



Child Centred Diversity in Quality
Early Childhood Education and Care



Child-Centred Practice – European Perspectives

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UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TRIESTE



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Contents

Introduction.....	3
Child-centredness and quality early childhood education and care.....	4
Perspectives from literature.....	4
Child-centredness in practice.....	5
Principles of child-centred practice.....	5
Examples from practice.....	7
The adult's image of the child.....	11
Developing educators' understandings of child-centredness.....	14
Romanticism in practice: Doing child-centredness from an embodied perspective.....	15
Developmentalism revisited; Child-centred documentation for the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care.....	16
Democracy in practice: the Power of Stories for Child-Centred Practice in ECEC.....	17
Looking forward.....	18
Translations.....	19
Primjeri iz prakse.....	19
Ejemplo de práctica.....	21
Esempi tratti dalla pratica.....	22
References.....	24



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Introduction

The Erasmus+ project *Interpreting Child-centredness to support Quality and Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Care* (2017-1-UK01-KA201-036798) Our project has focussed on concepts of child-centredness and the role of the adult in developing child-centred pedagogy. We started with the question:

How might different understandings of child-centred practice promote learning amongst diverse groups within early childhood education and care provision?

The question reflects international recognition for the role of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in providing the foundations to children's lifelong learning and supporting their holistic development. Evidence to date has demonstrated that it is the quality of ECEC services that determines the extent with which services (and those working in them) can support the holistic development of young children. Child-centredness has become associated with the quality ECEC (Tobin, 2005), often as a short hand for quality pedagogy. Internationally child-centredness features in curricula guidance (Georgeson et al., 2015, Chung and Walsh, 2000), signifying that it is a commonly used term within ECEC. Despite the commonality of the term, central to this project has been exploring the different understandings of child-centredness, both in relation to evolving theoretical conceptions and pedagogical practice. In this booklet we aim to reflect on child-centredness as a component of quality ECEC before going on to consider a series of observations and survey data on child-centred practice to help elucidate the role of the educator in facilitating a child-centred pedagogy. We conclude by presenting an overview of a series of child-centred approaches, linked to online courses that can be accessed to support your next steps in reflecting on your own conception of child-centredness.

Throughout the booklet we refer to ECEC services to represent those services that children access prior to attending compulsory schooling. We recognise that in many countries some form of ECEC is now compulsory as children are expected to attend some form of educational service prior to starting school. The services vary depending on the country in which the children are located, such as pre-schools, pre-primary and kindergarten, and many children will attend for more than the stated compulsory period. Our interest is in any of the ECEC services that children may attend prior to starting school – compulsory and non-compulsory. However, in adopting an international approach to our analysis of ECEC services and child-centredness we recognise that there is a wide array of services on offer. While we do not wish to undermine the differences between the services that are available, we have adopted a generic approach to our discussion of ECEC.

The generic approach has also led us to refer to those who work in ECEC as 'educators' to represent all those who work in ECEC services. However, we are acutely aware that there are many differences in the kinds of roles that those working in ECEC may undertake, with varying job titles, professional recognition, pay and conditions. In recognition of *all* those who work in and want to work in ECEC, this booklet is intended to support educators in reflecting on their understanding on child-centredness in relation to the context in which they work.

Finally, this project is just the beginning of our engagement with this topic and this booklet is very much a work in progress; although the original project has ended, we have just embarked on a new project with a specific focus on supporting students and those who mentor them. Project partners are also using and developing course materials in their own contexts. The booklet is being converted to a Moodle book as part of the new project ensuring that partners can add new understandings and resources as these arise.

Child-centredness and quality early childhood education and care

Debates on the quality of ECEC are extensive, particularly in relation to what it is and how it can be observed and assessed (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016, Dahlberg et al., 2013, Penn, 2011).

Perspectives differ dependent on epistemological viewpoints and different priorities as to the role and function that ECEC services are seen to have for children and wider society. Assessments of child-centredness, as a component of quality ECEC, will also be tied to conceptions of the role and function of ECEC services. As such, interpretations of what ECEC services should 'do' (the outcomes that they are identified as needing to achieve) will have a bearing on how educators interact with children and construct the pedagogical environment. However, those who have a perspective on quality ECEC and the pedagogical environment include a range of stakeholders such as educators, parents and policy makers. Frequently it is adults who have a perspective on ECEC services, but we also acknowledge that children will have their own views. The range of standpoints can result in diverging and potentially conflicting ideas as to what constitutes quality ECEC.

We write about child-centredness at a time when the debates on quality ECEC have given rise to subsequent and related debates on issues such as professionalism and qualifications, school readiness, the curriculum, normative child development, funding for services and remuneration of educators. The list is not exhaustive, but illustrative. While our focus is on understanding child-centred practice as an aspect of quality ECEC to promote learning amongst diverse groups of children, we acknowledge that the ECEC contexts in which educators work are also diverse. The diversity represents structural differences such as qualification requirements and ratios, but also cultural differences in understanding ECEC services. We are, therefore, not looking to present a universal interpretation of child-centredness, but to offer an overview of theoretical and practical interpretations of child-centredness to provide readers with opportunities to develop their own perspective.

Perspectives from literature

There are three broad concepts of child-centredness: romantic, developmental and democratic (Bogatić et al., 2018, Campbell-Barr, 2017, Chung and Walsh, 2000, Georgeson et al., 2015). The romantic perspective represents the child in the centre of their world (Chung and Walsh, 2000), where the child is an active participant and the social environment fulfils their needs (Toros et al., 2013). The developmental perspective represents the child in the centre of their learning and the learning environment is organised (by adults) according to the child's needs and interests. The democratic perspective positions the child as the leader of their learning, with the child's perspective of their needs and interests being visible.

In identifying the three broad concepts of romantic, developmental and democratic, we maintain that the different perspectives are closely related and often overlapping. In part, the relationship between the concepts relates to how they have evolved historically, alongside related developments in ECEC services and concepts of children and childhood.

