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In May 2013 an exposé of verbal, physical and emotional abuse of young children attending three early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings in Ireland was aired on national television in a documentary called Breach of Trust. This paper argues that while the programme raised public awareness of fundamental flaws within the ECCE system in Ireland, it also came as no surprise that bad practices had been exposed. This paper specifically explores the policies and government in/action that led to the public revelations. It also critiques the Irish government's response to the issues highlighted and its proposed plan to address these issues.

Original Policy Paper

Breach of Trust - Getting it Right for Children in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland

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Abstract

In May 2013 an exposé of verbal, physical and emotional abuse of young children attending three early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings in Ireland was aired on national television in a documentary called Breach of Trust. This paper argues that while the programme raised public awareness of fundamental flaws within the ECCE system in Ireland, it also came as no surprise that bad practices had been exposed. This paper specifically explores the policies and government in/action that led to the public revelations. It also critiques the Irish government's response to the issues highlighted and its proposed plan to address these issues.

Key words: Regulations; child abuse; early childhood education; policy; duty of care.

Introduction

On 28th May 2013 the Irish national broadcaster RTE aired an exposé of verbal, physical and emotional abuse of young children attending three early childhood care and education (ECCE) services in Ireland. This programme, titled "Breach of Trust" raised public awareness of fundamental flaws within the ECCE system in Ireland. The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs¹, Frances Fitzgerald, T.D. stated that it reflected "poor practice, dereliction of duty and care resulting in the appalling mistreatment of young children bordering on abuse" (Oireachtas, 2013).

Some people however, were not surprised by what they saw. In fact, Moloney (2011) notes that in spite of numerous policy developments and initiatives focused on policy for at least a decade, there is a "considerable gap between policy and practice that seriously undermines children's experiences in early childhood settings" (p. 172). While the ECCE sector attracts much attention at policy level, Moloney and Pope (2013) argue that consistent weak investment, a lack of a mandatory training requirement and poor salaries result in a sector that is low status, low paid, low skilled and unmotivated (Moloney, 2011). Consequently, quality practice is "sporadic rather than consistent" within services (Moloney 2011, p. 172). In relation to the examples of mistreatment shown in the documentary *Breach of Trust*, Fergus Finlay, Chief Executive,

Barnardos, Ireland, stated that they “were inevitable due to the lack of State involvement in the provision of childcare facilities” (www.rte.ie/news).

Yet, over the decade from 2000 – 2010, the Irish State invested almost €1.139 billion in the development and enhancement of the ECCE sector. Furthermore, since 1996 the sector has been regulated and subject to annual inspections. In addition, the universal Free Pre-School Year (2010) requires pre-school service leaders to hold a basic minimum qualification. So how did the practices exposed on May, 28th materialise? Further, what is the policy and investment context which resulted in the practices? This paper discusses the government’s proposed pre-school quality agenda intended to address the issues highlighted in *Breach of Trust* and, questions whether enough is being done to support and enhance the quality of ECCE provision.

The supply side of childcare provision

Perceptions about what is appropriate for young children in the field of ECCE are shaped by values and political priorities (Penn, 2009) as well as historical, social and economic trajectories (Moloney, 2011). This is the case in Ireland where Constitutional parameters traditionally rendered childrearing a private family matter undertaken by women in the home (Kennedy, 2001). Historically, the Irish State had little involvement in children’s early care and education up until the mid-1990s; its responsibility lay in the areas of primary and secondary education and the child protection system, which operated through the Health Services Executive (HSE).

The economic boom from the 1990s onwards saw a major increase in female labour force (from 35.8% to 52.2% between 1990 and 2006) (Office of the Minister for Children (OMC) 2007, p. 2). This created new challenges for the State in terms of ensuring sufficient supply of childcare. Motivated by a desire to consolidate economic prosperity, the Government embarked on an ambitious funding programme, the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP, 2000 – 2006). This resulted in an investment of €564.7 million to develop a childcare infrastructure, with the objective of enabling parents to remain in or return to employment, education or training. The EOCP rested with the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR), indicating the fragmentation that existed in Ireland with regards to where responsibility should lie for young children.

