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A Decade of Reflection: Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland 1996-2006

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‘A DECADE OF REFLECTION’

Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland:

1996 - 2006.

Proceedings of

CSER EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION SEMINAR SERIES I

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Foreword

The Centre for Social & Educational Research (CSER) was established as an independent research and policy analysis body within the Faculty of Applied Arts. The CSER, which developed from research in early childhood in the Department of Social Sciences at DIT, particularly the IEA Pre-primary Project. The IEA Project is an acknowledged national pioneer and lead research project in early childhood care and education (ECCE).

Over the past decade, ECCE has received unprecedented policy attention, both nationally and internationally as governments recognise its increasingly vital role within the evolving social fabric. Within Europe, there is a growing movement towards universal ECCE services for children, where quality care and education are emphasised as key. While Ireland's focus on ECCE has undoubtedly improved and developments in the field are welcomed, we continue to lag behind our EU counterparts in relation to service and policy provision for our pre-school children.

The CSER has, since its inception, researched, monitored and analysed ECCE policy developments and contributed to the ECCE debate through its own research on policy and practice. In November, 2006, the CSER, given developments since the Childcare (PreSchool) Regulations (1996) hosted a seminar with key national and international experts to consider aspects of Ireland's ECCE from a policy, research and practice perspective and to generate discussion and debate. The first in this series of CSER seminars, 'A Decade of Reflection, Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland: 1996 – 2006', aimed to elevate awareness, generate debate, highlight issues and advance collaboration amongst key players within the field.

I would like to thank the seminar speakers: Dr. Noirin Hayes, Dr. John Bennett, Dr. Mathias Urban, Sylva Langford and Denise McCormilla for their excellent and insightful presentations. I extend further thanks to I extend further thanks to Heino Schonfeld, Director of the CECDE who chaired proceedings on the day and to everyone who attended for their contributions and continued commitment to enhancing ECCE in Ireland over the past decade and indeed in the decades ahead.

It gives me great pleasure to introduce the proceedings 'A Decade of Reflection, Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland: 1996 – 2006'.

Professor Ellen Hazelkorn
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Dublin Institute of Technology

Notes on Contributors

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Dr. John Bennett was program manager of the OECD early childhood reviews and co-author of the two *Starting Strong* volumes. He was formerly head of the early childhood and family division in UNESCO.

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Sylda Langford is Director General of the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC), Department of Health & Children.

Denise McCormilla is Manager with the Boarder Counties Childcare Network and Founding Member of the Irish Childcare Policy Network (ICPN).

Early Childhood Education and Care A Decade of Reflection 1996 - 2006

Nóirín Hayes

You are welcome to the first seminar in a CSER series intended to consider aspects of early childhood education and care¹ [ECEC] from a policy, research and practice perspective and promote discussion and debate. In this introduction to the seminar I want to outline some of the thinking behind the topic for today and present - with limited elaboration - a personal reflection to add to the discussion and debate. In choosing to reflect on the development and impact of early childhood education and care policy in Ireland it is no surprise that the decade 1996 - 2006 should act as the framework. Taking any decade as a period of review has a certain danger to it, providing a definition to it which may give a false sense of the reality of policy development and practice. Nonetheless, it could be argued that ECEC became a serious policy issue in Ireland in 1996 following the signing of the final sections of the Child Care Act in December and the implementation of the Preschool Regulations in January 1997.

Service development for young children in Ireland was, until the 1990s, largely driven by the voluntary sector, in particular membership groups such as the Irish Preschool Playgroup Association and the Comhchoiste Réamhscólaíochta [Irish medium playgroups]. In addition there had always been a philanthropic interest in developing family supports for disadvantaged children through charitable organisations such as the Civics Institute, the Daughters of Charity and Barnardos. However, while these organisations did receive some state support for their work the developments across the country were *ad hoc* and unregulated. The Child Care Act 1991 was a crucial piece of legislation, updating legislation from 1905 to bring Irish law into line with much of the practice in the social and health domain. The Act was significant in that it gave a legal definition of the child as under eighteen and focused on the protection and welfare of children and the responsibility of the state in this regard. Specifically in relation to ECEC this was the Act, which outlined the context for the regulation of preschool services. This created a national context within which early childhood care and education settings were regulated and standards established. Prior to the implementation of Section VII of the 1991 Act, early years services were unregulated and despite parents and providers welcoming the regulations there was some concern that they did not go far enough. They called for notification of intention to provide a service but did not seek registration, there were limitations to the services covered so that many childminders were exempt² and there was no requirement regarding the training and qualifications of those providing early years services. In 2006 amended regulations widened the services to be regulated but failed to move on either registration or qualifications.

Whilst the Preschool regulations mark a very particular policy engagement with ECEC, there had been a growing attention to the issue from the mid 1980s with women's groups, unions and, latterly employers, calling on support for the development of childcare services to facilitate the participation of women in the workforce. Evidence of this growth of interest can be seen particularly in the partnership agreements [Hayes, 2002] and in a number of reports, specifically the Report of the Working Party on Child Care Facilities for Working Parents

¹ Policy development for children aged 0-6 in Ireland can be found under the headings of childcare, early childhood education or early childhood care and education. The designation 'early childhood care and education' is gaining currency across the sector in Ireland. Some variations of the term are also used - 'early childhood education and care' is the term used in the OECD (2004). The terms are used interchangeably in this paper.

² The exemption was determined by the number of children under the age of six years attending the service.

[1983] and the 1985 Report on Minimum Legal Requirements and Standards for Daycare Services [Unpublished Department of Health].

In addition to the various reports there were funding schemes available for developments in childcare. Although children, as a group, do not come within the legal competence of the EU, childcare was one of the sectors eligible for European funding under a number of different programmes including the equality initiatives such as the New Opportunities for Women [NOW] programme. Such funding led to the establishment of a number of pilot childcare projects at local and community level. These initiatives coincided with the work of the European Childcare Network, which highlighted, among other things, the very low level of state support for childcare in Ireland when compared to all other European countries (EC, 1990). Such information led to increased calls on the government for support and development of the sector, particularly among those who saw the potential value of childcare to disadvantaged children and their parents. By the early 1990's the impact of European reports, the recommendations from different working groups and the availability of funding began to yield a more concerted approach by interest groups in Ireland for policy action in relation to childcare. At this time, as a result of growing economic prosperity, there was an emerging drop in the unemployment rate that began to give rise to a shortage of workers. This led to employer organisations and unions adding their voice to demands for childcare, an identified barrier to the full participation of women in the labour force and a threat to sustainability of economic growth. Despite the variety of reports and recommendations there was a very limited response at a political or practical level, as evidenced through, for example, the fact that childcare services in Ireland remained unregulated until January 1997.

The 1990s:

It was not until the latter part of the 1990s that attention to childcare policy escalated to the top of the policy agenda. However, there were a series of initiatives from earlier in that decade that drove the increased impetus. One action - the establishment, through the Department of Education, of the Early Start early intervention project in 1994 - did unsettle the status quo and caused the wider early education sector to review its position. The Early Start was established within the existing primary school system and supported the development of a network of preschool classes for 3 year olds in designated disadvantaged areas [Educational Research Centre, 1998]. The classes were staffed by primary teachers and childcare assistants and operated a curriculum reflective of the original Rutland Street intervention project of the late 1960s [Kellaghan, 1977; Kellaghan & Greaney, 1993]. In addition each classroom was provided with an equipment and material grant. The effect of this development on services outside the formal primary school system was reflected in the greater organisation of the not for profit preschool agencies and organisations who began raising the profile of their services as potential sites for early intervention strategies also. Among a number of initiatives at the time, an EU funded childcare project - the DIT/NOW OMNA early childhood training project - offered an opportunity for the sector to come together and review childcare services, identify training requirements and develop, ultimately, a model framework for training and education for early years staff [OMNA, 2000; Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2002].

Interest in the policy potential of early childhood/childcare and the combined influences of the unions, business and the community pillar at the *Partnership 2000* (1996) negotiations was highly significant for many sectors, but particularly so for children. The momentum that gathered on the issue of childcare ensured that it was included within the agreement as an area that needed to be addressed at policy level. While children do not feature in *Partnership 2000* as a constituency for specific policy consideration in themselves they become visible in respect of wider policy issues such as social inclusion (Chapter 4) and equality (Chapter 5). Attention is directed at the expansion and development of certain services for children. For instance, under the heading of combating educational disadvantage there are commitments to

extending the Breaking the Cycle education initiative and to developing an early years intervention project for disadvantaged 3-4 year olds. Under the heading of equality there is a commitment to support measures to develop the childcare sector so that parents, particularly women, have less barriers to accessing the labour market (Hayes, 2002)

In 1997, as a response to the *Partnership 2000* agreement, a widely representative working group, which included childcare providers as well as employers, unions and statutory representatives, met under the direction of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, to produce a national strategy for childcare. The focus of the report of the Working Group was the need for immediate attention to the supply and demand side crises in childcare evident in Ireland at the time. The terms of reference of the group restricted attention to the childcare needs of working parents only. This was a serious limitation and guaranteed a fragmented policy response, as it did not allow for consideration of the wider issue of childcare for all children and their parents. This group considered the wide range of childcare services for children from birth to 12 years of age. This brought the sector of after-school, as well as preschool and other forms of early childcare into the policy arena for the first time and also included reviewing the services offered by private childminders. The final, agreed, report of the Working Group was published in February 1999 and proposed a comprehensive, seven-year strategy for the management and development of the childcare sector. This period coincides with the period of the National Development Plan 2000 -2006.

On publication the National Childcare Strategy (1999) was broadly welcomed. However, the government was somewhat cautious about accepting the recommendations in isolation from other policy documents. As a result the publication of the strategy led to the formation of an interdepartmental group, under the direction of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, to review the recommendations alongside those of the Report of the Commission on the Family (1998), the Report of the National Forum on Early Childhood Education (1998) and the White Paper, *Ready to Learn* (1999). In July 1999, a National Childcare Co-ordinating Committee was established, again under the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, to commence the implementation of aspects of the National Childcare Strategy. The National Development Plan allocated over €400m through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme [EOCP] to facilitate the development of the childcare sector. The EOCP funding covered areas of capital investments, staffing grants for settings in disadvantaged communities, innovation supports and the establishment of the National Coordinating Childcare Committee. Funding was also released to support the establishment of local City and County Childcare Committees, linked through to the National Coordinating Childcare Committee and strengthened through the national voluntary organisations. An interim report of the EOCP (2003) concluded that the performance of the EOCP was disappointing and constrained by the requirement to meet the dual objectives of increasing supply of childcare places for children of working parents and promote social inclusion through provision of affordable childcare.

Alongside the EOCP investment, the Department of Health and Children established a Preschool Inspectorate to implement the 1996 Preschool regulations. Inspection teams were established across the country over the period 1997 to 2000 and comprised public health nurses and environmental health officers. However, concern was expressed about the nature of the regulations and the inspectorate in that the focus was, initially, on health and safety with little attention to the developmental needs of children, the daily routine or curriculum and the qualifications or training of the staff. Within the revised regulations of 2006 these limitations continue with no requirement on setting staff to have a qualification in the field.

The new century has seen some important developments, which have confirmed early childhood care and education as a serious policy issue in Ireland. The growth of local childcare support networks and the broadening of influence of the collective national voluntary organisations has given a visibility and credibility to the sector that was missing in

the 1990s. In addition two important external reports on early childhood care and education have had an impact - one from the OECD (2004) and the other from the National Economic and Social Forum (2005). A structural development of potential was the establishment - in 2006 - of the Office of Minister for Children [OMC] where there has been an effort to bring about cohesion and integration across a variety of policy issues impacting directly on children's lives through, in relation to ECEC, relocating the childcare section from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform to the Department of Health and Children and the co-location of a number of units within the one office. These include youth justice section from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and the newly established Early Years Education Policy Unit from the Department of Education.

At a national level the publication of Siolta, The National Quality Framework [CECDE, 2006] and the forthcoming National Framework for Early Learning [NCCA] create a rich basis for considering the real integration of care and education in services for young children. Finally, the attention to the quality of staff working in the sector and the Training Initiative promised in the 2006 budget offers an opportunity to support and develop a graduate led diverse professional base to enhance the quality of service provision and the experiences of young children.

And yet:

Despite the various policy documents and the increased levels of investment there continue to be dilemmas, difficulties and restrictions to the development of comprehensive quality early educational system for young children in Ireland. Some of these are outlined below and are intended to form the basis for discussion rather than simply as a critique of the current situation.

The focus on women at work: The terms of reference of the EOCP made it clear that investment in the development of childcare services was primarily, to overcome a barrier to the full participation of women in labour market. Taking this focus, rather than a child focus has influenced the way in which services are developed and supported. It has also led to a still unaddressed conflict between the traditional ideology of the family and the economic necessity to attract women into the workforce (Hayes, 2002; Hayes & Bradley, 2006)

A targeted versus a universal approach: As with so many of our social policies in Ireland the approach to the development and support of the ECEC sector has been to focus most investment on services for disadvantaged families and children. While no one could dispute the fact that services provided in areas of disadvantage need additional supports there is some question as to the value of targeting early childhood services in the absence of a universal policy on the sector as a whole. To some extent the sectoral collaboration that has been a feature of developments such as the publication of the Model Framework [DJELR, 2002], the National Quality Framework [CECDE, 2006] and the forthcoming National Framework for Early Learning [NCCA] has created a momentum across diverse settings that is universal and, as such, may provide the path towards a more complete attention to all services experienced by young children.

Centre-based institutional childcare over mixed service developments: With such extensive funding available for investment in creating more childcare 'spaces' there has been a robust response from the building industry and a rapid development of centre based full-day childcare without the concomitant development of smaller, sessional services and family based childcare. This trend has continued despite the available information which suggests that Irish families would prefer a wider choice of settings for young children with different preferences across different ages and family requirements. The danger of the 'corporatisation' of early childhood services [Sumsion, 2006] that accompanies a market-led approach to service development should not be underestimated and is a cause for concern.

Parental funding versus sectoral support: The decision to commit €350m exchequer funding annually from 2006 to assist all parents of children under six years in buying childcare through the Early Years Supplement is one that will do nothing to strengthen the early childhood sector or improve and sustain quality. This crude measure was guided more by an attempt to treat all parents equally than by any commitment to improve and maintain the quality of the early education experiences of young children and there is no guarantee that the supplement will be used to fund the early education of young children at all. Had that money been directed towards the services themselves - through, for instance, a quality linked fee subsidy scheme or a capitation system - it would have marked the beginning of addressing the sustainability of a quality early childhood care and education system. It seems that the need to treat all families the same in terms of investment in childcare - rather than address the rights and needs of young children attending early childhood services, dominated and this may well be a decision that will be regretted in the future.

Childcare versus Early Education: Co-location alone does not integration make! Historically, we have, in Ireland structurally separated childcare from early education in our policy development. The importance of approaching service development in an integrated way has been noted many times [DES, 1999; Hayes, 1995, 2001, 2002; NCCA, 2004; NESF, 2005, OECD, 2004;] and yet - within the recently established Office of the Minister for Children there is a separate Childcare Section and a separate Early Years Education Policy Unit. Were there a serious attempt being made to integrating care and education the National Childcare Investment Programme would have been titled the National Programme for Investing in Children's Services and the units developing and implementing early childhood policies would have been merged. We have a way to go.

