Unreasonable expectations: the dilemma for pedagogues in delivering policy objectives

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ABSTRACT: Internationally, early childhood care and education policy is increasingly informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989). In the Republic of Ireland, the importance of this convention was reflected in the National Children's Strategy (2000), espousing a 'whole child perspective'. This strategy served as a catalyst for the development of a myriad of policy initiatives that have established quality as a core principle of pedagogical practices within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECCE) settings. Significantly, there is now a National Quality Framework: *Síolta*, Diversity and Equality Guidelines as well as an Early Childhood Curriculum Framework: *Aistear*. Furthermore, there has been a review of the Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations, 1996, resulting in the publication and implementation of the revised Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations, 2006. Each of these initiatives delineate a particular construct of the child and impact considerably on those working within the ECCE sector. Hence, this paper explores constructions of childhood as elucidated through the initiatives outlined from 2000 to 2006 and considers their implication for practice within ECCE. When measured against the inadequacy of the staffing and management of the Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations 2006, the core question is whether it is reasonable to expect pedagogues to deliver upon ambitious policy objectives.

RÉSUMÉ: Au niveau international, les politiques d'accueil et d'éducation de la petite enfance sont de plus en plus influencées par la Déclaration internationale des droits de l'enfant (1989). En République d'Irlande, l'importance de cette Convention se reflète dans la Stratégie Nationale pour les Enfants (2000), épousant la perspective d'une prise en compte de l'enfant dans sa globalité. Cette stratégie a servi de catalyseur pour le développement d'une myriade d'initiatives politiques qui ont établi la qualité comme un principe fondamental des pratiques pédagogiques dans les établissements de la petite enfance. De manière significative, il existe désormais un cadre de qualité national: *Síolta*, guide de la diversité et de l'égalité ainsi qu'un curriculum préscolaire: *Aistear*. De plus, il y a eu une revue de la Réglementation de la petite enfance (services préscolaires), en 1996, aboutissant à la publication et la mise en œuvre de la Réglementation révisée de la petite enfance (services préscolaires), en 2006. Chacune de ces initiatives présente une image particulière de l'enfant et influence considérablement ceux qui travaillent dans le secteur de la petite enfance. Aussi cet article explore-t-il les constructions de l'enfance telles qu'elles apparaissent à travers les initiatives développées entre 2000 et 2006 et considère leur incidence pour la pratique dans le champ de la petite enfance. La principale question, au regard de l'insuffisance du recrutement et du management dans la Réglementation de la petite enfance (services préscolaires) de 2006, est de savoir s'il est raisonnable d'attendre que les pédagogues remplissent les objectifs politiques ambitieux.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: International richtet sich die Kleinkinderbetreuung und Bildungspolitik zunehmend nach der UN-Kinderechte-Konvention (1989). In der Republik Irland wurde die Bedeutung dieses Abkommens in der Nationalen Kinder-Strategie (2000) widergespiegelt, die für das, Perspektive des ganzen Kindes' eintritt. Diese Strategie diente als Katalysator für die Entwicklung einer Vielzahl von politischen Initiativen, die Qualität als ein Grundprinzip der pädagogischen Praxis in frühpädagogischen Einrichtungen zugrundelegen. Bezeichnenderweise gibt es jetzt ein Nationales Qualitäts-Rahmenwerk, Síolta', Vielfalt- und Gleichstellungs-Leitlinien sowie einen Bildungsplan für die frühe Kindheit, Aistear'. Darüber hinaus hat es 1996 eine Überprüfung der Kinderbetreuungsbestimmungen gegeben, aus der 2006 die Veröffentlichung und Umsetzung der revidierten Kinderbetreuungsbestimmungen resultierte. Jede dieser Initiativen entwirft eine bestimmte Konstruktion des Kindes und beeinflusst erheblich die Arbeit innerhalb der frühpädagogischen Einrichtungen. Deshalb untersucht dieses Papier Konstruktionen von Kindheit, wie sie durch die Initiativen von 2000 bis 2006 erhellt wurden, und betrachtet ihre Auswirkungen für die frühpädagogische Praxis in den Einrichtungen. In Anbetracht der Unzulänglichkeit der Bestimmungen zu Personal und Management der Kinderbetreuung von 2006 ist die zentrale Frage, ob es vernünftig ist zu erwarten, dass Pädagogen und Pädagoginnen der Verwirklichung ehrgeiziger politischer Ziele gerecht werden können.

