

1 EARLY CHILDHOOD



Tara McCallion-Gleeson, 3, investigates a slide under a microscope at the annual Sligo Science Fair held on 10 November 2018 in IT Sligo as part of Science Week Ireland.

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They are exclusively the views of our highly valued writers and do not necessarily reflect
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Ireland's Yearbook of Education 2018 2019

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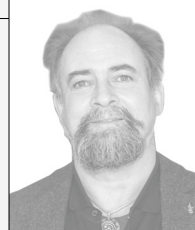
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AIM wins Excellence and Innovation Award

The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) was among the winners of a 2018 Civil Service Excellence and Innovation Award, announced by Minister Paschal Donohoe in a special ceremony in Dublin Castle in November 2018.

The Awards are held annually to recognise the achievements of civil servants and showcase examples of best practice and innovation in Government Departments and Offices.

Speaking at the event, Minister Donohoe congratulated all those who participated:

“These projects highlight the best practice that we see every day in our workplaces. The passion and commitment of staff to deliver on their objectives is a common thread that shines through all of the projects that have been shortlisted.”

The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is a model of supports designed to ensure that children with disabilities can access the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE).

Part of the DCYA, AIM's Excellence and Innovation award was for Citizen Impact.



Pictured at the 2018 Civil Service Excellence and Innovation Awards in St. Patrick's Hall, Dublin Castle, 22 November 2018, are: **Paschal Donohoe**, Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure & Reform; **Dr Anne-Marie Brooks**, DCYA; **Mairéad O'Neill**, DCYA; **Martina Morey**, DCYA; **Teresa Griffin**, National Council for Special Education – DES; **Bernie McNally**, DCYA; **Robert Watts**, Sec Gen, Dept of Public Expenditure and Reform; **Katherine Licken**, Sec Gen, Dept of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.



Dr Margaret Rogers

National Manager,
Better Start National
Early Years Quality
Development

ECEC IN IRELAND 2018

Where to from here?

The early childhood education sector in Ireland has been evolving rapidly over the past five years in particular, having come from a relatively marginal level of policy focus and investment, lagging behind the experience in Australia, New Zealand, and many EU countries. In common with many jurisdictions:

ECEC [early childhood education and care] tends to receive less attention than any other level of education and training, despite evidence that investing efficiently in quality early years education is much more effective than intervening later and brings considerable returns throughout the lifecycle, particularly for the disadvantaged. (CEU, 2011)

In terms of advancing professionalism, emerging models of practice and growth of knowledge, skills, and experience, it is in a period of transformative change. State investment, starting from a very low base, has grown substantially. Though at 3% of GDP it still falls far short of the EU average of 7%, early childhood education is nonetheless firmly established as a political, economic, and social priority.¹

Many developments in recent years, whether driven by policy or emerging from practice, have created both opportunities and challenges for ECEC providers and staff. There is a drive towards greater professionalisation at many levels, from practitioner to organisation. Increased emphasis on quality, governance, and accountability across many sectors, both non-profit and commercial, has meant that the early years sector has had to engage with new systems, processes, and responsibilities, such as charity regulation and company law. In children's services, preschool regulations have been updated, and a system of registration² rather than notification is now established. Legislation on child safeguarding³ and Garda vetting⁴ has placed statutory duties on early years providers and staff.

Opportunities and incentives for quality improvement have been provided. The state now offers a bursary for preschool staff working in services who complete degree-level qualifications. Continuing professional development opportunities have greatly increased, with the development of the Leadership for Inclusion course⁵ and a programme of training to support inclusion, with, for the first time, CPD payments provided to employers to release staff to participate.

This article outlines some of the changes and opportunities that have emerged, especially in the past five years, and speculates on the pathway forward for ECEC in Ireland in the years to come.

RECENT CONTEXT 2013–2018

The past five years have been a period of rapid growth, development, and transformative change in ECEC in Ireland. Government investment has increased by 80% (DCYA, 2018); 200,000 children are accessing state-supported early years programmes; new training, mentoring, and professional development programmes are being implemented; and regulation has strengthened. Many of the goals identified by advocacy and policy informing groups, as outlined below, have influenced the developments across the sector.

2013 – RIGHT FROM THE START

Right from the Start (2013) was the final report of an expert advisory group established by the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Frances Fitzgerald, to inform the development of an early years strategy. The group compiled its report under ten themes and articulated a vision for the Early Years Strategy.

The National Early Years Strategy will be for all children aged 0–6 years.

1. All children from birth to 6 will flourish and thrive in healthy and supportive families and communities. They will be happy, healthy, secure, and hopeful, and will have a sense of belonging.
2. Young children will grow up in nurturing environments in which the quality of their experiences supports their learning, development, and well-being. This will allow them to make the most of their early childhood and maximise their individual life chances.
3. Society will recognise its responsibility for the health, care, education, and nurturing of all young children. It will value all young children as competent, capable, able doers who have histories and potential and who matter here and now.
4. All Government policies should be informed by the rights of children and be child-proofed for their impact on children aged 0–6.

Early childhood education is firmly established as a political, economic, and social priority.

FIVE PEAKS OVER FIVE YEARS:

- increasing Investment
- extending paid parental leave
- strengthening child and family support
- insisting on good governance, accountability, and quality in all services
 - public funding allocated only to services that achieve quality standards
- enhancing and extending quality early childhood care and education services
 - investing in training, mentoring, and professionalising the early years workforce
 - two full years of ECCE before entering primary school.

Paradoxically, while the group was finalising its report in 2013, an RTE *Prime Time Investigates* programme, 'A Breach of Trust', revealed instances of appallingly poor practice in a number of early years settings, and raised

public concerns about standards of care for children. In response, Minister Fitzgerald announced an action plan to improve standards, known as the Pre-School Quality Agenda, which outlined a number of commitments:

- increase the required qualification standards of childcare staff
- support implementation of Síolta and Aistear, including examining the establishment of nationwide mentoring supports
- implement new National Preschool Standards
- introduce registration of all childcare providers
- develop a more robust, consistent, and regular inspection system
- publish inspection reports online
- ensure action is taken in response to findings of non-compliance
- increase sanctions for non-compliant childcare providers.

Over the following five years, these commitments have largely been implemented, with significant impact on practice.

Preschool inspection regulations were updated and published in May 2016, coming into effect from 30 June on a phased basis. They now include a requirement for a minimum qualification (QQI level 5) for all staff working in preschool settings, and registration for early years services, to which conditions can be attached where necessary.⁶ The Preschool Inspectorate was restructured nationally and additional staff employed, widening the qualification criteria to include ECEC graduates.

The state now offers a bursary for preschool staff, working in services, who complete degree-level qualifications.

Better Start National Early Years Quality Development was established in 2014 to provide a quality development mentoring and coaching service to early years settings, and to bring an integrated national approach to developing quality in early years education and care. The work of Better Start is underpinned by the Síolta Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and by Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.

The Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (NCCA, 2015), an online resource integrating Síolta and Aistear, was published in 2015. It provides a rich suite of resources, including podcasts, video, tip sheets, and self-assessment tools, linked to the original frameworks, to support implementation in practice.

Alongside the revised preschool regulations, 2016 also saw the establishment of the Early Years Education Inspectorate (EYEI) in the Department of Education and skills (DES). The EYEI model provides evaluative information, advice, and support on the quality of education provision in an early years setting with reference to:

- the quality of the context to support children's learning and development
- the quality of the processes to support children's learning and development
- the quality of children's learning experiences and achievements
- the quality of management and leadership for learning. (DES, 2018)

The Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) was also launched in 2016, providing seven levels of progressive universal and targeted supports to ensure that children with a disability can access and meaningfully participate in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) (state-funded preschool) programme.

In 2017, the ECCE programme was expanded to allow up to 62 weeks' participation by children, and further extended in 2018 to provide a full two academic years of state-funded preschool for children in Ireland. As a result, the number of children availing of ECCE increased by 63%, with 120,601 children availing of the programme in the 2016/17 academic year.⁷

In 2018 the **Better Start Early Years Learning and Development Unit** was established to coordinate a programme of training aiming to build the capacity of early years settings to provide high-quality, inclusive programmes to all preschool children. In support of it, a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) fund was announced by Minister Katherine Zappone, providing for eighteen hours of annual paid CPD for early years practitioners attending approved training courses.

2018 also saw the establishment of an Early Childhood Research Centre in Dublin City University Faculty of Education.

In September 2018 a Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF) for the early years sector was published by Tusla. It sets out Tusla's interpretation of the preschool regulations and defines the parameters against which services are inspected. It promotes the continuous improvement of the quality and safety of services provided to children (Tusla, 2018).

All of these developments are rooted in a commitment to ensure that children are at the centre of policy and practice and derive optimal benefit from public investment in ECEC. However, it must be acknowledged that for those working in ECEC, change has been rapid, pervasive, and complex, but with little evidence of increased professional recognition or enhanced working conditions, a key driver of quality (OECD, 2006).

