

## Practical Professionalism

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### Introduction

This paper discusses the nature of professionalism in the early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector in Ireland. The discussion is based upon analysis of four national policy documents that have been published since the late 1990's. It proposes that there is evidence of an emergent consensus on the nature of professionalism in practice in ECCE in Ireland and identifies the core characteristics of this consensual view.

### The Practice Context - Historical

The provision of early childhood care and education (ECCE) services for children aged birth to six years in Ireland has traditionally been regarded by the state as the responsibility of parents. Hence the fact that a very diverse range of provision exists, usually developed and delivered by community and voluntary or private providers who respond to parents needs at a local level. The major exceptions to this rule are the Infant Classes of Primary schools where a significant proportion of four and five year old children are enrolled (Department of Education and Science [DES], 2004). Service provision outside of schools includes full day care services for working parents, both centre-based and home-based (childminding), sessional preschool services, which operate to a wide range of philosophies and curricula (e.g. Montessori, Steiner, High/Scope) and a range of early intervention initiatives for children with special educational needs or at risk of educational disadvantage.

In the past decade, state involvement in the provision of ECCE services has significantly increased. A number of policy objectives can be identified as the main drivers of this increased attention. Firstly, a booming economy places increased demands on the labour market and for the first time in Irish history, it became necessary to encourage women to return to or remain in the workforce. Secondly, rising awareness of the importance of early childhood as a time for intervention to combat social exclusion, poverty and also to mediate educational disadvantage was stimulating the development of a wide range of policy initiatives (CECDE, 2003). International pressure emanating from Europe (Equality Agenda and Barcelona Targets); from Ireland's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992 (UN, 1989) and from national lobby groups representing children's rights from a number of perspectives, also added to the impetus for developing services for young children and their families.

Government funding increased dramatically with the establishment in 2000 of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) (2000-2006). This initiative, primarily

designed to address the provision of childcare for working parents, impacted significantly on the profile of service provision. In addition to increasing the numbers of services, it also addressed issues related to the quality of service provision by funding staffing in qualifying settings, by establishing a national childcare management infrastructure, and by funding voluntary support organisations to develop support systems and initiatives for their membership.

### **The Early Childhood Workforce**

As with provision, a two-track trajectory of development can be identified for those working within the education sector and those working in the childcare sector. In the case of education, professional qualifications are highly regulated and prescribed by law. Individuals wishing to practice as teachers in the Infant Classes of primary schools are required to have achieved a third level degree in primary education or a recognised equivalent. The professional identity of this cohort of the early childhood workforce is clearly located within education and the wider teaching profession.

The situation of the remainder of the workforce is not so easily or clearly defined. In the same way as care and education services have developed over time in an ad hoc manner resulting in enormous diversity, the workforce also has evolved in the absence of structure and regulation with the equivalent complexity and diversity. There is a dearth of baseline data on the nature of the early childhood workforce so it is difficult to describe with any degree of authority. However, in 1999, a national census of childcare was conducted and included questions that attempted to profile the nature of the workforce in the surveyed settings. Findings revealed that levels of nationally accredited qualifications were very low (approx. 15%) amongst staff in early years settings and that the level of these qualifications was sub-degree. It was also reported that salaries were very low with concomitant low status for the work. Work was often part time in nature and the vast majority of the workforce was female (Area Development Management [ADM], 2003a). Whilst there has been no more recent comparable study which would afford an opportunity to update this data, ADM has reported on qualification levels amongst staff in receipt of EOCP funding (ADM, 2005) and in addition, a number of locally based surveys have been conducted by City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs), (Dublin City Childcare Committee, 2004; Kavanagh and Healy-Magwa, 2005; Fingal County Childcare Committee, 2005).

When viewed collectively, these reports give some insight into the current situation. In general, significant improvements have been achieved in the numbers of staff who have achieved a nationally accredited qualification in childcare with an estimated figure of 70% of staff now holding some form of nationally accredited qualification in childcare. Closer examination of reported figures reveals that the majority of these qualifications are at the

Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) Level Two, which would now equate to Level Five on the National Framework for Qualifications ([www.nfq.ie](http://www.nfq.ie)). To put this in perspective, a B.A. degree is considered to be a Level seven qualification. Moreover, in many of these reports, it is still cited that childcare work remains female dominated, low status and low paid (Dublin City Childcare Committee, 2004; Kavanagh and Healy-Magwa, 2005; Fingal County Childcare Committee, 2005).

