International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education, 2015, 8(2), 287-300.

Early Childhood Education in Ireland: Change and Challenge

Rosaleen MURPHY*
University College Cork, Ireland

Abstract

Early childhood care and education in Ireland has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years, as a result of public concern about standards in some early years services. Services for children before they enter primary school are largely the responsibility of the department of health, while children in the formal school system are the responsibility of the department of education. This split is reflected in the pay, working conditions and qualifications of those working in each sector. Primary education is state funded; pre-school care and education has been seen as the responsibility of parents, and is among the most expensive in Europe. Investment in early years services is low and has been focused on expanding the number of places. There is now more co-ordination at government level and improved standards and frameworks for quality in early education (Síolta) and for early learning (Aistear) have been put in place. However, expanding services without paying equal attention to quality will not bring the desired benefits either to individual children or to society. Regulation and enforcement are important but are only one element of quality, and more attention needs to be paid to developing the early years workforce and improving their working conditions.

Keywords: Early childhood education, Quality, Ireland

Introduction

While the importance of early childhood care and education (ECCE) has been widely acknowledged in policy documents in Ireland since at least the mid-1990s, it is only in recent years, and in response to public concern about the affordability of ECCE and the quality of some of what is on offer, that major initiatives have been taken to improve both. In the last fifteen years, policies have been introduced and efforts have been made to increase the number of early years places available, and to some extent, this had the desired effect. However, as the OECD (2012) points out, expanding services without paying equal attention to quality will not bring the desired benefits either to individual children or to society as a whole, and may indeed have detrimental effects on both. While initiatives to improve quality have also been launched, there is concern that these have not always had the desired effect. In part, this may be due to inadequate funding and support,

* Rosaleen Murphy, School of Education, University College Cork, Ireland, Phone: +353 21490 2173 E-Mail: murphy.r@ucc.ie
ISSN:1307-9298

www.iejee.com

as well as the historic fragmented nature of ECCE in Ireland. Much of the ECCE sector outside of the formal education system was starting from a very low base in terms of staff qualifications and working conditions as well as the physical environment and facilities, all of which are important in attaining and maintaining a high quality environment for young children.

Recent media reporting on non-compliance with standards in nurseries and crèches have led to calls for tightening up of the current inspection regime, and a much closer scrutiny of the day-to-day operation of childcare services. While regulation and enforcement is important, it is only one element of quality, and on its own, is unlikely to lead to the kinds of improvements that it is desired to bring about. The Childcare (Pre-school) Regulations (1996, revised 2006) set out minimum standards for health and safety, and the introduction in 2006 of Síolta, the national quality framework for early childhood education, and in 2009 of Aistear, the national early years curriculum framework for children from birth to six (NCCA, 2009), set out the standards that ECCE services should meet. However, neither Aistear nor Síolta is compulsory and the implementation of both has been slow. The introduction of the Free Pre-school Year (ECCE Scheme) in 2010 was a landmark in early education, and for the first time meant almost universal access to at least one year of ECCE for all children. In the 2011/2012 school year, 67 000 or 94% of eligible children were enrolled in pre-school services under this scheme. It 'transformed national social policy in relation to the provision of childcare as, for the first-time, the objective of the investment was the impact on children … rather than the provision of places' (CEEU, 2014, p.6). The ECCE Scheme also offered a financial incentive to services to ensure that staff had a least a minimum qualification, and in this it has succeeded to some extent, though not perhaps as well as had been envisaged (CEEU, 2014).

Within the formal school system, while the 1999 Primary School Curriculum espouses a developmental approach to learning especially in the early years, the 2004 OECD review found that an overly didactic approach prevailed in the majority of classrooms catering for four to six year olds. Among the reasons that have been put forward to explain this are large class sizes, lack of space and facilities and an over-dependence on workbooks (Nic Craith & Fay, 2007). Regrettably therefore, it cannot be said that early years provision, either within the formal school system or outside it, has reached the kind of standards that all of us would wish for our children, and without a concerted effort at national level, this is unlikely to change.

This paper will first consider how national policy has both influenced and constrained the development and accessibility of ECCE in Ireland, and second, it will discuss the issue of quality in ECCE, using as a framework the five policy levers for quality identified by the OECD (2012): (i) quality goals and regulations; (ii) curriculum standards; (iii) improving qualifications, training and working conditions; (iv) engaging families and community and (v) advancing data collection, research and monitoring. This paper will look at the Irish early years sector in relation to each of these headings, but will focus mainly on the first three, as these have been to the forefront of current discussion and debate. Reports appear in print and on-line regularly also of families describing the cost of childcare as excessively burdensome, while workers in pre-schools and nurseries campaign against low pay and poor working conditions. There are reports of non-compliance with standards in nurseries and crèches, and of crèche owners being fined for breaches of the Child Care Regulations. The overall impression is of a problematic system of care and education for children in the early years, but how valid is this impression, and how can it be remedied?