From reflection to refocusing:

This last decade has shown a growth in investment in early childhood care and education, an increase in the number of places and settings, although the demand still outstrips supply. There has been a growth and refinement of structures with the creation of the OMC and the establishment of an Early Years Education Policy Unit within the Department of Education and Science. However, there has been only a limited resolution of problems of access and affordability with a large population of children who would benefit from early educational experiences unable to access them. Furthermore there has been a limited development of sustainable, high quality settings for young children and their families with the integration of childcare and early education still in its very earliest stage. This latter concern is exacerbated by the limited growth of a well-trained professional body to provide and maintain quality services. This opportunity for reflection confirms my view that we have yet to place the young child at the centre of our policy development and until such time as we do that we may be compromising the rights of children to quality early childhood care and education, and correspondingly compromising their development, by expediency, ambivalence and the economically driven pressure to increase childcare places for working parents.

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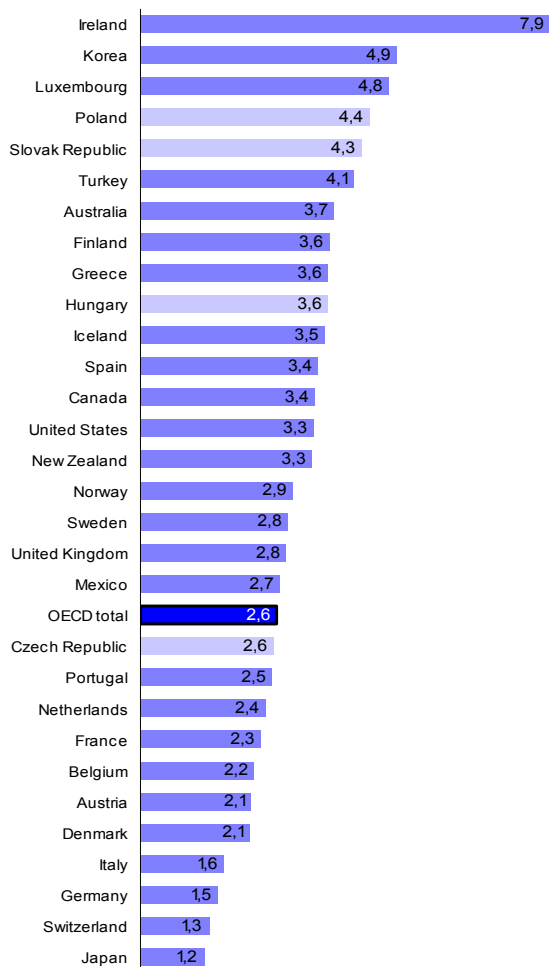
ECEC financing in Ireland

John Bennett¹

Part I – Introduction

Unlike the not so distant past, the Irish economy is rich and dynamic. Among the OECD countries, Ireland is *the* economic success story of the late 20th century (Fig. 1). According to the Irish Department of Finance (October, 2006), the economic outlook remains positive with a growth rate in excess of 5% being forecast for 2007-8. Although a slow-down on the heady years of the late 90s, this rate of growth is still far beyond the present capacity of the continental European economies.

Fig. 1 GDP growth: average annual real change from 1994 – 2004



Source: OECD 2006

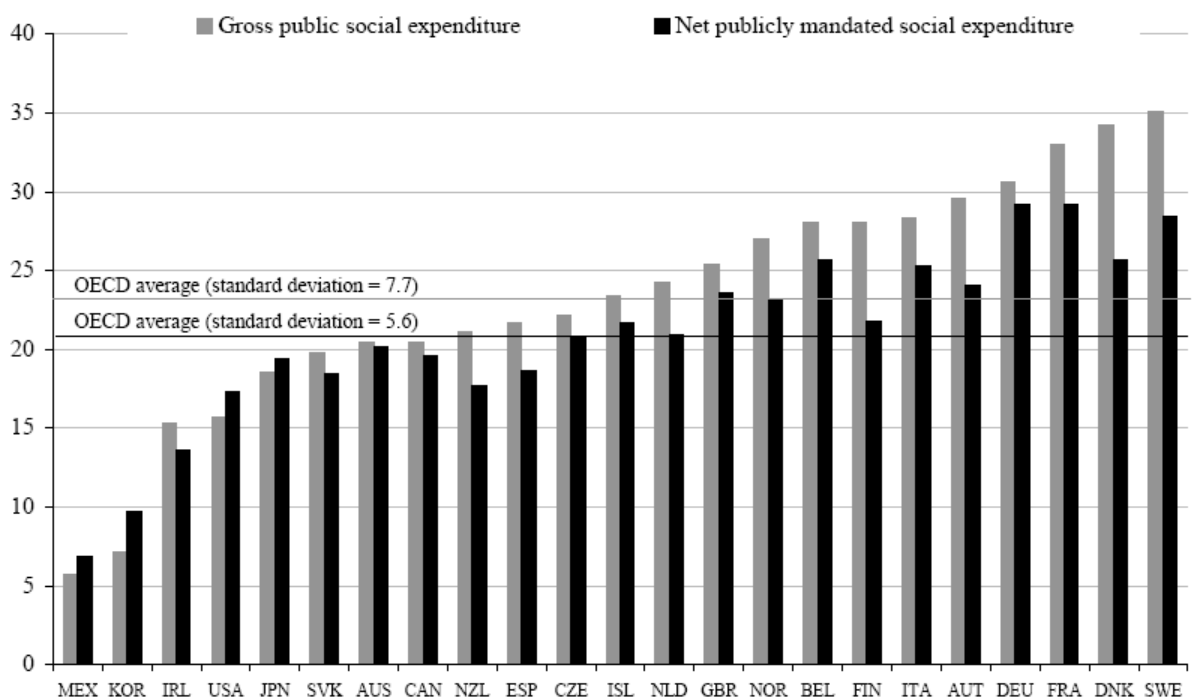
In addition, as affirmed in the NESF report (NESF, 2005):

¹ John Bennett has been involved with the OECD Early Childhood Reviews since 1998, where he has been responsible for collecting country information, organising the reviews in the each country and for publishing the country reports. He is also co-author of the two *Starting Strong* volumes, the first (OECD, 2001) with Michelle Neuman (United States) and the second (OECD, 2006) with Collette Talyer (Australia). The opinions expressed in this article are his own and do not necessarily represent the views of the OECD.

Many of the elements which can make for a strong, progressive, socially cohesive society are in evidence in Ireland. It is also the case that its social capital is still strong (NESF, 2003) with a good tradition of community activity and local ownership. There is also a great spirit of generosity toward societies less fortunate and developed. There is a strong commitment within the caring professions. There is also a growing concern for the national heritage and national environment. Creativity is alive and well, with great dynamism in the arts in all their forms – literature, drama, arts, music, dance and film...

At the same time, it should be noted that Ireland is a classical liberal economy, that is, it is characterised by a) low government spending, and b) significant poverty at the base of society. Like most other liberal economies, government spending in Ireland has been held firmly in check over the last decade, and has fallen, in fact, relative to GNP: from 39% of GNP (national product) in 1995 to 32.7% in 2004. Health spending has increased and now exceeds the EU average, but both social protection spending and education investment are below the EU25 mean, whether one uses a GDP or GNP measure. The tendency bodes ill for people in low- and modest income brackets, for despite the ‘rising tide that lifts all boats’, there is a counter tendency in liberal economies toward income disparity and class polarity – in sum: the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Commercial interests, property owners and the highly educated section of the population have benefited greatly from economic growth in Ireland, but other categories remain at the margins, e.g. single parent families (almost 17% of all families of whom over 48% are at-risk-of-poverty)² the unemployed (almost 7% of the population lives in jobless households), large families, minority groups such as Travellers or immigrant families not covered by social security; the old and infirm with small pensions, and increasingly, young workers unable to access the property market.

Fig. 2 Gross and net public expenditure across OECD countries as percent of GDP



Source: Adema and Ladaique (2005).

Where child poverty is concerned, I could not find disaggregated figures on the numbers of young children (0-6 years) living in poverty (that is, living in families with less than 50% of

² At-risk-of poverty is defined in the *Government Discussion Paper: Proposals for Supporting Lone Parents* (Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2006) as households with below 60% of the median income.

the median household income) or at risk of poverty (below 60% of median), but UNICEF figures (see Figure 6 below) suggest that poverty affects around 15% of the total child population. Irish census figures (2004) confirm this estimate: 9.5% of Irish children live in consistent poverty and 21.2% are at-risk of poverty. A further 4%-5% of children with learning difficulties stemming from organic causes (the usual percentage across all OECD countries) can be added to these figures, suggesting that there is ample room to improve the situation of a sizeable proportion of young children in the country. Early childhood services have an important role for both categories of children. They help to identify special learning needs early, at a moment when preventive action is most effective. In situations of poverty and family dysfunction, these services provide a secure environment for young children, contribute to primary health and socio-emotional needs, and provide support to parents, in particular to mothers living in difficult circumstances. Such services are still seriously lacking in Ireland. Of course progress has been made – a fact underlined in the OECD and NESF reports. Among the major events have been:

- 1992 Irish ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
- 1996 publication of Pre-School Regulations
- 1996, passage of the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, and amendments 1997.
- 1999, publication of the *National Childcare Strategy*, implemented through the *Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) 2000 – 2006*, with an investment of €500 million Euros. Under this programme, 40,000 childcare places were created.
- 1999, formation of the National Childcare Coordinating Committee, the County and City Childcare Committees and official support granted to the 7 National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCOs)
- 2000, founding of the National Children’s Office
- 2002, founding of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE),
- 2003, appointment of a Children’s Ombudsman
- 2003, the OECD *Review of ECCE Policy in Ireland*
- 2005, the creation of a new Office of the Minister for Children
- 2006, the launching of a new *National Childcare Strategy (2006 – 2010)* with a budget of €575 million €o

In addition to the official and alternative reports on the state of children’s rights in Ireland, several first-class reports and analyses have also been published: in 1998, the reports *Strengthening Families for Life* and the *Report of the National Forum on Early Childhood Education*; in 1999, the *National Childcare Strategy* and the DES *Ready to Learn: White Paper on Early Childhood Education*; in 2000, the *National Children’s Strategy*; in 2002, the National Childcare Co-ordinating Committee’s *Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning: Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development of the ECCE Sector*; in 2004, the OECD report *Country Note on Ireland*, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*; the CECDE’s *An Audit of Policy Practice and Research (1990–2004)* and *Insights on Quality and Making Connections*; in 2005, reports by the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) and the National Women’s Council in Ireland; in 2006, the CECDE’s *Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood* – in sum, much excellent work, most of it financed or supported by government bodies. Overviews of this progress – and of future directions - are available in the excellent papers provided by Ms Sylva Langford and Dr Noirín Hayes in this collection. Yet, despite real progress, some weaknesses are still apparent in the ECEC sector in Ireland, in particular, if one takes a comparative perspective. A major purpose of this

paper is to provide for readers a cross-country analysis of ECEC financing and to provide a comparative lens through which to assess the efforts of Irish governments in this domain.

The organisation of this paper

In addition to this introduction (Part I), which comments on the economic and social context, the paper is organised as follows:

- Part II explores some of *the limits in Irish financing of ECEC*, viz. the relatively low contribution of Irish government to ECEC financing; the adoption of an American type model for family support and child poverty; a highly ambivalent attitude to women's place in society, which serves to lessen and divide child care financing; an outdated conceptual split between 'early education' and 'child care' which impacts negatively on ECEC financing; the tendency of child care funding to aim at targeting rather than inclusion; the decades-long neglect to fund an adequate administration within the Department of Education for the ECEC sector; and the use of a demand-side funding model in child care that functions poorly in most OECD countries.

- Part III examines *how much countries should be investing in ECEC*. Two common criteria of funding will be discussed: the 1% target set by the European Commission Network on Childcare in 1996; and the more qualitative measure of basing financing on the costs of quality programming in other countries. Each of these measures is applied to the Irish situation. The second criterion – based on known costs per child for full-day, year-round, quality provision and aligned on the Barcelona targets – generates costs far greater than the figures proposed in the NESF report (NESF, 2005).

- Part IV outlines some *Options for bringing new resources into the ECEC field*. In this section, I refer to some of the means used in other OECD countries to finance ECEC services. Many of these strategies do not require large increases in the direct funding of services, but rather the channelling of expenditure by different ministries on families and young children toward early childhood services, e.g. the partial transfer of anti-poverty funding or child health funds or national training funds, etc. to ECEC services. Other strategies require changes in taxation so as to favour investment in young children. Several examples are given, but first governments and ministries of finance need to be convinced that such measures are possible and necessary.

- Part V draws five tentative conclusions:
 - o Despite remarkable progress over the last decade – in particular, in the childcare sector - Ireland is seriously under-investing in services for young children. Other European countries – including the UK - are planning or are already making the effort to invest between 1% and 2% of GDP in services for young children.

 - o Ireland's delay seems to spring from ambivalent attitudes toward the role of women in contemporary Irish society and to a distrust of 'socialised' child care, linked to a lack of examples of affordable, high quality, centre-based services. Where pre-primary education is concerned, low investment seems to derive from an under-estimation of the importance of early education and from treating the sector as if it were a junior primary school, with a pedagogy and child:staff ratios at odds with the natural learning strategies of young children;³

 - o Expenditure on young children is an investment in human capital that more than pays for itself in terms of potential (full-time and professional) job creation and of improved education levels for the whole population... with less dependency on

³. The natural learning strategies of young children 1-6 years are: warm, inter-personal relationships and communication with both peers and caring adults (based on an ethic of care), personal investigation of the surrounding environment, including the outdoors; much personal and social play; and (in early education centres) participation with peers in interesting, well designed project work.

social and health services, less delinquency and anti-social behaviour among poorly integrated families and groups in society;

- o Many ECEC programmes in Ireland, both in pre-primary and child care – at least at the time of the OECD reviews - are not of sufficient quality to nurture as they should the social and cognitive development of young children, or to raise effectively parental aspirations with regard to the social development and education of their children;
- o The current Irish economy has the capacity to aim for a 1.5% of GDP investment in ECEC services, based on a more energetic and creative financing approach to the sector. Experience from many countries suggests that direct investment in services (supply-side funding) is more effective than subventions to parents.

