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Exploring childcare: A north west of Ireland study

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Abstract

This study sought to explore and examine if the provision of full day care improves the quality of life for children and their parents. There are now 60.8% of women employed in the workforce (CSO, 2008). This means many changes for children, parents and families. Twenty-seven childcare managers in the north west of Ireland were interviewed. Also, 325 questionnaires were completed by working parents. Babies as young as four months are being cared for in childcare facilities from 6.45am until 6pm daily, five days per week. Some children are spending up to 11 hours per day in childcare facilities. The study concluded that full day care can have both positive and negative effects for children. Childcare facilities are providing good quality childcare encompassing various services. Parents are finding it difficult to manage work life balance. Health dominated quality of life issues. Two hundred and thirty five (235) (73%) parents reported being stressed. The study also found that 315 (97%) working parents feel that the government is not doing enough to support working parents. On a positive note, 241 (74%) parents said they are happy in general with the quality of life for them, their family and their children.

Keywords: Children, parents, childcare managers, childcare facilities.

Introduction

This article is a result of a research study examining the provision of full day care and whether it improves the quality of life for children and their parents by investigating the changes in their lives due to the economic boom in Ireland. The study was designed to investigate the effects of some aspects of these changes on children and families in the North West of Ireland who avail of childcare. These areas may be considered representative of much of modern Ireland, being medium sized towns with active economies. Findings from the study may provide useful information for future societal planning.

Semi structured interviews were conducted with 27 childcare managers in childcare facilities in the North West of Ireland in 2007. In addition, 325 questionnaires were completed by working parents in the public and private sectors out of 1,110, which were distributed. Both the interviews and the questionnaires raised many important issues regarding childcare, which gave rise to conclusions and recommendations for change for the future. However,

for the purposes of this paper, the issue of time spent in childcare and the effects of same on children and their parents will be discussed.

Ireland has witnessed many positive social and economic changes over the past ten years due to the economic boom. However, it can be argued that as a result of the boom there are some social problems. Media reports and personal experiences are congruent with signs of people being cash-rich but becoming time-poor. One factor contributing to the new monetary wealth has been an increase in employment. A major change in recent years is that 60.8% of women are in the workforce Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2008).
However, many of these new workers, especially women, are parents who are juggling their roles, attempting to achieve work life balance and quality of life, between childcare, work and leisure. One response by parents nationwide has been to use professional childcare facilities such as full day care or home-based child-minders. The consequence is that children, even babies, are placed in non-parental care for major portions of the day. But while their parents rush, do children lose or gain from this arrangement? The fleeting nature of childhood makes it imperative to make the best possible use of it, by investing early in children's education, care and development which will ensure a well balanced future for children and society.

In April 2009 the Government announced a new free pre-school year in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). The scheme is expected to benefit some 70,000 children every year and to cost the State €170 million to operate each year (Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2009). Under the scheme all children aged between three years and three months and four years and six months on September 1st each year are eligible for a year of pre-schooling paid for by the State. Services in the scheme - providing three hours a day, five days a week for 38 weeks of the year - will get a grant of €64.50 per child per week for providing a free pre-school service (Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2009).

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to present the current state of knowledge of the positive and negative effects of childcare on children. For the purposes of this paper, 'childcare' refers to day care facilities and services for pre-school children and school going children out of school hours. It includes services offering care, education and socialisation opportunities for children. Thus, 'childcare' includes naíonraí, day care services, crèches, play groups, childminding and after-school groups, but schools (primary, secondary and special) and residential centres for children are excluded (National Economic and Social Forum (NESF), 2005, p. 63).

'Full day care' is the provision of a service for up to five hours per day. Pre-schools offer a structured day care service for pre-school children which may include a sessional pre-school service for pre-school children not attending the full day care service. Typically each premises is broken down into various rooms (for example, baby room, wobbler room

and toddler room). A child will be assigned a room depending on age, stage and ability (Department of Health and Children, 2006).

Between 2002 and 2007 the proportion of households using non-parental childcare for pre-school children increased from 42% to 48%, while the proportion using non-parental childcare for their primary school children remained unchanged at 25% (CSO, 2009).

One of the objectives of The National Children's Strategy (Government of Ireland, 2000, p. 50) is that "Children's early education and developmental needs will be met through quality childcare services and family-friendly employment measures".