The origins of child-centredness can be identified in the works of Comenius, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey, Montessori, Vygotsky, McMillians, Isaacs (Campbell-Barr, 2017, Chung and Walsh, 2000) and we can trace elements of the three strands of romanticism, developmentalism and democracy:

- Comenius – learning by doing
- Locke – reasoning, rationale beings

- Rousseau – preserving inherent goodness
- Pestalozzi – practices for holistic development
- Froebel – special places/things for child’s development
- Montessori – planning for inclusive, self-directed learning
- Vygotsky – children learning from interacting with more experienced others in a cultural context
- 20th century (Dewey, McMillians, Isaacs): children as citizens with rights to healthy playful childhoods

The different theorists illustrate how the term has evolved from a romantic concept of the child’s natural curiosity, to incorporating recognition for the role of ECEC in supporting children’s holistic development, alongside developments in children’s rights. The desire to demonstrate the effectiveness of the romantic child-centred approach, where the child is the leader of their world and learning, led to the monitoring of children’s development. Thus a pedagogy that supports children’s autonomy became grounded in theories of child development, with a regulatory gaze (Walkerdine, 1984). The Children’s Rights movement articulated understandings of child participation, while valuing their uniqueness and individual development, encompassing both romantic and developmental perspectives. The intertwining of the different concepts illustrates that as ideas around child-centredness develop, former concepts do not cease to exist.

Child-centredness in practice

Examples are limited as to what each of the three perspectives of child-centredness look like in practice. Perren et al. (2017) discuss a Swiss example of child-centred practice whereby children are given opportunities to be explorers and learners in a stimulating, social and material environment. Murphy (2006), writing from the Irish context, identifies child-centred activities as those that are play-oriented, whereby activities support learning through free play and exploration. In Croatia, Mlinarević (2004) identifies ECEC practice as grounded in a humanistic and developmental approach, whereby children are seen as capable learners and the ECEC environment should be organised in a way to support children in constructing new knowledge. Children should be able to choose resources to play with and explore, as well as having time to engage in activities.

There is a risk that educators are positioned as the ones to ‘give’ the opportunities and establish the resources that are available in the environment, which would appear counter to the democratic perspective of child-centredness or one that seeks to support children’s autonomy. Langford (2010) has criticised child-centredness as the educators become a ‘facilitator’, who organises the environment, but without the need for relational involvement. Conversely Bašić (2011) considers the educator as providing resources in support of offering children opportunities to forge connections with the world. In considering what child-centred looks like in practice, the literature therefore begin to illustrate two core elements of child-centredness; firstly the educator has a pivotal role and, secondly, where the educator places the emphasis on the three different concepts will influence how they undertake that role. As we will go on to demonstrate when we look at [our observations of practice](#), [educators incorporate all of the concepts](#), balancing them in different ways dependent on the context.

Principles of child-centred practice

In sum, the literature (Chung & Walsh, 2000; D’Cruz & Stagnitti, 2008; Cumming, Sumsion & Wong, 2015; Fung, 2015; Georgeson et al., 2015; Helavaara Robertson et al., 2015; Campbell-Barr, 2017b;

Cheung, 2017; Sak, Tantekin-Erden & Morrison, 2017) pointed to eight guiding principles of child-centred practice:

- a) focusing on children's learning through play,
- b) respecting children's needs, interests, strengths and capacities,
- c) recognising children's learning strategies,
- d) recognising children's uniqueness,
- e) respecting children as capable learners,
- f) respecting children's participation and decision making,
- g) respecting children's diversity and individuality, and
- h) respecting children's family and culture.

Interestingly, the principles focus on children, whereas child-centredness implies a singular 'child'. Child-centredness is, therefore, potentially flawed as it fails to acknowledge that ECEC services cater for groups of children. The group sizes and ratios of staff to children vary internationally, but it is rare to find circumstances where there is one adult to every child. The group dynamics of ECEC services pose a potential challenge to an individualised concept of child-centred practice (Wood, 2007), but we would argue that educators are creating a balance between child- and children-centred when working in ECEC (Campbell-Barr et al., 2018).

UNESCO's (1994) Salamanca Statement, made the inclusion of all children, 'regardless of individual differences or difficulties' a priority. The Salamanca Statement put forth 'the principle of inclusive education' enrolling 'all children in regular schools' (Ibid, ix). Thus ECEC, as with other educational environments, will provide services for all children, who will have diverse needs and interests. While initially the focus on inclusion may signal a focus on children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), the earlier established emphasis on quality ECEC has also indicated that children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds have higher cognitive and socio-emotional gains from attending quality ECEC services than children from middle-class backgrounds (Bennett, 2012). This signifies that those working in ECEC services will be working with groups of children with a range of needs and backgrounds.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) articulates and draws attention to the uniqueness of the child (Article 2). Thus, while educators will work with groups of children, and the principles reflect this group dynamic, there is still an emphasis on each child. For example, within *respecting children's diversity and individuality* the balance between the individual child and the group dynamics of ECEC services can be seen. Child-centredness therefore requires the educator to hold in constant balance the needs and interests of all children. Furthermore, policymakers, service providers and academics also need to bear in mind the diversity of contexts for ECEC; within countries services can be provided by the state, by employers or exist as private business or independent charitable entities.

Examples from practice

The following examples are drawn from observations undertaken in [Croatia](#), Denmark, Ireland, [Italy](#), [Spain](#) and the UK as illustrative examples of child-centred practice (Campbell-Barr et al., 2018). The examples are not representative but offer the opportunity to explore the different concepts of child-centredness in relation to the daily practices observed in ECEC settings internationally. Each example is presented and then discussed in relation to the three concepts of child-centredness: romantic, developmental and democratic. While we present each concept in its own block, readers are reminded to remember (and reflect on) the overlapping nature of the three concepts.

