



An Lárionad um Fhorbairt  
agus Oideachais na Luath-Óige

## **When Two are One: The Changing Nature of Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland**

*ESAI Presentation by Thomas Walsh, Development Officer, and Dr.  
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### **Introduction 1900-1990:**

Good morning everyone and welcome to our joint presentation on 'The Changing Nature of Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland.' My name is Thomas Walsh and I work as a Development Officer at the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education while my colleague, Dr. Gemma Kiernan, is the Assistant Director of the CECDE.

While early childhood care and education are now perceived as being interlinked and interdependent, this was not the case historically, where care and education were largely treated as separate entities. This presentation will trace the evolution of care and education in Ireland since 1900, framing this within our conceptualisation of childhood. This forms part of a Conceptual Framework on how Young Children Develop and Learn in Ireland which will be published by the Centre later this year.

It is important to envisage this evolution within broader social, economic, political, demographic and cultural developments of the twentieth century, which will not be possible to outline in this short presentation, as such factors greatly affected our conceptualisation of childhood and the care and education of children in society. I will trace the historical developments until 1990 while Gemma will present the contemporary context.

### **Conceptualisation of Childhood:**

Our concept of children is context-linked and time specific and has evolved greatly over the past 100 years. In the early part of the century, families were invariably large with a modal size of 7-9 children, reducing to 4-6 children in the 1970s. This was to ensure generational continuity, as a source of labour and to ensure assistance into old age for parents. Infant mortality was particularly high in the early decades of the twentieth century, running at nearly 10% in 1910.

There is a dearth of documented research for much of the twentieth century outlining the position of children within the family and society. Certain

anthropological studies provide insights into the place of children within the home. Arsenberg and Kimball in the 1930s observed homes in Clare in which the child was the centre of the family, cared for primarily by the mother and extended family (such as grandparents, aunts and siblings) and to a lesser extent in the early years by the father. Fathers played a more assertive role in the socialisation of males in the later years, usually after the child had celebrated his First Holy Communion. In tandem mothers prepared the female children for their future roles within the home. There is some evidence that male children were preferred to girls owing to the fact that they would continue the family name.

In the early part of the twentieth century, children did not assume a prominent position in Irish society and many commentators illuminate a picture of children as being shy and withdrawn, speaking only when spoken to. There is evidence that young children up to the 1970s were largely kept indoors, protected away from the community and that upon school going age children became more visible and prominent in the community. Children born with disabilities were often cared for by their families or within institutions and there is some evidence that some children with disabilities were hidden away from society. There is much evidence of the harsh treatment of some children cared for within reformatory and industrial schools. This trend has altered greatly in recent years and children occupy a much more visible role in all aspects of Irish life. Consultation with children is now seen as important and Gemma will further highlight this point.

The methods of disciplining children have evolved greatly in the course of the twentieth century. Corporal punishment was a common feature both within the home and school settings throughout much of the century, with its abolition within the education system occurring in 1982. Commentators remark that corporal punishment was utilised within a Catholic doctrine framework, to combat the weaknesses imposed by original sin, even in the early years.

A number of policies and pieces of legislation both impacted on and reflected our conceptualisation of children in the twentieth century. The Children's Act 1908 was a landmark document for the care of children in Ireland, passed in Westminster. This focused on the treatment as opposed to the punishment of children and bestowed upon children a separate legal status. This Act was replaced by the Child Care Act (1991). The UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child (1958), the UN International Year of the Child in 1979 and UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, ratified by Ireland in 1992 raised the profile and prominence of children as citizens in society.

### **Early Childhood Care:**

For the greater part of the twentieth century, the vast majority of children in Ireland were cared for within their own homes, primarily by their mother. This period of care within the home ended usually when the child began formal education in the infant classes of the primary school, usually from the age of 3 to 6. Arsenberg and Kimball (1940) paint a positive image of the care afforded to the child within the home and the centrality of children within the family.

