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EARLY YEARS EDUCATION IN GERMANY AND IRELAND  
- A STUDY OF PROVISION AND CURRICULAR  
IMPLEMENTATION IN TWO UNIQUE ENVIRONMENTS

ENSEIGNEMENT PRECOCE EN ALLEMAGNE ET EN IRLANDE: UNE ETUDE  
DE LA REALISATION DES BESOINS ET DU PROGRAMME SCOLAIRE DANS  
DEUX ENVIRONNEMENTS UNIQUES

EDUCACIÓN EN LOS PRIMEROS AÑOS EN ALEMANIA E IRLANDA -  
UN ESTUDIO DE DISPOSICIÓN E IMPLEMENTACIÓN  
CURRICULAR EN DOS AMBIENTES ÚNICOS

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**Abstract**

*This paper highlights the differences and similarities between a Kindergarten outside Bremen in Lower Saxony, Germany and a Primary School Junior Infant Class in County Cork, Republic of Ireland. Both are concerned with the education of the young child but whereas the Kindergarten is attended by three to six year olds, the Junior Infant Class caters almost exclusively for four to five year old children.*

*A case study account of both groups is given and an analysis of the activities which took place in each using the 'Target Child Observational Schedule' [Sylva et al., (1980)] is presented in bar-graph form.*

*The paper concludes that Erzieherinnen, Kinderpflegerinnen and Junior Infant Class teachers need to engage in more interaction with the children in order, in particular, to raise the frequency and quality of linguistic interaction. An increase in the structure of the children's play would help to enhance cognitive development.*

## Résumé

Cet article souligne les différences et les similitudes entre un Jardin d'Enfants en Basse Saxe, près de Brême (Allemagne) et une classe maternelle dans le comté de Cork (République d'Irlande). Les deux établissements sont chargés de l'éducation de jeunes enfants, mais tandis que les élèves du Jardin d'Enfants sont âgés d'entre trois et six ans, la classe de maternelle ne s'occupe pratiquement exclusivement que d'enfants de quatre à six ans.

On donnera un compte-rendu de l'étude de cas faite sur les deux groupes, ainsi qu'une présentation sous forme de graphique en barres de l'analyse des activités proposées de part et d'autre, basée sur le *Programme d'observation cible de l'enfant* du Professeur Kathy Sylva (1980).

En conclusion, nous avancerons que les *Erzieherinnen*, les *Kinderpflegerin* et les enseignants de la classe maternelle doivent faire preuve de davantage d'interaction avec les enfants afin, en particulier, d'élever le niveau auquel de tels enfants parlent. Une structuration accrue des activités ludiques des enfants aurait également pour résultat un développement cognitif plus rapide.

## **Abstracto**

Este ensayo trata de las diferencias y semejanzas entre un prescolar en la baja Sajonia, en las afueras de Bremen, Alemania, y una Clase Junior Infantil en la Escuela Primaria del Condado de Cork, en la República de Irlanda. Los dos sistemas se ocupan de la educación de niños en la primera infancia pero, mientras que el prescolar se ocupa de niños entre las edades de tres y seis años, la Clase Junior Infantil se dedica casi exclusivamente a los niños de cuatro a cinco años de edad.

Este papel describe un caso particular de cada uno de estos dos grupos así como de las actividades que tuvieron lugar en cada uno de ellos, utilizando *Target Child Observational Schedule* (1980) de Kathy Sylva, y que se presentan a manera de gráfica de barras.

Es estudio llega a la conclusión de que los educadores de *Erzieherinnen*, *Kinderpflegerin* y de las Clases Infantiles Junior necesitan aumentar la interacción con el niño para elevar, especialmente, el nivel en el que estos niños hablan. Un incremento en la estructura del juego de los niños también resultaría en la mejora del desarrollo cognitivo.

## INTRODUCTION

*The educator working with under fives must pay careful attention, not just to the context of the child's learning, but also to the way in which that learning is offered to and experienced by the child, and the role of all those involved in the process. Children are affected by the context in which learning takes place, the people involved in it, and the values and beliefs which are embedded in it. For the early years educator, the process of education - how children are encouraged to learn is as important as, and inseparable from, the content - what they learn. We believe that this principle must underlie all curriculum planing for the under fives.*

[D.E.S., (1990), par.67-8 original emphasis]

### **Background to Study**

In the late 1970s, the Target Child Observational Schedule [Sylva et al (1980)] was devised as a means of evaluating child development through play and activity-based learning. A survey of early years provision in Oxford and Oxfordshire was subsequently undertaken by Brüner, Sylva and others in the Oxford Pre-School Research Group. Over the past ten years, we in the Education Department at University College Cork have replicated this major study by investigating early years provision in Cork city and county [Horgan, M. (1987) Junior Infant Classes; Dunlea, C. (1990) Montessori Schools; Douglas, F.G. (1993a) Playgroups; Horgan, S. (1994) *Gaelscoileanna* (all Irish speaking schools)]. Recently, similar action research in German Kindergartens has been undertaken [Douglas, F.G. (1993b)].

In both major studies the ethnographic research

strategy was found to be the most suitable method of assessing empirically the nature and frequency of play at this stage of the child's development.

Our investigation in Cork city and county was therefore eclectic in nature, employing a multi-faceted approach, encompassing the Target Child Observation Schedule, interviews, a study of classrooms, a questionnaire and an interaction analysis system. In all, over 460 children have been observed during 150 hours of continuous observation. This figure accounts for approximately half the total time we spent in the pre-schools/infant classrooms.

