

Ireland's Early Years Policies: Past and Future

Childcare – Business or Profession?

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Policy development rarely straightforward

- A change in policy direction may come slowly over time but appear sudden in the end, particularly where the considerations leading to a given policy have taken place outside the public view.
- The Early Childcare Supplement to the Free Pre School Year is a case in point

Key Drivers

- Rapidly changing demographic, social and economic context of Ireland
- Increased demand for childcare services as female labour force participation grew
- Highlighted many inadequacies in the provision of quality, affordable Early Childhood Care and Education places

Key policy developments - 1

- The *National Strategy for Childcare* in 1999
- A critical feature of the report was the restrictive nature of its terms of reference, which limited the group to considering the childcare needs of working parents and their children.
- Furthermore – the extensive brief to cover the age range 0-12 led to confusions across sectors.

Outcomes from the National Childcare Strategy

- The establishment of the *Equal Opportunities Childcare programme* [EOCP] from 2000-2006 and its successor the *National Childcare Investment Plan* [NCIP] from 2006-2011
- Both these programmes laid the foundation for continued, though less extensive investment in the childcare sector in subsequent years to date
- One consequence of the need to increase childcare places rapidly from a low and poorly resourced base was the focus on centre-based institutional childcare over mixed service developments

Outcomes from the National Childcare Strategy

- Under the NCIP (2006-2011) private providers were incentivised to apply for funding.
- Situation now is that we have some 70% private settings [ranging from small to large] and 30% community provision
- Until recently the preferred policy instrument for supporting families access and pay for childcare services has been direct cash payments to parents.

Key policy developments - 2

- Also in 1999, the Department of Education and Science produced a *White Paper on Early Childhood Education, Ready to Learn* (Ireland, 1999)
- Focused on the early educational needs of children from birth to six (the compulsory school age in Ireland).
- Included recommendations which covered the whole spectrum of early childhood services but prioritised the age range 3-6

Outcome from the National Childcare Strategy

- Arising directly from the White Paper two practice frameworks were developed.
 - Siolta – the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education was published in 2006 by the Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development [CECDE]
 - In 2009, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA] published Aistear – the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Some difficulties -

- The policy actions arising from the White Paper on Early Childhood Education (1999) were not aligned to those of the National Childcare Strategy (1999)
- Absence of a coherent implementation plan for the frameworks meant that, until as recently as this year, they were considered in isolation
- Síolta has been perceived as a framework for enhancing the quality of care while Aistear has been perceived as an education framework.

Some difficulties -

- Although the frameworks were developed at different times and by two different bodies they both fall under the responsibility of the Early Years Education Policy Unit of the DES
- Which is co-located within the Department of Children and Youth Affairs with the Childcare Directorate
- And, recently, Tusla – the Child and Family Agency
- But – co-location has not necessarily led to coordination

The consequences -

- The absence of a strong link between the development of ‘childcare’ places, support for training and enhanced quality initiatives across early years settings has contributed to the poor practices revealed in some childcare settings and exemplified by the Breach of Trust documentary aired on RTE in 2013

And this is the core of the problem

- Irish policy responses to the demands for Early Childhood Education and Care have been reactive and ‘broken’ from the beginning
- It should be no surprise that we have a dysfunctional, poorly supported, fragmented and costly ECEC system which mitigates against the development of quality settings

Absence of an integrated vision

- Irish macro-economic policy continues, structurally and conceptually, to maintain a clear distinction between childcare and early education
- A fact supported by the continued separation of the childcare and early education policy units within the DCYA
- Despite ample research on the importance of a coherent and integrated overall system to develop and maintain quality early years services

The case of investment - 1

- Until recently the preferred policy instrument for supporting families to accessing and pay for childcare services has been direct cash payments to parents
- This avoided the direct provision of ECEC services – where such a policy could be perceived as a restriction of parental choice in relation to early years options
- However, funding for the universal FPSY, since 2010 goes directly to services and not to parents
- But no similar mechanism exists to support services for children under 3 years

The case of investment - 2

- The FPSY is grossly underfunded yet makes huge demands on poorly paid staff
- It could be seen as a cynical attempt to appear committed to quality ECEC
- Less than 0.4% GDP allocated annually compared to a the OECD average of 0.7%
- Removing the investment in the infant classes of the primary school actual public investment in the sector is less than 0.2% of GDP

Can this broken system be fixed?

- Not easily
- If we are to get serious about ECEC we need to get serious about investment
- There needs to be a real shift to an agreed, integrated government vision and action for ECEC – across settings and ages - which goes beyond rhetoric and hand-wringing

Can this broken system be fixed?

- Children should expect quality early years experiences, quality depends on staff and staff need training [initial and Continuing Professional Development]
- Regulation and inspection can support quality practices where it integrates care and education
- Inspection teams must include professionals with qualifications in ECEC

Can this broken system be fixed?

- Local structures can be an asset to supporting settings and informing policy – however, there is a need for a clear policy leader at a national level to guide a strong network of local level systems.
- Policy and practice can both be enhanced through supportive monitoring and evaluation and well designed research.
- We have the wherewithal to provide excellent early years experiences for all our young children

However, there must be serious reform which places the child at the centre of policy and practice

And - within the mixed-model of provision that has developed – ways must be found to realise the rights of all children to quality early years experiences wherever and whenever they happen.

