**Implementing counter-hegemonic research approaches to evaluating high-profile, national policies in Early Childhood Education and Care**

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**Introduction**

This paper reports on the counter-hegemonic research methods which were applied to an evaluation of a national policy (henceforth referred to as ‘the policy’) for the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Its focus is on methodological design. It is relevant to policy makers, researchers and practitioners who wish to enact research methods that affirm the expert status of both children and practitioners as ‘truth’ knowers in an inclusive milieu.

**Context**

The policy which was the focus for the counter-hegemonic research methods described in this paper, was implemented in 2016 in a country (‘the country’) in the European Union (EU), and its continuing purpose is to ensure that all children, including those with disabilities, are able to access, and participate in high quality ECEC. In particular, this refers to a state subsidised programme ( ‘the programme’) of mainstream pre-schooling for children aged three to school age. Policy makers in the country had recognised ECEC a powerful catalyst for social inclusion but were aware that children with disabilities were not accessing the programme as fully as their non-disabled peers, often because of barriers in the system. For this reason, the policy was developed to improve pre-schools’ readiness, willingness, and ability to include children with disabilities, towards genuine inclusion. This was in a context where the majority of pre-school providers delivering the programme are private (for profit) organisations.

The policy enacts two types of state-subsidisation, universal support, and targeted support. Universal support includes programmes of continuing professional development (CPD) for early years educators focussed on inclusive practice and leadership for inclusion. Targeted funding is provided when it is considered crucial to the effective inclusion of an individual child following an application process, but the allocation of funding is not dependent on a diagnosis. Targeted elements included subsidies for building alterations, specialist equipment and expert advice according to the needs of individual children with disabilities. Targeted elements also include funding for additional staff, such that the child to adult ratio in the pre-school can be reduced. The purpose of is not one-to-one support, but a more distributed model to counter the tendency for one-to-one support to diminish independence and isolate children from peers and other adults. Figure 1 summarises the universal and targeted supports provided through the policy.

The authors of this paper were commissioned by the government of the country, to investigate the implementation and impact of the policy on the inclusion and participation of children with disabilities in state subsidised ECEC. In what follows we explain how research methods were designed to be counter-hegemonic, and in the spirit of inclusion as a plural and participative human experience.

**Methodological approach.**

*Overview*

A mixed methods approach was adopted to ensure the development of a rich dataset which captured the experiences and perspectives of a large, and varied range of stakeholders. Methods included an analysis of documents and statistics, a review of the international literature, online surveys of parent/carers and practitioners, and multi-modal interviews of varied stakeholders. Finally, 14 case studies were constructed to investigate how well the policy was working to achieve the inclusion of children with disabilities in pre-school settings, for children who were receiving support through the policy. Figure 2 provides a summary of the overall methodological approach. Methods were applied within an ethical framework, and the trustworthiness of the data and interpretations were tested through cross-checking and validation, peer review, expert review, and the constant comparative method. Overall, just over 2,000 stakeholders participated in the study.

*The engagement of ECEC practitioners as co-researchers*

The study innovated the integration of practitioners as co-researchers in the evaluation of the policy. Seventeen practitioner researchers (PRs) were appointed through a selection process that was enacted in collaboration with one of the country’s leading organisations for ECEC advocacy. Criteria for selection included higher level qualifications in ECEC, experience of the policy, and leadership of inclusion in a pre-school setting. PRs engaged in a professional development programme focussed on ethics, research trustworthiness, deployment of the research instruments, and interpretation/write-up. This was provided by a higher education establishment, recognised as the leading provider for teacher and practitioner development. In most cases, PRs were deployed to complete a case study of one pre-school, and then one child attending that pre-school who was receiving support from the policy. More detail on the methods used to elicit the children’s experiences is provided following some explanation of the rationales for involving PRs.