The EOCP was a “supply side” measure that focused mainly but not exclusively on the community and voluntary sector (OMC, 2007, p. 6) resulting in the creation of 33,582 new childcare places, of which 14,799 were fulltime. A successor funding stream was announced in Budget, 2005. The National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP 2006 – 2010) resulted in a further investment of €575 million. It was also a capital funding programme primarily focused upon creating an additional 50,000 childcare places, with additional

support for staffing costs in community facilities with a focus on disadvantage (OMC, 2007). When the programme closed, an additional 24,487 places had been created OMC, 2007. Even though the NCIP was promoted as being 'centred on the needs of the child and the family',) in reality, it too, was a supply side measure driven by the need to capitalise upon economic prosperity. (www.pobal.ie²)

Indeed, following *Breach of Trust*, Minister Frances Fitzgerald, T.D acknowledged that while the economic boom "saw a scramble to put services in place in response to demand [there had been] a wholly inadequate approach to quality and sustainability". She went on to say that

On Tuesday night we saw that legacy starkly exposed. We saw the challenges at first hand. We saw what happens when you don't invest in building an effective system and culture of quality-focused, child-centred service provision, and when you don't invest in robust oversight and inspection (Oireachtas, 2013).

There is no doubt, that quality was essentially overlooked in the scramble to satisfy childcare demand during the period of economic prosperity from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s. However, the establishment of the City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) in every city and county in Ireland was one of the major achievements of the EOCP (Moreau, 2006). The CCCs who were tasked with prioritising funding and coordinating childcare at local level are now an integral part of the ECEC infrastructure. Together with the National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative (e.g., Early Childhood Ireland, Barnardos), they have worked to enhance quality provision, through training, advice and support.

Ongoing ECCE investment

Penn (2009) extrapolates ten rationales commonly used to justify investment in ECCE, of which human capital theory is frequently used. Human capital theory is about the "economic productivity of individuals and the situations in which it might be maximized" (p. 27). According to Heckman (2012) investing in early childhood education builds the human capital required for economic success. This assertion by Heckman and others (e.g., Carneiro and Heckman, 2003, Schweinhart 2004) is primarily based upon cost-benefit analysis of three longitudinal intervention programmes; the High Scope/Perry Pre-School, Ypsilanti, USA, the Carolina Abecedarian, and the Chicago Child-Parent Centres which justify the relationship between investment in ECCE and long term private and social outcomes. Premised upon these studies, there is universal acceptance that investing in ECCE "mitigates the expense of remedial action in primary and secondary schooling and results in subsequent adult productivity and in the relative absence of anti-social behaviour" (Penn, 2009, p. 26). This is a persuasive argument and, in Ireland, the government ascribes to it as seen through targeted provision for the most vulnerable children. For

instance, the DES funds a number of pre-primary services including the Early Start Programme established in 1994 in 40 primary schools in areas of urban disadvantage and the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme available to community based providers caring for children from certain targeted low income families.

The question as to whether human capital theory is the most appropriate rationale for investing in ECEC is salient. There is increasing scepticism of the “iconic status” (Penn, 2009, p. 29) achieved by the three longitudinal studies mentioned. Citing Brooks-Gunn (2003) and the OECD (2006), Penn articulates a number of issues associated with targeted provision; for example, early intervention on its own is not sufficient to change life chances. It is associated with stigmatisation and the social segregation involved at pre-school level may follow the child into primary school in so far as the targeted provision is attached to a school (Penn, 2009, p. 29-30). Moreover Moloney (2011) notes that definitions of disadvantage can be problematic resulting in the exclusion of certain vulnerable children and families, and targeted services risk withdrawal or reduction in funding during straitened economic climates or political trends (Ibid.).

Another concern is that interventions based upon these well-known longitudinal programmes, may not replicate the vital aspects that resulted in the benefits accrued; staff qualifications, adult/child ratios, quality of the curriculum, the stimulating learning environment, family support and so on. Certainly, in the case of Ireland where investment in ECCE is poor by international standards, it is unlikely that the conditions outlined can be simulated, or that targeted provision in Ireland can yield any significant returns. Therefore while the Nordic countries spend between 1.2% and 1.7% of GDP, Ireland’s investment is 0.2% (OECD, 2010). Only 20% of Ireland’s entire public spending on children and families goes towards early childhood (birth to 5 years) (Ibid.).

