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A Whole new Spectrum of Queries, Concerns and Anxieties: Exploring Families' Childcare Decision Making within the Irish Context

Catriona O'Toole and Delma Byrne

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that early childhood is a time of vital importance in children's development. The quality of care that children receive in their early years makes a real difference to their development and later outcomes (NSCDC, 2004, 2007; OECD, 2012; Melhuish, 2003). Today's parents face considerable challenges in securing quality childcare and balancing their work and family commitments. Such challenges are particularly notable within the Irish context. Childcare in Ireland has developed mainly on a supply and demand basis and is largely available only from private childcare centres or from informal extended family members and community networks (Barry and Sherlock, 2008). Because of a lack of public investment, Irish parents pay amongst the highest childcare cost across all OECD countries, and those working in the sector experience very poor pay and working conditions (OECD, 2010). Penn and Lloyd (2014) highlighted that when early years services are run on this type of private market model, quality tends to be variable and access to services is inequitable. Specifically, they noted that

within this model, quality depends largely on the good will of providers, as well as on parents' income and capacity to 'shop around' when making childcare decisions.

Previous research on parental decisions around childcare has highlighted a complex combination of practical concerns, family values and considerations around child wellbeing. Vincent and Ball (2006) highlighted the role of social class in shaping families' differential engagement with the childcare sector. Others have highlighted constrained choices due to family finances, inflexible work schedules, and limited availability of suitable options (Forry et al., 2013). Currently, little is known about the experiences of Irish families as they navigate the early years sector. The current research[1] sought to address this gap by exploring parental preferences, decision-making and satisfaction with childcare within the Irish context.

Methodology

A total of ten interviews were conducted; nine of these were interviews with mothers and there was one interview in which both father and mother were present. The final sample of participants was similar in that all had attained higher education qualifications, all were in stable relationships (either married or cohabiting), and all were in paid employment although some were availing of parental leave. However, participants varied in terms of family income, family stage, ethnicity, and type of childcare arrangements. The interviews were

conducted in summer/autumn 2013 (this was shortly after the airing of the Prime Time investigation A Breach of Trust, and before the publication of inspection reports[2]).

Key Findings

We found that parents exercised considerable agency in seeking out optimal childcare arrangements based on priorities of quality and goodness of fit with family characteristics. However, they also encountered considerable constraints and barriers in navigating the early years' sector and in accessing the type of care that met their individual needs. These themes will be discussed in turn.

Priorities and preferences in childcare choices

All parents spoke of prioritising quality when making childcare decisions. In so doing they tended to emphasise the everyday interactions that their children experienced within the setting. These process-oriented aspects of quality - or what Bronfenbrenner (2006) refers to as proximal processes - include features like warmth, openness, language and cognitive stimulation. In the current study, continuity of care, the emotional tone of the setting, and a sense of belonging were central to parent's understandings of quality. The latter is illustrated in the following quotation:

> *The crèche fitted with our philosophy, the group care seemed like a really nice way, and the naturalness about the crèche - while it was regulated and part of HSE system, it actually is small enough to be very personal....And my eldest now, at four, comes home and tells me all the news from everybody, and what's going on, and she goes to her little birthday parties from the crèche group. She has a lovely sense of community. So, fundamental from the very start, it was the very small nature of the crèche that attracted us to it. And it was that sense of community that I'd always have there.*

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[1] This study formed part of a broader research project by Byrne and O'Toole (2015) and was supported by a grant from TUSLA and the Irish Research Council.

[2] The Prime Time investigation was a televised documentary which uncovered instances of mistreatment of children in some crèches. The decision to publish childcare inspection reports was made by government as a result of this documentary.

There were also variations in parental definitions of quality and these were reflected in choices relating to the type of childcare. Parents who favoured centre-based care tended to associate crèches with positive opportunities for structured learning activities and socialisation. These parents attached importance to the broadening their child's networks beyond the immediate family:

Parents sought to identify a goodness-of-fit between childcare choices and the unique characteristics of their families and individual children

I feel the socialisation that Amelia's getting in a crèche that she wouldn't get at home. I see her getting bored at home, she gets bored with her toys, she gets bored looking at me, she's kind of going 'let me get out and let's do something'. That's what she gets in crèche, like there's a different set of toys, there's a different set of people, a different group of children and I feel she benefits from that.