### **Professionalism in Practice?**

Despite the difficulties that continue to exist in relation to professional identity amongst those working with young children in Ireland, there is evidence that a developing discourse on professionalism in practice has been taking place over the past decade. This discourse has been facilitated by the creation, by policy makers, of a number of fora where debate and discussion across the diverse workforce that characterises early childhood services in Ireland has taken place. The progress and outcomes of this discourse may be distilled from the policy publications that have emanated from these processes. Four key documents may be identified as central in this debate, they are: *The National Childcare Strategy* (DJELR, 1999), *Ready to Learn - A White Paper on Early Childhood Education* (DES, 1999), *Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning: Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development* (DJELR, 2002) and finally *Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006).

The National Childcare Strategy (DJELR, 1999) was published as the result of a wide ranging consultation process with an expert working group drawn from representatives of many of the key stakeholder groups involved in the provision of childcare in Ireland at the time. It focused on the need to develop childcare as a support for working parents and particularly to afford equality of access for mothers to the labour force. One of the key issues identified was the need to address the staffing of childcare provision. Despite the fact that these reports highlighted the difficulty in accessing accurate information on these issues, the final report of the expert working group did publish an agreed set of occupational profiles with associated qualification levels for childcare services (DJELR, 1999: 32).

Whilst the DJELR was chairing the deliberations of the expert working group on childcare, the DES called a National Forum on Early Childhood Education (Coolahan, 1998), a three day event at which invited stakeholder groups were asked to deliberate on the broad range of issues related to the provision of early education to children aged birth to six years, (with a particular focus on three to six year old children who were deemed to be more in need of education input). Ironically though, whilst the policy situation was separate, scrutiny of the participant lists in these two policy making events show that the same core stakeholders were represented at both events (Coolahan, 1998; DJELR, 1999).

Within this Forum, the issue of the early years education workforce was debated and a number of core knowledge areas were identified as essential in pre-service education for those adults wishing to work in an education capacity with children aged birth to six years (Coolahan, 1998). These included child development and learning principles, creation of a safe and caring environment, teaching methodologies, curriculum, administration and record keeping and working with parents and guardians (Coolahan, 1998). It was acknowledged that in general *"... the work of those dealing with young children has been undervalued ....and does not carry the social cache which many other personnel groups have secured for their occupations, which are often less demanding."* (Coolahan, 1998: 103). It was also acknowledged that much diversity of provision and practice existed and that whilst this diversity might offer strengths, the absence of interaction or productive dialogue between the different groups was a drawback to the future development of the workforce. The report of the DES forum went on to provide the basis for the production of *Ready to Learn*, a White Paper on Early Childhood Education (DES, 1999).

In 2001, the Certifying Bodies Subgroup of the National Coordinating Childcare Committee (NCCC), which had been instituted by the DJELR as part of the EOCP national childcare infrastructure, provided an opportunity for the diverse workforce of ECCE providers and practitioners, to participate in another consultation process. The key objective of this consultation was to develop a model framework for education, training and qualifications for ECCE in Ireland, which could feed into the National Qualifications Framework that was being developed by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI, 2005; DJELR, 2002). In order to produce this framework, a consultation on occupational profiles was carried out, as well as a detailed consultation on the core knowledge, skills and competencies appropriate to a professional qualification in the field of practice that was now becoming generally known as early childhood care and education (ECCE). The discourse around these issues provoked significant debate on issues of professionalism and indeed the thorny issue of professional identity was once again revisited (OMNA, 2001). Whilst there was no resolution on the issue of a single professional identity, significant progress was made regarding identifying occupational roles and associated education and training, and perhaps more importantly, articulating a set of agreed values that should underpin practice in ECCE.

The debate on the value statements contained in the Model Framework was a significant catalyst for provoking debate on what the parameters of professionalism were in practice in ECCE in Ireland. All the key representative organisations were consulted extensively on the wording of each statement, and whilst there were some areas where controversy arose, it was finally agreed in September 2002, that the DJELR could publish the Model Framework document and present it to the NQAI as an agreed statement from practitioners in ECCE regarding the parameters of their professional practice.

