



Child Centred Diversity in Quality Early Childhood Education and Care



Child-Centredness in Practice Report on Output 2

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A note on Terminology:

Throughout the *'Child-Centred Diversity in Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) (2017-1-UK01-KA201-036798)* project, the term 'educator' is used to refer to all members of the ECEC workforce. However, the use of this term in all instances potentially masks subtle differences between members of the workforce in the different participating countries (Croatia, Denmark, England, Ireland, Italy and Spain). The ECEC workforce in Europe consists of individuals with a range of qualifications (with varying levels and foci), professional development experiences and job roles, and we fully recognise the complexities of how best to describe members of this workforce. These variations reflect national requirements and local socio-historic contexts that are important in understanding the environments in which members of the workforce are employed. However, in consultation with all project members, it was agreed that 'educator' was a suitable term that could be adopted to refer to those who work in ECEC in each of the participating countries.

Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) services have developed for different reasons in different parts of the world, and whilst there are some commonalities in the conceptions and objectives of services, not all have put the child at the centre. ECEC is internationally recognised as a social investment strategy for supporting parental employment and providing the foundations to children's lifelong learning. ECEC provides early intervention for disadvantaged groups with high quality ECEC offering the opportunity to lessen the negative consequences of disadvantage on children's later learning. Internationally those who work in ECEC are recognised as central to the quality of ECEC. The European Commission (2014) identified the importance of initial training and subsequent professional development as contributing to the development of professional competences of the ECEC workforce and contributing to the overall quality of ECEC. Despite the continued focus on the importance of the ECEC workforce for the quality of services, structural attributes, such as initial qualification requirements, vary across Member States, and professional development requirements, if present at all, are even more differentiated (Lindeboom & Buiskool, 2013). Beyond these structural attributes are questions as to what constitutes the knowledge, skills and attitudes required for a competent ECEC workforce (Urban et al., 2011). This project is intended to enhance and extend understandings of the competences required for working in ECEC in diverse contexts, whilst creating innovative professional development to support the ECEC workforce in developing professional competences.

The project focusses on child-centred practice, a commonly used and deeply embedded concept for ECEC, encompassing developmental, democratic and individualised constructions of ECEC (Chung & Walsh, 2000). These different constructions resonate with different aspects of ECEC's importance in supporting children's development whilst offering equality of opportunity irrespective of social circumstances and individual needs. However, questions arise as to how ALL children can be at the centre of pedagogic practice, particularly when considering diverse communities and whether democratic approaches can be combined with a focus on developmentalism.

Output 2 of the Key Action 2 Erasmus+ project '*Child-Centred Diversity in Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)*' is concerned with the collection, collation and analysis of examples of child-centred practice. These examples are discussed in this report and also presented as a series of vignettes on report cards generated from observations of practice, in order to illustrate both understandings of child-centred practice and the ways in which they inform pedagogical approaches for working with diverse learners. All project partners were involved in collecting observations of ECEC practice in their own contexts, and in discussing these examples during the second transnational meeting in Osijek, Croatia.

The project Initial Literature Review (Output1) identified eight key principles of child-centred practice in high quality ECEC; and these helped to shape research instruments and analysis. The selection of project partners from six countries (Denmark, Italy, Spain, England, Croatia, Ireland) with different histories and structures (see Output 1) means that this output offers a transnational insight into the practice of child-centredness in ECEC services, which is of relevance and interest across Europe. Illustrative vignettes from the observations provide 'real-life examples' to practitioners, policy makers, training providers and professionals from other sectors. The examples of practice also play a key role in disseminating emerging findings from the project at the Multiplier Events in the first year of the project. The report therefore aims to enhance understandings of child-centred practice for quality and diversity.

Methodology

The agreed method of data collection for this part of the project was narrative observation. This was preferred to time- or event-sampling methods because of its potential for rich detailed accounts in different contexts. The aspects of practice which are the focus of the project (child-centredness, quality, diversity) are not easily quantifiable; it was therefore agreed that qualitative data would be collected. Narrative observations also offer greater flexibility, which was important because of possible variations in methodological emphasis between project partners. Narrative observations enable observers to adopt a naturalistic approach to observing using their own writing style and epistemological assumptions. For example, within a broadly Tavistock approach the observer engages in 'open-minded naturalistic observation' concentrating on 'what is seen or felt' without attempts to explain or compare with expectations, and only writing this down after the observation has ended (Reid, 1997:1). A narrative observation within a cultural-historical approach, however, is more likely to be theoretically driven, focussing on 'small novelties' and 'environmental affordances' with the observer's interpretations included immediately during in the course of the observation (Bang, 2008:119). Both approaches produce narrative accounts that can convey immediacy for the reader and offer a vivid picture of what took place.

In addition, to help us to situate each account, all observers collected the same information describing the context of each observation, and responded to a set of prompt questions after the observation to consider its depiction of child-centredness. The observations comprised a mix of written and visual recordings, each with clear documentation of the scope of permissions for sharing beyond the setting across a variety of media.

Partners worked together to devise an observation sheet to be used within a variety of settings across six countries. A variety of existing observation formats (mostly used by early years practitioners) were considered and a draft was formulated. It was recognised that the format would be used by a range of observers including for example educators, leaders and managers and academics and therefore there was a requirement to meet the needs of all observers. Key aspects of child-centred practice in ECEC identified in the Initial Literature Review (Output 1) were used to devise prompts to guide observers (see appendix one).

Appropriate ethical procedures were developed to reflect the transnationality of the project and ensuring adherence to local ethical requirements and general ethical principles (as set out in BERA 2011). An application for ethical approval was submitted to and approved by University of Plymouth and was supplemented with guidance from each country about how local legal requirements for suitability for working with young children were addressed in that country.

The draft observation sheet (appendix one) was tested initially by sharing it with a smaller group of practitioners involved the project. The feedback led to a discussion about whether to include key factors related to child-centred practice as prompts for reflection following observations; it was felt it could constrain the responses. However, it was finally agreed that the prompts would provide a useful focus and result in responses which could be better compared and analysed.

