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Lessons for parents of pre-school children [1]

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EXCERPTS

The parent arrives with their child on their first day at school and proudly announces to the teacher "she knows her ABCs". It isn't really what the teacher wants to hear.

What the schools want, and what the child needs to set them up for a lifetime's learning, is not an early example of rote, but to arrive with a curiosity, a level of perseverance that will help them work their way through a problem and an ability to get on with others.

The development of pre-school provision in Ireland is putting a new focus on the transition to primary school and on what 'school readiness' should mean.

In 2010, and lagging well behind other countries, the State stepped in to provide a free pre-school year, known as the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme, amounting to three hours a day, five days a week for 38 weeks.

From this month, the ECCE is being extended and, depending on when they were born and when they start school, children will be eligible for, on average, a further 23 weeks. That is expected to bring the number of children benefitting from the ECCE at any one time from about 65,000, to about 85,000.

As early years provision develops, more importance is attaching to what children are actually doing in their crèche, nursery or pre-school. Rather than being regarded as a State-sponsored babysitting service, the question increasingly being posed is 'how is it serving the needs of children'?

This year saw the first Department of Education inspections in ECCE settings, complementing the traditional health and safety inspections.

So, what is early childhood education supposed to be, if not giving three-year-olds a head start with their ABCs?

The first batch of education-focussed reports provided some warning signs of what inspectors don't want to see. They noted a "tendency in some services to make the early years experience for children overly formal rather than play-based, a tendency that can, at times, be driven by parental expectations."

They added: "Where this occurs, it can result in provision which prioritises 'academic' skills such as knowing letters and being able to hold a pencil over the development of important learning dispositions such as creativity, problem-solving, self-regulation and persistence."

One major transition point in Irish schooling, the Leaving Certificate year, is an example of how the nation's reputation for placing a high value on education can turn into something of an obsession, in this case driven by the 'points race'.

Inspectors' findings from their initial round of early years settings indicate a similar affliction may be hitting parental aspirations at the pre-school stage.

Putting a structure on early childhood education may be a new kid on the block in Ireland, but the lesson for all is that it is based on natural learning experiences of toddlers that are as old as time itself - and nurtured through play.

Some years ago, the Government's education advisers, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) developed guidelines, called Aistear, which focus on the centrality of play in early learning experiences.

Aistear's play-based approach to children's learning and development is not intended to be confined to pre-schoolers, and the NCCA and the Department of Education encourage its use for the teaching and learning of children up to the age of six, in other words covering the first couple of years at primary school.

Early childhood education was explored in great detail over three days last week at the conference on European Early Childhood Education Research Association, held in Dublin City University (DCU), and attended by 1,000 early childhood researchers and educators from around the world.

One of the speakers was Alison Gopnik, cognitive scientist and professor of psychology and philosophy at the University of California. and author of 'Against Parenting'. She warns against pushy, helicopter parenting, and, by extension, her arguments are relevant to 'in loco parentis' settings, such as pre-schools.

In her view, raising children "shouldn't be a goal-orientated task, such as a carpenter making a chair and trying to chisel it perfectly. Rather parents, like a gardener, should create a loving, natural environment for a child to grow".

She says: "We don't have to make children learn, we just have to let them learn."

Dr Anne Looney, former chief executive of the NCCA, who oversaw the development of Aistear, was another speaker. Dr Looney, currently interim chief executive of the Higher Education Authority (HEA), has been appointed Executive Dean of DCU's new Institute of Education, and she will move into that role early in 2017.

Dr Looney says the sort of learning to which children are exposed has an impact on their well-being, and she believes that the power of play-based learning should not be underestimated.

In a world where education is often crudely measured by league tables, she says education systems could learn a lot from good pre-school practice.

She says that while lifelong and deep level learning is seen as something to grow into, a consequence of becoming older, wiser and more mature, passionate advocates for early learning believe the contrary to be true: "that lifelong and deep-level learning is something that children grow out of in systems that increasingly corral them and their learning into measurable outcomes, and hyper-regulated times and spaces."

Teresa Heeney, chief executive of Early Childhood Ireland, the representative body for early education and care, says "our children are our teachers, our researchers and our scientists, but they depend on us as the adults in charge, for the moment.

"We need to give serious thought to creating a society and education system that keeps children's sense of well-being, identity and belonging at its core."

Back at the primary school gate, Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) president Rosena Jordan confirms that children don't need to be able to write or recognise letters or count before they arrive, but what they do need is a confidence about their abilities and capabilities, and so a willingness to take on new challenges.

"They should be encouraged to develop good listening skills, as instruction and directions are part of life at school, and need to learn how to be sociable, how to share and take turns, to have respect for others, to be aware of others' feelings and to have developed a good level of independence," she says.

Pre-schoolers' 'then and now' pictures tell their learning story

Beverton Preschool, Donabate, Co Dublin is a multiple award-winner for its approach to early childhood education.

Owner Nickola Cullen says learning activities arise out of each child's interests, actions and ordinary, everyday events.

She says she wants an environment that supports the development of children who can make choices, think independently, take challenges, explore ideas, ask questions, and feel nurtured, safe and well cared for, within a social play-based context.

In their "mud kitchen", the Beverton preschoolers get to grips with some rudimentary culinary skills.

As the last school year came to an end, the children were given an opportunity to display some of what they had learned, but not through the usual end-of-year show.

The Beverton team decided that the children's last memories of the preschool should not be rushed, adult-led activities, but rather a natural winding down and celebration of the journey of learning that had taken place over the previous year or two.

Instead of spending six weeks rehearsing for a show, the children spent time taking down their photos from their coat hangers and family wall pictures and 'putting away' equipment for those coming after them.

And it was through that process that the children themselves started reflecting on their own personal journey: through simple activities such as comparing photos of what they looked like when they started at Beverton, and what they looked like now; the friends they had made there; the skills that they had developed. Then they recorded it in individual journals.

The Beverton 'Reflections' learning stories earned it an Early Childhood Ireland award in July.

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