

Progression or regression. Is the pre-school quality agenda perpetuating a care-education divide in the Early Childhood Education and Care sector in Ireland?

Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) services tend to embody two differing traditions: care and education which manifest as ‘split systems’ where both the care and education sectors are divided and governed, in terms of policy making and governance by different ministries (Kaga, Bennett and Moss, 2010). Ireland has long had a ‘split system’ of care and education where responsibility for early education for four and five year olds rests with the Department of Education and Skills (DES), while the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) holds responsibility for children from birth to school going age. In spite of repeated calls to develop a coordinated and integrated policy approach under a lead Ministry (Hayes and Bradly, 2006) to address the care and education of children from birth to six years more holistically and coherently (OECD, 2006); policy in Ireland repeatedly perpetuates a structural and conceptual distinction between education and care. Hence, early childhood services remain “fractured across the welfare (childcare) and educational (early education) domains” (Hayes, 2008, p.33) with childcare predominantly positioned as a private good to be dealt with, and paid for by the family, and education positioned as a public good provided for free by the State (Adshead and Neylon, 2008). Consequently, both sectors differ in relation to governance, investment, staff qualifications and remuneration, access criteria, and regulation.

Notwithstanding attempts to bridge the divide between the sectors, and to enhance the quality of ECEC provision through initiatives such as *Síolta*: the National Quality Framework (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), 2006) and *Aistear*: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2006), there is a “considerable gap between policy and practice that seriously undermines children’s experiences in early childhood settings” (Moloney, 2011 p. 172). Indeed the gap between policy and practice, and the negative impact upon children’s experiences was brought to the fore in 2013 when poor practices in a number of ECEC services were publicly exposed on national television. While unsettling and shocking, for many, this exposé was not surprising as the state repeatedly invests far below the

international benchmark of 1% of GDP in ECEC. Therefore while the average across OECD countries is 0.8%, public investment in Ireland's ECEC services is 0.2% of GDP (Start Strong, 2015).

Following the 2013 exposé, the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Frances Fitzgerald, T.D. launched a pre-school quality agenda comprising of eight key areas of action to address the issues within the sector as a matter of urgency. Among the areas identified was the need for increased qualification requirements for educators working within the Free Pre-school Year Scheme (ECCE scheme) introduced in 2010, a mandatory training requirement for all other staff, and a strengthening of the national inspection system.

Addressing the qualifications issue

The purpose of the ECCE scheme is to provide access to a free pre-school year of appropriate programme-based activities to children in the year before they start primary school.

Participating settings are required to adhere to the principles of *Síolta* and *Aistear*. The State pays a capitation fee to participating settings, and in return, they provide a pre-school service free of charge for fifteen hours per week, over 38 weeks (September to June) (www.dcyia.ie). Currently, 97% of eligible children are availing of the scheme (DCYA, 2012).

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). 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” (Ibid. p. 12). Critically, the ECCE scheme was the first funding programme in Ireland to introduce staff qualification levels.

All pre-school leaders delivering the scheme must hold a nationally accredited Major Award in Childcare/Early Childhood Education at Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) or equivalent. In addition, a higher capitation rate is paid to settings employing pre-school leaders qualified to Level 7 or 8.

Following the launch of the pre-school quality agenda, Frances Fitzgerald, T.D. quickly addressed the issue of qualifications more generally, noting that “training is a big issue for the sector and it needs to be supported in terms of gaining those qualifications...” (Oireachtas,

2013). A mandatory minimum qualification of Level 5 on the NFQ for all staff working with children in early childhood settings has now been introduced with effect from September, 2016, and the qualification level for pre-school leaders delivering the ECCE scheme has been increased from Level 5 to Level 6 (www.dcy.gov.ie). Regardless of EU recognition of the importance of the pre-school period in a child's learning trajectory, and the EU (2011) recommendation that at least 60% of staff should be qualified to Bachelor level, there is no indication to date that the government intends to introduce any benchmark in this regard.

It is interesting to note that while *Síolta* and *Aistear*, which are perceived as essential “pillars of quality” (DCYA/DES, 2011 p. 18), uphold the inseparable nature of care and education from birth to six years, the present approach to qualification requirements further perpetuates a two-tiered ECEC system. Consequently, educators in the ECCE scheme are ostensibly educating children, and are therefore required to hold a Level 6 qualification, while those working with children from birth to three years require Level 5 and could be viewed as simply caring for children for which a minimum basic qualification is considered sufficient.