In 2008, UNICEF published *A League Table of ECEC in Economically Advanced Countries* which evaluated and compared 10 ECEC standards in 25 OECD countries. Ireland achieved just one benchmark with the report stating that only 20% of three year olds were participating in ECCE. The report argued that most European countries were already guaranteeing a pre-school place to all four year olds.

This report may well have been the impetus for the introduction of the universal Free Pre-School Year in ECCE scheme (FPSY), 2010 (Neylon, 2012). The FPSY is directed at giving children access to a free pre-school year of appropriate programme-based activities in the year before commencing primary school. It is open to all children irrespective of circumstances aged between aged between 3 years 3 months and 4 years 6 months on 1 September each year. The State pays a capitation fee to participating settings, and in return,

they provide a pre-school service free of charge to children within the qualifying age range for 3 hours a day, 5 days a week, over 38 weeks (September to June) (www.dcy.ie).

This scheme marks a watershed in the development of ECCE in Ireland. It supports all parents with childcare costs in the year prior to their child starting school irrespective of their financial circumstances or the location of the service. Currently, 97% of eligible children (DCYA, 2012) are availing of the scheme.

Focus on quality

Goodbody Economic Consultants claim that since the late 1980s and early 1990s, there has been a “growing preoccupation with quality in the ECEC sector in Ireland” (p. 6). In fact, in the absence of national standards, the NVCCs developed and implemented training, developed best practice guidelines and offered support and advice to the sector in the early days.

Moreover as mentioned, the first ever Childcare (Pre-School Services) Regulations were introduced in 1996. The relationship between regulations and quality is well established (e.g., Gormley, 2000, Oberhuemer, Schreyer & Neuman, 2010, and Sciarra, Dorsey & Lynch, 2009). Following an extensive review of the 1996 regulations, the revised Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations, 2006 were introduced. As the only legislative ‘control’ over the sector in Ireland, these regulations set out the minimum acceptable standards of care and education within settings. While maintaining a focus upon the structural aspects of care i.e., adult/child ratios, space requirements, sleeping arrangements, ventilation and so on, Regulation 5: *Health, Welfare and Development of the Child* is concerned with the dynamic aspects of quality including the provision of “opportunities, experiences, activities, interaction, materials and equipment...” (DHC, 2006, p. 9).

Services are inspected by pre-school inspectors operating under the auspices of the Department of Health and Children and the inspectors generally have a background in public health. In addition to the introduction of Childcare Regulations, the period from 1999 to 2010 has been the most prolific period in the history of the State with regards to the development of ECCE policies focused upon enhancing and supporting quality. Table 1 provides an overview of policy trajectory during this period.

Table 1: Policy trajectory 1999 - 2010

Year	Policy
1999	Ready to Learn: White Paper on Early Childhood Education (Department of Education and Science)
2000	The National Children’s Strategy: Our Children their Lives (DHC, 2000)
2000 - 2006	Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme
2002	The Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform)
2004	Towards a Framework for Early Learning (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment)
2006	Siolta ³ : The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education)
2006 - 2010	National Childcare Investment Programme
2006	Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers (Office of the Minister for Children)
2006	The revised Child Care (Pre-school Services) (No 2) Regulations, 2006 (Department of Health and Children)
2009	Aistear ⁴ : The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA)
2009	Developing the workforce in the Early Childhood Care and Education sector; Background discussion paper (DES) Developing the workforce in the Early Childhood Care and Education sector; Report on the findings from the consultative process (DES)
2010	The Free Pre-School Year in ECCE Scheme (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs)

These various policies, strategies and initiatives focus on a range of factors that are universally recognised as central to quality ECCE provision, i.e., qualifications, an early childhood curriculum, national quality standards and, regulation. Together with the financial investment discussed earlier, they clearly point to the government's awareness of and commitment to quality within ECCE provision. Or do they? Notwithstanding government commitment to quality, it could be argued that much of the investment from 2000 – 2010 was misdirected, focusing as it did upon buildings and childcare places. A much needed parallel investment in quality has not been realised.

