A comparison of early years practitioners’ conceptualisations of young children and the impact of these on practice and provision in pre-compulsory settings in Murcia, Spain and Kent, England.

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Abstract
This paper draws upon research undertaken in the County of Kent and the Region of Murcia for a PhD funded by the Froebel Educational Institute, Roehampton. The research is based on the premise that an ideology of childhood functions as a collection of ideas about what children are like that informs the best ways of teaching or socialising them. To become aware of practitioners’ ‘ethnotheories’ or cultural belief systems, data were collected using interviews and observations in six pre-compulsory early years settings in the County of Kent, England and the Region of Murcia, Spain. These were examined to identify any differences in practitioners’ attitudes to child-rearing. Qualitative analysis of these data suggests that practitioners in Kent and Murcia have contrasting priorities both about what their settings should offer to the children that attend, and also in the type of social interactions that they enter into with the children. These become evident in practitioners’ planning and organisation of activities in the settings. In particular, the Murcian practitioners seem to give priority to group activities whilst the practitioners in Kent tend to emphasise the importance of individual choice. The Kent practitioners saw independence and autonomy as being desirable qualities to foster in young children. However, the children in the Kent settings were given less opportunities to develop these qualities due to the amount of time they were supervised by the practitioners in comparison to their Murcian counterparts.
Background to the research
The initial interest for my doctoral research arose from a personal hunch that Spain may be a more child-friendly/child-centred culture than England (Gomez, 2009). This perception has also been given further support in research reports from organizations that have compared England with other countries on child-focused issues. These include the National Family and Parenting Institute (NFPI) (2000; 2003); the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) (2006); the Social Policy Research Unit (SPRU) (Bradshaw, Hoelscher & Richardson, 2006); the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (2007); the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) (2009) and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) (2008). In particular, the report by the NFPI (2000), in assessing how Britain compared with Europe, although also looking at family and work policy and focusing on the child within the family, indicated that attitudes to children’s presence in public spaces could be improved. On a similar vein, the DCSF (2008) study headed one of its sections in the report “It’s our culture, we don’t like children” (p.67) whilst highlighting the apparently favourable attitudes to children in Mediterranean countries as opposed to those in the United Kingdom (UK).

The IPPR (2006) report and the SPRU (2006) report compared children’s well-being in the European Union. The IPPR report included concerns that the socialising capacity of many parents and communities had waned. This was supported someway by indications that British children tended to spend more time in the company of peers and less time with adults and parents. It was also indicative that adults in Britain appeared less likely to intervene in youth violence and behaviour, than those in Spain. Likewise, adults in Britain were more likely to blame young people for antisocial behaviour than adults in Spain. In the SPRU (2006) report, the UK appeared to fare badly in the overall well-being of its children, being rated 21 out of 25 countries. Although it was top of the league for educational attainment and housing quality, the UK scored poorly for the quality of children’s relationships with their parents and peers and for subjective well-being. In contrast, Spain was rated at 6 out of 25 countries on the league table of well-being, but fared less well on educational attainment and housing quality. It also scored much higher than the UK on the quality of children’s relationships with their parents and peers and children’s subjective well-being.
In turn, the much quoted 2007 UNICEF report attempted to measure and compare children’s well-being under six different dimensions in 21 OECD countries. The UK’s average ranking position out of all dimensions placed it bottom of the table, and Spain was ranked number five. By its own admission, the report was heavily dependent on the currently available data and did not collect any new data. However, as highlighted by James and James (2008) the report has drawn attention to apparent differences in the physical and emotional well-being of children, and has provided a context in which to question the political, cultural and social factors underpinning different childhoods in Europe.

On the other hand, in a league table released by UNICEF’s Innocenti Research Centre (2008) listing ten benchmark standards for early childhood care and education services, England had met five whereas Spain had only met three. England also emerged more positively than Spain in a World Health Organization Report (WHO) (2008) that looked at health-related indicators. Children in England reported lower use of cannabis, said that they had more friends and liked school more than their Spanish counterparts.