The Provision of Good Quality Childcare: Positive Effects of Childcare

Where non-parental childcare is the option for families in Ireland, it should be of the highest quality and it can be argued that positive childcare experiences may also enhance later educational opportunities. For example, those experiencing early non-parental care are better able to benefit from education, adjust to routines, and resist conflicts (Ahnert and Lamb, 2004).

Children in their first four years develop at a pace unparalleled at any other stage in life. Children's development is heavily dependent on the availability, resources and capacity of their caretakers. With this in mind, childcare and early education should aim to ensure that children experience a healthy and safe environment that respects the child and encourages self-confidence and an interest in learning (Hayes, 2005). In addition, Hayes and Kernan (2008) emphasise that by investing heavily in quality childcare in the early years, it prevents trying to correct deficits later on. Quality provision in early childhood education and care in Ireland has improved greatly over the last decade as thinking is informed by theory and best practice (Hayes and Kernan, 2008).

Smyth and McCabe (1999) stress that the best-known example of an early intervention programme in the Irish context was the *Rutland Street project*. The project began in 1969 and ran as a research project until 1974 (David, 1994). In addition, in 1994 the Department of Education initiated a pilot pre-school intervention project, *Early Start,* in forty disadvantaged areas nationwide (Hayes, 2002; O'Toole, 2000). Numerous research studies on quality and advancing early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Ireland have been conducted by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) (2002-2008)[1]. For example, Duignan & Walsh (2004) published the report *Talking About Quality:* Report of a *Consultation Process on Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education.* Also in 2006, CECDE produced the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (NQF) – Síolta (Duignan et al., 2007).

[1] In October 2002 the Minister for Education and Science launched CECDE. The CECDE was established by the Dublin Institute of Technology and St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra who also formed a board of management consisting of representatives from both institutions. The CECDE was closed in a government rationalisation move in November 2008.

Furthermore, Walsh (2007) in the *Revised Audit of Research on Early Childhood Care and Education* describes numerous initiatives relating to quality. For example, the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) (2000-2006) and the establishment of the County Child Care Committees (CCCs).

The aim of the CECDE was to develop and co-ordinate early childhood education in pursuance of the objectives of the White Paper 'Ready to Learn' and to advise the Department of Education and Science on policy issues in this area. The Centre's brief covered children from birth to six years of age in a wide variety of settings, including families, nurseries, crèches, playgroups, child minders, preschools and the infant classes of primary schools.

The main objectives of the Centre were:

- To develop a quality framework for early childhood education;
- To develop targeted interventions on a pilot basis for children who are educationally disadvantaged and children with special needs; and
- To prepare the groundwork for the establishment of an Early Childhood Education Agency as envisaged by the White Paper.

The aforementioned research is of critical importance to ensure that the development of the sector in quantitative terms is accompanied by a concomitant emphasis on the quality of the experiences provided for the youngest children in ECCE settings.

In addition, NESF (2008) were pleased to record areas where a number of its key policy points have been incorporated in the *Programme for Government 2007-2012*, the Social Partnership Agreement *Towards 2016*, and the *National Development Plan 2007-2013*. The policy frameworks set out in these documents provide a valuable context for the further development and implementation of ECCE policies. These documents incorporate provisions for a review of progress in 2010. This should provide a valuable platform for planning and implementation up to 2015, which is the NESF target date for a comprehensive ECCE policy system to be in place, based on best practice principles (NESF, 2008).

Moreover, in Ireland, to ensure that standards are maintained all childcare facility proprietors must register with the Health Service Executive (HSE) and must adhere to standards in compliance with the Pre-school regulations (Department of Health and Children, 2006). In providing good quality childcare, staff must be trained to a minimum standard of FETAC Level 5, and FETAC Level 6 for Managers. Some staff are also trained in Montessori.

In the UK, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-blatchford, Taggart & Elliot (2003) report from a longitudinal study on the *Effective Provision of Preschool education* (EPPE). They noted that:

> Good pre-school still matters. There is new evidence of continuing pre-school effects for attainment in Reading and especially in Mathematics as well as better social/behavioral development (increased self-regulation and reduced hyperactivity). It is differences in the quality and effectiveness of pre-schools that contribute to better outcomes in the longer term rather than just attending or not attending a pre-school setting (Sylva et al., 2003, p. 61).

The key findings from the EPPE study showed that:

1. Pre-school experience compared to no pre-school experience, enhances children's development.

2. The duration of attendance is important with an earlier start being related to better. intellectual development and improved independence, concentration and sociability.