It is not surprising that the history of early childhood provision in Ireland has been described as, “a collection of unfinished stories, of fragmented and un-coordinated initiatives” ((European Commission on Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care (CoRe), 2011, p. 32). Not one, but various, government departments have been involved in the development of ECCE policies and initiatives. This reflects the continued fragmentation of responsibility for the sector prior to 2006, when it was characterised by a complex web of government departments, each bearing some level of responsibility for certain aspects of child policy. None the less, a ‘permanent home’ for the sector emerged relatively quickly. Consequently, an Office of the Minister for Children was established in 2005, followed by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) to which a junior Minister for Children was appointed in 2006. Also in 2006, an Early Years Education Policy Unit (called for in *Ready to Learn*, DES, 1999) was established in the DES (co-located within the OMCYA). Significantly, a Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) with a full Ministerial post was established in 2011, to which responsibility for the ECEC sector has been transferred.

Unlike other countries however, for example France, Finland, Norway, Scotland, Sweden and the United Kingdom, where responsibility for all early childhood provision rests with a single Ministry, responsibility in Ireland continues to be shared between two government Departments; the DCYA and the Department of Health and Children (DHC). Thus, an element of fragmentation still exists and, at government level, there is uncertainty about the purpose of ECCE, i.e., is it about child welfare, an intervention strategy for children at risk, a common good or, is it still perceived as a private family matter with ultimate responsibility resting with parents?

Pillars of quality

The DCYA/DES (2011), claim that *Siolta* and *Aistear* constitute essential “pillars of quality” (p. 18). *Siolta* is a developmental tool, intended to define, assess and support the improvement of quality across all aspects of ECEC practice in services where children from birth to six years are present. It comprises 12 principles and 16 standards of quality that cover the particular areas of practice that services should address such as environments, parents and families,

interactions, play and curriculum. Services participating in the FPSY must adhere to *Síolta*, yet for the majority of services there is limited support to enable them to do so. Services can engage formally or informally with *Síolta*. At an informal level, services are provided with *Síolta* resource materials so that practitioners can use them in their own time and at their own pace (Goodbody Economic Consultants, 2011). Formal engagement involves services implementing the *Síolta* Quality Assurance Programme (QAP), supported by one of 25 *Síolta* coordinators (DCYA/DES, 2011). The goal of *Síolta* QAP is to “foster the development of an organisational culture which empowers both the setting and the staff to take ownership of and drive quality improvement as a continuous feature of everyday practice” (ibid., p. 4).

The second pillar is *Aistear* which also comprises a set of “nationally agreed and evidence based Principles, Themes and Goals which provide guidance for adults supporting the learning, well-being and development of children aged birth to six years” (DES, 2011, p. 18). At a minimum, *Aistear* and *Síolta* ask practitioners to support children to “realise their full potential [through] fostering independence, self-esteem, creativity, communication skills (in particular oral language development) and self-regulation” (DES, 2011, p. 18). This is a large task requiring a significant level of practitioner knowledge, skill and expertise. It is therefore perplexing to note, that the NCCA has developed a network of *Aistear* tutors to support infant teachers in their use of *Aistear* (DCYA/DES, 2011). According to the Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairi Quinn, T.D, up to the end of 2012, 322 two-hour workshops provided support to 5,977 teachers and principals and 827 teachers were supported through 38 summer courses in 2011 and 2012. No such training has been provided to the ECCE sector outside of primary school. Rather “support materials and activities are being developed to assist adults as they begin to incorporate *Aistear* into their practice with children” (DES, 2011, p. 18). In stark contrast to the support provided to teachers, an *Aistear* toolkit is available online at the NCCA website (www.ncca.ie).

Professional development

At EU level it is recognised that the “pre-school period is the most important time in a child’s emotional and social development...staff working with pre-school children should therefore have appropriate qualifications” (EU, 2011, p. 7-8). Moreover, “the well-being and safety of the child is of the utmost importance when recruiting staff” (Ibid, p. 8). The EU holds that qualified and well-trained staff are essential for quality ECCE. It argues that in countries where staff are not required to undertake professional training or gain specific qualifications to work with young children, “many of them lack the interactive skills and overall proficiency necessary to ensure that the children in their care develop adequate cognitive skills” (EU 2011, p. 12). In the Foreword to the

Workforce Development Plan (DES, 2010), the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs Barry Andrews, T.D states that:

A better prepared workforce in our early childhood care and education settings will improve the quality of centre based early childhood experiences of our children and impact positively on the lives of the children and their families (p. iii).

But in Ireland the need for staff qualifications has to a large extent been overshadowed by the rush to create a physical childcare infrastructure.

