

Invited Guest Paper

**From Vision to Practice
Are Children at the Centre or Clinging on at the Periphery of
Practice within Early Childhood Care and Education
Provision?**

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Key Words: child-centred, agency, policy, practice, quality

Abstract

Concepts such as child-centred practice, children's agency and active participation feature strongly within Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policy. They have been shaped by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Thus children are increasingly recognised as being "able, willing and reliable contributors within their own significant social contexts of home and school" (Wyness, 2000, p. 2-3). What does this construction mean for children as they go about their daily life within ECCE settings? What does it mean for practitioners working with young children on a daily basis? What role do policy makers play in ensuring that the vision for children espoused in policy becomes a reality within practice? Drawing upon a doctoral study, this paper identifies multiple barriers to realising children's agency in daily practice.

Introduction

In the first hour on the very first morning a 5-year-old boy asked me why the ball bounced. I knew I was in trouble. Before that day was done I was challenged to consider the blueness of the sky, the sticky residue from spilled juice, and the phenomenon of a man sleeping in a doorway on our way to the park. Why? Why? Why? (Ayers, 2005, p. 322).

Parents and teachers are similarly challenged by children's insatiable desire for answers. In the context of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), how do teachers respond to this simple question of 'why'; in their interactions with children? How do they view the child's quest for knowledge? Is it an opportunity for extending and enriching learning, or does it leave the teacher feeling deficient and inferior? Children who think independently, who are social and scientific researchers within the learning environment, who probe, question, demand answers and push the boundaries of knowledge in an attempt to satisfy their internal, innate capacity to learn, challenge teachers to respond in kind (Moloney, 2011).

The teacher's capacity to respond to children is greatly influenced by a) the way in which they view the child as a learner (Woodhead, 2005) b) the value placed upon them as teachers by policy makers, parents and the wider society (Moloney, 2010, 2011) and c) by their experiences.

On the one hand, children are seen as meaning makers, critical thinkers and powerful pedagogues (Malaguzzi, 1993), always in relationships with others, seeking an answer, rather than the answer (Moss, 1999; Moss & Petrie, 2002). Children are co-constructors rather than reproducers of knowledge. Within this construct, ECCE settings are characterised by activity and noise, children painting, playing, drawing, building, reading, eating and “most importantly conversing” (Massey, 2004, p. 227). Moss and Petrie (2002) advocate for ‘children’s spaces’ places where children have opportunities for excitement, wonder and the unexpected, places of emancipation, enabling them to become critical thinkers and crucially, where they are not governed by power.

On the other hand, the teacher’s perspective of learning may be rooted in Locke’s view of the child’s mind as a tabula rasa, awaiting the transmission of knowledge from the teacher. Brostrom (2006) summarises this approach:

Every day we see adjustment in preschool where teachers, in a friendly way, arrange activities and force children to participate. Although the children usually carry out the activities without objections, sometimes they are neither motivated nor do they understand the reason for the activity (p. 396).

Rather than being active learners, children are at risk of “receiving an education as a passive receptor or an inert vessel” (Ayers, 2005, p. 234). The emphasis is upon school oriented subjects (Moloney, 2011; OECD, 2004, 2006) rather than education in its broadest sense that combines aspects of care and education. By contrast, Waldfogel, Higuchi and Abe (1999) urge teachers to move away from adult-determined agendas with their focus on pre-academic work, toward children’s natural interests, and innate capacity to learn, striving to involve them in reciprocal learning interactions with peers and teachers. This commentary reflects a broader societal discourse about the purpose of ECCE. In Scandinavian countries, it is considered to “constitute a unified socio-education system for children from birth to six.... and a social support system for their families” (Bennett & Neuman, 2004, p. 430). As yet, while Ireland has not arrived at a consensus in relation to the purpose of ECCE, it is clearly associated with school readiness (Moloney, 2011) which the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2006, p. 127) claim may “distract teachers from the intense relational and pedagogical work that young children need”.

Equally important, are the perceptions that teachers have developed of themselves in relation to their societal value and their importance to young children and families (Flores & Day 2006; Tucker 2004). ECCE is located within a feminist paradigm (Moloney, 2010) where the traditional construct is that of physical care undertaken by women without training (Jalongo et al., 2004; Lobman et al., 2007; OECD, 2006). Moreover, Bennett and Neuman (2004) claim that because of a historical emphasis on minding, “the idea predominated that looking after infants and young children did not require any significant qualifications and could be entrusted to people with no special training” (p. 427). In fact, Jalongo et al. (2004, p. 146) suggest that the care of young children has been treated as a “natural outgrowth of maternal instincts, a role for which the rewards are intrinsic rather than material”. This attitude diminishes the critical importance of ECCE and serves to undermine teacher’s self-esteem, self-belief, confidence and job satisfaction perpetuating a long held belief that ‘anyone’ can mind children (Moloney, 2010). Teachers not being given due recognition for the complexity of working with young children creates a domino effect that can impact directly upon children’s experiences within settings (ibid).

This paper explores the tensions between policy and practice in terms of how teachers facilitate children's learning and development within daily practice in ECCE settings. It examines key ECCE policies in Ireland, i.e., the National Children's Strategy: *Our Children their Lives* (Department of Health and Children [DHC], 2000), The National Quality Framework: *Síolta* (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2006), the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework: *Aistear* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA] 2009) and the Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations (DHC, 2006). Each of these policies presents a child-centred ideology where the child is viewed as an active participant in his/her learning. Consequently, the level of critical engagement and decision making capacity required of teachers is considerable, and clearly calls for appropriate academic qualifications and experience. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that the ECCE sector needs well-educated, well-trained teachers (Galinsky, 2006; Moloney, 2010; OECD, 2004, 2006; Schweinhart, 2004).

