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# Partnering to Support Early Childhood Development in Eastern Europe

Pauline Walmsley

**NIPPA—The Early Years Organisation** is the largest non-governmental organization in Northern Ireland working with children (infancy to 12 years) and their families and communities. The organization is rooted in a firm value base that considers all young children as strong and competent and as participants in their communities. The work of the organization is based on a children's rights approach, and it endorses the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child as its philosophical foundation.

NIPPA was founded in 1965, just a few years before Northern Ireland erupted in violence. Two groups have fought bitterly and violently over Northern Ireland's governance and political identity: (1) Republicans (primarily Roman Catholic), who hold that Northern Ireland should be joined as one nation with the country of Ireland, and (2) Loyalists (primarily Protestant), who believe that Northern Ireland should remain part of the United Kingdom. The story of NIPPA is inextricably linked with the history of the region.

During the many years of violence, NIPPA consistently worked to meet the needs of children and their families on both sides of the political divide. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, this support manifested itself in the provision of shared space for parents (mainly mothers) to come together to develop and manage services in their local communities for their preschool children.

With the ceasefires in 1994, NIPPA became an Intermediary Funding Body to deliver the child care and early education funds provided by the European Union Special Support Program for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Since that time, the European Union has invested over £40 million (approximately \$81 million) in young children, their families, and their communities in Northern Ireland, with the recognition that such an investment can begin the process of building a more peaceful, stable, tolerant, and inclusive society.

As a result of this role in dispersing funds, in 2001 representatives from NIPPA attended an international conference in Athens where they met representatives from the Christian Children's Fund, Inc. (CCF). The two groups discussed the needs of children and families in the emerging democracies of Eastern Europe.



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**Pauline Walmsley**, MSC, is Director of Knowledge with NIPPA—The Early Years Organisation. Key responsibilities include the maintenance of effective communications and evidence-based policy and advocacy strategies. She is also responsible for expanding opportunities to learn from international best practice and supporting NIPPA to develop a range of strategic partnerships with civic society, ECD (early childhood development), and other governmental and nongovernmental organizations and local communities in Eastern Europe and beyond.

Photos courtesy of NIPPA.

## Partnership for professional development in Eastern Europe

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CCF and NIPPA share common goals. Both organizations are committed to promoting high-quality care and education and supporting families and community development at the regional, national, and international levels. In the two years following the Athens conference, representatives of both organizations attended each other's annual conferences and made study visits to CCF project sites in Eastern Europe and to early years settings in Northern Ireland and in each Eastern European country where CCF worked—Albania, Belarus, Moldova, Serbia, and Ukraine.

These countries had been isolated from the rest of the world for many decades. Totalitarian governments, centralized economies, and a collectivist mentality had been key influences on the social structures in place. During the transition to independence, the countries experienced severe economic problems, massive unemployment, undesired migration, and in some cases, armed conflicts. Public services such as education (including early years) and health care deteriorated. The slow development of democratic society, weakness of civil society, and widespread discrimination against minorities and women were also major problems.

In this social context, CCF in-country staff took NIPPA representatives to visit services for children in small isolated communities in the northern hills of Albania, and other villages in Moldova, Belarus, Serbia, and Ukraine. These services had been organized by local communities with the support of families and local CCF staff. CCF had focused much attention and work on engaging parents, identifying partners—local municipalities, pedagogical institutions, or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—and developing the partnerships to increase access to services for young children and their families.

To address the quality and consistency of services provided for young children, CCF and their local partners asked NIPPA to provide training on quality early childhood care and education. NIPPA personnel provided the trainings to CCF staff or local people working in the services for young children based on their needs.



### Preparing for the training programs

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NIPPA representatives hosted a one-day Round Table consultation in each of the five countries. The Round Table discussions brought together organizations and individuals with an interest in services for young children—representatives of Ministries of Education and Health, representatives from local and regional governments, teachers and preschool providers (including those from state-run kindergartens, where present), educators from teacher training colleges, social workers, psychologists, and representatives of other NGOs.

The meetings served to identify the needs of young children and their families in each country. They raised the profile and awareness of

CCF's work in local communities and examined how to improve the organization's services to children and families. Participants discussed quality early care and education and what it would look like in the local settings. They agreed that those who worked in state kindergartens would receive training alongside those working in community settings. The participants also identified the following as needed training topics: child observation and evaluation, learning through play, adult/child interaction, physical environment and layout, and use of local resources for learning development, including outdoor areas

## The training programs

The training design included formal elements (training workshops) and informal ones (trainers working side-by-side with local practitioners). The training allowed educators from government-based services and those working in the nongovernmental sector to develop working relationships. It also facilitated the further development of relationships between CCF and relevant government departments and agencies to explore how the initiative could be integrated with state programs.