The value statements, which for the first time capture a vision of professionalism in practice in ECCE in Ireland, include the following:

**The Early Childhood Care and Education Sector values:**

- The rights of children, who are active agents in their own growth and development
- Professional development as central to good practice
- The role of the practitioner as the facilitator of enhanced well-being and development of the child
- Diversity by acknowledging and promoting each child's and each adult's individual, personal and cultural identity
- The right of children to protection from any form of abuse, neglect and discrimination
- Experiences and activities which support learning and allow children to actively explore, to experience, to make choices and decisions and to share in the learning process
- Play as the natural, constructive mode of children's interactions with their peers, adults and environment (DJELR, 2002: 17).

This is a very comprehensive vision for professionalism in practice. In addition, the document also made specific reference to management practice considered to be appropriate in early childhood services. *"In the context of early childhood, managing services in an ethical manner requires collaborative, consultative, communicative and respectful decision-making"* (DJELR, 2002: 16).

In respect of occupational profiles, this publication built upon those proposed in the *National Childcare Strategy* (DJELR, 1999) but made them much clearer and more explicitly related to levels of expected knowledge, skill, competencies and, importantly, responsibility in practice. The achievement of this publication demonstrates a developing capacity for those working in ECCE services in Ireland, to be reflective about the nature of their work, to be able to identify distinct parameters around the body of knowledge essential to the work and perhaps, more critically, to be able to articulate the values and ethics which must underpin best practice. In other words, a vision of professionalism was evident.

In 2002, the DES established the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) arising from the recommendations of the White Paper on Early Childhood Education (DJELR, 1999). In particular, it was the CECDE brief to develop *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education that provided the necessary catalyst and opportunity to revive the debate on professional practice in ECCE in Ireland. Of particular note is the fact that the CECDE has a brief to work with all settings where children aged birth to six years are present, including for the first time, the Infant Classes in primary

schools. The Framework therefore would be applicable to professional practice in all settings whether they had historically been characterised as 'care' or 'education' focused.

Over a three year period from late 2002, a series of research and consultation reports were published as the evidence base for the development of the quality framework (CECDE, 2003; 2004a; b; c; 2005). Within these documents, perspectives on the issues of defining, assessing and supporting quality were gleaned from national and international sources. Detailed analysis of this research was then used to formulate the definitions of quality in the form of a set of national Principles, Standards and Components of quality (CECDE, 2006). These were subject to rigorous scrutiny by a consultative committee made up of fifty stakeholder organisations whose constituencies spanned the breadth of interest groups that are involved in ECCE. A very high degree of endorsement was achieved for the proposed content of the framework with only minor revisions of wording. In June 2006, the Minister for Children officially launched the draft National Quality Framework, now known as *Síolta*, which is an Irish word meaning seeds (CECDE, 2006). The importance of this launch is not insignificant in the history of the development of professionalism in practice in ECCE. Whilst the ultimate intention of the DES is to have a national quality assurance programme that will ensure quality early education experiences for the children of Ireland (DES, 1999: 54), what has been achieved with the publication of *Síolta*, and its equitable dissemination to the diverse workforce, is perhaps the most significant professional development activity in the history of early childhood provision in Ireland. Distribution of the materials has been supported by a series of practice workshops (Fallon, 2007), where those directly engaged in working with children are coached in the use of the *Síolta* materials in their everyday practice. The collective outcome of this activity is a raised awareness of the nature and importance of the work of ECCE. This is, for the first time, presented as the same work irrespective of where it takes place. *Síolta* presents a vision for quality in all dimensions of practice in ECCE and as a vision, which has been endorsed by all those engaged in such practice, it could legitimately be described as a vision of professionalism in practice.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion therefore, it is evident that the ECCE workforce in Ireland is on a developmental journey that may be conceptualized as a process of professionalisation. Whilst the issue of professional identity is problematic due to the diverse nature of provision and practice, the past decade has witnessed the emergence of a 'practical professionalism', which transcends traditional professional boundaries and identities. This has been catalyzed, facilitated and documented through a series of significant policy developments culminating in the publication of *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for

Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006). The vision of professionalism in practice that emerges from these documents is based on sound principles of democracy, respect, partnership and community which, when informed by appropriate pre-service and in-service professional education, provides an essential basis upon which to build quality ECCE services in Ireland today and into the future.

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