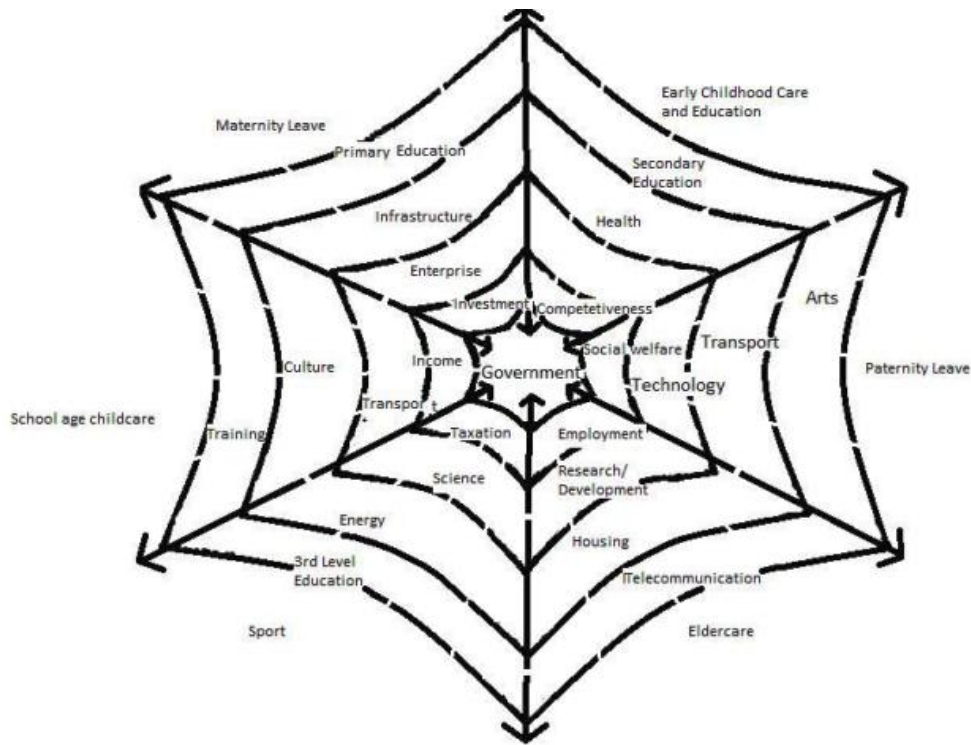
Drawing upon observations of practice and interviews with key stakeholders in ECCE, this paper shows a considerable gap between the child-centered ideology espoused within policy and the realities of daily practice. It highlights the contradictory nature of policy: while policy demands the highest possible standards of care and education, it fails to address the critical issue of teacher education. This anomaly is most evident when viewed in the context of two recent policy developments. As the only statutory policy governing the ECCE sector in Ireland, the Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations (2006) do not specify a minimum training requirement, rather, they requires 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, p. 37). By contrast, the provisions of the Free Pre-School Year in ECCE scheme (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2010) require that the pre-school leader working directly with the children must be qualified in childcare/ early education at a minimum of FETAC Level 5 (See Appendix A). While this minimal training requirement is admirable, and is a step in the right direction in terms of acknowledging the complexity of working with young children, there are issues with the scheme in relation to the financial supports available to the sector.

Lack of policy implementation, and the absence of a mandatory training requirement coupled with inadequate resources has created a perilous situation for children and teachers to the extent that practice is driven by adult agendas and schedules with a predominant focus upon children's cognitive development. These issues undermine children's agency within ECCE and stand in the way of translating policy into practice.

Government Influence on ECCE Provision and Practice

Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 4) holds that "bi-directional" influences within the child's micro-environment have the most significant impact on his/her development and that the child is located at the centre of the ecological system. However I propose that such is the strength of Government influence on social and economic policy that government can be regarded as being at the centre of the ecological system. In placing the Government at the centre, its impact radiates outwards, influencing all aspects of daily life for the child and the teacher. This reversal of influences is portrayed as a pulsating ecological web at the centre of which is the Government. See Figure 1 below for how this might be illustrated.

Figure 1: Ecological Web



Holding the web together are the tenuous strands of government priorities that are interwoven in a multiplicity of demands, where those with less power, agency and voice receive the least attention and allocation of resources. From this perspective the economy is of paramount importance and is closest to the epicentre, encompassing employment, job creation, and income and taxation policies. Competing demands are made on the resources generated within this strand by services for health, education, and welfare for example. Depending on temporal priorities, strands within the web are strengthened or weakened, either reducing or increasing their proximity to the centre. Children, because of their vulnerability and dependency on others to speak on their behalf, are often relegated to the outermost layers.

Likewise because of its low status (Mahony & Hayes, 2006; Moloney, 2010, 2011; OECD, 2006; Saracho & Spodek, 2003), the ECCE sector is firmly ensconced on the outermost layer. Such is the gap between policy and practice, that notwithstanding national and international policies to the contrary, children's needs and rights are far removed from policy, values, and priorities at the centre. What happens at the centre, influences the extent to which parents, families, teachers and others in the community are enabled to support children's well-being and development. Bi-directional influences are strongest between the centre and the proximal strands. They weaken as the distance between strands and the centre increases.

This hypothesis has considerable bearing on children's experiences within ECCE settings. It developed out of my doctoral study which examined how public policy in Ireland impacts on

the quality of ECCE provision in pre-school and infant classrooms for children aged three to six years (Moloney, 2011).