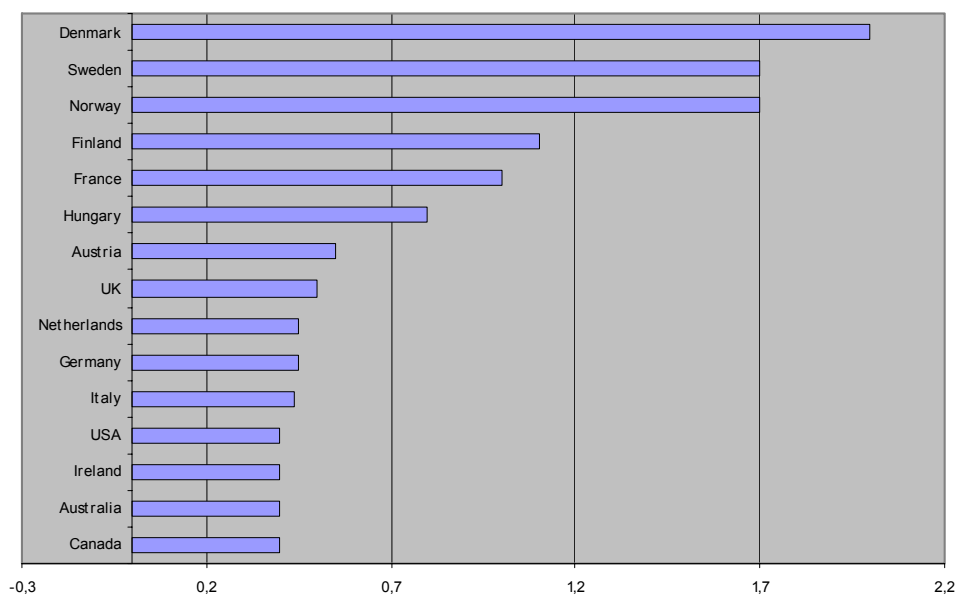
Part II - The limits of Irish financing and funding

Without being ungracious or failing to acknowledge the patient work over the last fifteen years of Irish administrators, the County Committees and other early childhood experts and stakeholders, it must be acknowledged that the financing and the funding of services for young children in Ireland gives rise to serious concern:

a. *The financing of services for young children in Ireland is comparatively very weak*

It is not clear that Irish governments regard the funding of early childhood services as a solid investment in the well-being of families and in the development and education of young children. Up to the moment, a major part of expenditure on children below the age of 4 years has been funded through European EOC funding. From the figures supplied to the OECD for the ECEC country profiles, the following chart provides a comparative picture of public investment by selected countries in ECEC services (including out-of-school services but excluding family benefits and parental leave). The chart indicates that investment in early childhood services per country ranges from about 2% of GDP in Denmark to about 0.4% of GDP in Australia, Canada and Ireland. This is a significant difference in investment, which can be seen in the quality and range of services available to parents in the Nordic countries compared to Ireland and the other liberal economies.

Fig. 3 Public expenditure on ECEC services (0-6 years) in selected OECD countries



Note: This chart is comprised of expenditure estimates, based on replies provided by country authorities to an OECD survey in 2004. The figures provided suggest that Denmark spends 2% of GDP on early childhood services for children aged 0-6 years, and Sweden 1.7%. These countries – and Finland - also allocate an additional 0.3% (approximately) to the pre-school class for children 6-7 years. The figure for the UK is probably higher than the expenditure shown in this chart as primary school in Britain begins at 5 years.

Source: OECD Survey (2004)

What looks to be an impressive sum of €575 million (over 5 years) for ECEC in the new National Childcare Strategy is, in fact, extremely meagre for an annual group of about 240,000 young children, spread over four years.⁴ Per year, the annual sum (€115 million) would allow an expenditure of about €479 per child per year. If only children in poverty (15% of the total) are served, the sum available per child is €3,194 annually. As a basis of comparison, State reimbursement rates to early childhood providers recommended by the US Federal government (a government not reputed for its generous funding of early childhood services) are *per month*: \$660 for the care of 4-year olds, and \$850 for infant care, that is, in annual terms: \$7920 per child for the 4-year olds and \$10,200 annually per child in infant care.

According to *Education at a Glance* (OECD, 2006), DES invested in 2003, €4,760 *per child, per year* in primary school classes (including Early Start and the pre-primary classes), a sector in which excessive child:staff ratios and a short day and year are operated. As Ireland did not disaggregate expenditure on pre-primary from primary education in *Education at a Glance*, 2006, I take the average primary expenditure per child as being valid also for the younger children.⁵ However, if Ireland is aiming for quality, the costs per child in early education will perforce be higher than in primary school, as young children need better child:staff ratios (to allow teachers to interact appropriately with each child); their day is generally longer (if parents work a full day), and research suggests that experienced teachers obtain better results with young children.⁶

b. Supports for families with young children – and especially for families at-risk of poverty - continue to be hesitant

Irish financing, and in fact, the general conceptualisation of early childhood and family services, resembles more an American than a European model. Similar to the situation in Ireland, childcare services in the US are fragmented, expensive, often unregulated, of mediocre quality, and generally inaccessible to low- and modest-income parents (Kagan and Rigby, 2003). Publicly funded, remunerated parental leave does not exist in the US and support to families is extremely weak. The name of the major family programme, TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) gives some idea of the approach adopted. A discourse about ‘family values’ and temporary welfare payments tend to replace the provision of comprehensive services and community networks that can effectively support families with young children.

Where Ireland is concerned, it was possible to understand this discourse in a relatively under-developed economy in which unemployment was high, and community and family solidarity were strong. Today, isolation and alienation are not uncommon in many housing estates in Ireland, and extended family support is often unavailable to provide support and child care to young couples with children. In addition, the costs of rearing children have greatly increased. Recent figures on poverty in the UK (Department of Work and Pensions, October, 2006) show that half the families living in poverty have at least one parent in work, mainly part-time

⁴. For ease of calculation, I round the number of children per birth cohort to 60,000, although in fact, recent cohorts exceed this figure and, if the economic boom continues, will probably rise in the future.

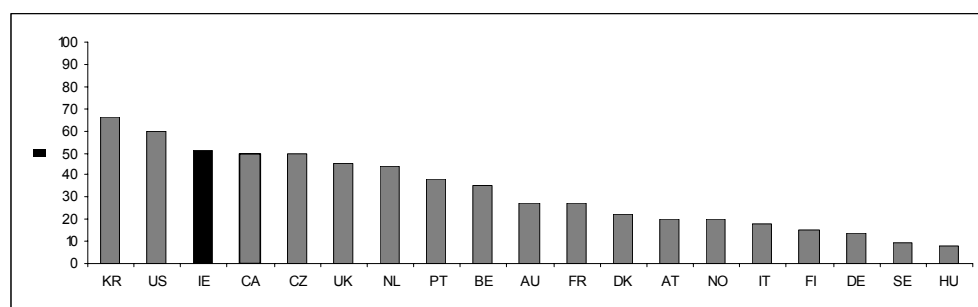
⁵. As classes in pre-primary have the highest child:staff ratios and generally employ junior teachers, the cost per child is probably lower than the average for the whole sector, while the cost per child in Early Start is certainly higher.

⁶. The NESF figure of €2831 euros is per child based on a 3.5 hours session

but sometimes full-time. Today, in many OECD countries, families without two working parents can encounter financial difficulties in rearing their children. For this reason, the costs of child care are increasingly shared between parents and governments. However, the share of costs taken in charge by government differs greatly across the country groups.

- o In the Nordic countries (excepting Denmark), the state takes in charge 85% to 90% of ECEC costs;
- o In the continental European countries, governments cover on average of 70% of costs (with some exceptions, e.g. in the Netherlands where the state share is far less), and in addition, provide universal and free early education services to children from a young age: from 2 years in France, 2.5 years in Belgium, and from 3 years in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Italy.
- o In the liberal economies – among which Ireland is an example - the share is reversed with states taking in charge 30% or less of costs. The UK is an exception where poor families are concerned, as the child care tax credit takes in charge 70% of formal child care costs for low-income parents who work more than 16 hours per week.⁷ In Canada, in contrast, the median annual fees for a family with an infant and a pre-schooler in full-time centre care were approximately \$12,000 per year in 1998, that is, 23% of the median income (\$52,500) of double income families (Statistics Canada, 2000). The picture is similar in the US, with the result that only 45% of three- to five-year-olds from low-income families are enrolled in pre-school programmes, compared with almost 75% from high-income families (OECD, 1999).

Fig. 4 Costs to parents for early learning and child care programmes



Data source: OECD. (2006). Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care. Country Profiles.

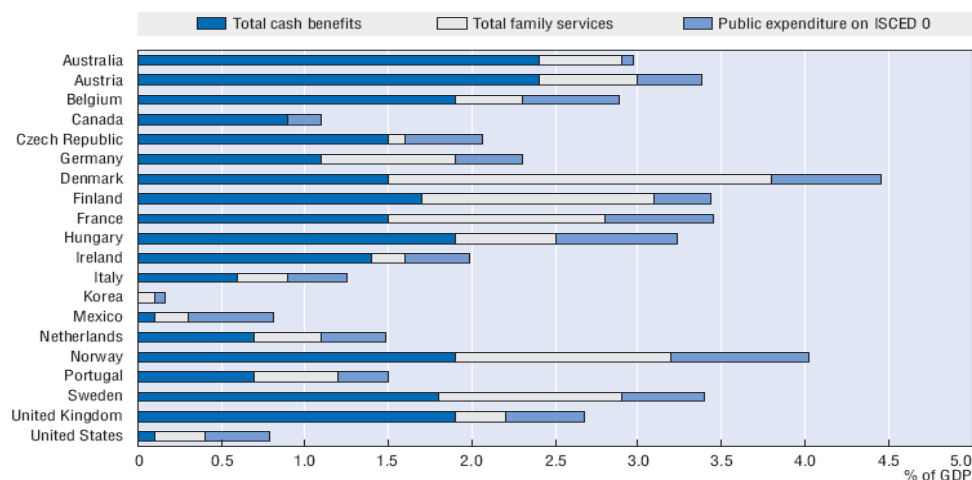
In sum, compared to most European countries, young Irish parents are receiving insufficient support from the state. In consequence, rising childcare costs – borne on average by families to some 51% of costs (and often by middle-class families to 100%) - have become a real disincentive to women remaining in the labour force, particularly if a second child is born (CSO, 2002; *Country Note for Ireland*, OECD, 2004). The general picture is that in continental Europe, governments contribute from about 66% to 90% of childcare costs, and parents less than a third. In most liberal economies, including Ireland, the situation is reversed with parents paying the major share and governments providing about a third of costs.⁸ Chart

⁷ A main purpose of early childhood strategy in the UK is to tackle social exclusion, and focuses on the expansion of early years *education* in disadvantaged areas. The strategy has two practical aims: a) to improve the material circumstances of young children through helping their mothers in particular to move into employment (the UK anticipates having 70% of lone mothers in employment by 2010); and b) to provide a sure start for young children in disadvantaged areas through providing subsidised child care and free education from the age of 3 years.

⁸ In calculating which countries best support parents, other factors need to be taken into account such as taxing patterns and the treatment of female partners in the tax system, wages and the range of family supports.

5 below, based on OECD data sources, provides an indication of what countries are investing in services for families and young children in percentages of GDP. What is interesting to note from an Irish perspective is the relatively small expenditure on family services, despite the prominent place given to families both in the Constitution and in political discourse.

Fig. 5 Public investment in services for families and young children in percentages of GDP



Note: Public expenditure on ISCED level 0 in Portugal also includes private expenditure. For Denmark and Sweden, expenditure levels on ISCED level 0 – as represented on this chart (white portion of the bar)- cover only a small proportion of their actual ECEC expenditure on children 1-6 years. Similarly for Korea, where only Ministry of Education expenditure is included.

Sources: OECD (2005) *Education at a Glance*, DELSA/ELSA (2004)8

c. Despite strong progress in promoting the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, insensitivity to child poverty and special need still seem to characterise early education and care funding in Ireland.

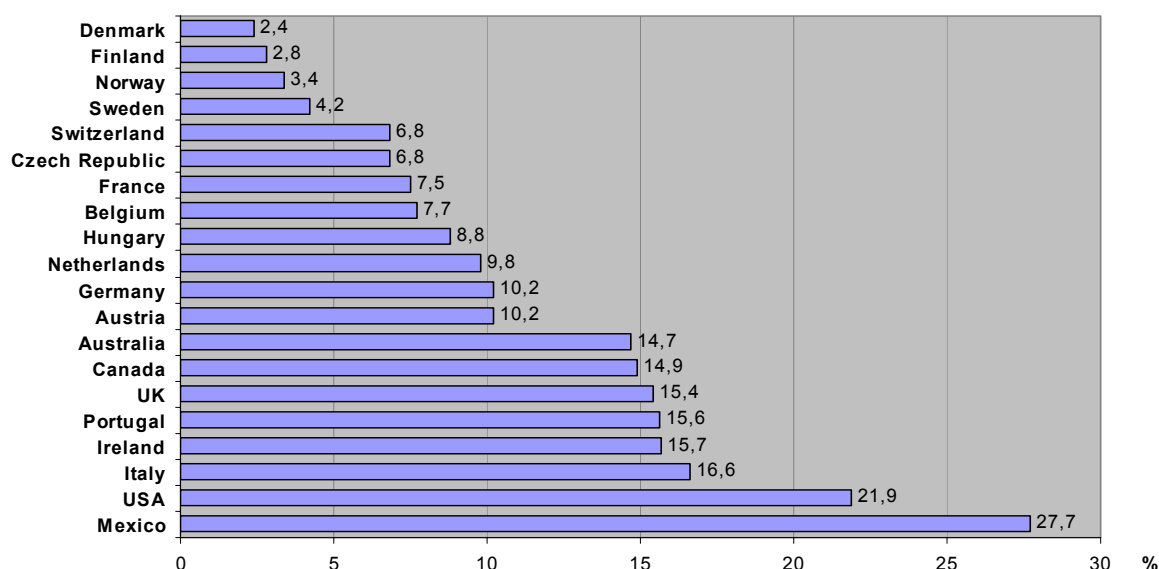
A central aim in all countries is to improve the development and learning of young children, and not least, of children from disadvantaged and second language backgrounds. Early childhood programmes make an important contribution to this aim: they contribute to the development of young children and to their school-related achievement and behaviour (Brooks-Gunn, 2003, Thorpe et al, 2004, Takanishi, 2004). They are particularly important for children with diverse learning rights, whether these stem from physical, mental or sensory disabilities or from socio-economic disadvantage. The former group generally constitute about 5% of the child population, and the second group from 2.4% (Denmark) to over 20% (one child in five) of the child population in some OECD countries.

The US is particularly generous toward children with special needs but performs relatively poorly in redistributing wealth or providing sufficient services for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Although it provides care and education to children from ‘at-risk’ backgrounds, early childhood programmes cannot substantially address issues of structural poverty and institutional discrimination (Zigler et al., 1996, Dearing, et al 2006). The challenge of reducing child poverty needs also to be tackled upstream by governments through energetic social, housing and labour policies, including income transfers to low-income groups, comprehensive social and family policies, and supportive employment schemes and work training. Preventive, anti-poverty measures can significantly reduce the numbers of children arriving to early childhood centres with additional learning needs;

In Ireland, a consequence of weak support for families, and of low social protection levels is that child poverty levels remain high by OECD standards. Countries, such as the Nordics, which are often reputed in the popular liberal press to favour “socialised child care”, have, in

fact, stronger family policies. Working parents in these countries can spend far more time with their young children, particularly during the first critical 12 to 18 months of the child's life. In addition, a priority in these countries is to ensure that each child should be given a fair start in life, and that government fiscal, social and labour market policies should combine to ensure that child poverty is eliminated, and that all children should achieve satisfactory outcomes from schooling.

Fig. 6 Relative child poverty rates in rich countries (source years range from 1997-2001)



Source: Child Poverty in Rich Countries, (UNICEF, 2005)

These UNICEF figures are based on 1997-2001 data, and by all accounts, Ireland's performance has improved significantly since that period (CSO, 2004, 2006). The latest Irish census figures show, for example, that the middle class has expanded significantly since the previous 2002 survey. The economy continues to expand and upward social mobility is high, but the data also show that poverty remains entrenched among certain categories, e.g. single parent families (almost 17% of all families of whom over 48% are at-risk-of-poverty)⁹, the unemployed (almost 7% of the population lives in jobless households), large families, minority groups such as Travellers or immigrant families not covered by social security. (I have not included here the elderly and infirm, as they normally do not have young children in charge). Despite large increases in social budgets and the National Action Plan Against Poverty (NAP), social protection expenditure in Ireland still remain – at 16.5% of GDP - well below the EU15 average of 28.3% of GDP. Income distribution and social transfers to at-risk-of-poverty families remain significantly weaker than the average of similar transfers in European countries. *Measuring Ireland's progress 2005* (CSO, 2006) describes the situation as follows:

In 2004, the percentage of the population at risk of poverty in Ireland, before pensions and social transfers, was 39%. The effect ("risk reduction") of pensions and social transfers was less in Ireland than in other EU countries. Hence the risk of poverty rate, after pensions and social transfers, at 21%, was among the highest in the EU.