Early years education and care in Ireland: The background

Historically, the responsibility at government level for early childhood care and education in Ireland, as in many other countries, has been split between the departments of education and health. Children in the primary school system (ages 4 to 12) are the responsibility of the Department of Education and Skills. While compulsory attendance at school begins at age 6, in practice around 40% of four year olds and almost all 5 year olds are already attending school. Children may begin attending school in the September of each year, and in the past almost all of those who had reached the age of four did so. A trend has been noted in recent years for a slightly older starting age, with many children waiting until they are 5 to start school, but this effect is less noticeable in families from a lower income bracket. The Growing Up in Ireland study (a major longitudinal study of Irish children) found that children from more advantaged families were more likely to defer starting school, with only 23% of children from the highest income quintile born in June 2008 starting school in September 2012, compared to 52% of those born in the same month from the lowest quintile (McGinnity, Murray & McNally, 2013, p. 1). It is possible that for lower income families the longer school day (four and a half hours, compared to three hours in pre-school) may be more attractive, as it might allow a parent to return to work part-time without having to pay for childcare.

The first two years of primary school are known as junior infants and senior infants, and in the past, Ireland has classified enrolment in these classes as 'early childhood education' in official returns to the OECD. Although the 1999 Primary School curriculum takes a developmental approach and emphasises the benefits of active learning and learning, the 2004 OCED review criticised the implementation of the Primary School Curriculum in these infant classes as being overly didactic. Teaching tended to be formal, with an emphasis on literacy and numeracy, and with an average class size of 24.7 (DES 2013) but with many classes of up to 30 children and in some cases more, there seemed to be little opportunity for active learning in many infant classrooms . Schemes aimed at tackling educational disadvantage recognised this- the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) scheme reduced the number of children in classes in a number of designated disadvantaged schools. A further initiative, the Early Start pre-school scheme which was introduced in 1994. There are 40 Early Start units located in designated schools catering for 1650 children (DES, 2015). Each unit is staffed by a primary teacher and a childcare assistant and offers a fully funded two and a half hours of pre-school per day to qualifying children in the year before they start primary school. There is a maximum class size of 15. This scheme was extremely limited in its availability but until 2010, when the Free Pre-school Year (ECCE scheme) was introduced, this was, apart from one long-running preschool in Dublin, the only free pre-school experience that children could avail of that was funded by the state.

Other major changes in primary schools have arisen from the integration of children with learning disabilities into mainstream schools. This entailed the appointment of extra resource and support staff in schools, and since most classes now has some children with additional needs, the presence of classroom assistants became widespread. The same cannot be said for pre-school services; parents are currently lobbying for extra supports to be made available so that children with additional needs can access the ECCE scheme. At the same time, Ireland for the first time in the early 2000s experienced inward migration of both asylum seekers and economic migrants, so that classes became much more international in nature, with a significant number of children whose home language differed from that of the majority.

Unlike primary school, care and education for children of pre-school age has by and large been seen by the Irish state as a private matter, and the responsibility of parents.

There are some indications that this may be changing, but for the most part, it still holds true. While the Department of Education and Skills is responsible for primary education, responsibility for younger children was, and to a large extent still is, primarily the responsibility of the Department of Health, with units in several other departments having an influence on policy- the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR) had a particularly important role towards the end of the 1990s and early 2000s is supporting the development of the childcare sector. From an equality point of view, and spurred by the expanding labour market and the availability of co-funding from the EU, measures were introduced under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000 -2006 to encourage the private, voluntary and community sectors to expand the number of places available for children and to offer more full-day care. The city and county Child Care Committees (CCCs) were also set up at this time to support this expansion and to advise providers.

The publication of the National Children's Strategy in 2000 was an important development in bringing greater coherence to services for children. The Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) was set up in 2005 to support the implementation of the Strategy. The OMCYA was part of the Department of Health and Children but had units from the Department of Justice and Equality and the Department of Education and Skills (DES) co-located with it, including the Early Years Policy Unit of the DES. The OMCYA became a full Department in 2011, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), with a senior minister at cabinet level, and a wide ranging brief with respect to children and youth in Ireland. Among the range of policy and service activity for which the DCYA is responsible, a key priority is 'to enhance the provision of quality and accessible early childhood care and education and school age childcare places' (DCYA, 2015). This includes elements of funding, inspection, and support, both direct and indirect.

ECCE in Ireland was (and for the most part still is) and is provided by a mixture of voluntary, community, and private for-profit services, most of which cater for fewer than 20 children. Pre-school services usually offer sessions of two and half or three hours, on four or five days a week, for 38 weeks of the year for children aged three to four, while crèches and nurseries also cater for younger children and offered extended hours. The pre-school sector includes community and private playgroups, Naíonraí (Irish-language playgroups), Montessori and Steiner and other pre-schools as well as nurseries and crèches which offer full-day care. Parents have to pay the full costs, except where community based provision is offered at a reduced cost to parents, or where parents in low paid employment qualify for schemes such as the Community Childcare Subvention. According to a report jointly produced by Barnardos and Start Strong (2012), childcare costs in Ireland are amongst the highest in Europe, and can amount to more than 50% of the net income of some families.

