

The Dynamics Of Sharing Professional Knowledge And Lay Knowledge

A Study Of Parents' And Professionals'
Experiences Of Childhood Interventions
Within A Marte Meo Framework

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May 2011

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November 2011 | Art. 18E
[Republished in new design: March 2015]

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Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank the following people who facilitated this research in various ways:

- The *parents* who agreed to be interviewed and who gave so generously of their time without whom this research would not have been possible.
- The *Marte Meo Therapists* who graciously participated in the focus group interviews.
- Ms. *Colette O'Donovan*, Licensed Marte Meo Supervisor in Ireland and Coordinator of the Marte Meo Training Centre, HSE, who enabled us to develop an understanding of Marte Meo.
- Ms. *Patricia Byrne*, Assistant Co-ordinator of the Marte Meo Training Centre, HSE.
- *Maria Aarts* who founded this way of being with parents and children for her support, encouragement and enlightenment.
- *Ellen MacDermott* for her art work on the front cover. [In this Marte Meo Magazine design by *Simone Stegeman*/The Netherlands. Ed.]
- Finally we wish to thank the *HSE* who funded this project.

Executive Summary

This research report provides an account of the understanding parents and therapists constructed of their experiences of participating in the Marte Meo method.

The research study took place between February 2009 and February 2011.

The research team were *Dr Jean Clarke* (Dublin City University); *Ms Yvonne Corcoran* (Dublin City University); *Dr Mel Duffy* (Dublin City University).

Ms Colette O'Donovan (Marte Meo method HSE) was the professional (Marte Meo) consultant to the team.

The research was funded by the *Health Services Executive*.

CHAPTER ONE:

Background And Introduction

Early attachment is a critical component of a healthy start in life for children and families. Attachment contributes to an environment of trust and safety that promote the achievement of personal, social and professional relationships, and physical and psychological health. Attuned parental responses to the child's behaviour and emotions impart meanings of trust and empathy; the child learns that her/his emotions and behaviour influences those of others, through the subtleties of both non-verbal and verbal communication.

The Marte Meo Method looks at moments of interaction in daily situations between parent and child, professional and parent. The central focus of the method is to identify, activate and enhance constructive communication, interaction and development for the child, family and professional. The method involves an interactive solution focused programme. The programme can be offered as part of a range of therapies for parents with children with autism, Asperger, or behavioural problems.

Specifically, through the Marte Meo method, the HSE provides a therapeutic programme for parents toward enabling them to build on their own strength as parents. There are occasions when the programme is sanctioned as part of a child protection response by statutory agencies.

Research goals

The goals of this research study were to:

1. Review the national and international literature on underlying theories related to family intervention therapies, and the efficacy of using the Marte Meo method as an intervention programme to support social, emotional and communication development of children;
2. Explore the experience of parents who participated in the Marte Meo method toward enhancing their parenting skills;
3. Investigate the meaning(s) that parents construct from that experience;
4. Explore the experience of participants who completed the therapist training programme and who have worked as Marte Meo therapists for not less than one year;
5. Investigate the meaning(s) that therapists construct from that experience.

CHAPTER TWO:

A Review Of The Literature

Human development refers to patterns of change over time; it begins at conception and continues throughout the life span. Development occurs in a number of different domains namely biological, social, emotional, cognitive and language. Development and learning take place through language and dialogue. Language development is a complex process of both nature and nurture; nurture is critical to the emotional and social development of the child. The role of the parent(s) is vital if the child is to develop a sense of trust, security and self esteem.

Parallel to the critical importance of children's social and emotional development is the need for them to form a bond or attachment with the parent. Secure attachment is core to family life and affords an important framework to make sense of behaviours, relationship strengths and difficulties that children may experience in the complexity of their family life. A secure attachment is strongly linked to the care provided by parents. In circumstances where children experience an unpredictable or unresponsive parent-child connection and where nurturing and sensory

enriched care giving is not realised, normal bonding and attachments will not develop. Understanding the role of attachment helps health care professionals to assist parents and children, so children can be more trusting, positive, capable and secure.

Parenting and being a parent require skills that, due to their apparent familiarity, are often taken for granted as part of everyday life. However, parenting can be elusive when it comes to describing, defining and objectively analysing it as a concept. When parents are deemed to need support, parenting programmes are normally focused on short-term interventions aimed at helping parents improve their relationship with their child, including behavioural and emotional attachment.

Support for parents offered through the Marte Meo method builds on the idea that children grow and develop in an environment of interaction with supportive adults.