⁹ At-risk-of poverty is defined in the *Government Discussion Paper: Proposals for Supporting Lone Parents* (Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2006) as households with below 60% of the median income.

The impact of poverty on young children is summarised by *Combat Poverty* (2006), as follows:

*Child poverty has a long-term effect. It makes a difference to children's health, their educational achievement, how long they will live, how well they develop physically and mentally, what kinds of jobs they get, as well as on their overall life opportunities. A study by Combat Poverty, **Against All Odds**, highlights the impact of poverty on children. This included bullying in school because of pressure to fit in and not being able to afford the brand name clothes of friends...The longer a child is poor, the greater the deprivation they will suffer in later life. According to studies by UNICEF, children from poor households are much more likely to do poorly in school, to become teenage parents, to spend time in prison and to have difficulty finding or keeping good jobs.*

One can draw different conclusions from these data, and ultimately, societies are faced here by a political choice. Governments in the liberal economies tend to intervene as little as possible in family life, to view it as the private sphere and to become involved only when poverty reaches crisis proportions. Thus, they may judge EU policy toward families as 'nanny state' interventionism that creates dependency, and wastes public taxes on non-productive areas. Better, they argue, to invest in infrastructure, industry and job creation. On the other hand, the social democratic countries of the north, while not denying the interest of creating strong industry (whether it is Nokia, Statoil, IKEA or Volvo) see investment in human capital as a priority. These countries are characterised by low poverty, low criminality, strong family policies, high social and gender equality, widespread early childhood services, high education standards and high employment rates (including of women). In sum, they achieve greater security for all families and greater social cohesion than found in the liberal economies.

d. There continues to exist in Ireland a highly ambivalent attitude to women's place in society, which serves to lessen and divide 'child care' financing

Although referred to as the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP), the major child care programme in Ireland has never acquired, in the eyes of mainstream society, a frank 'equality of opportunity for women' label. The following international table on gender equality indicates where the country stands on this indicator:

Table 1. Women's empowerment in selected countries

The Gender Gap Rankings

Country	Overall rank	Overall score*	Economic participation	Economic opportunity	Political empowerment	Educational attainment	Health and well-being
Sweden	1	5.53	5	12	8	1	1
Norway	2	5.39	13	2	3	6	9
Iceland	3	5.32	17	7	2	7	6
Denmark	4	5.27	6	1	20	5	2
Finland	5	5.19	12	17	4	10	4
New Zealand	6	4.89	16	47	1	11	26
Canada	7	4.87	7	27	11	12	14
United Kingdom	8	4.75	21	41	5	4	28
Germany	9	4.61	20	28	6	34	10
Australia	10	4.61	15	25	22	17	18
Latvia	11	4.60	4	6	10	24	48
Lithuania	12	4.58	10	11	13	19	44
France	13	4.49	31	9	14	31	17
Netherlands	14	4.48	32	16	7	42	8
Estonia	15	4.47	8	5	30	18	46
Ireland	16	4.40	37	51	12	9	12
United States	17	4.40	19	46	19	8	42
Costa Rica	18	4.36	49	30	9	14	30
Poland	19	4.36	25	19	18	20	38
Belgium	20	4.30	35	37	25	15	16

Source: World Economic Forum, 2005

Despite its mediocre showing in the above table, Ireland has made real improvement in gender equality in the last 15 years. With female wages now at 89% of male wages, Ireland has reduced the gender wage gap and is now above the EU25 average gender wage gap, which has stood for a decade at about 85%.¹⁰ At the same time, it should be noted that where part-time work is concerned, the employment situation of women compares unfavourably with that of men, that is, a far greater proportion of women are in part-time work compared to men: 35.1 % of women work less than 35 hours a week, compared to 6.9 % of men. However, for the younger age-group, gains in full-time employment in Ireland in recent years have been made more by female workers than by males (see CSO, 2002).

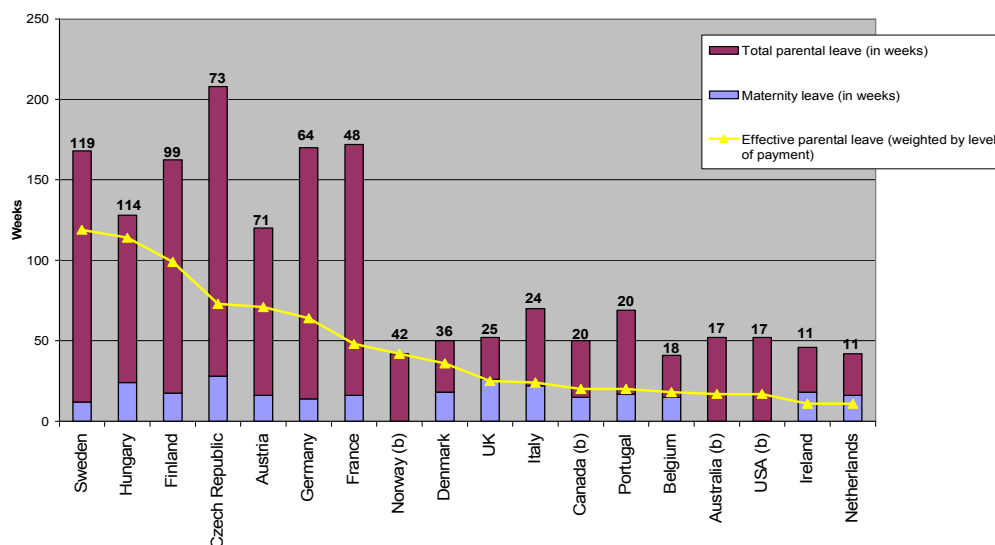
Faced with this conflicting evidence, a conclusion must be that EOCP and other gender measures continue to co-exist in Irish society with more conservative views about ‘the family’ and the role of women, views that are reinforced by the 1937 Constitution. Because of government attention to two voting constituencies, EOCP has been tracked over the six years of its existence by parallel expenditure on mothers-at-home – a nice example of policy incoherence: on the one hand, government provides financing for childcare services to allow women access to the labour market and to take in charge the early education of young children from disadvantaged backgrounds; on the other, it funds a parallel policy designed to keep women in the home to care for children. Norway introduced a similar policy in 1999, but under the new government that came to power in 2005, is now committed to phasing out the home-care child allowance. Apart from the irrationality of running contradictory policies, the main reason put forward for this change in policy was the following: that the parents most likely to accept the home-care stipend were single parents or parents from low-income families. These are precisely the families whose children benefit most of all from early childhood services. Decades of research show that children from disadvantaged families gain more in terms of language, socio-emotional development and readiness for school than mainstream middle-class children.

Again, Irish ambivalence to mothers taking up employment is illustrated in its parental leave measures which, although recently extended, are both ungenerous to mothers and infants, and patently ineffective in terms of labour market engagement. Reflective governments seek to strike a balance between what is best for infants and mothers and what will best serve national economic and gender equality aims in the long term. Figure 7 below on “effective” parental leave provision is based on work by the Dutch researchers, Plantenga and Siegel (2004). Effective leave is computed by weighing the duration of the legislated parental leave by the level of the replacement wage or benefit offered. Because the level of the replacement wage influences take-up, the figure provides an indication of the usefulness of the parental leave package to parents and their probable use of leave. Effective leave ranges from a coefficient of 119 points in Sweden to a low of 11 points in Ireland and the Netherlands. Some countries outside the European Union are included in this chart, but it should be noted that unlike in the EU, parents in these countries – with the exception of Canada - generally have no entitlement to leave, nor do they receive substantive public benefits during the parental leave period. For this reason, the coefficient 17 allocated to Australia and the United States applies only to ‘best case’ scenarios as, in fact, many Australian and American parents do not benefit from any parental leave. Korea is not included in Figure 7, as though a legal right to parental leave exists, work culture prevents most women from taking leave, and most mothers simply resign their jobs. Canada with its parental leave entitlement of 35 weeks and replacement monthly stipend of 55% of wages (with an upper limit) is an exception. Canada also provides a

¹⁰. A further analysis of gender differentials in pay shows that countries with low female participation rates, e.g. Ireland and the Mediterranean countries, generally do well on the indicator of female earnings. A probable reason for this is that the great majority of the women employed in these countries are highly educated, while women from low or modest SES groups remain in the home. In countries with high female employment rates, low SES women are also employed, but wage differentials between men and women are particularly wide in the low-paid retailing and services sectors. (Female) child care workers are generally paid much less than (male) janitors, security guards or garbage collectors.

Compassionate Care leave benefit that allows for up to 6 weeks of paid leave for employees to care for a gravely ill family member, including young children.

Fig. 7 Effective parental leave provision



Notes: The degree of parental leave effectiveness is calculated by weighing the length of parental leave by the level of payment (Effective parental leave = ((maternity leave in weeks – 14 weeks) * % payment benefit) + (total parental leave in weeks * % payment benefit)

a. Data taken from Mexico Country Note, OECD, 2004c.

b. Data taken from Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2003.

The position of the Central European countries in the chart calls for some explanation. Effective parental leave is strong in these countries (at least for *employed* parents), but the provision of child care services is weak. In Austria and former West Germany, the reaction against the care of children outside the home was reinforced by the confrontation of ideologies in post-war Europe. *Maternalism*¹¹ became the dominant practice in the central European countries allied to the West, with low provision of services for children from birth to 3 years, and a long parental leave of two years in Austria (extendable to three years) and of three years in Germany (extendable to six years). In the socialist republics, child care services were promoted to match high rates of female participation in the labour force. After the transition from communist to democratic regimes in the early 1990s, funding to public sector child care systems was significantly reduced in the Czech Republic and Hungary while parental leave was extended. As a result, child care services in many municipalities simply disappeared, and long parental (maternal) leave, lasting up to three years, has become the rule. As was reported by OECD review teams, the current arrangement has the support of women in these countries and suits the present configuration of the labour market. In the long term, the arrangement may become unsatisfactory in light of negative demographic trends and of future demands on labour supply, which will – as in Western Europe - require improved population/employment ratios, that is, the recruitment of more women to the labour market.

The position of the Netherlands – with a limited entitlement to a parental leave without pay, for six months for both parents – is also interesting. Rather than invest in parental leave, an attempt was made in the Netherlands during the 90s to provide more flexible work arrangements for parents, allowing them to move toward an equal “two-times, three-quarters” job pattern. In this arrangement, each member of a couple would work, in principle, for three-quarters of the official working period, and so between them, be able to provide parental care

¹¹ *Maternalism* is defined by (Randall, 2000) as the ideology or strong belief that the young child should be cared for in the family, and in particular by the mother.

for their child(ren) on a half-time weekly basis. The reality has not lived up to expectations, as men have been far less likely to reduce their hours of work. To some extent, this is a rational economic decision, as the opportunity costs are greater for the family budget when the male partner's salary is foregone. However, underlying the seeming rationality is an acceptance in our societies that women should be earning less, and a series of decisions made in this sense is likely to reinforce gender inequality even more. Because of the differences between men's and women's salaries, what was expected to be an equitable sharing of child care responsibility has become in practice, a one-and-a-half times (or one-and-a-quarter if calculated on the basis of earnings) job sharing pattern in the Netherlands, with again women taking on part-time work and making the sacrifice of salary, career and pensions in order to rear the children. The participation of Dutch women in the labour market at 67% is higher than the EU average, but not on a full-time basis: almost 60% of all women work part-time in the Netherlands, with the part-time rate for women with young children reaching 64%. In fact, of Dutch women with one or two children who are still in employment, 90% work part-time compared to 53% of women without children (*OECD Employment Outlook*, 2002b).

The parental leave policies adopted in Sweden seem most successful in reconciling economic efficiency and gender equality. Sweden leads in terms of effective leave (calculated in terms of duration and salary compensation allocated to parents), and also in female employment rates, which at 76.6% is among the highest in the world. As in other countries, parental leave is taken overwhelmingly by women. However, the Swedish authorities have formulated specific policies to address the imbalance, and in Sweden 35% of fathers now take their full six-months entitlement to leave, a far higher rate than in other countries. Their participation has important effects. Research indicates that the period around and after child-birth is an important moment for the bonding of male partners to their partners and offspring, and a period during which men learn to share caring and household chores (Mezulis *et al.* 2004; Barclay & Lupton, 1999, Dermott, 2001).

In comparison, Irish governments have not been particularly supportive of the efforts of working mothers nor fully effective in improving the population/employment ratio. Seen through kind eyes, the policy could be interpreted as an example of Irish respect for the choices of people. This particular interpretation becomes less convincing when one examines the effects of Irish policy. From an economic perspective, Ireland with only 58% of women in the labour market is likely to be less productive than, for example, Norway with 75.7% of its women (15-64 years) at work. This comparative loss to the Irish economy and its impact on gender equality can be attributed in no small measure to an unsatisfactory supply of affordable child care services, to home child care allowances, and to an ungenerous parental leave package.¹² Norwegian women – even though they work and are supported by good services - are no less parents to their children than in Ireland and, as Table 2 shows, they also enjoy greater economic opportunity, political empowerment, health and well-being. The table also shows that Irish gender equality is dragged downwards by low scores in women's economic participation and economic opportunity.

In addition to low-income women withdrawing from the labour market after the birth of a child, a tendency also exists in Ireland for many middle-class women to leave the labour market, especially after the birth of a second child (CSO, 2002). The costs of services are so great that it does not pay women – even those on good salaries - to continue to work once a second child is born. In this situation, better to have the satisfaction of rearing ones own children than to continue a job that can pay only for an unqualified child minder. For this reason, there exists in Irish society a larger and more articulate section of public opinion that supports the home child care allowance, although it does not serve the long-term interests of either children or women (see the *OECD Country Note for Norway*, OECD 1999, where this issue is discussed in some detail). Home care allowances to parents are seldom based on respect for the role of parents in rearing children (the meagreness of parental leave in Ireland reinforces this hypothesis), but on a factitious even-handedness that does not take the long-

¹². In many EU countries, parental leave for about a year has been enacted, in which the leave remuneration is linked to ones previous job and is counted as part of the individual's pension right

term interests of women and children into account. Greater respect for the parental role is shown by countries that provide both high quality early childhood services and a remunerated parental leave linked with work, that is, parental leave is considered as part of a woman's (and increasingly a man's) working career and further, is taken into account for pension estimates. Research on infant development and the labour market experience of countries suggest that this leave should be both limited in duration and yet of sufficient duration to respond to the best interests of infants. According to this research, a parental leave period of about one year serves well the interests of children, women, family cohesion and the national economy, especially when parental leave is shared with fathers. An easy rule of thumb for parental leave is: *not too long, not too short, and not too maternal!*

e. The financing of ECEC services in Ireland is influenced strongly by an outdated conceptual split between 'early education' and 'child care'.