Building a Tower – Croatia		
<p>Overview: In a kindergarten with 15 children, aged 5-6 and one teacher. <i>A boy is observed is playing with unstructured construction materials in the centre of the class trying to build a high tower. A girl is checking its stability by blowing on it. The building stands tall so the girl leaves. The boy continues to add material. The activity lasts 10minutes before the boy goes to play with peers. The teacher explains that recently they have been reading Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf.</i></p>		
Analysis		
<p>Romantic: The children are observed engaged in free play, where the environment is fulfilling their needs. The children are active participants.</p>	<p>Developmental: The children are learning through following their interest in the story they have been told. The children also use the resources provided according to their needs and interests. There is evidence of the children 'experimenting' in support of their learning, demonstrating an appreciation for their learning strategies.</p>	<p>Democratic: The children are leading their learning, with the boy using his ability to develop the tower. The free choice respects the children's participation and decision making.</p>

Building a Tower – UK

Overview:

Nursery school with 80 children aged 2-4 in total.

A group of children build a tower from wooden blocks. The children work together to make the tower very tall, placing the bricks on the top and being careful not to let it fall. The children then use the holes in the bricks to post objects such as cars and trains as if the blocks are a garage. They then develop the idea and turn the tower into a zoo with a collection of animals. Adults only observe to ensure that the tower is safe.

Analysis

Romantic:

The children are engaged in free play. The children are active participants in the social environment, with the environment fulfilling their needs.

Developmental:

The children are learning collaboratively, taking the lead from their interest in what one child was doing. The children are learning according to their needs and interests.

Democratic:

The children are being respected as capable learners, following their own interests. The participation and decision making of the children is respected as adults only observe to ensure the tower remains safe.

Following the Child's Lead - Ireland

Overview:

Sessional pre-school with 10 children aged 3-5, one managed and two educators.

The children go outside to play in the snow. The educator supports the children to collaborate in building a snowman. One girl talks about needing to find a head for the snowman, so the educator ask how and the child replies with a ball. The educator really listens to the girl and later repeats what they have said.

NB: As it is snowing not all children have attended the pre-school that day.

Analysis

Romantic:

The children actively participate in the environment, with the snow fulfilling their needs through their playful engagement with it.

Developmental:

The educator is following the children's lead and asking questions to help the children problem solve. The children's learning is supported according to their interest.

Democratic:

The children are the leaders of the task. In repeating what the child has said, the educator acknowledges that the child has been heard and their interest and needs are visible.

Assembly - Spain

Overview:

Urban public Primary school classroom with 21 children aged 5-6 years.

The teacher holds a classroom assembly based on a child's interest in a video game and a mural the child had created the day before with his own drawings of imagined scenes from the video game. Some of the drawings depict violent scenes. The mural of the video game is used to get the children to reflect on what 'evil people' do and what can be done to stop them. The teacher comments that reflecting on his own practice has helped him to realise that assemblies don't have to involve all the children. He also thinks that some of the power should go to the children, i.e. the teacher does not have to control the turn-taking. Still, the teacher controls the turn-taking as children ask questions and offer opinions. The teacher also asks questions. At one point, when the noise level gets loud, he blows a whistle. One child accuses another of pushing, while the latter says he was just close to him. The teacher explains that at school we are often just very close to each other.

Analysis

Romantic:

Educator stays with the child's interest, even though this is not recognised as part of curriculum.

Developmental:

Educator recognises that children are still at a developmental stage when they need support with turn-taking and managing various aspects in a small space.

Democratic:

Educator acknowledges and tries to compensate for differences in power between child and adult. Children have opportunities to ask questions and offer opinions.

Parachute - Denmark

Overview:

Kindergarten, 10 children, 2-4 years and four educators play a parachute game.

Children are presented with a parachute. It is clear that they know the game of shaking the parachute, throwing a ball onto it, singling songs and later running round it. 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.

The parachute game responds to the children's emotional response of excitement. 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. Planning indicates knowledge of what activities excite the children, whilst also sometimes holding back on the excitement then building it up again.

Analysis

Romantic:

Educators respond in the moment to children's excitement. The motivation appears to be children enjoyment of taking part in physical activity.

Developmental:

At time some children's excitement is contained/pulled back in. Whilst children appear to have full participation, evidence that educators manage activity.

Democratic:

This is clearly a favourite game with all children. The circle format encourages equal participation in a collaborative endeavour.

Circle of Music - Italy

Overview:

A small village which is home to a cultural minority of Slovenian, speaking both Italian and Slovenian. Teacher with 5 children (ranging from 13 months and 36 months of age -4 boys and 1 girl).

The teacher asks a shy child to help set up the activity (pillows in a circle, with instruments covered with a blanket). The teacher invites the child to play each instrument and then pass it on to the next child. She encourages the children to listen to each other and adjusts her interactions according to the child. She offers a lot of scaffolding. Whilst the teacher maintains the structure of the activity, the coordination is loose as there is no set way to play with the instrument. She encourages all children to explore the sounds of the instruments (although children are expecting to participate in the music activity). Asks children to respect each other.

Analysis

Romantic:

Activity is set up as exploration in terms that relate to the children's world. The instruments are sleeping under a blanket and need to be woken up.

Developmental:

The teacher tells me that his parents are a little bit worried about 'shy child' and quiet. She thinks that music could be a very pleasant and helpful activity for his growth.

Democratic:

Teacher encourages mutual respect by letting each child to explore the instruments. "Please, listen to Sammy playing the drum". The children are very quiet and attentive.

The adult's image of the child

In considering the role of the adult in supporting child-centred practice, we consider the some of the findings from of a survey of ECEC educators in Croatia, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Spain and the UK in order to reflect on how the adult's image of the child is central to the way in which child-centredness is enacted.

The survey was online survey distributed among educators in the participating countries in 2018 via social media and the networks of those involved in the project. 928 questionnaires were received and analysed, but it is important to stress that the sample sizes varied in each country as can be seen in the table below (see report on survey (IO3) for more details).