Whilst statistical data underpin many of these reports, and recognising the need to read the outcomes critically, they have highlighted some issues that are worthy of further investigation in relation to some of the possible differences between the two countries. Many of these reports have also raised questions pertinent to the culturally and socially constructed beliefs and values about childhood, and the value assigned to children. In turn, these factors appear to inform the respective attitudes of individuals and collective groups towards the centrality and place of children. As Qvortrup (1997) suggests, ‘…individual adults draw on their experience of children in daily life and make generalizations on this basis…’ (p.86).

Comparative studies are crucial to highlight social and cultural diversities within Europe, especially in the light of agreements such as the Lisbon Strategy (2000) and the Barcelona Summit of 2002 that move countries towards an integrated European early childhood and education agenda. Nevertheless, since research undertaken by Penn (1997) there have been no qualitative studies that have compared early childhood and care settings, and the broader child-rearing environments of Spain and England. Thus, it is envisaged that the attention to detail in my small-scale qualitative study will contribute to a better understanding of how different cultures may have contrasting conceptions of children, and how this may define their place and status in
society. My research will also help to begin to make sense of some of the issues that underpin the cultural differences in child rearing that large-scale quantitative studies may identify but fail to explain. Thus, by focusing on one locality in Spain and another in England, the intention has been to begin to highlight some of the key differences in their cultures which may lead to insights about whole societies and what the good life may be, or in particular, what a good childhood might consist of, or even be perceived as.

**Conceptualisations of young children**

As Harkness, Raef and Super (2000) propose, different ideas about children, childhood and childrearing can be viewed at several levels – the global level – for example, differences between East and West; the societal level – differences between social classes, cultural groups and groups with different educational backgrounds; and at a community level – focusing upon differences in social roles. Additionally, they may be explored in terms of universal categories such as individualism or collectivism or within a framework of variability in socially constructed concepts of the child, or children. How the topic of study is approached will depend on whether children are seen to have their own identity or viewed as becoming adults.

Sociologists such as Jenks (1996); James and Prout (2008) view childhood as a social construct. This is defined by James and James (2004) as the:

…complex interweaving of social structures, political and economic institutions, beliefs, cultural mores, laws, policies and the everyday actions of both adults and children, in the home and on the street…(p.13)

Anthropologists have studied the cultural belief systems (or ethnotheories) of childrearing (Super and Harkness, 1986), and socialization and enculturation in comparative cross-cultural contexts (LeVine, 2003). Hoffman (2003) writes of childhood ideologies that function ‘in each nation as a complex of ideas about what children are like and how best to teach and socialise them’ (p.190). From a psychological perspective the value of children has been classified in terms of their Psychological–emotional value; Economic-utilitarian value and their Social-normative value (Suckow and Klaus, 2002). The literature on the positive and negative dimensions of the value of children (voc) (Arnold, Bulatao, Buripakdi,
Chung, Fawcett Iritani, Lee and Wu, 1975; Suckow and Klaus, 2002) and pronatalism (Jones and Brayfield, 1997) is particularly interesting in the context of Spain’s falling birthrate. However, as research on the value of children and pronatalism mainly focuses on parents’ reasons for having children, it may hide their ambivalence to other people’s children (Madge, 2007; Aynsley-Green, 2003; 2007) and mask discrepancies between self-interest and societal-interest (Arnold et al. 1975).

As aforementioned, one way of helping to understand cultural differences and similarities, and their influences on educational practices, has been to make use of a collectivistic and individualistic framework. The continuum of collectivism-individualism represents the degree to which a culture places emphasis on fostering interdependent relations, social responsibility, and the well-being of the group versus fostering independence and individual fulfilment (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield & Quiroz, 2001). In turn, the former label has been assigned to Hispanic countries and the latter to Anglo-Saxon, northern European cultural contexts (Triandis, 1990, 1995; Ho, Holmes & Cooper, 2004). Other studies have drawn upon alternative terms to describe the concepts of individualism and collectivism such as modern and traditional (Palacios and Moreno, 1996), and independence and interdependence (Raeff, 2006).