The dichotomy between 'education' and 'care' has proven to be unhelpful in most countries and has embarked Ireland on an inequitable, two-tiered system of 'child care' and 'pre-primary education'. To split care from education makes little sense in terms of developmental psychology and is retrograde in social terms. Effective education will include care that is practical (meeting the needs of the child), relational, and ethical (in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child), while care should include broad education: *learning to be, learning to do, learning to learn and learning to live together* (UNESCO Delors Report, 1996). To divide one from the other is fruitless: developmental psychology shows no dividing line between the learning capacities and natural learning strategies of children over 4 years and under 4 years. In fact, along with the Netherlands, Ireland is the only European country that makes a split between care and education at the age of 4 years; most other countries (including the USA at the moment) either split services at the age of 3 years or integrate all services for children 1-6 years. The integrated model of the Nordic countries is superior in terms of *pedagogy* (it employs a concept of pedagogy integrating care, nurturing and education), *funding* (parental fees are carried upward to the age of 6 years in parallel with universal public funding and regulation), and *structural organisation* (the qualifications and training of staff are excellent across the age group, and financing is rationally deployed across each group with child-staff ratios being increased incrementally to follow the care, nurturing and education needs of young children as they mature).

In contrast, split systems demonstrate schizophrenic thinking and practice: pedagogy is often weak in the child care sector and over-academic in pre-primary; one is costly to parents, the other completely free; low recruitment and training levels are practised in child care while early education requires tertiary-trained teachers and in some instances (Ireland, Mexico) will not allow trained child assistants to work in pre-primary classrooms. To the advantage of the child care sector, it generally practises child:staff ratios based on research and good practice, while the pre-primary sector adopts child:staff ratios unsuitable even for primary school children; one sector tries to respond to the needs of working parents, while the other continues to serve an earlier male provider family model, where mothers took young children home for lunch or were able to pick them up in mid-afternoon.¹³

The splitting of the sectors has also unfortunate social consequences. If countries do not recognise 'child care' as a public good, subsidised for all families on an equitable basis, then it becomes a private good, subject to parental buying power in an open market. Well-off parents can afford good services, but low- and modest income families cannot. To remedy this situation, governments often turn to targeting, that is, they provide a highly subsidised service, such as Head Start and Sure Start, to children from the less affluent backgrounds. Despite the equity aims of such programmes, analysis over the decades shows targeting to be

¹³. To some extent, the split between 'pre-primary education' and 'care' is addressed in the new *DEIS* programme, initiated by DES. Targeting 180 disadvantaged schools, the programme will address the early learning needs of young children. The OMC will support its implementation through appropriate linkages with services in the childcare sector.

deficient on several grounds, and that it rarely achieves either equity or quality for children at risk of educational failure. The issue is further analysed in the next section.

f. Irish child care funding aims at targeting rather than inclusion

At first view, it seems rational and equitable to opt for targeted services as programmes for low-income or second language children are known to yield excellent results, higher in fact than programmes for middle-class children. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds gain more from early childhood programmes – particularly in language and socio-emotional development – than their middle-class counterparts. The benefit per dollar invested in these children has been calculated in several US research projects as ranging from 2:1 (if no children from disadvantaged backgrounds are included) to about 7:1 (if all children are disadvantaged and attend a specialised, high quality programme). Benefits for middle-class children are about 3:1, while children from higher income brackets gain little in cognitive development as their families generally provide them with the types of educational experience that prepares them for school. Although benefits are high for children from low SES backgrounds, research also shows that targeted programmes for disadvantaged children actually miss about half of the children they are supposed to serve. In short, it makes better economic sense to fund a universal programme that will pick up all children rather than to rely on targeting. This is not to argue that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ universal model should be applied. For reasons of equity and efficiency, a flexibility allocation of funds is necessary within a universal system, e.g. when the OECD reviewed the Netherlands, a weighted funding scheme was in operation: schools catering for mainstream children received 1 unit of funding per child; for children from low income backgrounds 1.5 units; for children from low-income, second language backgrounds 1.7 units; for children with special learning disabilities 1.9 units; and children with accumulated difficulties 2.5 units.

The following table from the National Institute of Education Research at Rutgers University, based on US funding and child enrolment figures, shows the economic rationale in favour of universal programming:

Table 2. The case for investing in a universal ECEC system

Family SES level	Children enrolled	Cost in billion \$	Benefit in billion \$	Net benefit \$
TARGETED FUNDING POLICY				
Low SES	383,871 (50% of cohort)		34.3	28.8
Middle SES	383,871 (marginal 17%)	\$5.5	17.2	11.6
High SES	0	\$0	0	0
Total benefit from policy	767,742	\$11 billion	\$51.5 billion	\$40.5 billion
UNIVERSAL FUNDING POLICY				
Low SES	767,742 (100%)	(c. 11)	69	58
Middle SES	2,303,226 (100%)	33.1	33.1	0
High SES	383,871	5.5	0	-5.5
Total benefit from policy		\$50 billion		\$52.1

- Source: Barnett, S. (2006)

In order not to over-estimate the effects of early intervention, benefits for middle SES children in this table are calculated to be only half those for poor children, and benefits for the high SES children (from the top 20% income percentile bracket) are considered to be zero. However, the far greater enrolment of both poor and middle-class children tips the financing balance in favour of a universal programme, which produce significantly greater benefits to children and the economy. Other things being equal, this analysis suggests that the Irish education authorities would reap greater benefits – and spend budget more effectively - if they were to fund a universal service for all three-year olds rather than to persist in a small-scale, targeted Early Start programme.

g. Financing of the Irish pre-primary education has consistently neglected to fund an adequate administration for this sector:

The White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn*, issued by the Department of Education and Science in 1999, outlined a broad policy perspective: ‘the development of very young children in the home, supports to parents concerning how best to help their children learn, a wide range of supports for private providers and voluntary/community groups and a strategy to enhance the quality of infant education in primary schools¹⁴.’ (p. vii). This was an ambitious programme, which obviously would have required a sizeable and dynamic unit to conceptualise and implement. The White Paper was followed, however, by the founding in 2002 of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), a centre with 8 staff located in St. Patrick’s College, but without a mandate for policy legislation or the authority and financing to implement country-wide ECEC initiatives. Policy responsibility for the early childhood sector remained firmly subsumed under primary education, until the creation in December 2005 of a new Early Years Education Policy unit. This unit, located at DES, will co-operate with the childcare directorate (formerly located in the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform), now attached to the new Office of the Minister for Children, within the Department of Health and Children. With this initiative, DES had, in effect, established for the first time a separate policy unit for early childhood, staffed by a single professional.

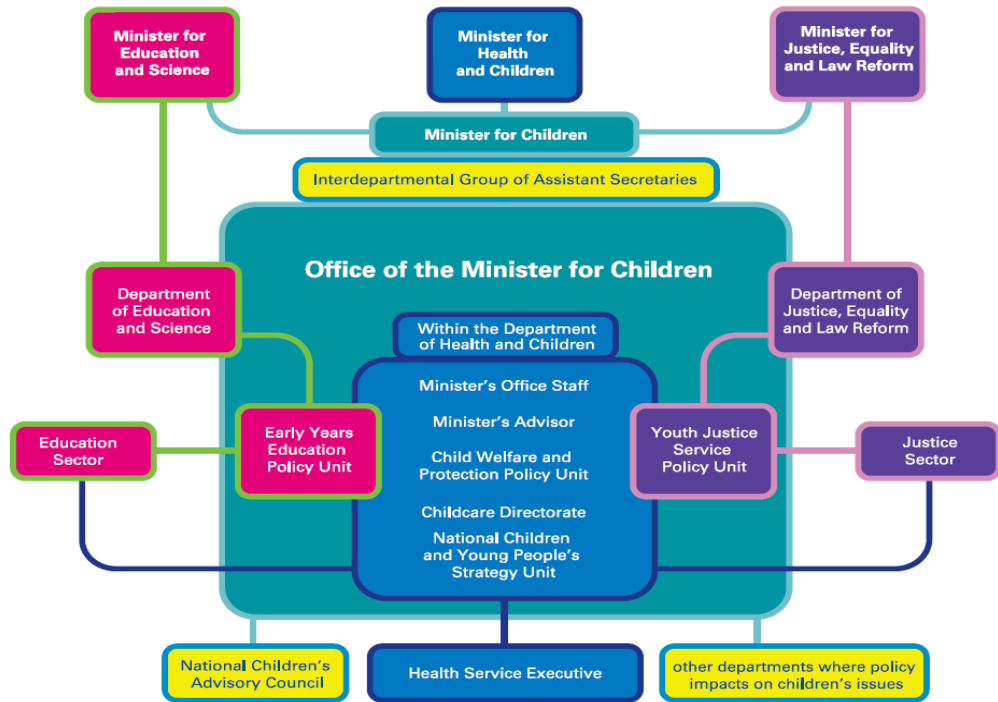
One understands, of course, the difficulty of creating additional civil service posts in the present context in Ireland. Yet, one cannot fail to be impressed by the caution of DES in staffing the new unit, which, in principle, has responsibility for the foundation stage of learning of approximately 105,000 young children (Early Start and the age cohorts 4 and 5 enrolled in public early education services) and for the teachers and schools that take these children in charge.¹⁵ In contrast, about 270 administrators are involved in the English *Sure Start* project (primarily, an education initiative) in various locations in England, supported by local authorities and local partnerships. Likewise, when in April 2005, the State of Massachusetts (about 6 million inhabitants) merged the Office of School Readiness with the Office of Child Care Services into a consolidated office for early education and care, the goal of recruiting about 200 (two hundred) professionals to the new office was announced. In sum, in a growing number of administrations, investment in ECEC infrastructure (administration, regulation, evaluation, a training authority, data collection...) is considered important.

Despite the cautious approach of DES, Ireland has the capacity to establish – with little extra expense - a strong early childhood administration for the country. The new Office of the Minister for Children, the Department of Health and Children, the Department of Education and Science, the National Children’s Office, the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education... - all have highly experienced staff (perhaps, in total, nearly 100 administrators and professionals) who are well capable of forming together a national administration for young children and of formulating the legislation that any government might wish to initiate.

¹⁴ Compulsory school age in Ireland is six years but a majority of four year olds and all almost all five year olds attend formal primary school.

¹⁵. Presumably, the unit has also the responsibility of reaching out to the families of about 20,000 children who do not enrol in this public education service.

Fig. 8 The present shape of children’s administration in Ireland



Source: OMC, 2006

In addition, several of the government departments have inspectors or advisors spread throughout the counties and regions: for example, DES has 74 primary school inspectors who, were they retrained and reinforced in numbers, could ensure (just as Ofsted does in the UK) the certification and pedagogical quality of centre-based early childhood services throughout the country, in co-ordination with the inspection corps established by OMC and DHC. In sum, the infrastructure is already present - it suffices to bring it together under a less divided administration that will work to ensure the creation of a comprehensive and cohesive *system* of children’s services.

h. The efficiency of ECEC financing in Ireland is handicapped by reliance on a demand-side funding model that functions poorly in most OECD countries.

The distinction between public supply-side funding and demand side funding is not simple, and in fact, most countries employ a mix of funding. For the sake of discussion, one can say that a demand-side funding model provides funds directly to families, allowing them to choose the types of ECEC they will purchase within a disparate market of service providers. Supply-side funding, on the other hand, provides funding to chosen providers of ECEC, either public or private, and in this way, deliberately channels the choice of parents towards certain types of care or early education. An example of demand-side subsidies would be tax credits or vouchers, which provide subsidies directly to parents with little requirement other than that they purchase some kind of ECEC. An example of supply-side subsidies are subsidies provided to providers who meet certain specific requirements such as various aspects of quality (staff-child ratio, educational attainment of staff, parental involvement...), and in some cases follow a certain mode of provision (public or non-profit). The public supply-side funding model is found in early education in most countries, including Ireland. In this funding model, public authorities provide operating costs to centres (providers) – supplemented in some countries by parental fees. Subsidies to the centres generally include wage supplements or, as in Ireland and many other countries, the full salaries of teachers (full salaries take up at least 70% of the real costs of ECEC services).

Despite current economic orthodoxy, the experience of the OECD reviews suggests that for the moment at least, a public supply side investment model, managed by public authorities, brings more uniform quality and superior coverage of childhood populations (1-6 years) than parent subsidy models. This is due to a number of reasons, e.g. the weaker regulation of private provision in the liberal economies,¹⁶ the predominance of family day care in parent subsidy models, and to the frequent reluctance of private providers to employ sufficient numbers of highly qualified staff.¹⁷ It may also be caused by the newness of parent subsidy models, and the relative inexperience of administrations in dealing with marketised child care services. Whatever the reason, the OECD reviews suggest that direct public funding of services brings, in the majority of countries reviewed, more effective control, advantages of scale,¹⁸ better national quality, more effective training for educators and a higher degree of equity in access and participation than consumer subsidy models. The difference becomes apparent when the organisation of early education – generally a public education responsibility – is compared with that of childcare. Stopped here

It should be noted that the choice between a parent subsidy and a supply-side model is not a question of public or private provision, although in most countries, parent subsidy models favour the growth of private services at the upper end of the market. Supply-side funding can – and is, in fact – used for both public and private providers in several countries, including Ireland and the UK. In Norway (where over half the kindergartens are privately owned), the local authorities provide direct supply-side funding to both public and private kindergartens. In exchange for funding, services regulation is the norm, with group sizes and staff qualifications being subject to legislation and enforcement by the responsible ministry or local authority. Services receive also the supervision and support of ministry or local authority management units, or are guided by public child agencies. For this reason, more efficient mapping of services, more coherent training, and benchmarking can be attained. The mixing of children, valued in public education, can also be achieved more easily in public services, unless (which is often the case) there is a high degree of spatial segregation.

The main critique made of the public funding-to-services model is that it is expensive, although the argument that high public investment in early childhood services necessarily implies significant tax increases is simplistic (see for example, the discussion by Kvist, 2002). Another criticism, cited in *Early Childhood Education and Care for Children from Low-Income or Minority Backgrounds*, Leseman (2002), is that the presence of well subsidized public programmes like *Head Start* leads to a crowding out effect, and reduces initiatives by private providers to increase their ECEC activities in the neighbourhood, as they cannot compete in quality with the better-funded public programmes. This became a sore issue in Ireland, for example, when Early Start was first initiated. The critique also points to a major weakness in public ECEC systems in the conservative European countries (with the exception of Belgium and France) viz., the failure of these countries to create sufficient numbers of licensed, publicly supported, child care places for children under 3 years, until a crisis arises. Then action is taken, but as was seen in Ireland, without sufficient consultation with the private and non-profit providers already on the ground.

Are there advantages in the market system? Defenders of the market argue that a competitive child care system based on private markets and incentives produces higher quality and more self-reliant families at less cost than a public system. This affirmation is rather doubtful as experience of the field suggests that the private provision of human services – whether for old

¹⁶. In order to bring in private providers into early childhood systems, governments will often relax both quality and equity requirements.

¹⁷. Quality in services depends to a great extent on being able to retain experienced, certified staff. This can be difficult if salaries are pushed down.

¹⁸. To be distinguished from *economies of scale*. Some, but rather few economies of scale can be achieved through the purchase of supplies in public ECEC systems, and, in general, these economies are minor. Most expenditure in ECEC is devoted to salaries (about 70%). *Advantages of scale* can be considerable, however: public systems make it easier to enforce regulations, support educators, monitor quality and communicate good practice *across* a system – which is considerably more difficult to achieve in a situation dominated by private provision.

or young people – in an open and deregulated market leads frequently to corner cutting and inferior services. Quality comparisons between the services offered by countries which assume public responsibility for services (both public and private), and the services available in deregulated market systems leave little doubt that young children from low- and middle-income backgrounds fare better in publicly financed systems.¹⁹ However, the political rewards of giving money to parents and the corresponding rapidity and cost-effectiveness of private providers in providing the types of service that parents desire are tempting for politicians, who may underestimate the need for equity in regard to essential services, such as health and education. In addition, the current economic culture seeks to cut back on public services, and for this reason, many government finance departments would prefer to have a mixed market of services. This is a legitimate aim if inequities can be avoided and if private services can be held – as in Norway, for example - to appropriate public standards.