Table 1: Number of survey responses by participating country

Country	Ireland	UK	Italy	Denmark	Croatia	Spain	Total
Number of responses	151	123	62	17	126	449	928
% of total responses	16%	13%	7%	2%	14%	48%	

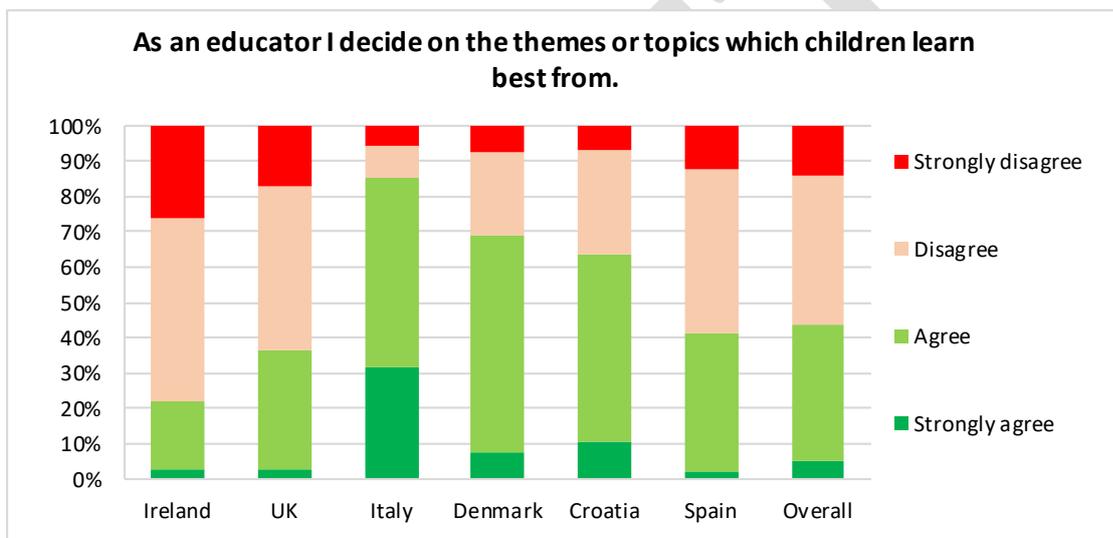
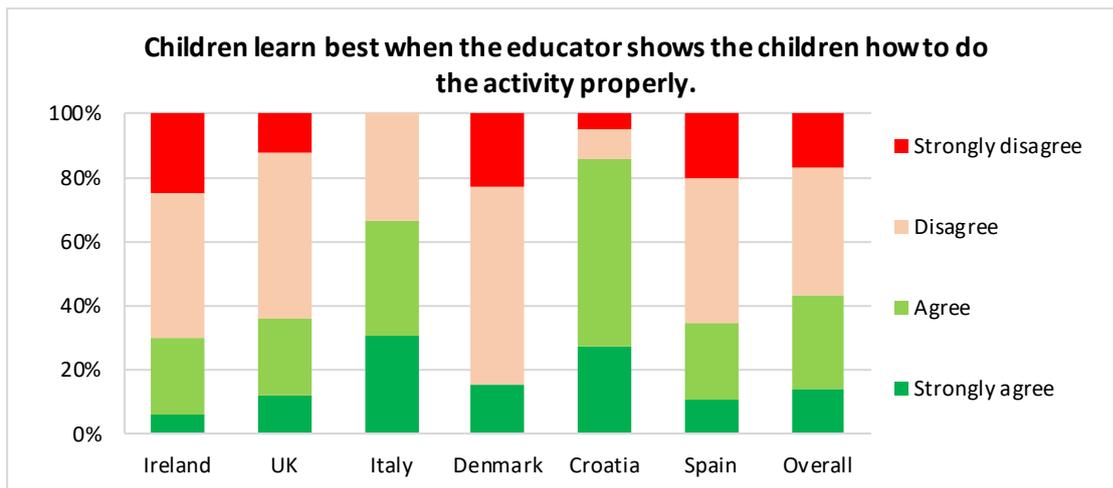
Overall the respondents were female (94%), with only Denmark having a proportion of male respondents that reached double figures (18%). Respondents to the survey were also predominantly over 30.

Table 2: Age profile of the respondents

Age	Number of Respondents
20 to 30 years old	128
31 - 40 years old	322
41 - 50 years old	294
51 + years old	184

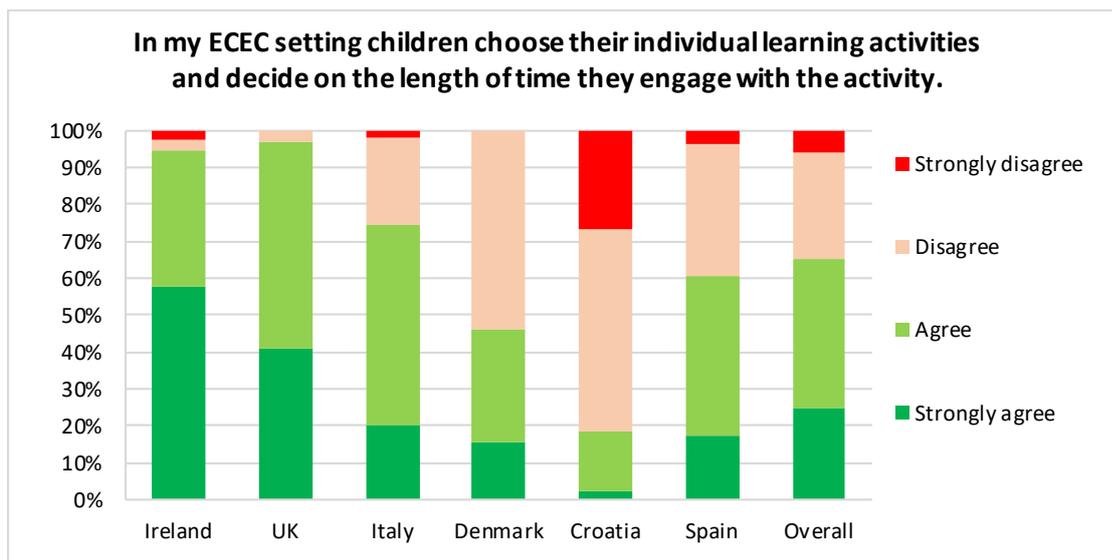
The qualifications of those who responded to the survey was in accordance with the national qualification requirements of the participating countries (Bogatić et al., 2018). 59% of respondents had at least ten years' experience in the sector, with this being highest in Ireland (71%) and lowest in Croatia (44%). The predominantly experienced respondents should be borne in mind when looking at the results of the educators' images of the child.

