

Towards the Development of a Professional Development Portfolio for Childcare Practitioners

Rosemary Murphy

Introduction

The development of a professional development portfolio for childcare practitioners has evolved from research carried out and published by Waterford County and City Childcare Committees in 2005. The research entitled *Professional Development in the Childcare Sector in Waterford City & County: A Discussion Paper* examined the levels of experience, training, networking, employment practice, pay and working conditions, trade union membership of both community-based and self-employed childcare service providers and practitioners. The objective of the research was to explore the factors affecting the professional development of childcare practitioners. The Professional Development Portfolio aims to provide a useful tool in which the childcare practitioner can collate his/her professional development. It is envisaged that the Portfolio may be used for the purpose of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the future.

Findings from the Research

The main findings from the primary research indicated that a high number of the respondents either held or were undertaking a nationally accredited childcare qualification, mainly a Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) level five award. For example, of 125 childcare practitioner respondents, sixty-six reported having a nationally accredited childcare qualification (NACQ) and thirty-six were currently participating in nationally accredited training giving a total of 102 practitioners holding a NACQ or currently undertaking a NACQ. The primary research results also indicated a high level of participation in local quality training (LQT) - for example of 122 childcare practitioner respondents, 116 had participated in LQT (Waterford City and County Childcare Committees, 2005). Fifty-two of the 115 childcare practitioner respondents reported that they attended seminars and conferences and fifty-six reported that they participated in a local service provider network (Waterford City and County Childcare Committee, 2005). Between ninety-five and one hundred per cent of all respondents, including childcare practitioners, community based and self-employed service providers agreed or strongly agreed that a professional body for the development of workers in the childcare sector should be established. Childcare practitioner respondents rated a code of practice, pay and working conditions, local quality/in-service training, NACQ and the number of years experience in childcare as the top five factors for professional development (Waterford City and County Childcare Committee, 2005).

With regard to levels of experience, of 122 respondents, seven reported working in childcare less than one year, fifty reported working between one and four years, thirty-three reported working between five and nine years, twelve reported working between ten and fourteen years and twenty reported working fifteen or more years (Waterford City and County Childcare Committees, 2005). The findings indicate a fall-off trend after working between one and four years in childcare. This finding is of concern as it may indicate a difficulty with retention of workers within the sector.

With regard to pay, twenty-five responses were received from practitioners who reported working full-time; of these eight fell below the recommended range outlined in the Border Counties Childcare Network (BCCN) *Recommended Pay Scales for Early Years Workers*. Seventy-five responses were received from practitioners working part-time; of these ten fell below a rate of eight euro per hour (the minimum wage was seven euro and sixty-five cent per hour in May 2005). The majority of respondents were earning between eight and thirteen euro per hour (Waterford City and County Childcare Committees, 2005).

With regard to having a written contract of employment, sixty-three percent of 105 childcare practitioner respondents reported having a contract in place. Of nineteen childcare practitioner respondents, ten contributed towards a pension. Twelve of 104 practitioner respondents were members of a trade union (Waterford City and County Childcare Committees, 2005).

The strong level of commitment to ongoing professional development of the research participants is evident from the research findings, which show a high level of participation in NACT, LQT and networking events. However, findings with regard to the levels of pay and working conditions and the retention of workers are a matter of concern.

The benefits and challenges and the need for professional development in the childcare sector are documented in a number of recent national publications and serve to highlight and strengthen many of the research findings. For example, the OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland states that;

"...the present situation of staffing and training in the childcare sector is unsatisfactory.... While strong efforts are being made to train and professionalize, the sector is still characterised by high staff turnover (with negative effects on young children), low pay, weak professional profiling, limited access to in-service training and limited career mobility." (DES, 2004: 83).

Research carried out by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) concluded that;

"...the availability of a qualified workforce with clearly defined career structures, good terms and conditions of employment and regular opportunities for continuing professional development is fundamental to the development of quality in ECCE. ...Professional practice in ECCE must be recognised, rewarded and supported. Clear career pathways, opportunities for education and training and a national code of ethics should be developed and implemented." (Duignan and Walsh, 2004: 101-102).

