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**‘An undervalued, under-appreciated profession,  
long hours, hard work, poor pay’.**  
**A study of the professional identity of BA ECCE graduates**

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*Drawing upon a Bachelor of Arts (BA) ECCE graduate occupational profile survey, this paper explores the experiences of graduates with particular reference to the relationship between graduate qualifications and professional identity within the early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector. While findings are positive in terms of the numbers of graduates who successfully gained employment, there is an underlying belief that ECCE is an undervalued profession with low wages. Findings also indicate that graduates tend to diminish their professional role and identity by stating that they have ‘ended up working in a crèche’. Such sentiments are clearly associated with a sectoral perception that graduates are overqualified to work in the ECCE sector.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Traditionally, professions and professional identities have been associated with academic qualifications, which confer ‘status and provide for a common means of identifying membership of a community of practice’ (Miller and Cable, 2010: 150; Moloney, 2010 and 2011a). However, for the Irish early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector, this is as yet an emerging concept (Moloney, 2011a).

Nationally and internationally, the construct of professional identity in ECCE is highly contested (Woodrow, 2007). Historically, ECCE was associated with altruism: ‘women who love and care for children’ (Carter and Doyle, 2006: 373). In Ireland, this stance is perpetuated by the polarity of the care and education sectors. Neuroscience (see, for example, Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007; Perry, 2002) claims that at birth the brain comprises multiple circuits that lay the blueprint for the development of vision, language, motor, social and emotional development, for



instance. However, while the newborn's mind is primed for learning, it needs to receive health-promoting care and appropriately stimulating experiences that are critical to neurological development (Perry, 2002).

Schweinhart (2004), for example, provides irrefutable evidence of the link between quality ECCE and positive developmental outcomes for young children. Despite such profound findings, ECCE is characterised by a mix of trained, semi-trained and unqualified practitioners (Bennett and Neuman, 2004; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001 and 2006). In contrast, primary school teachers are required to hold a Bachelor of Education degree.

While providing training for ECCE personnel, Rike et al. (2008) found that many childcare providers do not appear to be proud of their profession and may even be 'ashamed that they only work with young children': when asked what they did for a living, childcare providers answered 'I'm only a pre-school teacher' or 'I just work in a daycare centre' (2008: 22). In common with Moloney (2011a), these authors conclude that this negativity has been shaped by a perception that society does not really appreciate what ECCE practitioners do. Rike et al. (2008) suggest that in answer to the question 'What do you do?', ECCE personnel must answer, 'We grow brains.' Indeed, neuroscience supports a claim that those working within the ECCE field do 'grow brains'.

In the ECCE field, professional identity is contentious and problematic. Irrespective of a proliferation of policy developments in Ireland directed at improving the quality of provision and enhancing the professionalism of the sector, identity formation is compromised by multiple competing discourses (Moloney, 2010, 2011a and 2011b). Such discourses include a lack of understanding about the value of ECCE and its impact upon the developmental trajectory of the young child; the absence of a mandatory training requirement; and a continuing belief that 'anyone can mind a young child'.

Policy initiatives, such as the national quality framework, *Síolta* (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006); the early childhood curriculum framework, *Aistear* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009); the introduction of a universal free pre-school year; and ongoing work on the development of a workforce development plan, mean that the ECCE sector is undergoing unprecedented change. ECCE discourse, therefore, is increasingly concerned with professionalism and the need for pre-service academic qualifications.

Arguably, the extent to which there is a societal belief in neurological science determines how ECCE is understood, valued and perceived as a profession. In Ireland, policy directives and initiatives, including the practice frameworks *Aistear* and *Síolta*, uphold a belief that early childhood 'marks the beginning of children's lifelong learning journeys' (NCCA, 2009: 6). The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2009) identifies the knowledge, dispositions, skills and abilities required to implement *Aistear*. These initiatives, together with the *Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006*, demand a considerable level of critical engagement and decision-making capacity from practitioners, and call for appropriate academic qualifications and experience (Moloney, 2011b). Paradoxically, as the only statutory policy governing ECCE provision, the childcare regulations simply require that 'a sufficient number of suitable and competent adults are working directly with the children in the pre-school setting at all times' (Department of Health and Children, 2006: 37).