ECCE Policy in Ireland

Strongly influenced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the period from 1999 to the present has been the most prolific period in the history of the Irish State in terms of developing ECCE policies, strategies, frameworks and initiatives as a means of enhancing the quality of provision and bridging the traditional gap between pre-school and primary school.

This paper focuses upon the National Children's Strategy (DHC, 2000), *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006), *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) and the Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations (DHC, 2006) at the core of which is the child's right to actively participate in his/her learning. The child's right to active participation is a "legal imperative" (Lundy, 2007, p. 931) as determined by the UNCRC.

Rooted in the guiding principles of the UNCRC the National Children's Strategy presents a vision of Ireland as 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, p. 4).

Highlighting Ireland's obligations under Article 18 of the UNCRC, the strategy commits to supporting parents with their childrearing responsibilities through the provision of quality childcare services. Such services have the capacity to meet the 'holistic' needs of children as identified through a 'whole child' perspective which underpins the strategy (DHC, 2000, p. 51). Thus, the 'whole child' perspective allows teachers to recognise the "multidimensional aspects of children's lives", and to 'identify the capacity of children to shape their own lives as they grow while also being supported by the world around them (DHC, 2000, p. 24).

Building upon the principles of the National Children's Strategy, *Síolta*: the National Quality Framework was published by the CECDE in 2006. *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 teacher as a skilled gardener who supports the child to reach his/her potential (CECDE, 2006). 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' (Síolta, 2006: Principle 11). Crucially, it recognises that the "competencies, qualifications, dispositions and experiences of adults...are essential in supporting and ensuring quality experiences for children" (Síolta, 2006: Principle 9).

Working closely with the CECDE, the NCCA published *Aistear*: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in 2009. The Irish word for journey; *Aistear* focuses specifically on learning throughout early childhood from birth to six years. Adopting a thematic approach, it outlines children's learning through four themes: Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking. It portrays the child as a "confident and able learner" (p. 7) requiring opportunities to make decisions about what, when and how they learn.

Fundamentally, *Síolta* and *Aistear* establish the vision for ECCE in Ireland. They support the concept of active participation in learning and the child's right to be listened to and to have their views on issues that affect them heard, valued and responded to.

Notwithstanding the development of these practice frameworks, the most influential policy are the Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations, 2006. As the only statutory policy governing the provision of ECCE in Ireland, these regulations delineate the minimum acceptable standards of care and education within settings.

In addition to a considerable focus upon the structural aspects of ECCE; adult/child ratios, space requirements, sleeping accommodation and so on, Article 5 of these regulations places an onus upon the ECCE teacher to facilitate and support the child's development. Accordingly, teachers 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, p. 36).

The Childcare Regulations together with *Síolta* and *Aistear* demand a considerable level of critical engagement and decision making capacity from teachers, and as mentioned earlier, they call for appropriate academic qualifications and experience. Unlike *Síolta* however, which acknowledges the necessity for trained and skilled teachers, the childcare regulations simply require 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, p. 37). It is recommended that at least 50 percent of childcare staff would have a qualification appropriate to the care and development of children, and that qualified staff should rotate between age groupings.

The staffing requirement is highly questionable given empirical evidence of a strong link between highly qualified teachers and child outcomes. Ireland, in common with many other countries, is beset by problematic legacies of which the employment of underpaid and untrained personnel is paramount (Bennett & Neuman, 2004). The ECCE sector in Ireland is highly stratified and is characterised by a mix of trained, semi-trained and untrained teachers (Mahony & Hayes, 2006, OECD, 2004 and 2006). Indeed, a DES study (2008) into the qualification levels of ECCE staff revealed that 41% of those working in the sector held a FETAC Level 5 qualification, effectively placing the majority qualification below degree level (Moloney, 2010).

Universal Pre-School Provision

In an historical move the government introduced the Free Pre-school Year in ECCE Scheme (OMCYA, 2010), which for the first time in the history of ECCE development is linked to teacher qualifications and programme quality. This scheme is designed to give children access to a free pre-school year of appropriate programme-based activities in the year before they start primary school.

Contrary to the Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations, 2006, this scheme requires that pre-school leaders working directly with the children must be qualified in childcare/ early education at a minimum of FETAC Level 5. Crucially, this training requirement creates a direct link between quality ECCE and trained teachers. However, the overall poor levels of training within the sector necessitated the introduction of an interim measure to enable participating settings to ensure that playgroup leaders acquire a FETAC Level 5 qualification by 2012.

Participating settings receive an annual capitation fee of €2,425 in respect of each child enrolled in the free pre-school year. In addition, a higher capitation fee of €2,850 per child is

payable to sessional service providers where all the Pre-school Leaders in the service hold a bachelor degree in childhood/early education and have 3 years experience working in the sector, and where all the Pre-school Assistants hold a relevant award in childcare/early education at level 5. These payments and criteria are problematic on a number of levels; they:

1. Do little to encourage the sector to employ Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) ECCE graduates
2. Are insufficient to motivate those currently working within the sector to attain a B.A. ECCE
3. Do not enable the sector to remunerate adequately teachers who are highly trained.

Barry and Sherlock (2008) found that remuneration of teachers in Ireland ranged from €9.27 per hour for those with up to four years experience, to €10.03 for those with over ten years experience. Such salaries are anathema for those working with young children (Moyles, 2004). They highlight a wide discrepancy between what research says about the important role of ECCE and existing policies and practices that do “not support an adequately compensated professional workforce” (Early & Winton, 2001, p.286).

There is little doubt that while policy demands optimal standards of care and education, it also portrays a contradictory message with regard to the need for trained teachers. Decisions at a macro-level which deprive the sector of vital resources and supports push children to the periphery of practice.