A small number of changes were made, notably:

- the optional inclusion of levels of wellbeing and involvement (Laevens et al., 2005), depending on the use and understanding of these levels across the countries involved in the project.
- the clarification of contextual information to ensure relevance to the project.

Possible limitations to the observation sheet were identified and attempts were made to mitigate these as follows:

- The observation sheet being Anglo-centric and therefore being challenging to use for European partners. Consequently, the format was kept simple without acronyms or language referring specifically to the English curriculum
- The potential work involved in gathering the observations given the limited timescale which could present a possible 'bureaucratic burden' (BERA, 2011). An example observation was therefore shared to indicate a realistic length of observation and therefore possible timescale.
- The introduction of a new observation process which might be different from the one used by the observer on a regular basis may present challenges or difficulties. Participants were likely to differ in what they 'see' and their own interests, understanding and knowledge might dominate their reflection (Willan, 2010). Examples of the reflection were shared to guide observers. However, the project team recognises that observations will be influenced not only by the personal resources each observer brings to the task but also by the national/cultural context in which s/he will be observing. These variations help to bring different perspectives to reflection, and analyses should acknowledge this and recognise it as a strength of the project.

To further test the model and provide any guidance that might be deemed necessary, an early years teacher¹ within the group tested the observation sheet while observing a group of children with another teacher. The completed test observation and reflection were presented to a validation group which consisted of a group of teachers from both Nursery Schools involved in the project and one of the project leads. This group undertook critical analysis in the form of a group discussion. The impact of this validation exercise was the need for further clarification about contextual information and how this might be interpreted. It was also agreed that given that the small size of sample of observations in the scoping exercise, the range of data possible for collection should be extended to include video, audio and photographic materials in addition to the written observations where possible, to ensure greater trustworthiness (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

The final draft of the observation form was circulated to all partners in the project with the guidance requesting completion within a specified timeframe². Questions were raised by partners during an online meeting and were addressed through discussion. All partners agreed to the approach being open, honest and rigorous, and were encouraged to remind observers of core ethical principles, namely respect for children and practitioners, gaining informed consent, along with making participants' right to withdraw explicit and ensuring protection from harm. Any further considerations relevant to each country were to be respected. Partners were also reminded that observations should be carried out flexibly, respectfully and sensitively; in particular care should be taken with the balance between written and visual material, which would be directed by policy and regulations pertaining to each country. Importantly, all observers were experienced ECEC experts and were skilled in responding to and respecting the needs of children. Observers therefore were sensitive in their approach to data collection, ceasing observations if needed.

A total of 44 observations were recorded, ranging in length and detail, with at least four observations in each country from different kinds of early years setting. All the observations were collected using the agreed format/s and uploaded to a shared secure platform hosted by University of Plymouth and accessible to project partners only, by invitation, and password protected.

The partners responsible for Output 2 and project lead partners then began initial analysis for further discussion. The analysis followed a three-stage process. The first adopted a framework analysis, looking for evidence and examples of the statements of child-centredness identified by

¹ The term 'teacher' is used here to reflect the local (national) term for the colleague who undertook the piloting of the observation framework.

² The majority of observations were completed between January and March 2018.

Output 1 and used within the observation framework (see appendix one). The second was to adopt a more grounded approach, whereby analysers recorded and coded for themes that were emerging from the data. A final layer of analysis looked to explore the similarities and differences between the participating countries against both the framework analysis and emerging themes. These initial analyses were shared with all partners for further discussion and reflection at the transnational meeting. In addition, report cards with examples of practice from each country were designed for easy use during professional development.

Reflections on methodology

Not surprisingly there was variation in observers' understanding about what was to be included in the observation, both in terms of content and commentary. Although the intended outcome was a reflection upon child-centred practice related specifically to what was observed, many of the observers' reflections also demonstrate the individual beliefs, passions and understandings of the observer. Participants reflected on the incidents they observed and described them in different ways, bringing their own constructions of what they understood was happening to the task of observing and narrating (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). The different interpretations enabled a wide range of concepts of child-centred practice to be explored amongst the partners. Despite the variation in perspective, there were common themes around the child-centred practice supporting a broader consideration of the possible definitions of child-centredness.

The timescale for the research was relatively short especially considering the translation required in some of the countries. In addition, there were some initial complications with accessing the secure site, which made viewing all the observations in good time prior to the transnational meeting challenging. This may have limited the quality of reflection possible from all partners in time for the transnational meeting. However, this was perhaps mitigated by the time allowed at the meeting to consider the findings.

It was recognised too through discussion that the omission of information about qualifications of the practitioners observed limited the analysis to a small degree. However, this could be overcome through further clarification with partners. Further, in analysing the data it was apparent that the ECEC settings that were observed were those who were willing to participate and who often had an existing relationship with the research team. The settings are not representative, potentially being skewed towards those that are of a high quality, although no data were collected pertaining to quality. The settings were well resourced and may not reflect the challenges of providing ECEC services in localities where considerations of quality are something of a new addition, or those where funding is insufficient for adequately resourcing ECEC settings.

The final limitation was that, with the exception of quotations from the children involved in the observations, the voice of the child was not always present. In many instances, observers selected incidents to observe in which the adult played a pivotal role. There are exceptions, with observations of children interacting by themselves with materials which have been placed in the environment by adults with specific intentions. Had more instances of child-initiated activity been included, this could have given greater breadth to the analysis of child-centredness.

Role of the adult

Whilst the term 'child-centred' clearly focuses on the child there is little beyond this to indicate who is doing the centring or how they are to be centred. As a form of pedagogic practice, being 'child-centred' implies a social practice that will encompass particular social agents, subject to socio-cultural influences. The focus on practice implies a focus on the adult who is responsible for enacting being child-centred and implementing child-centredness. Further, given that the '*Child-Centred Diversity in Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)*' project is concerned with the professional competences of educators and enhancing their reflections on, and development of, practice, there was a perhaps unsurprising focus on the role of the adult within the observations.

The adults involved in the observations were reflective of the different national ECEC requirements in each of the participating countries. As such, those working in the ECEC centres that were observed had qualifications and overall staffing numbers that met the local statutory requirements. A key aspect of the 'diversity' within the '*Child-Centred Diversity in Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)*' project has been to identify the diversity that is present amongst educators across Europe (and beyond). Not only do qualification levels vary, but so do the foci of training and the ways in which the training is delivered (such as the combinations of theoretical and practical elements). The enactment of being child-centred therefore takes place in very different contexts, but with some similarities in the structure of the environments.