In this increasingly complex system, an almost existential quest for recognition and parity of equivalent professionals is a persistent theme. This could be characterised as an emerging profession in search of an identity, as it struggles to find its place in the multifaceted system of ECEC in Ireland and the wider professional context of children's services. Key characteristics of a profession include:

- special knowledge and skills in a recognised body of learning derived from research, education, and training at a high level who apply this knowledge and learning in the interest of others
- adhering to a code of ethics and standards of practice regulated by a professional association or council
- a commitment to competence achieved through continuing professional development
- accountability to those they serve and to society.

In 2018, a Continuing Professional Development Fund was announced by Minister Katherine Zappone, providing for 18 hours of annual paid CDP.

Despite the rapid growth and development in ECEC in Ireland, the construction of a profession has yet to emerge, and the quest for identity and consequent recognition continues.

WHAT CONTRIBUTES TO DEVELOPING A PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY?

A shared understanding of professional development supported by adequate initial and continuing professional development contributes to developing a professional identity. (Hayes, 2015, p.27).

A growing body of research evidence points to the impact of the education standard, qualifications, and professional development of those working in ECEC on the beneficial outcomes for children (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000; OECD, 2006; Urban et al., 2011; European Commission et al., 2014; Slot et al., 2015). It is essential to recognise that professional development is not linear (as with formative training) but a dynamic process of experience and interaction, honing knowledge and skills (Sheridan et al., 2009). The calibre of those professionals influences the process and content or curriculum quality of ECEC provision (Pramling and Pramling Samuelsson, 2011).

Core to professional identity is a need for clarity of role and professional orientation (Hayes, 2015). Ireland currently operates a split system of early childhood education and care for children from birth to six years, with a variety of delivery, mostly (70%) provided through private enterprise for children up to school age. While the intrinsically integrated nature of learning and development for children under six is well understood, policy and the wider education system privilege 'education' as a distinct practice.

Ireland currently operates a split system of early childhood education and care for children 0-6 years.

The public education system is available to children from the age of four years, in state-funded schools, staffed by qualified (NFQ level 8 or 9 degree) primary school teachers. In contrast, just 20% of ECEC staff hold a BA level (NFQ 7,

8, 9)⁸ degree or higher, up from 13.6% in 2013.⁹ Degree-level qualifications for working in the ECCE programme (children aged 3–5) are incentivised through higher capitation, while no such incentive is available for younger children, resulting in a higher proportion of graduates working with the 3+ age group.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY - WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The terminology used to describe people working in the non-statutory preschool sector varies hugely. There is a plethora of titles (e.g., early years assistant (ECCE), early years assistant (non-ECCE), room leader (ECCE), centre manager, deputy manager) (Pobal, 2017), none of which indicates an established professional identity.

Again in contrast to primary teachers, social workers, nurses, and other established professions, there is no professional registration body, no requirement for CPD, and until mid-2018 no policy incentive to undertake such training – though most ECEC staff do regular CPD on a voluntary and unpaid basis.

The issue of professional identity and recognition is not confined to ECEC in Ireland. In 2015, Stacey Goffin wrote:

Even though in recent years ECE has experienced significant increases in policy support and funding, the field continues to be characterized by sector fragmentation, reliance on an under-developed workforce and uneven public respect, resulting in a divided field of practice, patchy policy support and capricious public financing. Further exacerbating the field's status is its historic reluctance to step forward and create a desired future for ECE as a field of practice. (Goffin, 2015, p.1)

The EU framework for quality in ECEC aims for a pedagogical workforce of professionals holding a full qualification specialised in early childhood education at bachelor degree level (NFQ 7 or 8): professional pathways that are flexible and commensurate with the professional skills and competencies of its members, but also reflecting their contribution to the public good that is ECEC. This requires a fundamental rethink on how ECEC is structured, funded, governed, and delivered in Ireland, through which children's rights and best interests are promoted.

Employment in ECEC in Ireland and many other countries is currently characterised by low pay, lack of full-time, secure employment, and absence of clear career structures. In recent years, New Zealand has introduced pay parity between kindergarten and primary school teachers, making ECEC teaching a more attractive occupation, leading to lower staff turnover and a higher proportion of qualified staff, trained to implement the national curriculum.

In recent years,
New Zealand has
introduced pay parity
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and primary school
teachers.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

With the publication of a ten-year early years strategy now imminent, it is time to take stock and examine the emergent state of ECEC professionalisation in Ireland. The current profile of provision does not meet the commonly accepted definitions of a profession. Yet the recognition of ECEC as a public good, in terms of its beneficial outcomes for children, is on a par with the education system and necessitates its delivery by a body of professional peers. Currently the model of delivery in Ireland is largely privately owned and commercial, though state funding increasingly underpins its provision.

To achieve progress, the body of ECEC professionals and policy must move in tandem if a competent system (Urban et al., 2011) for ECEC in Ireland is to be realised. This will require substantial growth in graduate-level professionals; a clear framework for CPD; professional recognition reflected in terms, conditions, and career structures to ensure retention of qualified personnel; and the development of a professional affiliation system.

This structure must be underpinned by a commitment to adequate investment in children's early learning experiences, and a quality-assurance process to ensure that the quality of provision results in beneficial outcomes for all children. The forthcoming ten-year early years strategy will hopefully provide a clear strategic policy direction to progress the development of a

professionalised ECEC sector in Ireland, ensuring that all children derive the optimum benefit from participation.

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TERMINOLOGY

In keeping with the definitions in the OECD and the EU Quality Framework, this paper uses the term *ECEC* to refer to childminding, community, and private-setting-based services (full and part-time) and junior primary classes for children from birth to six years – that is, the various out-of-home settings where the early care and education of young children take place.

FOOTNOTES

1. www.startstrong.ie/files/Double_Dividend_Policy_Brief_Web.pdf.
2. Child Care Regulations: The Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016.
3. The Children First Act, 2015 (commenced December 2017).
4. National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012; updated to 20 December 2017.
5. The Leadership for INCLUSION in the Early Years programme, LINC, is a Level 6 Special Purpose Award (Higher Education), designed to support the inclusion of children with additional needs in the early years.
6. Note: this only applies to full, part-time, and sessional services, and exclude childminders.
7. PobaI, Early Years Sector Profile (2017).
8. PobaI, Early Years Sector Profile, 2017.
9. PobaI, Annual Early Years Sector Survey, 2013.

Early Childhood Ireland Conference 2018

The Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) 2018 annual conference took place in April.

Minister Katherine Zappone used the occasion to announce a new Continuing Professional Development (CPD) initiative, which was welcomed by ECI.

The Minister said that an initial €3 million had been secured; Better Start National Early Years Quality Development would be the national lead for the management and oversight of the new CPD initiative; and a pilot initiative would be rolled out in 2018 to Early Years practitioners attending the AIM Hanen Teacher Talk and Lámh training programmes, with a view to expanding to include, for example, First Aid Response training in 2019.



Pictured here are **Teresa Heeney**, CEO, Early Childhood Ireland; Minister for Children and Youth Affairs **Dr Katherine Zappone**; **Jillian van Turnhout**, Chairperson, Early Childhood Ireland.




Dr Josephine Bleach

Director, Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland

KEY MESSAGES ON PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS

Supporting parents as primary educators of their children

 On 13 June 2018, the Early Learning Initiative (ELI), National College of Ireland, hosted an early-years conference titled 'The Constitutional Role of Parents as the Primary Educators of their Children'. Research in Ireland and internationally consistently finds that parents have a powerful influence on their children's educational and social development. This is also reflected in the Irish constitution, which recognises the crucial role of the family as the natural and primary educator of the child (1937, Article 42.1), with rights and duties to active participation in the child's education.

EARLY LEARNING CONFERENCE

The aim of the ELI conference was to raise awareness of the vital role that parents play as primary educators of their children and how this contributes to children's development and learning. Throughout the day, there were many interesting presentations and discussions among the diverse audience of early-years educators, family support professionals, researchers, and policymakers. All highlighted the valuable and interesting work being done with parents, of all genders and from all communities, to fully realise their constitutional role as the primary educators of their children.

The morning sessions outlined innovative supports for parents in challenging circumstances, along with the implications of local and national policies for parents. The afternoon sessions focused on the importance of play and the evaluation of parenting support programmes. A common thread running through the presentations was the importance of the home learning environment and the need for more creative, sustainable approaches that maximise dialogue and enhance partnership between parents, children, and professionals.

Attendees greatly appreciated the opportunity to learn more about a wide range of quality-practice-based research projects from across Ireland. As one wrote, 'There is some fantastic research going on in this area! Continuous need for support for development, dissemination and awareness of evidence based practices/supports.' Several themes emerged on the day, most of which centred on rethinking relationships with, supports for, and perceptions of parents, at both national and local level.

PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS AND FAMILIES CRITICAL

Afterwards we were left with as many questions as answers, most of them 'how' rather than 'what' or 'why' questions. This indicates the consensus that partnership with parents and families is critical to the development of children's social, language, and thinking skills from

an early age – but that human diversity, social norms, and organisational complexities may make it difficult for families and services to translate partnership into practice.