Study Design and Methodology

The overarching objective of the study was to determine the extent to which macro policy translates into practice at micro-level in individual setting contexts. In other words, how does children’s agency manifest itself in everyday practice within settings?

The study was underpinned by a qualitative methodology with a quantitative element. The qualitative component consisted of 175 hours of child observations in 10 pre-school settings (see Table 1). Using a purposive sampling technique, settings were selected because they were “information rich” offering useful information and insights (Patton 2002, p. 46). The sampling frame used consisted of Health Services Executive (HSE) notified listings of ECCE settings within a particular geographic location. Settings represented variation in terms of socio-economic status and location, i.e., urban/rural.

A total of 60 interviews were conducted with ECCE managers, teachers, students and graduates, policy makers, support agencies (National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative and the City and County Childcare Committees) and representatives of the HSE. In addition, 4 focus group discussions were undertaken with B.A. ECCE graduates and FETAC Level 5 and Level 6 students.

These qualitative methods were supplemented by the use of observation tools (Management of Time, Child Activity and Adult Behaviour) developed by the IEA for the Pre-primary Project (1987-1997). Based upon time sampling procedures (Hayes, Montie & Claxton, 2002) these instruments facilitated analysis of the number and types of actions and interventions observed.

Table 1. Profile of Participating Settings

Setting	Community	Private	Age range of children	No of children	Programme type
1	√		3 – 5 years	20	Play based
2	√		3 - 5 years	20	Montessori and play
3	√		3 - 5 years	20	Play based
4	√		3 - 5 years	20	Play based
5	√		3 - 5 years	20	Montessori and play
6		√	3 - 4 years	17	Play based
7		√	3 - 5 years	20	Montessori
8		√	3 - 4 years	24	Montessori and play
9		√	3 - 5 years	16	Montessori
10		√	3 - 4 years	28	Play based

Of the 10 participating settings, 5 were community-based and 5 were privately owned and managed. Four of the private settings were rural while the remaining setting was located in an urban area. The community-based settings were located in areas of social-economic disadvantage and three were rural and two urban.

Data Analysis

Drawing on grounded theory methodology, a systematic, inductive, comparative and interactive approach was taken to data analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz & Bryant, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Analysis was built step by step from the ground up. Codes emerged naturally from the data. Following initial general coding; more focussed coding enabled units of analysis of the data to be fully developed (Charmaz, 2006). Codes were clustered so that links between codes could be established. By reviewing these tentative links, additional categories were identified. Throughout this interactive process, data was continuously integrated and reduced leading to the development of provisional hypotheses.

The IEA/PPP observations were analysed using the computer software programme Statistical Package for the Social Sciences which calculated the frequency of each category of activity observed as percentages of the overall observations.

Findings

The study results yielded compelling evidence that children’s agency (given that their active participation a core tenet of ECCE policy) was not supported within daily practice in individual setting contexts. On the one hand, teachers genuinely cared about the children in their care and had their best interests at heart. For the most part, children’s care and education occurred in the context of warm caring relationships. On the other hand, the study found a considerable gap between policy and practice in terms of how teachers facilitated

and supported children's learning and development. Contrary to the concept of active participation underpinning policy, activities were predominantly teacher initiated and teacher led. This gap between policy and practice was associated with a number of issues including a clash of ideologies between those working in ECCE and policy makers, ambiguity about the purpose of ECCE, confusion about children's agency and how to support it in practice, the supremacy of the Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations, 2006 and a poor sense of professional identity.

A Clash of Ideologies

At macro level, policy makers claimed that the vision for ECCE in Ireland is to provide the best experiences possible for children from birth to six to help them reach their full potential. In this regard, they highlighted the prolificacy of policy throughout the last decade.

The development of Aistear, Siolta...the revised Pre-school Regulations, the development of the City and County Childcare Committees, the work of the National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative, the free-pre-school year, the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs...have helped us greatly (policy maker interview).

While policy makers upheld the vision for ECCE that is at the heart of policy, belief in this vision became increasingly diluted the further stakeholders were located from macro level. There was scant belief where it matters most, at practice level within settings where there was scepticism about the motivation behind the policies. This was most evident in relation to the free pre-school year in ECCE scheme. Although policy makers associated this scheme with the development of a knowledge economy and an absolute belief in the value of ECCE for children, the majority; 87.5% of interviewees (managers, teachers, graduates and students) (N = 46) questioned the rationale for developing this scheme, particularly as it was introduced in times of fiscal austerity. Hence, there was a belief that it was the result of government opportunism. Fundamentally, it was perceived as a cost saving measure that saw expenditure on ECCE reduced from €500 million to €170 million per annum. Therefore, the scheme was "about saving money at the end of the day" (City and County Childcare Committee [CCC] interview).

From the perspective of the support agencies, managers and teachers, there was a "clash of ideologies" within the sector that was not redressed by the provisions of this scheme.

The scheme is being run off an ideology where the child has a right to education...but its market driven. So there's a mismatch because if it's the child's right everything has to be in place to support that. Whereas market forces dictate costs ...so you have this clash of ideologies (National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative [NVCC] interview).

Central to this discourse was a fear that while parents expected a "free childcare place", that settings would not 'be able to provide the service within the funding available' (NVCC interview). It was claimed that the actual cost of providing a childcare place had not been explored by policy makers. Given the likelihood that the capitation fee would remain static into the future, the sector "will not be able to attract well qualified practitioners...people with a degree; they won't be able to pay them" (CCC interview).

