
Emerging Issues in Early Childhood Education and Recommendations

Early childhood is a significant and distinct period in life that must be nurtured, respected and valued. Recently, there has been a growing recognition of the importance that the first 5 years' of life carry through the development of the First 5 Strategy which sets out an optimum vision for ECEC. As highlighted, children deserve the best start in life. (DCYA, 2019). As Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System's Theory (1989) highlights, children are profoundly affected by the experiences surrounding them. These encounters establish the foundation's for later development offering opportunities for society to maximise children's lifelong potential as they are critical for positive transitions in life. (Core, 2011). As there is well established links between childhood experiences and later outcomes, there is a strong economic rationale for investment in ECEC. However, Ireland spends only 0.3% of GDP on ECEC, which is extremely below UNICEF's goal of 0.8% annually on ECEC. (Start Strong, 2015). While ECEC in Ireland is progressing rapidly, the quality of ECEC services today are extremely variable. The recent RTE Prime Time Investigation 'A Breach of Trust' has made the quality of early years services an issue for concern. The absence of a consistent child-centred approach and lack of quality assurance is unacceptable. (DCYA, 2013). Unfortunately, as there is minimal in ECEC policy that is impeding deepening of quality, issues remain. This essay will discuss the importance of quality, issues that remain and recommendations for the ECEC sector in Ireland with reference to policy, practice and research.

The quality of ECE provision is of great importance. The UNCRC (1989) which recognises the rights of the child highlights that all children ought to have the same access to high-quality provision in Article 28. The introduction of Aistear and Siolta as the two key quality frameworks underpinning the ECEC curriculum and the Tusla Early Years Inspectorate have improved the quality and consistency of childcare practices by establishing the core values of the ECEC sector; the recognition of children as active agents in their own development. (OECD, 2017). Research has shown that high-quality ECE programs staffed by well-educated, competent staff, responsive interactions, smaller child-adult ratios, a professionally developed curriculum and regular monitoring (Core, 2011) are key determinants of positive child-outcomes. Investment in young children has high economic and social returns as it creates viable future citizens with high education status' and market outcomes, increasing substantial returns on public investment resulting in €7 for every €1 spent on ECEC. (Oireachtas, 2012). High-quality universal provision is especially beneficial for children from disadvantaged/marginalized backgrounds as evidence shows that it can make society more equitable through reducing social exclusion, by declining child-poverty and anti-social behaviours resulting in lower levels of crime. (Start Strong, 2006). These effects of high-quality services with early intervention decrease additional needs in the future by supporting families, promoting a positive sense of agency and security within the child permanently.(DCYA, 2013). Whereas delivering services where quality is low can have detrimental effects on a child's holistic development; cognitive, physical and socio-emotional leading to developmental delays and behavioural difficulties. (DCYA, 2019).

OECD (2017) highlights that there are multiple aspects to understanding the concept of quality in ECEC; educational, operational, oriented and parent/community quality with structural, process and outcome quality being prominent in constituting high-quality practice. (Core, 2011).

In the ECEC context, structural quality considers how the ECEC system is designed and organised; educators with high qualifications, correct child-adult ratios, a hygienic environment and a recognised child-centred curriculum. (DCYA, 2013). Process quality focuses on practice within the setting –children’s interactions, the rich learning environment offered, involvement of parents and the stimulating pedagogic practice of staff. Outcome quality concentrates on the benefits for children, families and society. Thereby, settings of high-quality must have interactions which are responsive and trusting aiding in enhancing children’s self-worth. (CECDE, 2006). As stressed by Core (2011), quality should be perceived as an ongoing objective process of development involving children, families and professionals who work to promote the best interests of children rather than an achieved subjective system.