Nevertheless, employing these dichotomies may be a simplistic way of viewing societies especially as a number of studies have found that individualism and collectivism appear to coexist not only within societies but also within individuals (Killen and Wainryb, 2000; Harkness, Super and van Tijen, 2006; Raeff, 2006). Thus, it appears more prudent to view these distinctions as ‘…graded, interrelated, and multi-dimensional’ (Huijbregts et al. 2008, p.234) or as suggested by Greenfield and Cocking (1994) as ideal types at opposite ends of a continuum. However, some of the perceived problems associated with contemporary child-rearing, especially in England, have been linked to the evils of individualism (Thomas and Hocking, 2003; Layard and Dunn, 2009). Consequently, as individualism is often considered to be detrimental to a positive childhood and the collective values of a country appear to render it being perceived as ‘child-friendly’, data relating to these two constructs have been examined.

Referring to a study which was part of the project ‘Care Work in Europe: Current Understandings and Future Directions’, Cameron (2007) indicated, that in the four countries focused upon there was variability in the meanings early years practitioners
assigned to notions of independence and choice. Thus, comments from expert and care worker groups revealed that these notions were linked to ‘…practising decision-making, expressing individuality, exercising creativity and experiencing freedom’ (p.479). In particular, providing a structure to enable children to exercise choice and develop individuality appeared to be a key priority in English early childhood settings. This is compatible with the frequent references to developing independence and to the individual needs of children, learning etc. in the *The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfES)* (2007). On the other hand, in a study by Harkness, Blom, Oliva, Moscardino, Zylicz, Bermudez, Feng, Carrasco-Zylicz, Axia and Super (2007), exploring teachers’ ethnotheories of the ‘ideal student’ in five western societies, independence or autonomy were valued qualities mentioned in all the groups apart from Spain. Nevertheless, one of the three key areas in the Spanish curriculum for early years - *El currículo de la Educación Infantil (Ley Orgánica de Educación 2006)* is Area de Identidad y Autonomía Personal (Area of Identity and Personal Autonomy). However, closer examination of this document indicates that the development of the child’s personal autonomy is closely related to his or her membership of the group.

Contemporary scholarly and popular literature asks ‘What are children for?’ (Taylor & Taylor, 2003). It explores topics such as the consequences of living in a risk averse society (Gill, 2007; Piper and Stronach, 2008; Furedi & Bristow, 2008; Guldberg, 2009), the moral panic about parents, children and childhood (Freely, 2002; Brooks, 2006; Furedi, 2008). In doing so, it bemoans the loss of childhood, writes of disappearing childhoods (Postman, 1994), warns of the toxic perils of modern society (Palmer, 2006, 2007) and proposes solutions to create better childhoods (Clinton, 2007; Layard & Dunn, 2009). Consequently, it has also been interesting to take note of these contemporary concerns that have emerged in the analysis and interpretation of the data collected in Kent and Murcia. This is especially pertinent in the context of the literature on risk aversion that focuses on topics such as children’s loss of freedom and fears for their safety, particularly in terms of their relationships with adults and their lack of opportunities for challenging play. In turn, these concerns may have implications for practices aimed at developing children’s independence and autonomy.