Currently the only qualification requirement relates to the FPSY. The playgroup leader must hold a nationally accredited major award at Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications in childcare/ early childhood care and education (www.dcy.gov.ie). Subsequent to the introduction of the scheme, and, based upon the significant numbers of practitioners who did not hold this minimum training requirement, an interim measure enabled them to acquire a qualification up to September, 2012. Capitation funding is “differentiated based on the qualification profile of staff in ECCE services” (DES 2010, p. 15). Accordingly, a higher capitation rate is payable where settings are led by staff with a relevant bachelor’s degree (minimum of Level 7 on the NFQ) and have three years experience. Figures available from the DCYA (2012) indicate that only a small proportion of staff working in settings delivering the FPSY hold a bachelor degree and that the majority hold only a minimum basic level of training. Accordingly, of 4,162 settings contracted to deliver the FPSY in 2011, 85.4% (3, 553 settings) met the basic capitation criteria, with only 14.6% (609 settings) meeting the higher criteria (DCYA, 2012).

The DES (2011) recognises that the ECCE workforce has not been required to meet qualification requirements similar to those required of school teachers who must hold a Bachelor of Education degree. Ironically, even though the DES also states that the “role of the adult working in ECCE settings is no less critical [than that of a primary school teacher] to ensuring positive experiences for and outcomes for children’s learning and development” (p. 27) it simply commits to encouraging and supporting the “up-skilling” of those working within the sector.

A low level of qualification and lack of training impacts upon the sector’s ability to engage with quality initiatives. For example, in their evaluation of an initial implementation of *Síolta* QAP in 134 services from 2009 – 2010, Goodbody Economic Consultants (2011) found that staff education and training levels impeded their ability to engage with and implement *Síolta*.

A quality pre-school agenda

In response to the RTE documentary; *Breach of Trust*, the Minister for Children identified eight key areas of action to address the issues within the sector as a matter of urgency. Table 2 provides an overview of the proposed action plan.

Table 2: Overview of action plan

Action	Description
1	Publication of on-line inspection reports from 1 st July, 2013
2	Strengthening the national inspection system
3	Introducing new protocols on regulatory compliance and enforcement
4	Increasing and widening the sanctions which can be taken for non-compliance
5	Increasing the qualification requirements for all staff in pre-school services
6	Introducing a registration system
7	Implementing new national pre-school standards
8	Supporting implementation of the <i>Síolta</i> framework and <i>Aistear</i> curriculum

Having exclusively obtained the 2012 pre-school inspection reports, RTE highlighted considerable deficiencies with the current inspection system. For example, of the 4,782 notified ECCE settings currently operating in Ireland, 2,644 were inspected, giving an inspection rate of 55% in 2012. Not only is the rate of inspection low, it also fluctuates dramatically by geographic location ranging from 95% in some areas to 19% in others. It was further revealed that 75% of pre-schools and crèches inspected, were in breach of the Childcare (pre-school services) regulations, 2006 with 34% in breach of five or more regulations; 48% of crèches were in breach of regulation 8: adult/child ratios and staff background checks; 29% in breach of regulation 18: overcrowding and upkeep of premises; 41% in breach of regulation 27: provision of a safe environment and, one in seven crèches nationally were in breach of regulation 5 concerning the welfare of children. The inspectorate had not taken any action.

In one centre (exposed by RTE), which had been inspected just one month before the documentary; the inspector noted under Regulation 5; that “the environment throughout the service is homely and child centred”. This observation raises concerns about inspectorate capacity to effectively inspect ECCE settings.

Commenting upon the anomalies highlighted by RTE, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs acknowledged that the inspection system “has not been a national system [and] much work has been done...to develop a new national inspection system, including standardising operating procedures” (Oireachtas, 2013).

On introducing new protocols on regulatory compliance and enforcement, there is a need for greater clarity and consistency of approach as to how inspection reports record serious non-compliance and what happens as result (Oireachtas, 2013).

Hence, a new and different approach to enforcement, prosecution, closure, and suspension or termination of State funding will be introduced. On 12th August, 2013, the government approved draft legislation to increase inspectorate powers to close or impose higher fines on ECCE providers.

A new registration system will be introduced in January, 2014. Currently, any person intending to open a service is required to notify the HSE at least 28 days in advance. The proposed registration system will require persons wishing to open a service “to register with the HSE and be deemed compliant and suitable for purpose before they will be permitted to operate” (Oireachtas, 2013). Registration will be extended to existing providers as they renew contracts under the various government schemes. In line with the new registration and improved inspection system, the new national pre-school standards which will replace all current guidelines will be implemented and inspected.