In analysing the ECEC environment, it was evident within the observations that those working in the ECEC settings had an important role in determining the nature of the child-centred ECEC environment. Across all countries it was evident that whilst *child*-centred practice presented the child as innermost to the environment and the activities being undertaken within it, adults also had a central role. Adults were involved in both constructing the learning environment and shaping how activities were structured and sequenced. As such, the role of the adult is also centred alongside that of the child, but the observation data indicates that this is done in very different ways.

Constructing the Learning Environment

The environments in which ECEC practice was observed shared many similarities in overall structure and contents, although how these were utilised often varied. Indoor rooms were largely divided into zones that provided different activities and resources intended to respond to or to stimulate children's interests and facilitate their learning. As such, the indoor areas frequently provided a mix of more open spaces, alongside more structured spaces that were structured either through the use of furniture, such as tables and chairs or through specific types of resources, such as a home corner. Embedded in the different zones were a range of resources that signalled the character of that zone, such as wooden blocks within a construction corner. Where the size of the room facilitated a more open space, this would occasionally have resources left out in it, such as a wooden train set, or it could be space for the children to move freely in or to play with their self-selected resources.

In some of the observations, an additional space or room was utilised from the one in which the day-to-day activities took place. Often the separated spaces provided the opportunity to undertake small group-based work and, as will be discussed, the resources and activities were frequently structured by the adults. There is an inevitability to the adults structuring the environments and the provision of resources on a broad scale (such as setting up the layout of a room), but in some circumstances the environment and resources were more intricately structured to support a particular activity or topic. For example, some settings had particular topics that spanned a given time period, such as in Italy where one setting had a project called 'Our Surrounding Nature' (Observation Italy:8), where the children explored woods and gardens and the differences between the natural and artificial world through a variety of activities. The adults therefore provided the resources and structured the environment to reflect the topic.

All ECEC settings were well resourced, with some of our participants clearly indicating that this was about providing choice to the children. For example, in one English nursery the staff commented about children being able to choose what they wanted to 'get out'. Staff would therefore get out some resources to go into the open area of the room, but children could also self-select resources to play with. The staff also commented that there were some resources that were located outside of the room that the children could still request, but that as a team they often moved resources around to stimulate children's interests. Staff members therefore supported children in accessing 'favourite' resources, whilst also offering alternatives. The provision of resources therefore illustrates one of the ways in which ECEC staff are involved in structuring the learning environment.

In many of our observations, outdoor environments offered less evidence of practitioners structuring the learning environment. This, however, might have been influenced by the season of the observations (a rather prolonged winter). Whilst climbing frames (and other similar equipment), sand-pits and the physicality of the space provided some degree of structure to the outdoors, it was not to the extent of that seen indoors. Often resources were not provided in the same way. Instead the outside was seen to be the resource. For example, in Croatia and Ireland, observations in the snow illustrated how snow can be a resource in itself.

The requirement in England to have free-flow access to the outdoors, whereby children are able to freely go between indoor and outdoor spaces, meant that resources were sometimes provided to support this (such as wellington boots and waterproof coats), but also that the outdoor spaces did include structured areas. For example, in some of the ECEC settings, there were mud kitchens and water-play resources that were a permanent feature of the outdoors. Therefore, whilst the outdoors was less structured, there was evidence of it being used as a room of its own in some of the observations.

Pacing and Sequencing of Activities

The environment and the provision of resources inevitably influenced a pace and sequence to the activities observed within the ECEC environments (Wickett, 2017). For example, in the zonal development of the indoor spaces, the provision of books and soft furnishings indicated slow-paced and calm areas, whilst other resources indicated faster-paced activities. The construction of the learning environment was therefore one attribute that contributed to providing messages as to how different areas were to be engaged with. In addition to the role of staff in constructing the differently paced zonal areas, it was also evident that staff members could take up a number of different roles in the pacing and sequencing of activities.

The position of staff within, alongside or away from activities also determined the structuring, pacing and sequencing. Staff within activities indicates that staff were embedded within activities. Staff alongside activities demonstrates that staff can be present, but might not be directly involved in an activity, perhaps only intervening when asked to or if there is a cause for concern. Staff away from activities represents the times when no adults were seen to be involved with the observed activities.

However, it was also evident that staff could shift their position as activities evolved. For example, in Croatia:

Children are playing a game that is similar to golf, using paper rolls and a ladle. The children take turns, understanding the rules within their group. The educator explains that whilst golf isn't very well known in Croatia, the children were playing basketball and it was getting dangerous, so he found a different way for them to play. The educator explains the game has been around for a month and the children still find new ways to develop it and keep it interesting.

(Observation Croatia:4)

In the above example, the educator explains how his role changed from being alongside the children's play (intervening as it was getting dangerous) to being away from the golf game.

Staff can also take on multiple roles as they respond to the needs of different children. For example in Spain:

The teacher has designed a reading and writing project where the children will create their own books. Micro-groups of children determine the story line, illustrations, writing and page numbering of the stories. Under the children's writing the teacher has corrected the children's writing, getting them to make the corrections. As the children number the pages they have a number line to help them and the teacher adds a commentary about the pictures. When children make mistakes the teacher gets them to correct them. Activities develop slowly to respond to the needs of the children.

(Observation Spain:3)

The example from Spain illustrates how the educator shifts from being within and alongside the children. The structuring and pacing of the activity has been set by the educator, along with the outcomes of the activity. The combination of the educator structuring the activity and the clear outcomes of the activity embeds the educator within the activity, but she shifts her position to being alongside the children depending on how they are performing in the task. The shifting of the educator's position demonstrates that even in a group-based activity that has been constructed by the educator, the educator is still responsive to the needs of the children in the way in which she is pacing the activity. However, the example also illustrates how within all observations, activities with clear outcomes are more likely to position staff as within the activity.