**Research Methods**
The fieldwork for this small-scale qualitative study has been undertaken in two parts. Phase One of the empirical research investigated whether or not there were differences in adult-child interactions and practices in pre-compulsory early years settings in (Murcia) Spain and (Kent) England. This was a multi-site ethnographic case study which made use of observations and interviews. The case studies comprised six pre-compulsory early years settings (three in Murcia and three in Kent). Taking the findings from these early years settings as a starting point, the second phase of this study investigated whether or not the differences, identified in the pre-compulsory early years settings, were reflected in broader social attitudes towards children and childhood. Thus, 18 research participants who negotiate the place of young children in public spaces were interviewed. These comprised three restaurateurs, three hoteliers and three representatives from shopping centres in both Kent and Murcia. Additionally, parents and carers who had experienced spending time in the two countries with young children were interviewed.

In this paper I focus upon Phase One of the study that was undertaken in the six pre-compulsory early years settings. The purpose of this part of the study was to address the following two questions:

- Are there significant differences in adult-child interactions and relationships that define their practices in pre-compulsory early years settings in (Murcia) Spain and (Kent) England?
- Do identified formal patterns of interactions and adults’ beliefs and values that underpin their attitudes towards children in early years settings reflect the social location of young children within the cultures investigated?

Data were collected using semi-structured interview schedules with 48 early years practitioners (23 in England and 25 in Spain). All of them were female and their ages ranged from early twenties to mid-sixties. Their time spent working with young children varied from just two months to 37 years, and some of the practitioners were unqualified whilst others held degree level qualifications. Observations of practitioners’ daily practices, and their interactions and relationships with the children in their care were also undertaken.

The selected areas: the County of Kent and the Region of Murcia
The two areas selected as the focus for the research were Murcia and Kent. Murcia is situated in the South East of Spain and Kent is located in the South East of England. These areas were chosen in terms of practical issues such as ease of access, and also geographic, economic and demographic factors. In 2008, the Region of Murcia had a population of 1,411,623 (Centro Regional de Estadística de Murcia (CREM)) and in 2007 the County of Kent had a population of 1,394,700 (Kent County Council). Additionally, both the Region of Murcia and the County of Kent place particular emphasis on their agricultural produce – Kent is known as the ‘Garden of England’ and Murcia is known as the ‘Huerta de Espana’ (Market Garden of Spain) and the ‘Huerta de Europa’ (Market Garden of Europe). Likewise, in researching the local histories of the two areas I also discovered that they both have historical records of children working in agriculture.

Both the chosen localities have coastal areas, urban areas and semi-rural areas. Access was gained to an out-of-town setting, a coastal setting and a town/city setting in Murcia and also in Kent to ensure that different infrastructures and socio-economic backgrounds were represented. This enabled comparisons to be made both within the country, for example to consider if the geographical location had any impact on the practices, and also between the countries. It is notable that the two town/city early years settings were situated in areas with high levels of local authority housing.

The countries’ curricula

Whilst the data were being collected, both countries were, and still are, undergoing changes in relation to the organisation and structure of their pre-compulsory early years settings. However, information obtained on both the Spanish early years curriculum *El currículo de la Educación Infantil* (*Ley Orgánica de Educación 2006*) and *The Early Years Foundation Stage* (*EYFS*) (*DfES*) (2007) enabled comparisons to be made between the two systems. Although a national framework (*Ley Orgánica de Educación*) was in place in Spain, as Murcia was an autonomous region, it also had its own localised curriculum (*Los Reales Decretos – autonomías*). Spain’s pre-compulsory phase consists of two cycles (0 - 3 years and 3 - 6 years), whereas England has brought together its previous frameworks (*Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* and *Birth to Three Matters*). As a result of this the *Early Years Foundation Stage* is a continuous curriculum for children from birth to the end of the academic year in which a child has their fifth birthday. Although the English and
Spanish systems of early years education and care, varied in size and scope, one of the salient features was that they both appeared to be based upon educational values that were linked to children’s ages and stages.