RESUMEN: A nivel internacional, Early Childhood Care y la política de educación es cada vez más influenciada por la Convención de las Naciones Unidas sobre los Derechos del Niño (1989). En la República de Irlanda, la importancia de esta Convención se refleja en la Estrategia Nacional de la Infancia (2000), adoptando una 'perspectiva del niño en su totalidad'. Esta estrategia ha servido como un catalizador para el desarrollo de una miríada de iniciativas políticas que han establecido la calidad como un principio fundamental de las prácticas pedagógicas en la configuración de la AEPI. Significativamente, existe ahora un marco de calidad nacional: Síolta, Diversidad y la Igualdad de directrices, así como un currículo de educación infantil temprana: Aistear. Además, ha habido una revisión de la normativas preescolares de 1996, dando lugar a la publicación y aplicación de las Normativas de Servicios Preescolares, 2006. Cada una de estas iniciativas, delinean una particular construcción del niño e impactan considerablemente en las personas que trabajan en el sector de la AEPI. Por lo tanto, este trabajo explora las construcciones de la infancia, según lo expuesto a través de las iniciativas presentadas desde 2000 hasta 2006, y considera sus implicaciones para la práctica dentro de la AEPI. Considerando la insuficiencia de la dotación de personal y la gestión del cuidado de niños (Pre-school Services) de 2006, la cuestión central es si es razonable esperar que los pedagógos puedan cumplir los ambiciosos objetivos de la política?

Keywords: policy; constructions of childhood; training; regulations; expectations

Introduction

The period from the mid 1990s represents a time of considerable change in societal and government approaches to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE, see Appendix for a full glossary of terms and abbreviations) worldwide. Consequently, industrialised nations have made significant investment in developing an ECCE infrastructure, perceived as being central to social and economic development in healthy and wealthy countries. Commenting on ECCE policies in 20 participating countries, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2006b) highlight a number of factors that underpin government focus on childcare provision, whereby it is seen as a conduit to (a) increase female labour force participation; (b) reconcile

work and family life on a more equitable basis for women; (c) confront changing demographics in OECD countries; (d) address issues of child poverty and educational disadvantage. While ECCE is predominantly perceived as a necessary pre-requisite to female labour force participation, there is growing recognition that children's early development lays the foundations for lifelong learning (Kagan et al. 1998; Department of Education and Science 1999a, b; Schweinhart et al. 2002; Bennett and Neuman 2004; OECD 2006b; Arnold et al. 2007; Irwin et al. 2007).

The Republic of Ireland (ROI) has witnessed a period of prolific policy development as well as the emergence of a developing childcare infrastructure. Thus, the traditional gap between care and education has narrowed considerably. The focus of discourse has become increasingly child-centred with an emerging child-as agent theme taking precedence in policy rhetoric. While analysis of ECCE policy places the child at the centre, a core consideration is whether the child-at-centre concept has become, or can become, embedded in practice within settings. In arguing that we need to raise new questions about children's services Moss and Petrie (1997) are critical of the dominant discourse about children, parents and society that have shaped public policy towards children in the UK. Critically, they highlight three dominant concepts in which relationships between children, parents and society are framed:

(1) Children are the private responsibility of parents.
(2) Children are passive dependants of parents and recipients of services.
(3) Parents are consumers of marketised services for children (Moss and Petrie 1997, 4).

There is little doubt that the approach to providing children's services has been similarly framed in the ROI within which the emphasis is placed primarily on the child and parents as well as parents and the market place with scant regard for the role of the child in society, societal responsibility or the broader social context (Moss and Petrie 1997). Indeed it can be argued that while children are located at the heart of policy development at a macro level, policy implementation at a micro level as manifest through the provision of children's services is firmly embedded within a mercantile paradigm. Effectively, in spite of a child-centred positioning in policy, as the ROI became increasingly prosperous and progressive in terms of building a knowledge society and encouraging female labour force participation, children have become problematic (James and Prout 1997; James, Jenks, and Prout 1998; Wyness 1996, 2000, 2006; Corsaro 2005), resulting in a multiplicity of concerns, changing viewpoints and altering conceptions of childhood. James et al. (1998, 10) succinctly describe prevailing perceptions of children as barriers to women's progression in the labour market, suggesting that they:

… constitute a countervailing pressure to adult success in a flexible and increasingly global labour market, or they represent obstacles to the participation of women in the labour force because of the expectation that it is their mothers or other female carers who will take the burden of attending to children's needs.

Constructions of childhood fulfil a dual purpose. At one end of a continuum, they influence early childhood pedagogy and policy and are strongly linked to perspectives about the purpose and nature of early childhood education. At the other end, they shape discourses about the roles and responsibilities of families, communities, government and society as a whole. In analysing these constructions, we begin to

understand the manner in which they are enmeshed in a myriad of social, political, historical and economic trajectories. Ultimately, we understand why policy and practice are the way they are.

Irish policy context: 1990–2006

Up until the mid 1990s, the State had little or no involvement with childcare, reflecting historical constitutional parameters that delineated the State's responsibility for children within the confines of the family unit. Indeed Article 41.2 of the Irish Constitution, *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, consolidates the place of the Irish mother within the home: 'The state recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the state a support without which the common good cannot be achieved'.

Crucially, Article 42 supports and protects the family as the cornerstone of Irish society, recognising the family as the child's principal educator. Ultimately, the State's responsibility lay in the areas of primary and secondary education and in the child protection system operated through the Health Boards (now the Health Services Executive). Childrearing, regarded as a private matter, was the responsibility of women who fulfilled the role of wife and mother in the home (Kennedy 2001).

