

Exploring the Connection Between Child Observation and Curriculum Planning in Early Years Settings

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Joanne Roe recently completed a Master of Education Studies (Early Childhood Education) in Marino Institute of Education. Since completing an undergraduate degree in Early Childhood Education (DIT) in 2001, Joanne has gained extensive experience in the Early Years Sector, including direct practice with children experiencing homelessness, a role as a mentor supporting quality improvement in early years' settings and in her current policy role, within a national initiative to support the coordinated roll out of *Síolta* and *Aistear*, the national quality and curriculum frameworks. Throughout her professional career Joanne has been committed to engaging in ongoing professional development is also a qualified play therapist.

KEYWORDS: Early Childhood Education, Assessment, Planning, Observation, Curriculum, Policy

INTRODUCTION

Recent policy developments in the Irish early years education sector include a requirement to implement the national quality and curricular Frameworks- *Síolta* and *Aistear* to comply with inspection and funding requirements such as the Early Childhood Care and Education programme (ECCE)¹ and Early Years Education Inspections (Department of Education and Skills, 2015). These developments have focused increased attention on the quality of early years provision and have implications for child observation, assessment and curriculum planning practices in early years settings.

¹ Early Childhood Care and Education programme, a government funded initiative which provides two years of free pre-school provision prior to formal primary education.

Effective structures, methods and practices of observation, assessment and planning for individual children are identified as integral elements of high quality early years provision (Bruce et al., 2015; Alasuutari, et al 2014; Carter & Nutbrown, 2014; *Aistear* 2009; *Síolta* 2006; OECD, 2006) and assessment is described as part of daily practice in striving for quality (Drummond, Rouse & Pugh, 1992). Research such as the EPPE (Effective Provision for Pre-School Education) study (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004) demonstrate that attendance at high quality Early Year's settings has an unquestioned impact on children's learning and development and capacity to assess formatively and plan for individual children's learning is an indicator of quality.

The study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (PEEL) carried out by Moyles, Adams & Musgrove (2002) identified that in many early years settings the links between planning, assessment, recording and the use of records to inform planning and assessment of progression appeared not to be well understood or well used and recommended that training in this area was a high need. This research study explores how child observation methods are used in early years settings to inform curriculum planning for individual children's interests and learning progression. There is a limited body of research into the assessment practices of early years practitioners working with preschool children (Brown & Rolfe, 2005). Consequently, this study explores the following research questions:

- What, if any, child observation, assessment and curriculum planning systems and practices are in place within participating settings?
- What factors influence the child observation, assessment and curriculum planning systems and practices in place?
- Are there connections between child observation and curriculum planning for individual children's interests and learning progression?

This article is based on a more extensive dissertation carried out as part of a Master of Education degree programme in 2018.

CONTEXT

There are increasing expectations for early year's settings to implement high quality assessment and planning practices to adhere to national funding and policy requirements. Contractual obligations for settings receiving government funding to deliver the ECCE programme directly relate to the areas of observation, assessment and individual planning. In order to qualify for funding under the ECCE programme there is a requirement that early

years settings implement *Síolta* and *Aistear*, which offer guidance and set standards related to assessment and curriculum planning, for example *Síolta* Standard 7 focuses on curriculum and suggests planning for curriculum implementation should be based on the child's individual profile which is established through systematic observation and assessment for learning. Area 2 of the DES early years inspection framework, which evaluates the quality of learning experiences for children in settings providing the ECCE programme is underpinned by *Síolta* and *Aistear* and focuses on “*the quality of processes to support children's learning and development*”, (DES, 2016, p. 8). This framework evaluates how information about the child's development informs the next steps in learning and to what extent these plans for learning are closely aligned to children's interests and developing capabilities.