Therefore, there is "no vision and there is nobody facilitating the development of that vision either" (NVCC interview). This interviewee was critical of ECCE policy stating that "It's been piece-meal development from start to finish". In relation to the introduction of the free pre-school year in ECCE scheme, she stated that "nobody asked the real question: what is

education about and what do we want for children ...The answer to that question should be debated at national level and involve all stakeholders... We all need to have our say; that has to be built into a visionary plan for the next ten years”.

The Purpose of ECCE

Managers and teachers held strong views on the relationship between ECCE and preparing children for school. Hence, an overall 84% (N=26) cited preparation for school as a primary objective of pre-school. Preparation for school had broad connotations, many of which precluded the child's agency within settings. It was strongly associated with school related activities such as: “getting them [children] used to sitting down like in school”, “giving them worksheets”, “teaching them to colour inside the lines”, “teaching them their numbers and A, B, Cs”, and “getting them used to routines and schedules”. Teachers were concerned that if children were not ready for school, it would negatively reflect upon them.

The NVCCs claimed that there was an increasing “focus on literacy and numeracy” within settings, which was linked to a ‘national push for school readiness’ that is embedded in policy. In turn, teachers were under pressure to translate this macro objective into practice. Therefore, pre-school was seen as a “very good start to [children's] education” without which, ‘they’ll be at a disadvantage when they go to school’ (NVCC interview). Consequently, teachers must “prove that children know their numbers and letters and can colour between the lines...it’s seen as so much evidence of learning” (NVCC interview). If children are able to “rattle off their numbers and taking home worksheets”, it proves that ‘learning is happening...its concrete evidence of learning where parents see results’ (CCC interview), whereas, there is no way of “measuring activities like play-dough, sand and water play or painting at the end” (NVCC interview).

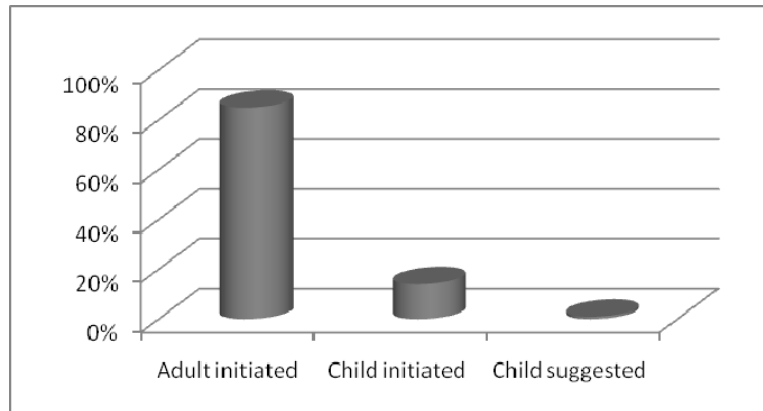
Commenting on the propensity for academia in pre-schools, 88.8% of interviewees (HSE, NVCCs, CCCs) (N=18) described pre-school as “a scaled down version of school”. Fuelling this discourse was the experience of B.A (ECCE) graduates, who, based upon their experiences on work placements while at college, claimed that the only discernible difference between pre-school and primary school was the absence of a curriculum, “other than that they [teachers] do everything else that a primary school teacher would do”. There are inherent pitfalls in this approach as teachers are not “clear about what or why they are teaching anything” (B.A ECCE graduate).

The NVCCs suggested that in mimicking the primary school system, teachers were implementing “pedagogy in the most traditional sense...a stand and deliver method; a good control, sit down and be quiet and listen to me approach”. Both the HSE and NVCCs linked this “didactic” approach to insecurity about practice.

Children's Agency within Settings

Although 85% of teachers (N=16) believed that activities were primarily child initiated; analysis of child observations and IEA/PPP counts of activities showed that activities were predominantly teacher initiated.

Figure 2: Social Origins of Child Activity



Within this model the learning environment is devoid of meaning for the child. And yet, those activities that are not teacher directed, where children are empowered to discover and construct knowledge are the most meaningful.

There were numerous instances of negative teacher/child interactions, didactic approaches and lack of choice. ECCE managers and teachers did not countenance the notion that children were not actively involved in their learning. However, analysis of IEA/PPP Management of Time observations (N=847) indicated that while some teachers considered themselves to be child-focused; they avoided programming, relying instead on routines. For example, routine activities accounted for 22.6% of observations with supervision accounting for 6.1%. Teacher demonstration accounted for 2.2%, giving knowledge/information intended to teach 2%, providing assistance or clarification 0.1%, and/or suggesting solutions accounted for 1.4% of observations. The category “other” (61.9%) accounted for a broad range of activities such as eliciting an action or behaviour, reminding children of rules, providing feedback on activities and/or behaviour, personal activity, transitional activity, giving permission and so on. Rigid scheduling, long periods of sedentary activity, confined spaces and academic pressures were patently evident.

Indicating their lack of understanding in relation to children’s agency, teachers explained how they gave children controlled choice because “you couldn’t just give them free choice; they’re too young and it wouldn’t work” (teacher interview).

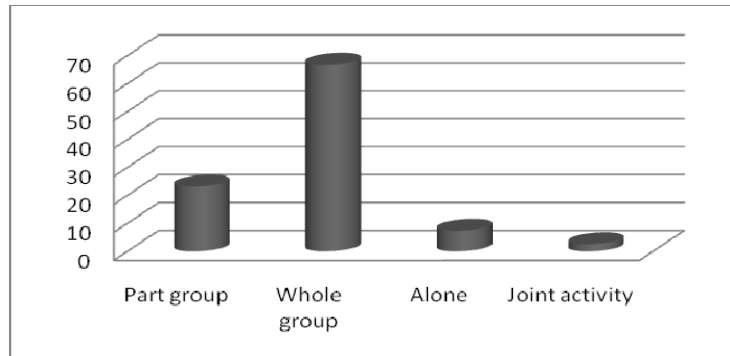
Teacher A: (Community based setting) Let’s say we were doing a colouring activity. We’d always say to the kids “well what would you like markers or crayons” that way we’d get the colouring activity done but they’d get to choose what they wanted; crayons or markers.