Gender equality in parenting was highlighted by Paschal Donohue, Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform, who outlined the need for parents, employers, and society to move from the traditional roles of father as financial provider and of mother as carer and home-maker, to the modern egalitarian parenting model, where both parents are active, equal partners in their children's education and lives. Minister Donohue outlined the challenges parents face in trying to achieve a balance between parenting and work, and called on employers to value and support all their employees in their parenting role.

Pregnancy and the early years of childhood are the most crucial times to ensure that children grow up healthy and happy and have the best possible chance of achieving their potential. Francis Chance, programme manager of the Nurture Programme, Katharine Howard Foundation (KHF), emphasised the importance of empowering parents and ensuring that their perspectives inform family-focused services and support. He summarised the key messages from a KHF report 'Giving Our Children the Best Start in Life: The Voices of Parents', where parents identified how Irish services can be more closely attuned to the supports that parents need and find most helpful. Chance noted that while many parents were doing well and appreciated the support available to them, a significant number were struggling with issues such as isolation, time, and homelessness.

Liz Kerrins, early years manager, Children's Rights Alliance, discussed the Alliance's work in ensuring that children's rights were respected and protected in laws, policies, and services. She mentioned the annual Children's Rights Alliance Report Card, which evaluates the Government's progress on actions for children and identifies serious issues for children. However, as acknowledged in the national policy framework 'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures' (2014), parents are instrumental in ensuring that their children's rights are both respected and realised. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child places a duty on the State to respect the rights and responsibilities of parents (Article 5) and to support them with their child-rearing responsibilities (Article 18).

"Valuing parents' role means listening to them and consulting them."

ROLE OF STATE

Throughout the day, there was much discussion on the role of the State, with the following question put to the panel from the plenary sessions: How do we ensure a whole-of-government approach to parenting and education that everyone can feed into and support? A key policy recommendation from the delegates was the need for a long-term strategic Government plan for early interventions for children and families, which builds on existing projects that are working well and where parents are included as equal partners in decisions being made about their children. As one participant observed, 'Valuing parents' role means listening to them and consulting them. Long-term multi-party policy and investment are essential.'

There was recognition that all aspects of public policy affect parents. The impact of homelessness and social isolation on parents and families was raised frequently. The need for suitable housing and space to support children's learning and play was highlighted, as was the need for the Government and services to treat people as individuals rather than stereotyping them as 'homeless', 'addicted', and so on. A strengths-based approach was advocated, with the situation being considered the problem, not the individual concerned.

Another question for the panel was: 'What is the consultation process for national strategies, and how do we feed into it?' Parents and children were invisible, it was suggested, unless they were in the National Development Plan (NDP). Consultation for the NDP and the National Children's Strategy should, it was argued, be linked and include a commitment to more long-term, sustained funding for family learning and community parent-support programmes.

Áine Lynch, CEO of the National Parents Council, discussed how the NPC supported and empowered parents to become effective partners in their children's education and feed into national strategies. NPC now had the responsibility for supporting parents whose children attended early years services as well as primary schools. Lynch questioned if parents' councils were the best way to involve parents, particularly as they tended to focus on fundraising rather than policy formation. Parental involvement, she argued, needed to be supported by the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of all members of the education community, with parents acknowledged as full partners in the decisions that affect their children. True partnership was the only way, in her opinion, to deliver better outcomes for children.

Positive, friendly, respectful relationships with staff were regarded as the most important factor in getting parents involved.

Another question that arose was: How do we effectively blend key parenting messages with the practical support that parents with children in early years to post-primary education need to implement those messages? Many presentations highlighted the innovative and effective

ways practitioners around the country were supporting parents through home visits, parenting groups, and services. Many of these programmes provided strategies and supports for parents to enable their children's development through play-based learning activities. There was broad consensus that these programmes were valuable but required large-scale Government commitment and investment to ensure they were available to all parents, both urban and rural, across the country.

Parents' understanding of school-readiness and the value of play for children were discussed, as was their awareness of the importance of developing children's resilience. There was a sense that parents tend to focus on a limited number of early literacy and numeracy skills rather than having a holistic view of the broad range of dispositions and skills a young child will need in school.

One question that challenged everyone was: Is there a way we can support parents in understanding what is actually important for being school-ready, that is, socially and emotionally? Positive, friendly, respectful relationships

and interactions with staff were regarded as the most important factors that influenced parents to get involved with programmes and services. But it was also agreed there was a need to recognise the many constraints that may limit parental involvement and prevent parents from feeling comfortable in a service or school and raising issues they may be concerned about.

PARENTS: EQUAL AND VALUED PARTNERS

ELI would like to acknowledge and thank all those involved on the day. While the debate was lively, there were three clear messages from all contributors: *Parenting matters*. As a nation, we need to invest in and empower all parents as the primary educators of their children. If children are to realise their maximum potential now and in the future, then legislation, policies, and services need to respect parents' rights to be included as equal and valued partners in their children's lives.

Transitions across Early Years Education

The *Transitions across Early Years Education* seminar took place in June 2018. This joint INTO and Early Childhood Ireland seminar was an opportunity to bring together representatives of the primary and pre-school sectors to explore opportunities and challenges in transitions across early years education.

In round table groups, delegates discussed how the current redevelopment of the primary school curriculum could be used as an opportunity to ensure better alignment in the curriculum across pre-school and primary education.



Pictured at the seminar are: (l-r) **Dr Harold Hislop**, Chief Inspector, Department of Education & Skills; **Emer Smyth**, Head of Social Research Division, ESRI; **Teresa Heeney**, CEO, Early Childhood Ireland; **Sheila Nunan**, General Secretary, INTO; **Dr Deirbhile Nic Craith**, Education Officer, INTO; **Joe Killeen**, President INTO.



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TUNING IN TO BABIES

Nurturing relationships in early childhood settings

Babies are born primed to engage with people and to explore the world around them. They are learning and developing from their day of birth in every context in which they find themselves. As babies' participation in out-of-home early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings is rising (OECD, 2012), the quality of this education and care is of the utmost importance. This article explores why we should focus on babies in ECEC settings in Ireland, the unintended consequences of some policy actions, the specialised knowledge and relational skills required for working with babies, and some recommendations for policy and practice.

WHY WE SHOULD FOCUS ON BABIES IN ECEC SETTINGS

We now know that the period from birth to 18 months is when more will be learned than at any other time. Early experiences, including babies' relationships with others, interact with genes to shape the architecture of the human brain and provide the foundation for sound mental health. The postnatal brain doubles its size in the first year and attains 80–90% of its adult size by age three (Nugent, 2015). What babies learn and how they develop in their early months and years is truly extraordinary. In contrast to the vulnerability and dependence of a newborn baby, a typically developing 18-month-old baby may be walking, talking, and feeding independently. Such leaps of learning and development require nurturing and support by committed educators in early childhood settings.

A wide range of argument and evidence from babies' rights, health, infant mental health, and neuroscience points to the importance of nurturing education and care for babies' flourishing (French, 2018). We have 'a good deal of evidence that early childhood interventions, including child care interventions, can make a difference in improving outcomes' for children, including babies, when the intervention and care are of high quality (Waldfogel, 2002, p.553). There is also evidence, however, that attendance in non-parental care can have negative effects (Melhuish et al., 2015). Despite these inconsistencies, comprehensive reviews of research conclude that training and qualifications affect educators' ability to provide responsive, nurturing, sensitive care and education to enhance babies' development and learning (Melhuish et al., 2015).

POLICY CONTEXT IN RELATION TO BABIES IN IRELAND

Early Childhood Ireland (2018) reports that 3,542 children from birth to one year and 30,060 from 13 months to 36 months attend early childhood settings in Ireland. Since December 2016, all staff working directly with children in such settings must hold a minimum of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Level 5 Major Award in Early Childhood Care and Education (or equivalent). If the setting

is providing the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme (for children from two years and eight months), all ECCE room leaders must hold a minimum QQI Level 6 Major Award in Early Childhood Care and Education (or equivalent).

To ensure that qualifications meet requirements, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs has released a list of Early Years Recognised Qualifications, available on its website. A higher capitation fee is payable to ECEC providers where all ECEC leaders in settings hold a bachelor degree in childhood/early education (minimum of Level 7 on the National Framework of Qualifications or equivalent) and have three years of experience working in the sector.

There is an unfortunate consequence of this policy for babies in ECEC settings in Ireland. Currently there is no capitation scheme for babies and consequently no higher capitation incentive for higher qualifications. The literature acknowledges the importance of the quality of nurturance that babies receive, and that the higher the qualification, the better the experience for the child (Melhuish et al., 2015). Because of the current policy and the demands on settings, babies are likely to be left in the care of the least qualified personnel. But given the explosion of learning and development in their earliest months and years, babies should be educated and cared for by the most qualified personnel.

SPECIALISED RELATIONAL PEDAGOGY

Qualifications alone are not sufficient to guarantee the nurturance of babies' learning and development. Dalli (2014) reports on the rise of research evidence in relation to pedagogy with babies in group-based settings, with key findings converging on the notion of a specialised 'relational pedagogy'. A concept called a 'neuro-relational approach' has emerged (Lebedeva, 2018), in recognition that experience, not simple maturation, changes the brain (neuro-) and that all learning happens in the context of relationships (relational). In other words, the brain is an organ that is changed, in interactive and complex ways, by relational experiences with others.