In the 1980s and 1990s, there were few nurseries offering full day care. Many working parents relied on childminders or relatives to look after children of pre-school age, and the female labour force participation rate was low by European standards, and was particularly low among women with children aged five and under (Russell, McGinnity, Callan & Keane, 2009). An analysis of the findings on childcare from the Growing Up in Ireland study show that the majority of parents still utilise a network of informal childcare arrangements in the years before the child is eligible for the ECCE scheme (Byrne & O'Toole, 2015). This may include care by childminders and grandparents; 12.4% of infants in the Growing Up in Ireland study were looked after by grandparents and 15.7% by other home-based carers compared to 10.5% in centre-based care (Share, McNally & Murray, 2014). The ECCE scheme is not in fact designed to meet the childcare needs of working parents, and even after children start school, parents will need to make arrangements for

after-school and holiday care. Some early years services offer an after-school element also, but in general, parents rely again on a patchwork of care to meet their childcare needs.

Hayes (2007) characterises the approach to investment in early childhood services in Ireland as a low public investment, mixed market model which depends on parental choice and market forces to regulate both the supply and the quality of services. The IDWG report (2015, pp. 117-118) found that in reality, this has not happened, and that affordability of service is the primary reason for choice of provision. This market-driven approach was exemplified in the Early Years Supplement which was paid directly to parents of children under six from 2006 to 2009. Hayes (2006) warned that this would neither strengthen the early years sector nor improve quality- there was in fact no guarantee that parents would choose to spend it this payment of €1,000 annually on ECCE. It may be argued that this mixed market model is still in operation, even after abolition of the Early Years Supplement and the introduction in January 2010 of the free pre-school year (FPY) under the ECCE Scheme; the change actually reduced the overall cost to a government that continued to depend on the private and voluntary sectors to provide early years services. Further, the FPY grant which initially was paid at a weekly rate of €64.50, or €75 where the pre-school leaders hold degree level qualifications in Early Education, was cut by approximately 3%, to €62.50 and €73 respectively in September 2012, when demographic changes meant that the number of children entering the scheme had increased. In compensation, services were allowed to take in 11 children per adult, instead of 10, with the argument that this would have a negligible effect on quality. (DCYA, 2011). The ECCE Scheme did however ensure that funding went directly to pre-school services in the form of capitation grants for children attending their services, and it also increased the number of children aged 3 to 4 attending pre-schools. The scheme also had the corollary effect of subsidising smaller services, many of which were in danger of closing following the economic downturn and consequent decrease in employment rates in Ireland from 2008 onwards.

In recent years, the focus has moved from increasing the supply of places available in early years settings to improving the quality of those services and the experiences of the young children using them. This was partly inspired by evaluations of ECCE initiatives in Ireland and internationally that showed a link between the quality of services and the outcomes for children, partly by media reports of breaches of regulations and mistreatment of children in a small number of services, as well as by long-term lobbying from the early childhood organisations. The negative publicity about childcare caused a high degree of public concern, and this may have added impetus to the drive to promote quality.

Quality Element 1: Regulations and Goals. Concerns were expressed at the time of the expansion of services under the EOCP (see for example Hayes, 2000) that the focus was on childcare as a service to allow parents to participate in the labour market, and that the quality of the education and care on offer seemed to be a lesser priority. The pre-school care and education sector was until 1996 almost totally unregulated. The Childcare (Pre School) Regulations which were brought into effect in late 1996 focused largely on issues of health and safety and set minimum adult to child ratios for the first time (1:10 for sessional services, 1:3 for babies under a year old in full day care, 1;6 for 1-3 year olds, 1:8 for 3:6 yr olds) . There was for the first time an obligation for services to notify their local health board (later the Health Service Executive) and to be inspected for compliance with the regulations. The regulations do not for the most part apply to childminders, as those who cared for smaller numbers of children (fewer than three) in their own homes were exempt.

The Pre School Regulations had been first introduced as part of the 1991 Childcare Act, the main focus of which was the safeguarding of children, and the Regulations tended to reflect this, in their emphasis on health and safety, and on the static variables such as room size, numbers of children, basic record keeping and so on. Little or no attention was paid to the dynamic variables, such as staff interactions with the children, opportunities for indoor and outdoor play, developmental activities, etc. The enforcement of the Regulations was the responsibility of the Health Boards, and was carried out by environmental health officers and public health nurses. A frequent criticism of inspections under the 1996 regulations was that they were largely concerned with the physical setting and made little mention of the quality of the child's experiences in that setting. The revised Pre-school Regulations (2006) address this to some extent:

> *…Each child's learning, development and well-being needs should be met within the daily life of the service through the provision of the appropriate opportunities, experiences, activities, interactions and materials. In meeting these needs, service providers should recognise how children affect and, in turn, are affected by the relationships, environment and activities around them. (Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) 2006: Regulation 5)*

The 2006 regulations in their explanatory guide also refer to the 'Whole Child Perspective' as contained in the National Children's Strategy (Ireland, 2000), which recognises that the child is an active participant in his or her own development. Hence the 2006 regulations, which are themselves currently being revised, are somewhat closer to placing the child at the centre than the 1996 ones.