Drawing on the literature and observations a series of statements were created to ascertain educators understanding of their role and their image of the child in relation to child-centred practice. Respondents were asked to consider statements pertaining to their role in relation to children's learning. As can be seen in the following tables, educators mostly either 'strongly disagreed' or 'disagreed' with regard to the statements that emphasised the role of the adult.

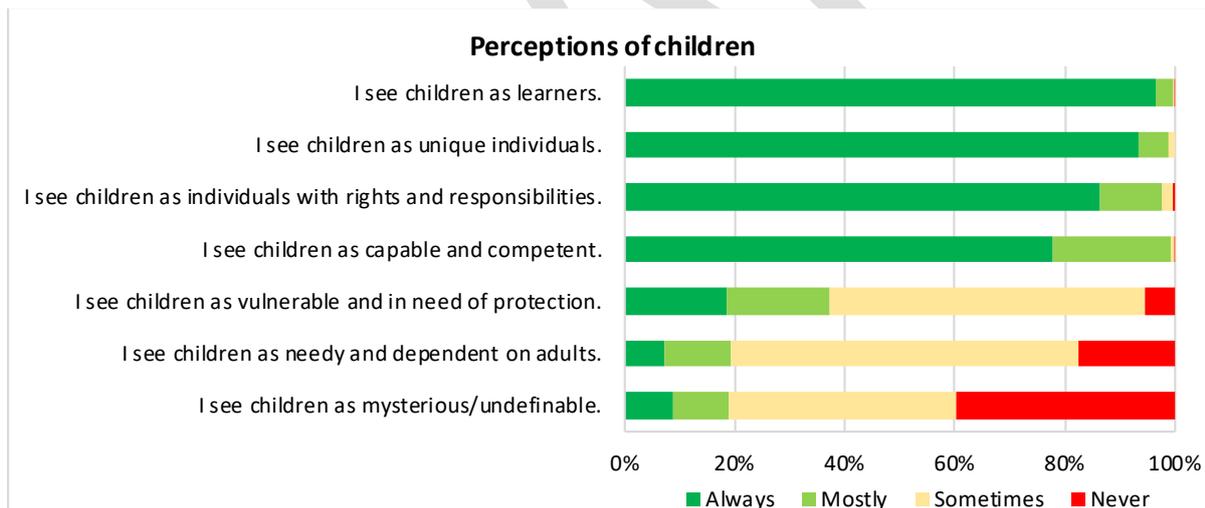


There is some evidence of cultural differences in the responses in the role of the educator in the respective countries, although the small sample sizes in Denmark and Italy mean that these results should be treated with caution. Broadly, the results indicate that the educator does not identify as taking a leading role when deciding topics or undertaking activities.

When asked about their image of the child, educators were more like to respond 'strongly agree' or 'agree' to statements that emphasised children as leaders of their learning.



The emphasis on children as active learners can be identified as relating to developmental and democratic perspectives of child-centredness. Overall, the perceptions the respondents had of children appeared to reflect the [principles of child-centredness discussed earlier](#). This is reflected in the following graph where educators considered their perceptions of children.



Despite child-centredness being deeply embedded in understandings of ECEC quality pedagogy, there were mixed messages as to whether qualifications had helped educators develop child-centred practice.

Extent to which qualifications have helped staff to develop child-centred practice

	Ireland	UK	Italy	Denmark	Croatia	Spain	Overall
A lot	65%	65%	33%	0%	20%	41%	44%
A moderate amount	29%	26%	43%	100%	56%	40%	39%
A little	6%	6%	16%	0%	23%	18%	15%
Not at all	1%	3%	9%	0%	2%	2%	2%

Levels of confidence amongst educators in supporting child-centred practice were relatively high, but this appeared to be related to the experienced sample who responded to the survey.

Years of Experience by How confident do you feel you are in terms of supporting child-centred practice in your ECEC setting?

	up to 1 year	1 - 2 years	2 - 5 years	5 to 10 years	more than 10 years	All Respondents
Very confident	39.1%	28.0%	25.0%	25.9%	36.6%	32.5%
Confident	34.8%	56.0%	65.2%	65.1%	58.5%	60.0%
Not so confident	21.7%	16.0%	9.8%	7.2%	4.7%	6.8%
Not at all confident	4.3%			1.8%	0.2%	0.7%

The findings suggest that qualifications go some way in supporting educators develop their confidence in supporting child-centred practice, but that experience also has an important role.

Developing educators' understandings of child-centredness.

Using what we have learned from compiling the literature review, from observing and recording practice and from carrying out a survey of educators in different contexts, we devised three online courses that reflect our own interests and educators' concerns. These three courses represent examples of the three strands of child-centredness. The course on 'Doing child-centredness from an embodied perspective' very much places child at the centre of their own world and invites adults to join them there. 'Child-centred documentation for the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care' strikes a balance between the need to document children's developmental progress with a concern for individual children on their own trajectories. The third course the Power of Stories for Child-Centred Practice in ECEC take a social justice approach to creation, sharing and understanding of stories so that the rights and voice of all children are taken into account.