Because of current policy and the demands on settings, babies are likely to be left in the care of the least qualified personnel.

This idea of relational pedagogy speaks to what educators *do* in relationships, environments, and experiences in their daily care of babies (Benson McMullen et al., 2016). Consistent with neurobiological and child development research, Dalli (2014) reveals that relational pedagogy draws on the same concepts for optimal development: very young children need sensitive, responsive caregiving from educators who are affectionate, available, and on the same wavelength as them.

Relational pedagogy involves meeting babies' care needs and emotional demands in a predictable, consistent, calm, and loving manner. Babies need those around them to follow their lead and focus on them as people (not just the task). For example, bodily care routines (feeding and nappy changing) are opportunities for learning and are managed in a calm, unhurried, interactive way, with the baby given time and space to eat at their own pace and to be held and physically moved with respect. Respect is important and is demonstrated in how the baby is talked to about what is happening

and how the baby is offered respectful and gentle touch. The difference between task-based care and a specialised relational pedagogy is outlined in the table below (adapted from Fleer and Linke, 2016, p.9).

TASK-BASED VERSUS SPECIALISED RELATIONAL PEDAGOGY

Task-based care	Specialised relational pedagogy
Related to getting the task done, e.g. quickly change nappy or feed baby	Relating to the whole child, not just the task – seeing opportunities for learning and communication, e.g. narrating the experience for the baby, using the nappy-changing experiences to offer choice – hold the powder or the tissues, playing, singing songs, nursery rhymes, and games.
Adult routine/schedule-based	Infant rhythm and need-based, e.g. the baby is gently placed in their cot when they indicate that they are tired, and are fed when they should be hungry after the last feed.
Do what has to be done	Stop, look, listen, and think about what it means for the baby first, e.g. if the baby has to have a nappy changed, think what it would be like to have an adult (sometimes an unfamiliar person) pick you up and change your clothes, without explanation.
Doing things to the baby, e.g. wiping their face with a cloth after feeding	Doing things with the baby, e.g. offering the baby the cloth to respectfully wipe their own face; if not accepted gently, unhurriedly wipe her face while explaining what is happening.
Focus on the task	Focus on doing things in the relationship with the baby, e.g. talking through everything that is happening, pointing things out to the baby, and seeing the situation from the baby's point of view

While it is accepted that reliable, sustained relationships in the family are important, the need for predictable and stable relationships in ECEC settings is acknowledged less frequently. The negative and disruptive impacts of abrupt changes in personnel for babies, related to high educator turnover, are too often disregarded (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). The specialised relational pedagogy needed for working with babies can be achieved by developing a quality, key person approach.

The role of the key person involves having particular responsibility for the baby and the relationship with the baby's family. This relationship begins before the baby starts in the setting. The key person engages in every aspect of the baby's day, from the time the baby arrives to the time they go home, with responsive interactions tuning in to the baby's natural rhythms. Key persons work in teams, and ideally stay with the same baby for the first three years of their life, providing continuity of care.

Babies are just starting to make sense of the world. In their early stages in the ECEC setting, it is important that babies be exposed to a limited number of people: 'Being handled by many different people – each with their different way of holding, soothing, talking to and changing the baby' impedes babies'

sense-making (Fleer and Linke, 2016, p.9). One study reported an alarming number of people changing babies' nappies over time (Jackson and Forbes, 2015). This is to be avoided. Only the baby's key person (or a family member) should change the baby's nappy in the setting.

According to the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 'Prolonged separations from familiar caregivers and repeated "detaching" and "re-attaching" to people who matter' are emotionally distressing and can lead to enduring problems (2004, p.3). The authors write that no scientific evidence supports the belief that a baby having to form numerous relationships with educators provides valuable learning opportunities for them.

The argument about whether the key-person approach works or not is over in the UK, to the extent that it is compulsory in the Early Years Foundation Stage (the mandatory curriculum in the UK). That is not the case in Ireland: the key-person approach is recommended in the Aistear Siolta Practice Guide, and excellent resources are provided, but the approach is not mandated here yet.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

It is recommended that there be incentives to increase the qualifications of and attract higher capitation for those working with babies. If I am a baby of six months, surely I have a right to be nurtured and educated by a person with equal qualification as if I am three, six, or seventeen years of age? Those qualifications must include content on relational pedagogy. It is also recommended that a key-person approach be mandated for working with babies in Ireland.

Greater attention
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We now know that the first days of a child's life set in motion a train of events that are the basis of later learning and development. We also know that babies' learning and development is a function of the everyday experiences and people they encounter. Greater attention is required to strengthening the resources and capabilities of those who nurture babies. The skills required to work with babies are not intuitive and require a specialised relational pedagogy.

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First ever early years cross-departmental strategy

On 19 November 2018, the Government unveiled 'First 5', Ireland's first ever cross-Departmental strategy to support babies, young children and their families.

The ambitious ten-year plan will deliver:

- A broader range of options for parents to balance working and caring
- A new model of parenting support
- New developments in child health, including a dedicated child health workforce
- Reform of the Early Learning and Care (ELC) system, including a new funding model
- A package of measures to tackle early childhood poverty.

The Strategy was jointly launched by An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs Dr Katherine Zappone, Minister for Health Simon Harris, and Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills, Mary Mitchell O'Connor.



l-r: Minister for Children and Youth Affairs **Dr Katherine Zappone**, An Taoiseach **Leo Varadkar**, and **Oscar**, aged 5.

TRANSITIONING FROM PRESCHOOL TO PRIMARY

A case study

The transition from preschool to primary school is a pivotal experience in a child's and family's life. It requires careful thought and planning for every child, particularly when a child may need additional supports to enable their inclusion. When transitions work well, they help children to develop confidence and acquire skills to manage future changes in their lives (ABC Start Right Limerick, 2018).

Research has identified the transition to school as a time of potential challenge and stress for children and families. It involves negotiating and adjusting to an array of changes, including the physical environment, learning expectations, rules and routines, social status, and identity (Hirst et al., 2011). It is essential to recognise the complexity of factors that influence each child's learning and transition experiences, and the diversity that exists within and between groups of children, and to understand transition as a process rather than an event (Peters, 2010).

WHAT WORKS IN TRANSITIONS FROM PRESCHOOL TO PRIMARY SCHOOL?

Transitions from preschool to primary school have become a focus of research interest in many countries. In Ireland the National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA) is currently undertaking a project to support transition planning and information-sharing and has completed a pilot demonstration project with preschools and primary schools (NCCA, 2018). Studies in other countries have found that successful transitions depend on the nature of the relationships between all involved. A study in New Zealand found that 'for children, their friendships, peer relationships and the relationship with their teacher appear central. Respectful, reciprocal relationships between the adults involved are also key factors in a successful transition' (Peters, 2010, p.1).

Recent analysis of data from the Growing Up in Ireland study, commissioned by the NCCA, looked at children's experience of starting primary school. It found that parents engage in a range of activities to help prepare children for school, such as talking to them about school, visiting the school, and practising reading, writing, and numbers with children. Teachers were less concerned with pre-academic skills but valued children having life skills such as managing personal care (clothing, toileting, lunch, school bags, etc.); they reported receiving little information on children's individual strengths or challenges (Smyth, 2016).

Overall, the literature points to the benefits of preparing in advance, creating collaborative links and communication between all key



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stakeholders, involving children in developing practical skills, promoting confidence, and introducing them to the new environment through visits, images, stories, and meetings with key people. The Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), outlined in brief below, supports transition planning and outlines a case study of such planning in practice.

BETTER START ACCESS AND INCLUSION MODEL (AIM)

The Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) was established to create equality of access and opportunity for children with a disability. A key component of the model is to work collaboratively with parents, preschool providers, and other professionals to enable a child's inclusion and meaningful participation in preschool and to support their timely and successful transition to primary school.

This article, through a case study, outlines the steps taken to ensure a smooth transition from preschool to primary for a five-year-old child with autism. It demonstrates how active collaboration with parents, preschool, school, and health professionals works effectively to prepare and support children for this significant life transition.

CASE STUDY

Profile of child:

Age: 5 years 6 months in June 2018

Gender: female

She attended two years in the same preschool.

Strengths: This child comfortably engages in free play for a large part of the morning session with support from her key worker. Her receptive and expressive skills have developed over the preschool year, and she can communicate functionally with the adults and peers in her preschool environment. She has begun to show an intrinsic interest in tabletop activities without support of an adult.

Interests: She is extremely sociable and enjoys role play in the home corner with small groups of friends. She loves exploring books in the cosy corner and watching the bubbles and fish in the tube lights in the sensory corner with her key worker. She loves running, parachute, and bouncing balls in the playground.

Needs: She is presenting with autism after consultation with a private therapist. She is attending a paediatrician for therapy to address dietary aversions and nutritional deficiencies due to pica. Adult support is needed for toileting, lunch, and snack time.