Inspection of pre-school services was transferred in 2014 to the newly established Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, which is now responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children, including child protection, early intervention and family support services. A recent analysis of inspection reports (Hanafin, 2014) found that while most services were compliant with most regulations, a number of inspection reports gave cause for serious concern in relation to children's safety and well-being. Also among the most commonly noted instances of non-compliance were the requirement for all staff to be adequately vetted before being employed, and in a small number of cases, the poor level of engagement of staff with the children was noted.

The inspection process has also been criticised for inconsistency. Consequently, a set of National Standards for Pre-School Services (DCYA, 2010; Tusla, 2015) have been developed by a working group drawn from the voluntary and state sectors. A National Assessment Guide based on these has been developed, which will standardise inspections across the country, and will initially support the inspection of Regulation 5 (Health, Welfare & Development of the Child) in particular (Tusla, 2015). A further development (May/June 2015) is the recruitment by the Department of Education and Skills of a number of Early Years Inspectors, whose brief will be to monitor the quality of the education experience being provided for children within the ECCE Scheme, to provide advice and support to providers, and to complement the Tusla inspections. This will come into operation in the autumn of 2015.

While the Pre-school Regulations might be considered to be the minimum standards that any early years' service should meet, Síolta, the national quality framework for early childhood education published in 2006, was designed to define, assess and support the improvement of quality across all aspects of practice in ECCE, and to support practitioners in ECCE settings to become critically aware of, and reflect on, their practice. Síolta (the Irish word for seeds) opens with a set of 12 Principles, setting out its vision for early childhood, followed by 16 Standards each of which covers an aspect of ECCE. An

evaluation of the initial Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (QAP) found that while services who engaged with it became more conscious of aspects of quality and put quality improvements into place, the amount of time needed was considerable, and the support of the Síolta coordinators was crucial (Goodbody Economic Consultants, 2011). The final evaluation of the Siolta QAP found that one of the main reasons for services not to complete the programme was the amount of staff time required, coupled with the fact that in general, staff are not paid for non-contact time. Other findings of this evaluation were (1) the positive effects of mentoring (2) the need for some streamlining across components and (3) the broader implications for national policy in ECCE:

> *… the data also shows that there is a strong need in the ECCE sector for clarity and coherence across all national practice guidelines with repeated advocacy for alignment of Síolta, Aistear and regulatory requirements. Professional education and training programmes also need to embrace the content and direction provided by Síolta and Aistear and ensure that all graduates are adequately prepared to engage with them in everyday practice.' (Early Years Education Policy Unit, 2013: 23)*

There has been criticism (e.g. Barnardos & Start Strong, 2012) that quality initiatives have tended to focus on three to four year olds, and that quality for the under-threes has been neglected, and that there is an urgent need to look at services for this very vulnerable age group. Better Start, a national early years quality development service, has begun to address this to some extent (Rogers, 2014), but as it only came into operation in 214, it is too early to say how effective it will be. Better Start was set up in 2014 by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) to work with the City and County Childcare Committees and bring an integrated national approach to developing quality in early childhood services. Its main function will be to provide mentoring and support to services in which a need for quality improvement has been identified in inspection reports. To begin with, the focus will be on larger services providing full day care for children from birth to six- this is partly in response to the public concern generated by media reporting of poor standards and ill-treatment of children in some settings.

Quality Element 2: Curriculum Standards. One of the most important advances in ECCE in Ireland in recent years was the publication in 2009 of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework for children from birth to age 6. Aistear (meaning a journey in the Irish language) was developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in consultation with a broad range of stakeholders from across the early years sector, including young children themselves and their parents. It was also based on a wide-ranging review of the literature on early childhood learning and development and of international best practice. Aistear is a curriculum framework, designed to be used across a wide range of settings, in the home as well as group settings and infant classes. It works alongside and is compatible with existing curricula (e.g. Montessori, HighScope) but it can also be used to give structure to and increase the effectiveness of less formal, play-based, early years practice. Aistear begins by setting out 12 Principles that underlie learning and development, and then takes a thematic approach to early learning, under the four themes of Well-Being, Identity and Belonging, Communication, and Exploring and Thinking. It also contains guidelines designed to underpin good practice (NCCA, 2009) While Síolta focuses on all elements of quality in ECCE settings, Aistear focuses primarily on providing appropriately challenging, positive and enjoyable learning experiences for children. It supports and complements several of the Síolta standards, and a joint Síolta/Aistear Practice Guide (NCCA 2015) has recently been launched. While Aistear is not compulsory, all pre-schools in the state-funded ECCE scheme are expected to operate in accordance with it, as well as with the Síolta quality framework.