Some of the concerns raised about the market model by early childhood policy experts and planners are as follows:

- *A purely market system moves away from the principle of universality in education*, that is, of providing equal opportunity for all children within a universal system in which values of citizenship are inculcated, and a democratic and multicultural mixing of children is practised. In contrast, targeting and special supports can be effectively achieved within a universal system, and the educational mix of children from all backgrounds is generally positive for both at-risk and mainstream children (Jensen & Saint-Martin, 2003);
- *Demand-side funding is, in general, under-funding*, and the burthen of costs in market-led systems falls essentially on parents. This can be seen in the analysis in section c. above on costs to parent, who, in the market economies pay fees ranging from 35% to 100% of the costs of child care, unless they belong to low-income groups. Families with modest resources, who are not eligible for public funding, are often unable to pay such a proportion. As a result, their children can be excluded from participation in early childhood services (Fuller *et al.* 2005).
- Again, when public funding to the child care system takes the form of subsidies paid directly to parents, *the steering capacity of governments vis-à-vis services is considerably weaker than in funding-to-services systems*. Tax rebates and parent subsidies do not, in general, support system co-ordination or universal provision or contribute to the improvement of in-service training and salaries for staff. When parental vouchers are used to support informal and unlicensed child care as well as licensed providers, the result can be a diffuse network of small-scale organisations and individuals offering an array of child care services. Negative practices tend to appear, e.g. the growth of unregulated services; the selling of services on appearance and the practice of offering ‘slot’ services to parents, which undermine all notion of continuity of relationship for young children,²⁰ of continuous programming or of developmental progress.
- *Parent subsidies can be problematic in that they may not be used efficiently on behalf of children, may not be passed on fully to providers, or more generally, may be insufficient to meet real childcare costs*. In sum, some commentators argue that if subsidies are given directly to parents, they may not be passed on in full to providers.²¹ A critique based on sounder evidence is that parent subsidies are generally very inadequate to meet the real costs of services. The financing of child care in the liberal economies is a case in point (see Figure 5 above). Another weakness is that unemployed parents and parents with low

¹⁹. Similar evidence is available for education systems. For this reason, after centuries of education, public systems are still considered the most effective means of ensuring desirable educational outcomes for the majority of children.

²⁰. Although young children are very adaptable, they are so only if there is a base of stability and continued relations with parents and/or other significant adults. Among the significant adults in a young child’s life is the childcare care or kindergarten professional. For this reason, the proposed new EYFS curriculum requires that every child in a centre should be allocated a practitioner who is their key person, and is mainly responsible for their well-being on a daily basis.

²¹. To our mind, this criticism smacks of a ‘beer and fags’ argument that does not do justice to the concern of mothers for their children.

educational levels have difficulties in claiming what is due to them (United Kingdom Inland Revenue, Analysis and Research, Child and Working Tax Credits, 2004).²² From a planning perspective, demand side subsidies can also be problematic, as financial flows in a parent subsidy system depend not on the number of eligible children (which can be estimated accurately) but on how many parents choose to claim tax credit;

- *The reluctance of market providers to invest in poor neighbourhoods incurs the risk of inequity toward low income families with young children.* If this is the case, lack of investment in poor neighbourhoods undermines a major rationale for investing in early childhood services, viz. to provide an equivalence of outcomes for young children at the starting gates of school. This risk is answered to some extent by increased subsidies to parents and providers in low-income areas, as in Australia and the UK, and/or through parallel, publicly funded, targeted programmes, such as *Head Start* (US) or *Sure Start* (UK). However, as discussed above (see Table 2), these programmes miss not only a significant proportion of the children whom they are supposed to serve, but also the large group of moderate income families who are unable to afford the programmes that are on offer in a market system. In addition, targeting is generally inaccurate – that is, it does not cover poor families who do not live in poor neighbourhoods or the children whose families move in and out of risk, whatever their social, cultural or linguistic status. (Barnett et al. 2004; Fuller *et al.*, 2005). As noted by the DayCare Trust analysis of 2003, fully one half of children at-risk live outside designated disadvantaged areas in the UK;
- *Parent subsidies for child care generally give rise to a significant increase in family day care,* which statistically provides significantly lower quality compared to professional ECEC centres (NICHD, 1997b). A further difficulty about family day care – unless organised into a public system as in Denmark – is that financial control of the system is taken out of the hands of public authority management, making planning and steering problematic;
- The conclusion reached in the PricewaterhouseCoopers report (2004),²³ on financing a universal ECEC for England by the year 2020, finds that: “*Supply-side funding tends to be the dominant form of finance in countries with the best developed systems of early years education and care, such as Sweden, Denmark, France and New Zealand, whereas means-tested, demand-side funding is more typical of countries with less well-developed systems, such as the UK and the US.*” (Daycare Trust, 2004). In addition, the liberal economies adopting a market model of child care seem to do little better than the conservative (European continental) countries in increasing licensed provision for younger children because of ‘churning’, that is, a high turn-over and loss of providers. This can be seen quite readily from the provision statistics that are available, showing that the liberal economies provide fewer places than even the conservative European countries. In addition, child care services in these economies often fail to establish adequate regulation, monitoring structures and quality standards in their child care sectors (Kagan and Rigby, 2003)

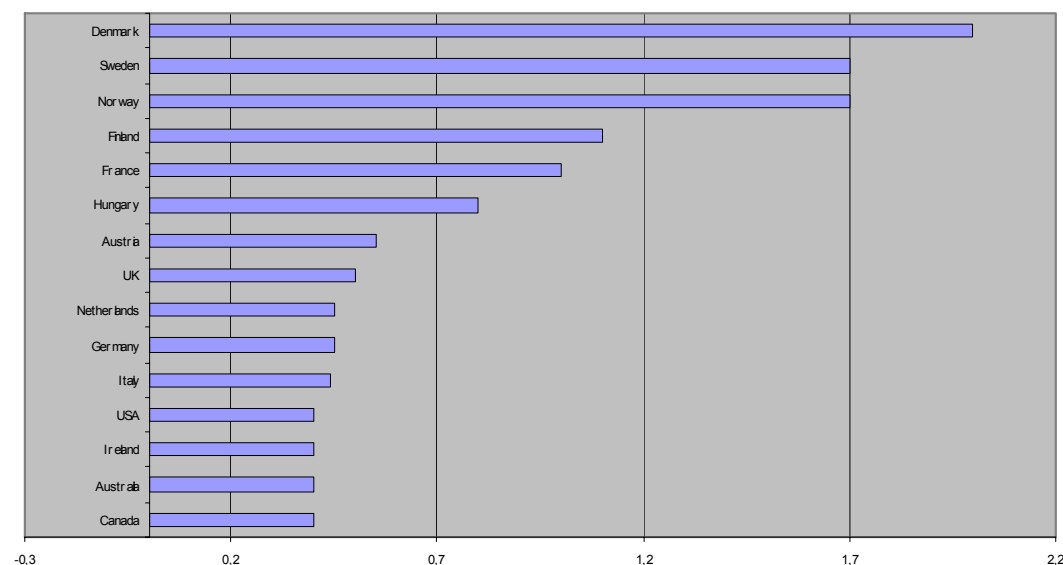
22. The argument is often made that childcare subsidies should not be paid to unemployed parents, who, in principle, can look after their child at home. However, withdrawal from care can be disruptive for the child, and does not support parents in finding new employment.

23. A more focused review of the economic arguments can be found in the PricewaterhouseCoopers report referenced above or in the work of the Canadian economists, Cleveland and Krashinsky (2002, 2003), who remark: “*The debate over demand-side and supply-side (funding) is often really a debate over what kind of quality will be provided and what kind of standards will be set.*” According to this team, early childhood services are not appropriate for marketisation. For them, ECEC is a public good, delivering externalities beyond the benefit of immediate, personal consumption. Important national goals are achieved through early education and care, in particular, a significant contribution to the health, development and learning of a nation’s children. If this is the case, it is appropriate for governments to intervene in the field, through funding and quality control, particularly if the benefits gained by society are greater than the costs incurred.

Part III - How much should countries be investing in ECEC?

In 1996, the European Commission Network on Childcare (EC Network, 1996) recommended that European countries should spend at least 1% of GDP, if they wished to provide a universal early childhood service of adequate quality. As can be seen from Fig. 3 above (reproduced below as Fig. 9) only five countries of the twenty reviewed have clearly reached this investment level: Denmark, Finland, France (the 1% investment attributed includes local authority investments; free *école maternelle* for children from age 2; and child care services), Norway and Sweden.

Fig. 9 Public expenditure on ECEC services (0-6 years) in selected OECD countries



Note: This chart is comprised of expenditure estimates, based on replies provided by country authorities to an OECD survey in 2004. The figures provided suggest that Denmark spends 2% of GDP on early childhood services for children aged 0-6 years, and Sweden 1.7%. These countries – and Finland – also allocate an additional 0.3% (approximately) to the pre-school class for children 6-7 years. The figure for the UK is probably higher than the expenditure shown in this chart, as primary school in Britain begins at 5 years.

In this chart, public expenditure by Ireland as a percentage of GDP is about 0.45%. The Nordic countries²⁴ and France reach 1%, and it is probable that Belgium (Flanders) also approaches that level, as in addition to the free *kleuterschool* from 2.5 years, both child care and diversity expenditures are significant. Hungarian investment also probably approaches the 1% mark, but although investment in kindergarten is strong, childcare services are relatively few (parental leave payments are not included in the chart). However, the case can be made that 1% of GDP is insufficient if adequate quality is to be maintained. For example, France's investment of about 1% does not ensure adequate child:staff ratios, for although the system employs only graduate level teachers, with some assistants, it enrolls almost 100% of children from 3 years and almost 40% of the 2-year olds. The French system depends almost entirely on public financing, with no support from parental fees. In contrast, Finland, spends 1.3% of

²⁴. Several of the Nordic countries, as the figure shows, approach or go beyond the 2% of GDP investment level. Basing its figures on EAG (OECD, 2003) returns, NESF calculates an investment of 0.7% of GDP for Norway, and 0.8% for Denmark. These figures are incorrect, as the underlying OECD presentation of the data is misleading. In general, the Nordic countries return expenditure levels for the pre-school class only or for a short morning 'educational' session in the kindergarten, which, of course, does not represent the real costs of their day-long services.

GDP on ECEC services for 30% fewer children under 6 years. In addition, parents are charged a small fee, and a more mixed (and less expensive) workforce is employed.

What would a 1% investment per year in ECEC imply for Ireland? For the reference year 2003, used in *Education at a Glance* (OECD, 2006), Irish GDP amounted to €139,097 million Euros, while GNP amounted to €117,676 million. 1% of GDP comes to *€1391 million euros annually for ECEC services*, or if calculated on GNP, *€1177 million euros*. The figure is obviously greater than the combined total of current ECEC spending (€115 million allocated each year for five years through the NCS, plus €500 million allocated yearly by DES for pre-primary and Early Start, plus €350 million annually for the Early Childcare Supplement) but not so far off as to be impossible to achieve (see Part IV below). To expand and to ensure *high* quality in the services would demand, however, greater investment, as the next paragraphs indicate.

Another way of looking at ECEC financing is to ask — *what is the average investment per child in a good quality programme or in a public ECEC system known to have high quality services*. A figure of this nature may be perhaps a more concrete benchmark for early childhood managers. From the evidence at our disposal - for example, average child costs in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden; American Abecedarian²⁵ and *Head Start* average costs; and estimates made by the (New York) Committee for Economic Development (CED, 2002, 2006); or as proposed by the American researchers, Kagan & Rigby, 2003 - the figure per child works out at over US \$8,800 per child per year in early education (3-6 years) for a full-day, school year programme in which reasonable child:staff ratios are practised, and a majority of certified educators are employed and a light, leisure-time programme is provided. The Committee for Economic Development (CED, 2006) proposes \$5,000 as a rough starting point for a child attending a *part-day*, part-year program, and \$8,800 for a full-day school programme. Again, from an American perspective, Kagan and Rigby (2003), propose that states allocate at least \$8,000 - \$12,000 per child enrolled in a full-day preschool (early education) programme, and from \$4000 - \$6000 per child enrolled in a half-day programme.

The following table summarises the evidence referred to:

Table 3. Investment estimates per child in high quality early childhood programmes

Source of estimate and year	Half-day, school year programme	Full-day, school year programme	Full-day, year round, integrated child care	Reference
Denmark, 2004			\$19,500 (this figure includes a parental contribution of c. 30%). The net public investment is \$13,650 per child	BUPL, 2005
Finland, 2004			€10,248 (not including parental contribution).	STAKES, 2005
Norway, 2005			€12,520 (not including parental contribution)	BFD, 2005
Sweden, 2004			\$12,097 (not including parental contribution)	Ministry of Education & Culture, 2005.

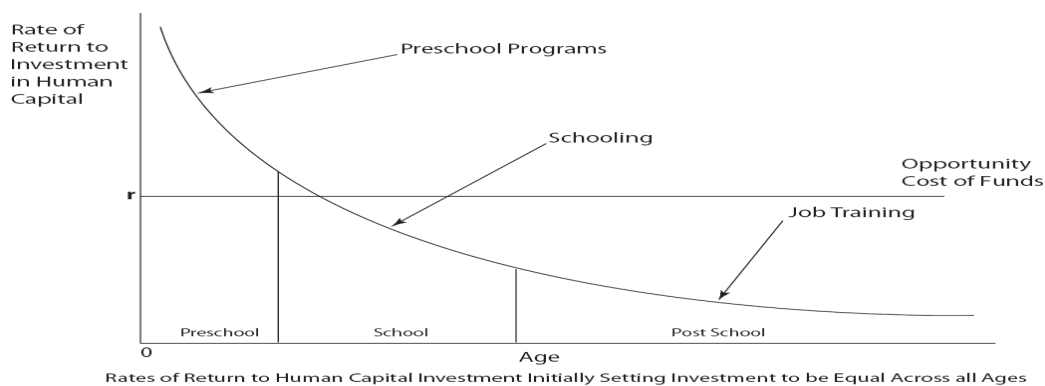
²⁵. Abecedarian costs run to \$63,476 per child over 5 years. See also Gormley *et al.* 2004 on Oklahoma Pre-K costs, and the analysis of Barnett *et al.* 2005 of pre-K costs across five states.

