

Early years education-focused inspections

A reason to celebrate?

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The Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills (DES), at the request of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), is currently developing a model of early years education-focused inspections (EYEIs) to evaluate the quality of educational provision in early years settings participating in the Free Preschool Year (FPSY) in Early Childhood Care and Education scheme. The FPSY was introduced in January 2010 with the specific purpose of making early learning opportunities available to all children aged more than three years and two months on September 1st in the relevant pre-school year. The initiative represents an annual government investment of 170 million euro (DES, 2015a). On May 26th 2015, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) organised a briefing and consultation meeting for early years' education stakeholders. Dr. Maresa Duignan, Early Years Specialist, at the DES described the occasion as an opportunity to celebrate and affirm the early years' sector and the EYEIs as a huge opportunity to impact on the lives of children (Duignan, 2015). This article explores whether indeed the proposed EYEIs are a reason to celebrate.

The Inspection of Early Years Education in Ireland: A Historical Context

In contrast to other European countries, where the provision of early childhood care and education has been a feature of children's experience for many decades, Ireland has only recently begun to focus specifically on children's pre-primary experiences. Recent research suggests that the school-starting age of four in Ireland is based primarily on historical, socio-economic and political contexts, which prevailed at the establishment of the primary school system in 1831 (Centre for Early Childhood Research at Mary Immaculate College (CERAMIC) and Centre for Social and Educational Research (CSER), 2015). In Ireland, primary education has developed separately from pre-primary education. While the funding of primary education has been the remit of the Department of Education and Skills, in its various iterations, the funding of pre-primary education has been the remit of up to nine separate government departments (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR), 1999). Similarly in Ireland, the inspection of primary education has developed separately from the inspection of pre-primary education. The Irish national school system was established in 1831 and a state school inspectorate system, followed in 1832 (Coolahan and O'Donovan, 2009). This inspection system built on an existing school inspection system developed in 1818 by the Society for the Promotion of the Education of the Poor of Ireland (the Kildare Place Society). The inspection system at pre-primary level was up until recently the remit of the Health Service Executive (HSE) and is currently the remit of TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency (Ireland, 2013). Inspections are conducted by pre-school inspectors who are professionals with expertise in children's development and environmental health

(Hanafin, 2014). An analysis of pre-school inspection reports (n=3,007) conducted in the period from January 2012 to May 2013 demonstrates that most pre-school services were compliant with most regulations and that about three-quarters of all regulatory requirements inspected were assessed as compliant (Hanafin, *ibid*). The EYEIs provide an opportunity to extend the existing inspection system at pre-primary level to focus specifically on the nature, range and appropriateness of the early educational experiences for children participating in the FPSY (DES, 2015a).

The Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills

The Inspectorate of the DES operates under the Education Act, 1998 (Ireland, 1998). The functions of the Inspectorate are detailed in section 13 of the Act and include advisory, supportive and evaluation roles. The general principles under which the Inspectorate carry out their work are set out in the The Code of Practice for the Inspectorate (DES, 2015b). Four key principles underpin the work of the Inspectorate: A Focus on Learners; Development and Improvement; Respectful Engagement and Responsibility and Accountability. The purpose of these principles is to provide a benchmark against which the quality of the Inspectorate's professional practice can be assessed. At the heart of the Inspectorate's role is improvement in the quality of learning and teaching for children. Through the provision of high quality evaluation and advice, the DES Inspectorate has contributed significantly to the vast improvements evident in the Irish Education system (Coolahan and O'Donovan, 2009). High levels of satisfaction are consistently expressed with the performance of the inspectorate (MORI Ireland, 2005; DES, 2013). The involvement of the DES Inspectorate in EYEIs represents a valuable opportunity for early years settings to benefit from vast knowledge, experience and expertise that has been developed by the Inspectorate since its inception.

Rationale and Purpose of Early Years Education-focused Inspections

The rationale and purpose of EYEIs are detailed in the Early Years Education-focused Inspections in Early Years Settings Participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme: Briefing Paper: 26th May 2015 published by the DES (DES, 2015a). Through EYEIs, the importance of high-quality early education in building the foundations for lifelong learning and enabling children to reach their full potential will be highlighted. Early years educators will benefit from the supportive and advisory role of the Inspectorate, which will contribute to the ongoing development of quality and best practice in early years settings participating in the FPSY scheme. The implementation of the internationally acclaimed Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2009) and Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), 2006) will be further complemented and enhanced through EYEIs. The publication of written inspection reports will assist in the dissemination of good practice in early years education nationally and provide information for parents on the quality of early education in early years settings participating in the FPSY scheme. Critically EYEIs will provide an opportunity for the existing positive practice in early years settings to be identified and affirmed.

Early Years Education-focused Inspection Framework

A quality framework for EYEIs against which inspections will be conducted has been developed (DES, 2015a). This framework is informed by Aistear; The Early Childhood

Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009); Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE), 2006); pilot inspections conducted by the DES and HSE inspectorate in 2011; national and international research and policy related to early years education and a review of relevant agencies' inspection processes and protocols in early years settings. The framework views the key elements of best practice in early years education through four lenses. A total of twenty key outcomes are identified in respect of all of the four areas. In order to assist early years educators, a range of possible signposts associated with each outcome has been identified. These signposts are described as 'neither prescriptive nor exhaustive' (DES, 2015a, p, 4). Area One focuses on the atmosphere and organisation of the setting, the responsiveness, respectfulness and reciprocity of relationships and the nurturing of children's sense of identity and belonging. The extent to which provision is informed by Aistear, the quality of interactions, the role of play in children's learning and development, the alignment of children's interests and developing capabilities, the fostering of emergent language, literacy and numeracy skills and the inclusivity of the environment are among the key foci of Area Two. Children's well-being, belonging, identity, communication, engagement and interaction with others and their environment comprise Area Three. Area Four focuses on management within the setting and the planning, review and transition processes that are in place.

A Reason to Celebrate?

It is envisaged that the EYEIs will be piloted in Autumn 2015 and that the process will subsequently be shared and discussed with early years stakeholders. EYEIs are a reason to celebrate in terms of the potential benefits to society, parents and most importantly children. A substantial corpus of international research supports the view that a playful approach to learning is best suited to achieving the goals of early childhood education (Fisher et al., 2011). While Síolta (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009) both endorse play as a key context for learning, experiences elsewhere indicate that a play-based approach can be difficult to implement in practice (Moyles, 2010; Wood, 2013). Appreciating these challenges, the strong focus on play in the EYEIs provides a unique opportunity to support the development of sustainable pedagogies of play in the early years.

Clearly the provision of continuing professional development and engaging in ongoing professional dialogue and discussion with the early years sector must continue to be central to the development of EYEIs. EYEIs are a reason to celebrate if we continue to listen to each other and remember that in the words of Carla Rinaldi "listening is not easy. It requires a deep awareness and suspension of our judgements and prejudices. It requires openness to change. It demands that we value the unknown and overcome the feelings of emptiness that we experience when our certainties are questioned" (Rinaldi, 2001, p. 1).

Providing access to high-quality early childhood care and education experiences for children can enhance and optimise children's learning and development and impact positively on their future attainments. In these environments children's dispositions for learning are developed and sustained. Poor quality early childhood environments impact negatively on children and place them at an early disadvantage, which is more difficult and costly to compensate for at later stages in their education (Heckman, 2013). Through investing in early childhood care and education and providing high quality experiences for children in the early years, society places a value on childhood and on children.

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