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Is it time to establish an Early Years Council? A possible solution to inordinate fragmentation.

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Introduction

In many ways, the Early Childhood Education and Care sector in Ireland, has come a long way in the last decade. Not only do we now have two national practice frameworks: *Siolta* (2006) and *Aistear* (2009), there is also a universal *Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme* since 2010, the *Access and Inclusion Model* (2015), a minimum qualification requirement (2016), and Education Focussed inspections of settings participating in the ECCE scheme, also in 2016. Overall, the professionalisation of the ECEC sector seems to be on an upward trajectory. Or is it?

In spite of the many initiatives mentioned here, it is widely acknowledged that the sector in Ireland is not perceived as a profession at either a macro (government, society, other pedagogical professions) or micro (local, setting) level. This overall lack of recognition can be traced to the traditional care and education divide, where mothers in the home cared for children, while education was seen to begin with formal schooling. However, Ireland's entry to the EU, economic prosperity, and women, especially mothers, entering the workforce from the mid-1980s onwards, dramatically challenged the State's position with regards to care and educational provision for children outside the home, prior to school entry. It can be argued that the State rose to this challenge, and invested heavily in the development of a childcare infrastructure, which at the time (2000-2010 approx.) was essential to enabling mothers, in particular, to return to, and remain in employment. Ireland can be justifiably proud of the physical infrastructure that has been established throughout the country. But quality ECEC is not just concerned with bricks and mortar, equal consideration must be given to those who work with young children in settings. So what of the ECEC educators, how has the ECEC profession been supported and developed over the years? It goes without saying, that while a parallel investment in staff training and development was required, little attention was in fact, paid to this.

It is remarkable that in spite of widespread recognition that the early years from birth to six are a critical period in a young child's development, and that educator qualifications are one of the critical determinants of quality in early years settings, up until January 2017, there was no

mandatory training or qualification requirement for those working with children aged from birth to six years. Regrettably, the notion that anyone can mind a child, or that attendance at a once-off workshop, or series of workshops was all that was required, prevailed. Although the current Level 5 mandatory training requirement is a welcome development, it falls far short of the training associated with being a professional, i.e., advanced knowledge and rigorous training over a lengthy period of time. Crucially, professionals hold a body of knowledge, skills and expertise that is generally unknown to the lay public. It also enjoys the trust of the public that this knowledge will be exercised in a selfless and altruistic manner for the betterment of society as a whole.

Rationale for Establishing an Early Years Council

Interestingly, one of the hallmarks of a profession is having a Professional Association which acts to protect the status and position of its members. Members tend to share a singularly focused and shared interest, a common bond which sets aspirations for the occupation. However, does this exist within the ECEC workforce – it includes employers and owners of small and large settings, and community settings, as well as managers and employees with various levels of Early Years qualifications. Their interests are multi-faceted and do not always coincide. Contrast this position with the State-regulated teaching profession which is overseen by the Teaching Council. It is the Teaching Council that determines the entry criteria and licence to practice. There is no corresponding overarching body with decision making power to determine the suitability of training, and fitness to practice of ECEC educators in Ireland. When it comes to who can work with young children in ECEC settings, it seems that almost anybody can. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) maintain, and regularly update a recognised list of Early Year Qualifications. In 2017, this list indicates that in excess of 500 qualifications from across thirty-seven countries are acceptable for working in the ECEC sector in Ireland. Is there another sector where this is the case? Of course not. This is fraught with challenges relating to the following:

- (a) Absence of assessment criteria to determine the suitability of these 500+ qualifications in the Irish context. This is especially important when we consider the focus upon implementing the *Síolta* and *Aistear* practice frameworks. How then, can qualifications from outside Ireland take account of these critical initiatives?
- (b) Absence of Fitness to Practice criteria which signifies the validity and the adequacy of the training. Indeed, fitness to practice is considered the ‘mark of a professional’ (Uhlmann

Schuette and Yashar, 2010, p. 468). It ensures a standard of practice, education and qualification

- (c) Lack of criteria relating to the hours of practice required prior to entry to the field. A recent study undertaken by PLÉ Ireland (2016/17 forthcoming), and based upon fourteen Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) offering full-time degree programme in Early Childhood Education and Care, found that practice in the field during the training period ranged from 540 hours to 1,000 hours. Findings from this study overall, signify the need to establish a set of criteria for practicum across the HEIs in Ireland.