A brief summary of the three courses follows. Interested readers can register on the course for free at

<https://open.plymouth.ac.uk>

Romanticism in practice: Doing child-centredness from an embodied perspective

Pedagogy is more than what you say, it is also what you do and express with your body. Children also make sense of the world through their bodily interactions with it. Child-centredness therefore requires environments around the child that support them to be drawn into and inspired to participate in the environment to support their sense making. The educator will have a role in establishing the environment (Campbell-Barr et al., 2018), but they will also engage with the children that they work with through bodily exchanges, such as gesticulations and facial expressions. The bodily exchanges of the educator can determine things such as children's feelings of attachment, autonomy and so on.

Pedagogical tact, as a part of child-centredness from an embodied perspective, refers to the educator's ability to be in touch with the children that they work with. This entails:

- Meeting the child where it is
The educator develops a sense of the inherent norms, values and skills that guide the children. The educator should meet the child with openness, treating the child as a mystery and wondering with them. The educator should refrain from pre-conceptions and understandings of the children.
- Enacting a sensitive, intimate and personal relationship with the child
The educator should coordinate their movement and speech (such as tone of voice) to that of the children's. In practice, the educator engages actively with what the children say and do and continues the interaction from this point, while also considering the direction that the interaction may take (Thulin and Jonsson, 2014).
- Creating the environment
The educator should create an environment that is habitable for the children, with situations that inspire the children to move beyond what they usually do.

Considering child-centredness from an embodied perspective has something of a romantic ideal, whereby children make sense of the world through their bodily interactions with it. Potentially, the role of the educator is marginalised, with them providing little more than a stimulating environment for the children to engage with, but in recognising that the educator is also a part of the bodily exchanges that the children encounter in ECEC, the educator takes on a role of guiding how the children engage with the environment, while forming attachments with the children.

There is a strong democratic focus in the embodied perspective as the child's point of view is visible. Children are autonomous, as in their engagement with the world *they* set the paths that *they* want to follow. The educator can support the child's autonomy through their bodily expressions towards the child, such as gesticulations and the tone of voice that they use.

Children's learning and development are supported in how the educator establishes the environment and responds to the needs and interest of the children. Environments will be developmentally appropriate, with resources that stimulate the children's engagement with the world.

Developmentalism revisited; Child-centred documentation for the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care

Documentation represents an artefact that makes selected aspects of children's learning tangible and recognisable. Documentation can support communicating with colleagues, families and children to reflect on the content and consider new opportunities for learning.

The object of documentation (what is focussed on) can differ:

- The children's products
The educator documents what each child has completed. However, if only the educator documents the product it will be documented according to an adult model of performance, so children could participate in the documenting.
- The children's levels of achievement
The educator documents what each child is able to achieve across different (mainly standardised) tasks.
- The children's thinking processes
The focus in this documentation is each child's intellectual process of intentionally undertaking an activity. For example, a child may follow a series of goal-oriented actions, and the educator would document the child's actions, their reflections on emerging obstacle in the situation, and problem solving. The ongoing process of thinking is the object of documentation, rather than the child's product and the educator may ask questions of the child to elucidate their thinking.
- The contextual elements of the learning situation
In framing the situation as the object of documentation, the educator looks to appreciate the scaffolding interventions that promote children's learning and identifies opportunities to evolve the design of the learning environment in support of children engaging in new and meaningful situations.

There are different forms of documentation (standardised tasks, check lists or rating scales, learning stories and ministories - making learning visible), but each is focused on a specific unit, such as those listed above. The focus of the documentation can determine the form that the documentation takes.

There is a developmental ideal within child-centred documentation. Child-centred documentation recognises children's learning and their ability to achieve the intended goals. The focus on the child's development and ability can support the child's participation in ECEC through identifying both strengths and areas for support.

As a democratic approach, child-centred documentation recognises children's theories of the world and their ability to use them to solve problems. Child-centred documentation values the multiple paths of children's learning, whereby the educator highlights the various meaningful and creative paths that children take when engaged with stimulating activities. With no single, pre-defined path, the child's perspective is made visible.

Child-centred documentation recognises how children participate in the learning environment. Educators identify the environment, resources and other aspects that will scaffold children's engagement and thinking in the learning environment. Child centred documentation from a romantic perspective is of the child in the world, as opposed to reaching pre-defined norms.

Democracy in practice: the Power of Stories for Child-Centred Practice in ECEC

This course is composed of six modules starting with the child and their own most personal stories and moving outwards to consider children in relation to other kinds of narrative. Each module addresses a particular story genre followed by examples and activities to promote discussion and some final reflections, with folder of additional material for further reading.

Several fundamental considerations underpin the modules:

- childhoods are diverse in characteristics and origin;
- all children are not only entitled to the same rights, but are also acquiring shared responsibilities;
- education and care are intertwined, making education first and foremost a form of care.

Stories of all kinds, including those that children create and explore, have extraordinary educational potential for children's holistic development. These modules encourage critical reflection about the power of stories and the role they can play in the development of child-centred practice in learning environments.

Early Childhood Education and Care offers children the opportunity to relate to particular life stories by interacting with others who might learn using different paths and rhythms, and have diverse needs and potentials. In such settings, children from varying socio-cultural, ethnic, political and economic backgrounds mix and are thus able to value difference. This process becomes an invaluable form of learning because it serves as a necessary fertiliser for the development of their human capacity for empathy, so vital to the pursuit of equity.

Empathy has been part of our human condition even from the earliest ages. Discussions about moral dilemmas arising in children's daily lives represent an inexhaustible source of stories and this must have a prominent role in the classroom. These stories can provide solutions to the most varied of situations: from solving a dispute over an object, to reconciling opposing decisions, or – as a four-year-old girl once did – finding a fair way to share a packet of biscuits by establishing a criterion to decide priority of having had breakfast (or not), or of being more or less hungry, as opposed to merely distributing the biscuits in a mathematical way. When educators provide opportunities for the youngest of pupils to experience how justice is enacted, we nourish stories around the empathy that characterises us as human beings.