Strengthening the inspectorate

Since pre-school inspections began in 1996, they have been undertaken “predominantly by public health nurses acting as early years” (Jeyes, 2013). According to Start Strong (2013) the qualifications and role of the inspectorate “is too narrow with the primary focus on health and welfare, rather than more broadly” (p. 3), and as a result, there is a reality disconnect between those working in the sector and those inspecting ECCE settings (Moloney, 2014).

On many levels therefore, the imminent involvement of the DES in the inspection of settings participating in the ECCE scheme is a positive and progressive development. It validates the work of early childhood educators by adopting a strengths- based approach to inspection. Accordingly, the main focus “will be on the quality of the dynamic processes that facilitate children's learning in the early years setting... [and the] ongoing development of quality through co-professional dialogue between practitioners in early years settings and DES Early Years inspectors” (DES, 2015a). This approach represents a new departure for the ECEC sector where early childhood educators and inspectors are seen as co-professionals, and where the inspectorate is interested in what these educators are doing well, in encouraging self-evaluative review processes, and supporting them to enhance quality provision, rather than the current system which instils a culture of compliance through fear (Moloney, 2014).

Moreover, the DES is recruiting a number of early years inspectors who must hold an honours primary degree (Level 8, NQF) in Early Childhood Education and Care plus at least 5 years' experience within early years settings (0-6 years). This recruitment process establishes a career pathway for early childhood graduates while also ensuring that those with the appropriate knowledge and skills are included in the early years inspection team. Heretofore graduates from BA. ECCE programmes have struggled for recognition of their degree (Moloney and Pope, 2013) and many have left the sector to take up employment opportunities elsewhere (Madden, 2012; Moloney and Pope, 2013; Moloney, 2014).

Reinforcing the care-education divide

Although the proposed DES education focussed inspections are primarily a positive development, they none-the-less reinforce the care-education divide discussed earlier. The decision to focus solely upon settings participating in the ECCE scheme, as well as the increased qualification requirements for pre-school leaders working in the scheme, implies that the free pre-school year is the only aspect of provision that is educational. Alongside this, and further sustaining the care-education divide, there is now a parallel system of inspection where TUSLA: the Child and Family Agency inspects all settings in relation to health and safety, while the DES inspects the quality of educational provision in settings participating in the ECCE scheme.

As mentioned, Ireland has a split system of education and care. The present emphasis upon the ECCE scheme in terms of funding, qualification requirements and inspection, not only sustains the distinction between education and care, it also leads to an emerging divide between children aged from birth to three years, and children aged from three to six years. Worryingly, children under three years are increasingly disadvantaged in terms of investment, qualified staff, and a holistic approach to their early care and education. Drawing upon international experience Kaga et al. (2010) hold that the best provision for children under three years is achieved when policy making is 'unitary' with a single set of rules, supports and funding arrangements.

Conclusion

Progress has been made in relation to the introduction of the ECCE scheme, raising the qualification requirements for those working in the scheme, and introducing education focused inspections for settings participating in the scheme. These developments however

show considerable regression with regards to developing an integrated model of education and care in terms of government administration, funding and staff training. This is especially the case in relation to children under three years old, where lower qualification levels are required, settings remain outside of the remit of the DES education focussed inspections, and where there is no comprehensive national funding policy. Additionally, although progress has been made in incentivising services participating in the ECCE scheme to employ graduates at level 7 or above, there is no reward for obtaining a degree in early childhood education and care, and there is no incentive for existing educators in the field to upskill to higher level qualifications.

These issues must be addressed at a policy and a planning level. In the long term the present fragmented governance and funding structure is unsustainable, and unacceptable especially with regards to children under three years. To advance the oversight and regulation of the ECEC sector in Ireland, and to ensure equity for all children, it is paramount that the DES works collaboratively with the DCYA to agree where ultimate responsibility lies for the sector, and to develop and implement a coherent single, unified approach to training, inspection and funding for all settings outside of the primary school system.

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