In each country, NIPPA Early Childhood Specialists provided training in six weeklong blocks over a 12-month period. The programs included information on education theories, practical demonstrations, modeling, site visits, and reflective practice. The challenge for trainers was to enable the adult learners to experience a learner-centered approach. Trainers provided materials to enable the adult learners to collaborate with each other to manage their own learning activities. The hope was that such experiences during training would lead the educators to use child-centered approaches in their delivery of learning activities for children when they returned to their classrooms.



### Peer support and reflective practices for teachers

While the original design for the training program had included site visits, the NIPPA trainers decided, in consultation with CCF, to make the visits a more central feature of the program to enable mentoring, modeling, and peer-support strategies. The site visits allowed the trainers to provide individual training to staff, while staff from other sites acted as observers. To maximize the learning potential from this strategy, trainers introduced participants to the concept of reflective practice. These changes to the training program enabled the creation of a rich peer-

learning environment and the development of supportive relationships among the participants, staff members from multiple sites training together.

### Administrative and community support

The training also focused on building the knowledge of local CCF staff members, in particular the country directors and others leading the early childhood programs in each country. NIPPA hosted these leaders during two weeklong visits to NIPPA programs in Northern Ireland to familiarize them with early childhood

settings. They learned about developing strategies for supporting partnerships, governance, and leadership for nongovernmental organizations. This program included training in democracy, advocacy, and relationships with policy makers.

## Evaluating the effectiveness of the training

The evaluation of the training addressed a range of questions, which can be summarized under these two broad themes:

1. To what extent have the activities been undertaken as planned, within schedule and budget?
2. To what extent have the trainings resulted in the anticipated outcomes, and are these of high quality?

To perform the evaluations, CCF and NIPPA staff used a number of instruments. The NIPPA Early Years Specialists, who provided the training, used daily monitoring sheets to assist them in planning. The forms focused on asking the participants about what they had learned that day and identifying further information needs or questions. Participants completed weekly monitoring questionnaires to evaluate the training venues, duration of sessions, and the methods used by trainers and to indicate which ideas they would use from the training and what support they felt they would need to implement the training.

During site visits, trainers taught reflective practice techniques to participants to support them in evaluating what they learned in the trainings and how

they used the information in their classrooms. The reflective practice exercise included these five questions:

- What were the children doing?
- What were the children learning?
- How worthwhile was it?
- What did you, the adult, do?
- What did you learn?

Teachers were to answer these after working with the children in their classrooms.

NIPPA trainers held a weekly meeting with CCF staff and the CCF country director

to review the trainings using the information from the evaluations, establish in-country support structures to help learners implement the practice, and plan the follow-up training program. Evaluation also included group interviews with participants and with the CCF country directors and regional directors.

### Educators' Voices

Participants said they learned much from the training—new philosophies, practical activities, information about how children learn, how to manage activities in a center, how to plan and observe activities, and the adult's role in the classroom. Their comments included:

"We learned the pleasure of play because we experienced play. We were children with drawing, junk art, water, and dough play."

"I learned in a very clear way the importance of good treatment for preschoolers."

"I [now] understand how many things a child can learn from playing and the different areas of development."

Participants were also able to identify how they would change the practice in centers as a result of the training:

"I can change and improve my communication with children and help mothers do the same."

"I saw your role modeling. I did not understand my role before."

"You managed activities very carefully; I did not know I needed to do this with children."



## Impact on Families

Socialization, networking, and integration into new communities are all benefits parents can enjoy when their children attend early childhood education programs. The NIPPA Early Years Specialist visiting a center one year after training had taken place observed that parents who had been sitting around knitting in the past were now communicating freely and openly with each other and participating in activities with the children.

“When I came to this village, I felt very isolated and lonely, and now I have friends in this center.”

“We have learned how to deal with our children and how to play with them. We have learned this from the educator and from each other.”

The role of fathers and the relationship between mothers and fathers has also shifted with the growing confidence of the mothers.

## Next steps for the trainers

NIPPA was aware that participating as a trainer in this program presented a creative and innovative area of work for members of its staff. The organization introduced debriefing meetings for staff returning from work in Albania and Belarus lead by the international project manager. NIPPA used this information from these meetings to inform the induction and orientation of staff who would



be undertaking international work in the future for the organization. In-country CCF staff continued with trainings after the NIPPA trainers completed the original program.

## Conclusion

In total, 90 adults across the five countries participated in the program. Those partic-

ipants teach over 4,500 children. The project has shown very positive effects for children, mothers, families, ECD (early childhood development) practitioners, and communities in the areas of child development and family support. The project has confirmed that the NIPPA model of high-quality care, education, family support, and community development has relevance in Eastern Europe and can be replicated in a culturally appropriate way.

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