### **Introduction to Case Studies**

The two case studies below represent the best Kindergarten visited in Germany and the most outstanding Junior Infant class studied in Ireland, each affording the child opportunities for cognitive, social, and linguistic development which far surpassed those provided in all the other centres visited. The respective philosophies of both types of provision are outlined below. German Kindertagesstätten have three particular distinguishing features:

1. Children engage in no formal lessons. They are not taught to read or write and the experiences of the child outside the Kindergarten are related to the activities which are undertaken inside;
2. Three, four, five and six year old children interact

together in groups of not more than 25 children; the proportion of boys and girls is roughly the same. Each group typically has an *Erzieherin* in charge and a *Kinderpflegerin* to act as assistant;

3. The community around the Kindergarten - the parents, places of employment, the church/local authority - is involved as much as possible.

The current Irish curriculum, introduced as the latest addition to the educational pharmacopoeia in 1971 [Curaclam na Bunscoile (1971)], is similar in many respects. It is based on a number of guiding principles of which the following are the most significant:

1. In the first instance, it recognises that opportunities should be provided for exploration and discovery;
2. Secondly, it states that wherever possible this methodology should incorporate the use of concrete materials, verbal discussion and first-hand experience of the subject matter;
3. These directives are rooted in an acknowledgement of the differences between children and of the need to give precedence to the learning process rather than the product to be learnt. Although this curriculum is divided into traditional subject headings, it emphasises that learning should be regarded as an integrated process, and, that at Infant level the potential of play should be exploited.



In several other respects, however, they are quite dissimilar. The essential difference between the German Kindergarten and the Irish system of early years education is that the majority of four to six year old children in Ireland have already entered the formal educational system. Approximately 95% of five to six year olds, for example, are in Senior Infant Classes in the Primary Schools while 56% of four to five year olds are in Junior Infants [Department of Education Statistics (1990)]; roughly 25% of three to four year olds are in Playgroups with a further 5% of this age group divided equally between Montessori Schools and Naíonraí (Irish speaking Playgroups) while the remaining children are at home [McKenna (1990)]. In contrast, approximately 67% of three to six and a half year olds in former West Germany attend a Kindergarten [Deutsches Jugendinstitut (1993)].

A second difference is the fact that in Ireland, formal instruction in Reading, Writing, Mathematics and Irish begins in Junior Infants whereas children in Germany do not receive such instruction until they enter the *Grundschule* the September after their sixth birthday.

The third major difference is the pupil:teacher ratio. In Germany, the usual group size is 25 children with two adults or one full-time and one part-time adult. Full day groups are usually smaller accommodating 20 children with possibly a third adult to help during longer hours. In Ireland, by comparison, 73% of Junior Infants are in classes of between 30 and 44 children with one teacher and

no ancillary help [Curriculum and Examinations Board (1985), p.12]. Indeed, a major international comparative study, recently published by the O.E.C.D. (1991) confirms that at Infant level, Ireland has the worst pupil:teacher ratio in the developed world. Moreover, the difference in wealth between the two countries can be seen in the allocation of space per child; in Germany, in Lower Saxony, recent building regulations specify that each child is allowed approximately four square metres, whereas in Ireland this figure is approximately two-and-a-half square metres - figures which in reality have rarely been achieved.

### **Training**

High quality work in early years education is only possible with sufficient staff of high calibre and with appropriate training. In Ireland and Germany, as indeed in many other countries, those who teach the youngest children are lowest in the perceived 'pecking order'. This is reflected in the low status of early years educators in both countries.

The training of *Erzieherinnen* is usually of three years duration - the first two of which are theoretical whereas the final year, spent in a Kindergarten or similar type of provision, is practical in nature. [It must be noted, however, that intending *Erzieherinnen* are usually required to spend one or sometimes two years in a full-time pre-course work placement during which time their

suitability is assessed.] This qualification does not enjoy degree status. About one-fifth of Kindergarten staff are not fully qualified [Colberg-Schrader and Oberhuemer (1993)].

In Ireland, by contrast, Junior and Senior Infants are taught by fully qualified primary teachers. The majority of these have received a Bachelor of Education degree (the remainder have the pre-1977 National Teacher qualification) which is pursued over three years in one of the Colleges of Education. Moreover, a probationary year must be undertaken, after graduation, in order to gain Department of Education recognition.

The financing of Kindergartens and Junior Infant education is quite different. Although slight variations from *Land* to *Land* exist, there are generally four sources of funds in Germany:

- (a) from the particular organising body;
- (b) from parental contributions;
- (c) from local authorities/communities;
- (d) from State subsidies.

Parents generally finance between 10% and 15% of operating costs. (However, their contributions can be reduced by 'means testing' according to their income and number of children in the family.)

The control structure of the Primary School system in Ireland reflects a division of power between central and local bodies. Education is 'free' for those attending Junior and Senior Infant classes, although a small parental

contribution may be required from time to time to purchase books and subsidise running costs.

Interestingly, these similarities/differences of philosophy, provision, and pedagogy between the two countries are manifest in the studies below.

#### **CENTRE A - A Kindergarten in Lower Saxony outside Bremen**

To Irish eyes this Kindergarten is a remarkable pre-school. The local community/local authority has just finished an additional building which extends its Kindergarten from four groups to seven. This extension cost just under four million deutsch marks without equipment. It is managed by a trained social worker whose function would be broadly similar to an Irish 'Administrative' Principal. Indeed he, together with three or four members of the Community Association, is responsible for the appointment of all new staff. From his very modern office, he also controls the budget for office supplies, classroom equipment and repairs. At the moment, any other venture (e.g. refurbishment) would require the approval of the Community Association. In the near future, however (as a result of the 1991 Federal Childcare Act), he will enjoy even greater financial autonomy than hitherto.

