner, M. B. (1986). Consequences of the three preschool curriculum models through age 15. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 1: 15-45.

Sylva, Kathy (1994). The Impact of Early Learning on Children's Later Development. Appendix C, in C. Ball, *Start Right: The Importance of Early Learning*. London: RSA.

*The High/Scope Preschool Educational Approach: A Prospectus for Pre-Kindergarten Programs*. High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, December 2004. [www.highscope.org](http://www.highscope.org)

*Watoto- Children from Around the World*. Available from <http://www.trocaire.org/educationandcampaigns/education/Resources/resources.htm>