Effective structures, methods and practices of observation, assessment and planning for individual children are identified as integral elements of high-quality early years provision (Bruce et al., 2015; Carter & Nutbrown, 2014; OECD, 2006). Assessment is described as part of daily practice in striving for quality (Drummond, Rouse & Pugh, 1992), and “*observational assessment is integral to effective early year's provision*” (Tickell, 2011, p. 30). According to Wall (2006), a clear understanding of the purpose of observational assessment should be a guiding principle for all early years' practitioners. The purpose of assessment is to inform planning for each child in order to deepen and extend the child's learning (Kamen 2012). Practitioners need to reconsider practice and take account of the rich and diverse nature of each child within the planning process (Hayes, 2012), and build on individual children's strengths and interests to provide relevant and meaningful curriculum opportunities (McLachlan, Fleer and Edwards 2013). As such, assessment should result in planning which is tailor-made for each child and based on their developing interests, skills and understandings (Fisher, 2013). According to Dubiel “*the explicit purpose of assessment is to ascertain the point on development, the propensity for extension, the skill, knowledge, understanding and/or motivation to be built on by the practitioner*” (2014, p.72). Observation is continually linked with and viewed as part of the cycle of assessment throughout the literature for example in assessing children's progress and needs (Sharman et al., 2015; Dubiel, 2014; Hayes, 2012; Kamen, 2012). The literature suggests that learning is enhanced where practice is planned within a framework of observation and assessment (Palaiologou, 2015) hence this research investigating the connection between observation as an assessment method and planning for children's learning.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative, interpretive approach was adopted for this case study research. A case study methodology was selected as it lends itself well to exploring an issue from a holistic perspective that analyses multiple sources of data (Anderson, 1998). Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000) suggest case studies can penetrate situations that are not susceptible to numerical analysis and a strength is they observe effects in real contexts recognising the significance of context. Yin (2009) offers a comprehensive definition of a case study and makes the point that it is an empirical inquiry that “*investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real life context*” (p.18).

Data was collected from six case study settings using a variety of complementary qualitative research methods including documentary analysis, one-to-one interviews and focus group interviews. The use of sub-methods allowed the researcher to use a variety of sources, a range of types of data and a variety of research methods (Denscombe, 2014). Methods provided a range of perspectives to develop a richer picture, explaining how and why things happened (Thomas, 2011; Simons, 2009). In total, 6 one-to-one interviews were conducted with the lead practitioner in the setting, 6 focus groups were conducted with other educators in each of the settings and documentary analysis was conducted with relevant planning documents in each of the case study settings. In total, 18 participants took part in the study.

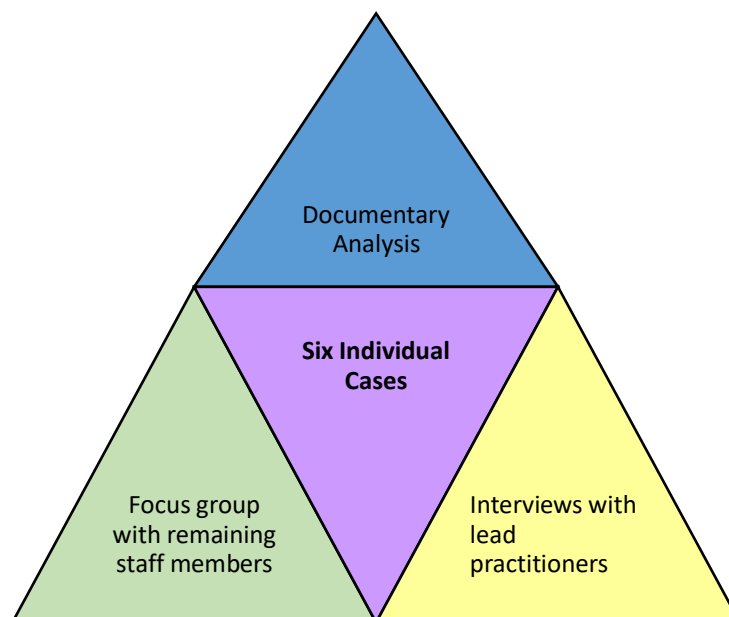
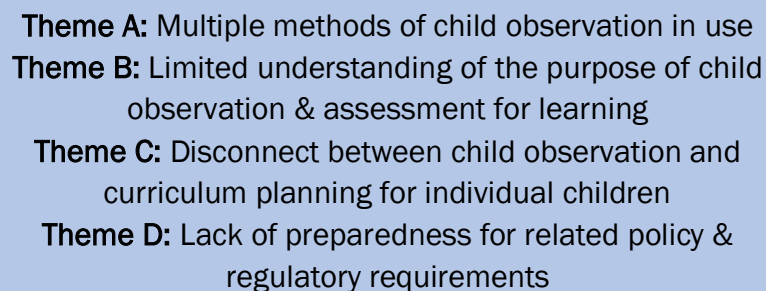