However, the traditional role of wife and mother was to undergo radical transformation from the 1970s onwards. Ireland's entry to the European Union in 1973 marked a significant shift in society's view of women, resulting in a change in emphasis from primary carer within the home to that of participant in the labour market. Accordingly, children's vulnerability and dependency was exposed by this dramatic societal shift. In 1985, a United Nations Convention against All Forms of Discrimination against Women ratified and transposed into Irish law the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. While directed at improving the circumstances of women, it also has implications for the well-being and development of children as demonstrated through Article 6 which decrees that state parties are responsible for ensuring 'to the maximum extent possible the development of the child'. Also in 1985, the need to cater for working parents with regard to childcare provision and a demand for state run childcare gathered momentum (Kennedy 1999, 2001; Purcell 2001; Devine et al. 2004). Finding the balance between the need to provide childcare provision for working parents on the one hand with the need to safeguard and enhance child development within ECCE provision on the other continues to dominate childcare discourse in the ROI.

The childcare debate was stalled during the recession of the 1980s. It returned to prominence on political and social agendas with the emergence of the Celtic tiger from the mid 1990s onwards. This period saw ever increasing numbers of women return to the labour force, prompting the OECD (2006a, 109) to refer to the economic boom as the 'Celtic Tigress'. The childcare landscape and consequent policy development has been pre-dominantly shaped by:

(1) Unprecedented economic growth from the mid 1990s onwards (National Economic and Social Forum 2001, 2005; Combat Poverty Agency 2005; National Women's Council of Ireland 2005; Office of the Minister for Children 2007).
(2) Accelerated social change including changing demographics, marital breakdown, divorce legislation and increasing numbers of lone parent families

(Department of Health and Children 2000; Kennedy 1999, 2001; Purcell 2001; NESF 2001, 2005; O'Sullivan 2005).

(3) Growing recognition of the benefits of good quality early childhood education for all children (DES 1999a; Martin 1998; NESF 2005; CPA 2005).

Contrary to Article 41.2 of the Irish Constitution, the increasing involvement of women in work outside the home necessitated the provision of out of home childcare arrangements (DHC 1999; Kennedy 2001; Purcell 2001; NESF 2001, 2005; OMC 2007). The traditional male breadwinner model was dramatically altered by new found female aspirations and labour market participation. This dramatic transformation in the role of women continues to impact on the provision of services for children and consequently on their early experiences to the present day.

Significant new challenges were created for the State by the combination and magnitude of accelerated social change and economic realities. Fundamentally, its traditional role in supporting the family unit shifted towards acknowledging and seeing the child as an individual with its own needs and rights. This shift in thinking was reflected in Ireland's ratification of the UNCRC in 1992. While reaffirming the parent's role in the upbringing and education of the child, the Convention stipulates that 'state parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from childcare facilities and services for which they are eligible' (UNCRC 1989, Articles 18.2 and 18.3). The UNCRC acted as a catalyst worldwide placing children's rights firmly at the centre of social and political agendas. Conversely, it has created many challenges for individual countries, including the ROI, as policy-makers examine the ways in which children's needs and rights are met within ECCE provision.

In an attempt to progress the implementation of the UNCRC, multiple strategies have been developed in the ROI particularly with regard to child protection and welfare, while fiscal policies are 'predominantly concerned with funding/capital investment in existing services or toward the creation of new services' (Mahony and Hayes 2006, 157). In spite of an impressive range of policy initiatives, the NESF (2005, 33) alludes to the 'relative inaction, peripheral implementation and drift' in relation to their implementation. While much remains to be done in terms of translating macro policy into micro practice within ECCE services, it is possible to delineate a comprehensive construction of childhood from the major policy initiatives which serve as 'markers on the landscape of evolving attitudes and increasing provisions for children in society' (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education 2006, 11).

So who is the twenty-first century Irish child, how has this child been constructed and what are the implications for pedagogues in supporting the development of this child? The answers to these pertinent questions are to be found in four significant initiatives: The National Children's Strategy (DHC 2000), The National Quality Framework: *Síolta* (CECDE 2006), Equality and Diversity Guidelines (OMC 2006) and *Aistear:* The Early Childhood Curriculum (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2009). These initiatives serve to establish the parameters that guide and inform the development and provision of quality ECCE services to which many aspire. Nonetheless, policy is greatly undermined by two major issues: the lack of a mandatory training requirement and the fact that these initiatives at best can be termed soft policy, i.e., they are not a statutory requirement for those working in the ECCE sector.

