

Caroline



Photo H.1: Caroline

Caroline (Photo H.1) lives with her Mum, Dad and older sister Claire in a local authority housing estate on the outskirts of a large city. When this portrait was compiled in the summer term, Caroline was four years and six months old, and had been attending the Early Start unit attached to the local national school since the previous September. She attends five mornings a week, from 9.00 a.m. until 11.30 a.m. each morning. Her mother works part-time, and when she is working, Caroline is brought to school and collected by her childminder, who is a friend of her Mum's. At home, Caroline loves riding on her bicycle, going for walks with her Dad and their three dogs, playing soccer, listening to music and playing her keyboard, and painting. At school, she enjoys all the activities, especially drawing and painting, doing puzzles, sand and water, and story time.

Early Start - Background and context

The pre-school class that Caroline attends is one of those set up under the Early Start Pre-School Pilot Project in 1994/1995 in forty schools in designated disadvantaged areas in Ireland. The objective of the Early Start programme, which is managed, funded and evaluated by the Department of Education and Science (DES), is to address educational disadvantage by targeting children who are at risk of not reaching their potential within the school system by giving them a year of pre-school education before they enter the junior infant class. Each Early Start class is staffed by a primary school teacher and a childcare worker with at least a Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) Level Five certificate in childcare. This Early Start class operates two sessions each day; the first from 9.00 a.m. until 11.30 a.m. and the second from 12 noon to 14.30 p.m. Thirty children aged three to four years are enrolled in all, with fifteen attending each session. Caroline attends the earlier session. Martina is her teacher, and Joanne is the childcare assistant. Both Caroline and her parents see Early Start as *school* and this is how they referred to it in conversation with me.

The school where Caroline's Early Start class is located is bright and modern, red-brick with large windows. The school was built in 1981 beside a small shopping centre, a modern church and a community school, all built around the same time to cater for the large number of people living in social housing nearby. A high fence surrounds the school grounds, but this is freshly painted green and all the gates are open as the children arrive. The Early Start unit is at the right-hand end of the school, which houses the infant classes. The office of the Home-School-Community Liaison officer, and a crèche for children of parents attending adult education classes are also at this end of the school. This section of the school has its own entrance, and a wide hall where parents can wait when collecting their children. On the walls inside the entrance are welcoming notices, information on events for parents and photographs of the children at play.

Curriculum and assessment

A set of draft curriculum guidelines was drawn up in 1998 for use in all Early Start classes by an In-Career Development Team working in collaboration with Early Start personnel. The curriculum guidelines outline a developmental curriculum, with

particular emphasis on developing children's cognitive skills, their language, their personal, social and emotional development and their creative and aesthetic development. Play as a medium for learning is given a prominent place.

Planning and assessment are integral parts of the Early Start Curriculum. Martina, the teacher, and Joanne, the childcare assistant, together plan daily and weekly activities for the group as a whole, usually based around a central theme. Within this, they plan a variety of opportunities for the children's development in each of the key areas of language, cognition and social and personal development. The daily routine in the Early Start class is structured; the overall structure stays the same but the activities within it vary from day to day. For the first 30 to 45 minutes, there is a free-play session, where the children can choose from the materials on offer. The rest of the session is organised into small and large group activities, pair and individual work.

Martina and Joanne find the small group and pair activities particularly useful for monitoring the children's progress and identifying their interests. They regularly review and record on a summary sheet each child's progress in the key areas and adapt the overall plan according to the child's individual needs. They use these records to plan specific learning objectives for each child, and they are also used when they talk to parents, both informally and at scheduled parent-teacher meetings.

Caroline's experiences in the Early Start class

Table 11: A day in the Early Start class for Caroline

9.00 a.m. Arrival	The children and their parents are greeted at the door
9.05 a.m. to 9.35 a.m. Free play	Caroline plays on the slide, and then she goes to the sand tray. She watches Brian play with blocks, and joins in.
9.35 a.m. to 10.30 a.m. Small group activities	The children are divided into groups of three or four. Caroline and her friends rotate between different table-top activities, e.g. jigsaws, painting, colouring. Caroline especially likes the water tray.
10.30 a.m. to 10.45 a.m. Lunch	All the children sit together. They talk to one another and to the teachers about their news as they get ready to eat. Caroline obviously enjoys her sandwich and sliced apple.
10.45 a.m. to 11 a.m. Outdoor play or large group activities	If it is fine, the children go outside to play ball games or to climb on the climbing

	frame and slide down.
11.05 to 11.25 a.m. Story time	This is the time for songs, stories, rhymes and finger plays. Caroline listens attentively to the story and joins in the songs.
11.30 a.m. Time to go home	Caroline puts on her coat and collects a book and a copy of this week's parent's newsletter to take home. Her Mum is waiting in the hall, and takes the opportunity to ask Martina how Caroline is getting on.

