

From the corner shop to the classroom^[1]

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EXCERPTS

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The Journey to the pre-school building in Brookfield, in west Tallaght, passes through some of the most stark pockets of deprivation in the State. Unemployment here is way above the national average. Early school-leaving rates are among the highest in the country. Literacy is a major problem, too.

As you pass row after row of mostly grey corporation estates and turn the corner onto Brookfield Road, one building stands out: it's an angular, multi-coloured community centre that many see as a beacon for the area.

The centre is home to Fledglings Early Years, a groundbreaking early childhood education and care facility.

Inside, sunlight streams in the windows and children run around a big room filled with paintings, wooden furniture, sand pits, saucepans and cardboard. In here, early years educators try to reverse the disadvantage faced by many of the children by providing a form of education that is academically proven to have dramatic benefits in later life.

In its own quiet way, it is one of the most ambitious attempts to address education and economic inequality anywhere in the country. But what makes the project really stand out is that it's a not-for-profit social franchise that could be easily replicated in other parts of the country. It operates in the open market. It is cheaper than anything provided by private operators. And it could change the way we go about trying to tackle disadvantage.

Brookfield is one of five centres operated by Fledglings around west Tallaght.

The organisers see this as just the start; they hope to double the number in operation over the next few years. In addition, many of the qualified early years educators are women from the local community who have availed of back-to-work and education initiatives.

"It really is a virtuous circle," says Dara Hogan, manager of Fledglings, who operates out of An Cosán community organisation.

"This is responding to the unmet need for affordable childhood education and care, as well as generating jobs in the local community. Research shows that children who receive this kind of early years education have better outcomes in terms of educational achievement and personal development."

The extent to which children from poorer families can fall behind at an early age is frightening. One piece of research in the US found that three-year-olds with professional parents knew about 1,100 words on average, while three-year-olds whose parents were on welfare knew only 525.

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"I'd always worked to make money for other people," says Hogan. But a few years ago he decided to use his skills in management and franchising in a different setting. After more than a decade on its board, he joined An Cosán, a community organisation in west Tallaght, fulltime in 2007 and was tasked with setting up a childcare enterprise scheme.

An Cosán had been training locals to become highly-qualified childcarers using the HighScope approach, but there was a problem. Trainees were being produced, but there were few jobs available. There were just 450 childcare places in the area, catering for a child population in excess of 3,000.

Private operators weren't moving into the area because many parents couldn't afford childcare. "It wasn't good enough to just get them qualified, we wanted to help them get jobs and use their skills for the good of the community, too," says Hogan. "So, we came up with the idea of a not-for-profit social franchise. When I worked with Spar, if you were a retailer, you served the customer and retained their business. Spar head office provided a comprehensive suite of services like IT, the advertising, buying goods, shipping them to stores and provided HR advice and finance. I said, 'Why not do the same here?'"

As with any other franchise, Fledglings benefits from economies of scale. Because the front-end set-up costs have been covered, the extended cost for new services is relatively low.

For Hogan, the joy has been much more than just a logistical success of joining the dots. There is also the opportunity to address a social problem.

The highscope curriculum is based on the philosophy that children learn best by pursuing their personal interests and goals. The aim is to instil confidence, independence and self-esteem and to help children reach their potential. Most importantly, children are encouraged and supported to develop at their own pace using play-based learning. "The children have a say in structuring their own learning through play. They're asked to plan what they'd like to do and educators facilitate it," Hogan says.

During his years working with early years educators, one of the main things Hogan has learned is not to judge a facility by its neatness, how good the drawings on the wall are, or how well-behaved the children.

"Sometimes you go into other services and see children sitting very quietly around a table. That's not necessarily a good thing. Or you might see children who are quiet when they're eating. Even though they're not. I'd be much more impressed if the children were making a racket and being curious about who's just arrived into the room."

The early years educators are not childminders. When they've finished training, they have the crucial tools to deliver high-quality education: a knowledge of child-development, an understanding of the ways in which young children learn and an ability to foster the child-initiated activities that give young learners a sense that their ideas are part of the curriculum.

Over at Brookfield, staff say there can be additional challenges. Some children are from broken or unstable families and may have developed behavioural problems. They try to tackle these and record children's development by observations and address them through case management.

Jennifer Gruntulis is a mother of one. Her two-year-old son attends Brookfield and she has already seen the positive impact on him.

"Jacob is an only child and if I was a stay-at-home mum, I know he wouldn't be socialising with other kids. From what I see, this is a very nurturing environment: the children are encouraged to think about what they want to do, solve problems, express their opinions. I don't think that happens in other places.

"There's a big emphasis on relationships too, and how your actions can have an impact on someone else. Those are life-long skills."

Hogan feels we could be doing much more to support high-quality early years education in Ireland. While he says the focus on the issue by the Department for Children in recent years has been of great help, much more needs to be done. "We have children going straight into primary school where the teacher/student ratio is 1:25. That's unacceptable in my view. In other places, France and Scandinavian countries for example, early education is fully funded by the State. It's viewed as part of the education process. It doesn't just start when they reach five years of age."

The single year of free pre-school education introduced by the previous government was a step in the right direction, he says, but it has its limitations. "It's a big benefit and a significant policy improvement. But it's just three hours a day - not eight hours - and it's 38 weeks a year, so it's not a full year. And there's no funding for planning time or for child observations."

Fledglings prides itself on using better than the legal minimum staff-to-child ratios and using child observations and case management. How does this compare to the average childcare centre? The HSE's inspections process, Hogan says, should be heavily focused on the quality of education provided.

"It focuses more on the things like space allocation, health and safety issues. That's fine, and that has to be done. It's easy to detect the temperature of the water - but it's more difficult to measure the quality of early years education."

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For now, Fledglings has five services, with 175 children and just over 40 employees, but it is facing something of a crossroads.

It needs to keep growing to be sustainable in the long-term and Hogan says establishing 12 branches is a key target. Once it reaches that milestone, the sky could well be the limit. Might it even have the potential to expand nationwide? "Absolutely, that is our intention. What will be key is maintaining the quality. We'll always stay with disadvantaged communities - that's where the need is greatest."

Some Fledglings centres have benefited from grant aid from sources such as Childhood Development Initiative (an initiative funded by Atlantic Philanthropies and the Government). Crucially, though, some of them are also faring on their own in the open market with only the normal subventions.

At a personal level, Hogan's work in Fledglings has been enlightening and fulfilling in a way that has surprised him.

"I enjoyed my old work but it was often very political. This is a lovely place to work - there is a genuine, positive ethos about the organisation," he says. "Our founders, Ann Louise Gilligan and Katherine Zappone, set it up 25 years ago this year in their own kitchen out in Brittas. They had a commitment to beauty, love and respect for the individual. They're both academics and they saw education as the solution to poverty. That, at the end of the day, is what we're all about."

-reprinted from the Irish Times

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