In relation to the training requirements associated with the FPSY, playgroup leaders working directly with children will be required to hold a Level 6 rather than a Level 5 qualification from September, 2014. Moreover, on 24th September 2013, the government approved a number of legislative proposals that give the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs the power to set qualification levels for the sector. From September 2014 therefore, staff in new ECCE services will be required to have a Level 5 qualification in ECCE, and team leaders will be required to have a Level 6 qualification. These revised criteria will also apply to staff and team leaders in existing ECCE services from September, 2015. The Minister notes that:

Training is a big issue for the sector and it needs to be supported in terms of gaining those qualifications and examining a mentoring system that has proved very successful in other jurisdictions (Oireachtas, 2013).

The government in its Budget for 2014 has committed €1.5million to training support “to assist staff already working in the sector to meet the new qualification requirements being introduced from September 2015” (www.dcyia.ie). Given that 4,782 ECCE services are currently notified to the HSE, this €1.5million commitment to training support equates to €318 per setting in 2014.

A further €2.5million has been set aside for a mentoring service to which ECCE graduates will be recruited to work directly with services to implement the *Síolta* and *Aistear* Frameworks ([www. Dcya.ie](http://www.Dcya.ie)). Other than the recruitment of ECCE graduates, the details of this mentoring scheme have not been finalised, the indications are that 40 to 50 coordinators will be recruited. In the event that the maximum number, i.e., 50 coordinators are recruited, each one would effectively be responsible for 156 ECCE services.

Conclusion

While the proposed quality pre-school agenda appears promising, there are a number of concerns and anomalies. In the first instance, six of the eight actions are directly related to the pre-school inspection system. Currently, pre-school inspections are undertaken “predominantly by public health nurses acting as early years inspectors and in collaboration with environmental health officers” (Jeyes, 2013).

In addition to the €4million committed to training and mentoring, the government has ring-fenced €1.1million to recruit “additional staff...to address gaps which currently exist in the inspection system” (www.dcya.ie). Implicit within the Budget announcement is that the additional staff will also be PHNs. Notwithstanding repeated calls within the ECCE sector that inspectors should hold an early years education qualification; early years research experience or ideally, hands-on experience working in the field, there is no such requirement for inspectors. The option which the sector is calling for has been ignored, i.e., to set up an inspectorate that is staffed by early childhood experts.

Equally disconcerting are the increased inspectorate powers in the areas of enforcement, prosecution and closure of settings. The inspectorate already had these powers but did not use them. Of concern also, is the government’s failure to require the current inspectorate to engage in a programme of up-skilling so that it is better equipped to conduct and make balanced judgements in relation to process quality within settings (e.g., relationships between practitioners and children and curriculum development).

The proposal to introduce a minimum qualification requirement for all ECCE staff is indeed welcome as is the increase in qualifications for those delivering the FPSY from a basic Level 5 to a Level 6 qualification. As previously indicated, €1.5million has been allocated to training support in 2014. While this investment is a step in the right direction, it is difficult to see how the stated objective “to assist staff already working in the sector to meet the new qualification requirements being introduced from September, 2015” will be realised in a context where the amount allocated reflects an investment of €318 per setting in 2014.

More broadly, CoORe (2011) recommends that early childhood professionals should be trained at Bachelor level and that at least 60% of the workforce

should be trained to this level. Likewise, the DES (2010) highlights the need for career paths and progression within the sector. This too has been largely ignored in the proposed action plan. As indicated, €2.5million has been committed to establishing a mentoring service in 2014 to support the implementation of *Aistear* and *Síolta*. The recruitment of ECCE graduates to this service is a positive development that will afford recognition for the value of graduate level training. Such recognition has heretofore been markedly absent (Moloney & Pope, 2013). The recruitment of graduates is also a step towards establishing a career path for graduates.