There are seven *Erzieherinnen*, each with her own group of up to twenty children. There are also two assistants, or *Kinderpflegerinnen*, for 'long-stay' groups and one assistant for 'short-stay' groups. Long-stay groups

operate from 7.30 a.m. until 4.30 p.m. and cater for working mothers. Short-stay groups operate from 8 a.m until 12 noon.

The new building has a large central hall with climbing equipment. Leading from this hall are the classrooms, domestic science room (with special child-size low electric cookers and kitchen units), sewing and craft room, woodwork shop and children's toilets. There is also a refectory for the long-stay children's lunch which is prepared by two domestic staff in the adjoining kitchens. Upstairs one finds a separate staff room (with coffee-making facilities) and bedrooms in which the long-stay children may have a nap after lunch.

Each group of up to twenty children (aged 3 to 6) and its respective adults has a large room. This room contains tables and chairs, shelf units and drawers for each child (each child's drawer has a fruit symbol which corresponds with that on his/her coat hook outside in the hall) and a block/toy train/toy lorry play area. The *Erzieherin* has her own desk and bookshelf. Upstairs is a large balcony area which contains equipment for playing houses or shops and for 'dressing-up'. There are lots of small mattresses which can be re-arranged in many different ways to make private 'dens' and so forth. Additional equipment is stored in the downstairs storeroom which opens off the main classroom.

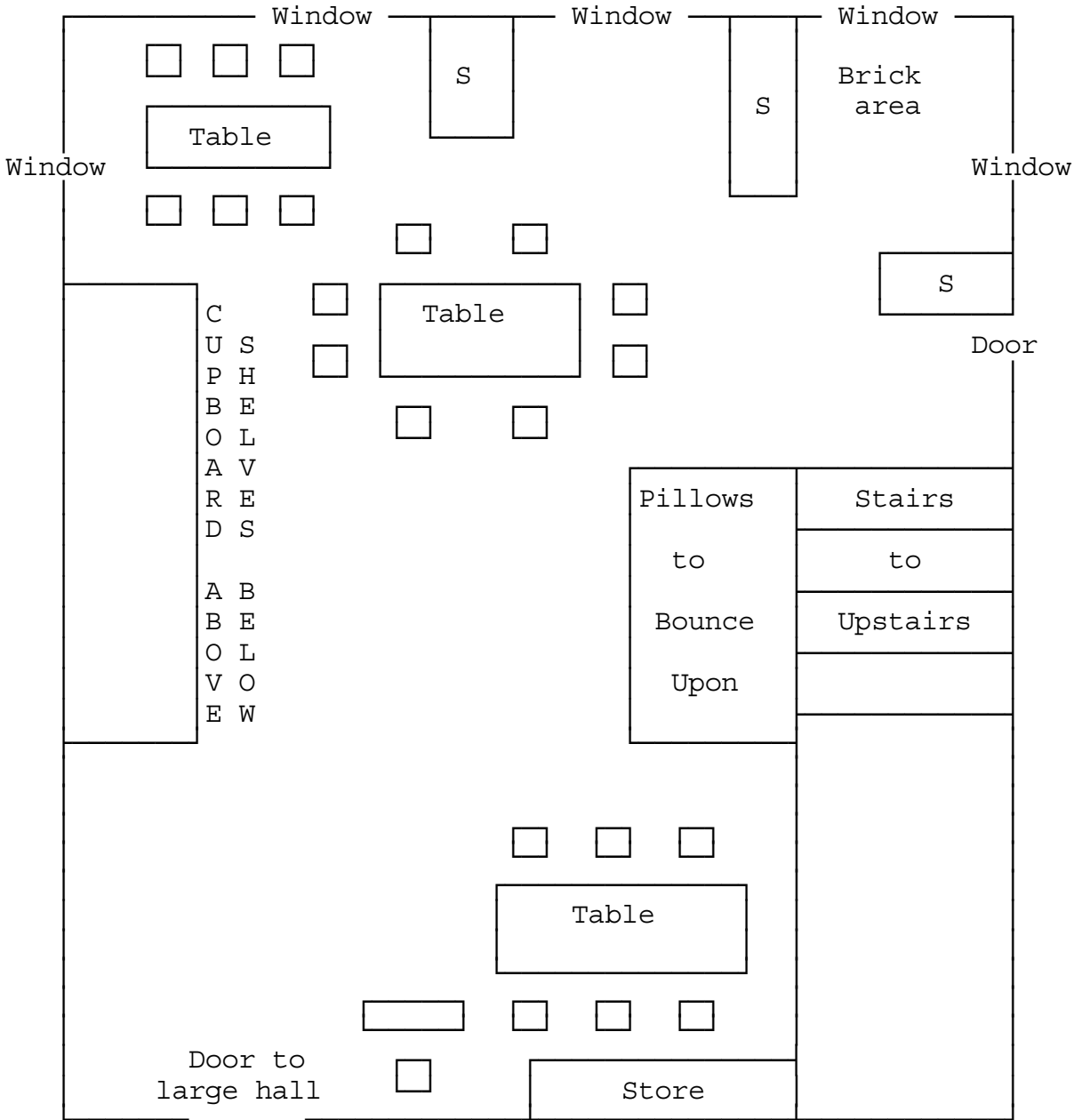
The outside play area, sandwiched between the old building and the new, is completely fenced in. It is

mostly in grass with trees and shrubs everywhere and covers approximately one acre of land. Here and there amongst the trees and shrubs (which, of course, offer their own magic 'hiding places') are different climbing frames, slides and 'see-saws', all surrounded by sandpits. Many of the climbing frames have a facility for lifting sand in a bucket and pouring it down a chute which returns it from whence it came.

