

## Reflections on IFDCO Conference

Patricia Murray

As we came to the closing session of the Conference, I had made some notes to share my reflections but time was moving on – and I thought it better to take some time and distance, and share my reflections on the website.

We started the planning for the conference in April 2008, when a group of the International Executive Committee gathered in Ireland and agreed the theme “*Celebrating Quality Family Child Care*”

This gave me the inspiration to bring our international visitors, as our first stop on the journey from Dublin to Cork, to visit An Cosán which is the Irish word for “pathway” (see [www.ancosan.com](http://www.ancosan.com)) where I had previously been invited to speak to a group of women who had achieved Level 5 in Childcare training there and who were supported by An Cosán in setting up their family day care. An Cosán is committed, in a very spiritual way, to excellence in all the work they undertake, founded on a sincere respect for each person and each child coming there, which covers a wide range of training courses, the childcare services and the counselling. We were welcomed there most warmly, escorted on a tour of the facility where we saw the meeting rooms, the computer room, the counselling rooms and the childcare facility – which provides full and sessional care for the local children and particularly for those whose parents are attending training. We were provided with tea and scones made by those undertaking cookery training. I was proud to showcase the excellent work done in a community which has been severely affected by unemployment and the difficulties that brings to generations of families, particularly children. We were not surprised to learn that An Cosán is applying to deliver the degree course Bachelor of Arts in Early Years Studies. This will be a great opportunity for the community and particularly for the women who have come so far with their studies there.

We carried on our journey to the Rock of Cashel, one of Ireland’s most significant heritage sites, where we had lunch and a guided tour of the site. The rain was torrential as we drove, but magically, the sun came out as we came out of the restaurant which enhanced our visit and gave us a great view of the surrounding countryside and distant mountains. More heavy rain showers as we drove on to Cork and settled into our accommodation – anticipating the days of the conference ahead.

On Wednesday afternoon, our conference opened with a great welcome from the Lord Mayor of Cork, Councillor Dara Murphy. Prof. Francis Douglas was the first keynote speaker – as he was responsible for IFDCO choosing Cork as our conference venue because he elevated childcare training to degree status for the first time in Ireland, by introducing the BA and achieving the first professorship in Early Years Studies in University College Cork. His keynote brought the child to the centre of our conference in a very spiritual way, connecting us with the spiritual approach to children and families in An Cosán. He reminded us to pay attention to intuition, coming from the balanced relationship between the spirit, emotion and rationality and asked us to avoid negative emotions, eat the right food, listen to the guidance given and be open to life and the universe! He joined us in our Ceili – our Irish dancing party and welcome reception - which was a really enjoyable social evening. Many of

our visitors proved to be very proficient Irish dancers, probably those who had seen the Riverdance show in Dublin before coming to Cork!

Sylda Langford, Director General of the Office of the Minister for Children, shared with our visitors her own personal memories of taking exams at UCC in the very hall where we were gathered, the same clock ticking away on the wall. She outlined the strides made in Ireland in building childcare infrastructure over the past decade, and particularly the support mechanisms for family day care and our moving now into implementing quality standards.

Prof. Guy Claxton brought us back to the child's spirit – fostering the spirit of adventure and exploration, and encouraging children to pursue worthwhile goals with reasonable confidence and success. I felt the confidence returning to think more and do less when spending time with my six year old grandson.

Prof. Erik Sigsgaard kept children at the centre of the conference, showing how we are institutionalising childhood – and viewing children's resistance as lacking social competence or disobedience – to which our society responds by increased institutionalisation – more classes, more discipline, more formal teaching! He inspired us to look again at scolding – now almost an out-of-date word in English! Because, he told us, it is “Hush Hush – don't mention it!” It has disappeared from the guidebooks! But he helped us reflect that while we pride ourselves in having removed physical punishment from our schools and childcare, we must be mindful to keep our attitude, our voice and language free from a scolding tone. We must become the children's helpers! And reinforcing what Prof. Claxton had told us – we must allow them out of our sight sometimes. I have received a copy of Prof. Sigsgaard's book *Scolding – why it hurts more than it helps* ISBN 0-8077-4579-0

Prof. Thelma Harms, how enjoyable to hear her speak about the environment in child care in such a child-centred way! We didn't hear a word about square metres or the temperature in the fridge! Her description of becoming a Childminder herself resonated with so many of us. Family Day Care is lucky that Thelma turned her finely-tuned understanding of what constitutes quality in a family home into the FCC Environment Rating Scale, where she identifies it so well.

At short notice, Sumi Fukukawa gave us a very short presentation about family day care in Japan. It was great to see such a large number of Childminder delegates from Japan and I know that language was not a barrier to them enjoying the conference.