The construct of professional identity has been further blurred recently with the publication of the national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy among children



and young people (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2011). Developed on foot of growing concerns about children's literacy and numeracy skills, this strategy, as with *Síolta* and *Aistear*, acknowledges early childhood as a 'time of significant opportunity for learning' (DES, 2011: 10). While it acknowledges the absence of a degree-level training requirement for ECCE practitioners, the strategy simply commits to encouraging and supporting the upskilling of those working within the ECCE sector. Although it does mention an action to 'increase the minimum qualification requirements', the indicative target date is vague and non-specific: 'incremental over period of strategy' (DES, 2011: 29). Of concern also is the fact that the strategy does not indicate what the minimum qualification requirement will be. This is in stark contrast to the language used throughout the same document in relation to initial teacher education, which suggests setting higher standards for entry to Bachelor of Education courses and 'recruiting the best students' (DES, 2011: 30). In fact, the tables of actions relating to the primary school sector span four entire pages (34–7).

The underlying message is clear: teaching is a profession that depends on graduate-level pre-service training, whereas those working within ECCE do not require academic qualifications. This blasé approach to ECCE in Ireland is contrary to the situation that pertains in other countries. For example, all Danish pedagogues undertake three and a half years of training and graduate with a bachelor's degree (Jensen et al., 2010) and in New Zealand the benchmark qualification is a diploma of teaching or a bachelor's degree (early childhood education), both of which require three years of full-time study.

Further undermining the professional identity of the sector in Ireland are the abysmal remuneration levels. Early Childhood Ireland (2011) found that the 'average salary of a staff member in a service that is an Early Childhood Ireland member is €14,180'. On the other hand, the average annual salary for pedagogues in Denmark is Dkr282,000 (€37,884), or Dkr372,000 (€49,980) for managers ([www.bupl.dk](http://www.bupl.dk)). In New Zealand, kindergarten teachers have pay parity with primary school teachers (ECE Taskforce NZ, 2010); in the most recent kindergarten teachers' collective agreement, a teacher with a bachelor's degree would earn NZ\$44,348 (€24,974) in his or her first year of practice (Ministry of Education, 2009).

Drawing upon a BA ECCE graduate occupational profile survey, this paper explores the experiences of graduates, with particular reference to the relationship between graduate qualifications and professional identity within the ECCE sector.

## THE STUDY

In autumn 2010 a graduate occupational profile survey was distributed to all graduates (N=209) of the BA ECCE programme in Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick between 2007 and 2010. The data collection process was facilitated by the Quality Office in Mary Immaculate College in order to minimise potential bias, thus respondents were not replying directly to the ECCE lecturing team.

Eighty completed questionnaires were returned, giving an overall response rate of 38.3 per cent. The response rate was highest for the 2007 cohort (44 per cent) and lowest for the 2009 cohort (28.8 per cent). Of the eighteen questions asked, fourteen were concerned with statistical data – primarily on the number of graduates employed in the ECCE sector and remuneration levels. Questions 15 and 16 were open ended and



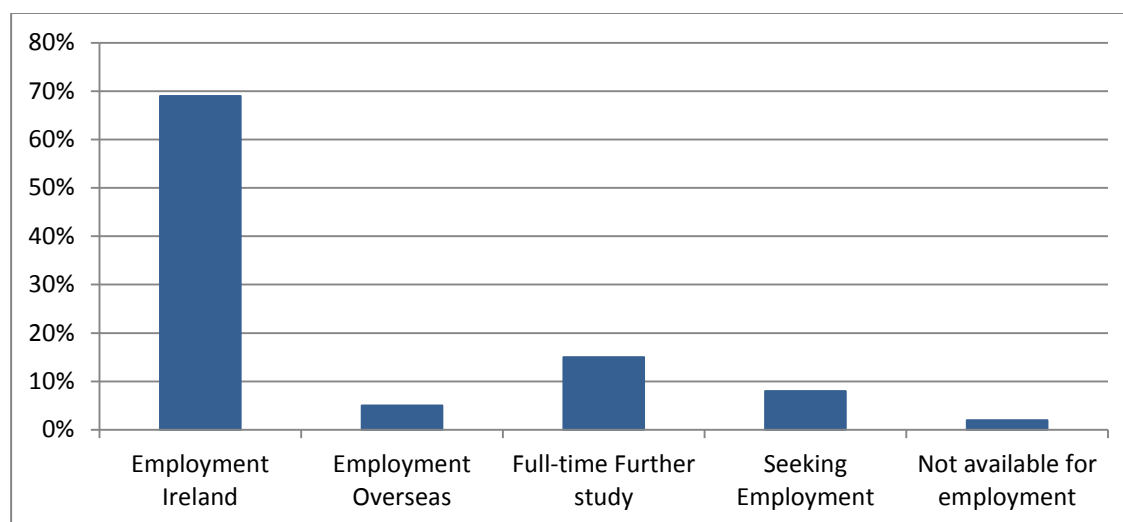
directed towards attitudinal data concerning graduate perceptions of working in the ECCE sector and the value of a BA ECCE; these qualitative questions were analysed using content discourse analysis.