Well-being

The Early Start classroom is spacious, bright and welcoming. The walls are decorated with posters and displays of the children's work. Some of their paintings hang from a line overhead. The main part of the room is divided into a carpeted area and an area with vinyl flooring. The children play on the floor on the carpeted area and it is also used for story time, while messier activities, including lunch, take place in the area with vinyl flooring. There are also sand and water trays, as well as a sink for adult use. On shelves around the room are books, various table top games and materials for art. More games and materials are stored on higher shelves- these are taken down in rotation. There is a home corner, with cupboards, a realistic looking sink and cooker and a full length mirror. A bed, complete with blankets and pillow, has some teddies tucked up inside. The bed is big enough for a small child. Next to this is a shop corner, with all sorts of play food and vegetables, a climbing frame and slide, a tricycle, and other large floor toys.

A low fence makes a small lobby, with doors leading to two toilets, decorated with colourful stickers. Martina and Joanne stand here to greet the children and their parents as they arrive and leave. Greeting time is used to exchange information in a relaxed way, and the parents often come into the room for a few minutes until the child is settled.

Parent and community partnership is an important principle in Early Start, and this begins even before the children start to attend, as soon as they are enrolled. Caroline's parents were invited to visit the classroom and introduced to the teachers and the programme before she began. There is on-going contact and communication both formal and informal between home and school. Martina and Joanne send home

a weekly newsletter, telling parents what stories, rhymes and other activities the children will be doing in the coming week. Outings are organised for parents and children together, and these are very popular. Links are further strengthened by the various activities organised by the Home School Community Liaison teacher, and there is a Parents' Room in the school with a crèche for younger children so that parents can attend meetings and courses.

Caroline began attending Early Start last September. She settled in very easily. Her mother told me that, *she loves coming to school – when she had chicken-pox she cried because she couldn't go to school.* Her parents reflected that they sent her to Early Start

because she herself wanted to go to school, because it is part of the school where her sister attends and to get her used to the routine of getting up and getting ready for school in the morning.

According to her mother, the benefits they saw from her attending at Early Start were that

she has company, friends. She has news when she comes home, she can have a conversation, tell you how her day went, who was bold and who was good, she's learning a lot and I get the full list of what they do.

Personal, emotional and social development is an important part of the programme. The children are encouraged to develop not only a sense of self-esteem but an ability to see situations from other points of view. Whatever Caroline is doing herself, she watches what others are doing, and when something captures her interest, she joins in. For example, Brian was playing on the floor with large wooden blocks. Caroline was playing with the sand nearby (Photo H.6), but looked up to see what Brian was doing. She went over and picked up a toy saw and started to "cut" one of the blocks. Brian objected. He was using that one to make a boat. Caroline was unwilling to give back the block. After a few minutes when they still had not arrived at a solution, Joanne, who had been supervising unobtrusively, said, *Brian says he needs that block. What are we going to do? Why don't we get some more blocks from the box for Caroline to cut so that Brian can finish his boat?* The children agreed and Joanne helped them to take out some more blocks. Brian finished his boat and stood beside it, saying *Look what I made!* The children are encouraged to try to solve problems like this by themselves, with the adults intervening only when they fail to find a solution.

Caroline likes to be a leader in the games she plays. In the Christmas play *Mouse's Christmas*, she played the role of Mouse. According to Martina,

She was the centre of attention, which she absolutely loved, she even gave the directions to the other children. If they were in the wrong place or at the wrong time, she'd stop her own role and she'd tell them what to do and she'd say "No, you're supposed to be over there while I'm here".

She is gradually learning to share the role of leader, and to listen more to others, but her strong personality makes her a natural organiser.

As one of the aims of the Early Start is to prepare children for school, they are encouraged to develop independence in their everyday activities and their self-care. Over the year, they gradually learn to tidy up after themselves, to wash their hands after activities and before meals, and to put on and take off aprons and coats themselves. The daily routine includes time for all these activities, and they can be important times for learning social skills. Lunch time is a particularly social time- the children chat to one another and to the teachers as they eat. The school has a Healthy Eating policy, so sandwiches, fruit juice and sliced fruit is supplied for lunch. Children can bring their own, provided it is healthy (e.g. yogurt) but most of them, including Caroline, opt for the sandwiches and fruit provided by the school. The children help to tidy up afterwards, and they put the fruit peelings into a bucket to be composted and the crusts of bread into a box for recycling. Sometimes, Martina or Joanne reminds them to tidy up, but by and large, they do it themselves. Through these everyday activities, Caroline is learning to care for her immediate surroundings and for the wider environment.