The Marte Meo family intervention method was first introduced in the early 1980s as a method to strengthen and empower parents' potential to support their child's development. The Marte Meo method was developed as a practical model for promoting new parenting and child rearing skills in daily interaction moments. It was specifically designed for both parents and professional caregivers to support their care giving roles. The Marte Meo method adopts a social exchange framework, where the movement of resources between the child and parent is viewed as beneficial both to the parent/caregiver and the child. Through the use and analysis of video-pictures that record normal daily interaction moments in naturalistic settings (the family home), Marte Meo therapists enable parents to see their reality, including their strengths. The therapist offers step by step guidance on specific behaviours, checking if a new behaviour is working and providing opportunities for parents to see positive outcomes of their enhanced parenting skills.

Research evidence supports the use of the principles of the Marte Meo Method; however, there is a dearth of research specifically relating to the experiences of parents and therapists who have shared both professional and lay knowledge within a Marte Meo Framework.

CHAPTER THREE:

Methodology

This research study is a qualitative endeavour which gives voice to parents and therapists and their experiences of participating in a Marte Meo Programme. As the study aims were to explore the lived experiences, the interview method was used. A total of eleven parents were interviewed in one-on-one interviews. Parent participants were randomly selected from the Marte Meo therapist list. Parents who were interviewed had participated in the Marte Meo Programme between the years 2005 and 2008. At the time of the interviews, two families were still involved with the programme. All parents interviewed shared the parenting role with a co-parent. Five parents choose to be interviewed on their own; three couples were interviewed. The interview was initiated with one statement; parents were asked to: »describe your experiences of Marte Meo.« Thus, the interviews revealed the ideas, thoughts and recollections of the parents, in their own words, rather than in the words of the researcher.

Therapist participants were interviewed using three focus group interviews: group one (therapists with one – three years experience), group two (therapists with between four to six years experience), group three (therapists with greater than six years experience). Focus group interviews elicited therapist experiences of employing the Marte Meo method. Sampling was achieved through purposive selection, to allow for the deliberate selection of a heterogeneous sample, and the observation of commonalities of experiences across participants as well as the documentation of uniqueness. As with individual interviews, the focus group interview was initiated with an invitation to the participants to: »describe your experiences of Marte Meo.« A total of 17 therapists were interviewed, five in group one; six in group two and six in group three.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Analyses was an endeavour of the three researchers, who engaged with the interviews singularly, before engaging in collective analytical sessions that allowed for the emergence of themes that articulate the essence of the meanings, in context, of the parents and Marte Meo therapists. Themes were subsequently explored for resonance with existing evidence and debated toward making a case for the applications of contemporary concepts in circumstances of

the experiences of parents' and therapists' engagement with the Marte Meo method.

The study followed the highest ethical principles. Ethical approval was granted by Dublin City University Ethics Board and other agencies from which therapist and or family participants were drawn. All participants were provided with a plain language statement explaining the purpose of the research. Participation was voluntary and all participants signed a consent form agreeing to participate in the research.

CHAPTER FOUR:

The Parents' Story

The overarching theme that emerged from the interviews with families is »thrownness and the rediscovery of the self«, in the sense that parents found themselves pitched from one image of a child(?) to another, from one service to the other, and from a sense of self as a good to a bad parent. Parents described their growing awareness that their child was not developing or behaving in a »normal«, socially expected and acceptable way. This realisation prompted them to go beyond themselves, into the more public domain of the medical, health, education and social care systems, to seek answers and to pick up »therapies« including engagement with the Marte Meo Programme. In so doing, they experienced a sense of loss as to who they were as parents, before coming home to their own sense of self and what it meant to be a parent. The notion of coming home to their own sense of self is not a finite destination, but rather one where parents have a renewed self worth as they journey forth as a parent to their child and tackle the challenges that lie ahead. For a few parents, however, their sense of self as a parent continued to be a challenge as they questioned their own sense of worth as a parent to their child.

The parents' narrative is a privileged truth; it is both authoritative and appealing. It details a journey that took them from an intuitive or subjective knowing that something was wrong with their child into the public domain of the authoritative knowing of other. The world of the authoritative knower and their experience of that received knowing was for many a place and space where the self as a parent was diminished, undervalued and sometimes invisible. However, parents did not accept their being invisible

within this public domain; instead, strengthened by their own subjective knowing, they continued to seek out answers and solutions. As they journeyed on they experienced a coming together of their own subjective knowing and the authoritative knowing of other in a pragmatic sense of needing to learn new skills in how to parent their child. Then began what was for many a range of therapies (not always successful) before being introduced to the Marte Meo method. While the introduction to the programme was ad hoc, it did represent a turning point for parents, where they had their subjective knowing not just acknowledged by the other but foregrounded in the whole process of how they developed and learned new parenting skills.

