

## **Practical Professionalism?**

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### **Abstract**

The professional identity of the early childhood care and education (ECCE) workforce in Ireland has traditionally been resistant to definition. This paper argues that despite such difficulties, an agreed vision of professionalism in practice does exist and can be revealed through analysis of key national policy documents; *The National Childcare Strategy, Ready To Learn the White Paper on Early Childhood Education; A Model Framework for education, Training and Professional Development for Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland and Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education in Ireland*. A brief consideration of international literature is then presented to locate the nature of this vision of professionalism. Finally, the key messages of *Síolta* are explored for their potential as a support framework for professionalism in practice that transcends traditional boundaries created by the diverse professional identities that characterize the ECCE workforce in Ireland.

### **Introduction**

*Síolta*, the National Quality Framework (NQF) for Early Childhood Education has been developed and published by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE). The Framework was initiated in 2002 at the behest of the Department of Education and Science (DES) in part fulfilment of commitments made in *Ready to Learn*, the White Paper on Early Childhood Education (DES, 1999). Since the establishment of the CECDE in October 2002, a significant programme of research, consultation and development has been undertaken in close collaboration with the DES and a broad range of stakeholders in early education in Ireland. This work culminated in May 2006 with the

publication of *Siolta*, which is a national quality assurance scheme for all early education settings where children aged birth to six years are present.

This paper discusses the potential of *Siolta* to support the development of professional practice in early childhood settings in Ireland. It presents a view of the current nature of established notions of professionalism through a review of major national policy documents in this area in the past decade. It discusses these ideas of professionalism, against some of the current discourse on professionalism in national and international literature. And finally proposes that *Siolta* presents a vision of professional practice that has the potential to advance the development of professional identity for those working in early childhood services as well as promoting practical professionalism

### **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 exception to this rule are the Infant Classes of Primary schools where a significant proportion of four and five year old children are enrolled (DES, 2004a). Primary school education is open to all children and is free. However, despite efforts to ensure that Infant Class provision is significantly different to the rest of primary school, in the majority of schools children are enrolled in large classes (often 30 children to one teacher), which are inappropriately resourced in terms of space and equipment (Irish National Teachers' Organisation [INTO], 2000). 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 general, early intervention initiatives attract some level of state funding. The age of the children served is generally the deciding factor as to which government department provides the funding e.g. health funding for care services for under threes and education funding for three to six year old children. This separation of care and education is a strong defining characteristic of state intervention in early years provision in Ireland (DES, 2004b). In addition to determining funding sources, it is also reflected in regulatory structures. School based provision in the Infant Classes are inspected by the DES Inspectorate, with the Education Act 1998 (DES, 1998) as the statutory instrument. All other provision is subject to inspection by the Preschool Inspectorate, under the auspices of the Department of Health and Children (DHC) with the Preschool Services Regulations (DHC, 1998) as the statutory instrument.

In the past decade, due in the main to the unprecedented success of the Irish economy, state involvement in the provision of early care and education 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. This immediately necessitated addressing barriers to such participation and in the main this meant ensuring adequate provision of childcare facilities for working parents. 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, (e.g. Early Start, Traveller Preschools, Breaking the Cycle) (CECDE, 2003a). Additionally, 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, were exerting influence on policymakers to formulate national strategies to support children in their earliest years. Almost overnight, child care and early childhood education policy documents mushroomed from virtually none to an almost bewildering array including:

- Department of Health (1991). *Child Care Act*.
- Department of Health (1998). *Child Care (Preschool Services) Regulations*.  
*Department of Health and Children (1998). Child Care (Preschool Services) Regulations 1996 and Child Care (Preschool Services) (Amended) Regulations 1997 and Explanatory Guide to Requirements and Procedures for Notification and Inspection*.
- Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (1998). *Study of the Economics of Childcare in Ireland*
- Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (1998). *Strengthening Families for Life: Final Report of the Commission on the Family to the Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs*.
- Department of Education and Science (1999). *Ready to Learn - A White Paper on Early Childhood Education*.

- Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (1999). *National Childcare Strategy, Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare.*
- Department of Health and Children (1999). *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children.*
- Department of Health and Children (2000). *The National Children's Strategy. Our Children-Their Lives.*
- Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform (2000). *Childcare Funding in Ireland.*
- Department of the Environment and Local Government (2001). *Childcare Facilities: Guidelines for Planning Authorities.*
- Department of Health and Children (2002). *Our Duty to Care: The Principles of Good Practice for the Protection of Children and Young People.*
- Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (2002). *Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning: Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector*
- Department of Education and Science (2003). *Preschools for Travellers: National Evaluation Report.*
- Department of Education and Science (2004b). *OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland.*
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2004). *Towards a Framework for Early Learning.*
- National Economic and Social Forum report (2005). *Early Childhood Education*

- Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2006). *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education in Ireland*.

Government funding also 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 picture of service provision outlined above. 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**

All of the above contextual information is a necessary backdrop to a discussion of professionalism in ECCE in Ireland as it illustrates clearly the conditions within which concepts and constructs of professionalism have evolved. 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. Monitoring of professional practice is carried out by the Schools Inspectorate, who produce a report on the first year of practice of newly qualified teachers as part of their professional qualifications. The recently established Teaching Council will have responsibility for all professional activities of Teachers in the future. 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], 2003) 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, 2005a) and in addition, a number of locally based surveys have been conducted by City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs), (Dublin CCC, 2004; Waterford CCC, 2005; Fingal CCC, 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 (ibid).

### **Professional identity**

Prior to the early 1990's, it is arguable that there was no clear professional identity, with the clear exception of primary school teachers, for staff working in early care and education services for young children. Indeed a collective title for the field of work did not exist in any meaningful way until the publication, by the Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform (DJELR) in 2002, of a Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development for Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland (DJELR, 2002). Prior to this, a wide range of terms was used to refer to such services including, Childcare, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and Early Childhood Education. In 2000, the DJELR attempted to resolve this lack of clarity by conducting a 'Naming and Framing' exercise which sought to establish an agreed title for both the work and the workforce in early childhood services in Ireland (OMNA 2000). The outcomes of this endeavour remain unpublished, as the response rate to the survey at 18% was too low to be deemed significant. However, even amongst those responses it was clear that there was little consensus on any title. It was decided that professional identity at that time was too disparate and divisive an issue to raise amongst practitioners. Rather it was decided to concentrate on establishing consensus regarding the education, training and qualifications appropriate to practice in ECCE services. Even in the present day, after travelling a significant developmental journey together, it is still apparent that there is little cohesion across the diverse range of service provision and practitioners that constitute the 'early childhood care and education sector' as we understand it today. Rather, it can be characterised as a loose collection of common interest groups whose unity has been crafted through participation in national policy initiatives such as the EOCP. Within this, there is evidence of an emergent community of practice that has the potential to develop a new professional identity, however, no single national professional body exists which seeks to draw together these disparate groupings into a cohesive organisation. The establishment of such an organisation is often integral to the

development of a profession as it facilitates the development of consensus about many of the defining characteristics of the profession such as a code of ethics, defined body of core knowledge, skills and competencies, and qualification criteria for professional status. Currently, such issues are not universally agreed or accepted by all potential members. This is unsurprising given the traditional diversity that exists in both practice and provision in early childhood services and also the low status and limited funding that has been attached to the work. Until 2000 and the inception of the EOCP, many practitioners and practitioner support groups were consumed with the daily task of accessing survival funding and had little time or energy left for participation in professional development activities which would have been necessary for the formation of national professional structures (OMNA, 2000). It is notable also that the recent surveys of the workforce cited above, also reveal a very low level of membership of trade unions especially amongst those staff working in privately operated services (Kavanagh and Healy-Magwa, 2005, North Tipperary CCC,).