Expectations of the child - bringing children to the centre

ECEC settings can be considered as pieces of social practice (Georgeson, 2018). Children and adults in Early Childhood Settings behave in particular ways; educators plan, interact, and reflect with children's futures in mind. Educators' responses and their selection of what to praise and what to ignore shape children's understanding of what is valued and what worthwhile as opposed to what is inappropriate and what should be avoided. As children learn from interacting with adults and other children who have been at the setting for longer than they have, they develop understandings of the expectation of the setting how to participate in the activities on offer and so begin to move towards the centre of practice

Children therefore learn about expectations of 'good' pupil, knowledge which they need in order to progress along the educational path set out by society where they are living and learning. This brings us back to the central dilemma: how much should educators help children to move to the centre of ECEC practice (so that they are more likely to have a successful school career) or how much should they arrange resources, routines and activities to reflect each child's current concerns? In brief should they follow child's interests OR act in their interests? We would argue that the skilled and sensitive educator does both through respecting child's culture, home background and individual interest while also enabling them to reach their potential with the confines of the education system which they find themselves. This is not an easy balance to strike and educators need opportunities to consider, discuss and debate where the balance lies for them, their children and their families. The project team are dedicated to finding ways to support educators with this important and sophisticated endeavour.

Looking forward

We continue separately in our own diverse contexts and together with our second project to find ways to supporting educators to reflect on their child-centred practice through the refinement of three, free, online courses and the development of future courses and online resources. Working with mentors and employers to support students and newly qualified educator, we also seek to development of a child-centred competences framework to aid debate and development of sensitive child-centred practice

Translations

Primjeri iz prakse

Sljedeći primjeri crpe se iz opažanja provedenih u Hrvatskoj, Danskoj, Irskoj, Italiji, Španjolskoj i Velikoj Britaniji kao ilustrativni primjeri prakse usmjerene na djecu (Campbell-Barr i sur., 2018). Primjeri nisu reprezentativni, ali pružaju priliku za istraživanje različitih koncepata usmjerenosti na djecu u odnosu na dnevne prakse koje se promatraju u ustanovama ranog i predškolskog odgoja i obrazovanja na međunarodnoj razini. Svaki je primjer predstavljen, a zatim raspravljen u odnosu na tri pojma usmjerenosti prema djeci: romantičnom, razvojnom i demokratskom. Dok predstavljamo svaki koncept u svojem bloku, čitatelje podsjećamo da pamte (i razmišljaju o) preklapajuće naravi tri koncepta.

Izgradnja kule - Hrvatska		
<u>Pregled:</u> U vrtiću s 15 djece, uzrasta 5-6 godina i jednog odgojitelja. Dječak je opažen kako se igra s nestrukturiranim građevinskim materijalima usred grupe i pokušava izgraditi visoku kulu. Djevojčica provjerava stabilnost kule puhanjem u kulu. Kula stoji visoko, stoga djevojčica odlazi. Dječak nastavlja dodavati materijal. Aktivnost traje 10 minuta prije nego što se dječak odlazi igrati s vršnjacima. Učiteljica objašnjava da su nedavno čitali Tri male svinje i Velikog lošeg vuka.		
Analiza		
<u>Romantični:</u> Djeca su promatrana kako se igraju u slobodnoj igri, gdje okolina ispunjava njihove potrebe. Djeca su aktivni sudionici.	<u>Razvojni:</u> Djeca uče praćenjem vlastitih interesa za priču koja im je ispričana. Djeca također koriste sredstva koja su osigurana prema svojim potrebama i interesima. Postoje dokazi da djeca "eksperimentiraju" u prilog svom učenju, demonstrirajući razumijevanje prema njihovim strategijama učenja.	<u>Demokratski:</u> Djeca vode svoje učenje, a dječak koristi svoje sposobnosti kako bi napravio kulu. Slobodni izbor poštuje dječje sudjelovanje i odlučivanje.

Izgradnja kule – Velika Britanija

Pregled:

Dječji vrtić s 80 djece u dobi od 2 do 4 godine.

Skupina djece gradi kulu od drvenih blokova. Djeca zajedno rade na tome da kula bude vrlo visoka, postavljajući drvene blokove na vrh i pazeći da ne padnu. Djeca tada koriste rupe u drvenim blokovima za postavljanje predmeta poput automobila i vlakova kao da su blokovi garaža. Zatim razvijaju ideju i kule pretvaraju u zoološki vrt sa životinjama. Odrasli samo promatraju sigurnost kule.

Analiza

Romantični:

Djeca se slobodno igraju. Djeca su aktivni sudionici u društvenom okruženju, a okruženje ispunjava njihove potrebe.

Razvojni:

Djeca zajednički uče, vodeći se interesom za ono što jedno dijete radi. Djeca uče u skladu sa svojim potrebama i interesima.

Demokratski:

Djeca se uvažavaju kao sposobni učenici, slijedeći vlastite interese. Dječje sudjelovanje i donošenje odluka se poštuje dok odrasli promatraju samo kako bi kula bila sigurna.

Postavljanje pitanja - Irska

Pregled:

Sezonski dječji vrtić s 10 djece u dobi od 3-5 godina, jednim upraviteljem i dva odgajatelja.

Djeca se vani igraju u snijegu. Odgajatelj podupire djecu da surađuju u izgradnji snjegovića. Jedna djevojčica govori o tome kako treba pronaći glavu za snjegovića, pa je odgajatelj pita kakvu i djevojčica odgovara loptu. Odgajatelj stvarno sluša djevojčicu i kasnije ponavlja što su mu djeca rekla.

P.S.: Kako pada snijeg, tog dana nisu sva djeca pohađala dječji vrtić.

Analiza

Romantični:

Djeca aktivno sudjeluju u okruženju, snijeg ispunjava njihove potrebe kroz igru s istim.