Emergence of the 'whole child' perspective

Drawing heavily on the UNCRC, the period from 1990 saw a significant shift from a control and management approach to ECCE to an emerging emphasis on children's needs and rights, from a structural approach, to a focus on processes within the child's micro environment (Moloney 2007). The importance of the UNCRC is reflected in the National Children's Strategy (2000), published as a major initiative to progress its implementation. Underscored by three national goals for children whereby they will have a voice, their lives will be better understood and they will receive quality supports and services, the strategy is rooted in the guiding principles of the UNCRC. Thus, it presents a vision through which the ROI will be a place where:

> Children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own, where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society, where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential. (DHC 2000, 4)

Highlighting our obligations under Article 18 of the UNCRC, the strategy commits to supporting parents with their childrearing responsibilities through the provision of quality childcare services. Equally important is the acknowledgement that quality ECCE provides lasting cognitive, social and emotional benefits for children, most notably those with special needs or who are disadvantaged. Accordingly, quality ECCE services have the capacity to meet the 'holistic' needs of children as identified through a 'whole child' perspective reflected through nine developmental dimensions (DHC 2000, 51). Described as being compatible with the spirit of the UNCRC it represents a 'broad framework for understanding children's lives' (ibid. 2000, 11–24).

Clearly emphasising the complexity of the pedagogue's role in working with children, the strategy suggests that the 'whole child perspective' allows them to:
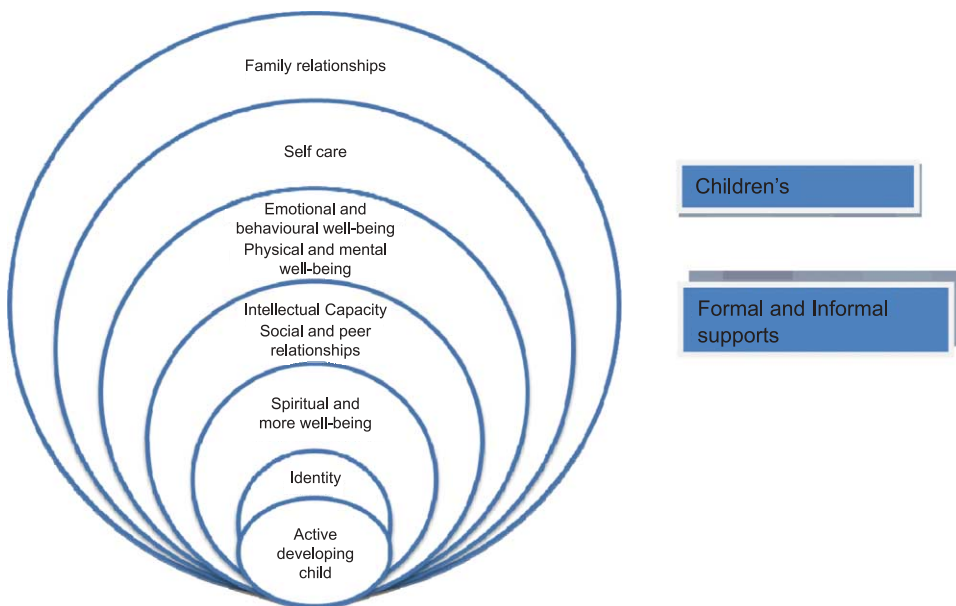

Figure 1.   The nine dimensions of childhood (DHC 2000).

Table 1.   Constructions of childhood within the National Children's Strategy.

The child will:	
Will have a voice	Be an active citizen
Be listened to	Be physically and mentally strong
Be better understood	Be emotionally and behaviourally well
Be an active participant in the world	Be morally and spiritually well
Have innate capacities for learning and growth	Have a sense of identity
Be socially responsible	Be capable of self care
Be part of as well as forming and sustaining positive relationships with family and peers	Demonstrate social presentation

Source: DHC (2000).

> …focus on their own particular interest and responsibility, while at the same time recognising the multidimensional aspects of children's lives… identifies the capacity of children to shape their own lives as they grow while also being supported by the world around them. (DHC 2000, 24)

Arguably, this new way of looking at children poses particular challenges for adults in understanding the multiple contexts for children's learning and development, as well as the need to take account of varying milieus when planning for learning and responding to children's needs, interests and abilities within formal and informal education settings. Table 1 depicts constructions of childhood as delineated within the National Children's strategy.

The strategy clearly indicates that caring for children requires much more than basic minding or simply putting down time.

Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Working closely with the CECDE, the NCCA published a consultative document, *Towards a framework for early learning* in 2004. Following a period of extensive consultation throughout the ROI with a broad range of stakeholders, *Towards a framework for early learning* was revised. As a result, *Aistear:* The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, was published in 2009. Its publication marks a watershed in the history of curriculum development for the ECCE sector. *Aistear,* the Irish word for journey, focuses specifically on learning throughout early childhood from birth to six, and, therefore, traverses the child's first two years in primary school.

According to the NCCA (2009), both *Síolta* and *Aistear* are important milestones in the development of ECCE in the ROI and both play a role in helping practitioners improve the quality of children's early experiences. *Aistear* is premised on the principles that are central to the National Children's Strategy: that children have opportunities to participate in all matters that concern them, and that their voice will be heard. It celebrates early childhood as a *meaningful life stage* and as a *time of being rather than becoming* (Principles and Themes 2009, 6). It provides information for adults to *help them plan for and provide enjoyable and challenging learning experiences, so that all children can grow and develop as competent and confident learners within loving relationships with others* (ibid.).