However, not all parents favoured centre-based care, some spoke of having their children with a trusted childminder in a family-like environment. Others saw relatives as the best option, citing the strength of natural kinship bonds:

I don't think twice about him staying with his granny because I know she adores him. And anything that he does, while she might, you know, be cross or she might tell him off or whatever, I know she adores him at the end of it, so she would only want to do right by him.

It was also apparent that families' unique situations shaped their childcare decisions. For example, one father of Asian ethnicity spoke of the family's plans to recruit a childminder from his native country so that the children would have additional exposure to the native language and culture. Additionally, the mother of an adopted daughter took cognisance of the time her daughter had previously spent time in an orphanage and made childcare choices in light of this: "I felt [that] because she may have been somewhat institutionalised....a crèche was going to reinforce this. So I was steering clear of that, if at all possible".

Similarly, some parents were conscious of their children's individual temperaments when considering childcare options. One parent spoke of how she felt the crèche was an ideal fit given her daughter's "incredibly social character". In this way parents sought to identify a goodness-of-fit between childcare choices and the unique characteristics of their families and individual children.

Constraints and barriers

Despite the sense of agency that is notable in the quotations above, it was also evident that parents experienced considerable constraints in navigating, accessing and maintaining childcare arrangements. Unsurprisingly, affordability was a key concern for many parents:

I hated the fact that money came in as a deciding factor…I'd love to choose childcare on what I feel is best for my babies, not what I feel I can afford, and that grates on me, it really, really grates on me, you know.

Another mother explained how she could not afford to give up work after the birth of her first child, but now that she is expecting her second child, the additional childcare cost is presenting another dilemma:

I know we can't afford two kids in a crèche, that's not going to be an option, so we're looking at having to get somebody in to the house. So that's a whole new spectrum of queries, concerns and anxieties, who will we get, how will we trust them, how do we know what they're doing during the day..

Many parents invested considerable resources in making childcare decisions by actively seeking out information, making enquiries, visiting crèches and interviewing carers. In this way, decisions were often made through 'a process of elimination'. However, it was also evident that decisions were sometimes heavily reliant on parents' gut instinct, on word-of-mouth testimonials, and chance encounters:

And then when I came to this other crèche… I just… my gut! I just didn't like it… The one that we chose in the end is round the corner and my niece had already been there for a year and they loved it and they totally recommended it and I got such a good vibe from it.

I kind of had it in my head, I really wanted a childminder. But then I didn't know who was good, or who wasn't good – so I really wanted to go for somebody who was recommended. So I went to a funeral and I met a girl that I went to secondary school with, and she recommended the lady that I'm currently with.

The above narratives show that parents in general had little information available to them and did not feel supported in making childcare decisions. There often remained significant uncertainty as to whether their choices are the right ones for their children, which led to considerable stress and worry in some cases. Commenting on the process of selecting childcare one mother stated:

You find out in having kids probably the most stressful part of it is the childcare! Something I never even registered as being difficult or as being challenging…

Another mother commented:

So we were trying to decide what to do and I went and visited I'd say ten crèches.... Interviewed probably another ten potential child minders and found the whole thing so traumatic. I just thought it was the most awful experience.

Furthermore, while most families expressed satisfaction with their current childcare arrangements, some experienced ongoing conflict with regard to the choices they had made:

I've consistently struggled with the crèche. I don't know whether I'm happy with it or not.

I felt massively that I was handing the responsibility of moulding him and bringing him up to somebody else and I really very deeply felt that that's not what I wanted.