Razvojni:

Odgajatelj slijedi vodstvo djece i postavlja pitanja kako bi pomogao djeci da riješe problem. Dječje učenje je podržano u skladu sa njihovim interesima.

Demokratski:

Djeca su voditelji zadatka. Ponavljajući ono što je dijete reklo, odgajatelj daje do znanja da sluša djecu i da vidi njihove interese i potrebe.

Ejemplo de práctica

Asamblea - España		
<p><u>Visión de conjunto:</u></p> <p>Colegio público y urbano de Educación Infantil y Primaria, en un aula de 21 niños y niñas de 5 a 6 años de edad.</p> <p><i>El maestro desarrolla la asamblea a partir del interés de un niño en un videojuego y un mural de papel que ha creado en casa la tarde anterior, a base de dibujos suyos de las escenas imaginadas del mismo. Entre estas escenas se encuentran situaciones de violencia. El mural del videojuego es utilizado para que los niños y niñas reflexionen sobre aquello que hacen las “personas malvadas” y qué se puede hacer para detenerlas. El maestro comenta que la reflexión sobre su práctica le ayudó a darse cuenta de que las asambleas no tienen por qué involucrar a todo el alumnado. También piensa que parte del poder debería residir en los niños y niñas; es decir, el maestro no tiene que controlar el turno. Aún así, el maestro decide los turnos de intervención mientras las niñas y niños hacen preguntas y ofrecen opiniones. El profesor también hace preguntas. En una ocasión, cuando el nivel de ruido es elevado, hace sonar un silbato. Un niño acusa a otro de empujarle, mientras que su compañero afirma que solo estaba cerca de él. El profesor explica que en la escuela a menudo estamos muy cerca los unos de los otros.</i></p>		
Análisis		
<p><u>Romántico:</u></p> <p>El maestro se hace eco del interés del niño, a pesar de que esto no se reconozca como parte del currículo.</p>	<p><u>Evolutivo:</u></p> <p>El maestro reconoce que los niños y niñas aún se encuentran en una etapa de desarrollo donde necesitan apoyo para turnarse y manejar diferentes aspectos en un espacio pequeño.</p>	<p><u>Democrático:</u></p> <p>El maestro reconoce y trata de compensar las diferencias de poder entre niños y adultos. Los niños y niñas tienen la oportunidad de hacer preguntas y ofrecer sus opiniones.</p>

Esempi tratti dalla pratica

Costruire una torre – UK		
<p>Un Nido con 80 bambini di età 2-4 anni <i>Un gruppo di bambini sta costruendo una torre con blocchi di legno. I bambini giocano assieme per fare la torre molto alta, stando attenti che non cada. I bambini mettono nei fori dei blocchi di legno degli oggetti come automobiline, come fosse un garage; inseriscono anche animali di plastica. Quindi propongono di trasformare la torre in uno zoo. Gli adulti si limitano ad osservare, per evitare che si facciano male.</i></p>		
Analisi		
<p><u>Romantico:</u> I bambini sono coinvolti nel gioco libero. L'ambiente offre le risorse per le loro iniziative.</p>	<p><u>Evolutivo:</u> I bambini stanno imparando in gruppo; l'interesse di ciascuno converge su quello che sta facendo un bambino. I bambini stanno sviluppando il loro apprendimento seguendo il loro interesse</p>	<p><u>Democratico:</u> I bambini sono riconosciuti come capaci di guidare il loro apprendimento. I tempi e le modalità di apprendimento sono rispettate dagli adulti che si limitano ad evitare che possano correre pericoli</p>

Costruire una torre – Croazia		
<p>In una scuola per l'Infanzia: 15 bambini, di età 5-6 anni e 1 insegnante <i>al centro della sala, un bambino sta giocando con dei blocchi di costruzione, e cerca di costruire una torre. Una bambina ne verifica la stabilità soffiando sui blocchi. La torre sta in piedi e la bambina va via. Il bambino continua ad aggiungere blocchi. La sua attività dura 10 minuti e poi raggiunge gli altri in un altro gioco. L'insegnante dice che recentemente hanno letto "I tre porcellini e il Lupo cattivo".</i></p>		
Analisi		
<p><u>Romantico:</u> i bambini sono osservati mentre sono coinvolti nel gioco libero, l'ambiente è ricettivo dei loro bisogni. I bambini scelgono le loro attività</p>	<p><u>Evolutiva:</u> I bambini stanno apprendendo mentre seguono i loro interessi, suscitati (probabilmente) dalla fiaba. Utilizzano i materiali presenti nell'ambiente, per seguire i loro interessi e per sperimentare alcuni aspetti della realtà. Si focalizzano sul loro apprendimento</p>	<p><u>Democratica:</u> I bambini stanno seguendo i loro percorsi di apprendimento: il bambino utilizza le sue competenze per costruire la torre. Il gioco libero rispetta la partecipazione dei bambini e le loro scelte</p>

Fare domande - Irlanda

Scuola dell'infanzia. 10 bambini di età 3-5 anni con 2 educatrici.

I bambini escono per giocare nella neve. L'educatrice invita e sostiene la collaborazione tra bambini nella costruzione di un pupazzo di neve. Una bambina dice che bisogna fare la testa del pupazzo.

L'educatrice come si deve fare la testa e la bambina risponde che occorre fare una palla di neve.

L'educatrice ascolta attentamente e rilancia agli altri l'idea della bambina.

Analisi

Romantico:

I bambini sono coinvolti dalla nevicata. L'ambiente è stimolante per il loro gioco e il loro piacere

Evolutivo:

L'educatrice segue e rilancia le idee e le proposte dei bambini, per costruire una costruzione in maniera collaborativa. Le idee dei bambini sono incoraggiate e quindi sono contributi al loro apprendimento.

Democratico:

I bambini seguono il loro progetto condiviso. Rilanciando ciò che la bambina ha proposto, l'educatrice riconosce il contributo alla costruzione condivisa.

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