Aistear presents children's learning through four inter-related themes rather than traditional developmental domains. The themes are: well-being, identity and belonging, communication, exploring and thinking. Each theme contains four aims and each aim has six broad learning goals. The implicit need for staff qualifications and training is elucidated throughout the framework.

Other aspects of the framework support a partnership approach to working with children, together with the need for reflective practice to 'empower the adult in his/her role as educator and as learner' (NCCA 2004, 69) and the need to plan for early learning, thus 'allowing children's changing interests and responses to learning to be incorporated over time' (NCCA 2009, 12). The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework recognises learning within informal environments representing a more holistic approach to ECCE than heretofore. It includes the active participation of the child in his/her learning based upon reciprocal relationships with caring and understanding adults. There are both implicit and explicit links with the Primary School Curriculum, 1999. However, the subject-based infant curriculum for four- to six-year-olds will continue to be used in primary schools for the foreseeable future.

Construction of childhood within *Aistear:* The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Childhood is constructed as a unique period in which children develop and learn at different rates, and during which they explore, think and investigate as they make sense of the world (see Table 2).

The national quality framework: *Síolta*

Jointly managed by the DES and Dublin Institute of Technology, the CECDE was established in 2001. One of its key objectives was realised in 2006 with the publication of *Síolta:* A National Framework for Quality, covering all aspects of ECCE in the ROI. *Síolta,* the Irish word for seed, relates to the metaphor of the kindergarten as a place of development and learning and the role of the pedagogue as a skilful gardener who supports the child to reach his/her potential. Central to *Síolta* is the principle that 'Pedagogy in early childhood is expressed by curricula or programmes of activities which take a holistic approach to the development and learning of the child and reflect the inseparable nature of care and education' (CECDE 2004b).

In common with *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) *Síolta* is to be used by pedagogues as well as junior and senior infant teachers to facilitate the delivery of quality early education.

Table 2.   Constructions of childhood within *Aistear*.

The child is:	
An active learner	Has a healthy and positive sense of their own identity and place in society
Has innate capacities for learning and growth	Has opportunities for play
Has a positive self-image and strong sense of self esteem	Will be part of as well as forming and sustaining positive relationships with adults, siblings, peers and other children
Has a positive learning disposition	

Source: NCCA (2009).

The aspiration is to 'bridge many of the traditional divides between education and care and between early year's settings and the formal education system' (CECDE 2004, 1). This objective will be achieved through the development of services in line with a series of guiding principles and standards that will serve as the benchmark for all quality practices and service provision in early education. Evidently, the implementation of these standards require significant staff competency. Implicit within them is the need for adults to:

(1) Establish appropriate learning environments.
(2) Understand their own role in providing quality early childhood experiences.
(3) Implement appropriate curricula or programme of activities.

Síolta implies that pedagogues should have knowledge of child development theory, educational philosophy and an understanding of what it is they want for children and how these objectives can be achieved. Crucially, it emphasises the need for enriching and informing all aspects of practice through cycles of 'observation, planning, action and evaluation, undertaken on a regular basis' (CECDE 2006). Ultimately, *Síolta* represents the vision that underpins and provides the context for quality ECCE practice.

Construction of childhood within *Síolta*

Childhood is constructed as a significant and distinct time in life that must be nurtured, respected and valued in its own right (see Table 3). At the core of both *Síolta* and *Aistear* is a commitment to support pedagogues in attaining the highest possible standards of ECCE. Their starting point is the pedagogue, and rather than looking at a deficit model in which poor practice is highlighted, they examine instead that which is working well, thereby affirming the pedagogue in their role, while simultaneously identifying areas for improvement. Worthy of note is the fact that both initiatives are based upon an ecological approach to children's development. Within the ecological approach, the pedagogue takes account of children's learning within a broad social framework encompassing home, pre-school, childminding and formal educational settings. Fabian et al. (2006) posit that curriculum frameworks that bridge pre-school and primary education strengthen pedagogical continuity, thus helping to maintain enthusiasm for learning and school attendance. There is compelling evidence that child policy in the ROI is predicated on an understanding of the need, and a willingness to bridge the gap between care and education.

Table 3.   Constructions of childhood within *Síolta*.

The child will:	
Have his/her rights met	Have opportunities for play
Be capable of making choices and decisions	Be part of as well as forming and sustaining positive relationships with adults, peers and other children
Have a voice	Have a positive identity and a strong sense of belonging
Be listened to	Have a positive understanding and regard for the identity and rights of others

Source: CECDE (2006).

Diversity and equality guidelines

Building on the work of Louise Derman-Sparks and recognising that the foundations for equality and respect are laid early in life, Murray and O'Doherty (2001) developed *Eíst: Respecting diversity in early childhood care, education and training*. While *Eíst* encourages practitioners to reflect on their own practices and experiences, it strongly promulgates the inclusion of diversity education in ECCE provision and training. Drawing heavily on *Eíst*, and set against the backdrop of the UNCRC, international agreements and national policy initiatives the OMC published *Diversity and equality guidelines for childcare providers* in 2006. These guidelines serve to support pedagogues and policy-makers in their exploration, understanding and development of diversity and equality practice. Described as essential to building a 'childcare system that truly nurtures all of its children', pedagogues are advised that they must be:

> … well informed about each individual child, about their capabilities, their interests, their culture and their background. Informed by this knowledge practitioners can respond respectfully to the rich diversity around them. (OMC 2006, viii–ix).