EYS role:

Initially an early years specialist (EYS) visited the service when the child started in 2016. The EYS made three more visits over the first year of the child's participation, including introducing the Better Start Access and Inclusion Plan to the parent and preschool team. The child's strengths and interests were identified and built on to plan for her meaningful

participation. Strategies advised by her speech and language therapist (SLT) were integrated by the preschool team, with the support of the EYS. The Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (NCCA, 2015) was used to support practice overall in the preschool.

The following year, a different EYS was allocated and began work in the setting. In March 2018, in anticipation of the child moving to primary school in September, the EYS met with the child's key worker and parent to identify goals to support the child's transition. The goals focused broadly on supporting the child's independence, building her confidence in her abilities, and phasing out the level of support provided by her key worker. They included practical life skills such as:

- taking off her coat and putting her lunch bag away without physical prompt
- making independent, confident choices in the preschool environment
- making short visits to the primary school with her key worker and other children who were moving to the same school, to be familiar with the new environment.

Additional resources were created and added to the preschool environment, including photographs of her new teacher and SNA (primary school), a school bag, pencil case, and 'big books' that the child could pack and unpack during conversations about her sister's 'big heavy school bag'. Both the preschool and parents were encouraging more independence at mealtimes and during toileting. Visual prompts were used in the preschool to support choice and engagement during free play.

Collaboration between the preschool and school on joint visits, and information-sharing, were very effective.

The EYS arranged to meet the school SNA and key worker to share information on the child's strengths, abilities, and interests, as well as supports required using resources such as books and planning templates. Advice was received from the child's occupational therapist (OT) and early intervention team (EIT) to support her application for an SNA.

What helped the process to succeed?

- The family's willingness to share information from EIT and other professionals with the school and preschool.
- The preschool team were committed, engaged, and highly professional, benefitting from continuing professional development (CPD).
- Collaboration between the preschool and school on joint visits and information-sharing were very effective, creating a familiar and welcoming environment for the child.
- Support from the EYS to liaise with all parties, support collaboration, and implement small, measurable goals for transition that all key partners could work on together.
- Support and advice from the child's EIT professionals.
- A positive relationship between preschool and primary enabled good communication and cooperation, and strong parental partnership ensured that all concerned had full information on the child's strengths, abilities, and support needs.

Outcome:

The child had developed practical self-help skills to support her independence and had gained confidence due to her enhanced capabilities. She was familiar with the primary environment, teacher, and SNA, and necessary supports were in place to ensure her participation. She was enthusiastic about moving to primary school and joining her two older siblings, along with nineteen of her peers from preschool.

CONCLUSION

Better Start AIM is founded on the principles of inclusion, equity, respectful partnerships, and a strengths-based approach. This short case study outlines how applying these principles in practice in planning and preparing for transition from preschool to primary makes for a smooth and positive transition experience for the child, family, and educators involved.

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UPDATE FROM EARLY YEARS EDUCATION INSPECTION 2018



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This article describes progress to date in establishing early-education inspection by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in early years settings that are delivering the free preschool in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme funded through the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA).¹ It describes the trajectory of implementing education inspection and shares brief insights into the early findings of this initiative.

The Inspectorate of the DES works to improve the quality of learning for children and young people in places of learning, including Irish schools, centres for education, and early years settings providing State-funded early childhood care and education for children from 2 years 8 months until they enrol in primary school.² The Inspectorate is also responsible for providing advice to the education system, the Minister, and policymakers.

Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI) is carried out in accordance with section 13(3)(b) of the Education Act 1998 and in line with a Memorandum of Understanding between the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, the Minister for Education and Skills, and the DES Inspectorate. Early years settings delivering the universal free ECCE Programme are obliged, under the terms of their grant agreement, to facilitate inspection by the DES Inspectorate (DCYA, 2018, section 8.1).

EDUCATION INSPECTION IN THE EARLY YEARS SECTOR

The EYEI model was introduced in April 2016. It evaluates the nature, range, and appropriateness of early educational experiences offered to young children. Evaluation is based on a quality framework informed by the principles of Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework,³ Siolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education,⁴ and national and international research on early childhood education and inspection. The EYEI quality framework focuses on the following four areas of practice:

- The quality of the context to support children's learning and development
- The quality of the processes to support children's learning and development
- The quality of children's learning experiences and achievements
- The quality of management and leadership for learning.

These are detailed in the Quality Framework for Early Years Education contained in the *Guide to Early Years Education Inspection* (DES, 2018a).⁵

External inspections facilitate improvement and change in education provision. Inspection reports provide evidence-based judgements about the quality of education provision and affirm the aspects of practice that are working well. The outcomes of inspection also inform the judgements of staff on the strengths and priorities for improvement in the early years setting, complementing internal self-evaluation and review processes. The *actions advised* in inspection reports provide important direction for the early years setting as it seeks to improve the quality of provision and practice. EYEI reports are available on the DES website.⁶

IMPLEMENTATION OF EDUCATION INSPECTION – THE JOURNEY TO DATE

EYEI began formally in April 2016 with a small team of early years and primary inspectors, all of whom are highly qualified early years professionals with a diverse range of professional experience and expertise. The early phase of implementing EYEI allowed the practice of the framework for inspection to be tested in depth in a diverse range of settings nationally. It also allowed the EYEI model to be trialled in multi-room early years settings, and allowed a follow-through inspection model to be implemented.

To date, over 1,500 inspections have been conducted nationally in a wide variety of early years settings. This represents approximately one third of settings delivering the ECCE programme of free preschool education.

Very positive endorsement of the inspection model emerged from the 2017 review.

The DES Inspectorate adheres to a core principle of close collaboration with stakeholders and partners in the education system in developing and operating its inspection programme. This has been extended to the early years sector. An example of this commitment is the publication of a composite report outlining early findings from EYEI at the end of 2017.⁷ The report details a range of feedback, gathered through experience of implementing the EYEIs and wider consultation with all stakeholders in the sector.

Very positive endorsement of the EYEI model emerged from this review. A wide range of stakeholders, including practitioners, parents, and policymakers, reported that Early-Years Education Inspection had worked. Three main points of commendation were reported:

- EYEI highlighted the importance of giving every child enriching, enjoyable early childhood experiences that provide a great start for young children on their education journey.
- EYEI has valued and validated the professionalism and commitment of the early years workforce.
- EYEI has provided robust, authentic information to parents and policymakers about what has been achieved and what still needs to be addressed in delivering high-quality early education.

The report also identifies concerns about the context in which the ECCE programme operates. It highlights the need to build the capacity of the early years sector to meet the high expectations of quality early education detailed in the DES EYEI quality framework. Although the findings of inspection showed huge potential across the sector, much work remains to

be done to realise this potential to provide high-quality early education for all children nationally.

As the focus of EYEI in its first year was on evaluation in small-scale early years settings, a trial of the model in 40 large-scale early years settings was conducted in early 2018. Although most settings operating the ECCE programme are very small (one or two rooms), it was important for the DES Inspectorate to identify challenges that might arise for the EYEI model when applied in a larger setting (five or more ECCE rooms). Following the trial, further consultation took place to identify any amendments to the EYEI model that might be necessary.

In the end, a high degree of satisfaction with the EYEI model prevailed across all stakeholders. No changes were necessary to the content of either the Framework for Inspection or the inspection processes themselves. More details were included in a revised guide to EYEI, to ensure that practitioners and providers of early education were fully clear on the inspection processes. These included guidance on the editing and publication of reports, and additional Signposts for Practice to identify indicators of good practice across the four areas of the EYEI Framework. The revised guide to EYEI was presented to the Minister for Education and Skills and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in June 2018 and was signed off as the basis for EYEI from September 2018.

INSIGHTS FROM EDUCATION INSPECTION IN THE EARLY YEARS SECTOR ON CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY

Evidence from education inspection in the early years sector indicates a very diverse range of curricular approaches being used to inform the programmes of learning on offer. The most frequently declared approaches are Montessori, High/Scope, Play-based, and Irish-medium (Naíonraí). Many settings declare a hybrid or eclectic approach, selecting from the above and other approaches and philosophies. There is also evidence of commercial curricula being used.

Much work remains to be done to provide high-quality early education for all children nationally.

The EYEI model does not prefer any one curricular approach over another, but it does require that the curricula or programme on offer be informed by Aistear and Siolta. In this regard it is positive to note that the majority of early years settings are aware of these practice frameworks and in most instances reference Aistear in their declared programme of learning.

There is room for improvement. Analysis of the findings in Area 2 of the EYEI Quality Framework, which refers to the 'Quality of processes to support children's learning and development', shows that this is the area of practice most likely to achieve lower ratings on the EYEI quality continuum. Continuing challenges for practitioners include implementation of an emergent curriculum that is informed by the interests and individuality of children; the use of pedagogical strategies that focus on active learning and promote children's agency as partners in their own learning; and planning for progression in learning.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The nature and scope of early education practice illuminated by EYEI to date are diverse, with many challenges both internal to the setting and influenced by external factors such as staff training, funding, and access to support and advice. There are strong examples of innovative and exemplary practice, where expert professional early years practitioners have managed to create rich, inclusive, and engaging learning environments. Continued support and investment in improving quality in practice are certainly warranted. The DES, through the implementation of EYEI, looks forward to documenting and promoting the continuing improvement of early educational practice in the coming years.