Teacher B: (Private setting) I consult with the children every now and again, maybe one day a week...because teachers can only come up with so much.

Although teacher (B) recognised the need for children to have choice in order to “feel more involved”, commonly within this setting, it was taken for granted that the children ‘want to do what we decide’. Indeed, within each of the ten settings studied, children were generally expected to undertake activities chosen by the teachers. Hence, children frequently worked

in groups of four to six with limited opportunity to work alone or with their teacher/peers in joint activity.

Figure 3: Group Structure



Nine teachers (56.25%) claimed that in order for children to be truly at the centre of practice “they should have lots of opportunity for free play”. It appeared however, that the value of play as a mechanism for learning was little understood. Building on the school readiness discourse earlier, there was a belief among teachers that “even though [children are] learning [through play] we have to pull them back and get them to focus on their work; their table top activities and their numbers” (Teacher interview). Congruent with the previous discussion relating to choice, teachers further claimed that they “have to direct a lot of what [children] do, otherwise they won’t learn”, “things would be chaotic”, “and you wouldn’t be able to control them”. Equally, there was a consensus between the NVCCs and teachers; that parents “wouldn’t fully understand the benefits” of play. Therefore, as articulated by one teacher, “parents prefer structure, so that’s what drives what we do”.

Supremacy of the Childcare Regulations

The study pointed to the supremacy of the Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations, 2006. In this respect, 75% of ECCE managers and teachers stated that the regulations are a “core part of our work” (Teacher interview) whereas policies in general “don’t impact on how we work with children” (manager interview).

There were multiple concerns regarding the implementation of the childcare regulations with 89% of interviewees (managers, teachers and support agencies) claiming that there was an “unhealthy obsession with health and safety” (CCC interview) by the pre-school inspectorate. Hence, there were two prevailing discourses both of which are intertwined at macro level but which filter through to practices within the micro environments of ECCE settings.

In the first instance, the focus on health and safety is a societal issue that is embedded in legislation which places a responsibility upon the sector to “protect children at all costs” (NVCC interview). Directly linked to this discourse, was a belief that the childcare regulations have sanitised the environment for children to the extent that teachers are “afraid to let children climb, run, fall or get dirty or any of the normal things that children do when they’re playing” (CCC interview). One manager for instance, described how she had been asked by a pre-school inspector to “remove a vase of flowers from a window ledge” as it

was perceived as a 'risk to children'. In support of such claims, support agencies recounted examples where settings were required to "cover the whole outdoor play area in multi-purpose matting" or to "prove that paint used by children is non toxic" for example. This approach to children's safety was "unrealistic" and linked to an overall absence of 'basic trust' between the inspectorate and the sector (CCC interview).

Overall, 84.6% of managers and teachers stated that their primary role was one of supervision where they "ensure that [children] are safe at all times while they are in our care". Thus, the importance of the childcare regulations was primarily associated with children's health and safety rather than holistic development.

While acknowledging the challenges experienced by ECCE personnel in terms of adhering to the health and safety dimensions of the regulations, the NVCCs claimed that both discourses are valid.

NVCC 1: There is a focus in terms of static control; what can you see and what can you measure... so all the static dimensions of quality were very much the focus of the inspections – safety....ridiculous, to the point of cutting down a tree in case a child would climb up it, getting rid of sand in case the child would slip.

NVCC 2: There is a societal focusthat has become very conscious of safety and health in general...you have this focus along with this huge investment in children in terms of fewer children, more time, effort, love; nothing is ever going to happen to my child.

Therefore, the concept of accountability was to the forefront of practice, where the sector has the "HSE coming down on them telling them this is not safe that is not safe but they also have parents questioning practice". As a result of the perceived relentless focus on health and safety, managers and teachers stated that there was a tendency to lose sight of the child; because "you're constantly on your guard trying to keep [children] safe and keep the inspectors happy"(manager interview)

Although there was widespread agreement that the Childcare Regulations must take precedence, support agencies expressed concern that "providers don't realise that the pre-school regulations are only minimum quality requirements" (NVCC interview). As such, it was felt that the regulations do little to further the quest for quality. Accordingly, teachers are "more concerned with looking at what has to be done as opposed to what could be done" (NVCC interview) in order to achieve higher levels of quality.

Highlighting the "potential" of *Stolta* and *Aistear* to enhance quality, support agencies questioned the capacity of the sector to engage with these initiatives. Both the NVCC and CCCs believed that currently, the sector was "struggling to comply with the regulations...they simply don't have the capacity to even think about those other policies that are so important for their service" (NVCC interview). While the over arching objective is to improve quality, the sector's primary concern is to achieve the minimum standards as set out in the regulations. Ultimately, the regulations may in fact "drive standards down" (ibid).

Professional Identity

There was considerable disillusionment (teachers, students and graduates) with regard to how their role was perceived by parents, government and society. B.A ECCE graduates claimed that during work placements "some parents did not recognize us as future

professionals and although expected professional behaviour, still had the opinion that anybody could work with children.” In attempting to convey the complexity of their role, teachers explained how “we’re educating [children], we’re protecting them, and we’re caring for them”. However, there was consensus (managers, teachers, graduates and students) that there was a societal belief that children’s education only commences on entry to primary school. Consequently, the sector would “never have status or the recognition that it deserves” (Manager Interview).