As recognition for the contribution of ECEC services to providing the foundations to children's lifelong learning (alongside other social welfare functions) grow, so too do the expectations of the ECEC services and the educators that work in them (Campbell-Barr & Bogatić, 2017). Resultantly, strongly paced and sequenced activities, where the educator is within the activity, may reflect a strong regulative discourse (Nygård, 2017), whereby there are clear national standards and curriculum guidance that mould the pedagogic interactions of educators. The shifting between being within and alongside the child may therefore be a response to educators negotiating the expectations of their profession (socially and politically) alongside their own personal pedagogic values.

The examples from Croatia and Spain also illustrate how adults will change their role both over time and during specific activities. In the Croatian golf game (Observation Croatia:4), the educator has clearly changed his role over a period of time, whilst in Spain the educator is changing her role during an individual activity. The changing roles of staff members were clear throughout the observations, particularly where observations were undertaken over the duration of a day. For example, staff in England went from being alongside children and away from children during an outdoor play session to then being within a phonics session. The pacing and sequencing can therefore change during an activity, over the course of a day and over a longer period of time.

The changing role of the adult illustrates that often those working in ECEC will promote and support children's learning in a facilitative capacity. The facilitation may relate to a particular task or in verbally noting expected behaviours. Verbal interactions were often used to support children in their learning, such as narrating the activities that the children were undertaking. In some observations the narration was of a particular story or task, such as describing what the children are doing or praising a drawing or 'good' behaviour. In other observations, verbal input supported a repetitive activity, such as singing a song or saying a rhyme, whereby the repetition supported children's engagement and provided a sense of familiarity within the group. The narration provides another layer to the pacing of the activities and again illustrates that staff move from within to alongside activities depending on the level (and pace) of their narration.

The concept of scaffolding characterizes the role of the teacher as one of offering support through cultural mediation (e.g. subject matter, object, instruments etc.). The learning process is constructed in the communicative relationship between children and adults (Rinaldi, 2006). Learning and knowledge develop in the space through questions, dialogues and exchanges of ideas with colleagues, such as when educators discuss "what to do". However, in the process of narration and questioning, there is a query about who is being centred within the dialogue and exchanges. Questions are arguably motivated by the adult's interests, but questions from the child signify their interest. Scaffolding through communication is not just what is communicated, but who is communicating and how it is received, interpreted and responded to (see Thulin and Jonsson, 2014).

The different ways in which the role of the adult was performed suggests that it is the adult that either enables, facilitates or restricts child-centred practice. Whilst a highly structured, adult enabled activity might suggest that this is counter to child-centred practice, some of the examples illustrate that it is the responses of the children that can determine whether an activity is child-centred. For example, in Denmark a parachute game is structured and paced by the adults involved, but the children are clearly delighting in the excitement of the game.

Children are presented with a parachute. It is clear that they know the game of shaking the parachute, throwing a ball onto it, singing songs and later running around it. The children shout with enthusiasm at the announcement of the game and there are a number of times where the children are clearly excited and delighting in the game. Whilst the educators control the game, they do so in a playful way, pretending to look for the children as they hide under the parachute, singing songs and using a playful approach.

(Observation Denmark:3)

The examples illustrate that there is no single enactment of child-centred practice, but that the responses (and emotions of the children) can determine whether an activity is child-centred or not.

In pacing and sequencing the activity, the educator is making use of the children's prior experiences and interests, whilst also responding to the children's perspective, whereby the contributions of the children are taken into account (Thulin & Jonsson, 2014). Educators cannot make assumptions about the experiences that children bring with them to ECEC (see section on Child/ children centred), placing an emphasis on the role of the educator to observe and understand the children, whilst also considering how the children's understanding can be related to, and build upon, new experiences. However, it is important to emphasise that the adult is required to hear, listen to and understand the children's responses and to not impose an adult interpretation onto them (see Output 1, Initial Literature Review).

There is something of a paradox, whereby it is the role of the adult to ensure that the child is centred within the environment and the activities present. However, the observations illustrate the careful and skilled work of the professionals observed in adjusting their role during activities, over the course of the day, over longer periods of time and in response to the needs and emotions of the children. Educators are expected to see the world as children do and to support their learning whilst being within, alongside, but also away from children and the activities that they are engaged with. The educator supports centring the child via the different ways in which they position themselves within the learning environment (Thulin & Jonsson, 2014).

Responding to the child: pedagogic sensitivity / tact

As well as planning activities and environments and adjusting their role in activities, educators also revealed their own understandings of child-centredness through small and subtle responses and anticipatory actions during the course of activities and everyday routines. These actions demonstrated how the educators had the children's immediate needs and longer standing interests/dispositions in mind (Taggart, 2015). This includes gestures and facial expressions, often exaggerated to draw children's attention to salient aspects of an activity, as well as positioning and orientation of the body, or 'mimamoru', 'embodied attention and inattention' as educators watch and wait to see whether any intervention is needed (Hayashi and Tobin, 2015). Educators' supportive actions addressed individual children's basic moment-on-moment needs for warmth, comfort and security, using words and/or movements to shape children's involvement and guide their participation (Rogoff, 1990). Much of this is more easily identified in videos than written observations, but some further excerpts from the observations about the parachute activity in the Danish ECEC setting below offer examples of small actions from practitioners which demonstrate their anticipation of children's needs and responses, and how they subsume their own responses to preserve the children's mood:

The children begin lifting and lowering their arms. This makes the cloth of the parachute move like waves. Practitioner 1 throws a ball into the parachute. "Out on the big ocean, a little ship sails. Where is it going, where it's going. It's going tooooo... (name of child)! "The ball rolls off the parachute and the boy, (name of child), runs for it, but the girl, Elijah, grabs it, but Practitioner 2, who stands next to Elijah takes the ball, and gives it to (name of child) while repeating from the song: "It's going to (name of child)." ... As they all get ready for the next round, Kaye again starts to jump up and down and makes big waves with the parachute, and several of the other children are drawn into to this way of making waves. At one point, Practitioner 2 puts her hand on Kaye's shoulder and asks him to join the song [By this she may indicate that he is a little too wild/excited]., the children have all gathered under the parachute and have started screaming and jumping. Practitioner 1's facial expression indicates that the screaming is very loud. Practitioner 3 makes a comment about the wild waves [maybe the sound level was at the borderline of what she felt as tolerable? But she didn't intervene and let the children (at least in her perspective) go off the rails].