There were two rationales for involving PRs. The first was practical. PRs close-to-practice status would mean more astute awareness of phenomena of interest (e.g., design of learning activities, practice, inclusive interactions). In turn, this would lead to richer data and more authentic interpretation. The second was philosophical and adopted a feminist stance because the intersection of gender and expertise in the labour market is of significant interest for an ECEC workforce. Seminally, Beaverman (1974) explored the way in which work, and skills come to be devalued in sectors where women predominate, a process often referred to as ‘feminisation’ . Where a profession is feminised, its expert status is often diminished, along with pay and status (McNeil, 1998). Globally, and in the country, the phenomena of feminisation has prevailed in the ECEC sector. It has been argued that dominant constructions of the ECEC professional as ‘caregiver’ and ‘childcare worker’ have contributed to this situation (Lyons, 2011; Moloney, 2015). This is because ‘childcare’ discourses reproduce the assumption that the task can be done by any lay person, indeed, any lay woman (Bolton and Muzzio, 2008). Caring for children is often associated with innate or ‘natural’ female propensities, and such naturalisations are one method through which *expert status* and *expertise* is denied (Elson and Pearson 1981), with particular consequences for the ECEC workforce, their pay, and their power (Osgood, 2010). Involving PRs as co-researchers in the evaluation of a high profile national policy was a way to resist such discourses in pursuit of a counter-hegemonic research deign, where counter-hegemony refers to a process that opposes oppressive discourses through self-conscious thought and action (Weiler, 1988).

This philosophy also underpinned the design of methods for eliciting children’s experiences of inclusion. This is explained more fully in what follows.

*Case studies of children, and the elicitation of their lived experience of inclusion*

There is not scope in this paper to describe the methods used in the construction of case studies of settings, aside from noting that these included varied approaches to data collection - including spontaneous encounters with people in the pre-school, semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups, observations of practice, analyses of pre-school spaces, and analyses of documentary artefacts (e.g., policies, assessments). Instead, we focus on the case studies of children.

For case studies of children, PRs implemented an ethnographic, multi-modal mapping approach. The aim was to access children’s own accounts of inclusion in the context of their pre-school. The process drew on a growing tradition of ethnographic methods in research with young children (Renold and Miller, 2013). Such methods are influenced by Deleuzo-Guattarian formulations of meaning and reality, and the manner of their materialisation in social contexts.(Haliday, 2014). The semiotic position recognises multi-modal texts (signs, symbols, gestures, images) as tools for the construction of meaning, and posits that such texts are not an outcome of an innate or natural order, but of the processes through which people accomplish social outcomes in the context of their day-to-day instantiation. The mapping approach would enable young children with disabilities (including those who are not yet verbal, or do not yet use written texts) to communicate something of the lived experience of inclusion, as a social, bodily, and placed based phenomenon. In the mapping approach, there was an opportunity to represent ‘the dynamic realities of young socialities and subjectivities’ (Renold and Mellor, 2013, p24) as these relate to *included* bodies and becoming (Gowers, 2022, 2022a).

Though based on established methods of mapping (see for example, Clark, 2011 and Clark and Moss, 2010), the approach was developed to be bespoke to the research questions and the country context. In summary, a multi-staged approach was implemented by PR’s and is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 shows how the method moved through various stages of development, and began in the security of home, and then progressed to the use of the map as a scaffold for child-led interaction in the pre-school setting. The approach was designed as counter-hegemony, since it sought to investigate a national policy from a child’s perspective, and to bring their voice to policymakers in a rich and persuasive way. It had the potential to affirm the child as an expert in their own lived experience of inclusion, and to enact their right as citizens to have a say in the matters that effect their lives (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – UNCRC, UN, 1989).

There is not scope in this paper to report on and discuss the key findings in depth, so we present some key findings in summary find in what follows. We would not want to deny readers an opportunity to observe the findings that emerged from the methodological approach, even if the observation offers little more than opportunity to glance rather than a gaze on matters of interest.