Reflecting similar principles to those enshrined in *Aistear* and *Síolta* these guidelines consolidate the vulnerability and dependency of children within society, while simultaneously placing them at the centre of policy and practice. Commenting on the increasing levels of cultural diversity in the ROI, Deegan (1998, 40) notes that children are attempting to 'learn, live and play free of prejudice' in a multitude of environments including schools, classrooms, playgrounds, neighbourhoods and communities. Teaching needs to be 'correspondingly responsive and caring'; it must 'respect diversity by celebrating all cultures and challenging oppression and social injustice in the present cultures of classrooms and schools' (ibid.). While Deegan's comments are directed specifically towards the primary school sector, they can equally be applied to ECCE. Any attempt to redress issues of diversity and equality are dependent upon awareness including self-awareness, knowledge and understanding of the issues and challenges and an ability and confidence to deal effectively with oppression and social injustice. In the words of Derman-Sparks (1989, 5), ECCE teachers have a 'serious responsibility to find ways to prevent and counter the damage before it becomes too deep'. This is an onerous challenge that must not be underestimated or minimised.

Deegan (1998, 40–1) further observes that teachers have no prior experience of working with either newly arrived emigrant groups or with indigenous groups such as travellers. Irrespective of the challenges inherent in redressing the issues associated with diversity and equality, in the context of an increasingly multicultural society, the diversity and equality guidelines portray the child as being strong and confident, with the ability to stand up for themselves in the face of bias.

Construction of childhood within the diversity and equality guidelines

These various initiatives celebrate the uniqueness of each child. Children are seen as active agents in their learning and in society. Equally, their learning is recognised as being developmental in nature (see Table 4). The OECD (2006) highlight the need for ECCE systems to reflect wider societal issues including respect for children's rights, diversity and enhanced access for children with special and additional learning needs. Hence, 'Learning to be, learning to do, learning to learn and learning to live together'

Table 4.   Constructions of childhood within the Equality and Diversity Guidelines.

The child:	
Has an identity and a sense of belonging	Can think critically about bias
Is comfortable with difference	Can stand up for themselves and others in the face of bias

Source: OMC (2006).

are critical elements in each child's journey toward human and social development (OECD 2006, 18). ECCE policy in the ROI embraces each of these elements and consequently, policy initiatives construct a prototypic child, perhaps an elusive phantom child, but certainly a child of the future. The challenge for pedagogues is to shape the development of this child through a range of appropriate experiences within the micro environment of ECCE services.

Unarguably, the pedagogue's role is complex, demanding and challenging. It requires skill, ability and competence in understanding and applying child development knowledge. Simultaneously, it involves the coordination of a multiplicity of tasks that include materials, time and children, as well as thinking about the learning environment, task differentiation and assessment. It also entails 'pedagogical framing' that includes behind the scenes work, provision of materials, arrangement of space and the establishment of routines within the setting (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002). In considering the concept of the prototypic child it is obvious that the task of the pedagogue is to prepare the child for the challenges of life in the twenty-first century. In light of the lack of a minimum training standard within the revised Childcare (Preschool Services) Regulations, 2006, the only statutory instrument in the ROI by which ECCE standards are regulated and measured, this expectation may be unrealistic.

Process variables and the Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations

A focus on child development is an essential component of the revised Childcare (Preschool Services) Regulations, 2006, which embrace the nine dimensions of childhood development as espoused in the NCS (2000). This serves to firmly establish quality as a core principle of practice within ECCE. Given that these regulations are the only statutory requirement governing the establishment and day-to-day running of ECCE services in the ROI, this approach represents a major shift in emphasis from a predominant focus on structural characteristics to a much welcome focus on processes within settings.

Promoting the provision of quality ECCE, the childcare regulations oblige pedagogues to ensure that each child's learning, development and well-being is facilitated:

> … within the daily life of the service, through the provision of the appropriate opportunities, experiences, activities, interactions, materials and equipment, having regard to the age and stage of development of the child and the child's cultural context. (DHC 2006, 35)

Moreover, in line with an ecological approach pedagogues must be:

> … pro-active in ensuring that appropriate action is taken to address each child's needs in cooperation with his/her parents and following consultation, where appropriate, with other relevant services. (DHC 2006, 36)

In meeting these needs pedagogues should 'recognise how children affect and, in turn, are affected by the relationships, environments and activities around them' (DHC 2006, 36; DHC 2000).