Managers and teachers were aware of a broad range of factors that shape their professional identity: feelings of belonging, being valued by peers, parents and wider society and effective policy. In terms of policy, there was widespread dissatisfaction with implementation. As stated by one manager, “it all looks good on paper, there’s lots of policy but it fails miserably in practice.”

Managers condemned the short sightedness of the regulations in relation to the absence of a mandatory training requirement claiming that “it sends out the wrong message.” The lack of a training requirement was seriously undermining their practice and their identity. One manager articulated the view that “if we want to be professional we must be trained. We won’t be taken seriously unless everybody who works with a child is trained.” B.A (ECCE) graduates vehemently criticised the lack of a training requirement noting that “all professions are characterised by their training - nurses, doctors, teachers...the ECCE sector seems to be the only area where there is no mandatory requirement.”

Equally disconcerting for the sector was the levels of remuneration, as well as terms and conditions of employment. Teachers were demoralised by the poor levels of remuneration suggesting that “you can earn as much even more, stocking shelves in a shop or selling burgers and you have no responsibilities”. The poor salaries were an indication of the low status and lack of identity within the sector generally. As a consequence, highly trained ECCE graduates are being lost to the sector as they look to countries like New Zealand for recognition and job satisfaction.

I want to work in New Zealand . . . I want to experience what it feels like to work in a country where you’re valued for working in the early years. I want to experience that, to feel valued (B.A ECCE graduate).

Pointing to their lack of belief in a national vision for the sector, it was felt that the low status of the sector and poor parental perceptions had been fuelled by government policies that failed to “address the critical issues; staff qualifications and salaries...until these are addressed, we just won’t have quality” (NVCC interview).

Discussion

At the outset, this paper suggested that children who think independently, who are social and scientific researchers within the learning environment, who probe, question, demand answers and push the boundaries of knowledge in an attempt to satisfy their internal, innate capacity to learn, challenge teachers to respond in kind (Moloney, 2011). Equally, it suggested that the teacher’s capacity to respond influenced by the way in which a) they view the child as a learner (Woodhead, 2005) and b) the value placed upon them as teachers by policy makers, parents and the wider society (Moloney, 2010, 2011) and by their experiences. Moreover, it questions the extent to which ECCE policy manifests itself in practice within settings.

The core message within policy is that the child is a confident and capable learner from birth and an active participant in his/her learning. This message; embedded within the National

Children's Strategy (DHC, 2000), *Siolta* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) forms the basis on which a vision for ECCE has been formulated. Thus from a macro perspective, the vision is to "provide the best experiences possible for children from birth to six to help them reach their full potential".

This national vision is not shared by those working within ECCE who claim that policy is characterised by piecemeal development such that there is no vision. The sector is beset by scepticism and disillusionment which directly impacts upon children's experiences. Understandings are blurred leading to an almost singular focus upon children's cognitive development which loses sight of the "whole child" perspective portrayed in policy (DHC, 2000). However ambiguity about the purposes of ECCE cannot be viewed in isolation. It is evident that a lack of pedagogical knowledge and skill which is directly linked to poor overall levels of training has a detrimental effect upon practice. All of these factors lead to "insecurity about practice" (HSE/NVCCs) where teachers are unsure about how to support children's learning and development. This is evident by the manner in which children's agency is denied in practice. Teachers fear that the realisation of children's agency through choice, play and freedom of movement would result in "chaos". As a result, they focus instead upon getting children ready for school. School related activities including: "getting children used to sitting down like in school", "giving them worksheets", "teaching them to colour inside the lines", "teaching them their numbers and A, B, Cs", and "getting them used to routines and schedules" were prevalent.

Unlike the social pedagogy approach common to Scandinavian countries where ECCE is considered to "constitute a unified socio-education system for children from birth to six... and a social support system for their families" (Bennett & Neuman, 2004, p. 430), it is clearly associated with school readiness in Ireland. This approach may be poorly suited to children's natural learning styles (OECD, 2006). Teachers are pre-disposed to "educating" children. Their perspective of learning appears to be rooted in Locke's view of the child's mind as a tabula rasa, where in the words of Brostrom (2006 p. 396) teachers "in a friendly way, arrange activities and force children to participate. Although the children usually carry out the activities without objections, sometimes they are neither motivated nor do they understand the reason for the activity". Little wonder, that in the context of this study, ECCE was described as a "scaled down version of school" where in direct contrast to the child-centred ideology within *Siolta* and *Aistear*, teachers frequently decided how, when and where children would learn. This approach to children's learning, described as "pedagogy in the most traditional sense" (NVCC interview) not only denies children's active participation in their learning, it points to a distinct lack of teacher knowledge about how children learn and their innate capacity to shape their learning experiences within the daily life of the setting.

Children's agency is further impeded by adherence to the Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations, 2006 which is the ultimate driver of quality in ECCE. Given that this is the only statutory policy governing the sector; it is not surprising that teachers described it as a "core part of our work with children". It is worrying to note that 75% of ECCE managers and teachers felt that policies such as *Siolta* and *Aistear* did not impact on their work. While the regulations must take precedence, it is vital to remember that they set out minimum quality standards only. Therefore, there is a concern that teachers are "more concerned with looking at what has to be done" in order to comply with the regulations, rather than looking at 'what could be done' (NVCC interview). This concern is borne out by teacher commentary which confirms the need to be "constantly on your guard trying to keep [children] safe and keep the inspectors happy" (manager interview). Moreover, support agencies were concerned that the ECCE sector does not have the capacity to engage with

any other initiatives as it is currently “struggling to comply with the regulations”. Consequently, while the sector implements minimum quality standards, they lack the capacity to aspire to optimal quality. As such, the regulations may serve to perpetuate mediocre practice.