A considerable amount of support material for Aistear has been developed and made available on-line (video clips, podcasts, handouts, etc) through the Aistear Toolkit (NCCA, 2014) and these are designed for use by tutors on childcare courses as well as by settings and individuals. A pilot Aistear in Action programme was jointly run by the NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland, the largest national voluntary organisation for early years services (NCCA, 2013). It was received very positively by participating services, but, as with the Síolta QAP evaluations mentioned earlier, it identified the need for services to receive support and mentoring in implementing Aistear (Daly et al., 2014).

Aistear is also increasingly being utilised alongside the Primary School Curriculum (Department of Education and Skills, 1999) in the infant classes (children aged 4 to 6 or 7) of many primary schools. The Aistear Tutor Initiative was a collaboration between the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the Association of Teachers' Education Centres in Ireland (Uí Chadhla, Forster & Hough, 2014). Experienced infant teachers from each of the teacher centres were trained as tutors to support teachers in embracing a play methodology as part of their repertoire of teaching approaches. Over 3,000 teachers have participated in seminars and summer courses on Aistear, and there has been an enthusiastic reaction to its introduction in the classroom (Ryan & Ní Fhoghlú, 2012; Keane, 2014; Leogue-Moran, 2014; Leen, 2014). In a report to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills (NCCA, October 2010), the NCCA pointed to some ways in which Aistear gives positive support to infant teachers: it endorses the importance of play and offers examples of how play can be used to support learning; it gives numerous practical examples of how to support young children's emerging language, literacy and numeracy development, and it encourages teachers to allow children to sometimes follow the children's lead when planning and implementing learning experiences. This last is particularly challenging in an infant classroom, where the existing (1999) curriculum places greater emphasis on the role of the teacher. There is an on-going review of this curriculum as it applies to infant classes being conducted by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, and it is expected that Aistear will be influential in this.

Since its launch, Aistear has been received very positively, both at home and abroad, and the NCCA continues to develop, and to make available on its website, an extensive range of support materials to aid with its implementation. Together with Síolta, the national framework for quality, Aistear provides a blueprint for high quality education and care that will enable children to develop to their fullest potential in an environment that is warm and nurturing as well as stimulating and full of opportunities to explore and learn.

Quality Element 3: Improving Qualifications, Training and Working Conditions. The split between education and care in Ireland is nowhere more evident than in the area of staff qualifications and working conditions. Teachers working in the infant classes of primary schools must have at least a Bachelor's degree and a teaching qualification. The latter may be incorporated into their degree (B. Ed., for example) or added as a post-graduate diploma. They are paid by the State, and once appointed to a permanent post enjoy security of employment and opportunities for further professional development. Those working in the pre-school sector, on the other hand, have a variety of qualifications reflecting the ad-hoc nature of how services have evolved, and in some cases, staff may have no recognised childcare qualifications at all. There has been a concerted effort to bring about improvements in this regard. The National Standards for Pre-School Services state, with regard to staff qualifications:

At least 50% of the staff in the service who are caring for children [should] have a qualification appropriate to the care and development of the pre-school child. All others should be working towards achieving one within an agreed timescale. (DCYA, 2010, Section 5)

This may be seen as a very low benchmark, especially since staff are now being asked to engage with and implement Síolta and Aistear. The minimum qualification for staff participating in the ECCE Scheme is a Level 5[1] on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), a basic vocational training for work as a childcare assistant. The Workforce Development Plan (Dept of Education and Skills, 2010a) recognises that many of the existing workforce need opportunities to acquire accredited qualifications and to have their existing prior experience and knowledge validated. The most recent survey of the early years workforce (Pobal, 2013) found that there had been substantial progress across the sector in recent years, with 87.0% of staff having qualification equal to or higher than NFQ Level 5 in 2012. Worryingly, however, the survey found that 8.1% of staff who worked directly with children had no childcare training (Pobal, 2013, p. 51), although this is an improvement over the 12% of staff with no qualifications in a 2008/2009 survey, and the 21% who were unqualified in 1999 (Department of Education and Skills, 2010b). The ECCE Scheme offers services an incentive to employ more highly qualified people, whereby a higher capitation grant is payable where the ECCE room leaders hold an accredited NFQ Level 7 (equivalent to EQF Level 6) award or higher in ECCE, plus three years' experience, and the assistants hold an NFQ Level 5. The 2013 Pobal survey found that almost all ECCE scheme participants now meet the minimum requirement of staff being trained to NFQ Level 5.