These provisions imply a certain level of knowledge, competency and skill on behalf of the pedagogue. The realisation of this aspirational level of knowledge, competency and skill is considerably undermined by Regulation 8: Management and Staffing, which stipulates simply that a person carrying on a pre-school service shall ensure that 'a sufficient number of suitable and competent adults are working directly with the children in the pre-school setting at all times' (DHC 2006, 37). In this regard, a suitable and competent adult is defined as a 'person (over 18 years) who has appropriate experience in caring for children under six years of age and/or who has an appropriate qualification in childcare' (DHC 2006, 38). The responsibility lies with the childcare provider to determine what constitutes appropriate experience or qualifications. This regulation devalues both the importance of the pedagogue's role in moulding children's development during their formative years as well as the highly skilled nature and content of ECCE. It is extremely unlikely that any 18-year-old has appropriate experience in caring for children under 6-years-old enabling them to adequately implement the child development provisions of the childcare regulations, let alone hold an appropriate qualification.

In this construct, ECCE is perceived as physical care that can be undertaken by women without training (Jalongo et al. 2004; OECD 2006; Lobman et al. 2007). Conversely, ECCE policy demands that pedagogues should have the capacity to provide quality services taking account of the milieus of children's lives, their individual needs and learning styles as well as working collaboratively with parents and other professionals.

Hargreaves (2007, 231–2) argues that we can learn from the past which serves as a motivator through which we can progress. Accordingly, the 'point of progress is not to ignore or suppress the past, but to learn from it and with it where we can'. In consideration of this argument, one must question the appropriateness of an 'and/or approach' to qualified staffing within the ECCE sector. In this respect, other countries, notably New Zealand, has taken innovative steps to ensure that those working in ECCE attain the highest possible standard of training by 2012. Equally, one cannot ignore the criticism of the exact same approach to staffing within the previous childcare regulations (1996) by the P2000 Expert Working Group report (1999). This report noted that the expectation in relation to appropriate experience and qualifications in childcare was 'understandably frustrating' for everyone working in the ECCE sector (DJELR 1999, 29). Furthermore, they alluded to confusion with regard to the meaning of these terms and what qualifications are appropriate. It is inconceivable that the same *laisse faire* approach to training and qualifications has not been redressed through the revised childcare regulations a decade later not withstanding a myriad of policy initiatives that point to the need for qualifications and training at many levels.

The issue is compounded by a modest requirement that childcare providers should aim to have 'at least fifty per cent of childcare staff with a qualification appropriate to the care and development of children' and that qualified staff 'should rotate between age groupings' (DHC 2006, 39). This begs the question: how can pedagogues with little or no training deliver the numerous aspirations embedded within policy? In this regard, the revised childcare regulations are inherently flawed, prompting the question: would a parent leave a child in a hospital in the knowledge that 50% of the staff was qualified?

Community childcare provision in the ROI has been characterised by a combination of trained/semi-trained/untrained staffing for many years. A number of researchers highlight significant dissatisfaction and frustration, as well as the ineffectiveness of this approach (OECD 2004, 2006; NESF 2005; Moloney 2007). As far back as 1999, the National Childcare Strategy recommended that future development of childcare should aim for a minimum of 60% of staff working directly with children to have basic training of at 'least three years at post-18 level' incorporating both the theory and practice of pedagogy and child development (DJELR 1999, 29).

Highlighting the necessity of grounding ECCE practices in theory, Pianta et al. (1997) argue that in order to address pressing ECCE concerns at local level we tend to create a vacuum that is filled by practices that are less and less linked to theory. The disconnect between policy, theory and practice creates challenges and difficulties for pedagogues in understanding how 'basic processes related to particular problems, and theories regarding those processes, can directly contribute to designing useful practice' (Pianta et al. 1997, 11). A fundamental principle at the heart of quality ECCE provision has been overlooked in the rush to address changing demographics and consequent requirement to develop a childcare infrastructure. Services must be staffed by appropriately trained personnel.

Notwithstanding an overarching objective to enhance the quality of ECCE and shape the emerging professionalism of the sector, there is every possibility that this goal will in fact be undermined by the childcare regulations. The mismatch between key stakeholder expectations and the capacity of pedagogues to deliver on such expectations is obvious.

While the progressive focus on child development within the revised Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations, 2006, represents a unified approach to quality, it appears that those responsible for revising the previous regulations (1996) failed to learn from the past or to take account of the many other highly pertinent initiatives developed to guide and inform the ongoing development of a comprehensive ECCE infrastructure.

Professional development

A number of studies highlight the direct association between professional development and the quality of early year's environment (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002; Bryant et al. 2004; Sylva et al. 2004). Such studies are supported by findings from Head Start FACES: the Administration of Children Youth and Families (ACYF 2001) and the Administration of Children and Families (ACF 2003). Utilising the Early Childhood Environmental Scale-Revised, Byrant et al. (2004) found that even though two-thirds of lead teachers had four year college degrees or higher, the overall quality of the environment was unexpectedly below the good range on the ECERS-R. Conversely, while only a third of lead teachers in the FACES study (2001) and 39% in the FACES (2003) study had a BA degree or higher, average quality in head start classrooms in both studies approached the good benchmark on the ECERS-R scale.