Additionally, closer analysis of the previously mentioned UNICEF’s Innocenti Research Centre (2008) report indicated many similarities in terms of services and provision for early childhood education and care. Namely, both countries had subsidized and accredited early education services for 80% of four year olds; 80% of the child care staff was trained and 50% of staff in accredited early education services was tertiary educated and held a relevant qualification. However, Spain did not meet the benchmark standard for the availability of child care services for children under three, and neither country had met the benchmarks for parental leave or the minimum staff-to-children ratio of 1:15 in pre-school education.

**The practitioners’ backgrounds and their reasons for working with children**

The 23 Kent practitioners held a variety of childcare/education qualifications and many were in the process of working towards new or additional ones. Only two of the practitioners did not hold any relevant qualifications. Significantly only five of them had chosen to work with young children directly after leaving school and all of these practitioners had experienced working in other environments such as shops and bars. The following comments were typical of how practitioners explained their reasons for starting to work in early years settings:

…its funny when you think about a career in early years because I started doing it when my kids went to playgroup and they found out I could play the piano and they roped me in…it suited me when my kids were young because then it was only open four days…HF grew and needed to be more professional and then Ofsted came on to the scene…when I first started we couldn’t afford to pay me…Well I can say it was by accident [how I came to work with children].

*Kent Setting 3, Interview with Practitioner Lis*

I sort of fell into it…I had children at school with Al’s children and Al and I worked together at B & Q…We worked together in the evenings and we got talking and Al said ‘Well if a job comes up’ and it did…Well it fitted in with [my children]…I really enjoy it.
Taking into account the broad range of qualifications and routes taken into working with young children it was perhaps not surprising that practitioners in Kent, when asked about their job title, responded with a variety of terms including amongst others ‘nursery assistant’, ‘playgroup assistant’, ‘nursery nurse’, and several were unsure about their title.

On the other hand, all of the Murcian practitioners, except for the managers, said they were either ‘educadoras’ or teachers. They were trained in ‘Técnico Superior Educación Infantil’ (Two year vocational route) and/or ‘Maestra Educación Infantil’ (Three year university route). Likewise, only two of the Murcian practitioners had not commenced their career in early childhood directly after leaving school. In discussing why they had chosen the early childhood career route, practitioners frequently spoke of their decision in terms of their affinity with young children and the rewards that this type of work brings:

I chose it because I liked children and also because this phase is the foundation of teaching and learning to which I can contribute…It is very gratifying for me.

(Murcia Setting 6, Interview with Practitioner En)

It is a very nice and satisfying job and in general I love the education and particularly with children so young.

(Murcia Setting 5, Interview with Practitioner MJ)

The consistency of responses in relation to the Murcian practitioners’ awareness of their job titles and their clear awareness of their roles at the setting were resonant with a shared group professionalism or identity that appeared to be underpinned by their training. Alternatively, the Kent practitioners, although mentioning that their training had been useful to them, appeared to hold a wider variety of personal beliefs that informed their child-rearing goals.

Practitioners’ priorities for the children’s care and education
The Murcian practitioners were very clear about what their settings could and should offer the children who attended – professional staff, timetables and routines, an educational programme and a need to meet children’s basic needs:

I think the stage 0-3 [years] is educational and my work is to educate. I believe that the teachers of Educación Infantil are an essential pillar for the development of the children.

(Murcia Setting 6, Interview with Practitioner Ma)

…[the setting] helps the children to have a routine because they are going to begin school later, which is obligatory, and they will have to adapt themselves to be with other children…

(Murcia Setting 4, Interview with Practitioner Mar)

It is very important to attend to [children’s] basic necessities (sleep, hygiene, diet etc.)…

(Murcia Setting 5, Interview with Practitioner P)

Conversely, the Kent practitioners emphasised a more informal set of priorities; promoting life skills in a warm, safe, caring environment, or as described by the following practitioner – providing a ‘little haven’…

I sometimes think of [the setting] as being like a little haven… so that when they come in and if they’ve had a fight with mum or something horrible has happened they feel safe…

(Kent Setting 3, Interview with Practitioner Sa)

Children go out from here able to know what their names look like and able to take their shoes and socks off and go to the toilet. What more can you ask for – what more can you teach them at three and a half?