When the weather is fine, the children go outdoors to play after lunch. There are large windows on two sides of the room which look out on a fenced outdoor play area with a safety surface, shared with the infant classes. It has climbing and scrambling apparatus and a slide. Caroline and her friends like to climb up the netting and take turns to go down the slide on the other side (Photo H.2). They do this again and again until it is time to go inside.



Photo H.2: Children on the climbing frame

The other windows look out on a hard surfaced play area used by the older children in the school and a large green area, with trees at the far side. Caroline likes to look out and see the older children at play. Sometimes birds come and land outside- one day at lunchtime there were two hooded crows. *Look, pigeons!* said Jack.

Identity and Belonging

Caroline has a strong sense of belonging to a family. Some of her favourite outings are going to visit her granduncle or her cousins—she has a large extended family all living within the locality or a short distance away, and she sees them regularly. At home, Caroline plays a lot with her older sister, and learns a lot from her. Her sister reads her a story every night, and her Mum takes them both to the library to choose their books. A favourite game at home is “school” with her sister Clare as teacher. According to Caroline, teachers *tell you what to do*. Her parents encourage Caroline and her sister to be active, and they go to a lot of activities outside of school - music, soccer and so on. Both of them got keyboards for Christmas, and they enjoy playing with them. Her sister is learning the notes, and Caroline in turn is learning from her.

Children's own names are very important to them, and are one of the first words they learn to recognise. When Caroline comes to Early Start each day, she is greeted by name at the door by one of the teachers. She takes off her coat and hangs it on the

hook with her name on it. Each hook has a symbol - birds, a train, a shoe, flowers- and a child's name written beside it. The same symbol and name appears on the back of one of the chairs and on one of the hooks where the children hang finished strings of beads. Caroline's symbol is a glass of juice, but she can recognise some of the letters of her own name now and tries to write them on her paintings and drawings. *That's a C, and an O...* she told me. The children also recognise one another's symbols, and know if someone is sitting in another child's chair or using another child's hook. Sometimes the children try to trick the adults by deliberately putting their work in the wrong place and then finding it again.

Making friends is another important element of belonging. Over the course of my visits, Caroline played with most of the other children at one time or another. The children are organised into small groups for part of the morning but are free to choose their playmates for much of the time. Her mother told me that the friends she talked about most at home were Michelle and Sarah, and she also spent a lot of time with Rory, whom she named as her friend when asked. Rory lives near her and she also plays with him at home. Rory is almost a year younger than her, and I noticed that he often seemed to follow her and join in whatever activity she was doing (Photos H.7 and H.8).

When Caroline goes on to junior infants, she will already know many of the children in her class. She also knows some of the older children in the school. Some are neighbours or friends of her older sister. Some of the older children visit the Early Start classroom every day to deliver lunches and collect the recycling containers, and they always say hello and wave to any of the younger children they know. This helps to build the children's sense of belonging to the wider school community.

Communicating

Caroline's time in Early Start gives her many opportunities to experience language and other forms of communication. The children are encouraged to express themselves through speaking and listening, through role play, listening to stories and joining in songs and rhymes, making marks, art and many more activities. The emphasis is on the development of oral language, but the children also do pre-reading and pre-writing activities, looking at picture books, talking about them, taking a line for a walk from left to right. Martina and Joanne listen attentively to the children

and pick up and expand on topics that they are interested in. The children are also encouraged to recall and talk about their experiences. The children especially enjoy looking at photographs of themselves taken at school and on outings, and this can act as a starting point for conversation and the exchange of ideas.

On most days, the children bring their chairs into a circle on the carpeted area for language and story activities (Photos H.3, H.4) Martina and Joanne plan activities each week around a central theme (although some themes last longer) and introduce stories and songs to complement this. They send home a sheet with the words of the songs and the names of the book they will be using, along with suggestions for activities that parents might do at home to fit in with the theme. The theme when I visited was Animals and it had been going on for a few weeks. The children had been doing animal jigsaws and matching games, painting animal patterns like stripes and spots. A favourite game was the box of furry animal tails- especially the stripy tiger one. The children tucked these into their waistbands, and pretended to be a tiger, an elephant or a monkey. They were also learning the names of the different baby animals and finding out how tadpoles turn into frogs and caterpillars into butterflies. One of Caroline's favourite puzzles was one showing the different stages from egg to caterpillar to butterfly. The children and their parents were also looking forward to going on a trip to a farm where they could pet the animals.



Photo H.3: Caroline listening to a story

At story time, the teacher brought out the box of plastic wild animals and talked to the children about them, following this with a story about a noisy tiger cub who creeps up on the other animals and frightens them. Caroline and her friend Sarah watched

attentively—they love story time (Photo H.3). Caroline, Sarah, Rory and Brian joined in with the tiger's "ROARS" whenever the story called for it. The children knew the story well, and Martina asked them to predict *what happened next?* or *what did the animals think then?* before she turned over the page. Martina pointed out the expressions on the animals' faces and asked the children what the animals were feeling. Then she asked them to make a surprised face or a scared face themselves. Rory and Sean joined in enthusiastically, as the others watched (Photo H.3). Later, Caroline would get a chance to borrow the book; the children take home a book each day to read at home with their parents and siblings.