### **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), The White Paper on Early Childhood Education (DES, 1999), the Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development (DJELR, 2002) and finally Síolta, 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 was instituted by the DJELR and 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. A number of background reports was prepared to feed into the deliberations of the expert working group including one which attempted to identify the nature of the workforce in terms of qualifications, occupational profiles and terms and conditions of employment. 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. It is interesting to note that 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). This is again strong evidence of the very separate way in which care and education provision for the same cohort of children was viewed by policy makers at the time. 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 (ibid. pp 104–109). 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.’ (ibid., p.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. Interestingly, the Forum report did not preference primary teachers over other members of the early childhood education workforce and indeed made reference to significant shortcoming to pre-service education for primary teachers in respect of early childhood education practice. In general, it expressed a vision that all those involved in early education provision should be equipped with the prescribed body of specialised knowledge and receive the appropriate supports and recognition for the important work they were engaged in. 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) The intervening years between these two seminal publications witnessed a dramatic chain of events, which elevated ECCE issues from the wings to centre stage in policy terms. In conjunction with this, debate continued about related workforce issues, particularly regarding the education and training of personnel engaged in work with young children (OMNA, 2000). Child abuse scandals were revealed that prompted a range of initiatives and publications related to child protection, the economy continued to boom at a rapid pace placing even greater pressure on the childcare infrastructure, educational disadvantage became associated with the high levels of child poverty in Ireland and attracted a number of educational initiatives to combat this phenomenon, and generally advocacy groups for children’s rights became more vocal and active. Regulation of preschool services became firmly established and the EOCP was established, injecting unprecedented funding into the development and provision of childcare. Groups that had participated in the two consultative fora in 1998/9 for the first time, were now regularly participating in policy development processes at national and local level. Education and training programmes had expanded at all levels of provision, particularly at third level, with new degree and postgraduate opportunities. In addition, a new regional infrastructure comprising thirty-three CCCs had been established, creating new

occupational roles and opportunities for the workforce. All of these change processes impacted on the work of staff delivering ECCE services to young children.

## **The Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development**

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. For the first time, clear statements were made acknowledging that a process of professionalisation was underway amongst the workforce in ECCE, *'In Ireland professionalisation of the ECCE sector is an evolving process'* (DJELR, 2002:16).

### **Values of a profession.**

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, are as follows:

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

- *Childhood in its own right*

- *The rights of children, who are active agents in their own growth and development*
- *Parents, guardians and family as the child's primary source of well-being*
- *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.*
- *Equality of access and participation in services.*
- *A positive approach to Irish language and culture*
- *The right of children to protection from any form of abuse, neglect and discrimination.*
- *The right of children, families and childcare staff to confidentiality, balanced with the interests of the child and the right of all to protection from harm.*
- *Experiences and activities which support learning and allow children to actively explore, to experience, to make choices a decision 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 p 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'* (ibid:16).

In respect of occupational profiles, this publication built upon those proposed in the National Childcare Strategy but made them much clearer and more explicitly related to levels of expected knowledge, skill, competencies and, importantly, responsibility in practice. They acknowledged, for the first time, that supervised practice was an essential element in all pre-service education that is deemed to be 'professional preparation' and furthermore emphasised the essential nature of continuing professional development. 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. The importance of this policy document even achieved international recognition, "The Model Framework offers for the first time a clear vision of professional development and articulation of professional roles on five levels: Basic. Intermediate, Experienced, Advanced and Expert.' (DES, 2004b:54 )

Unfortunately, despite the seminal nature of this publication, the necessary policy infrastructure for it to feed into was still underdeveloped and so little progress was made in respect of its vision and recommendations.

At the same time, the pace of development within the ECCE sector continued to accelerate as the EOCP became more firmly established and provided significant funding to many of the key stakeholder groups that had participated so effectively in the three national consultation processes already discussed. Ironically, it would appear that the unity of purpose that had been achieved through participation in these consultative processes dissipated to a significant extent once the various organisations received statutory funding. The funding was awarded under the quality improvement measure of the EOCP with the intention of allowing these organisations develop support mechanisms to assist practitioners deliver 'quality' childcare provision (ADM, 2003). It is perhaps not surprising therefore, that each organisation became occupied with meeting the needs of their separate constituencies within the broad range of ECCE provision. As an example, take the fact that a wide variety of quality assurance/accreditation schemes were developed between 2002 and 2005 targeting different groups of service providers.(IPPA, 2002; National Children's Nurseries Association, 2003; High/Scope Ireland 2003; Border Counties Childcare Network, 2004) Despite the fact that when analysed together, there were very many common aspect to these programmes (CECDE, 2004b), their existence serves to reinforce the fact that none of these groups were in fact concerned with addressing the overarching professional issues confronting practitioners across all areas of practice. Even the new NCCC failed to generate any further developments in this regard. The regional infrastructure, in the form of thirty-three CCCs was in its infancy

and was grappling with the challenges of constituting themselves and their remit in their local context. The urgency of the pre EOCP days almost disappeared. The EOCP did fund a collaborative committee of the voluntary organisations in receipt of EOCP money (National Development Plan/ Community Support Framework Evaluation Unit, 2003). This facilitated regular meeting of the groups, however there is no record or evidence of the substance of this process or of any product or outcome.

