



Child Voice and Influence: How Child-Led Agency Promotes Care and Education Between Preschool Children In Ireland

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Abstract

Child agency, endorsed by Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, is examined in a doctoral mixed methods and case research study, funded by Research Ireland (Grant number 8501). Phase 1, a purposive sample of educators, with experience of the Government's free ECCE preschool programme, participated in a mixed-methods online survey about their understanding of child agency in practice. Respondents (n=70) linked agency with child voice, child-led interests and activities and free play. Depending on who was in control of the agency, the adult or child, different levels of agency were evident; *Child-led Agency* (free-flowing agency) and more restricted agency evident in *Adult-led Child Agency* and *Adult-led Limits on Child Agency*. Phase 2 was a purposive sample of two ECCE play-based preschools whose managers agreed to participate. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with 4 educators before and after the research activities, with 35 children spread over ten weeks. Informed by the Mosaic approach, children expressed their opinions through play, conversations, art and photography. Preliminary findings indicate a link between *Child-led Agency*, wellbeing and friendships that happened over time spent at play with resources and free movement. Children were empowered when they decided what to do and when they drifted in and out of their Zone of Proximal Development at their own pace in child-led time. It is recommended that policy makers endorse the integration of care and education through child agency and that they promote freedom of expression and movement in preschool settings to encourage child-led agency in child-led time.

Keywords: Child agency, Wellbeing, Early Childhood Care and Education