Several issues of concern remain in policy documents relating to professionalism; qualifications, pay, positions and status due to lack of investment in the sector leading to a ‘split-system’ between childcare staff and teachers. (OECD, 2019). According to OECD, staff qualifications is one of the determining factors for quality in ECEC together with fair working conditions for practitioners in the sector. (Oireachtas, 2017). High-quality services require professional competencies at all levels as evidence shows that enriching, stimulating environments and high-quality pedagogy are fostered by better qualified staff leading to better learning outcomes. (European Commission, 2014). The Child Care (Pre-School) Regulations 2006 states that there must be suitable and competent adults working with children at all times. However, in Ireland, qualification levels in early years’ services are low, reflecting the lack of public investment, low wages and poor working conditions in the ECEC sector resulting in challenges for supply, recruitment and retention of staff. (OECD, 2015). The need for professional identity within the sector is well-established but the absence of a defined career structure and skill shortages within the sector are a major barrier to sustainable growth. (Core, 2011). Despite the introduction of the new Level 5 qualification requirements for ECEC workers as part of the Early Years Quality Agenda, the most recent data from POBAL (2015) on qualification levels of staff in ECEC indicates that only 15% of educators working in the sector in Ireland hold a level 7/8 degree in ECEC. This remains low by EU international standards which recommend 60% of staff be highly qualified. (Core, 2011). Disappointingly, state funding for further training has focused on supporting educators to meet minimum qualification requirements through the Learner Fund established in 2014 rather than progressing towards higher qualifications as there is no financial support for existing staff who wish to undertake Level 7/8 qualifications, thereby having to fund their own training, in their own time while working. (Start Strong, 2015). A survey carried out with Early Years Practitioners highlights that more than half (53%) of practitioners feel that the current minimum qualifications for those working in the sector are too low. (Oireachtas,2012). This is particularly the case in services for children under three, where there are even lower qualification requirements. As there is no professional regulator for the ELC workforce, variable quality of initial education, including the availability of quality settings for student placements represent a severe challenge for the ELC workforce. (DCYA, 2019). Undeniably, the proportion of graduates in the sector that have obtained a Level 7/8 qualification are often expected to exert leadership and act as individual change agents in a sector that is dominated by practitioners with experience but low level, or no recognised qualification. The Grandfather Declaration (2015) is an example of unprofessionalism in the sector as staff who do not hold a minimum Level 5 qualification and intend to retire from the sector by 2021 are exempt from the requirement to have a qualification, leading to injustice as these staff tend to be paid higher than staff with qualifications. (DCYA, 2016). This influences level 7/8 graduates to seek work elsewhere or move towards primary school teaching which recognises skills and provides paid aspects of non-contact, continual professional development

time to enhance practice unceasingly unlike in ECEC where there is no state funding for non-contact time with children, for opportunities of observation, planning, reflection and teamwork. (DCYA, 2019). Staff who do take part in CPD do so voluntarily for no pay. (Start Strong, 2015). Despite the introduction of the Siolta and Aistear frameworks in 2006/2009, there is limited training of staff on these frameworks and a low level of 'quality' implementation. In a 'Aistear in Action' report (NCCA, 2013), it was stressed that there has been no national, co-ordinated plan to support services in using the curriculum framework to guide their work with children, showing the Government's lack of interest in upskilling staff training towards a 'child-led, play-based curriculum' resulting in 'poor quality, adult-led' settings across Ireland.

Although staff are generally keen to improve their education, completing courses has little impact on their salaries or conditions of work. Wages in the sector are low from the lack of public investment, with qualified staff earning minimum wage with an average of €10.10 per hour with €11.24 for graduates, little to a living wage along with working a significant number of hours in preparation and administration which are unpaid (DCYA, 2019), leading staff to take on second jobs, lowering their performance in the sector. (French, 2011). Salary scales are non-existent, often not higher for highly qualified staff than those with minimum qualifications earning €15,000-16,000 annually, in comparison to the basic starting salary of a primary school teacher of €30,700 annually. Thereby being no financial incentive for educators to upskill themselves. (Start Strong, 2015). In addition to the low wages, job-security within the sector is poor with limited career opportunities and 40% of staff being on seasonal temporary contracts (DCYA, 2019) as the Free Preschool Year is limited to 38 weeks of the year. This leaves many staff unemployed during the summer. With such low wages, it is difficult for services to recruit and retain well-qualified staff leading to poor quality. (Sinn Fein, 2016).