In the earlier part of the twentieth century, many households contained three generations, incorporating grandparents or grandaunts, parents and children. This model provided assistance for mothers in rearing children, as this was often combined with multiple duties both inside and outside the home. The decline of the prevalence of the three generational family impacted on the availability of personnel to aid child rearing and childcare within the home and many commentators remarked the impact of this on the childcare process. Scheper Hughes (1979) believed that this placed the mothers time under greater pressure. Consequently, she would hold that children lost their centrality within the home, often placed in a cot or crib and not always present with the rest of the family.

The involvement of fathers in child rearing, especially for young children, remained low throughout much of the century as was evidenced by many biographies and anthropological studies. Arsenberg and Kimball (1940)

characterise the father as distant and authoritarian. A change is noted in the Humphrey's (1966) and Peskett and Roberts (1972) study whereby fathers played a far greater role in the lives of young children in the urban context. However, later in the century, commentators such as Scheper-Hughes (1979) among others revealed that the participation of fathers in child rearing remained low.

The economic, demographic and social changes in the latter part of the twentieth century catalysed an evolution of the ways in which children were cared for in Ireland. Increasing numbers of mothers entered the workforce and with increased urbanisation, there were reduced family and community supports to assist the childcare process. In the absence of state provision, movements began from the late 1960s to provide such services on a community or private basis. Such services include childminding, nurseries, Montessori schools, community playgroups, grúpaí naíonraí and preschools. Demand for such services grew in the proceeding decades and Gemma will speak shortly about the explosion of such services in the 1990s.

### **Early Childhood Education:**

There were 3 major curricular reforms that impacted upon the infant classes between 1900 and 1990, first of all we will look at the Revised Programme of 1900.

The Revised Programme of 1900 was introduced following a comprehensive analysis of national and international best policy and practice. It was a radical departure from the narrow and literary curriculum in operation previously under the system of payment by results. There was a greater emphasis placed on the infant classes, while schooling was to be an enjoyable and discovery-oriented experience. Subjects were to be taught in a heuristic and integrated fashion with an equal emphasis on literary and practical subjects. Junior Assistant Mistresses were employed in schools under a male teacher to provide appropriate instruction for the infant classes. There were problems with the implementation of such a radically different curriculum, exacerbated by poor financing, alienation

of the educational stakeholders and a lack of understanding of the philosophies underlying the programme.

The Irish government began a process of curricular reform prior to independence to frame a curriculum appropriate to Irish sensibilities and ideology. This was an attempt to afford to Irish children the cultural inheritance that had been denied to previous generations. The result was an increasingly narrower programme focusing on the core subjects with a particular emphasis on the Irish language and culture. The infant classes occupied a specific role within this drive for the revival of the Irish language, with all subjects being taught through Irish in the lower classes. This policy affected all infant classes, 90% of which spoke no English in the home, and despite a relaxation of this policy from 1926-1934 allowing some English to be used, this policy remained in operation until 1960. Following calls for reform in the 1930s and 1940s, a revision of the infant class programme was introduced in 1948, which employed many of the underlying philosophies of the Revised programme 1900.

Economic and social developments in the 1960s led to increased awareness of the need for reform within the primary school curriculum. The result was the New Curriculum (1971), which was child-centred, and heuristic, yet again a radical change from its predecessor. The curriculum sought to inculcate greater independence and self-reliance while a great emphasis was placed on creating a disposition for learning as well as transmitting actual content. Once again, the lack of finance and other obstacles impeded the implementation of the provisions.

Thus rested the picture of early childhood care and education in 1990. I will now pass you along to my colleague, Dr. Gemma Kiernan to sketch the contemporary picture of ECCE in the Irish context.

## **Introduction 1990-2004**

History is essential to an understanding of the present, but there is a famous line that says *'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there'*. This increasingly appears to be the case in relation to young children's care and education. The historical or traditional 'split model' approach, in which the childcare and education sectors operated independently, so that care and education were treated as separate entities, has begun to waver.

### **Conceptualisations of Childhood**

Changes in our conceptualisation of childhood have played a role in bringing this about.

