

'Childcare' – Business or Profession?

Speech by Ciairín de Buis,

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It's time we had a public debate about how we value our young children and their care and early learning –

The quality of early care and education in Ireland is extremely variable. While some services are excellent, some fail to meet minimum standards – and we know that poor quality can harm children. Meanwhile we estimate 50,000 young children are cared for by childminders who work without regulation and without support.

Our government invests a pitifully low amount in early care and education and public funding goes to services without regard to quality.

At the same time, parents in Ireland pay some of the highest 'childcare' costs in the world, without any guarantee of quality.

Parents often face an all or nothing choice – to work full-time or to leave paid employment entirely. And some parents return to work sooner, or work longer than they would like, because they cannot afford to take unpaid leave.

Some children spend long hours in services, while their parents work to pay their 'childcare' costs.

Service-providers are expected to run an educational service, while also being entrepreneurs and running a financially viable business. Many services aren't financially viable, and have no prospect of being. Some providers make little or no profit. Some, however, are big businesses and make significant profits, often supported by public funding. Some community services are in a precarious financial situation. Working with families living in poverty, they are still expected to operate within a business model of service provision and have to worry about financial sustainability

Staff in services are on low wages, with many paid an hourly rate barely above the minimum wage. Training and CPD are often at their own expense, and there is often

no reward for getting a higher qualification. A minimum qualification requirement is only now being introduced, and the requirement is at a basic level.

Our inspections process focuses on health and safety issues. A welcome development is that there will shortly be new 'education focused' inspections, but it is not clear how they will relate to the existing inspection process, nor whether they will look at services for under-3s. And it is far from ideal that the processes are separate.

None of this adds up to high quality early care and education, as a public good. And none of this suggests that we, as a nation, cherish our young children.

Contrast this with how we regard our children's school education. We are proud of the quality of our school education system. Schools are valued for the opportunities they offer children, and for their contribution to society. While the funding is never sufficient, our government invests significantly in our children's school education.

All children are entitled to a primary education and parents are not required to pay for it, much less to pay the market-value of primary school. School principals are evaluated on their management and leadership, not their business acumen. Teachers are required to be graduates. They are paid a salary, not an hourly rate, for which they are expected to teach, plan their classroom time, engage in CPD, and engage with parents. Whole-school evaluations focus on the quality of teaching and learning, as well as management and planning.

For too long we have regarded early care and education as 'minding' children to enable their parents to work. It is seen as 'childcare', not early education, and is not grounded in children's rights. It is treated as an industry, where services are expected to be entrepreneurs running businesses. It is no wonder we have very variable quality.

Today – this conference and the report we are publishing - seeks to explore how we can build on all that is positive in our legacy of private and community provision and childminding, and develop a new model of early years services.

Not a business model, but a profession, in which public investment allows early years educators to deliver a public service – a public service that is focused on quality, while also accessible and affordable to families. One that puts children's interests first, and shows the high value we place on young children's care and early learning.

A new Irish model for early years provision –

Using public funding to ensure quality

Speaking in the Dáil on 29 May 2013, the day after the Prime Time investigation, *A Breach of Trust*, the Taoiseach said:

‘Child care is a profession.... I do not like to see this referred to as a business, a sector or an industry. Unfortunately for some, that is what it has turned into.’

The research project behind this report and conference arose out of our concern at the variable quality of early years services, and the lack of assurance of quality. High quality early care and education can be very beneficial to children, and we know that there is much good practice in services across Ireland. However we also know that there is also bad practice, that many staff are working for low pay and in poor working conditions, and that the regulatory system has failed to ensure that minimum standards are met in all services.

What actions must the Government take if it is to ensure the quality of *all* early years services in Ireland? To answer this question, we asked Professor Helen Penn and Professor Eva Lloyd of the International Centre for the Study of the Mixed Economy of Childcare about the experience of other countries that have a market system of early years services. We also asked Professor Nóirín Hayes to respond to their report, and to put the Irish system in context. And we carried out research into the current state of early years provision in Ireland: drawing together official data and published research findings, and carrying out a series of interviews with service providers.

We’re delighted today to be able to share that research and that we will hear from the authors of those three reports later this morning.

Recommendations

National Early Years Strategy:

The Expert Advisory Group report should provide the basis for the National Early Years Strategy, in which the Government will set out its objectives for early years policy. The Expert Advisory Group concluded that improving quality must be the priority if we are to put children's interests first.

'Ensuring high quality' means ensuring quality in *all* early years services. It means ensuring that no child is in a low quality service. It means no repeat of the scenes we saw in *A Breach of Trust*. And it means a new Irish model of early years provision, to make variable quality a thing of the past.

Affordability

To put children's interests first, we must also look at the cost of services to families. Once quality standards are improved, the Government must continue with its plans to introduce a Second – high quality – Free Pre-School Year, given the evidence on the benefits of early care and education, and it ensure that no one cannot afford to work because of the cost of childcare. Where the high cost of early years services keeps a family living in poverty, children suffer.