Plan of Centre A Kindergarten unit

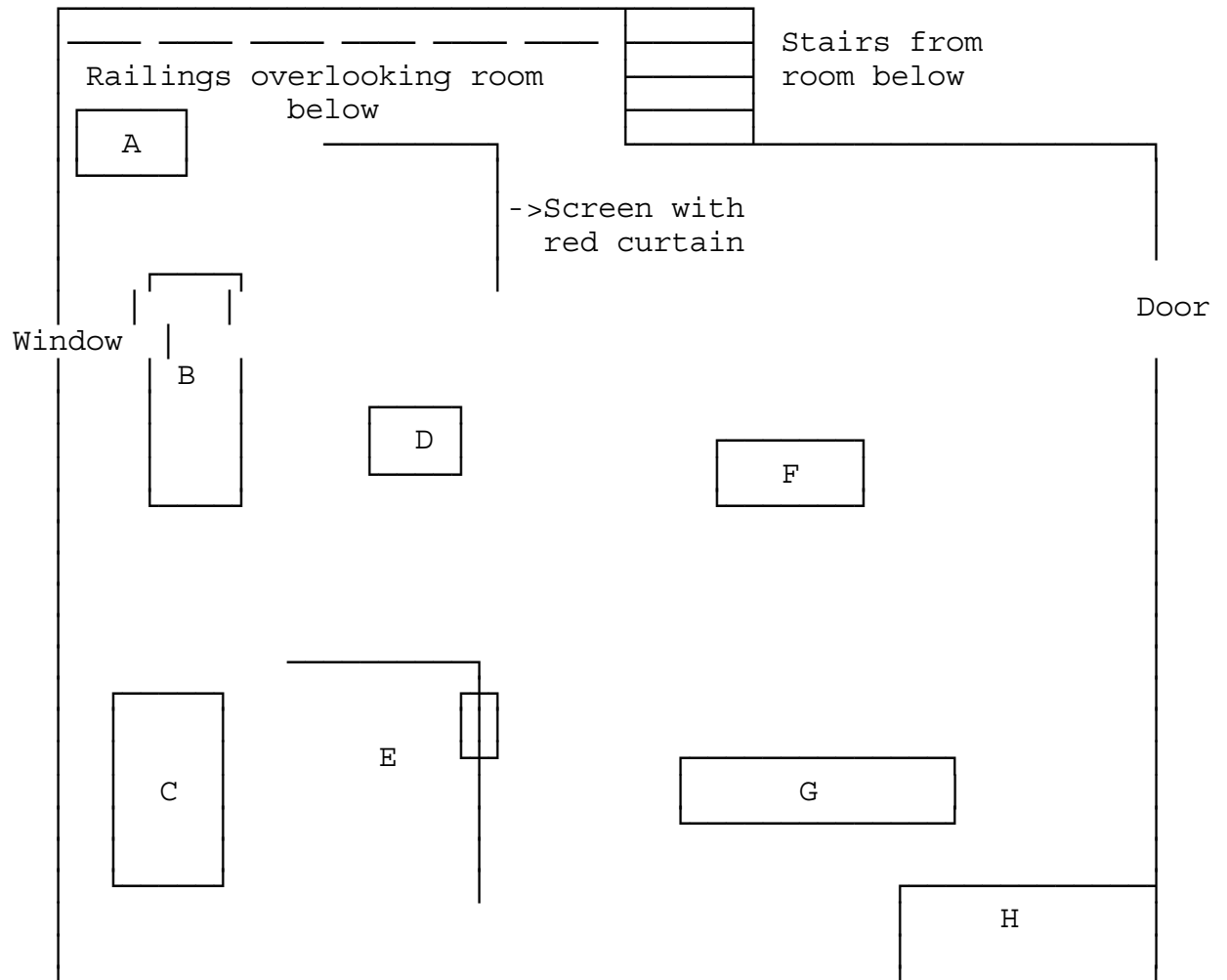
(for a group of 20 children or less)

Downstairs



S = Shelves

## Upstairs



- A = Wooden desk with (empty) T.V. on top.
- B = Piled up mattresses.
- C = Wooden 'cooker'. Also wooden ironing board, iron and clothes drier.
- D = Small table.
- E = Screen with 'counter' to make 'shop'.
- F = Dolls pram.
- G = Small settee.
- H = Piled up pillows.



All these sandpits/climbing frames are inter-connected by small roads or paths along which the children can drive their peddle cars, tractors and trailers and small bicycles/tricycles. There are even some sloping paths which lead to a sandpit down which the children can free-wheel on a cart or lorry. In one corner of the garden is a tiny house built like a Swiss cottage with its own little veranda. In another corner is an old-fashioned pump which allows the children to pump water and, because this water runs into a sandpit, it is possible to make sandcastles.

**Centre B: A Junior Infant Classroom in County Cork**

Contrast this centre and equipment with the Junior Infant Class below which is accommodated in a pre-fabricated structure erected behind an old country school which was built in 1906. A new school is planned but is as yet undergoing gestation on the architect's drawing board. The present school has a staff of nine teachers - three males, one of whom is the school principal, and six females. The most recently qualified of these women teaches the Junior Infant Class. Thirty-six children of both sexes are under her care, all aged between four and five years. A further ten, slightly older children (aged between five and five-and-a-half years) have been added to the ranks of one of the Senior Infant Classes. This mixed Infant Class and the large Junior Infant Class share the pre-fabricated building.