It is clear that there is still a long way to go as regards the upskilling of the early years workforce. The lower levels of qualifications compared to the primary school system reflect not only the unplanned way in which the sector has developed but also the poorer pay levels and less favourable working conditions that prevail in childcare generally. Many receive only the minimum wage, and some are only employed for the 38 weeks a year funded by the ECCE scheme. The workforce is largely female, and it may suit some of them to opt for term-time and part-time working, especially those with school age children, this means that working in ECCE is not a viable long-term option for many. It may also lead to a high turnover of staff, with negative consequences for quality. Since the mid-1990s, universities and institutes of technology in Ireland have been offering courses in early childhood care and education at degree level and the uptake of these programmes by school-leavers has been excellent. However, it appears that highly qualified graduates from these courses in many cases do not find a career in childcare sufficiently attractive, and they opt for other career paths instead. The Association of Childhood Professionals (ACP) has been campaigning for a fairer pay scale, stating that early childhood workers are subsidising the true cost of childcare by their low wages, and are expected to meet increasing demands and regulations while not being paid for non-contact time. At the same time, increasing the already high costs of childcare to parents is not sustainable. The childcare system in Ireland has received funding in recent years that could be considered significant in comparison with the past, yet the overall spend on early years care and education in recent years is in the region of 0.2% of GDP. Even when spending on children aged 5 and under who are in the education system are factored in, Ireland's spend is still only 0.5% of GDP, in comparison with the OECD average of 0.8% of GDP and the international benchmark set by UNICEF of 1% of GDP (IDP, 2015). The ACP, along with other lobby groups (including Early Childhood Ireland, Barnardos and Start Strong) have called for an increase in government spending on ECCE to bring it closer to the UNICEF target.

Quality Elements 4: Engaging Families and Community. The processes of developing both Aistear and Síolta identified the importance of developing relationships with parents, families and the community. They both acknowledge the importance of these relationships

[1] Equivalent to Levels 4 on the European Qualifications Framework.

to children and also see them as a key element of effective practice. Building partnerships between parents and early years practitioners is one of the key pillars of the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide. A significant element of this is the suggestions for sharing children's learning with parents. In this, Aistear draws on both the Learning Stories approach from New Zealand (Carr and Lee, 2012) and the multiple ways of documenting children's learning developed in Reggio Emilia, the pre-school setting. The focus has moved from traditional forms of involvement, which were generally about the parents supporting the pre-school service or school through volunteering or contributing in some way, to a greater sharing of children's learning experiences. This is an area that has significant potential for development, and one which may in the long term be crucial to the success of Aistear and Síolta; the involvement of parents in their children's learning has been shown in numerous studies to make a huge difference to the eventual outcomes.

Quality Element 5: Advancing Data Collection, Research and Monitoring. Co-ordination- at government level, the setting up of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in 2011 and of the Early Years Policy Unit within the Department of Education and Skills, reflect a welcome recognition of the need for co-ordination across the different policies and initiatives that affect children. It is also essential to monitor the implementation of programmes and initiatives, and this is generally being done; there have been numerous reports published on different local and national initiatives. Funded initiatives generally require an on-going evaluation to be built in as part of the planning. Tusla has begun to make the inspection reports from early childhood services more accessible through its on-line portal, Pobal collects statistics on various aspects of childcare, and the Department of Education and Skills monitors educational matters. A major longitudinal study of almost 20 000 children, Growing Up in Ireland, has already produced a huge amount of data and some very significant findings about the lives of children from its first phase of data collection (2007-2014), and the second phase (2015-2019) has just begun. Thus, there is a considerable amount of data already available to researchers, policy makers, parents and other interested parties. The challenge then is to make the best use of this data in order to plan for the future.

Conclusions

The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Frances Fitzgerald, in 2012, promised the introduction of a National Early Years Strategy. The Expert Advisory Group on the National Early Years Strategy (2013) produced a comprehensive report (Right from the Start), that identified five 'peaks' that needed to be scaled in order to transform the experience of young children in Ireland: increased investment, extending parental leave, strengthening child and family support, insisting on good governance, accountability and quality in all services, and enhancing and extending quality early childhood care and education services.

The first of these, increased investment, is crucial if the others are to follow and the desired improvements in quality and accessibility are to be achieved. The Expert Advisory Group (2013) advocated increasing investment to reach the OECD average of 0.7% of GDP within five years, and the international benchmark of 1% within ten years. It states that 'The increased investment is necessary to achieve higher quality, more accessible and more affordable services, particularly through the training and professional development of those working at all levels of the early care and education system.' (Expert Advisory Group, 2015, p.5). The report of the Inter-Departmental Working Group on Future Investment in Childcare in Ireland identifies two main drivers for change: a recognition of the value of early years provision in ensuring that children get the best start in life and in narrowing the gap between more and less advantaged children, alongside a concern about the effects of the availability of affordable childcare on the labour market (IDWG, 2015, p.

7). The reviews and the public consultation conducted as part of the IDWG's work identified the issues of affordability, quality, choice, accessibility and inclusivity as being crucial. With regard to quality, the two elements that the IDWG (2015) identifies as crucial are the need for greater regulation and inspection, and for the professionalization of the workforce, and these two elements need to go hand in hand.

