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Reflections on the Introduction of an Early Childhood Education and Care Apprenticeship Model

Authors: Dr. Mary Moloney and Gerard O'Carroll (IT. Tralee)

Has there ever been such a focus on the Early Childhood Education and Care sector? In the last two years alone, the Early Years Services Regulations, 2016; the expansion of the ECCE scheme; Early Years Education Focussed Inspections, the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), and the Diversity and Equality Guidelines and Charter have been introduced. Change is ubiquitous, as initiative after initiative, scheme after scheme is introduced to an over-stretched, undervalued, under-paid and fragmented sector. Evidence is emerging of a sector in crisis, as providers articulate the challenge of attracting and retaining staff, who are no longer willing to work for €10.27 per hour.

The latest suggestion is to develop and introduce an apprenticeship model for the sector. The Government claims that this will address existing and future skills needs, create an alternative source of varied skills supply for employers, and provide a range of career options for young people. It is also thought that such a model will address the supply problem resulting from the increasing staff turn-over which is becoming all too common in the sector. However, it is difficult to see how the introduction of an apprenticeship in ECEC at the present time can redress this particular issue, or realise the ambitious Government targets outlined here.

Let's be honest. An apprenticeship model is a tested and trusted mechanism of training/upskilling the early childhood education and workforce that is used effectively in many countries. Germany for example, has a long tradition, and a proven track record in this area. What is the difference between Germany and Ireland? If it works for Germany, why not here? The fact is, that in Germany, the apprenticeship model is predicated on a well-developed, traditional system, input from stakeholders and well defined existing career pathways. This is not the case with regards to the ECEC sector in Ireland.

As with all aspects of quality in ECEC, a competent system is a necessary pre-requisite for the introduction of an apprenticeship model. Unfortunately, Ireland does not have a competent system. It is in fact underscored by sectoral fragmentation, considerable variance in quality, and a dispirited, and disenfranchised workforce. Not only that, but it seems that almost anybody can work with young children in Ireland. Look no further than the

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (2017) recognised list of Early Year Qualifications where in excess of 500 qualifications from across thirty-seven countries are considered acceptable for working in the ECEC sector. Yet we are planning to introduce another qualification. Would this happen in any other sector? Of course not. Clearly, Ireland is currently not ready for the requirements of an apprenticeship model, and the sector is not in a position to support such a model at present.

The apprenticeship model is packaged and promoted as ‘real life learning’, offering students a combination of ‘on-the-job’ and ‘classroom teaching’. The suggestion being that existing pre-service training programmes are somehow lacking in this respect. The empirical evidence does not support this notion. The current model at all QQI levels incorporates elements of apprenticeship but with inbuilt quality control from educational institutions. In 2016, PLÉ undertook a study¹ across fourteen Higher Education Institutions in Ireland offering full-time undergraduate degree level programmes (QQI Level 7 & 8) in Early Childhood Education and Care. Interestingly, the findings indicate, that across these various programmes, students undertake between 540 and 1,000 hours of supervised professional practice experience. In effect, this means that students spend, on average, 40% of their time engaged in professional practice placement, i.e., working in settings, gaining practical experience. Opportunities for upskilling via the Learner Fund at QQI levels 5 and 6 already exist, and PLÉ recommends that this should be strengthened and extended to QQI levels 7 and 8 in the first instance. Blended learning opportunities can allow the existing workforce to upskill within a professional, reflective space appropriate to graduate education.

Task/performance achievement is a significant aspect of any apprenticeship model. The question, therefore, has to be asked: Do QQI Levels 5 and 6 currently not meet this approach? National and International research overwhelmingly points towards the need for a more reflective, professionalised system rather than a focus on tasks alone. Some of the greatest advocates of quality in ECEC, such as Peter Moss, and Helen Penn argue that practitioners should be perceived as much more than task oriented technicians. Moreover, the ‘*Review of occupational Role Profiles In Ireland in Early Childhood Education and Care*’ which was presented to the DES and the Early Years Advisory Group on May 28th, 2017 advises that in terms of ‘the necessary systemic professionalisation of the sector, such initiatives [apprenticeship] should be approached with extreme caution’ (Urban, Robson and Scacchi,

¹ Funded by the Teaching and Learning Forum

2017, p.52). As noted by Murray (2017) and further supported by the PLÉ research mentioned earlier, there is a shortage of excellent ECEC settings available to students while on training. In the context of an apprenticeship model, this is especially problematic. Why? While undertaking an apprenticeship, the ‘apprentice’ is supported, mentored and coached by the ‘master’ while engaging in ‘on-the-job training’. This issue requires considerable attention before any attempt to introduce an apprenticeship model is introduced.

A further consideration relates to the current climate of economic entrenchment and scarce resources. This calls into question the capacity of Higher Education Institutions to adequately service the needs of an apprenticeship model in a new area such as ECCE. It would therefore be difficult to ensure quality.

Is there empirical evidence of the demand from the sector for a new apprenticeship model? None that we are aware of. What the sector requires, and which is widely documented, is the strengthening of its professionalization and identity. An apprenticeship model could, at this premature stage, have, as indicated by Urban *et al*, the unintended outcome of weakening the emerging professional identity of the sector. The requirement of moving towards a graduate led if not a graduate workforce is not immediately compatible with an apprenticeship model (CoRe, 2011).

As mentioned at the outset, the ECEC sector is beset by change, and many providers are struggling to embrace and comply with new and complex requirements from an increasing array of sources. Administrative/management survival is the order of the day in many services at present, and it is therefore unlikely to garner buy-in from the sector to the introduction of another initiative

The concerns outlined in this article in no way take from the value of an apprenticeship model. Rather, they are intended to highlight the fact that presently, the ECCE sector in Ireland is not in a position to manage and benefit from such a system. We believe that the introduction of an apprenticeship model at the current time, is premature and will not address the supply problem (deemed to be at the core of this initiative) which can only be addressed by improving working conditions, better and fairer remuneration, clear career pathways and professionalization of the workforce.

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