These findings suggest that while the levels of training and qualifications may be important factors in establishing quality, the challenge of how to sustain quality remains. In other words, how can training be translated into quality practices in settings? And, more importantly, how can quality practices be maintained?

All of these issues are interwoven in the central thrust of policy in the ROI, to increase the professionalism of the ECCE sector by building the capacity of those already

working or preparing to work within it. Initiatives such as *Aistear, Síolta* and the provisions of the revised Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations, 2006, while welcome, nonetheless demand much more of pedagogues than heretofore, serving to create an uneasy juxtaposition in which pedagogues must negotiate a labyrinth of change.

ECCE represents a diverse group that differ considerably in their initial preparation, qualifications, career paths, employment situations and status. While the DES (2009, 13) suggest that through the development of both *Aistear* and *Síolta*, 'the breadth and depth of practice in ECCE is clearly articulated', the reality is that there is little consensus on what constitutes appropriate training, or, indeed, how professional development is defined and measured within the sector. Typically, the sector includes a mix of graduate and postgraduate qualified teachers who may or may not have specialist training in working with young children (OECD 2001, 2006; Bennett et al. 2004; NESF 2005; DES 2007, 2009).

A study undertaken by the DES (2007) into training levels found that an average of 41% of those working in the ECCE sector in the ROI held a basic childcare qualification at FETAC Level 5 on the national Framework of Qualifications. This finding is problematic as high expectations have been created within the current legislative framework that place considerable accountability pressures on those working in ECCE. In this regard Woodhead et al. (2007) posit that it is difficult for untrained caregivers to provide growth-promoting care. Worryingly, they claim that long hours and many years growing up in group settings of limited quality pose clear developmental risks for children's well-being. The inadequacy of the mandatory training regulation gives credence to Bennett's (2007) condemnation of short sighted government policies that fund childcare places which cannot deliver pedagogical quality.

Notwithstanding the current low levels of qualification, the government will introduce a universal free pre-school scheme in January, 2010. The objective of this scheme is to give children access to a 'free pre-school year of appropriate programme-based activities' in the year before they start school' (OMC 2009). ECCE services will be paid a capitation fee for each qualifying child enrolled. In return, services will be required to provide an appropriate programme of activities in ECCE. Initially, the introduction of this scheme which is closely linked to quality provision was premised on a requirement that pre-school leaders would have a childcare qualification at a minimum of FETAC Level 5 or its equivalent. However, as a direct result of the low levels of training within the sector an interim measure has been introduced whereby, during the first two full years of the scheme, the pre-school leader must be able to:

> … demonstrate that he/she has achieved a certification for an award in ECCE that includes significant content relating to early childhood/early learning and child development, health and welfare and has at least two years experience of working in a position of responsibility with children in the 0 to 6 age range. (OMC 2009)

All pre-school leaders must have at least a full FETAC Level 5 qualification by 2012. Surely this measure, more than any other in the history of the development of the ECCE infrastructure, points to the considerable chasm that exists between policy and practice in the ROI.

Conclusion

In general, the ECCE sector is beset by difficulties and challenges, many of which have been identified by the OECD (2004, 2006), including a lack of unified professional

identity, inadequate funding and supports, poor remuneration and working conditions. Critically, a common finding across countries relates to weak staff training and pedagogical practices. The OECD, therefore, highlights the centrality of professional education and work conditions to quality services (OECD 2004, 2006). In the ROI, investment in ECCE has focused primarily on increasing childcare provision. Based on expediency in the past, this approach reflected a desire to provide childcare for working mothers in particular, in order to support a buoyant economy. While necessary, such capital expenditure has not been matched by a parallel investment in human resources.

Without doubt, we have developed a broad range of progressive initiatives in a relatively short period of time through which an ideological child for the twenty-first century has emerged. As a result, working in ECCE is increasingly complex and demanding with regard to the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to support children's development. Unfortunately, in spite of the seminal nature of the National Children's Strategy, *Aistear* and *Síolta,* in combination with *Diversity and equality guidelines,* and notwithstanding the development of a workforce development plan (OMC 2009), little progress has been made in terms of adequately resourcing the ECCE sector to enable the vision espoused in these initiatives to become a reality. While the introduction of a free pre-school year in 2010 coupled with a training requirement for pre-school leaders is the first step in the process of redressing the chronic shortage of qualified personnel within the sector, the fact remains that for the majority there is no mandatory training requirement. Indeed, it could be argued that a retrograde step, which may yet serve to undermine the professionalism ascribed to at policy level, has been brought about through the absence of a statutory training requirement in the revised Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations, 2006.

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Appendix.   Glossary of terms

Administration of Children Youth and Families (ACYF)
Administration of Children and Families (ACF)
Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE)
Combat Poverty Agency (CPA)
Department of Education and Science (DES)
Department of Health and Children (DHC)
Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR)
Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)
Early Childhood Environmental Scale. R (ECERS. R)
Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC)
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)
National Children's Strategy (NCS)
National Economic and Social Forum (NESF)
National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI)
Office of the Minister for Children (OMC)
Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)
Republic of Ireland (ROI)
United Nations Convention against All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)