Figure 1. Methodological triangulation used in this study

Triangulation was employed in this study (see figure 1) to increase validity and reliability of analysis. Triangulation is almost an essential prerequisite in a case study approach as viewing from several perspectives is superior to viewing from one and may make us decide to reject initial explanations (Thomas 2011). The triangulated approach offered an opportunity to compare and contrast the findings from different sources and to consider whether the data converged to determine whether a true picture was achieved (Gillham, 2000).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal the opportunities and challenges for child observation, assessment and curriculum planning practices as identified by practitioners within a range of early years' settings. A number of consistent themes emerged across the breadth of data sources (see Figure 2). For the purposes of this article a brief overview of each theme is provided as each is inter-linked and helpful in understanding the full context.



Theme A: Multiple methods of child observation in use
Theme B: Limited understanding of the purpose of child observation & assessment for learning
Theme C: Disconnect between child observation and curriculum planning for individual children
Theme D: Lack of preparedness for related policy & regulatory requirements

Figure 2. Themes from data analysis.

THEME A: MULTIPLE MODELS OF OBSERVATION IN PLACE ACROSS & WITHIN SETTINGS

A positive finding of this research study was that regular child observation and curriculum planning practices were in place in all six settings. However, even when the same method of assessment was named, implementation varied widely depending on individual or setting interpretation. An example of this was use of the High Scope Child Observation Record (COR)² described as a standardised tool, where despite practitioners receiving training in the use of

² The preschool Child Observation Record (COR) is an observation-based instrument providing systematic assessment of young children's knowledge and abilities in all areas of development.

this, inconsistent approaches to the frequency of use, type of information recorded and sharing this information with parents was evident.

In the majority of settings, it seemed the key goal of the practitioner was to meet the needs of the observation system in place, resulting in an unintended lack of consideration for the child within this system. Observational practices appeared to be dictated by the interpretation of the demands of the system, for example, sourcing an observation that ‘fit’ with a particular *Aistear* theme, and therefore failing to observe or tune into what may have been particularly significant for a child on that day. The perhaps unintentional valuing of the system over children’s needs raises questions about the central focus of observation and planning practice which Drummond emphasises “*The choices teachers make in assessing children’s learning must be subject to this one central, inescapable principle: that children’s interests are paramount*” (1993, p.13).

THEME B: LIMITED UNDERSTANDING OF THE PURPOSE OF OBSERVATION & ASSESSMENT

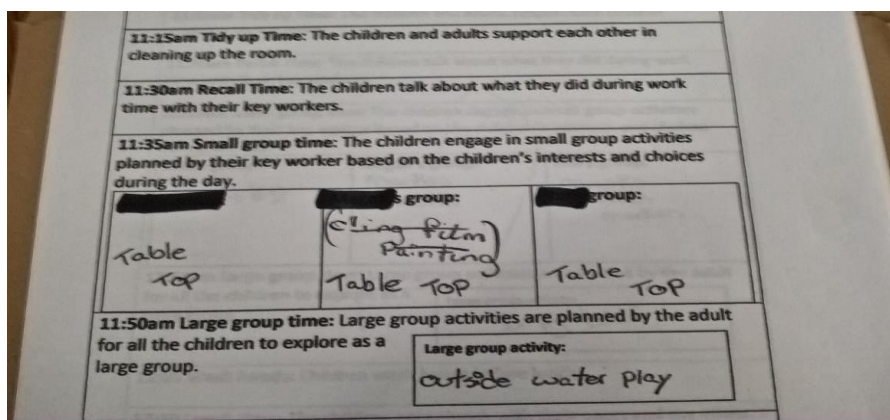
The second theme which emerged, primarily from interview and focus group data was that practitioners demonstrated a limited understanding of the purpose of child observation and assessment for learning. All participants agreed child observation was important and the main reason provided was that it supported an awareness of children’s development “*well, it’s so you know the children are hitting certain milestones*” [Setting A]. A small number of participants referred to child observation as a means of supporting planning; “*What to give the child as well like, activities and stuff*” [Setting C]. When discussing the purpose of observation most participants tended to focus on its uses in identifying deficits “*And if there’s anything going wrong there you pick up from it.*” [Setting C]