Childminders

Putting children's rights at the centre of early years policy also requires us to look at *all* settings where children grow and develop in their early years. It means looking not just at centre-based services, but also at childminding. Childminders, who are a key part of Ireland's model of early years provision, need both regulation and support.

Family Leave

And it means looking at the supports for parents and children in their own homes. Parents need the support of longer paid leave entitlements and work-life balance policies, so that they can spend more time at home with their children without suffering financially.

A new Irish model

There is much to be proud of in Ireland's early years provision, and there is much that needs reform.

Public Service

Given our existing market approach, we will only ensure quality through stronger public involvement, with a reformed and robust regulation and inspection system, a much higher level of public investment, and a professionalised workforce.

Just as our national school system is privately owned but is in effect publicly provided, so too must early years services. While they may be owned by a mix of private and community providers, are nonetheless delivering a public service. In a way, that's already happening. The Free Pre-School Year has already been the start of this new Irish model. Many early years services are now fully or largely State-funded.

Just to be clear, we are not talking about 'schoolifying' early years.

From a business to a profession

Early years care and education is in many ways the first stage of the education system, and early years services – and the educators working within them – must be treated as such.

For 'childcare' to be recognised as a profession, early years educators must have the qualifications, wages, working conditions and career development pathways – and the public esteem – that characterise a profession.

Only then will we see children's early care and education valued as the foundation of their learning.

Recommendations

The central objective of government early years policy must be to realise children's rights. To that end Start Strong are proposing a new model of early years service that is focused on quality, and is accessible and affordable to families.

A new model of early years services for our young children

- **Use public funding as a lever to improve quality**

The Government should develop a new funding model that uses supply-side funding not tax-based solutions. Funding needs to be linked to the cost of delivering quality services, including: higher salaries for graduate staff on agreed salary scales; higher rates of funding when a service needs additional support for a child with special needs or language difficulties; and higher rates of funding to services in disadvantaged communities (like the DEIS initiative in schools).

- **With greater public investment**

Fund this model through a significant increase in public investment, which is currently far behind international standards. Increase public investment in early care and education from 0.4% GDP to reach the OECD average of 0.7% GDP in 5 years, and the UNICEF benchmark of 1% GDP in 10 years. The priority for increased public investment must be quality improvement.

- **Making public funding conditional on quality**

No child should be in a low quality service, and no public money should go to services that fail to achieve quality standards. Introduce a mechanism to ensure that low quality standards (as assessed by a reformed inspectorate) result in a credible threat to withdraw funding, and to withdrawal of funding if standards do not rise in a given time-frame.

...focused on quality ...

In doing so, the Government should also

- **Form a new Early Years Inspectorate**

The new inspectorate should focus on a broad understanding of quality, should be staffed with inspectors who are both qualified and experienced in early care and education, and should be located within an agency that focuses specifically on regulation and inspection, such as HIQA. The new Inspectorate should be formed on the basis of the reform and merging of the Tusla inspectorate with the early childhood education inspectors being appointed by the Department of Education and Skills.

- **Move progressively towards graduate-led provision**

Setting timelines for further increases in minimum qualification levels, and for the achievement of fully graduate-led services.

- **Introduce salary scales –**

as a condition of receipt of public funding, with parity with primary school teachers for similarly qualified staff (as is done in New Zealand). Salaries should be sufficient for staff to be required to engage in routine curriculum planning, team-work, recording of observations of children, CPD, and engagement with parents.

- **Introduce the regulation and support of childminders –**

recognising and enhancing their central role in the Irish model.

- **Invest in national supports for quality**

- Full national roll-out of the Aistear Curriculum Framework and the Síolta Quality Framework.
- A well-resourced National Early Years Quality Support Service.
- A national network of quality support services for childminders.
- Expand the Learner Fund, to provide financial support beyond Level 6 qualifications, so that existing workers can opt to progress towards Levels 7 and 8.

- **Carry out a regular national quality audit**

Improve official data gathering and dissemination - including on the quality of provision, through the introduction of a regular national audit of the quality of a sample of services, using international quality rating scales.

- **Move towards the introduction of ceilings on fees –**

as recommended by Professors Penn and Lloyd, so that the financial costs of professionalisation and higher quality standards do not simply result in higher fees for parents who already pay among the highest fees in the world.

... that is accessible and affordable to families.

- **Continue progress to a Second Free Pre-School Year**

While the raising of quality standards must be the priority, the Government should continue putting in place the building blocks for a Second Free Pre-School Year.

- **Open up public funding schemes to regulated and inspected childminders –**

who meet quality standards comparable to those required of centre-based services.

- **Ensure access to quality services for all children –**

Rather than leaving access to market forces. Turn the publicly funded schemes into **entitlements** that are not conditional upon market forces or upon historic decisions about the location of community services.

- **Local structures meeting local needs**

To ensure all children can access these entitlements, **give local structures responsibility** for assessing and ensuring the availability of early years services locally, and **link future capital funding programmes to local needs assessments**, so that capital funding goes to areas of the country where access is limited.

- **Lower costs for families**

Provide income-related subsidies to families with low incomes. Make subsidised places available in all areas of the country, through reforming the CCS and extending it to all services which meet quality requirements.