(Observation Denmark:3)

Through watching carefully and noticing details educators act to avoid children becoming upset by a small injustice (like someone else picking up the ball destined for them) or to behaving just beyond what is acceptable. These interventions are made tactfully, however, without causing the child to lose face. These small actions show practitioners' sensitivity to children's emotions – enjoyment, excitement, inclusion or exclusion from the group. Through their careful watching, bodily response and verbal and nonverbal communication educators were:

Creating shared attention, bringing about fascination and interest among the children, creating excitement, tapping into and entering the imagination of the children, acting as if the imagination of the children is real to the educator.
(Observation Denmark 1: reflection on MIO-MIO puppet episode)

This educator is voicing the importance of shared attention between themselves and the children they are caring for. Shared attention offers opportunities for intersubjectivity and learning – both by the educator as he or she learns about children's interests, concerns and inner resources, and by children as they find out more about the world around them and how to cope and benefit from what each situation affords. It is about the application of professional attention and intelligent caring (Arnold, 2005).

Professional Responsiveness

In observations of practice such the parachute episode described above, educators worked together to keep children engaged and maintain their wellbeing. Educators each took responsibility for keeping a watchful eye on individual children to ensure that the way in which the activity unfolded stayed safe and enjoyable for all. In the reflection above (on another episode in which educators 'managed' suspense and excitement as a puppet appeared from its hiding place), the educator highlights the importance of genuine adoption of the child's perspective in an activity which is shared. Shared attention is facilitated by listening as well as careful watching as a means of learning about relationships.

You can provide all the nicest equipment in the world but it's no good if you don't listen to the child, take their views into account, get down to their level. You need to be playful prepared to perform with the child in order to get to know them.

(Observation Ireland:4 Reflection)

The listening and relationship building helps to focus attention on an 'object'. Learning is determined by the object and how this takes shape in the children's minds through reflection and action. The learning later becomes knowledge and skill through representation and exchange, whereby the role of listening further facilitates the process. Listening provides a context in which children report their mental images to others, they represent these to themselves and develop a conscious vision. For example, in the extract below from an observation in a Reception/Nursery class in the UK, children spontaneously tell each other what they are making, thereby putting their thoughts into words.

Five to six children are working at a craft table which had been set up as an exploration table. Equipment and materials are available to the children. Children had free choice about what to 'do' or 'make'. They were keen to communicate with each other: 'I'm making a short wand'; 'I'm making a flag'. Resources had been made available for children to make choices and share. When one child said, 'I need to use sellotape', in response another child passed it to her without question. One child was making a [musical] instrument. All the children were working alone but communicating their ideas with each other; there was no decision to make collaborative projects.

(Observation England:13)

When children move from one activity to another, from one field of experience to another, children develop the idea that other people are essential for their own identity. Others are important to build connections between thoughts and objects. In ECEC it is important to promote creativity as the ability of children to create connections between knowledge and actions, organize knowledge and generate innovation and change. Creativity is not just the quality of thinking of each individual but is also an interactive and social project.

The focus on the role of the adult within child-centred practice illustrates that there is a requirement for educators to have the knowledges needed to construct the learning environment, pace activities

and to respond to the children that they are working with. The competency of the educator is defined more in terms of understanding rather than a measure of pure knowledge. As such, the focus on knowledges reflects that the educator needs to know more than just ECEC theory, how to structure the learning environment skilfully and how to interact sensitively with children. The emphasis on knowledges (knowledge in the plural) illustrates that the competences of the educator will be those that are both observable and tacit, encompassing a practical wisdom that has developed with time and experience (Campbell-Barr, 2017). Through drawing on their knowledges, the educator has the familiarity to understand what is important and makes hypotheses about what could be suitable for each situation. Proceeding by trial and error enables the educator to acquire further knowledge. A cultivated educator not only has a multidisciplinary background but is also able to process their knowledges to inform their pedagogical practice.

Forms of play

Christine Stephen (2010) highlighted play as the second of the two 'big ideas' that permeate ECEC pedagogy, and the observations include examples of children engaged in different kinds of activities which could be categorised as play. Categorising play is notoriously difficult (Smith, 2017), but the observations from the different countries included categories of play which correspond to the three broad understandings of child-centredness: notably the child absorbed in his/her own world, the child progressing through different developmentally appropriate kinds of play and the child playing in relation to others (see Output 1). These ways of categorisation refer to different dimensions of play, so any one observation might offer examples of all three types.

The first broad category covers what in the literature would be described as exploratory or heuristic play (Goldschmied and Jackson, 2004), in which the child is left alone to explore objects and materials without intervention from educators (the adult role is one of being away from the play). In the example below from Croatia, a young child is attracted to objects that were visually interesting and prompted him to handle them and then arrange them according to his own pattern.

A boy aged 1.3 yrs. started playing with transparent sensory balls that were located near the window. He was trying to explore the small particles inside the balls. The sunlight that went through the window made the balls look even more intriguing and raised his attention. At first he was lining up the balls on the window bench and after that he started putting one on top of the other. A boy aged 1.6 yrs. joined him, observed him for a few minutes and then started handing him the balls.

(Observation Croatia:8)

He is leading his play without adult involvement – however, the objects were chosen and placed in the environment with the specific intention of attracting children's attention because of their physical and sensory properties. The emphasis is nonetheless on enabling time and space for the child to pursue their own exploration, using all their senses. There are elements of this unhurried and deeply sensual experience in other observed activities, particularly with younger children, such as the description from one of the Spanish settings of the toddlers eating spaghetti and meatballs. Amidst the busyness of serving, eating, clearing and tidying, there are spaces for children to be absorbed in exploration:

The girl observes the whole process attentively. She explores the pieces and sucks on them, then picks up the fork and explores the utensil. She tests the prongs of the fork and its handle. ... Mario has a piece of spaghetti in his hand and the educator takes his hand and tries to put it on the plate, but the child does not release the spaghetti, so she chooses to leave it that way. The boy continues to explore the spaghetti.