All participants agreed child observation was beneficial and a necessary part of their role. However, participants consistently failed to demonstrate an in-depth understanding of assessment for learning. Practitioners overwhelmingly interpreted questions about assessment to mean formal child assessment for additional needs “*I suppose the assessment it needs to be done if the child isn’t hitting certain areas.*” [Setting D]. Respondents were unable to provide information on views on assessment in the context of teaching and learning in early years, demonstrating a lack of understanding; “*When you hear the word assessment, you’re like what’s that? It throws you off*” [Setting B]. Some respondents questioned the suitability of sharing assessments with parents and *it’s not understandable for the Mothers’ cos the Mothers is not trained in any of it so they don’t know where it’s*

coming from” [Setting B] which raises an ethical question about the authenticity and appropriateness of methods used if they are viewed as not suitable for sharing with the primary caregivers of children. The literature suggests involvement of parents in assessment processes should be a critical component and this view raises a question on how fit for purpose particular methods are. The literature correlates with the finding of this research study that there is misunderstanding and misinterpretation about assessment and it is imperative that a universal understanding of what constitutes assessment is reached (Alasuutari, 2014; Tickell, 2011; Brown & Rolfe, 2005).

THEME C: DISCONNECT BETWEEN OBSERVATION & CURRICULUM PLANNING FOR CHILDREN

A disconnect between child observation and planning for individual children was demonstrated consistently throughout documentary analysis of observation and planning documentation accessed, interviews and focus groups. When asked if practitioners felt that observations and planning were connected, the vast majority found it difficult to answer. One participant said, “ehhhh....I don’t really think so, no. not really no” [Setting E]. Furthermore, documentary analysis of planning documentation using the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS)³ indicated that all settings tended to plan for a group of children and differentiation for individual children was not evident in any of the planning documentation reviewed. Learning journals titled as ‘individual’, captured largely the same information for all children ‘They more or less start of the same, date of birth etc.’ [Setting C]. Figure 3 below shows a daily planning sheet which refers to ‘the children’ throughout and was typical of documentation analysed. Similarly, a participant said, “I probably plan more for the group than the child” [Setting E].



11:15am Tidy up Time: The children and adults support each other in cleaning up the room.

11:30am Recall Time: The children talk about what they did during work time with their key workers.

11:35am Small group time: The children engage in small group activities planned by their key worker based on the children’s interests and choices during the day.

Table Top	group: (Cling Film) Painting	group: Table Top
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11:50am Large group time: Large group activities are planned by the adult for all the children to explore as a large group.

Large group activity:
outside water play

Figure 3. Daily Plan

³ The ECERS (Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale) curricular extension on Diversity, item 13 measures the quality of planning for individual learning needs based on accessing observation and planning records.

When children are consistently considered as part of a group and not as individuals there is perhaps a concern that this may impact negatively on a child's self-identity and individual learning progression. An underpinning principle and critical component of effective preschool education should be the provision of individualised interventions for each child to deepen and extend their learning and development (Wortham & Hardin, 2015; Giardiello et al., 2013; Tickell, 2011; Downs & Strand, 2006). Embedding learning in what is already understood sends a message to children that their competencies and contributions are valued, which can positively impact on self-esteem and motivation (Fisher, 2013). Drummond (1993) describes a constant tension in balancing what is appropriate for individual needs and what is appropriate for the group which is something it seems that practitioners are grappling with on a daily basis.

THEME D: LACK OF PREPAREDNESS FOR POLICY & REGULATORY REQUIREMENTS

There was strong consensus from practitioners that they feel inadequately prepared for current policy and regulatory requirements related to child observation and curriculum planning. The majority of participants (95%, 17/18 participants) indicated a complete lack of or very limited focus on child observation and curriculum planning in their initial childcare training "*I don't think the FETAC is doing that, I don't think it does have one thing around curriculum.*" [Setting D] All participants agreed that whilst child observation was covered to a limited degree, planning was not covered at all.