3. Full attendance led to no better gains for children than part-time attendance.

4. Disadvantaged children in particular can benefit significantly from good quality pre-school experiences, especially if they attend centres that cater for a mixture of children from different social backgrounds (Sylva et al., 2003, p. 61).

Moreover, the US study titled *Lifetime Effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40*, shows the benefits of good quality preschool care and education (Schweinhart et al., 2005). The study examined the lives of 123 African Americans born in poverty and at high risk of failing in school. From 1962–1967, at ages three and four, the subjects were randomly divided into a programme group that received a high-quality preschool programme based on High/Scope's participatory learning approach and a comparison group who received no preschool program. In the study's most recent phase, 97% of the study participants still living were interviewed at age 40; additional data was gathered from the subjects' school, social services, and arrest records. The study found that adults at age 40 who had the preschool programs had higher earnings, were more likely to hold a job, had committed fewer crimes, and were more likely to have graduated from high school than adults who did not have preschool education (High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2008).

In 1991, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) in the US conducted a large-scale study examining the long-term effects of childcare on children (NICHD, 2002). The NICHD is the largest, most rigorous, ongoing investigation of the

effects of childcare on children. The Study has followed 1,364 families since their infants' birth in 1991; the families have been studied at regular intervals. Twenty-five of the United States' most recognised researchers are participating in this study – a very impressive team. In 2001, the study's authors reported that children who went to day care were more disruptive both in kindergarten and Grade three, but that those who attended high-quality facilities also scored better on tests of memory and language skills.

In 2007, they looked at how those same children were faring in Grade six. Based on these latest results Belsky, Vandell, Burchinal, Clarke-Stewart, McCartney and Owen (2007) ask: *Are there long-term effects of early childcare?* The findings indicated that parenting was a stronger and more consistent predictor of children's development than early child-care experience. Also, higher quality care predicted higher vocabulary scores. However, more exposure to centre care predicted more teacher-reported externalising problems. Concurring with these studies, Peisner-Feinberg (2004, p.4) asserts that: "research evidence supports the contention that better quality child care [for children of preschool age] is related to better cognitive and social development for children". Also, Timmins (2008, p. 32) asserts that "children in centre-based childcare have higher cognitive scores and exhibit less conduct/peer problems and more pro-social behaviour than those in maternal care".

Ahnert and Lamb (2004, p. 3) noted that "it is only recently that researchers have begun to explore the advantages of good-quality care and its potential benefits for children". These findings have been corroborated by Loeb, Bridges, Bassok, Fuller & Rumberger (2005a) who examined the influence of preschool centres on children's development. Their findings showed that children from the very poorest families may benefit the most if resources are focused on their communities. Timmins (2008, p. 45) found that "children from low-income families benefit more from childcare early in life than high-income families in terms of cognitive development and emotional, conduct and peer outcomes".

In summary, many studies have been conducted into the benefits of early childhood care and education. Results indicate that good quality childcare can have positive effects on children and especially for children in the pre-school years before they commence primary school. However, not everyone agrees with the positive effects of full day care. The following section will discuss the negative effects of full day care.

Studies Detailing the Negative Effects of Full Day Childcare

While there has been much research into the positive effects of full day care on children, the following studies show that there can be negative effects resulting from long hours in day care for children, for example, stress, separation anxiety, and anti-social behaviour. Watamura, Donzela, Alwin, and Gunnar (2003) examined salivary cortisol (a stress sensitive hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical (HPA) axis hormone) in 20 infants (12 females; M age = 10.8 months) and 35 toddlers (20 females; M age = 29.7 months) in full day centre

based childcare. Samples were taken at approximately 10.00 am and 4.00 pm at childcare and at home. At childcare, 35% of infants and 71% of toddlers showed a rise in cortisol across the day; at home, 71% of infants and 64% of toddlers showed decreases.

Potential reasons for the rise in cortisol rates at childcare could be due to infants who may be stressed if they had been crying for a while before being fed or changed. Older children could be fearful from having to share and take turns as well as co-operating in the various programmes being conducted at childcare or they may be bored. Toddlers may be missing out on their afternoon nap when they become tired, however, this would depend on the quality of the childcare service. Good quality service would allow for toddlers to have afternoon naps. The environment at childcare could have an impact on the rise in levels of cortisol for both groups. On the other hand, the potential reasons for the fall in cortisol for both infants and toddlers at home could be attributed to them being in a familiar environment and, for toddlers, being free to roam about the house may be a factor as well as being able to have a daytime nap at anytime. However, Watamura et al. (2003) noted that toddlers who played more with peers exhibited lower cortisol.