FOOTNOTES

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EARLY YEARS INSPECTION

A case of two masters



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Issues of quality have permeated discourse on Early Childhood Education and Care¹ (ECEC) in Ireland for decades. Aligned to this is the question of governance: Where should responsibility for ECEC lie – with the Department of Education and Skills (DES) or the Department of Health? As with all aspects of ECEC provision, this is a complex question to which there is no easy answer. In some respects, the answer lies in the purpose of ECEC. Is it about children's care, welfare, protection, or early education?

In the absence of national debate about the positioning of ECEC, the age-old care–education divide continues, driven and exacerbated by policy initiatives. As a result, care (associated with children from birth to 2 years 8 months²) is under the aegis of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), while responsibility for education (associated with children aged 2 years 8 months to school-going age) rests with the DES.

REGULATORY REFORM

The ECEC sector has been governed and regulated since 1996 by the Health Boards/Health Service Executive. However, in 2014, responsibility for inspection transferred to Tusla, the independent statutory regulator of Early Years Services in Ireland, catering for children from birth to six years old, who are not attending primary school (Tusla, 2018, p.xv). Two years later, the Childcare Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 were published, resulting in wide-ranging reform, including:

- the establishment of a national register of Early Years services
- a requirement for existing services to re-register within a three-year timeframe
- the introduction of a long-awaited minimum qualification requirement at QQI Level 5.³

As Figure 1 shows, regulatory inspection under the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 focuses on four core areas.

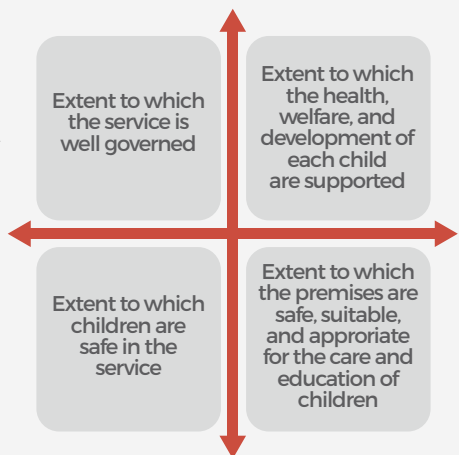


Figure 1: Overview of core areas inspected by Tusla

Tusla (2018, p.vii) notes there is ‘a significant emphasis on the governance of services to ensure that children attending ... are safe, receive appropriate care and have a positive experience where they can develop and learn in a quality service’.

Inspections are underscored by a Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF). Underpinned by the practice frameworks *Síolta*, *Aistear*, the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), and others too numerous to mention, the QRF brings together evidence-based national and international best practice in early years services, as well as international ECEC regulatory authorities and the European Commission. It ‘presents the scope of how the Inspectorate will assess services for compliance with the [regulations] which, in turn, will promote the quality and safety of services provided to children’ (Tusla, 2018, p.xvi).

EARLY YEARS EDUCATION INSPECTIONS

Since 2016, and at the request of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and the Minister for Education, the DES Inspectorate has been leading and organising focused inspections on the quality of educational provision in settings participating in the universal ECCE scheme,⁴ thus signifying alignment between this scheme and the education system.

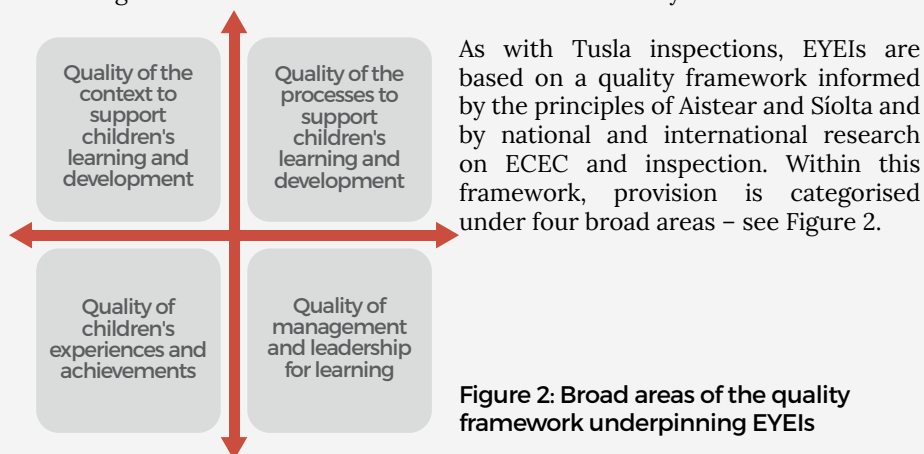


Figure 2: Broad areas of the quality framework underpinning EYEIs

The focus on process quality (Figure 2) and ‘inspection for improvement, has the potential to develop the capacity of early years services and educators to use ... *Síolta* and *Aistear* to support self-evaluation and review processes that are integral to quality improvement in practice’ (DES Inspectorate, 2018b, p.9).

WHO INSPECTS?

Historically, the HSE/Tusla inspectorate was composed almost entirely of Public Health Nurses. Following repeated calls to broaden its composition, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Katherine Zappone, announced a broadening of eligibility criteria on 5 September 2018. Individuals with a QQI Level 8 qualification in ECEC can now be considered for inspectorate posts alongside those who hold a professional qualification in social care, social work, teaching, or child psychology. While consideration of ECEC graduates for Tusla inspectorate posts should instil confidence in the sector with regard to salient qualifications, experience, and possible career pathways, it fails to recognise ECEC as a distinct discipline in its own right.

From the outset, the DES recognised the need to include people with ECEC qualifications and experience in the inspection of early years settings. Initially, therefore, they recruited a team of nine early years inspectors with a QQI Level 8 degree in ECEC plus five years' post-qualification experience. This team of qualified, skilled, and experienced ECEC graduates is supplemented by DES primary inspectors with expertise and experience in early years education (DES Inspectorate, 2018a).

DOES DUAL INSPECTION WORK?

The report 'A Review of Early-Years Education-focused Inspection: April 2016 – June 2017' (DES Inspectorate, 2018a) points to a broad welcome from ECEC providers and educators, who appreciate the 48-hour advance notice of an inspection and the co-professional dialogue on which the EYEI is premised. In the words of one educator, 'for the first time our work as Early Years Educators was actually looked at in context by inspectors that were experienced in the field' (DES Inspectorate, 2018a, p.23).

From a DES perspective, the EYEI model has worked. It has:

1. strengthened the commitment to providing every child with positive early childhood experiences that provide a great start for young children on their education journey
2. valued and validated the professionalism and commitment of early childhood educators
3. provided robust, authentic information to parents and policymakers about what has been achieved and what still needs to be addressed in the delivery of high-quality early education (adapted from DES Inspectorate, 2018a, p.7).

Nonetheless, the sector is concerned with the 'burden of evaluation and monitoring' (DES Inspectorate, 2018a, p.23) brought about by dual inspection whereby they are accountable to two masters. One master, Tusla, rightly stresses its statutory function as regulator. It promotes and evaluates the care, safety, and well-being of children from birth to six years attending ECEC settings. The other master, the DES, plays an equally crucial role in 'improving the quality of the learning for children' (Tusla, 2018, p.xxi). Tusla is focused on compliance, while the DES seeks to support self-evaluation.

While each master perceives its respective role as separate from the other, there is little doubt that they share a common interest in ensuring that children are safe, receive appropriate care, and have positive experiences that support and enhance their learning in the daily life of the setting. The current dichotomy in roles, however, speaks directly to the care–education divide.

We know that care and education are inextricably linked. One without the other is not possible. Inspection, whether by the DES or by Tusla, therefore does not happen in a vacuum. Inspectors are not blinkered. Surely a qualified, skilled, and experienced inspector does not evaluate children's learning in isolation, and does not fail to notice unsafe practices, to register poor adult–child interactions or pedagogical strategies, or to become aware of incorrect adult–child ratios or weak governance during inspection. Likewise, evaluation of care practices, for example, must surely

take account of the learning environment, relational pedagogy, parental involvement, and so on.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that educators are burdened by administration, including documentation of children's learning. It has been suggested that in some instances, educators receive conflicting recommendations from the two inspectorates. They do not know what they are meant to record or why. In addition, the DES points to pressure on educators to attend pre- and post-inspection meetings in their own time (DES Inspectorate, 2018a). They are under inordinate pressure, and in their attempts to please two masters, some educators are:

1. undertaking training programmes to ensure they 'pass' inspections
2. maintaining separate lots of documentation to satisfy both the DES and Tusla.

These actions are symptomatic of a malaise in the dual inspection system.

Interestingly, while both the DES and the Tusla inspectorate place young children at the centre of their practices, little attention is given to the impact of dual inspection on children in settings. Here I refer to the presence of two different inspectorates in the children's space, albeit on different days or months. Irrespective of how interactive inspectors are in engaging with children, the presence of multiple adult strangers is almost certainly an intrusion for children and usurps their time in the setting.