(Observation Spain:1)

Providing space and time for opportunities for heuristic play that leave the child alone in their world, as endorsed by Goldschmied, must however compete with other priorities in the minds of educators. In some instances, children's moments of exploration are seized on by educators to record/identify where the child is at and/or support them in their next steps; for example, in the example below from Italy the educator seeks to extend a child's vocabulary and so promote their development:

The educator observes the children that explore the moss. The children touch and smell it, rip off some tufts to make a close observation. The educator proposes to observe the moss through a magnifier. The children explore and the educator supports their sensory exploration by asking them question.

(Observation Italy:1)

At other times the logistics of many children pursuing their own explorations might lead the educator to judge that 'the play is becoming un-structured'; she might decide that 'some sense of order in the playroom needs to be restored', if the children are to be able to make connections in their learning (Observation Italy: 6).

This leads to consideration of the second dimension of play – namely in association with the level of cognitive, physical and socio-emotional demands on the child. 'For every aspect of children's development, there is a form of play' (Moyle, 1989) - physical play, symbolic play, pretence/ socio-dramatic play and games with rules (Whitebread et al. 2012). Play with objects also comes within this taxonomy but, unlike heuristic play above, is considered as part of the child's staged response to interacting with the world.

Observations provided examples of activities offering play opportunities in all five areas development – often within one activity. Opportunities for physical play could be structured and adult-led, as in the rhythmic session in Denmark, where children took part in activities with parachutes with both regular and unpredictable elements, but with space and time for children to improvise and move freely in different ways. Physical play activities could also be unstructured (as in the examples of playing in the snow from Ireland and Croatia) offering children the opportunity to explore what their own bodies can do, in the same way that heuristic play offered them opportunities to explore what objects can do. In instances where children could experience this kind of solo exploration of their own physical capacities, more structured activities were often available to children at the same time.

Observations of activities involving symbolic systems (spoken language, reading and writing, number, visual media (painting, drawing, collage) music and so on) varied in the extent to which they might be classified as 'play'. In many instances activities involving books offered limited scope for the scope for children to be playful; this included a session making books (Observation Spain:3) and sharing books (Observation Italy: 4,5). These activities were often educator-led and focused on the development of knowledge and skills which children would need in the next stage of schooling. Activities using other media (painting, drawing and modelling) were more likely to include opportunities when children could pursue their own ideas, although still supported by the educator. For example, in an observation from the UK, three children and one educator are sitting around the drawing table. The children make their own choices about what to draw but are prompted by the educator to talk about what they are doing:

All children are drawing independently. Two are drawing people and one is mark making. Another boy then comes over and gets some paper from the tray and comes to draw. The staff member asks the new boy, 'what are you drawing?' and he replies, 'a scary monster'.

Another girl passes her picture to the girl next to her, saying 'here you go'. She then walks over to the staff member and says, 'I gave her my picture'. The member of staff says, 'that's kind. What are you going to draw now?' The girl replies, 'I'm going to draw my mum and my dad' and the member of staff says, 'shall I draw my mummy too? Ok, my mum likes jumpers, so I'm going to put a jumper on her and trousers'. The original children join in: 'I can draw my mummy too. She has a sparkly dress'; 'do you know who I'm going to draw?'. The member of staff says, 'who' and the child answers, 'Marion and Issy. They are my family'.

(Observation England:8)

The educator's intervention does not direct or redirect the play but nonetheless influences its progression. The educator's presence prompts one child to seek confirmation of her 'good' behaviour (giving a picture to another child). Although the activity itself is playful and child-led, the social practice of which it is a part influences what children do and say during the course of the activity.

This was also the case with opportunities to take part in pretend/socio-dramatic play, with small world/construction materials or in home corners/dressing up areas. Observations of these activities reported children making choices and trying out ways-of being/doing/saying in a safe space – again offering opportunities for physical, cognitive and socio-emotional development that arose naturally in the course of their play. Children played with numbers as part of rule-based play included both established games like Uno (Observation Denmark: 2) – where children playfully suggested they had amassed huge scores and games invented by children (Observation Croatia: 4).

The third dimension along which play is often categorised considers the child in relation to others (Parten, 1933) – are they engaged in:

- Solitary (Independent) Play
- Onlooker Play
- Parallel Play
- Associative Play
- Cooperative Play

Children in our observations had opportunities to play in all these ways, but in some group activities the option of engaging in solitary or onlooker play depended on the context/particular educator. While there is often an element of developmentalism about this categorisation (cooperative play has classically been regarded as requiring a higher level of development than solitary play (Parten, 1933), our observations revealed subtle ways in which children were offered opportunities to find out about themselves in relation to others, to experience being part of a group and learn how to position themselves in the social practice of the ECEC setting. This ranged from learning through play about aspects of local and global culture (trying out what it feels like to be the educator in charge of story time when children are inattentive (Observation Croatia:2), or to be Elsa or Anna from Frozen (Observation Croatia:5)). Educators sometimes modelled ways of responding to difficult situation (like losing a game) so that children could have some experience of such situations in a safe

supported space. In other instances, children were enabled to work through how to manage disagreements in groups for themselves as the educator held back from intervening in small disputes (Observation Italy: 6).

Child/Children Centred

Despite the research focus on *child*-centred practice, it was evident within the observations that it was rare for there to be just one child involved in any given activity. Whilst childminders³ in England and occasional one-to-one activities within all countries did illustrate that, at times, there could be a focus on *a* child, mostly staff were working with groups of children. The group sizes could vary, not only as a result of the differing ratio requirements within the countries participating in the research, but also because it was not uncommon for small group activities to be undertaken. A strategy for responding to group sizes in support of child-centeredness therefore appears to be minimising group sizes at given points in the day.

Group dynamics pose a potential challenge to an individualised concept of child-centred practice (Wood, 2007). The shifting role and position of staff in their pacing and sequencing of activities (see earlier discussion) already illustrates how staff adjust themselves to respond to the needs of individual children and group dynamics. This is well illustrated by an example from England:

Two children are playing chase with a member of staff. They are laughing and run away from the staff member when she gets close to them. Then when she stops they look to her and pull faces, for her to chase them again.