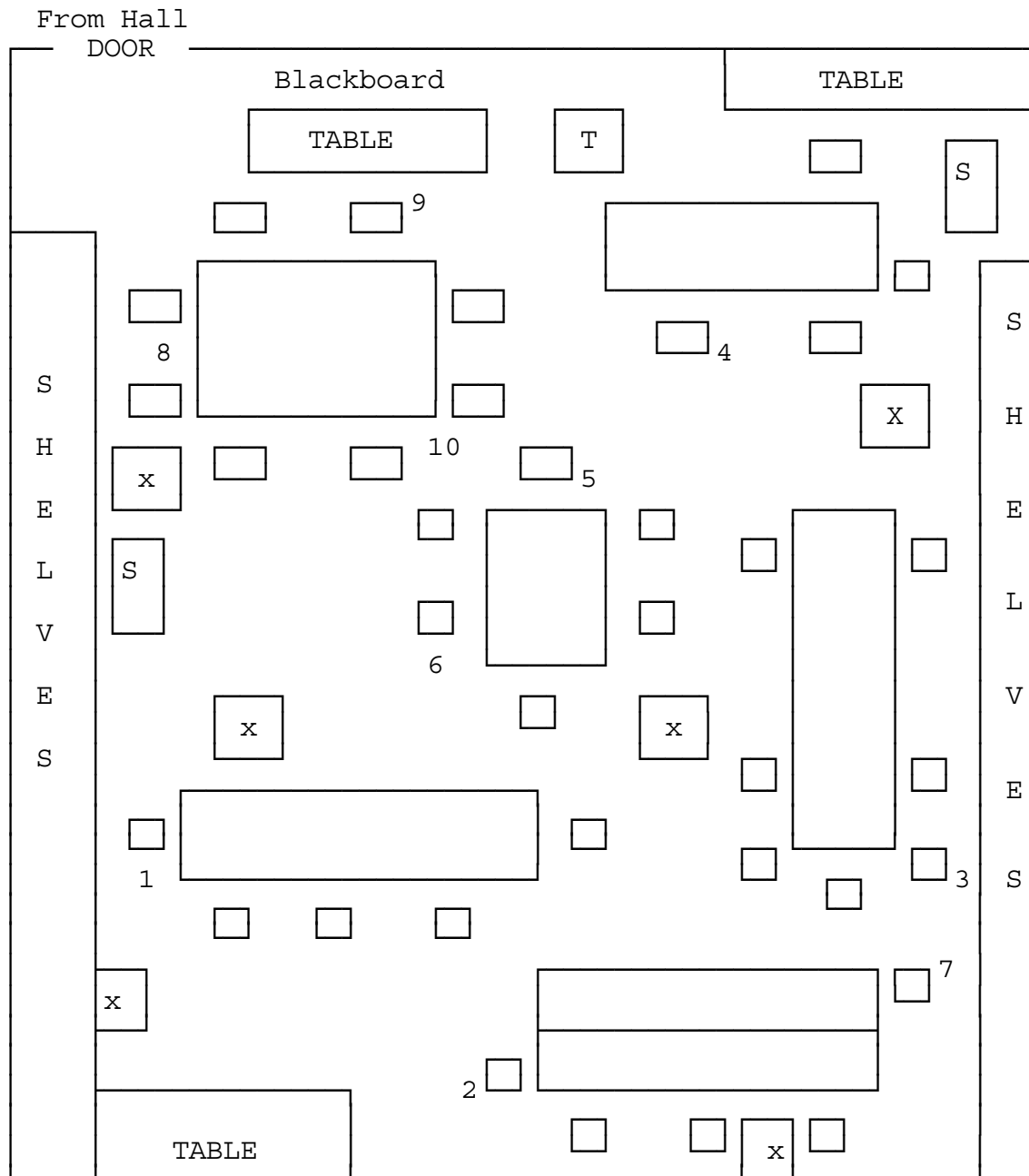
One reaches their classrooms by climbing the make-

shift steps which are really just a stack of cavity blocks. Straight ahead are two doors which open onto the toilets - one for each classroom. The remaining wall space in this tiny cramped hallway has been fitted with coat-hooks over which pictures have been glued at the Junior Infant class side. Some hooks are crowned with stickers of butterflies and animals. Beside others are 'A-Team' or 'Superman' characters - each is unique.

The door of the Junior Infant classroom has been painted bright blue. A large cardboard rainbow stretches across it while white fluffy cotton-wool clouds are glued on at random. Underneath are about forty little scraps of paper on which each child has attempted to write his or her name. The classroom appears to be very crowded as children move ant-like in every direction. It measures approximately seven metres by seven metres and this is exacerbated by the very low ceiling. The two side walls have full length windows which are almost one metre in height, thus making the room quite bright inside. The floor has no covering and the original timber floorboards are discoloured and noisy.

The class are seated on tiny chairs which are arranged around the six groups of tables (see plan below). A large circular table inside the door seats eight children. A similar but smaller table accommodates six. Six rectangular tables, arranged in pairs, seat five children per pair. The final group consists of three tables which are shared by seven children.

Plan of Centre B - Junior Infant Classroom  
(for 36 children)



The Windows run 100% along both vertical walls.

- S = Storage heaters
- T = Teacher's stool.
- x = Points of observation
- 1-10 = Positions of the children observed.

The blackboard and shelves are fixed areas.

Each child has a special place. This is identified by a cardboard strip, placed on the table in front of each one, on which the teacher has written his/her name. This strip also contains a sticker which matches that over his/her coat hook. Each strip has been covered with a plastic adhesive material ('contact').

With the exception of three small tables and a stool, the room is devoid of any other furniture. One of these tables contains the children's copies, workbooks and so forth. The second is the teacher's desk. The final table has been divided in half by a row of chestnuts and is used as a nature table.