With cooperation and goodwill, however, steps can be taken to reduce the pressure on providers and minimise the intrusion on children's time and space. While mindful of the different professional cultures in which each inspectorate operates, it is imperative that they work together to develop a streamlined inspection system. Ideally, what is required is a single unitary inspection where both the DES and Tusla inspectors would undertake joint inspection of settings, using a combined quality and regulatory framework. Not only would this reduce stress and administration for providers and educators, it would consolidate respect for young children in settings and would support inspectors to embrace and model co-professional dialogue both within and outside early years settings.

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FOOTNOTES

1. This is a contested term. This article uses the terms *ECCE* and *Early Years Services*, depending on the source.
2. The age at which children can access the universal ECCE scheme since September 2018.
3. Room leaders working in the universal ECCE scheme are required to hold a QQI Level 6 qualification.
4. Formerly known as the free preschool year, originally introduced in 2010.

REIMAGINING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN IRELAND

A competent system and a public good

The early childhood sector in Ireland has undergone constant and substantial policy changes for almost two decades, from John Coolahan's 1998 'Report on the National Forum for Early Childhood Education', which led to the publication of the white paper 'Ready to Learn' and the National Childcare Strategy, to the publication of the long-awaited *Early Years Strategy* in November 2018.¹

Like in other countries, policy developments in Ireland have responded to, and reflect, wider societal and socioeconomic changes. Ireland has seen two decades of unprecedented efforts to develop, expand, and sustain better quality for children and families in a highly fragmented sector, with many actors following diverse agendas and pursuing often contradictory interests.

Despite these efforts, major challenges remain unresolved in four key areas: governance of the system at all levels, resourcing and funding, fragmentation of services, and over-reliance on a supposed 'market'. Together, these result in a system that is not fit for purpose: it denies children's rights to high-quality early childhood experiences, neglects families' rights to reliable and affordable services, perpetuates unacceptable working conditions for educators, and fails to address the needs of a fast-changing and diverse society. How can these challenges be addressed?

Here I argue that radical culture change is necessary, inevitable, and possible. I offer a preliminary appreciation and analysis of the government's recently published early years strategy *First 5*, and lay out steps towards an early childhood system based on rights, oriented by values of democracy and diversity, and understood as a public good and a public responsibility.

SETTING THE SCENE

I have noted the substantial policy changes in Ireland's early childhood sector this century. As recently as 2004, the OECD found that 'National policy for the early education and care of young children in Ireland is still in its initial stages' (OECD, 2004). The report concluded that much needs to be done:

Significant energies and funding will need to be invested in the field to create a system in tune with the needs of a full employment economy and with new understandings of how young children develop and learn.



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The challenges at hand are confirmed by internal experts who took part in the international study 'Strategies for Change' in 2004–05 (Urban, 2006, 2007). For example:

The 'Early Childhood Care and Education' (ECCE) Sector in Ireland is as interesting as it is bewildering in its evolution, structure, diversity, quality, inequality, key players and controlling interests. (Murray, 2006)

In 2015, a European Commission report on Ireland's macroeconomic context painted a picture of major challenges, especially for working parents trying to access childcare services of acceptable quality in the private and voluntary sector:

The scattered provisions for childcare support are complicated and difficult to navigate. The shortcomings of current provisions relate mainly to a combination of low payment rates for childcare providers, limited knowledge of the scheme and practical obstacles to accessing after-school care (geographical or administrative). In an attempt to increase the quality of services, a new National Quality Support Service will commence in 2015 with a limited budget and small staff. No budget was allocated to up-skill childcare staff beyond minimum qualifications. Childcare programmes generally fail to have a significant impact on increasing access to affordable and quality childcare, particularly for low-income families. The recently set up inter-departmental group on childcare might be seen as a platform to develop more comprehensive solutions to this problem. (pp. 60–61)

Ten different government departments share some responsibility for the [early childhood] sector.

PROGRESS IN KEY AREAS – BUT SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES REMAIN

Despite this rather bleak analysis, considerable progress has been made in key areas: the general regulation of the sector (Office of the Minister for Children, 2006), the framing of quality of provision (CECDE, 2006), content (NCCA, 2009), quality assurance (Better Start, DCYA, 2015; Early Years Education Inspectors, DES, 2016) and the development of the workforce as laid out in the call for proposals for this project. However, rapid change does not necessarily result in sustainable transformation (Hayes et al., 2013).

Any strategy to reform the sector can only be meaningful if it takes the entire system into account (European Commission, 2011) and builds on its ability and willingness to transform itself into a competent system (Urban et al., 2012). What are the central challenges for the Irish early childhood system? In a report commissioned by the Department of Education and Skills (Urban et al., 2017), we summarised them under four headings:

Governance: The CoRe project, 'Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care' (Urban et al., 2011), has shown that competent professional practice can only unfold in an environment where knowledge, practices, and values are coherent across all levels, including governance and administration. It is challenging to see how this can be achieved when 'a myriad of institutions' (Murray, 2017, with reference to Dr Thomas Walsh, NUI Maynooth) – i.e., ten different government departments – share some responsibility for the sector.²

Resourcing: Despite increased government spending, the early childhood sector remains critically under-resourced, and there has been a tendency to prioritise short-term incentives for parents over structural investment in services. This has led to unsustainable working conditions and levels of pay for staff, and to services that are unaffordable for users.

Fragmentation: Despite attempts to develop coherence across service provision for children and families, the sector remains divided between childcare and early education services. These follow different logics and interests, making it difficult to develop individual and collective professional identity and representation across the sector. The most problematic consequence of this is that it has prevented the various interest groups from coming together under a shared vision for all children, families, and professionals.

Marketisation: Reliance on private for-profit providers, especially in the so-called childcare part of the sector, puts significant strain on public finances without delivering quality for all (OECD, 2001, 2006; Lloyd and Penn, 2012). It also maintains a fundamental dilemma for the formation of the roles and identities of service providers, many of them owner-managers of small services (see Start Strong, 2014).

A WELCOME ROADMAP AND SOME CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Each of the systemic challenges above requires attention and concrete action. Moreover, they reinforce each other. Is there hope? I write this at a crucial point in time. Fundamental decisions about the future of the sector can't be postponed much longer. So the long-awaited early years strategy published in November 2018 is very welcome. 'First 5: A whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children and their families' (DCYA, 2018) introduces much-needed clarity to the debate.

Reliance on private for-profit providers... puts considerable strain on public finances without delivering quality for all.

First, it takes a holistic, integrated approach, setting out a vision, a roadmap, specific objectives, and concrete actions under four interconnected areas.³ Second, it includes ongoing, processual evaluation, which may allow for necessary recalibration during implementation. Both are crucial elements of a systemic, emergent, and reflective approach to developing a complex and dynamic system. The strategy includes explicit focus on research and acknowledges the need to invest in research infrastructure and capacity. A first concrete step, announced in the strategy, will be the establishment of an Irish early childhood observatory (First 5 research observatory).

All these are important steps towards a competent system; they deserve our full support and constructive engagement. However, while First 5 points in the right direction, it also gives reason for caution, critical interrogation, and debate.

If the clue is in the name, what does 'First 5' tell us about its positioning of the early childhood sector? The internationally adopted definition of early childhood refers to children from birth to eight years. This means our focus, as a profession and academic discipline, cannot and should not be defined

by the set-up of the settings or institutions in which children may find themselves.

A baby or toddler might be cared for in the home, by immediate or extended family, in a crèche, or by a combination of nurturing, caring, and supporting arrangements, regardless of their country of birth. A five-year-old, however, will be either in an early childhood setting (kindergarten, preschool) or in the compulsory school system, in primary school.

The international definition enables and challenges us to treat primary school as an early childhood institution that requires our attention as much as preschool. As a space for children provided by society, its values and practices must be holistic, nurturing, loving, based on children's rights, and addressed to the whole child in all their diversity. Does the age limitation implied by the name 'First 5' imply a conceptual demarcation between preschool and school, between departmental responsibilities, between present and future models of the workforce (early childhood *practitioners* as opposed to *teachers*)? I don't accept this to be the case, but it deserves our critical engagement.

A second urgent question arises from First 5's change of terminology referring to the sector: after years of slow shift from *childcare* over *early childhood care and education* (ECCE) to *early childhood education and care* (ECEC), the strategy now refers to the *early learning and care* (ELC) sector. ECCE, the umbrella term adopted by many Irish policy documents, led to confusion with the 'free' preschool scheme with the same acronym. ECEC is adopted internationally (e.g., in EU council conclusions and the EU Quality Framework). Does introducing ELC imply deviation from international consensus? Does the new emphasis on *learning* imply distancing from *education*?

A first concrete step, announced in the strategy, will be the establishment of an Irish early childhood observatory.

Thirdly, First 5 rightly identifies the need for a strong and highly qualified early-childhood workforce capable of building the effective system at which the strategy is aiming. The critical question is whether introducing a new defining term for the sector implies yet another attempt to define the collective professional identity from an external position, without debate or meaningful consultation. Is this the best way to build an 'appropriately skilled and sustainable professional workforce that is supported and valued and reflects the diversity of babies, young children and their families' (DCYA, 2018, p.160)? Is an 'appropriately skilled' workforce different from a *professional* one, and if so, what does that imply?