Exploring and Thinking

The teachers in the Early Start class plan many different structured activities to introduce the children to concepts like number and colour, but also use the opportunities to reinforce this learning that arise through unstructured activities using sand, water and playdough.



Photo H.4: Caroline getting ready to slide a boat down the slide
Photo H.5: Caroline and David at the sand tray

At free-play time during my visits, Caroline often chose the sand (Photo H.5), but she also seemed to really like climbing up and sliding down the slide and hiding underneath it. She brought a boat on wheels with her from the sand area and launched it down the slide (Photo H.4). She did this again and again, watching to see how far it travelled and how fast it went. When I asked her to show me her favourite place, she went straight to the slide, slid down it and then hid in the cubby hole underneath it.

After the free-play session that begins the morning, the children are directed to one of the small group activities that have been planned for the morning- three or four children to each group. One or two of these activities will be messy such as painting, using chalk or playing at the water tray (Photos H.7, H.8, H.9). The children put on aprons with long sleeves in preparation for this. Caroline can manage to put on her apron by herself and sometimes helps another child to fasten the Velcro strips at the back. Caroline especially enjoys messy play at home as well as at school. Her Mum recalled

She loves anything messy- playdough, paint, sand, anything that takes a lot of cleaning up ... but as my Mum always used to say, it's clean dirt, they're enjoying themselves.

Caroline is given lots of opportunities to do what she enjoys both at home and at school.



Photo H.6: Caroline and Michelle cutting out playdough

The activity Caroline herself picked out as her favourite is playing with márla (playdough). I watched as Caroline helped Martina to mix the flour, water and food colouring to make a big bowl of yellow playdough, and then to divide it between the children at the table. Caroline and Michelle shared the cutters and rollers, and make shapes. Caroline showed great concentration as she manipulated the dough (Photo H.6).

At small group time, the groups rotate between the activities so that they all get a chance at each one. One morning, a table was set up for sponge painting. There were sponges in different shapes - square, circle, star. The paint was yellow, and the large sheets of paper had been ruled into squares, three rows of four. The children were encouraged to stamp a shape in each one, from left to right and each row in order- Joanne explained to me that this was a preparation for writing and reading left to right and top to bottom. Caroline finished hers quickly; some of the other children took longer or stamped the shapes in a different order. As each group finished, they washed their hands in a basin nearby and moved on to another activity, perhaps jigsaws, pegboards or playing a game where they have to find matching pairs of cards.



Photos H.7 and H.8: Caroline, Rory and David at the water tray

Caroline particularly likes the sand and the water trays and often chooses them. One morning, she, Rory and David were standing around the water tray (Photo H.7). They filled and emptied containers, poured water into the waterwheels and watched them turn. There were balls floating in the water. Caroline picked up an orange ball and put it on top of the waterwheel. Rory watched intently as she poured water from a colourful teapot and the ball rotated in place. They had discovered how to make the ball move using the water. Caroline poured carefully until the teapot was empty and then refilled it and began to make the ball rotate again (Photo H.8).

Caroline also likes drawing and colouring. One morning she began by joining a group that were looking at a book of animals and each picking out an animal to draw. She asked Martina, *how do you draw a tadpole?* Martina told her to draw a circle first, then to add a tail. Caroline did this and showed it to the teacher.



Photo H.9: Caroline drawing a house and a babba

Then she got more paper and drew a stick figure (Photo H.9) and showed it to Martina. *That's a babba*, she said. *It's a baby, is it?* enquired Martina. *No, a babba!* responded Caroline emphatically. Caroline carried on drawing, and attempted to write her name at the top of one page - a series of circles and lines, one with a dot on the top. Then she started a new drawing. I asked her to tell me what she was drawing. *A house*, she said pointing to a large oblong shape. *What are these?* I asked referring to small, almost square shapes within the larger one. *Bed, dressing table*, she informed me. A minute later, she took a black pencil and filled in the interior of the large shape. *It's a tent, a black tent*, she said. The black colour covered over the earlier shapes so that they could not be seen in the final drawing. Some of the others finished and moved on to other activities while Caroline stayed at the drawing table on her own until she was called to get ready for story-time.

Conclusion

Early Start is an important part of Caroline's life. Her parents are very involved in helping Caroline and her sister to learn, but they feel that she also needs the

structure and routine that attending the pre-school class provides. It also gives her an opportunity to meet and make friends with the children who will be her classmates when she goes into the junior infant class in September. Caroline enjoys her time in Early Start, and her teachers can see the progress she has made since she started.