“Sppp, your frozen”. Says Child 1 as she waves her hand around as if it’s a wand. The staff member freezes.

Both children laugh and run off. They approach another friend and hide behind her and then pretend to look around the corner. The staff member pretends to walk towards the children in a funny way (like a mummy-Egyptian mummy). The children scream and run off. The staff member calls the child’s name, whilst standing still and watching the children.

A different child then approaches the staff member with a ball and throws it to her. The staff member begins to throw the ball back and forth with the child a few times. The original children run past her and tap her. The staff member then returns to chasing them, before returning to throw the ball with the other child as well.

(Observation England:7)

The educator from England illustrates a shifting between being alongside and within the children’s play, but does so to respond to the different games of the children present. The educator divides her time between playing chase with the two children at the start of the observation and catch with the individual child who comes along later. The educator therefore manages the needs of the group by adjusting her role over the course of the free play period. In another example, from Denmark, where the children are also playing a game of catch (tag), the role of an educator in meeting the needs of the children illustrates the balance between the individual child within the group and the group. As a group, the children recognise the game, as the repetition of the game has provided a shared understanding. However, the observation that whilst group dynamics can be supported through having an object of shared attention (in this instance the game of chase), for those outside of the group there is a need to support them to participate in the group. The participation is more than just understanding the rules, as it also encompasses developing a sense of the felt excitement, interest and existential meaning of the game. As such, there are the rules that constitute the ‘game’, but

³ Childminders are home base childcare providers who can work with six children under the age of eight, including their own.

there is also the rhythm, movement and feeling of the game that the educator has a role in making apparent (and attractive) to the child. Here the rules of the group (and associated common understanding) are those of playing chase, but the observation also illustrates that the rules can take different forms, such as anticipated emotional responses.

We are in a nearby park. The educators have decided that the children should play tag. An experienced male educator approaches a new boy and briefly explains the rules of the game to him. Then, the educators and the children gather around the two chasers and begin to repeat a rhyme. The end of the rhyme tacitly marks the beginning of the game. The chasers remain standing counting to ten, while the other children run away - many screaming - and all of them trying to create distance between themselves and the chasers as fast as possible. Only the new boy hesitates. For a moment it is like he considers whether or not he should participate. The male educator sees this. He grabs the boy's hand and pulls him away from the chasers. Again and again, the educator looks back at the chasers while unreservedly yelling: "OH NO! OH NO! WE HAVE TO GET AWAY!". This does not seem to be an expression of actual anxiety or fear for the chasers, but rather a deliberate attempt to imitate such experiences. They run hand in hand for a while and every time the chasers approaches, the educator starts to yell and imitate anxiety and fear. I notice that the boy starts to smile. A bit later, the educator has released his hold on the boy's hand. But the boy continues to run and seems preoccupied with the game and with avoiding and escaping the chasers.

(Observation Denmark:6)

More structured roles represent those that are particular to an individual ECEC centre (although these can be shared across centres), such as not standing on furniture or who serves food and drink at meal times, but other rules reflect the role of ECEC centres in socialising children. For example in Spain, the children eating meatballs (Observation Spain:1 discussed earlier) illustrates the coming together of the rules of the ECEC centre and cultural rules. The rules of the centre support baby-led weaning, alongside having a focus on local and organically sourced foods. Children are supported to explore their food and to socialise as they do so. The social aspects of the mealtime reflect wider cultural expectations about mealtimes as a social time within the Spanish culture. As such, the staff member sits and eats with the children, using the situation as an opportunity to converse with the children. However, the staff member recognises that baby led weaning might not be accepted within the children's family homes. The potential for differences illustrates that the rules of the ECEC centre might not be the same as those identified at home, but also how presumed cultural norms may risk homogenising children. The balance between child- and children- centred practice is therefore complex as a result of recognising the balance that staff members have to create between the rules of the centre, cultural norms and the cultural diversity of the children within the group.

Mediating between child- and children-centred demonstrates a potential risk that there are assumptions made about the knowledge and experiences that children bring with them to ECEC centres. For example, two observations discussed have involved the game of chase, illustrating a potential assumption that children will know what a game of chase entails. However, the Danish example illustrates how staff support individual children in participating in the group game. Throughout the observations there are examples of how ECEC centres and the staff who work in them manage the balance between child- and children- centred practice. For example, in Ireland,

one centre had pictures of all children with short descriptions of their likes and their family, illustrating one way in which centres looked to value the individual child and their family context within the group-based environment of the ECEC centre.

Within the countries participating in the research, there are different expectations as to the information that is recorded about children and their individual circumstances and needs. Whilst educators in countries such as England will record details about children's socio-economic circumstances, cultural and religious background, in Spain such information is 'off the record', often only recorded on an informal basis by a lead educator or head teacher. The observations did not record details about individual children, but focussed on the role of the educator in supporting child-centredness, illustrating the careful and skilled work of those observed in responding to children's individual needs irrespective of their social circumstances. The diversity of the children means that there is a diversity in their interests, experiences and needs, to which educators carefully attune themselves.

Invisible children

While the observations were not explicitly selected to be representative, they are overall typical of life in ECEC centres in the participating countries. Many of the observations capture everyday routines involving all children, such as meal times, regular movement sessions and planned activities; other observations focused on more unusual events, such as playing in the snow or a child building an unusually high tower with blocks. Observers did not aim to cover a representative sample of children but, because they were likely to observe things that for some reason they found interesting, there is a risk that some children might not have featured in the observations because what they were doing did not attract the eye or fit into the narrative. This is a possible limitation of the open and flexible methodology adopted for the observations. A further methodological limitation is that the observations were intended to provide 'snap-shots' of child-centred practice; observers did not focus on whether all children were included in activities, nor did they purposefully sample children of different genders, ethnicities, socio-economic statuses or abilities in order to determine whether there were differences in the ways in which children were 'centred'. As such, the children within the observations are just children and we recognised that this risks homogenising them rather than focussing on their uniqueness, as the observation framework implies.