## FINDINGS

In terms of current employment status (see Figure 1), the majority of respondents (74 per cent; N=62) had gained employment either in Ireland (69 per cent; N=58) or overseas in Scotland, Australia, Canada or New Zealand (4 per cent; N=5). Only 8 per cent (N=7) of respondents were seeking employment.

Of those in employment, 92 per cent (N=57) were predominantly working directly with children aged from birth to six years within the ECCE sector. Respondents were employed in a variety of settings including national voluntary childcare organisations, childcare committees, other state agencies and as special needs assistants (predominantly working with children with autism) in primary schools or special needs settings.

**Figure 1:** Current employment status



In terms of further education, 22 per cent (N=18) of graduates had undertaken postgraduate studies in a range of areas such as: postgraduate diplomas in education or youth and community work, or master's degrees in applied behavioural analysis, education or applied social research. A further 24 per cent (N=19) reported engaging in a variety of courses related to their work in the ECCE field.

Although the majority of graduates were employed within the ECCE sector, the predominant discourse to emerge from the qualitative data findings was one of disappointment and frustration. This discourse was embedded within a multiplicity of conflicting challenges and issues within the sector, all of which impact upon professional identity: salaries, recognition, confidence and self-esteem. There was an overwhelming perception that 'ECCE is an undervalued, under-appreciated profession' (2009 graduate). This discourse of disappointment and frustration was consistent across each graduate cohort.





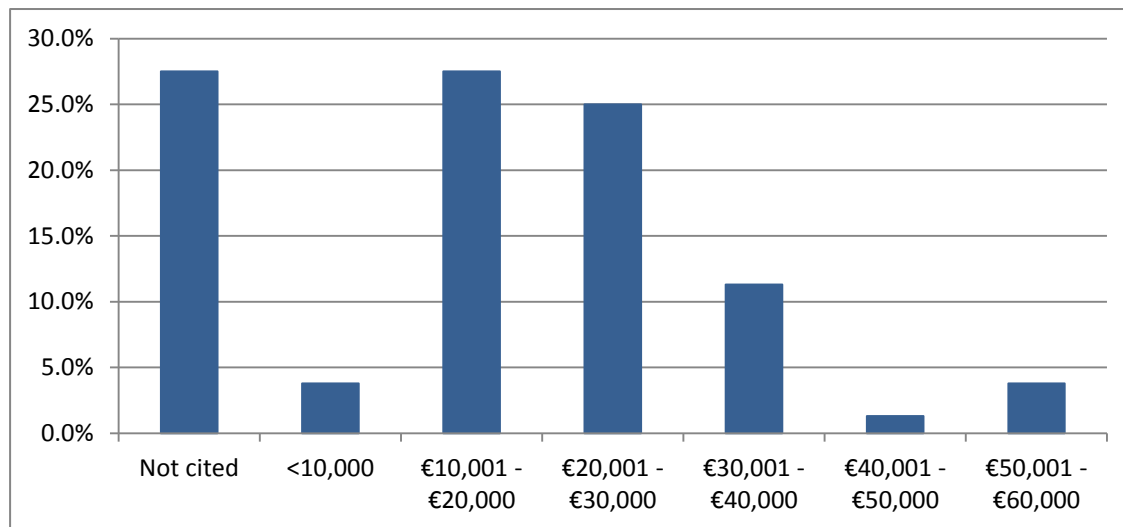
## Salaries

From the quantitative analysis, it is evident that, though gainfully employed, the graduates' salaries tended to be low: just over 16 per cent (N=13) of respondents reported salaries upwards of €30,000 (see Figure 2). Of the 56 per cent (N=45) of respondents earning below €30,000, 76 per cent (N=34) reported working in excess of thirty hours per week. Of the 27 per cent (N=22) of respondents who did not complete this question, nine were in further full-time study and six were seeking employment.

As expected, there was a trend for the 2007 graduate cohort to report marginally higher salaries commensurate with further experience and/or further qualifications.

Based on the qualitative data, there was an overwhelming consensus that 'pay is very low' and that 'the four years of hard work is not reflected in the rate of pay'. These 2007 sentiments were reiterated by 2008 respondents: 'Even though I have a degree in ECCE, I didn't get paid according to my qualification. This is very disappointing' and 'I am so disheartened that people who had very little qualifications were getting very near the same pay as me'. Similarly, 2009 graduates wrote that 'there are many opportunities for part-time or low-paid work in the ECCE sector' and the 'salary is the same whether you've done Level 8 or nothing at all'.