Currently, there are twenty-five *Síolta* QAP coordinators nationally. The report from Goodbody Economic Consultants (2011) leaves little doubt that mentoring is a labour intensive and time consuming task. Careful consideration must be given to how the proposed mentoring service will operate to ensure maximum benefits for children attending ECCE settings. This cannot be achieved in circumstances where the work load for individual mentors is too arduous and limits the amount of support provided to settings. Moreover, it is vital that the pre-school inspectorate and the mentoring service complement each other in supporting and enhancing ECCE quality. Failure to ensure these complementary roles may result in adversarial relationships between practitioners/mentor/inspectors. It is critical that there is a shared understanding among each of these stakeholders with regards to how the *Síolta* and *Aistear* frameworks can be realised in everyday practice within settings.

In the longer term, as a part of a national vision for ECCE, it behoves the government to make provision for the recruitment of ECCE graduates to work directly with children in ECCE settings. As a long term measure, this would be more cost effective than a single mentoring service. Differing qualification levels within the sector, i.e., level 5, level 6 and level 7 or 8 (ECEC graduates) would support the natural emergence of a mentoring system for the sector over time with more highly qualified practitioners working with those with more experience but lower qualifications and vice versa.

However, it should not be assumed that qualifications alone result in quality practice. Take for example, Sweden which topped the UNICEF (2008) league table by meeting all ten quality benchmarks, where the '*Local*' an English Language digital news publisher, described how in September, 2012 a recently qualified pre-school teacher taped children's mouths shut because they were being too loud (news@thelocal.se). The mothers of two boys whose mouths were taped called it a 'violation and physical assault [and] completely unthinkable' (news@thelocal.se). Given that 98% of staff in Swedish ECEC settings are trained, these abuses not only call into the question the effectiveness of training but also the suitability of those working with young children. Likewise in Ireland, where, although the staff hold much lower levels of training, we must ask whether the sector is attracting the wrong people to work with young children?

The *Breach of Trust* documentary highlighted a culture of complicity within settings where it was evident that all staff were aware of and did nothing about the abuse of young children that they witnessed on a daily basis. Not only did staff not understand children's developmental needs, they had absolutely no nurturing or relational skills and were totally lacking in empathy for the children in their care. Yet parents were duped into thinking that they were taking good care of their child/ren, consequently, the intolerable breach of trust.

The Minister's plan is to 'fix' the sector on the cheap. Although an investment of €5.1 million has been committed towards training support, mentoring and strengthening the inspectorate in 2014, €4.5 million will come directly from the exchequer, while the remaining €600, 000 will be payable by service providers. There is no serious government investment in the sector. For instance, it is widely acknowledged that ECCE in Ireland is a minimum wage sector (Barry and Sherlock 2008; ECI 2011; Moloney 2010; Moloney & Pope, 2013). Therefore, even though new training requirements are proposed, government investment is abysmal. There is no support for higher salaries within the sector appropriate to increased qualification levels and responsibilities. Nor is there any incentive for ECCE providers to employ ECCE graduates. Hence, the international objective within CoRe that at least 60% of those working with children in ECCE should have relevant 3rd level qualifications cannot be achieved.

It seems that the approach to quality in the future lies in punitive measures to be enforced by the pre-school inspectorate. In other words, what is proposed is a top-down, heavy handed approach. Systemic reform commencing with the up-skilling of the inspectorate, and or, expansion of the inspection teams is required. Careful consideration must be given to how participants are selected for and monitored while undertaking training programmes. The ECCE environment is highly pressured and demanding; not everybody is suited to work with young children. Training and education providers must play a role in identifying students who are simply not suited to such work.

Bad practice must not be condoned, but there should be a balance between sanctions and support. The proposed action plan is a high stakes strategy. In the absence of a significant investment in quality, i.e., training, capacity building; development of career paths and salary scales commensurate with other teachers in early childhood (e.g., primary schools), there is every risk that the government will again overlook the systemic issues that undermine quality and, will succeed only in 'papering over the cracks'. However, the key question is whether the proposed action plan is sufficient to bring the sector back from the abyss that has been created by continual government inaction.

Endnotes

¹ This ministry holds responsibility for harmonising policy issues that affect children in areas such as early childhood care and education, youth justice, child welfare and protection and young children's participation.

² Pobal is an intermediary body established by the Irish Government and the EU in 1992. It manages programmes and funding on behalf of the government.

³ *Síolta*, the Irish word for seed, represents the metaphor of the kindergarten as a place of development and learning and the role of the teacher as a skilled gardener who supports the child to reach his/her potential (CECDE, 2006).

⁴ Aistear is the Irish word for journey.

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