Abecedarian Project, North Carolina		c. \$13,000 in 2002 costs		Masse & Barnett, 2003
Committee Economic Development, 2006	\$5,100	\$8,800	\$12,970	CED, 2006 www.ced.org
Head Start, 2005	\$8,626 (Federal and local contributions combined).			NIEER, 2006
Kagan & Rigby, 2003	\$4000 - \$6000	\$8000 - \$12,000		Kagan & Rigby, 2003

No doubt, countries would have to judge these figures in light of their particular level of wealth,²⁶ but across the programmes and countries cited, there is a remarkable consensus in professional circles on per child costs for a quality programme. Unit costs in Denmark, Norway and Sweden for children aged 1-6 years are all in excess of \$10,000 per child, being more expensive at the beginning of the cycle and less so toward the end. The differences in costs among the Nordic countries can be explained by the higher proportions of tertiary trained pedagogues working in the Danish system (60%) than, for example, in Finland (30%). How would these expenditure levels work out in the Irish context? The two lowest estimates (based on a full day programme) suggest that a quality programme costs about €8,800 for a full day, academic year programme for children 3-6 years, with, in addition, a light leisure-time programme during holiday periods. For the younger children, at least €10,000 per year would be needed for a full-day, full year programme with integrated early education and care. In ‘child care’ therefore - basing our calculation on costs for 33% of children (the Barcelona target) from 0-3 years (that is, one third of 180,000 children or rather, for 50% of the 1-3 year olds, presuming that a parental leave of one year will be provided to all working families) - the costs in Ireland would come to €600 million *per year*, that is, an investment over five times greater than the current NCS sum of €575 million spread over 5 years. In early education, full enrolment (Barcelona target) of 180,000 children (3-6 years) at €8,800 per child, for a full day, academic year programme plus a holiday programme gives a figure of €1,584 million euros per year. The combined total (€2,184 million euros) comes to less than 1.5% of GDP, which allows one to understand why the Nordic countries are spending around 2% of GDP on ECEC programmes, and also have maintained parental fees for these programmes. However, in the scenario of spending €8,800 per child 3-6 years, Ireland could have an effective early education service catering for all children, with reasonable child staff ratios (particularly for disadvantaged young children), running from 8.30 to 18.00 hours daily, and a holiday programme. This is what the Nordic countries have already achieved, and what France, the UK and the US are planning to accomplish. Their ambition follows the economic returns analyses of the Nobel prize-winning education economist, James Heckman (Cunha, Heckman *et al.*, 2005) and other authors showing that investments in young children and their families have a more profound and lasting effect on learning potential than at any other age – in Heckman’s phrase: ‘skill begets skill and learning begets learning’.

²⁶ \$8,000 per child far exceeds the annual family income in many developing countries, but as the major costs in human services are generally for salaries and pensions, first-class programmes at far lower cost are found in these countries.

Fig. 10 Rates of return to human capital investment initially setting investment to be equal across all ages



Source: Cunha & Carneiro lecture, Dublin, 2005 – Also featured in Cunha & Heckman (2005) *Interpreting the evidence on life cycle skill formation.*

Part IV – Options for bringing new resources into the ECEC field

The figures that I have proposed to finance a high quality ECEC system in Ireland are high by present standards or when compared to the NESF estimates, but in fact, as the example of other countries show, this level of budget can be raised significantly without bankrupting public finances. A first condition would be to appoint a specialised team within the Ministry of Finance to examine how this could be achieved, keeping in mind the value added to the economy by greater participation of women in the workforce, the employment provided by the child care sector and the greater efficiency achieved in the education system through providing services for disadvantaged children within a universal system. Among the various strategies or mechanisms used to bring new financing into ECEC systems, OECD teams noted the following in the country reviews:

- *A pooling of resources and sharing of costs across ministries, social partners, local communities and users, whenever common objectives are being attained for young children and their families. If wrap-around education and care for young children improves social inclusion and labour market expansion, there is little reason why the capital and operational costs of services should not be shared across a range of ministries and other interest groups. For this to happen, the category, young children, needs to be a target group for the different ministries and agencies, each in its own sphere. In this sense, the OMC Inter-Departmental Group of Assistant Secretaries could have real potential. For example, in the US, much of the finance for child care comes from the TANF (Federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) programme, as the TANF agency recognises that provision of good child care benefits the young child and allows parents to work. For this reason, the Federal Government allows 30% of TANF funding to be transferred directly to the Child Care Development Fund to help low-income working families to pay for child care. TANF funds can also be used for wage enhancement, professional development or to increase linkages with Head Start and pre-K. In this way, about 50% of child care funding in Wisconsin comes from TANF funding. Health funds, crime prevention and economic development funds are also strong sources for ECEC funding in the US. Public health aims are well served – and duplication can be avoided - by obligatory screening of young children in their centres for sight, hearing, general health and learning disabilities. Not only can preventive screening be carried out, but good health and eating habits can be established at this age. The Healthy Schools movement in Scotland provides a good example of what can be achieved. In yet other states, economic development funds are used to co-finance early childhood centres and the training of personnel, as these services are considered important for in-coming industries. In itself, ECEC is also an employer, and may be considered as an industry to fund. According to research in this area, is indeed a very large employer and contributes strongly to local economies through the purchase of*

goods and services. A 2001 study of child care in California (Moss, 2001), shows that child care contributes \$65 billion dollars to the state economy – more than recognised industries such as electronics, the film industry and food products.

- *A reallocation of resources within education budgets:* All parts of the education systems have their importance – and not least, a top-performing tertiary and research sector.²⁷ At the same time, a better apportioning of educational resources toward young children needs to be considered. This is not only a question of an equitable distribution of educational resources towards children at the base but also of the efficiency of education investment (Cunha & Heckman 2005). For a good return on investment, programmes for young children must provide quality, which in turn requires favourable child-staff ratios and appropriate pedagogy.
- *A rational approach to staffing, based on the best interests of young children:* Quality services for young children require low child:staff ratios – a requirement that has been confirmed by decades of research. It is generally recognised that classes in which young children are enrolled must be limited in size, and a correct child:staff ratio provided, e.g. in the US *State of Preschool Yearbook* (National Institute of Early Education Research, 2005), the maximum class size recommended for 3- and 4-year old children is 20 children or fewer, with a maximum child:staff ratio of 10:1 (that is, at least two adults per classroom). The *Yearbook* notes that 28 States in the US already observe these standards. It also recommends that States should finance at least one university trained teacher per classroom. The other adult (or adults – some states do better than a ratio of 10:1 and will have two assistants with the teacher) should be an associate teacher or trained child nurse or trained child assistant. Different needs are catered for in this situation: on the one hand, the socio-emotional development of young children who need the attention and support of a sufficient number of adults and, on the other, the educational development of young children, who also need a trained pedagogue capable of providing an environment in which care, nurturing and education are available.
- Such standards are a key to success in the Nordic countries, where child:staff ratios are even lower (5.6 children per adult in Sweden) and teacher ratios are more or less equivalent to the NIEER standards, e.g. in Denmark, the ratio of tertiary-trained pedagogues to assistants is 60:40; in Sweden, it is 50:50; and in Finland and Norway 30:70 (OECD teams have recommended to these countries to bring up the pedagogue:assistant ratio to 50:50). Good staffing and correct child:staff ratios require, however, strong funding. For example, as they already invest close to 2% of GDP on early childhood services, Nordic countries can hardly afford – even if they wished – to employ teachers *only* in the early childhood centres. In fact, however, such a policy would not be welcome as the specific expertise brought to the classroom by the trained children’s nurses is considered essential to the well-being of children. A mixing of teachers and trained children’s nurses keep down the public costs of services, which are further lessened by the charging of parental fees. Nordic services do not lose in quality as a result, as the low child:staff ratios allow staff

27. Funding per student at the university level is, on average, almost 2.5 times greater than for a child in early education service (OECD, 2004). Although politically a difficult aim to achieve, the rolling back of free university places for *all* students can be justified in terms of achieving greater equality of opportunity for young children as they begin education. Because of the enhanced earnings that tertiary education brings to graduating students, it is reasonable to require from at least some university students a personal contribution to costs. It is also more likely that tertiary education will benefit from private sector investment and sponsorships than early childhood services, where returns on investment are by definition long-term. Moreover, free university places for all provides a subsidy for middle and high income groups at the expense of students from low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds, whose participation in tertiary education remains low in most countries. Research from Australia suggests that charging student fees has little effect on enrolments if appropriate fee exemptions are introduced to support low SES students, and loans are made available on favourable terms for other students, e.g. reimbursement schemes that are contingent on attaining appropriate income thresholds after completing education (Gallagher, 2003).

to provide individual attention to young children from deprived backgrounds, helping them to gain in confidence and to learn. Research from both France and the US shows that although middle-class children continue to do well in quite large groups of 15-25 children, children from deprived backgrounds quickly lose ground in large classes. A rational staffing programme would ensure classes of less than 15:1 for all children from disadvantaged backgrounds, led by a qualified (and certified) teacher assisted by a trained children's nurse. The returns to the state investment in early childhood services are lost unless high quality is maintained for these children.

- *A recuperation of costs through maintaining parental fees until children enter primary school, while waiving fees for low-income and large families:* As noted above, this is a measure employed in the Nordic countries, where, with the exception of Denmark, parental fees are low. In Finland, for example, fees are capped at €200 euros per child per month, but the accumulation of even this small fee can allow the local early childhood office to buy more materials or assign an extra nurse or special teacher to centres in the municipality.
- *A more energetic and creative approach to taxation and fees:* All states have the competence to raise revenue through taxes (corporate, property, sales and income tax) and fees (payments to obtain a licence, buy a house, drive on a motorway, etc.), and many governments earmark a part of these taxes for early childhood education and care. In Belgium, France and Italy, for example, a significant part (about 1%) of social security and/or corporate tax is channelled toward children's services. In Columbia, a 3% pay-roll tax is levied to finance early childhood services. In Denmark, Finland, Korea, Sweden and the UK, local authorities raise taxes, which are used to supplement the state allocation for health, social welfare and early education services. In the USA, grants from the large corporations toward early childhood services are common, as tax concessions can be granted by the public authorities for large donations. Other funding sources include special taxes, such as in Arkansas, where the excise tax on packaged beer is used to fund the state-wide Better Chance programme, or in Los Angeles County, where a tax on tobacco is used to fund early childhood programming. In Georgia, state lottery proceeds fund early childhood services and provide subventions to needy tertiary-level students wishing to enter college. A lesser but similar use of lottery money is practised in the UK through the New Opportunities Fund. It may be noted that governments in some countries would judge these means to be dubious and unnecessary, as they consider early childhood education and care to be the foundation stage of public education and hence, the direct responsibility of government.
- *Cost-effective coordination of early childhood policies at central level and integration of services at local level:* Integration under one ministry or agency is more efficient in terms of vision and planning, and removes the duplication of administrative and regulatory frameworks that multiple auspices impose. At local level, a rationalisation of services can also be operated, e.g. it seems more sensible to invest significantly in the school infrastructure (if it is suitable for young children), and to bring early education and care, full-day and out-of-school time provision together in one location, rather than engage separate investments in rented and other premises. Concentration of centre-based services can help to reduce costs and create new synergies. Having services on one site also reduces daily transitions for young children and facilitates the schedules of working parents.²⁸ Criticisms have been voiced in Denmark, however, of over-concentration of services at school level, as insufficient attention may be given to the smaller services, such as free-time services. According to DLO (2001), early childhood services and out-of-school time provision need well-designed buildings for their own particular needs, and

28. Respect for the rhythms and interests of young children, and consultation of parents and the community or voluntary sector need to be ensured in services attached to schools.

independent parent boards to ensure acceptable programming for the children involved in these services.

- *Public-private partnerships - a sharing of tasks with the voluntary, community and private sector*, and the incorporation of non-public providers into a publicly funded and professionally managed system. The contribution made by non-governmental organisations and local private providers to the state network is often significant, even essential, as for example, in Germany. Many countries, e.g. Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, the UK, and the US, grant operating licenses to providers that maintain quality standards and reward them either directly with operational subsidies or indirectly through subsidising parental fees. In granting subsidies, governments may require voluntary early education bodies to accept an appropriate quota of children from disadvantaged or special needs backgrounds, and to keep fees within the range defined by the public authorities. In the liberal economies, however, governments sometimes grant providers a derogation from the standards expected of public services, e.g. Section 108 of the new Washington State law (2006) in the US states:

Except for licensing as required by Washington State law and to the extent permitted by federal law, the director of the department of early learning shall grant waivers from the rules of state agencies for the operation of early learning programs requested by nongovernmental private-public partnerships to allow for flexibility to pursue market-based approaches to achieving the best outcomes for children and families.

- *Enlisting support from the corporate and business sectors*. In some countries, employers and corporations are important providers or funders of early childhood services. In the Netherlands, for example, companies above a certain number of employees are expected to pay a third of the costs of childcare places in accredited centres for the young children of their employees. In Korea and Mexico, firms employing a certain quota of young women are required by law to establish an on-site day care centre or subsidise child care and early education expenses for their employees. More in keeping with seeing ECEC as a public good, employers in France must contribute to the *Caisse d'allocations familiales* (the family benefits treasury) which, in turn, subsidises child care costs in the region to an average of 25%. Belgium (0.05% of the company's wage bill) and Italy have similar levies on employers to meet the costs of local child care. In other countries, e.g. Australia, Ireland and the UK, builders are expected to include in their costs for housing estates, the construction of appropriately-designed crèches and schools. Local communities and industry are also expected to contribute. Here a link with the Department of the Environment might be pursued, as many builders prefer to pay an exaction tax rather than to build – a tax which might be earmarked for future construction of early childhood facilities.

Part V - Conclusions

Despite remarkable progress over the last 10 years – in particular in the area of child care²⁹ - early childhood education and care policy in Ireland remains inconsistent in terms of its basic conceptualisation, financing, administration, organisation and pedagogy. The traditional split between 'pre-primary education' and 'child care' has survived over the last decade and tends to undermine a clear and workable conceptualisation of the field. Significantly, the 1999 Department of Education and Science initiative: *Ready to Learn: White Paper on Early Childhood Education* has still not been implemented, particularly in relation to the structures that are needed to integrate early care and pre-primary education.

²⁹. Because of the subject of this paper, I have not been able to outline sufficiently the impressive and steady progress made by the child care sector since the OECD review, in particular, the move toward greater integration of the sector, now under the aegis of the OMC.

Neither government as a whole nor the business community seem to have taken on board the economic and human capital rationale for investing in children's services. How else can one explain the meagreness of resources being channelled toward young children? Governmental domains that benefit from the widespread provision of early childhood education and care services are: the national economy (short-term, through the contribution of working women,³⁰ and long-term through more effective human capital formation); health (better mental and physical health for children and families, less at-risk behaviours...); social welfare and criminal justice (less dependency of families on social welfare; higher earnings for families; more gender equality; less family violence, less criminality...); education (better integration of young children at-risk into primary school, better grade progression, less participation in special education...). In contrast, lack of investment results in: child care shortages; low quality, especially in services for children from disadvantaged backgrounds;³¹ unequal access and the segregation of children according to income (Prentice, 2005; Sadowski, 2006; Waters Boots, 2005). Unavailability of services raises barriers against women's full-time employment and also channels women toward low-paid, part-time jobs (Lee, 2004, Immervoll & Barber, 2005).

Of particular concern is a certain insensitivity to child poverty and special need that still seem to characterise early education and care funding in Ireland. The OECD Country Note, 2004, drew attention in several places to the need to support special needs children more inclusively and more appropriately in child care and early education. Likewise, the need to provide better programmes (with smaller numbers) to children from low-income backgrounds, including Traveller children, was flagged. To our knowledge no great breakthrough has been made in increasing financing for early childhood programmes for these children, although the research is clear that effective support can be given to diverse families when their children are very young. Decades of research has shown that the level of family income is not the only cause of poor outcomes for young children, but more importantly, the low educational levels of parents and weak aspirations for their children. These are causes that can be addressed by comprehensive and two-generational early childhood services staffed by highly-trained personnel.