**Figure 2:** Present annual salary level



The issue of remuneration is having a detrimental impact upon graduate perceptions of working within the sector and is undermining their confidence and self-esteem in relation to the value of their work. Findings suggest that graduates diminish their professional identity, reducing their role to that of simply 'settling' for a position: 'My chances of employment were greatly limited to just working in childcare settings' (2007 graduate). A 2008 graduate explained how they 'ended up in a crèche'. Indicative of the anomaly that exists in Ireland in relation to the need for an academic qualification, a 2009 graduate claimed that 'most graduates end up settling for jobs in crèches which do not require a degree'.

We contextualise these findings within the context of the discourse of 'recognition' for ECCE as a profession.



### **ECCE – an undervalued profession**

As with the issue of salaries, respondents agreed that there was a lack of recognition for ECCE as a profession. There was a perception that this lack of recognition emanated from the macro level, i.e. the government and specifically the DES. Again, the consistency in responses across graduate cohorts was apparent:

Our government doesn't even value its importance ... our profession is seen as more childcare providers than educators in the most important time of a child's life. Sometimes I feel like and am treated as a glorified babysitter!

(2007 graduate)

[H]opefully, the government will soon realise how important ECCE is and give a pay rise.

(2008 graduate)

Graduates juxtaposed their position with that of teachers, expressing frustration with the lack of DES recognition for their qualification and a consequent perception that their work was less valuable than that of a primary school teacher.

I would really love if this course was recognised by the DES. It is very frustrating that I am more qualified than any primary school teacher to do the job [work with young children] ... but the DES doesn't recognise this qualification and want primary school teachers to do the job.

(2007 graduate)

[G]raduates from the ECCE course should receive a teacher number with the Department of Education, to validate the importance of trained early childhood teachers in Ireland ... The Department of Education don't recognise the B.A. ECCE as a sufficient qualification for teaching 3–6 year olds ...

(2008 graduate)

On a broader level, respondents repeatedly articulated a belief that the 'ECCE sector is an undervalued, under-appreciated profession, long hours, hard work, poor pay' (2007 graduate); 'it is an undervalued profession' (2008 graduate).

Reiterating this point and highlighting the anomalies within this field in Ireland, another respondent described attending for an interview for a position as childcare leader in a crèche after graduating:

A girl got the job that had two years' experience working in a crèche but she had no qualifications!! [It was] very disheartening!!

(2009 graduate)

There was evidence that graduates did not intend to remain in the ECCE sector. Of thirty-eight respondents who provided information in relation to further education, eight (20.5 per cent) were undertaking either a postgraduate diploma in primary school teaching or a Bachelor of Education degree to qualify as a primary school teacher. Clearly indicating their dissatisfaction with the ECCE sector, respondents explained:



I have applied for a Postgraduate in Primary School Teaching so I do not intend to work in the ECCE field.

(2010 graduate)

I'm hoping to do postgrad in primary teaching. At least I'll know what I'm qualified to do after that!

(2009 graduate)

This latter response indicates the level of frustration and dissatisfaction felt by graduates about the confusion over the value of their academic qualification within the sector.

Some respondents did report positive experiences in the ECCE sector and/or indicated that perhaps 'things are getting better'. This viewpoint was linked to the recently introduced free pre-school year (ECCE scheme), as a result of which 'settings now are keen to take on graduates ... where they will get a higher capitation for staff with a degree' (2010 graduate). Another respondent felt that the initiative had greatly influenced attitudes towards ECCE graduates within the sector:

I am respected as a professional in the workplace because of my B.A. ... ECCE settings have a very positive attitude towards our degree because of the financial benefits it has for them, because it allows them to qualify for the higher ECCE capitation funding.

(2010 graduate)

One respondent, who clearly recognised the relatively embryonic state of the concept of professional identity in the Irish context, advised fellow graduates to:

[B]e aware that this is the first step in a journey into a relatively young and previously unrecognised sector. We are laying the path for others to follow.

(2010 graduate)

## DISCUSSION

At an initial glance, the research data suggests that the situation is positive as the vast majority of graduates are in employment or are pursuing postgraduate studies. However, a different picture lurks beneath the surface – one of frustration and disappointment concerning the professional identity and status of the ECCE practitioner.