Additionally, recognising the ECEC workforce as professionals is key yet in this generation, a professional status for early childhood educators does not exist. The absence of a defined career structure and lack of agreement on the terminology used to describe the ECEC workforce can be problematic and leads to confusion. Selecting an appropriate term for the full range of the ECEC workforce is challenging as many use various terms to refer to the field like 'educators, teachers', yet 'practitioners' is the language used in the First Five (DCYA, 2019); portraying the field as an occupation rather than a profession from lack of consistency. Crucially, there is no reward for obtaining a degree in early childhood care and education (Sinn Fein, 2016) as people view the field as 'caring' for the child from the term used to describe the field and fail to see the complexity of work with young children leaving the workforce feeling under-valued. It is acknowledged the majority of the workforce being female is a potential factor contributing to the sector's low status as it is not diversified. There is a major gender imbalance in the childcare workforce in Ireland from the stereotyping of childcare as 'women's work', discouraging male participation. A large percentage of children have little contact with men and some children don't have positive male role models present in their lives especially during this period of developing identity and belonging. From statistics in 2016, only 1% of Ireland's childcare workers are male – 19% behind EU targets. The gender gap in ECEC is severely disregarded in policies and plans and serves to the inequality in the sector. (Men in Childcare Network, 2004).

The government's role in contributing to high-quality services deserves more attention and investment. Within the next five years the government should reach the OECD average of 0.8% and the UNICEF benchmark of 1% within 10 years to reduce the detrimental staff turnover in ECEC and increase working conditions. (European Commission, 2014).

The rights and standards for practitioners need to be explored with employees needing professional salaries. (Sinn Fein, 2016). A clear articulation of professional roles and career paths will improve the self-esteem amongst childcare staff. (OECD, 2017). The qualifications for childcare workers will need to rise significantly in the coming years if Ireland demands high-quality. The government need to set out targets for moving towards a graduate-led early years workforce to 70% on the current 22% over the next 5 years. (Pobal, 2016). As stressed by the First Five (DCYA, 2019), this would require reforms on the DCYA Workforce Development Plan which would allow the government to extend the Learner Fund to support progression from Level 5 qualifications to Level 7/8 qualifications but with government paid-support. As highlighted by Siolta's Standard 11 'Professional Practice' (CECDE, 2006), regular reflections upon practice are vital. Thereby, practitioners should be able to access pedagogical support programmes centred on the appropriate implementation of the Aistear and Siolta Quality Frameworks. It's recommended that time should be set aside regularly for professional development by paid weekly/monthly team-meetings to allow staff to share new insights. Thereby, the government should invest in allowing non-contact time; one additional paid hour for every three hours of contact with children, to facilitate documentation and planning with a minimum of five paid CPD days per annum as this is a central component of good practice. (Sinn Fein, 2016).

Recognising the ECEC workforce as professionals is key. Thereby, the government needs to address the impact of inadequate state subsidies in sustaining the low pay. The government need to increase capitation for the ECCE programme as it is not adequately funded to provide a decent income for staff from the current requirements. (Oireachtas, 2017). A new pay scale which recognises qualifications to receive financial recognition should be introduced. (Start Strong, 2015). The Association of Childhood Professionals proposed that there should be evidence of implementing a starting point by increasing salaries of staff above minimum wage to a living wage (€12) (OECD, 2017) and developing an agreed salary scale in line with primary school teachers in the next five years to retain and attract new staff to the sector. (Early Childhood Ireland, 2016). Long-term contracts must be implemented to prevent job-insecurity, increasing the number of paid weeks for ECCE staff in the year and an agreed length of paid summer-leave for services that close on public holidays to prevent staff from needing assistance from the Live Register. (Oireachtas, 2017).

Increasing the numbers of men working in the sector is vital for children to have male role-models to add diversity to learning. Children experience a range of femininity models in the sector, but they need to be part of multifaceted experiences which is critical in their gender-identity development. Although the increase of professionalism in childcare will attract more men into the sector, it is not enough to change the gender balance and increase the numbers to 20% as recommended. The sector should re-model towards a more 'men-friendly' open-culture with settings providing specific support for men who may be working in isolation from other men, ensuring they are included as part of the team. (Oireachtas, 2012). OECD states that society need to overcome the deeply-held cultural beliefs about child-rearing with more media campaigns appealing to masculine aspects of ECEC; helping recruit men. Thereby, policy-makers must emphasize the importance of male workers in policy documents. Settings should avoid patterns of invariable recruitment, instead allow diversity by being proactive in how men are recruited and retained in the field rather than seeing them as a 'threat' to achieve equality. (Core, 2011).

Although the early childhood sector is in crisis, by governing bodies and society recognising the

integral role that quality early childhood education plays in life-long learning, many of the challenges that Ireland faces as a 'ECEC profession' can be overcome and high-quality services can become the norm.

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