Key elements of the parents' experiences of the programme included the role played by the therapist, the use of the video camera and the dialogues of showing and seeing that were afforded by the video and enabled by the therapist. Parents experienced the dialogues, of seeing and showing, as affirmations of the self as well as evidence of how they were parenting and could, in the future, parent their child. In circumstances where it was perceived that the Marte Meo method was sanctioned, the sense of self oscillated between being positive about the self and a negative self image. Finally, parents' experience of applying the Marte Meo learning was a transitional process of growing confidence over the time of the therapy and subsequent to it.

CHAPTER FIVE:

The Therapists' Story

The main theme that emerged from the focus groups with the therapists is that of »gifting and the gift«, in the sense that therapists recognised the potential of the Marte Meo method toward enhancing their work with clients, which in turn developed a commitment to train as a Marte Meo therapist and then skilfully to work with families and parents. Becoming a Marte Meo therapist enabled the participants to empower their clients (parents and families) with tools for life. They worked with families experiencing difficulties and left them with tools which would enable them to work independently into the future. Thus therapists gifted families and the reciprocity they received was the knowledge that these families were able to use these coping strategies now and into the future.

The therapists' account details their journey of transition and how, through a circle of becoming, they moved along a trajectory from novice to expert in their role as Marte Meo therapists. Initially, this trajectory involved them working on the self by reviewing their own way of being and their communication skills, which, in turn, led them to the questioning of their own ease with the self and their style of interaction with families. They recognised that their trajectory of learning was not finite, rather, it was dynamic and, with each encounter with a family, experienced as a new learning opportunity. Thus, the Marte Meo method became a tool that therapists could use successfully to support and empower families. Through their use of the method, therapists found they could return to families and parents a sense of the self that was often splintered by the experiences of the families' past. They emphasized the positives to families and parents and gave them back the skills (often lost or not recognised within the medical approach) to support their child's social and emotional development in every day interaction moments. Critical to this process of giving back to parents was the timing of the introduction of the programme to families, their readiness to engage with it and also the recognition that for some families the Marte Meo method was not appropriate. By taking the family at where they were the Marte Meo therapists gifted the families to be themselves, while at the same time the therapists opened up avenues where they could choose their authentic way of being.

A principal element of the therapists' experiences was their use of and engagement with the video camera and the video film of the family. In their endeavours to help families understand the focus of the therapist's role, and to adjust to the use of the camera, the therapists demonstrated an understanding of individual family systems as well as developing a respectful, trusting and supportive relationship between themselves and the families. The dialogue of seeing and showing, facilitated by the video camera and pictures was for the therapists key to their experiences within the cycle of becoming. Therapists experienced the dialogue afforded by the camera and video pictures as the conduit of a moment of epiphany for parents, when at a moment in time on their journey of thrownness and the rediscovery of the self (see Chapter Four) the parents began to see their child as the child and not as the image of someone else. The use of the video camera and pictures proved useful to the

therapists themselves, when they demonstrated both the ability and willingness to see the communication skills of the self, which later they explored during supervision.

Supervision was acknowledged as a critical component to the enhancement of the everyday work of the therapists. While there was a desire by the therapists to differentiate between supervision for the self and supervision for the other (the parents and family), there was a suggestion of a synergy between a positive sense of self and a positive sense as the professional that could be achieved through personal supervision.

Finally, therapists' experiences of being gifted by and giving the gift of the Marte Meo method to others was a transitional process of becoming and empowering that involved both self and other (parents, families and children). However, while therapists assessed the need for Marte Meo method interventions to deliver positive outcomes for families, there was a constant pressure to find resources to do so.

CHAPTER SIX:

The Coming Together Of The Stories Of The Families And The Therapists

This chapter provides an overall analysis of the families' and therapists' experience of the Marte Meo method by bringing together the stories of both. In so doing a narrative of their journeys is created, including shifting meaning, unlearning and learning, which ultimately brought them to a new sense of self, a sense of presence with self and with other, and the development of the self as gifting and being gifted. The context of the journeys for both parents and therapists involved a process of shifting from rule bound activities of a regulatory framework to a position of foregrounding the actualities, skills and knowledge of families. Their stories illustrate the earnestness of people who sought help and support for their child and those who sought to find a way to provide a service of response to those who needed to live as parents with their child.

Both parents and therapists began their journey of the Marte Meo programme with a sense of a shift of meaning. For parents, the meaning of themselves as parents began to shift when they realised there was

something wrong with their child, while therapists experienced a shift in the meaning of how they viewed the appropriateness of service provision for parents who needed support with their parenting role. Each began a separate journey that was to find a common pathway in the future. The experience of finding the self in a circumstance of shifting meaning was for both a contingency of shifting notions of power, with the parents experiencing a sense of being disempowered, while therapists experienced a sense of empowerment.