Watamura et al. (2003) found that controlling age, teacher-reported social fearfulness predicted higher afternoon cortisol and larger cortisol increases across the day at childcare. This phenomenon may indicate context-specific activation of the HPA axis early in life. The finding that cortisol increases over the day in full-day 'out of home care' has been replicated a number of times. It appears to be age related, with the largest increases observed among toddlers. It seems to bear some relation to children's social behaviour and temperament. Based on previous research, quality of childcare also seems to be involved in predicting whether and how much of a rise in cortisol is observed. However, at this point, the factors that influence these rising patterns still cannot be determined conclusively, nor do we have evidence that these increases in cortisol affect children's development. Nonetheless, because cortisol is a potent steroid hormone that is known to affect the central nervous system, evidence that this hormone is elevated over home base-line levels for many young children in childcare warrants our attention (Watamura et al., 2003).

Lamb and Abbott (2004) noted that when mothers remained in the centres with their toddlers, secure infants had markedly lower cortisol levels than insecure infants, suggesting that they gained more protective support from the presence of their mothers. When the mothers stopped remaining with their infants, the cortisol responses of the securely attached toddlers were much more dramatic than the responses of the insecurely attached toddlers: on the initial separation days, cortisol levels rose over the first 60 minutes after arrival to levels twice as high as at home. This indicates that securely attached children experience more stress and separation anxiety when placed in childcare.

Secure toddlers also fussed or cried upon separation more than insecurely attached toddlers. Cortisol and behavioural markers of distress were correlated in securely attached but not in insecurely attached toddlers. The security of attachment changed in many cases following the onset of childcare, but attachments were more likely to become or remain secure when mothers remained longer in the child care facilities with their toddlers.

The above studies indicate that cortisol occurs at all ages in children and, as has been described in Watamura et al. (2003), the quality of the childcare could affect the prediction of the rise in cortisol. If it is good quality childcare the levels are not as high because children are given attention and are consumed in the interesting activities and play that is being provided for them. Anti-social behaviour is another factor reported from studies on the negative effects of long hours in childcare. For example, Sylva et al. (2003, p. 5) report that: "high levels of 'group care' before the age of three (and particularly before the age of two) was associated with higher levels of anti-social behavior at aged three".

Furthermore, Sylva, Stein, Leach, Barnes, and Malmberg, (2007) reports from the *Families Children and Child Care* (FCCC) study of 1200 children, which began in 1998 in the UK. Researchers interviewed mothers when their babies were three, 10, 18, 36 and 51 months old. They found that families use many different types and combinations of care at different stages in young children's lives. The study looked at the ways these different care experiences may be related to children's health and physical growth, social and emotional development, and intellectual development and learning. Among the first findings from the FCCC study were that: nannies and childminders offer the best non-maternal care for children under two, followed by grandparents, other relatives and finally nurseries – however the differences are slight. Another highlight from the study was the importance of training caregivers to understand their professional role with parents as well as with children, and supporting them as they undertake both together (Barnes, Leach, Sylva, Stein, Malmberg, and the FCCC team, 2006). In addition, Gilbert (2003, p. 5) notes that: 'those who spend long hours in childcare may experience more stress and are at increased risk of becoming overly aggressive and developing other behaviour problems'.

The above evidence suggests that those who spend long hours in childcare may experience more stress and are at increased risk of becoming overly aggressive and developing other behaviour problems. But how can we define what constitutes a long day in a childcare facility?

Shellenbarger (2005) writes that Greenman (2005), senior vice president of *Bright Horizons Family Solutions,* an operator of high-quality child-care centres in Washington D.C. says: "in some centres, six hours is a long day. The issue should be, 'What kind of life is the child leading?', 'How does the child's week fit together - the people, the pace, and the expectations?" The answer will lie largely with both parents and well-trained, skilled staff.