The evidence from the pilot Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (Early Years Education Policy Unit, 2013) and from the Aistear in Action Initiative (NCCA, 2013; Daly, Grogan-Ryan, Corbett & Connolly, 2014) shows the importance of professional development and mentoring. In the current state of childcare, with a workforce that is still at a comparatively low level of professional development and qualifications, it is unrealistic to expect staff to be able to engage fully with quality initiatives without considerable on-going support. The Better Start initiative recognises this; however it is limited in scope and unless it is assured of longer term funding and enabled to expand its services, its efficacy is also likely to be limited. The other pressing issue is the improvement of working conditions for people who work in early years education and care. Improved salaries and career prospects are needed if the sector is to attract and retain qualified people, and time spent on planning and documenting learning needs to be recognised as an essential part of the work of the early years professional and remunerated accordingly.

It is in the very earliest years that the foundations of learning are laid, and if the pre-school years are to be acknowledged as being equally as important, if not more so, than the years spent in primary school, then as a society, we need to invest accordingly in the future of our children. While regulation and inspection is essential, the development of a highly skilled and adequately remunerated early years workforce is perhaps the biggest contribution that could be made to improving ECCE in Ireland. This means providing on-going support and continuing professional development for those already working in the sector, and recognition that greater State investment is needed in this most important area. We know what good quality ECCE looks like; the challenge now is to make sure that all our children enjoy high quality early education and care.

• • •

Rosaleen Murphy works as a researcher with the School of Education, UCC, and has worked on several externally funded collaborative research projects on initial teacher education. She is also the editor of *An Leanbh Óg*, *the OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies*. She held an IRCHSS Government of Ireland Post-Doctoral Research Fellowship from 2003-2005, and was also part of the team that developed *Aistear*, *the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

References

Barnardos & Start Strong (2012). *Towards a Scandinavian childcare system for 0-12 year olds in Ireland?* Accessed 04/09/15 at http://www.startstrong.ie/files/Barnardos - Start Strong - Childcare Briefing Paper final version.pdf

Byrne, D. & O'Toole, C. (2015) *The Influence of childcare arrangements on child well being from infancy to middle childhood. A report for TUSLA: the Child and Family Support Agency*. TUSLA/

Maynooth University. Accessed 04/09/15 at https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document//Delma%20Byrne%20Childcare%20Report%20Jun%202015.pdf

Carr, M & Lee, W. (2012). *Learning stories: Constructing learner identities in early education.* London: Sage Publications.

Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 1996. Retrieved from http://www.dcya.gov.ie/docs/Child_Care(PreSchool_Services)_Regulations_1996_and_Child_Ca/495.htm

Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations 2006. Retrieved from http://www.dcya.gov.ie/documents/publications/Child_Care_Pre-_School_Services_Regs_2006.pdf

CEEU (2014) *Focused policy assessment of early childhood education and the ECCE scheme.* Dublin: Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, Central Expenditure Evaluation Unit.

Daly, M. & Grogan-Ryan, P. with M. Corbett & L. Connolly (2014). The Aistear in Action initiative 2011-2013. *An Leanbh Óg, the OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies*, *8*, 169-200.

DCYA (2011). *Q&As – Budget changes relating to childcare and pre-school funding, 6 December 2011*. Ireland : Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Accessed at http://www.dcya.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?docid=1724

Department of Education (1999) The Primary School curriculum. http://www.curriculumonline.ie/Primary/Curriculum

Department of Education and Science (2010a). *A workforce development plan for the early childhood care and education sector in Ireland*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. Accessed 22/05/2015 at http://www.dcya.gov.ie/documents/earlyyears/workforce_dev_plan.pdf

Department of Education and Skills (2010b). *Developing the workforce in the early childhood care and education sector. Background discussion paper*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. Accessed 22/05/2015 at https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Early-Years/eye_background_discussion_paper.pdf

Department of Education and Skills (2013) *Key Statistics* 2012/2013. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.

Early Years Education Policy Unit (2013) *Final report on the development and implementation of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme.* Ireland: Department of Education and Skills. Accessed 04/09/15 at http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/S%C3%ADolta-Final-Report.pdf

Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy (2013). *Right from the start. Report of the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy*. Ireland: Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Accessed 22/05/2015 at http://www.dcya.gov.ie/docs/Right_From_The_Start/2993.htm

Goodbody Economic Consultants (2011). Evaluation of initial implementation of Síolta. Final report. December 2011. Retrieved from https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Early-Years/Siolta-Evaluation-Final-Report.pdf

Hanafin, S. (2014) *Report on the quality of pre-school services. Analysis of pre-school inspection reports*. Dublin: Tusla, Child and Family Agency. Accessed 05/09/15 at http://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Report_on_the_Quality_of_Pre-school_services.pdf

Hayes, N. (2006) *Early childhood education and care: A decade of reflection 1996 – 2006*. In Proceedings of CSER Early Childhood Care and Education Seminar Series I, pp 3-9. Accessed 22/08/2015 http://www.dit.ie/cser/media/ditcser/images/Early-Childhood-Care-and-Education-in-Ireland.pdf

Hayes, N. (2007). *Perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood – a background paper*. Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Accessed 22/08/2015 at http://www.ncca.ie/uploadedfiles/ecpe/education%20and%20care.pdf

Ireland (2000). *National children's strategy: Our children, their lives*. Dublin: The Stationery Office .