The children's experiential environment can be seen to some extent from the variety of equipment in each classroom, as illustrated below.

**Table One:**  
**Availability of Equipment in Germany and Ireland**

**Key:-** Y = Yes; N = No; L = Limited.

	Germany	Ireland
Climbing Apparatus	Y	N
Materials for Music	Y	N
Materials for Painting/Crafts	Y	L
Large junk (e.g. large boxes)	Y	N
Small junk (e.g. empty jars, tins, boxes, pieces of carpet)	Y	Y
Large floor blocks	N	N
Small floor blocks (e.g. lego)	Y	L
Sand Pit	Y	N
Riding equipment (e.g. tricycles)	Y	N
P.E. equipment	Y	N
Books	Y	Y
Woodwork equipment and materials	Y	N
Structured apparatus (e.g. jigsaws, matching games, geometric shapes)	Y	L
Toys (e.g. dolls, balls)/Scale version toys (e.g. small cars, train sets)	Y	L
Science Corner Materials	Y	N
Home Corner equipment (e.g. wendy house, clothes for dressing up, kitchen utensils)	Y	N
Clay, play dough	Y	L
Nature Table	Y	Y
Sink and water play equipment	Y	N
Lacing and buttoning frames	N	N
Visual aids (filmstrips, etc.)	N	N

Despite the obvious differences in background, training, facilities, equipment and pupil:teacher ratio, it was interesting to note that the daily routine in both countries contained a similar flexibility.

In the German Kindergarten observed, the daily activities follow a certain, although very flexible, pattern. From 7.30 a.m. until 9.00 a.m. there is free play; then 'second breakfast' (which usually lasts about 20 minutes) for those who want it. This is again followed by free play inside the classroom until about 11.00 a.m. when the children are allowed outside where they engage in free play until 12.00 noon when they are either collected by their parents or have lunch in the refectory. The 'long-stay' children will then have a rest in the dormitory followed by more free play.

Free play can involve playing with the adults, for example, adult and child could be involved in a matching game with cards, or the adults might provide the children who so wish with paints, or paper to cut out. There are also 'projects' which in many cases last several months. The theme is always chosen because of its central importance to the child's development. (An example might be a project on the human body.) Approximately twenty minutes daily is devoted to the project theme with children being encouraged to participate in pairs or small groups. Each week, the 120 children in the Kindergarten are taken the two kilometres to the local sports hall (which is also

owned by the same community which built the Kindergarten) for an hour's intensive physical activity. The children usually walk there, a bus being provided for the return trip. They also walk to a local lake to sail boats which they make in the woodwork room. Regular swimming lessons are in the process of being arranged and at Christmas all the children will go to Bremen to see a Christmas concert.

An interesting "extra curricular" activity is the 'overnight stay' which is believed to foster the children's independence and sturdiness. Initially, the children all spent one night in the Kindergarten with the staff and four weeks later all those who are deemed suitable go to stay in a hall of residence for two nights. This hall has the minimum of play equipment - only enough for rainy days - as the whole object of the exercise is to give the children first-hand experience of country life. This residential centre is also owned by the local community and is occasionally used by local youth clubs.

During the early morning 'free play' period, the door of the classroom is constantly open to the central hall and the children move freely between the two, thus mixing with children from the other groups. A *laissez-faire* approach is very evident and the children are not obliged to tidy up after themselves. Although there is occasional brief interaction between older and younger children, the older children tend to stay in groups of their own age and sex.

There is also an abundance of small group activity ranging from dramatic play to games with dice and picture

construction using cut-out paper, feathers and old cartons and boxes.

For the 'second breakfast', which they provide themselves, most children have cereal or yogurt and fruit flavoured milk. The *Erzieherin* is also keen to give them fresh fruit. Although there is little or no formality of any sort and the children call the adults by their first names, they are quite compliant when required - for example, they hold hands and walk in pairs when leaving the confines of the Kindergarten premises.

The adults speak to individuals or to small groups of children, and given the staff:child ratio, most children are spoken to individually each day for a considerable period of time.

In a similar vein, the Irish Junior Infant teacher does not adhere to a fixed timetable but has a rough guideline which is followed every day: 'I always try to include Irish, English, Reading, Maths, Religion and either Drama or P.E.'. However, these are not allocated any special time with the exception of Reading and Mathematics which she usually takes in the morning as "the children are more alert before lunch". The remainder of the day contains a *mélange* of Music, Singing, Art, Rhymes and Stories. Social and Environmental Studies are taught entirely through stories but the children are taken on a nature walk to the adjoining sports field (a muddy unattractive, badly-fenced, football pitch) at least once a fortnight. Most of the Physical Education classes are also



conducted in this field as the school does not have a hall.

(Contrast this with the outside area previously mentioned!)

Although each day's activities do not adhere to a rigid schedule, their unpredictability is tapered by the use of fastidiously planned schemes. These schemes of work are compiled every two weeks by the teacher. They include her intended content in each subject for this period and also take cognisance of any areas which need to be strengthened since the previous fortnight. How and when the fragments therein are imparted troubles her little provided that the majority of the class has assimilated them before the next scheme is due. Her one methodological tenet, however, is that the children should enjoy what they are doing. 'If they get turned off school at this age, what hope have they afterwards?' This attitude is reflected in the freedom which the children enjoy. In the first instance they are allowed to move freely within the room - whether to look at a friend's activity, to collect something from the shelves or to show something to the teacher. Secondly, there is no restriction on their use of language and the children are allowed to talk to their friends during activities. They are actively encouraged to volunteer information or comment to the teacher and a vocal (often a singing) accompaniment to their 'work' is a common occurrence.