All but one participant felt that they were not adequately prepared for current policy and inspection expectations. Practitioners voiced concerns about lack of clear messaging from the inspectorate "*Nobody's told us. Well, I'm not really 100% what they're looking for*" [Setting E] and at a wider policy level on expectations of settings and as a result were implementing processes based on their knowledge and interpretation "*I'm just kinda winging it with what I'm doing at the moment*" [Setting F]. External inspection was identified as the rationale for particular practices in place and inspectors were often referred to as 'they'. "*They want to see that we've connected what we're doing. It's for the inspectors*" [Setting A]. Participants expressed a worry and anxiety to comply with these requirements "*Yeah. And I think that's one of the fears with the staff. And probably myself that when they do come in are you hitting all the marks*" [Setting D]. Despite inspections reportedly influencing practice, participants consistently expressed a lack of clarity of expectations of inspectors. In this sense, it seems that inspection is creating 'compliance anxiety' (Dubiel 2014) by delivering

instruction to settings by outsiders removing practitioners' ownership of processes, further compounded by a lack of coherent understanding of expectations.

CONCLUSION

This study indicated that assessment and curriculum planning practices are influenced by a number of factors (figure 4).

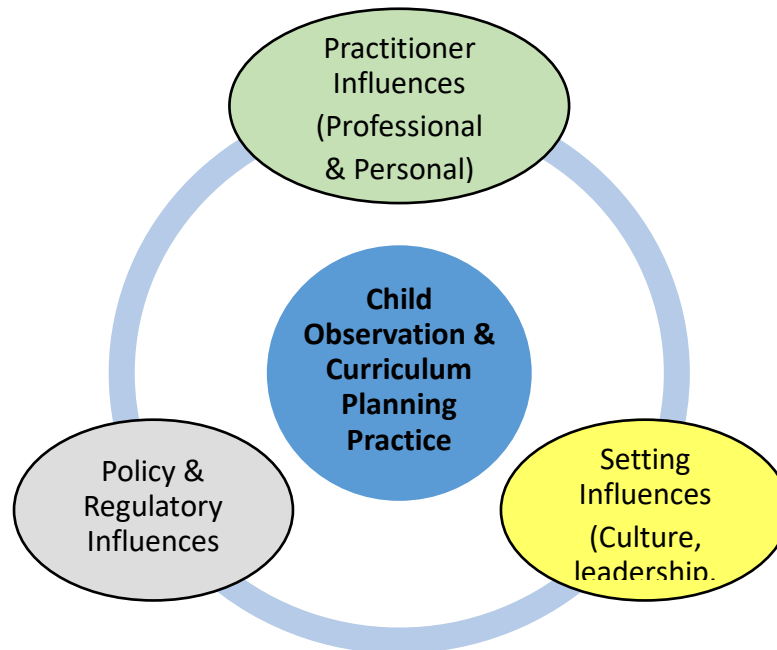


Figure 4: Influences on assessment and planning practices

The competence and capacity of Early Years practitioners is a theme which permeated throughout this research study. It is evident from this study that inconsistencies were evident in observation, assessment and planning practices both within and across settings 'We all do it different. I mightn't do it the way other people do it but it works for me'. [Setting D]. *Síolta* and *Aistear* were developed as unifying frameworks to support diverse settings to enhance standards of quality but require further resourcing to support implementation. The diversity of implementation raises questions about consistency and quality assurance and perhaps, highlights a need for training and stronger induction and leadership processes within settings. Effective assessment is an essential ingredient of all forms of successful early education (Nutbrown, 2011). However, observational assessment and effective curriculum planning is complex and requires skilled, knowledgeable and informed practitioners with a comprehensive understanding of child development and learning processes (Giardiello et al., 2013). This study indicates challenges in transferring knowledge into practice and suggests

that early years' practitioners in both leadership and practice roles would benefit from training and mentoring supports, reflective of individual contexts.

Despite the challenges facing Early Years Practitioners it is clearly evident that the individual practitioners who took part in this study are committed to their work with children and have their best interests at heart "you want to be able to come into work happy, knowing you're fulfilling every area of every child and that the child leaves here happy as well." [Setting D]. One of the recommendations arising from this study is to consider the development of a nationally coordinated training programme which comprehensively supports capacity building in assessment and planning and provides coherent, transparent messaging in relation to requirements. Palaiologou (2012) notes the complex nature of becoming a skilled observer and that this requires ongoing self-evaluation and self-development which is something which needs investment and resourcing at a policy and practice level.

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