Of concern also is the perceived over-emphasis upon the health and safety dimension of the childcare regulations which have created “sanitised environments” for children. This undue focus has reduced the teacher’s role to that of supervisor whose main task was to ensure that children are safe at all costs. Children are therefore not permitted to “climb, run, fall or get dirty”; activities that are inherently linked to child agency and active participation. In addition, it seems that a perceived didactic approach to inspection has resulted in an unhealthy dissonance between the inspectorate and the ECCE sector.

As discussed previously, the perceptions that teachers have developed of themselves in relation to their societal value and their importance to young children and families (Flores & Day, 2006; Tucker, 2004) are equally important. As mentioned, ECCE is located within a feminist paradigm (Moloney, 2010) where the traditional construct is that of physical care undertaken by women without training (Jalongo et al. 2004; Lobman et al. 2007; OECD, 2006).

While teachers were acutely aware of the policies and initiatives that have been developed to enhance quality and consequently the professionalism of the sector, they were critical of implementation, stating that it “all looks good on paper, but it fails miserably in practice”. When viewed in the context of non-statutory policy; *Síolta* and *Aistear* which is dependent upon the goodwill of the sector for implementation such criticism is justified. Moreover, teacher criticism of policy takes on even greater significance in light of the lack of a mandatory training requirement and the abysmal salaries described as “depressing” and where “you can earn as much, even more stocking shelves in a shop or selling burgers”. This finding is consistent with Barry and Sherlock (2008) who found that teachers earn little more than the minimum wage. In this respect, although the capitation fee payable through the free pre-school year in ECCE scheme is welcome, it is inadequate and does not enable the sector to employ or adequately remunerate teachers who hold higher qualification levels. All of these issues are endemic within the sector and significantly undermine professional practice and teacher competency. Worryingly, they also lead to a “brain drain” where highly qualified graduates, so essential to building the professionalism of the sector are being lost to countries like New Zealand.

Conclusion

The central argument of this paper is that policy alone is not a guarantor of children’s rights in ECCE. Policy must be compatible with the needs and rights of children and the ability of those tasked with its implementation. The inspirational standards that underpin ECCE policy in Ireland demand a level of critical engagement and decision making capacity of teachers and call for appropriate academic qualifications and experience.

Although the pursuit of quality as evidenced through policy initiatives is admirable it is a futile exercise in the absence of a mandatory training requirement and adequate financial investment. These issues require immediate attention. Having taken an initial first step towards introducing a minimum training requirement in respect of the free pre-school year in ECCE scheme, a review of the Childcare (Pre-school Services) regulations, 2006 is warranted so that such a requirement becomes embedded within statutory policy.

It is irresponsible of any government to develop policy without providing parallel financial support. The ECCE sector must be adequately resourced to realise the vision proposed at a

macro-level. This means that the government must invest in pre-service training as well as ongoing professional development. In the context of such investment, a coherent vision for ECCE can materialise resulting in the full realisation of children's agency within settings.

Conversely, in the absence of such support, policies espoused at a macro-level risk floundering within the micro-environment of settings due to a mismatch between national ideologies and the practicalities of implementation. Children are not commodities. Their future well-being cannot be reduced to a set of financial spread sheets. Financial expediency at macro level compounds issues for children and teachers. Any compromise at government level such as pertains in relation to training requirements in Ireland results in a reduction of quality in services to children and is destructive. Ultimately, children's agency is considerably undermined within ECCE settings. All those involved with young children whether as a policy maker, teacher, manager or pre-school inspector, must ask themselves what it is they want for children. Equally, they must question the child's location within practice – is the child at the centre or clinging on at the outer edges of practice?

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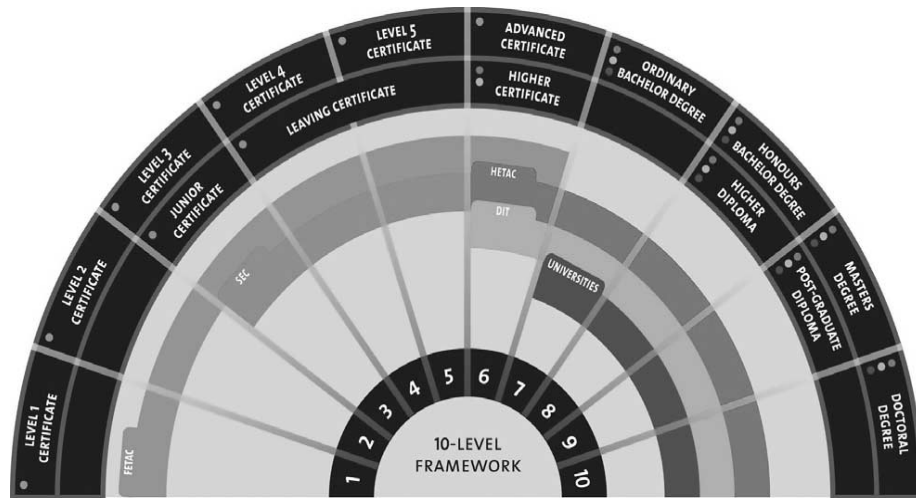
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Appendix A: National qualifications framework



(#2003, NQAI: Reproduced with kind permission)

The National Framework of Qualifications was introduced in 2003. This is a system of 10 levels encompassing the widest possible spread of learning. These range from Level 1 awards that recognise the ability to perform basic tasks, to Level 10 awards that recognise the ability to discover and develop new knowledge and skills at the frontier of research and scholarship.