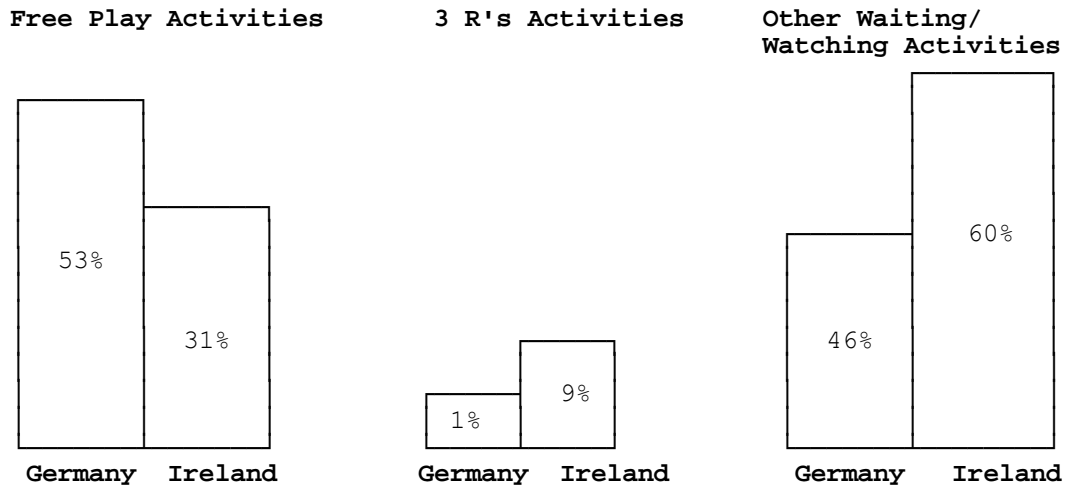
Because of the large number of children and the obvious lack of space, the class is taught quite frequently

as a unit. However, this must not be construed as didactic teaching as the results below indicate.

In the Kindergarten and the Junior Infant classroom, each child was observed for a 20-minute period during which time a written record was made every 30 seconds of his/her activity, social interaction and language. The results were later coded and evaluated using a similar research paradigm to Sylva (1980). As found by Sylva *et al*, the Target Child Observation Technique has a high level of inter-observer reliability. Indeed, use of the "Kappa-Statistical Test for Agreement" (Cohen, 1960) in our Cork city and county study, gave the authors an inter-observer co-efficient of 0.814, a figure which is similar to that calculated by the Oxford Pre-School Research Team.

Key results are presented in Figures One, Two and Three below and are based on the 800 half-minute time units of observed target child behaviour in these schools.

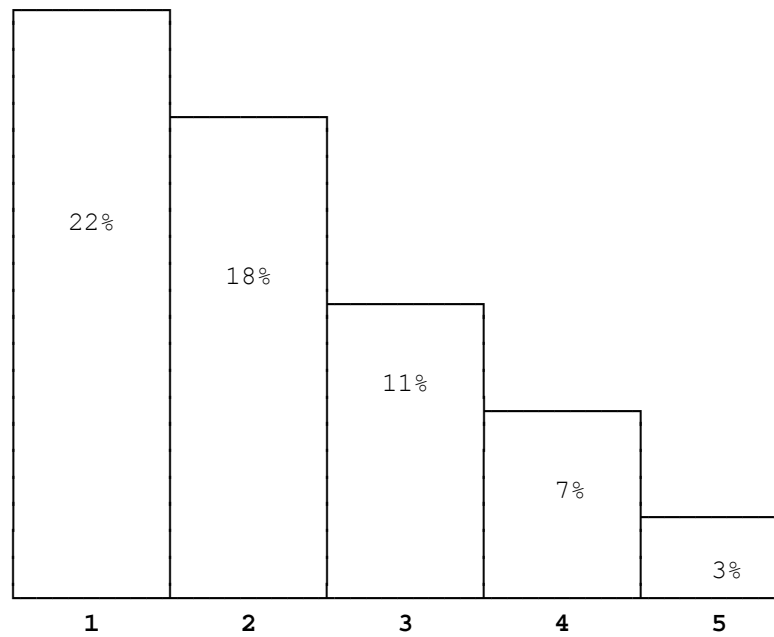
**Figure 1: Breakdown of Intellectual/Cognitive Activities.**



It is interesting to note the high proportion of free play activities in these two centres and the relatively small percentage of time devoted to formal 3R's activities. Nevertheless, the more formal Irish environment is reflected in its 9% figure for 3R's activities.

The greatest disparity between the two centres emerged in the area of language. Target Children in the Irish centre spoke for approximately 17% of the total time observed, while in Germany more than three times this figure (61%) was recorded. A breakdown of the latter is depicted in Figure Two below.