There are good reasons why everyone in the Irish early childhood sector should engage with these questions. They remind us that education and care are political practices stemming from profound political questions, with often conflicting answers from which political and democratic choices must be made:

- What does it mean to be a child, to live and grow up in our society?
- What is the purpose of early childhood services?
- What is the relationship between the private (family) and the public (society)?

- What are fundamental values?
- What do we mean by education? For example, is it learning oriented towards readiness for school and transition to the next phase, or fulfilment of the potential of every child, from birth, to be a whole person with physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual capacity? Definitions include what Freire meant by *Educação*: a political, emancipatory practice of liberation and transformation.
- Who has a say in defining, exploring, and answering these questions? Whose voices are heard, and by whom, and whose continue to be silenced?

These questions are preliminary and not exhaustive. Others will add their own. How we engage with the critical questions will ultimately decide whether First 5 will be the success it needs to be. How should we approach and frame our critical engagement? Below are four suggestions.

EARLY CHILDHOOD AS A PUBLIC GOOD AND PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY

We should engage in a broad public debate about the purpose and values of early childhood services in Ireland. One of my favourite nursery schools from my previous professional life, in Tottenham, asks new parents about their dreams and hopes for their children. All the collected dreams are on display in the hall.

I think we need this exercise as a country: what are our dreams and hopes for young children? Who, and what, do we think early childhood services are for? Who resists change because they benefit from the status quo? What do we want early childhood services to be and achieve in society? Individually and collectively, we must clarify our position and take a stand.

We have a shared public responsibility for the lives of all children from birth... There is no such thing as 'other people's children'.

To start, we should recognise that early childhood services are a common good that benefits all children, families, and society. We have a shared public responsibility for the lives of all children from birth, and for the cohesion of the society we want to live in. There is no such thing as 'other people's children'.

EARLY CHILDHOOD INSTITUTIONS AS PUBLIC, NOT PRIVATE, SERVICES

If the current structure of the sector is not fit for purpose, what are the alternatives? Much evidence shows that a sector that relies on a business model cannot, long-term, deliver the common good (OECD, 2001, 2006; Penn, 2011; Lloyd and Penn, 2012; Urban and Rubiano, 2015). Quality as experienced by children and families tends to be low (or variable at best), access and outcomes unequal, costs high, working conditions unsustainable, governance and regulation onerous. How the government's early years strategy is oriented serves to acknowledge this.

So we need to fundamentally rethink how early-years services are provided in Ireland – and by whom. What would a deprivatised, genuinely public sector look like? Soviet-style *kinderkombinat* institutions in each county? Certainly not. Any appropriate solution would build on the system's strengths: the profound connectedness of services and professionals to the

local community, and their knowledge of the rights, hopes, capabilities, and needs of the community that is often their own. Services would be diverse and decentralised (as now) but publicly resourced and coordinated.

INTEGRATED SERVICES

While grounded in local communities, services must also be highly integrated to cater for the rights of all children, families, and communities. In Ireland we are struggling to overcome the deep conceptual and institutional divide between childcare and early childhood education (Van Laere et al., 2012). Progress has been made. It is now widely accepted that education starts at birth and care does not stop at the primary school gate.

Now we must ensure that this holistic, rights-based approach to caring for and educating all children is reflected at all levels of the system, including governance. If we take our public responsibility for children seriously, we must think about integration on a much broader scale. Health, nutrition, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being should be included, integral to the services available to all young children and their families.

A STRATEGY FOR THE STRATEGY, BUT FIRST A VISION

The new early years strategy can provide much-needed orientation for the next decade. The time frame is important because it makes it possible to escape the short-termism of electoral cycles and the temptations of quick fixes and election giveaways. This approach brings Ireland in line with an emerging global consensus on the importance of long-term, systemic policies to reform and develop early childhood systems (Powers and Paulsell, 2018; Urban et al., 2018).

The new early years strategy can provide much-needed orientation for the next decade.

What are the implications for Ireland? I want to be radically positive and say it can become the road map for the system change I believe we need: from a fragmented, marketised, dysfunctional system to a fully integrated public service for all children and families, regardless of

their legal status, ethnicity, perceived ability, economic status, or any other artificial distinction. Exclusion is not an option.

I fully support the ambition, laid out in First 5, to develop fully integrated services for children and families in Ireland. We should aim high: five years from now, there will be a fully integrated early childhood development, education and care hub in each county. These will offer some services in-house, and will proactively coordinate many services in the region, in diverse settings: pre- and postnatal care, parental support and advice, infant health care, sessional and drop-in childcare, and early childhood education. They will reach out to all families in the area and work closely with other services and professionals providing child and family support.

The implications are huge. To start with, we must overcome silo mentality and competition. We will need a highly qualified (and sufficiently paid) professional workforce, able to collaborate across professional and disciplinary boundaries. We must recognise that coordination and communication across differences are essential competences, and we must create new support structures and roles to reflect the task. But Ireland does not face these challenges alone. We can learn from other countries.

STRATEGIC ALLIANCES: THE EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH CENTRE AT DCU

The publication of *First 5* coincides with the launch of the new interdisciplinary Early Childhood Research Centre (ECRC) at Dublin City University. In my new role as Desmond Chair of Early Childhood Education, I have the privilege to direct this unique venture. As the sector enters a critical new phase, we aim to support practice and policy through our key activities:

- With a global network of research collaborations, we can connect the local and the global at all levels of the early childhood system: practice, policy, research, theory.
- We will investigate the big picture without losing sight of the child, the family, the educator in that picture.
- We will respond and contribute to the developing Irish ECEC context and work with all stakeholders to provide information and evidence, conduct systemic evaluation, offer constructive critique, and suggest viable alternatives.

I am convinced that our new centre will contribute strongly to building much-needed early childhood research capacity in Ireland, grounded in local and global collaborations. We already provide a world-class environment for international and Irish doctoral and post-doctoral researchers, and for research-based teaching and professional development. We aspire to be a focal point for debate and imagination, towards an early childhood system that provides more equitable outcomes for everyone. Most of all, we see our centre as an open invitation for shared thinking and collegial collaboration.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Policy milestones since 1998 include: National Forum for Early Childhood Education (1998); White Paper Ready to Learn (1999); National Childcare Strategy (1999); National Children's Strategy (2000); Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development (2002); Siolta: National Framework for Quality (2004); National Economic and Social Forum Early Childhood Care and Education report (2005); Diversity and Equality and Inclusion Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education (2006, revised 2016); and Aistear: Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

(2009). The most recent milestone is the publication of the early years strategy First 5 in November 2018.

2. Departments of: Children and Youth Affairs; Education; Finance; Public Expenditure and Reform; Health; Justice, Equality and Law Reform; Health Service Executive; Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht; the Environment, Community and Local Government; and Social Protection.
3. Strong and supportive families and communities; Optimum physical and mental health; Positive play-based early learning; An effective early childhood system.

Ireland's first Early Childhood Research Centre

On 19 November 2018, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs Katherine Zappone launched Ireland's first ever dedicated research centre for early childhood at the DCU Institute of Education.

The centre will actively promote close collaboration between research, policy and practice in the field, both nationally and internationally, and will build upon the existing expertise of the DCU Institute of Education, which provides teacher education and research for every level of education.

The establishment of the Early Childhood Research Centre follows on from the appointment by DCU of Professor Mathias Urban as the Desmond Chair in Early Childhood Education in September 2017. It was made possible through the generosity of businessman and philanthropist Dermot Desmond.

This is the only early childhood research chair at an Irish university and aims to spearhead research that will have a transformative impact on public policy and practice in this sector.

Speaking at the launch of the Centre, Minister Katherine Zappone said:

"The establishment of the Early Childhood Research Centre and the appointment of a Chair in Early Childhood Education are very welcome developments. Professor Urban is a renowned leader in this field and I commend DCU for making this appointment. I look forward to the valuable work being undertaken here to help further inform policies which will deliver for generations of Irish families to come."

Professor Urban, who will lead the ECRC, is a world thought leader in the field of early childhood research, renowned for his contributions in international early childhood policy and professional practice.

He most recently presented to the 2018 T20 Summit (Think 20 – a network of research institutes and think tanks for the G20 countries) in Buenos Aires, where he highlighted that early childhood education requires a more coordinated approach to governance, resourcing, professional preparation and evaluation.

Access to high quality early childhood development, education and care is recognised as key to achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

The ECRC will continue to lead the early childhood policy brief during Japan's presidency of the 2019 G20 summit.

Speaking at the event, DCU President Brian MacCraith said:

"DCU is committed to engaging in research that will have a transformative impact on lives and societies. We were proud to establish the Desmond Chair in Early Childhood Education... The establishment of the research centre is a reflection of our commitment to the area of early childhood education."



Mathias Urban, Desmond Chair of Early Childhood Education, DCU; **Anne Looney**, Executive Dean, Institute of Education, DCU; **Dermot Desmond**, Philanthropist; **Brian MacCraith**, President, DCU, at the launch of Ireland's first ever Early Childhood Research Centre.