Another study by Loeb et al. (2005b) examined the influence of preschools on children's social and cognitive development. Previous research has demonstrated that attending centre care is associated with cognitive benefits for young children. However, little is known about the ideal age for children to enter such care or the 'right' amount of time, both weekly and yearly, for children to attend centre programs. Using national data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-K), this paper asks whether there are optimal levels of centre care. It looks at the duration and the intensity and whether these levels vary by race or income. Their findings show that, on average, attending centre care is associated with positive gains in pre-reading and math skills, but negative social behaviour. Across economic levels, children who start centre care between ages two and three see greater gains than those who start centres earlier or later. Further, starting earlier than age two is related to more pronounced negative social effects. Results for centre intensity vary by income levels and race. For instance, poor and middle-income children see academic gains from attending centre intensively (more than 30 hours a week), but wealthier children do not; and while intense centre attendance negatively impacts on social development for both black and white children, it does not have any negative impact for Hispanic children.

Barnett (2004) citing McCartney, Peisner-Feingberg, and Ahnert and Lamb (2004), argued that accumulated evidence showed that increased hours in childcare are associated with increased problem behaviour. The NICHD study confirms this association asserting that such findings are not mediated by quality of childcare. Similarly, Belsky (2005) asserts that placing children in an average non-maternal facility for long hours does seem to be associated with some (modest) developmental risk, especially with respect to mother-child relationships, problem behaviour, and social competence and academic work habits. Such outcomes are not merely by-products of low quality childcare. Brooks-Gunn, Hann and Waldfoqel (2002) drew a similar conclusion:

Although quality of child care, home environment, and maternal sensitivity also mattered, the negative effects of working 30 hours or more per week in the first 9 months were still found, even when controlling for child-care quality, the quality of the home environment, and maternal sensitivity (p. 1052).

Furthermore, it could be argued that because of some children spending long hours in childcare, they may feel unhappy or lonely within their families. Consequently, it appears that parents nowadays have to rely evermore on early years interventions to help to fulfill their children's dreams and according to Horgan & Douglas (2001, p. 23): "All early years educators are missionaries – all children have dreams".

Methodology

In and around Sligo town in 2007, semi-structured interviews took place with fifteen childcare managers from private childcare facilities, four from community childcare facilities and six home childminders who were registered with the HSE. Managers from two private childcare facilities from Letterkenny, Co Donegal also took part. Three hundred and twenty five completed questionnaires were returned (34% of the 1,110 distributed) from working parents in the public and private sectors in Sligo town. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at the Institute of Technology, Sligo. Participants were notified in advance about the research by the researcher posting flyers outlining the research and its purpose, including its confidentiality to the managers of workplaces where the questionnaires were to be distributed. Similarly, the researcher wrote to managers of childcare facilities outlining the purpose and confidentiality of the research while asking them to participate in the study. Once consent regarding participation was given, the researcher re-assured the participants about confidentiality, storage and disposal of their information for the study.

Results – Questionnaires

In this section the results from the questionnaires are presented first, followed by the results from the interviews.

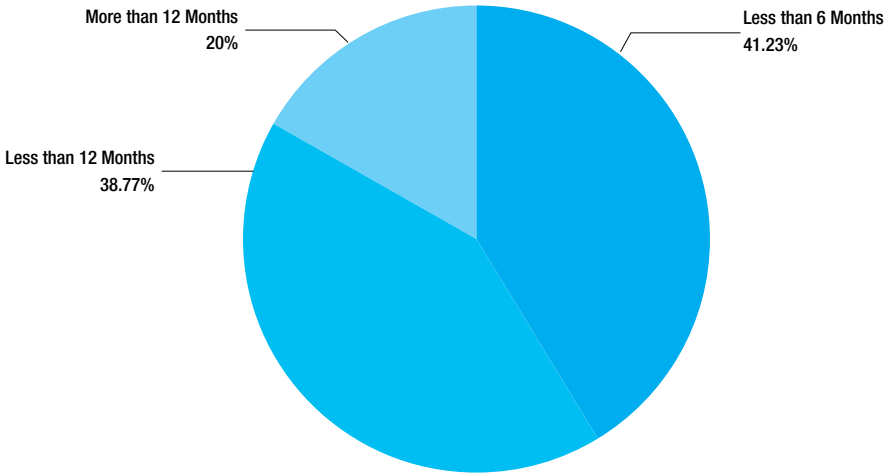
Profile of parents – age

A majority (52.6%) of respondents were aged between 25 and 35 years. A further 41.5% were older than 35 years. A small percentage (5.8%) were younger than 25 years.