Discussion and Conclusions

Families are complex and dynamic and have diverse needs in relation to early years' services. The parents interviewed in this study used a wide range of supports, including centre-based care, grandparents and wider family members, childminders, and after-school clubs. Each have a crucial role to play and it is important that policy makers enable families to have greater access and choice to a range of quality options. As highlighted elsewhere, there is a need for a coherent and integrated system to support families in balancing work and family commitments

... this situation is highly inequitable as it allows those with most resources access the highest quality options

(Hayes, 2010; NWCI, 2005; Plantenga and Remery, 2013).

It is noteworthy, that parents commented on the important sense of belonging that typified small, community crèches.

Worryingly, it is precisely these types of service that appear to be struggling financially. Indeed, many service providers are under considerable financial and personal pressure, and are fearful that their services may be forced to close (Matson, 2014). There is a strong need therefore, to consider various models of investment and support so that community services are sustainable.

Many parents make child care choices with inadequate information, no support and a great deal of stress. Although the Irish government publishes childcare inspection reports, these alone are insufficient as sources of information because they are only available for centre-based services and they focus predominantly on structural features of quality (adult-child ratios, hygiene etc).

They do not give adequate information on the crucial process-oriented aspects of quality that matter most to parents and children. Given the backdrop of private market provision coupled with inadequate information, the current system places a huge onus on families to "shop around" and make discerning and nuanced judgements about the quality of services. Clearly, families have different levels of capital (economic,

cultural and social) to mobilise in this decision-making process (Fuller at al., 1996). Ultimately, this situation is highly inequitable as it allows those with most resources access the highest quality options, thereby reinforcing social inequalities at the earliest and most formative stage of childhood.

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Food Marketing to Young Children on the Island of Ireland: Parents' Views, Attitudes and Practices, and Implications for Early Years Policy

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Introduction

Food advertising significantly (and independently) affects children's food preferences and consumption, with long-term effects on health (Cairns et al., 2013), and is therefore regulated across the island of Ireland. However, restrictions on unhealthy food advertising apply only during children's TV programming, yet young children watch substantial amounts of TV at other times. Thus they continue to see at least 1000 unhealthy food ads annually in the Republic of Ireland and 700 in Northern Ireland (Tatlow-Golden, 2014).

TV remains the major viewing medium for younger children, but digital viewing is increasing (Federal Trade Commission, 2013; Ofcom, 2014). Online food advertising is unregulated; combined with continued TV food advertising exposure, even in jurisdictions with regulations, this is a concern to policy makers worldwide.

To date, most research on advertising effects has focused on later childhood, but indications are that advertising exposure in the early years affects early taste preference and brand awareness. By three to five years of age, young children who have detailed mental representations of fast-food and soft drink brands (through advertising exposure as well as experience) also have higher salt, fat and sugar food preferences (Cornwell and McAlister, 2011). Even without conscious cognitive processing, advertising implicitly develops decades-long emotional associations with food brands, and exposure earlier in childhood may create stronger, longer-lasting attachments (Braun-LaTour et al., 2007; Nairn and Fine, 2008; Connell et al., 2014).

Across the island of Ireland, children aged three to five years had high levels of knowledge about eating healthy foods (fruit, vegetables, potatoes and milk) but knew much less about restraint regarding unhealthy foods (sweets, savoury snacks, deep-fried foods). Furthermore, when shown food brand logos, for brands advertised to a similar degree at times young children watch television, children's food brand knowledge was significantly greater for unhealthy brands, compared to healthy ones. In addition, unhealthy food *brand* knowledge advanced significantly between three and four years, before children's knowledge of unhealthy *food* started to develop (Tatlow-Golden et al., 2013, 2014).

Parental mediation of advertising – through explanation and/or restriction – can modify children's food preferences and choices (Buijzen, 2009). However, parents are reported to rarely engage in such activities, focusing more on content appropriateness than advertising (Ofcom, 2014). To design effective policy for public education and early years settings in Ireland, it is essential to identify the views and practices of parents in Ireland. As part of the study, cited above, exploring pre-schoolers' understanding of food and food marketing, we examined parents' views regarding advertising food and drink to young children and the effects on their children's food preferences, and parents' practices in mediating such advertising exposure.