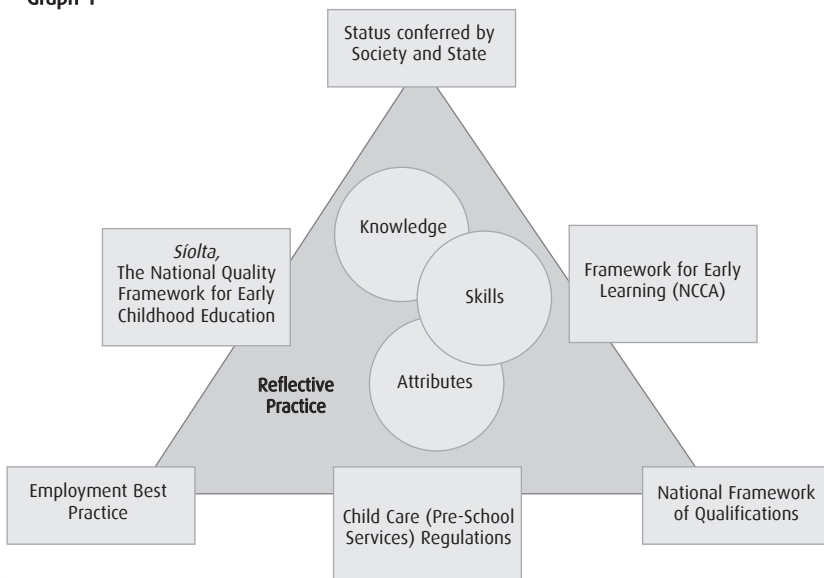
Under principle four (ongoing quality development in policy, infrastructure and service provision) of the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) Report it is recommended that;

"... a minimum standard of training for ECEC staff should be agreed and phased in over the next five years and that a national pay scale should be established for ECCE workers as a matter of urgency by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment." (NESF Report No.31, 2005: xvi)

Professional Development Portfolio for Childcare Practitioners

The idea of the Portfolio is not a new one; many professions adopt the use of a portfolio to collate and provide evidence of ongoing professional development and the portfolio may be used by the various professionals to retain membership of the governing/regulating body. In developing the Portfolio, a Conceptual Framework for Professional Development (Graph 1) has been created to illustrate the factors impacting on the trend to professionalise.

Graph 1



Knowledge, Skills, Attributes and Reflective Practice

Professional development may be seen as a dynamic process of formal (e.g. NACQ), non-formal (e.g. LQT, networking) and informal learning (e.g. life and work experience) (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland [NQAI], 2005). The area inside the triangle represents the professional development of the childcare practitioner and includes the acquisition and development of knowledge, skills, attributes and reflective practice gained from this process.

Policy Documents

The professionalism of the childcare practitioner is strongly influenced by national policy and a legislation framework including *Síolta*, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006), the forthcoming Framework for Early Learning (NCCA, forthcoming), and by the Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No. 2) Regulations 2006 (Department of Health and Children [DHC], 2006) which clearly set out the recommended and regulatory principles and standards for best practice.

Status

The status of women, children and childcare conferred by society and the state is also an influencing factor. The role of women within the family is enshrined in the Constitution of Ireland (Articles 41.1.1, 41.2.1, and 41.2.2) (Government of Ireland, 1937) and within this context, childcare has evolved from the private and voluntary sphere, remaining largely the domain of women and holding a low economic value in society.

The National Children's Strategy (DHC, 2000), National Childcare Strategy (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform [DJELR], 2000) and the establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children provide a national policy framework for children and childcare. The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) 2000-2006, introduced as an equality measure for women, provided a significant investment in childcare. All of these developments have helped to enhance the status of childcare in recent years.

Employment Best Practice

Since the introduction of the EOCP in 2000, a target of 17,000 trained personnel employed within the sector has been set for the period of the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) 2006-2010. Both private and community-based childcare service employers and employees are bound by employment and equality legislation and as indicated from the primary research findings, there are a number of issues for concern with regard to levels of pay and the terms and conditions of employment within the sector. The importance of good terms and conditions of employment (Duignan and Walsh, 2004) and the need for a minimum standard of training and national pay scale (NESF, 2005) to support professional practice have been highlighted previously.

National Framework of Qualifications

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) set up under the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 (Government of Ireland, 1999) is responsible for establishing and maintaining the National Framework of Qualifications (NQAI, 2003) and for establishing and promoting the maintenance of standards of awards given by the awarding bodies e.g. Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and for promoting and facilitating access, transfer and progression. The National Framework of Qualifications, operational since 2006, provides a ten level framework with an initial set of fifteen award types from a FETAC certificate at level one to a HETAC doctoral degree at level ten. The Framework facilitates the process of life long learning and provides a range of entry, access and progression routes for learners at all levels.