Keane, S. (2014) Aistear in a junior infant classroom. Putting theory into practice. *An Leanbh Óg, the OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies*, *8*, 215-226.

Growing Up In Ireland (2014). *Key findings: infant cohort (at 5 years). No 1. transition to schools among five-year-olds*. Accessed 01/09/2015 at http://www.growingup.ie/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/5-year_KFs/GUI_KF_1_School.pdf

Growing Up In Ireland (2015) *Growing up in Ireland: The national longitudinal study of children*. www.growingup.ie

IDWG(2015). *Report of the Inter-Departmental Working Group: Future investment in childcare in Ireland*. Ireland: Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Accessed 09/09/2015 at http://dcya.gov.ie/documents/earlyyears/20150722IDGReportonEarlyYrsInvestmentReport.pdf

Leen, H. (2014). Challenges in introducing a play-based methodology in the classroom. *An Leanbh Óg, the OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies*, *8*, 227-244.

Leogue-Moran, T. (2014) Aistear in a multi-grade classroom. *An Leanbh Óg, the OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies*, *8*, 245-254.

McGinnity, F., Murray, A. & McNally, S. (2013). *Growing up in Ireland: Infant cohort report 2: Mothers' return to work and childcare choices of infants in Ireland*. ESRI/Trinity College Dublin/DCYA. http://www.dcya.gov.ie/documents/growingupinireland/Executive_Summary_Childcare_Report.pdf

NCCA (2009) *Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework*. Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. www.ncca.ie/earlylearning

NCCA (2010). *Developments in the curriculum for primary schools*. Report for the Joint Committee on Education and Skills. Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

NCCA (2013) *Aistear in Action initiative: Final report. A collaboration between NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland.* Accessed 21/05/2015 at http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Early_Childhood_and_Primary_Education/Early_Childhood_Education/Aistear_Toolkit/AIA_Report.pdf

NCCA (2014) *Aistear* Toolkit. On-line: http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Early_Childhood_and_Primary_Education/Early_Childhood_Education/

NCCA (2015) *Síolta/Aistear* Practice Guide: http://www.ncca.ie/en/Practice-Guide

Nic Craith, D. & Fay, A. (2007) The curriculum in the infant classes in primary schools in Ireland – Creating learning experiences. In *Vision into practice: Making quality a reality in the lives of young children*. CECDE, Dublin, Feb 2007, Conference Proceedings. http://www.cecde.ie/english/pdf/Vision%20into%20Practice/INTO.pdf

OECD (2012) *Starting Strong III - A quality toolbox for early childhood education and care*. Paris: OECD.

OECD Family Database (2014) PF3.1: *Public spending on childcare and early education*.

Pobal (2013). *Pobal annual early years sector survey 2013*. Accessed 21/09/15 at www.pobal.ie/Publications/Documents/Pobal%20Annual%20Early%20Years%20Sector%20Survey%202013%20Report.pdf

Rogers, M. (2014). *Better Start. Working together for children*. Presentation, Start Strong, Nov 2014. Accessed 21/08/2015 at http://www.startstrong.ie/files/Margaret_Rogers_Better_start_Intro_Start_Strong_Dec_14.pdf

Russell, H., McGinnity, F., Callan T. & Keane, C. (2009) *A woman's place: Female participation in the Irish labour market. Dublin*: The Equality Authority and The Economic and Social Research Institute .

Ryan, E. & Ní Fhoghlú, T. (2012). Learning to play while playing to learn. *In Touch*, April 2012. http://www.into.ie/ROI/Publications/InTouch/FullLengthArticles/

Síolta (2006) *Síolta, the national quality framework for early childhood education*. Accessed at www.siolta.ie

Start Strong (2014). *Childcare: business or profession*? Accessed 02/09/2015 at http://www.startstrong.ie/files/Childcare_Business_or_Profession_Full_Report_Web_Version.pdf

Tusla (2015a) *Early years inspectorate*. http://www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services/early-years-pre-school-inspection-services/

Tusla (2015b) *National standards for pre-school services*. http://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/natstandards_preschool.pdf

Uí Chadhla, N., Forster, A. & Hough, M. (2014). The Aistear tutor initiative. *An Leanbh Óg, the OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood Studies*, *8*, 201-214.

UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre (2008) *The Childcare Transition: A league table of early childhood education and care in economically advanced countries*.