It took an initiative from the DES, in the form of the establishment in 2002 of the CECDE, to re energise the dynamism that had contributed so significantly to the previous policy publications. In particular, it was the CECDE brief to develop *Síolta*, a 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 has 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, 2003a; 2004a 2004b;2004c, 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 (CECDE, 2006). 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. 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 CCCs played an important role in facilitating this induction process and many have written support activities for the implementation of *Síolta* into their strategic plans into the future (ADM, 2005b). 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. This vision, if implemented and supported appropriately by all stakeholders, has the potential to advance the status of the ECCE workforce. With enhanced status, there is a richer environment for the emergence of a professional association that can drive the development of a distinct profession of ECCE in Ireland.

### **The nature of professionalism**

Having identified the emergent professionalism in the ECCE workforce in Ireland through its expression in the four landmark policy documents, The National Childcare Strategy (DJELR, 1999; Ready to Learn, the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, (DES, 1999); The Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development (DJELR, 2002 and Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006); it is now possible to speculate upon what type of professional identity might emerge in ECCE in Ireland by analysing these articulations against a sample of the extensive literature that exists around the issue of profession as a concept in general and specifically in ECCE. The limitation of this paper necessitates a very cursory examination of the literature and so whilst a small sample has been employed here to frame the discussion, a much more extensive review would be required to afford conclusive argument. Having said this, it is still interesting to observe through the lens of this international literature, that distinct characteristics are evident in the articulations of practical professionalism in ECCE in Ireland, which may predict a distinct professional identity in the future.

Jones and Joss (1995), writing from the perspective of the field of social work, propose a matrix of professional models. Whilst all detail of their theory is not fully relevant here, it

serves to illustrate that there are different dimensions to professionalism that can be clearly identified. They include:

- Self image
- Theoretical knowledge base
- Relationship with client
- Practice theory
- Professional development

They describe in particular a model of the “Reflective practitioner” which describes its practice theory as “..based in process and interpersonal theories in use” and relationship with client as “collaborative, based on ongoing dialogue; surfacing conflict, sharing meanings and a reflective contract with the client; Authority achieved through consensus” (Jones and Joss, 1995:51). This resonates positively with the definition of pedagogy expressed in the Model Framework:

*Pedagogy in ECCE refers not only to an agreed base of shared knowledge but also to practical experience, which incorporates opportunities for reflection and appreciation and understanding of the necessity of collaboration with other stakeholders in the sector including parents and families. (DJELR, 2002:13)*

More recent literature directly addressing the nature of professionalism in ECCE has also identified characteristics that can be found within Irish discourse. *Democratic*

*Professionalism* is a term, first used by Apple (1996) is particularly interesting to note as it deals more effectively with the complex web of power relationships that often characterise ECCE practice. The concept was developed further by Oberheumer (2005), who stated that the concept is based on “*participatory relationships and alliances and foregrounds collaborative, cooperative action between professional colleagues and other stakeholders. It emphasises engaging and networking with the local community.....and in relation to working with children, democratic professionalism presupposes a professional*

*disposition which acknowledges that children are social agents, participating in constructing and influencing their own lives” (Oberhuemer, 2005).*

This concept articulates exceptionally well with *Siolta*. The definition of quality, which is a key premise for the framework, is ‘*the pursuit of excellence which has the capacity to transform*’ (CECDE, 2006) Quality is conceptualised as dynamic and challenging. Whilst core indicators of quality can be identified, the ways in which these criteria are achieved are flexible and diverse. In other words, there is no prescribed formula which practitioners can follow in order to ensure quality provision. The big picture in terms of the vision is supplied but the detail is left open to interpretation. Achieving quality is conceptualised as a process of transformation and change, a quality spiral. This leaves the achievement of quality very dependant upon the practitioner’s ability to be a reflective practitioner able to engage with challenge at many different levels of practice. Even more critically perhaps, it requires them to be able to reflect upon, critically review and revise their existing knowledge, practice and belief systems hence effect real and observable change in practice styles. Additionally, the Standards reflect the view of children as active participants in a partnership with peers, adults, families and their wider community towards the construction of their own learning. Democracy is a central theme that pervades all dimensions of practice.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion therefore, it is evident that the ECCE workforce in Ireland is on a developmental journey which 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 *Siolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. 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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