*Summary of key findings: case studies of children*

In summary, the findings were as follows:

Across the case studies of children, the young participants communicated the importance of belonging and being a valued member of the peer group. Children depicted other children within their maps of the setting and referred to a ‘friend’ when describing the people on their maps, demonstrating their experience of feeling connected and welcome.

Practitioners in the setting figured as important in children’s experiences of inclusion. For some children, the practitioner was someone who supported you with your medical needs and cared for you in place of your own parent/carer. The practitioner was also someone who helped you, comforted you (with talk, gestures, or cuddles) and gave you a sense of security. The practitioner was also someone who children felt they could share their interests with, and who had a relationship with your family.

Children’s emotive responses were highly indicative of their experience of inclusion. They expressed excitement and happiness in and about the spaces where they played with others, and some children expressed ease and confidence about their relationships with others.

Children were able to participate across a range of physical locations, including small, enclosed, and relaxing areas. Outdoor environments were referred to by most children as places that they enjoyed being and interacting with others.

Children interacted with resources in settings, such as visual resources to help them understand the timetable and routine, specialist equipment. They viewed practitioners as people who could help you to join in, even when you were finding it difficult to do so.

Children’s experience of pre-school was one where you could follow your interests and where you had choices.

These findings indicate that, for all of the 14 children engaged in the study, pre-school was a place of belonging, safety, enjoyment, and positive relationships. In essence there was a ‘culture of recognition ‘ (Slee, 2005) where autonomy and co-operation are understood as paradoxical but interdependent aspects for achieving what is just. This is through enabling the realisation of the individual’s life objectives in cooperation with others, in a context where the individual has the greatest possible autonomy (Honneth, 2010). More generally, these findings were in harmony with the broader findings of the commissioned research (publication is pending), which demonstrated that for the majority, the supports delivered by practitioners in the context of the policy had impacted positively on the inclusion and participation of children with disabilities in state subsidised ECEC.

**Conclusion**

This paper had described a counter-hegemonic research approach to the evaluation of a national policy of inclusion for children with disabilities in Early Childhood Education and Care. It has attempted to theoretically position these approaches in feminism and human rights and assert the expert status of both practitioners and children. It has demonstrated how close-to-practice researchers can expertly enable children with disabilities to narrate their lived experience of inclusion, and in so doing, provide nuanced insights into the impact of high profile, national policies. We call on policy makers and researchers to prioritise the participation of close-to-practice researchers, and children in policy evaluations in the ECCE sector, not least to secure authentic, and actionable accounts of how well such policies are working on the ground.

***Figures and Tables***

***Table 1: Summary of the mapping process***

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| --- | --- |
| Stage | Activity |
| 1 | At home with the family, the child and parent/carers share a book ‘My Map Book’ by Sarah Fanelli and talk about life at pre-school. The child is invited to draw a map of their pre-school. |
| 2 | At pre-school with the family, child, and PR: a walking tour of the pre-school with the map, noting the child’s points of interest, utterances, emotional and embodied reactions |
| 3 | PRs take photographs of places, spaces, people, and artefacts of relevance to the child, noting utterances |
| 4 | At pre-school with the child: The PR engages in a focussed conversation with the child, using the map, photographs, and any collected artefacts, to further support the elicitation of lived experiences |
| 5 | The PR interprets the texts in ways that are as a priority, close to the child’s meaning and experience, and secondarily, related to the country’s policy definition of inclusion as equity, an experience of being welcomed, belonging, able to participate fully, and able to grow/progress |

State-Funded Universal Supports

Available to all pre-schools with state registration

CPD in inclusive practice

CPD and qualification in inclusive leadership

Information and advice for providers and parent/carers

State-Funded Targeted Supports

Expert advice and mentoring from specialist services

Building alternations and specialist equipment

Funding for additional staff

Figure 1: The support structure for the policy

Diagram

Description automatically generated

Figure 2: Summary of methods applied to the evaluation of the Policy

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