(Kent Setting 1, Interview with Practitioner C)

I think its important they feel they’re safe and you know - this is a nice place to be and they’re happy here.
Practitioners’ prioritised interactions with the children
Practitioners from both Kent and Murcia said that they interacted with children constantly throughout the sessions. However, with regard to the types of social interactions the practitioners prioritised in their daily practice, practitioners from Kent emphasised the importance of informally interacting with small groups and individuals. In particular they emphasised the importance of greeting children when they arrived in the morning and chatting to them during snacktime and also when they were working with them at the craft table, predominantly in small groups or individually.

I interact with the children as soon as they walk in the door – ‘Hello – How are you? That’s a nice coat; That’s a nice hat’; and to those who are not sure about coming in ‘Shall we go and do this?’; ‘Shall we go and do that?’…We’re constantly talking to them – poor little things, little darlings. Constantly.

(Kent Setting 1, Interview with Practitioner C)

Milk bar (snacktime that lasts for an hour to enable children to decide when they have a drink and snack) is a really good time – you can listen to what they are saying and they also learn how to listen to others.

(Kent Setting 3, Interview with Practitioner Su)

In relation to the Murcian settings, the most frequently mentioned times for interacting with the children were when the practitioners were changing the children’s nappies or when they were assisting them with personal care routines (i.e. cleaning teeth, brushing/styling hair), and also whole group assembly times:

During nappy changing, when the children are small it is a very personal and important moment.

(Murcia Setting 4, Interview with Practitioner No)
Interactions are frequent …during assembly, where we greet each other… we also observe if we are missing one of our companions and we tell the tale of Topi [the class squirrel mascot].

(Murcia Setting 6, Interview with Practitioner Ad)

The changing of children’s nappies appeared to serve a different function at Setting 3 in Kent…

I mean I can change like five nappies in less than five minutes…Well – I’ve done it so many times.

(Kent Setting 3, Interview with Practitioner Fio)

Arrangement of social environments in which interactions took place

The use of time was a salient feature in all six early years settings. All of the settings in both Kent and Murcia had a daily routine or timetable of activities which were predominantly adhered to. However, the planned length of time, allocated to the various activities and times (i.e. storytime), was negotiable rather than rigid, and was sometimes modified in response to unexpected events or external demands.

The children’s time in the three Murcian settings was underpinned by a range of highly structured and significantly unstructured activities. During a structured activity the children would work with their class group in their aula (classroom) usually with one adult. Class groups ranged in size from eight children to 20+ children depending on age and setting. This frequently involved the whole class completing an activity from their individual workbooks as in the following example:

[After Practitioner No has explained the activities to the 19 children whilst they are sitting on the floor as a group]…the children are then told to sit down at the three tables for the first activity. Practitioner (No) stands in front of the three tables to demonstrate the first activity. She holds up a picture of two children (from the children’s workbooks) holding a hoop each. The children have to colour one hoop in yellow and the other one red…the Practitioner gives them a yellow crayon. All the children colour in the first hoop. They are then given a red crayon to colour in the second hoop. Most children do this. Some of the children say they have finished. When the Practitioner considers the picture is
coloured in sufficiently she says ‘Muy bien’ and the paper is collected by her (to put into the child’s folder)...When all the children have coloured in their red and yellow hoops – they are given their masks of ‘Topi’ the class squirrel mascot and a small blob of red plasticine. The practitioner moves around the tables putting a blob of glue from a tube of glue on to the nose of each child’s mask. Children stick the ‘red nose’ on to the blob of glue. Most children sit on their chairs as they have been told to do by the practitioner. Some children wriggle...they are told by the Practitioner to sit still until everyone has finished.