The complexity of the parents' and therapists' journey involved unlearning previously expected and prescribed roles, recognising personal skills and know-how and learning about new ways of being a parent and a therapist. For both, the experience involved displacement – for the therapists a sense of newness, where previously practiced skills of engagement with families were no longer seen to be fit or purpose, and for parents a sense of loss, where their style of parenting was not working and the way forward was one of uncertainty and vulnerability – and discovery – a moment of privileged possibility of what could be achieved through engagement with the Marte Meo Programme. Circumstances of learning experienced within the notion of displacement and discovery suggest that the context of power relations, existing within regulatory frames of service provision, need to be considered when offering services to families. Circumstances of engagement to support families need to begin with an assessment of their willingness and readiness to engage, and to build on the actualities of their experiences.

In their shift from displacement to discovery parents and therapists experiences a renewed sense of self that can best be articulated within the notion of presence. Presence is about empowerment. Presence, as experienced by parents and therapists, through their engagement in the Marte Meo method, allowed for the gifting of the knowledge of parents and therapists. Through the dynamic of presence parents' talent, ability and skills were foregrounded through the skills of the therapists and their art in showing that other (parents) have a gifted performance as a parent no matter how fragile that performance might be. The guide provided by our exploration of finding presence suggests that in their provision of the Marte Meo Programme, family support services have

a model of best practice of how to provide empowering supportive family interventions.

Finally this chapter provides recommendations for practice, research, education and training.

Recommendations For Practice

- Prior to offering any therapeutic intervention we recommend the use of multidisciplinary case conferences/collaborative meetings, including involvement of the family, to assess family needs and resources and to determine the appropriate therapeutic response.
- All therapeutic interventions for families need to begin with an assessment of the latter's willingness and readiness to engage, and to build on the actualities of their experiences.
- Therapists and services providing the Marte Meo method need to be appropriately resourced to enable them to provide and grow the service.
- We recommend the development of guidelines on the maximum numbers of families Marte Meo therapists could be expected to engage/work with, based on whether therapists are full-time Marte Meo therapists and their level of experience.
- We recommend the holding of information seminars for professional workers involved in the care of families toward developing their understanding of the Marte Meo method and how it could be used with families/parents who need support.
- Information about the Marte Meo method needs to be made available on the Heath Services Executive website/Children and Family Services and on the websites of all voluntary services who include within their repertoire of service the Marte Meo method.

Recommendations For Research

- We recommend further research regarding the families who do not engage successfully with the Marte Meo method to ascertain why the method did not work or was inappropriate for them, and

whether the offer of an adjunctive family therapy could enhance the success of the Marte Meo method.

- We recommend that a research study that listens to and hears the voice of the children who experienced the Marte Meo method be carried out, as the voice of children was not part of this study.
- We recommend that research be carried out to determine the optimum time for introducing the Marte Meo method to families and whether the timing of the intervention influences the outcome of the therapeutic intervention.
- We recommend that a research study of the needs of families who have completed the Marte Meo therapeutic intervention and whose children are now adolescents is undertaken. This is necessary to determine if families require follow up Marte Meo method support and skills during the adolescent stage of the family lifecycle.

Notes:

- ⁽¹⁾ Or caregiver, in the absence of a parent.
- ⁽²⁾ Reference to the term »a child« implies a social category, where being a child is to experience and enjoy childhood (including freedom and spontaneity) and to pass appropriate developmental milestones. (Ribbens McCarthy, 2000)

Recommendations For Education And Training

- The communication skills of professional workers involved in general practice, family and child health and education services should be developed specifically to enhance skills in hearing the voice(s) of the patient/client in a shared dialogue.
- We recommend the introduction of the Marte Meo method as a communication tool to professionals at all levels who work with families (social workers, family support workers, public health nurses, per-school teachers and special needs assistants).
- We recommend the introduction of in-service training on »power and power dynamics within ruling apparatus« for managers of statutory and voluntary services who provide support to parents, families and children.

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KEYWORD:

Childhood intervention

FURTHER KEYWORDS:

- Early attachment
- Knowledge, Professional -
- Knowledge, Lay -
- Developmental psychology
- Parents' experiences
- Professionals' experiences

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[*Publisher's note:* This executive summary of the Marte Meo research report was originally published at Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland, in October 2011.]

Citation:

Clarke, Corcoran & Duffy, »*The dynamics of sharing professional knowledge and lay knowledge: A Study Of Parents' And Professionals' Experiences Of Childhood Interventions Within A Marte Meo Framework*«. Marte Meo Magazine 2011, Art. 18E, p. 1-9)