Recognition of Prior Learning

The Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Further and Higher Education and Training (NQAI, 2005) provide the guidelines to the awarding bodies in the development of their policies and procedures for RPL.

Training providers must now include a policy on RPL for entry/access to programmes, exemptions from programme requirements and access to full awards in order to meet their requirement for Quality Assurance and programme validation.

RPL has been defined in the FETAC RPL: Policy and Guidelines (Draft) as;

"...a series of steps in the process to enable learners to gain recognition for prior learning for an award

These are:

- i. Identifying the award*
- ii. Determining eligibility*
- iii. Analysis of knowledge, skill and competence*
- iv. Gathering evidence*
- v. Assessment of the evidence*
- vi. Making a recommendation"* (FETAC, 2005: 15).

The Portfolio itself is an A4 ring binder divided into five sections - an introduction and Sections A-D:

1. Introduction
2. Section A: The European C.V./Europass
3. Section B: Skills and Knowledge
 - 3.1 Child Development
 - 3.2 Education and Play

- 3.3 Social Environment
- 3.4 Health, Hygiene, Nutrition and Safety
- 3.5 Personal and Professional Development
- 3.6 Communication, Management and Administration
- 3.7 Supervised Practice
- 3.8 Full Awards
- 4. Section C: Employment
 - 4.1 CV (shortened version)
 - 4.2 Job Description
 - 4.3 Person Specification
 - 4.4 Contract of Employment
 - 4.5 Salary Scale
 - 4.6 Appraisal
- 5. Section D: References and Useful Contacts

Introduction

The introduction outlines the background and gives an overview of the Professional Development Portfolio. The introduction provides guidelines on how to use the Portfolio.

Section A: The European C.V./Europass

The Europass provides a comprehensive record of the practitioners' personal information, work experience (informal learning), education and training (formal learning) and competencies acquired in the course of life and career (informal and/or non-formal learning). Completion of the Europass is essential in determining eligibility for an award when used for the purpose of RPL.

Section B: Skills and Knowledge

This section is divided into sub-sections to include the core areas of knowledge and skills as identified in *Quality Childcare & Lifelong Learning Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (DJELR, 2002). Waterford County Childcare Committee issue a Certificate of Attendance and Self-evaluation Form to participants in LQT courses/programmes/workshops, seminars and conferences. The Certificate of Attendance sets out the details and main content of the LQT, Conference/Seminar and can be used by participants along with the completed Self-evaluation Form to support evidence of learning. The Certificate and Self-evaluation Form can be included in the relevant sub-section of the Portfolio - for example Certificate of Attendance and Self-evaluation for Manual Handling or Food Safety Training may be included in the sub-section Health, Hygiene, Nutrition and Safety. Minor awards may also be included - for example, FETAC Level 5 Child Development may be included in the sub-section Child Development, or FETAC Level 5 Occupational First Aid may be

included in the sub-section Health, Hygiene, Nutrition and Safety. Through this process, the practitioner builds up evidence of learning that may be used for entry/access to programmes, exemptions from programme requirements and access to full awards.

Section C: Employment

The section aims to raise awareness, promote and support employment best practice.

Section D: References and Useful Contacts

This section provides a list of references and useful contacts.

Conclusion

There is a strong level of commitment to ongoing professional development within the childcare sector in Waterford City and County as evidenced in the primary research findings. However, levels of pay and working conditions and the retention of workers is a matter of concern. There is a need for professional development in the sector highlighted by the findings from the primary research carried out by the Waterford City and County Childcare Committees in 2005.

The Conceptual Framework for Professional Development aims to illustrate the factors impacting on the trend to professionalise. These factors are taken into account in the design of the Portfolio. While it is envisaged that the Professional Development Portfolio will provide a useful tool in which the childcare practitioner can collate his/her professional development and may be used for the purpose of RPL, significant challenges remain. Training providers are required to have RPL policies in place as part of the Quality Assurance and validation process, however the provision of information to key stakeholders and the training of suitably qualified personnel as RPL mentors, assessors and external evaluators will require an allocation of resources.

It is hoped that the Conceptual Framework for Professional Development will raise awareness of the factors impacting on a growing professionalism within the sector and that the Professional Development Portfolio will provide a practical tool to promote and support the professional development of the childcare practitioner.

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