I was really disappointed that Sylda Langford was required by the Cabinet to return to the Office of the Minister for Children and that she did not have the opportunity to hear Ronnie Hill from the Children's Services, Regulation & Care Commission in Scotland. I think along with many delegates listening, Ronnie gave us much to think about in terms of proportionate, effective regulation and inspection of FDC homes. Again, he imparted a huge amount of information with a light, engaging delivery – and was so patient that his time was invaded by a late start. I felt that this courtesy was evidenced throughout the conference and a really friendly spirit took hold of us as a group of people – each one of the Keynote speakers and Seminar presenters was friendly and approachable. Many delegates commented on this – maybe the lovely spiritual welcome in An Cosán set a tone for us.

Dr. Judy Layland's pictures of New Zealand got many of us hooked on starting to save now for a big trip to Australia and New Zealand in 2012! During her description of children's participation and the interactions they experience in family day care – and indeed, many times during the conference - I found myself reflecting on my own childhood and my wonderful parents. My mother understood these things and as our Chairperson, Ann Caulfield said – it is really good to know that the positive outcomes of our natural way of working with children is backed up by observation and research. Dr. Judy Layland's "Titi Pāpera Windmill diagram" of the interactive, process model of participation provides a great tool for reflection as well as the basis of descriptive evidence of good practice. As we face quality implementation here in Ireland, such tools will be very helpful in assisting Childminders with portfolio building.

Dr Malene Karlsson brought children's interactions to life in their photo-documentation of what is interesting to them in the family day care. There is an expression that goes "children are the same the world over" and Dr. Malene's work shows how true this is and gave us an understanding of their needs – I thought this research gave us concrete examples of Dr. Claxton's guidance earlier in the week.

Jan White gave us very sound biological understanding of the need for us to encourage children to be active – and to let them do what comes naturally. They know what they need to do, just as Prof. Douglas, Prof. Sigsgaard and Dr. Layland had told us.

Dr. Jacqueline Barnes gave us a tremendous amount of very important information from the Families, Children and Child Care Study in the UK. I did a quick look around my "Grandma's house" before having my grandson to stay again! Dr. Jacqueline whetted my appetite to deliver further into the findings which give us a great opportunity to move forward in the right direction with our childcare policy here in Ireland.

Jeff Johnson spoke to us all, Childminders, academics and parents and left us inspired about the value of our work, the need to be reflective and to care for our own spirits – and I was really surprised and pleased that this vein had run right through the keynotes to the very end of the conference!

My overall reflections are happy! The week was long and demanding for me as well as for all the delegates, but the feedback in the evaluations and in the e-mails received from so many delegates since have been very positive, particularly about the quality and range of presentations over the week. The development of the Research Network has been a very rewarding outcome of the Conference. Family Day Care by its nature is difficult and expensive to study. Because I believe FDC has the capacity to offer children optimal non-parental care, we must study Childminding homes and produce guidance for both legislators and practitioners.

My disappointments were that it was not possible for me to get to as many Seminars as I would have liked. I was also very disappointed for you that my former colleague, Mary McGrath, due to her daughter's illness was unable to present information on her work with children's democratic participation, younger children have a form which mirrors local government at city and county council level [www.comhairlenanog.ie](http://www.comhairlenanog.ie)

and older children have Dáil na nÓg [www.dailnanog.ie](http://www.dailnanog.ie) (Parliament of Youth) which mirrors the Dáil, the Irish House of Commons.

I was disappointed that I did not get the opportunity to welcome each delegate individually, but I know that a warm welcome was extended to each of you by my colleagues, Bernie, Ger, Anne, Fionnuala, Siobhan, Fiona, Mary and Jacquie. I was sorry that in an effort to offer choice, we had two separate social events on simultaneously! Instead of choice, this in fact divided us into groups, and forestalled an opportunity for meeting each other.

I was overcome with emotion on several occasions – slightly overwhelmed by the number of delegates from far and near, that they were willing to travel thousands and thousands of miles to exchange information at every level for the purpose of learning as well as celebrating family day care. The wonderful Keynotes several times evoked memories of the days when my own children were little and our home was a Childminding home. I felt humbled by the extraordinary number of highly renowned and respected researchers willing to participate. I loved the UCC campus – it was big enough and small enough for the size of our group – and how amazing that the heavy rain came when we were indoors – and we walked through the campus in sunshine!

How wonderful to be greeted each day by Ruth and Noirin from Cork County Childcare Committee, offering us a memento of the wonderful week together in Cork and how wonderful to see my colleagues from the Board and staff of *Childminding Ireland* sharing the experience and paying superb attention to the detail of running the Conference so smoothly.

My three years of serving as the World President of IFDCO have been exciting, a bit demanding at times, but how rewarding, how fantastic to host and participate in this conference, to meet so many dedicated, good-humoured and highly esteemed people as the crescendo of those three years.

I know Grace McDonald will be a wonderful successor and I hope many of you will join me in Australia when Grace will welcome us there in 2012.

Patricia Murray.