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The voice of children in decisions in early learning and care services

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How babies, toddlers and young children had voice in decision-making in the design and delivery of a dance curriculum

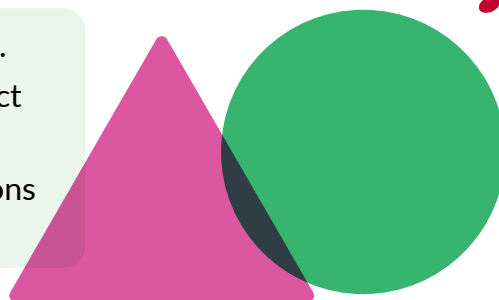
Limerick-Clare Local Creative Youth Partnership partnered with two early learning and care (ELC) services in Limerick city (Childworld and Nursery Times) to explore how babies, toddlers, and young children can have a voice in decision-making in the design and delivery of a six-week dance curriculum. In Childworld, there were fourteen babies and toddlers in the room (aged six months to 24 months) and eight educators. In Nursery Times, there were seven babies and toddlers in the room (aged 12 months to 14 months) and four educators. The dance curriculum was delivered by a professional dance artist and facilitator, who was contracted to undertake the pilot by Limerick-Clare Local Creative Youth Partnership (LCYP).

How the dance facilitator created the conditions for babies, toddlers, and young children to have a voice in decision-making

In both ELC services, the dance facilitator led each dance session. The educators took part in the dancing and movements with the children throughout each session when possible. Both services had toys and play equipment around the room which gave the children the opportunity to choose to do other activities during the dance sessions.

The dance facilitator planned the first dance session in each service by getting feedback from educators on the music and songs that the children like. She also used her own experience of facilitating dance with older children. After the first session, the dance facilitator planned the content of the sessions through:

- a. planning and preparation before each dance session.
- b. using a range of methods to listen to, observe and act on the voice of children during each dance session.
- c. discussions with educators and recording observations after each dance session.



a. Planning and preparation before each dance session

The dance facilitator developed the curriculum for each weekly dance session, based on her own observations of how the children participated in decision-making and what they enjoyed from the previous dance session; the notes she completed after each dance session; and the feedback from educators on their observations and translation of the children's views. With the use of the above material she:

- added movements into the next session that she observed the children enjoying.
- selected music that the children had enjoyed or had been listening to throughout the previous week.

- changed the order of the curriculum for each session so the children could experience movements and music that they liked at the start of the session.
 - planned familiar music for every session, like 'The Wheels on the Bus' because she observed that familiar music relaxed the children and enabled them to express their views.
- b. Using a range of methods to listen to, observe and act on the voice of babies, toddlers, and young children during each dance session**
- The dance facilitator created a safe space and a welcoming environment and started each dance session by inviting the children into a circle.
 - Educators also took part in the sessions and engaged with children in whatever ways the children chose (e.g. carrying a child, holding a child's hand, staying beside a child, dancing with a child).
 - Throughout each session, the facilitator asked children for their favourite songs, called out song options, observed the movements and song children liked, observed children's body language and reactions, modelled and copied the movements of individual children, invited children to join in, enabled children to do other things in the room and communicated with educators.
- c. Discussions with educators after each dance session**
- The facilitator asked the educators what worked best after each session.
 - She asked for their observations of the children and translations of what they observed, including what parts of the session the children enjoyed and didn't enjoy.
 - She asked educators for suggestions about songs and music the children enjoyed and what to add or change for the next session.

How the babies, toddlers and young children were ensured Space, Voice, Audience and Influence

Space

- The children were heard in a safe and familiar space (the preschool), and their familiar and trusted educators took part in every dance session with them.
- The dance facilitator and educators listened to and always observed their views during each dance session.
- The dance facilitator made sure that all children were heard by having a variety of ways for them to communicate and the freedom to choose to participate or not. Educators shared their observations with the dance facilitator about how effectively children were being heard.

Voice

- The dance facilitator provided support for children to communicate and be heard by encouraging them to share their views. The educators interacted with and connected with each child to ensure that they were supported to share their views.
- The dance facilitator regularly asked for the children's views about songs and movements. Children could also show the dance facilitator (in words, gestures, or actions) which dances and music they liked and did not like.
- The dance facilitator and educators provided a range of methods for children to give their views, share their feelings and choose if, how and when to take part in the dance sessions.

Audience

- The practice of the dance facilitator and educators was to tell and show the children through their words and body language how they were ready and willing to always listen to them.
- The children were an 'audience' with a key role in decision-making about the dance curriculum throughout each dance session and from week to week. The dance facilitator and educators were also an 'audience' who ensured that children's views were listened to and acted on.

Influence

- The children were given the opportunity to give their views at any time. The observations of the dance facilitator and educators on the aspects of each session that the children enjoyed and didn't enjoy were also acted on.
- The dance facilitator gave feedback to children in a variety of ways, including observing movements made by individual children and telling the children she was going to copy that child's movements.
- The impact of their views on decision-making was shared with the children through the continuous changes and adaptations made by the dance facilitator.
- The dance facilitator explained to the children in words and actions that the music and movements they chose were being included in each session.