Although *Síolta*, *Aistear* and the childcare regulations create core standards and principles by which a 'community of practice' (Miller and Cable, 2010) can be elucidated, they do little to further the quest for professional identity within ECCE. In the first instance, *Síolta* and *Aistear* have not been enacted by the government; thus their implementation is dependent upon the goodwill of the sector (Moloney, 2011b). Notwithstanding that respondents were trained to degree level and that many were pursuing further training and qualifications in the area, only 16 per cent reported salaries above €30,000 (below the national average industrial wage when the data was collected; Central Statistics Office, 2010). This finding is consistent with that of Early Childhood Ireland (2011), which reported an average salary of €14,180, and in stark contrast to salaries for teachers working in primary education. In this context, it is indeed a big ask of the sector to engage in ongoing professional development.



Despite the positive outlook and experience of some respondents, there was an overwhelming sense of frustration and disappointment at the lack of recognition of the importance of the early years and those who work with our youngest children. The 2006 childcare regulations fall short of what is required of national standards that support the emerging professional identity of the sector. The absence of a mandatory training requirement, coupled with the complex nature of ECCE and an increasing regulatory gaze, sends a mixed message to society, policy-makers, parents and ECCE personnel (Moloney, 2011a). It suggests that, as a society, Ireland has not moved beyond a traditional view of ECCE based on the notion that ‘anyone can mind children’ (Moloney, 2010). This attitude diminishes the critical importance of ECCE and serves to undermine the affective domains of professional identity and practitioners’ self-esteem, self-belief, confidence and job satisfaction (Forde et al., 2006).

Worryingly, these findings also support Rike et al.’s (2008) conclusion that ECCE staff may even be ashamed of their work within the sector. They indicate that graduates do not take pride in their profession; rather, they diminish their professional role and identity, stating that they have ‘ended up working in a crèche’. A significant proportion of graduates have either engaged or plan to engage in postgraduate qualifications to work in the primary school sector. Unlike Denmark and New Zealand, where academic qualifications are a priority within the ECCE sector, graduate sentiments in Ireland are clearly associated with a perception that graduates are ‘overqualified’ to work in the sector in Ireland. They further denigrate the critical importance of the early years on children’s learning trajectory. Moreover, this study supports previous research (Moloney, 2010) that highly qualified graduates are being lost to the ECCE sector in Ireland.

Negativity towards working in the ECCE sector has been shaped by society, where there is a lack of appreciation for the work undertaken (Moloney, 2011a; Rike et al., 2008). There is considerable merit in Rike et al.’s (2008) suggestion that in answer to the question ‘What do you do?’, ECCE teachers must answer, ‘We grow brains.’ Indeed, neuroscience would support the claim that those working within the ECCE field do in fact ‘grow brains’. Neuroscientific evidence leaves no doubt that we can ‘no longer count on an army of young women with limited education to take up low status, poorly paid work in the childcare sector’ (Littledyke, 2008: 45). The ECCE graduates who work with young children should therefore be recognised and valued as professionals who ‘grow brains’.

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# Enhancing the professional identity of ECCE practitioners

CARMEL SMITH

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*The limited literature on the professional identity of those working in the early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector tends to focus on the poor levels of remuneration, lack of recognition and high turnover of staff (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2006). This paper reports on preliminary research findings suggesting that this lack of positive regard may not be confined to frontline practitioners but may also be a feature of how ECCE researchers and their work are viewed in the academy. There appears to be a consistent thread underpinning the spectrum of ECCE practice and research, both in the field and within academic institutions, that considers ECCE as soft, uninteresting and less radical than other areas of childhood research. This begs the question as to whether the current status of ECCE professionals in Ireland not only reflects the lack of value placed on their professional skills but also indicates the low status of the lives and experiences of the young children with whom ECCE professionals work and research. Enhancement of the professional identity of those working in the ECCE sector may have to be part of a necessary shift in how young children are conceptualised and understood.*

## INTRODUCTION

Unlike the professional identity of others working in the broader field of childhood studies and education, scant attention has been paid to the professional identity of early childhood care and education (ECCE) practitioners. Instead, the work of ECCE professionals has traditionally been associated with low-status caretaking and childminding duties rather than being linked to any framework of professional roles and responsibilities (McGillivray, 2008). These perceptions have dominated in Ireland and in many English-speaking countries, such as the United Kingdom, despite consistent high-quality international research, particularly from the Nordic countries, which contradicts the traditional conceptualisations of professional identity associated with the ECCE sector (Fortunati, 2006; Kjørholt, 2005). Rather than simply providing a secondary caretaking and support role, early childhood carers and educators are positioned in the international literature as experts with rich and valuable knowledge about children and