Children & Childcare

The 325 respondents are parents of 519 children, ranging in age from 0-6 months to six years of age. Forty eight per cent (n=158) had one child and (43%) (n=142) had two children. A third (33.5% n=108) of respondents had a child aged two while 28.3% (n=92) had a child aged one year old. The other respondents had children aged three, four, and five while 14.8% (n=78) had a child aged six. Respondents reported placing 41.2% (n=134) of their children in childcare when they were less than six months old. A further 38.8% (n=119) of children were less than 12 months old when they started childcare. Twenty percent (n=72) of children were over 12 months old when they started childcare.

Figure 1: Ages of children at start of childcare



Choice of Childcare Facility

This section outlines parental reasons for choosing a childcare facility, a home childminder or a family/friend to care for their child/children. Over two-thirds 74.2% (n=241) of respondents chose a childcare facility to care for their children instead of using a family/friend or home childminder. Seventy percent (n=168) of participants chose a childcare facility where staff were fully trained and qualified. The next important factor for families was that they felt group care was better for their child/children and 66.8% (n=161) of respondents chose this option. A third option, chosen by 44.8% (n=156) of respondents, was that they wanted their child/children to be open to a wide range of learning facilities. Finally 46% (n=111) preferred that their child/children should be in an environment such as a childcare facility where there are lots of other children.

In comparison, only 25.8% (n=84) chose a family member/friend to care for their child/children. The main reason given by 82.1% (n=69) of parents for choosing a family member/friend was that they felt that their child/children was getting better care and attention by being with a family member/friend as opposed to a stranger caring for their child. Another reason for choosing a family member/friend was that 70.2% (n=59) felt their child/children were familiar with this person. Being happy to leave their child/children with this person was another factor and 63.1% (n=72) voiced this opinion. Accessibility was important too, with 48.9% (n=41) saying that the family member/friend's home was on their way to work and this was a deciding factor for choosing this type of childcare for their child/children.

Respondents were asked about the time that they take their children to the crèche and how long the children spend in care.

Time of Commencement and Daily Duration of Childcare
Parents were not asked directly how long daily their child spent in childcare. Similarly, there was no question as to how many worked part time. However, results show that nearly half (47.1%, n=153) of working parents left their homes between 8 am and 9am. Also, out of the 325 respondents over half (53.8%, n= 175) arrived home from work with their child after 5 pm, and 46.9% (n=150) arrived home after 6pm every day. We can speculate that some of those parents who leave both before 8am and before 9am do not get home until after 6pm. A high figure of 90.5% (n= 294) of respondents said that their child was in care for more than 3.5 hours per day. Some of these children are in care from 8am until after 6pm every day.

In addition, almost four fifths (79.4%, n=258) said that their child would remain in care for more than three years. More than half (59.1%, n=192) said that their child would return to the childcare facility for after school care. It appears from these figures that almost four fifths of the children (79.4%, n=258) are in care from six months old until they are over three years old and may still be in care until they are 12 years old (seeing as 59.1% (n=192) will go to after school care in the childcare facility).

Results from Interviews
This section relays the results from the interviews, which were conducted with 27 childcare managers. Respondents discuss the ages and numbers of children in childcare together with the duration of their time spent at the childcare facilities.

Type of Childcare Facility
At the time of interviews with childcare managers, there were 935 children in childcare across the three types of childcare facilities including those in Letterkenny and in Sligo. One childcare facility in Sligo town cared for 90 children per day while one facility in Letterkenny cared for 80 per day. The total figure (935) represents the amount of children in this small sample of 27 childcare providers.

Time Spent at the Childcare Facility
This section outlines the times children arrived at and departed from the childcare facilities. Childcare managers reported that most children arrived at their facilities between 7.05am and 8.30am, although one facility was accepting children at 6.45am. Children were collected from the childcare facilities in the evenings between 5.45pm and 6.30pm. Over half (53.8%, n= 175) of respondents arrived home from work with their child/children after 5pm, while 46.9% (n=150) arrived home after 6pm every day.

Ages of Child/Children at Start of Childcare

Childcare managers were asked if babies/children had to be a certain age before they accepted them in their childcare facilities. As the table below shows, eight facilities (29.6%) accepted babies that were less than four months old; ten facilities (37%) said babies had to be six months old; three facilities said they would not accept babies unless they were 12 months old. The remainder said children had to be two years old and some childcare managers said babies had to be nappy free and potty trained before they accepted them in their facilities. These figures concur with those from the questionnaires showing that 41.2% (n=134) of children were less than six months old when respondents placed them in childcare.