Sectoral Fragmentation

The sector is characterised by inordinate fragmentation at multiple levels including qualifications as outlined, but also in relation to governance, inspection, and resourcing. It is governed by both the DCYA and the Department of Education and Skills (DES). According to Moloney (2016) this dual governance approach perpetuates a traditional polarity of care and education within the sector, where those providing education and care for children under three years of age, have been denigrated as ‘care’ resulting in a ‘dumbing down’ of their role vis a vis, educational qualifications, and lack of investment into this particular aspect of the early years. She also argues that educators working with older children in the ECCE scheme (aged 3 plus) have had their employability and skills status somewhat elevated through the payment of higher capitation to ECEC providers, based on their Level 7 or higher qualifications. Adding to the fragmentation is the issue of inspection. Care and education quite rightly reside together within the core values of all educators in Ireland. Whereas, the DES called for a unitary inspection system as far back as 1999, the opposite has happened. Today, there are two disparate inspection systems which further perpetuates the false perception of a care education divide. Settings participating in the ECCE scheme are subject to DES Education Focussed Inspections, while TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency continue to inspect services for younger children. Many working in the sector claim that it is in crisis. Services report that it is increasingly difficult to recruit and retain educators in a context where the minimum wage prevails. The simple fact is, that the sector is not accorded appropriate recognition or status, and educators, many of whom are qualified to honours degree level are not appropriately remunerated for their contribution to the most formative years in a child’s life. The workforce is dispirited and disenfranchised.

An Early Years Council as a Solution to Fragmentation

Could the establishment of an Early Years Council (EYC) address some of the fragmentation within the sector? Is the time right for the establishment of such a council? What contribution might an EYC make in terms of addressing some of the issues arising from policy delivery fragmentation? At the outset, it is important to stress, that an Early Years Council must be an autonomous single agency with responsibility for accreditation of education and training providers, developing key standards for education and training programmes, workforce registration and fitness to practice. Its core functions would be to:

- (a) **Promote the standing of the Early Years Professional.** This would include regulation to support minimum qualifications, promotion of a Code of Professional Responsibility and promotion of best practice in education and care, innovative practice and inspirational leadership in the Sector;
- (b) **Establish and maintain criteria for Early Years Professional registration.** This includes maintaining and improving standards of learning and care, through knowledge, skills and competence, accrediting programmes in education and care to be delivered by competent early years teachers and the development of agreed models of professional practice placement as part of pre-service training;
- (c) **Establish and maintain a Code of Professional Practice and Responsibility for Early Years Teachers,** through establishing high standards of behaviour and professionalism, embedding the code within other public policies with education and care and collaborating with other Professional Bodies to ensure shared values and codes
 - a) **Establish and maintain a national register of Early Years Professionals** including development of transparent criteria for registration, establish and maintain ‘fitness to practice’ criteria, in addition to procedures for removal from public register

The responsibilities outlined underscore the long over-due development of the ECEC profession, and could overtime, reduce fragmentation, redress the issue relating to 500+ recognised qualifications as an entry point to the field, promote a clearer identification of the workforce, and establish a more focussed pathway towards enabling members of the profession to remain up to date with current and new information, practices and knowledge in order to maintain professionalism.

Conclusion

Naturally, the suggestion to establish an EYC will be met with some initial stakeholder resistance. People may see it as another layer of bureaucracy on top of a highly regulated sector. On closer examination however, the purpose is to reduce bureaucracy. Remember, what is

proposed is an independent, autonomous, statutory body with overarching responsibility for the sector into the future. Examples of Councils can be found in places like Australia and New Zealand where they have been integrated with broader educational councils. What is proposed here is an Early Years specific council. This is an innovative approach that could be unique to Ireland. This is an opportunity, for Ireland to lead the way, rather than follow what others are doing. It requires vision, commitment and daring. Are we ready for the challenge? Do we want to promote and support the development of an ECEC profession in Ireland? Do we believe that every child from birth to 6 years in Ireland has the right to access education and care which is delivered by a suitably qualified professional? If the answer to these questions is yes, then it is time to consider the way forward, time to consider new and innovative ways of achieving these goals. Time to consider the establishment of an Early Years Council.

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