Firstly, there is an expectation that children be **flexible and adaptable** to changes in their everyday life. In their analysis of children's lives in Ireland, Greene and Moane (2003) point out that children today live in increasingly diverse family structures. They highlight that in the wake of the Celtic Tiger, the greater participation of mothers in the workforce has led to an unprecedented demand for early childhood services, meaning that many young children today are exposed to the care taking and early education practices of adults other than their family. They also draw attention to the fact that young children are now living in a much more culturally diverse society.

Secondly, there is an **emerging consciousness regarding children's rights** and a move toward a more state interventionist approach in children's lives. This was prompted by our ratification of UN Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1992. Our commitment to implementing the Convention is largely being realised through our National Children' Strategy and its goals of giving children a voice in matters which affect them, of ensuring children receive quality supports and services and of achieving a better understanding of children's lives.

Thirdly, there is an **increased concern for children's welfare** and here again we can see

a more state interventionist approach. The introduction of legislation such as the Child Care Act (DoH, 1991) to make the Health Boards responsible for supporting childcare and providing family support services, the publication of *National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (DHC, 1999) and the Children Act (DJELR, 2001) to improve the juvenile justice system all represent significant developments in an overall approach to ensuring children's welfare.

Fourth, there is growing recognition of the **importance of the early years**. Neuroscience and psychological research has demonstrated that a high percentage of children's learning takes place in the first 6 years of life. We are cognisant of research indicating that high quality preschool experiences leads to immediate and lasting social and educational benefits for all children- especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special needs. Additionally, investment in high-quality early care and education programmes provides economic returns – one well known study on the Highscope preschool model, showed that it provided 7 dollars and 16 cents for every dollar invested. (Schwenhart, Barnes and Weikart, 1993).

There is an **emphasis on young children's holistic development and learning**. We are much more aware of the whole child perspective. Our National Children's Strategy, for example, recognises all of the different dimensions of childhood development and learning (e.g. the physical, cognitive, emotional, social, moral and spiritual). Research has demonstrated the interconnectedness of the different dimensions of development and learning, for example, a child's physical well-being influences their cognitive ability. The whole child perspective has highlighted that it is artificial to divide care and education in young children's lives – the interconnectedness of development and learning means that care and education must be interdependent and complementary. Caldwell (1989) recognised this when he coined the term 'educare'.

The developments in our conceptualisation of childhood highlight the inadequacies inherent in a separate childcare and education sector, and are

catalysing the emergence of a distinct early childhood care and education sector, one that bridges the gap between care and education and that focuses on young children's learning and development (from birth to 6 years of age) in a variety of settings –families, playgroups, pre-schools, drop-in centres, childminders, crèches and nurseries, infant classes, and after school groups. The identity of this sector is being shaped by developments at policy, practice and research level.

### **Early Childhood Care and Education**

At **policy level** there are 2 key initiatives relevant to early childhood care and education.

The National Childcare Strategy (DJELR, 1999) highlights the needs and rights of children whose parents are active in the labour market. It makes a clear and unambiguous statement that *'care and education are inextricably linked elements in a child's holistic development'* (DJELR, 1999:45) and recommends that *'this reality must be reflected in the ethos and programme of all services'* (DJELR, 1999: 45). The National Co-ordinating Childcare Committee and 33 county childcare committees were established to realise the strategy's recommendations at national and local level respectively. The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (2000-2006) is the primary source of current funding with a budget of Euro 349.49 million to be spent over 6 years on expanding provision and access to early childhood services, supporting the staffing in these services and enhancing the quality of these services

The White Paper *'Ready to Learn'* (DES,1999) aims to support the development of children through high quality early education with a particular focus on the target groups of the disadvantaged and those with special needs. It highlights that *'for young children, education and care should not be separated, but should be provided in a complementary seamless fashion'* (DES, 1999: 4). The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was established in 2002 to meet many of the recommendations of the White Paper. It's brief is to develop and co-ordinate childhood care and education and one of its core

objectives is to develop an overarching national quality framework, that is a set of quality standards for all of the different settings where early learning takes place including the infant classes in the schools, and a system to facilitate compliance with these standards.