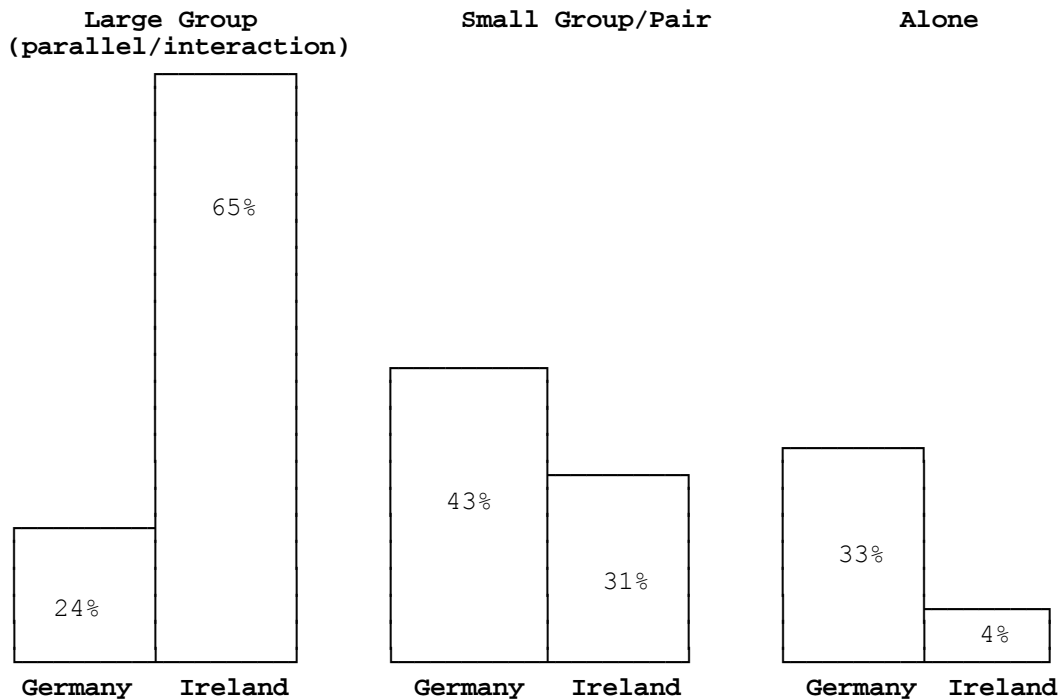
**Figure 2:** Categorisation of Language in a German Kindergarten.



- Key:**
- 1 = Target Child spoke to another Child.
  - 2 = Another Child spoke to Target Child.
  - 3 = Target Child spoke to an Adult.
  - 4 = An Adult spoke to the Target Child.
  - 5 = Ego-centric speech.

Finally, social interaction patterns can be seen from Figure Three below:

**Figure 3: Social Interaction by Target Children.**



### **Methodological Considerations**

The German belief appears to be that free play will satisfy all, or almost all, the needs of the three to six year old child. Consequently, most of the day is spent in free play either inside or outside the classroom. A further insight into the curriculum can be gained by analysis of what the *Erzieherinnen* consider to be important. They believe that the emotional development of the child must come first, adding that they have failed if the child is not happy. Next comes social development. Indeed, the activities of the Kindergarten are primarily

designed to foster this. Third is creative development; fourth being intellectual and linguistic development, while the physical and spiritual development of the child are relegated to fifth position.

In Ireland, a different emphasis is apparent. From a methodological perspective, the teacher observed valued play primarily for its role in the young child's intellectual and linguistic development. She also agreed very strongly with the questionnaire statements which assessed attitudes to play and social, emotional and physical development. This was important as it determined her subsequent pedagogic approach. What was even more significant, however, was her recognition of the need for a happy, stress-free classroom environment. 'Discovery methods aren't much good if the children cannot laugh and enjoy themselves'. This was the reasoning behind reducing her status from that of the omniscient pedagogue to that of collaborator with the children. Endowed with the ability to laugh at herself and her own limitations, she encouraged a similar outlook in the children who promptly admitted their own inadequacies.

However, it would be remiss to conclude that this was a classroom in which mayhem reigned. On the contrary, a mutual tolerance and respect was very much in evidence.

## Discussion and Analysis of Findings

1. The philosophy of early years education is similar in both countries in that the primary emphasis is on the child. Germany, however, is a more affluent country which is reflected in the provision of larger, better equipped classrooms and a more favourable staff:pupil ratio than in Ireland. This manifests itself in the greater freedom of choice of activity afforded the child in Germany.
2. (a) There is consensus between the two countries that emotional/spiritual development of the child is important. However, it is impossible to ascertain whether children in Germany are happier than Irish children or *vice versa*.  
  
(b) It was found that creativity in both systems could be much enhanced if, for example, a wider variety of "junk" materials was available. It was interesting to note how German children preferred the limited amount of junk materials to commercially produced toys.  
  
(c) Due to the greater freedom of activity and movement in the Kindergarten many more opportunities for social intercourse present themselves. This results in a considerably higher percentage of low-level interactions (linguistic and otherwise) between children.  
  
(d) Again, as a consequence of the larger allocation of space, German children are involved in a

significantly greater amount of physical activity than their Irish counterparts.

(e) The primary focus of any educational study must reside in the intellectual development of the child. However, it is impossible to compare the intellectual gains of the German child *viz-à-viz* the Irish child given that the two systems are so different. Nevertheless, by the age of eight the majority of children, in both Germany and Ireland, can read, write and are proficient at basic numeracy. Arguably, the practice in Germany of deferring formal learning of the 3R's until the post-Kindergarten stage, is a more efficient method than the Irish and takes cognisance of Montessori's concept of critical periods. Reserving the period from approximately age three to six for the development of social interaction, and linguistic and experiential development, could result in a greater understanding of the different academic subjects when introduced at a later stage.

3. A further advantage of the Irish system is that children are being taught by people of high academic status which possibly mitigates the effects of the poor staff:pupil ratio and the other environmental restrictions.
4. The non-pressurised nature of Kindergarten curriculum also raises questions. There is a lack of structured play which has profound implications for intellectual development.



5. In this German Kindergarten, the standard of dialogue [as shown by the Target Child Observational Method (Sylva *et al*, 1980)] between the older children was high, but not between child and adult. Furthermore, younger children rarely spoke and it was disconcerting to note that much opportunity for potential intellectual stimulation was lost.

These interwoven issues regarding the degree of structure of children's play and the 'ideal' level of adult interaction are questions which will continue to be strongly debated in any future discussion of early years education.

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