(Observation: Murcia Setting 4)

Other whole class group activities led by Murcian practitioners included singing songs, reading a story, explaining an activity, and modelling with plasticine. The groups also shared short rest times in addition to a two hour siesta after their lunch. At other times; for example, when children were still arriving in the morning, when the practitioner was in the bathroom with individual children or when children were waiting between structured activities children would select from a limited amount of resources or, as in Setting 5 and 6 choose to play in one of the various rincones (corners) which included a book corner, ball pool and role-play area.

It was significant that the play spaces in the Murcian settings contained fewer resources than the settings in Kent. In contrast to the structured activities, physical play sessions took place on a daily basis; outdoors if the weather was fine and indoors if the weather was inclement. During these periods interactions between practitioners and children were minimal and children from all the aulas (classrooms) would share the play space. The following extract from my research diary describes how the structure in one of the Murcian settings sometimes appeared to descend into chaos:

I can’t quite believe what happened next...Practitioner A tips out box of small plastic bricks...and puts on CD of children’s Spanish songs. Most of the children squeal loudly and dance around the area near the mirror. Whilst they are doing this Practitioner (A) takes the children to the bathroom individually and combs their hair (putting gel on and putting pigtails or bunches in girls’ hair). Out in the aula, blocks are being thrown by the children – hitting some of the children – several of the children are fighting. One child builds a large tower – some children take blocks over to the table. A mother arrives to collect child
and appears to be used to this happening (she seems unperturbed by the ‘chaos’). Practitioner (A) is still in the changing room styling children’s hair. After 15 minutes Practitioner (A) asks the children to collect the bricks – several bricks fly through the air – just missing me and the other children.

(Extract from Research Diary: Murcia Setting 4)

On the other hand, in the three Kent settings, practitioners emphasised the importance of setting up a wide variety of resources and small group activities from which the children could choose. Practitioners frequently worked on a one-to-one basis with the children in small groups and occasionally children were organised by age to undertake more structured activities, for example, playing a board game. However, due to the open plan nature of the Kent settings there was less segregation by age as in the Murcian settings. Additionally, as indicated in the following extract from an interview with Practitioner E, practitioners emphasised the importance of children’s individual choice:

I mean we’ve got our daily routine but only in the loosest sense of the term. I mean at snacktime …[children] just come and go as they want…I completely agree with that…because I think sitting them all down at ten o’clock altogether is wrong… they’re not ready for it some of them and at storytime they’ve got the option. If they don’t want to sit they just go off next door …I just don’t understand why it is important…to make a child do something they do not want to do.

(Kent Setting 3, Interview with Practitioner E)

Although practitioners at Setting 3 sometimes organised a whole group craft activity, most whole group activities at the Kent settings were confined to storytime, circle time and singing time, and rarely lasted more than 20 minutes. The two Kent settings (Setting 2 and 3) that had outdoor play areas did not have set times for using the outdoor space and at Setting 3 children had free access to this space for most of the sessions. However, as noted in this observation of the children using the indoor area at Setting 3, there were always several practitioners out there to monitor and join in with the children’s play:
In Room two children are involved in a variety of activities with and without practitioners. Two children are playing with the trains and track – a third child joins them. Child is playing next to them alone with plastic farm animals. Two children are at a table with P (N) drawing and cutting – she is helping them to make envelopes for their creations. P (Li) is playing in the ‘Home Corner’ with three children. P (An) is at a table with building some ‘wooden puzzle blocks’ with three children. P (Fi) enters into room to look for children who have not yet completed their Christmas cards. P (An) momentarily leaves the room and the children at the table she has left start to disagree. P (Li) comments ‘It falls apart when an adult isn’t there’. 

( Observation: Kent Setting 3)

Thus, the children in the Kent settings had fewer opportunities to play independently away from the watchful eye of adults than the children in the Murcian settings. In turn, there was not the same demarcation between highly structured activities and unstructured activities as in the Murcian settings.