Often within the observations a child (or small group of children) dominated the activity being observed. The domination was not in an oppressive way, but the attention of the observers was likely to have been drawn by the level of excitement (or other emotional response) of these child(ren). As such, there is a possibility that some children were perhaps silent during the observations or were engrossed in a play activity in a secret corner of the ECEC centre, purposefully keeping out of view of the adult observer. Not all children want to be seen and others may not have captured the attention of our observers. This presents a methodological issue to be considered for any future research into child-centredness and something which we must consider carefully before we proceed to the final stages of the project.

Summary and Questions for the next stages

The observations aimed to provide examples of what child-centredness looks like in practice. The observations succeeded in documenting in rich detail examples of practice in the six countries of the project (Croatia, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Spain and the UK) in a way that provided scope for local perspectives and priorities to emerge, while also enabling comparisons. The aim behind carrying out observations in this way was to collect examples of practice that would prompt discussions about child-centredness in practice, and this aim has certainly been fulfilled.

Drawing on the Initial Literature Review (Output 1) for the project, there was evidence in the observations of the three broad categories of child-centredness – romantic, democratic and developmental. The romantic construct of child-centredness recognises that children have a natural curiosity and that their learning can be supported through having freedom to explore. The observations illustrated how educators provided children with varying opportunities to play, in all of its different forms, to enable children to express their natural curiosity. Democratic perspectives of children's rights and active participation within the ECEC centres were evident throughout the observations. Educators sought to build upon children's prior experiences in recognition of the knowledge that children bring with them to the ECEC setting, whilst also acknowledging children's individual backgrounds. Support for the democratic perspective was also evident in the ways in which the educators listened to the children, not just with regard to children's verbal utterances, but in relation to the children's emotional responses, such as anticipating excitement or avoiding potential disappointment. The educators we observed had finely honed listening skills to help support children's active participation within the ECEC settings. There are possible tensions between constructions of child-centredness which highlight individual development and understandings of children's learning which foreground social processes; educators however managed the balance between enabling the child to be at the centre of their world and yet benefit from potential learning from being part of a group. Both the romantic and democratic perspectives of child-centredness were interwoven with developmental perspectives as educators sought to support children's holistic development. At times, clear developmental goals were evident in the pacing and sequencing of activities and the structure of the learning environment by adults, but often educators trusted that the children's natural curiosity would encourage them to become involved and remain engaged.

Unsurprisingly, given that the observation framework (see Appendix One) asked observers to reflect on the eight principles of child-centred practice identified in the Initial Literature Review, all of the observations included reference to some if not all of the following:

1. Focusing on children learning through play,
2. Respecting children's needs, interests, strengths and capacities,
3. Recognising children's learning strategies,
4. Recognising children's uniqueness,
5. Respecting children as capable learners,
6. Respecting children's participation and decision making,
7. Respecting children's diversity and individuality, and
8. Respecting children's family and culture

The principles informed one of the layers of analysis for the observations, but it was apparent that these principles overlapped, in that educators were addressing more than one of the principles at

any one time, and often addressing all of them at once. The observations thus illustrated the careful and skilled work of ECEC educators.

Analysis of observations pointed to the role of the educator in the design and resourcing of the environment and in the organising of activities. Much of the most subtle and skilled work was evident in the way educators responded to individual children in the course of activities but also incidentally as a part of routines. Observations demonstrated how educators moved from being within, alongside and away from children's varying forms of play, adjusting their roles to the range of activities that were being undertaken at any one time. Within the observations educators took on multiple roles, such as serving food whilst enabling children to utilise their senses in exploring the food that is being served, or facilitating both children's excitement and turn taking as they played the parachute game.

Further work to map the eight key principles from Output 1 with the three different construction of child-centredness will be undertaken in the next stage of the project. Surveys will be disseminated electronically in the six participating countries to explore the relevance of the principles identified and to consider educators' competences in supporting child-centred practice. The survey will enable a consideration of the themes identified within this report such as how educators support children's play and how they respond to children, but it is clear to us from our analysis that the observations provide evidence of all three of the broad categories of child-centredness and that educators uphold the eight principles.

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Appendix One: Framework for Observation, Reflection and Analysis (with annotated instruction)

Type of setting (e.g. school private / public/ maintained/nursery/ child minder/ day nursery)	Locality (e.g. urban /rural/ deprived/ affluent)	Date of observation
Number of Children (in the setting and in the observation) Age range of the children in setting and the observation	Staffing (e.g. teachers/ assistants/ volunteers/ educators)	Unique Code (to provide an identification number for the observation)

Time	Narrative	Who is involved	Reflection
		Please include details about children and staff, gender, ethnicity, additional needs and location.	(to be added in conversation with staff after event)
	<p><i>Observation of activity written at the time of observation or following observation.</i></p> <p><i>To include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Description of what happened</i> <i>Children's Dialogue in quotation marks</i> <i>Photos if necessary/possible</i> 	<p><i>-how many children in the activity in the group</i></p> <p><i>gender/age/ethnicity / additional needs</i></p> <p><i>-how many adults, teaching assistants, educators, volunteers</i></p> <p><i>-location where is the observation taking place e.g. outside, lunchtime, at the art area, on a trip, home time.</i></p>	<p><i>possible reference to</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>schemas,</i> <i>previous play/learning</i> <i>achievements-/new learning/new play</i> <i>links to curriculum or assessments</i> <i>new friendships/collaborative play</i> <i>social and emotional development</i> <i>future possible opportunities for learning</i>
	<p>Levels of Involvement (Optional)</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p>	<p>Levels of Wellbeing Optional</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p>	

Classification of Child Centred Practice and Why:

Use prompts (opposite) or other possibilities to reflect on how observation shows child centred learning.

Share this with colleague and reflect upon observation.

Focus on what child centeredness means to you and your colleagues and discuss with reference to this observation.

Prompts

- Children learning through play
- Respecting children's needs both physical and emotional interests, strengths, weaknesses and capacities,
- Recognising children's learning strategies,
- Recognising children's uniqueness,
- Respecting children as capable learners,
- Respecting children's participation and decision making,
- Respecting children's diversity and individuality,
- Respecting children's family and culture.
- Children in the centre of the world, in the centre of learning, and as the leader of his/her own learning.
- OTHER