The fact that there is no coherent and integrated national policy for early childhood care and education, makes it difficult to consolidate the identity of the early childhood care and education sector. However the fact that the key policy documents display consensus on the inseparable nature of care and education, holds great promise.

At **provision and practice level**, progress in relation to a distinct early childhood care and education sector has been much slower to take shape

There is **no overarching funding system** for early childhood care and education. State investment is limited, and has actually served to maintain a divide between care and education. For example, provision in what is traditionally seen as the Childcare sector (e.g. pre-schools, nurseries, crèches) is private, community or voluntary based and is either self-funded or partly state funded with grants from DJELR or from DoH. In contrast, provision in what is traditionally seen as the Education Sector (e.g. Junior and Senior Infants in the school system) is state based funded by DES. However the funding divide and consequently the structural divide is becoming blurred –for example, the DES is increasingly funding pre-school provision in disadvantaged areas including the Rutland Street Pre-School Project (1969), the Early Start Pre-School Project (1994, 40 schools) and the Traveller preschools. Such initiatives are facilitating a more co-ordinated approach to early childhood care and education.

As of yet, there is **no overarching curriculum** for early childhood care and education. Early years services outside the formal school system either provide a

particular programme such as Montessori or High/Scope or follow a broad play-based curricular approach (Hayes, 2001). In the schools, the 1971 Primary School Curriculum was superseded by a revised curriculum in 1999 that is delivered in the infant classes. However, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is currently developing a single framework for early learning to be used by all those working with young children from birth to six years. The development of a national framework is a new departure in many ways because it highlights the importance of early learning beginning at birth and addresses it in a more inclusive manner than heretofore.

There is no agreed overarching system for **staff qualifications and training** in early childhood care and education. Staff working in what is traditionally the Childcare Sector have variable qualifications. Attempts are being made to address this variation - the publication of the *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (DJELR, 2002) provides a co-ordinated vision and clear pathway for training for those working in the sector outside the formal school system. In contrast, staff working in what is traditionally known as the Education Sector, have a standardised teaching qualification, but their pre-service training often offers only a limited focus on the early years. While we are quite a long way off it, an overarching system for staff qualifications and training in early childhood care and education would undoubtedly have benefits for young children - staff specialised to work with children from birth to six years in any setting, and a more seamless approach to provision.

As of yet, there are **no overarching regulations or standards** for early childhood care and education. Provision within what is traditionally the Childcare Sector is governed by the Childcare (Pre-school Services) regulations (1991), which set minimum standards for all different types of preschool settings. Provision in what is traditionally the education sector is governed by the Education Acts, which are relevant to the infant classes in primary schools. However, the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education is

currently devising an overarching set of quality standards and a system to ensure compliance with them in all of the settings where early learning takes place. The benefits of overarching standards include assurance that there is consistency in the quality of provision for children between the ages of birth and 6 years and again, an integrated approach to care and education.

At provision/practice level, there is still a divide between early years care and early years

education, but the situation is evolving, with overarching developments underway at many levels.

At **research** level, there is a growing body research looking at early childhood care and education in Ireland. In an audit of all of the research undertaken in the area, from 1990-present day, the CECDE found that there were over 1000 pieces. While a growing research profile is apparent, and is helping to forge an empirical information base for the development of the early childhood care and education sector, there remains much scope for further progress.

## **Conclusion**

Transformations how we conceptualise childhood are catalysing the emergence of a distinct early childhood care and education sector. However, there is much to be done in relation to consolidating the identity of this sector. While there has been significant evolution in bridging the artificial divide between care and education, increased elaboration at policy level and implementation at provision/practice level, supported by Irish research, is required. This would bring us in line with many other European countries who provide a comprehensive 'educare' system, but more importantly, it would provide assurance that we are responding meaningfully to our youngest children's needs and rights, and providing them with experiences that will enrich their subsequent development and lifelong learning.