Discussion

In analysing the resultant data, within an interpretive framework, I argue that the similarities and differences in interactions and practices observed in the six case study settings are a reflection of how practitioners individually and collectively conceptualise young children. Thus practitioners’ decision to encourage children to become involved in certain activities or alternatively not to become involved in others arise from the qualities they value and want to foster in the children in their care.

With regard to the Murcian settings it seems that some of the practice observed is compatible with the European Child Care and Education Study (ECCE Study Group, 1997) of Spanish settings with three other European countries that indicated that Spain had a traditionally more academic approach and facilities and equipment that may limit play activities.

Locating these data within a social constructionist framework and also drawing upon the idea of ethnotheories – cultural belief systems that parents (Harkness and Super, 1996) and teachers (Harkness, Blom, Oliva, Moscardino, Zylicz, Bermudez, Feng, Carrasco-Zylicz, Axia & Super, 2007) hold regarding the nature of children has been helpful. For example, the Murcian practitioners placed more emphasis on
interdependent relations and the well-being of the group. Children were expected to sit still and to listen during adult-led whole group activities. Thus if a child was misbehaving during a group activity such as storytime they were frequently sent out of the room. In particular (Setting 6) had a ‘banco amarillo’ (yellow bench) outside the classrooms where children who, for example, were not sitting correctly at group activities were sent to sit. At other times, children were not supervised as vigilantly as the Kent children. Thus, the practitioners appeared to place less emphasis on safety aspects. The Murcian children were also observed engaging in more risky behaviours, especially outdoors, than the children in the Kent settings. Although this could be due to the larger number of children they are responsible for, none of the Murcian practitioners, when interviewed, suggested that safety was a key priority for them.

When discussing the promotion of children’s autonomy, the Murcian practitioners emphasised the importance of encouraging children to look after themselves, both in play situations and also in terms of personal care. With regard to the first point, children were more likely to sort out their own disputes between themselves and their peers without adult intervention. In terms of children’s personal care practitioners allocated a significant amount of time to this activity. This involved frequent adult child interactions during changing and toileting times, and when grooming and styling children’s hair.

In the Kent settings, children were encouraged by the practitioners to make independent choices in relation to the type of activities that they would like to engage in that fulfilled them individually. However, there were few observed times when children were able to sustain an activity without being approached by an adult. Additionally, when playing outdoors, children were carefully monitored by adults to ensure their safety, to observe their play and practitioners were frequently observed encouraging children to share the resources with their peers. For example, practitioners would keep a check upon how long children had been using a piece of shared play equipment such as a bike and then ask them to let other children have a turn. In some cases, a timer was used to ensure that all children, who wanted to, were able to use a piece of equipment such as the computer. Thus, in the Kent settings, independence involved practitioners providing activities from which children could choose to enable the development of their individual autonomy. However, individual choice was not necessarily equated with more freedom.
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In summary, early years settings are useful sites for investigating the cultural values and beliefs of the practitioners who work with young children on a daily basis. These can be revealed in the practitioners’ prioritisation of activities, and the time and space allocated to these. In particular, the exploration of practitioners’ ethnotheories has also been helpful in highlighting the qualities that they privilege in terms of developing children’s individuality and/or a group ethos. Focusing upon these in two locations; Kent and Murcia, has indicated their influence upon the underpinning structures of the early years settings, and also in terms of the type of adult-child relations, and the frequency of adult-child interactions. In turn, these will impact on some of the contemporary concerns of childhood such as the balance between risk and freedom, and affective dimensions such as physical affection. Nevertheless, further attention needs to be given to the interplay between the practitioners’ cultural belief systems and the respective frameworks of curricular requirements in which they operate. Thus, future analysis will give further attention to the two other features of the developmental niche, in addition to practitioners’ dominant beliefs or ethnotheories about childhood. These comprise the physical and social settings in which the child lives and the culturally regulated customs of child care (Super and Harkness, 1986).

References


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