Table 1: Ages of children arriving at the childcare facilities

Age of Child	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Less than 4 months	8	29.6	29.6
Less than 6 months	10	37	66.7
12 months	3	11.1	77.8
Other ages	6	22.1	100
Total	**27**	**100**	**100**

How Many Children are in Childcare for 3.5 Hours or More per Day?

Out of 935 children, there were 632 children in full day care (i.e. for more than 3.5 hours per day). Two thirds (18) of the childcare facilities had at least 20 and up to 90 children who were in care for more for 3.5 hours per day. The other nine childcare managers reported that children come in for up to three hours per day or in some cases a child is in a childcare facility on a part-time basis, for example for one or two days per week for a few hours. These figures correspond with the statistics from the questionnaires which show the high percentage (90.5%) of respondents reporting that their child was in care for more than 3.5 hours per day. In addition, childcare managers were asked if working parents were happy to leave their child/children in full day care and 26 (96.3%) out of 27 childcare managers said, yes, parents were happy to leave their child/children in full day care.

Discussion

This study explored childcare in the north west of Ireland. According to CSO (2008) the pivotal reason for children being placed in childcare is because 60.8% of women are in the workforce. What kind of childcare are parents choosing?

Results show that most respondents (73.5% n=239) choose a child care facility to care for their child/children. Reasons given included quality and trained staff with a choice of services within the facilities. In the literature, the importance of quality and fully qualified trained staff to parents has been stressed (Sylva et al., 2003, Walsh, 2007, Peisner-Feinberg, 2004). Quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) includes positive child interactions; adult understanding of early years curriculum; adult knowledge of how young children learn; skills in supporting children, particularly in their conflicts and adults supporting parents and the home learning environment (Hayes, 2008). In testament to this 48% of respondents (n= 157) wanted their children to be cared for by qualified and trained staff.

What Time was Spent at the Childcare Facility?
Forty one percent of children examined in this study commenced in childcare when they were less than six months old. Furthermore, 38.7% (n=119) children were less than 12 months old when they started childcare. Figures show that 20% (n=72) of children were over 12 months old when they started childcare. Given that this was a relatively small sample (325 working parents) the figure of 41.2% (n=134) of children being placed in childcare at under six months old is quite high. The current study did not measure stress in these children. However, the literature review cited studies by Watumara et al. (2003), Lamb and Abbott (2004) and Belsky (2005) who have documented stress in children who enter childcare at an early age. A limitation of the current study was that it was not possible to verify the exact number of hours spent by each child in childcare.

What Time did Parents Arrive at the Childcare Facility with their Children?
Children arrived at the childcare facilities between 7.05am and 8.30am although one facility was accepting children at 6.45am. Some children spent possibly up to 11 hours in care because children were collected from the childcare facilities in the evenings between 5.45pm and 6.30pm. Over half at 53.8% (n= 175) of respondents arrived home from work with their child/children after 5 pm, while 46.92% (n=150) arrived home after 6pm every day.

Furthermore, it can be assumed from the statistics that some of those parents who leave both before 8am and before 9am do not get home until after 6pm. In addition, over two-thirds 79.4% (n=258) said that their child/children would remain in care for more than three years. Childcare managers were asked, if parents were happy to leave their child/children in full day care? Ninety six point three percent (n=26) of 27 managers answered yes but citing that in some cases parents had no choice but to do so. Moreover, ninety six point nine percent (n=315) of parents and childcare managers agree that the government is not doing enough for the profession or for working parents.

Conclusion

Good quality childcare is practiced in the north west of Ireland. Some studies show that good quality childcare is good for children and especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, however other studies show that the stress hormone cortisol could be raised when children are in group situations, for example in childcare facilities for long hours. Also, there could be increases in agitated/aggressive behaviours from spending long hours in childcare facilities. The 'after school care' provision means children can be in childcare from when they are a few months old, until they commence secondary school.

Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge that in this important work of caring for and educating young children we must strive to provide the very best we can for them in an atmosphere of equality and tolerance. We must respect children for what they are and not what they will become. While acknowledging what we can do for the child in terms of encouraging and challenging her development and fostering her pro-social skills, we must never lose sight of the whole child, all her aspects and the other people in her life (Hayes, 1999).

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