Attention was also drawn in the OECD report to the upstream policies – income redistribution through taxation, primary health programmes, housing, job creation, family support... – that prevent poverty. Here, it seems Ireland is making good progress. Research and data on poverty are now available at a level comparable to other countries, provided by *Combat Poverty* and other bodies, and overall poverty levels are falling. Yet, as Part II of this analysis indicates, social protection and public investment in services for families and young children is still very low compared to other European countries, and the relatively high percentage of young children still living in poverty is a matter of serious concern. The long-term effects of child poverty can hardly be over-estimated: poverty makes a difference to children's health, their socialisation, their educational achievement, how long they will live, how well they develop physically and mentally, what kinds of jobs they get, as well as to their future contribution to society and the economy.

An additional consequence of under-funding in Ireland has been the generation of an inequitable childcare market, to which modest-income families (third and fourth quintiles) find difficult to access. When a second child is born to an Irish family today, it does not make economic sense for many mothers to return to work. Childcare costs are now among the highest in European countries and offset any gain that an average second salary can bring. Although the general thrust of the National Childcare Strategy has been toward helping families with low and modest resources, the amount of funding available has been so low and

³⁰: In the Nordic economies, where the rate of female employment is among the highest in the world, women's work is calculated to contribute around 40% of GNP.

³¹: A basic premise in the research on cost-benefits from ECEC services is that these services are of high quality. Where poor quality is the rule, the returns from investment are lost (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1996, Lamb, 1998).

so widely spread that most families at these income levels are still unable to access services, and thus opt for maternal care for children and the male-earner family model. The same pattern can be seen also in the Mediterranean countries, where investment in child care services is similarly weak. As a result, higher-educated women (with better salaries) in these countries are far more likely to continue in work and employ child care services than women lower on the socio-economic scale. Defenders of the present system argue that to keep children at home is the right and choice of parents. Of course, but it is interesting to note that in countries where affordable, high quality places are made available through government investment, there follows a significant move toward entrusting children from a year to 18 months to regulated services and significant increases in labour force participation by women.³²

However, a highly ambivalent attitude to women's place in society and to extra-domestic 'child care' continues to exist in Ireland, which serves to lessen and divide ECEC financing. This is illustrated in inconsistent policy approaches to women's employment, where on the one hand government is investing in early childhood services so that women can work, and on the other, providing €350 million annually to help women stay at home! An important element in any national calculation of whether and how much to invest in early childhood services is to calculate the potential contribution to the economy that women can make.³³ To date, no estimate – to our knowledge – of the economic benefits to be gained through stimulating the employment rate of Irish women from the present 58% to, for example, a Norwegian level of 76%.³⁴ Part of this gain could be reinvested in parental leave and high quality early childhood services, in the best interests of infants and young children. In neither of these areas has the government, in our estimation, responded sufficiently to the actual needs of the Irish economy or to the wishes of working women. Early childhood services in Ireland are in short supply, and parental leave is among the least generous in Europe. For example, the high employment rates among Norwegian mothers is accompanied by a 53 week-long parental leave, financed to 80% of earnings, which, in addition, are included in pension estimates. No more nor less than men, working women in Norway are not penalised at the end of their careers for having a child. Governments have a responsibility to strike a balance between what is best for infants and young children and what will best serve economic and gender equality aims.

Once the ambivalence about working mothers and child care is resolved in Ireland, the challenge of significantly expanding both parental leave and early childhood services will need to be met. The development of a quality system require significantly greater funding (including in pre-primary education) than assumed in the excellent NESF report. I have not provided in this paper costs for a parental leave system as there are several different ways of financing such schemes, but there needs to be a recognition that a remunerated year-long, parental leave scheme, counted as part of a woman's working career and her pension entitlement, is best for both infants and mothers. Research shows that one-to-one care of babies during the first year of life develops their sense of attachment, and contributes to their emotional and language development (Tanaka, 2004). There is evidence too of the value and importance of male involvement in the care of children, in particular in terms of family

³². An often-cited exception to this rule may be the US, where high female participation rates are achieved. Just under 70% (12 percentage points higher than Ireland, but below the 75% average for female employment achieved in the five Nordic countries) of American women are employed. The 69.8% participation rate in a country with relatively weak child care services can be explained by the high proportion of American children cared for at home by relatives or domestic child-minders. American patterns of immigration assist this solution to child care needs, as many young Hispanic and Asian women are available for this type of work. It is doubtful that the majority Eastern European immigration into Ireland could allow this type of solution, even if it were desirable.

³³. Other important elements in making the calculation are: the immediate impact of these services on the well-being of young children and families; and their long-term contribution to socialisation and education.

³⁴. A policy aim here should be to provide flexible long-term jobs for women rather than the stop-gap, part-time work which women with young children are often obliged to take.

bonding (Cabrera et al, 2000; McBride & Rane, 1997). In parallel, research raises some important doubts about the impact of institutional care in the period from birth to 10 months on the developmental of young children (NICHD, 2004).

In parallel to an adequate parental leave period, the expansion of early childhood services to reach the Barcelona targets should take place, but on a quality basis. In particular, I have stressed the need to bring down radically the overcrowding of pre-primary classes (20 children being the largest group size allowed, with a maximum child:staff ratio of 10:1) and to adopt reasonable training requirements across all sectors. This would include the employment of associate teachers or trained children's nurses in early education alongside a university-trained teacher, as in the Nordic countries. The delivery of the system would be mixed, with government dependents (e.g. the seven recognised statutory voluntary organisations) being financed to deliver service in accordance with government regulations and curriculum. The country needs to aim for an effective early education service catering for all children from 1-6 years, with reasonable child staff ratios (particularly for disadvantaged young children) and running from 8.30 to 18.00 hours daily for parents who may need this length of service. This is what the Nordic countries have already achieved, and what France, the UK and some US states are planning to accomplish. The present analysis provides two measures of establishing a financing estimate for early childhood services in Ireland that would provide wider coverage and better quality than at present. The first based on a simple calculation of 1% of GDP or GNP for 2003 provides a budget envelope of €1391 million euros annually for ECEC services if calculated on the basis of GDP, or if calculated on GNP, €1177 million euros. The figure is greater than the combined total of current spending on young children (€115 million allocated each year for five years through the NCS, plus €500 million allocated yearly by DES for pre-primary and Early Start, plus €350 million annually for the Early Childcare Supplement) but not so far off as to be impossible to achieve fairly quickly.

To ensure good quality and so provide an adequate return on the public investment, there is much to justify basing expenditure on another criterion, viz. the average annual investment per child in a good quality programme or in a public ECEC system known to have high quality services. The two lowest estimates (based on programmes from the US and the Nordic countries) suggest that a quality programme costs at least €8,800 for a full day, academic year programme for children 3-6 years (with light holiday leisure programmes), and at least €10,000 per year for a full-day, full year programme for younger children with integrated early education and care. Basing our calculation on the Barcelona targets, that is, costs for 33% of children from 0-3 years (that is, on services for 50% of children 1-3 years) and for full enrolment of children 3-6 years old, the investment would come to approximately €2184 million euros annually or less than 1.5% of GDP. These figures allow one to understand why countries such as Denmark and Sweden spend around 2% of GDP on ECEC programmes as the training requirements and staff:child ratios practised in these countries are among the highest. Their ambition follows the economic returns analyses of the Nobel prize-winning economist, James Heckman (Cunha, Heckman et al., 2005) and other researchers showing that investments in young children have a more profound and lasting effect on learning potential and education systems than at any other age – in Heckman's phrase: 'learning begets learning'. A similar ambition is not outside the range of possibilities for Ireland. This will require, as Part IV of the analysis suggests, a dedicated team at the level of the Ministry of Finance to identify financing sources that can deliver a system supportive of young children and their families and that will add value to Ireland's economic growth. It is open to question whether the present investment in services allows the country to achieve this aim.

In summary:

- Despite remarkable progress over the last decade – in particular, in the childcare sector - Ireland is seriously under-investing in services for young children. Other European countries – including the UK - are planning or are already making the effort to invest between 1% and 2% of GDP in services for young children

- Ireland's delay seems to spring from ambivalent attitudes toward the role of women in contemporary Irish society and to a distrust of 'socialised' child care, linked to a lack of examples of affordable, high quality, centre-based services. Where pre-primary education is concerned, low investment seems to derive from an under-estimation of the importance of early education and from treating the sector as if it were a junior primary school, with a pedagogy and child:staff ratios at odds with the natural learning strategies of young children;³⁵
- Expenditure on young children is an investment in human capital that more than pays for itself in terms of potential (full-time and professional) job creation and of improved education levels for the whole population... with less dependency on social and health services, less delinquency and anti-social behaviour among poorly integrated families and groups in society;
- Many ECEC programmes in Ireland, both in pre-primary and child care – at least at the time of the OECD reviews - are not of sufficient quality to nurture as they should the social and cognitive development of young children, or to raise effectively parental aspirations with regard to the social development and education of their children;
- The current Irish economy has the capacity to aim for a 1.5% of GDP investment in ECEC services, based on a more energetic and creative financing approach to the sector. Experience from many countries suggests that direct investment in services (supply-side funding) is more effective than subventions to parents.

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³⁵. The natural learning strategies of young children 1-6 years are: warm, inter-personal relationships and communication with both peers and caring adults (based on an ethic of care), personal investigation of the surrounding environment, including the outdoors; much personal and social play; and (in early education centres) participation with peers in interesting, well designed project work.

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Strategies for Change **Reflections from a systemic, comparative research project.**

Mathias Urban

1. Introduction

It is the aim of this seminar – as stated in the programme – to interrogate policies relating to the Irish early childhood care and education sector, and to compare them with international developments. The importance of this endeavour cannot be underestimated, particularly at times, where ‘evidence-based’ policy-making appears to be *the* paradigm in many European countries. It is only from a naïve utilitarian point of view, that one might expect research to provide answers and evidence for policy makers, enabling them to develop and legitimate political decisions and strategies. Questioning the expectation that academic research can produce knowledge as base for political decision and, in consequence, administrative and managerial action does not mean, of course, to deny the importance and possibilities of research in this field in general. There is a particular and predominant rationality, a causal way of relating research and policy that needs to be critiqued because it puts an emphasis on a particular social construction of *a* knowledge which is exclusive of many other possible knowledges. Deeply embedded in the ‘technoscientific’ (Turnbull, 2003) continuum of modern society, it claims to be objective. Therefore, as Dahlberg and Moss (2005) elaborate, it forms a basis for both performance and control. Research that situates itself in this particular paradigm can without doubt make valuable contributions to formulating rules and to making predictions about how best to achieve particular goals. It is therefore ‘a very appealing prospect to international organisations, governments and corporations pursuing an instrumental agenda and seeking certain and unequivocal answers to the question, “What works?”’ (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005:6). Research in Early Childhood, understood as a means of knowledge-production, directly links to predominant discourses on children and childhood in modern society, which, increasingly, turn out to be discourses on certainties and predetermined outcomes:

We know the adult we want the child to become, we know the world in which the adult must live and work. The challenge is to produce the adult to fit into that world, in the most cost-effective way – and with the help of scientific knowledge-as-regulation the challenge can be met.
(ibid)

But societies are not stagnant and, obviously, the prospect of linear development towards a predictable state of adulthood in a given social, cultural and economic environment is eroding quickly. Irish society has seen dramatic changes over the last years, with developments still accelerating. It has, for instance, become more visibly diverse and unequal than most people could have imagined a decade ago. The implications for children and families and, in consequence for early childhood institutions and practices are manifold and only beginning to enter the public’s awareness. Research that interrogates policy (instead of informing it) is crucial to gain understandings, however provisional, of the complexities and contradictions of today’s society – or of one of its specific aspects, which we refer to as the early childhood sector.

The aim of the research that this paper draws upon is to open the mind for critical thinking. It is much more about asking critical questions than about producing answers. Bringing together experiences from different countries, including Ireland, it is comparative to the

respect that it strives to shed lights on inspiring policies and practices in different countries – policies and practices that are possibilities rather than templates. Its intention is, following the authors of the recent OCED report on early childhood education and care,

not to identify ‘models’ for imitation or to construct league tables, *but to assist policy makers* [and practitioners, M.U.] *to think more broadly and critically* about ECEC. (OECD, 2006:190, emphasis added)

I want to put an emphasis on the critical dimension of thinking about current (and possible future) policies and practices – as well as on the *re* part of research and reflection (Rhedding-Jones, 2005:18). In a social context that is rapidly changing, as it is the case in present-day Ireland, huge pressures emerge on social institutions, e.g. early childhood care and education. While there is an obvious need to create change in the institutions and services for young children, it is important to be aware of the ‘unquestioned assumptions, discourses and practices’ (Moss, 2001) in the Irish ECCE sector. Adding a ‘critical’ dimension to reflection and research is one important way of questioning these taken for granted discourses, knowledges and practices. Critical reflection is political, in a general sense, as it opens a perspective on the broader picture: on the social and political *context* that shapes not only our ‘image of the child’ in this society, but also the institutions we construct around this image, the practices we develop within them and, last but not least, the questions we ask about them. We sometimes think of ‘becoming political’ as something to do with forming pressure groups, lobbying political representatives – TD’s – and joining a trade union. All that is true and ECCE, as a ‘sector’ as well as a profession, has clear weaknesses regarding its visibility and influence in a highly competitive society. As we can see from some of the first findings of the ‘Strategies for Change’ project in Ireland, actors on various layers of the ECCE system are very aware of these weaknesses and they urge for them to be tackled. I am going to discuss this in more detail in section 3 of this paper (‘systemic change in Ireland’). However, the political dimension of critical reflection, which, I want to suggest, is essential to develop an understanding of the processes that further or hamper change for the better in early childhood care and education, is broader than that. It is about questioning *individual* practices (and understandings, routines, attitudes ...) on every layer of the early childhood system – as much as it is about creating a culture of valuing questions and embracing change *in the system in the whole*.

The ‘system’ that I am referring to, comprises individual and collective practices in any early childhood setting as well as in training¹ and professional development, in academia, in the administrative and political sphere and, of course, in research in these contexts itself. All of these elements are embedded in the wider context of a society, with its local, national and increasingly global dimensions. Critical reflection, in these contexts, then, is about creating an ‘ethos of inquiry’ – as one interviewee put it –, but one that is informed by the political and social realities that produce knowledges and practices, ‘together with the use of this knowledge to *strategically* transform education in socially progressive directions’ (Mac Naughton, 2003:3 italics M.U.).

Research in early childhood is a practice in itself, and therefore it can be understood and done in different ways, none of them being the only possibility. We must – and we actually do –

¹ I am using the term *training* reluctantly, and only because it is how education, preparation and continuous learning of early childhood practitioners are usually referred to. *Training*, as a particular concept of learning through instruction, repetitive practice etc. is about acquiring skills to apply and deliver technologies. *Training* is about being taught how to do things right. Its connotations contradict the very essence of educational practice as a transformative practice of mutual dependence and respect, co-construction and shared meaning-making between human beings. Although I acknowledge that the terminology of ‘profession’ is problematic in itself, I prefer to write about *professional learning* and *professional development*.

make choices. Perhaps the most critical choice is whether to reproduce the status quo or to transform it. In early childhood education, like in education in general, and in any societal institution, there is no such thing as unpolitical practice – or unpolitical research. Even the intentional decision, still taken by early childhood educators and researchers alike, to steer clear of politics is a political one. But it is, to the contrary, the very nature of education – and of educational research – that gives reason for hope:

The revelatory, gnosiological practice of education does not of itself effect the transformation of the world: but it implies it.
(Freire, 2004:23)

It is from this perspective that I hope to give a *critical but sympathetic* external perspective on the developments, politics and practices of the Irish ECCE sector in the following sections.

The second section following this introduction introduces ‘Strategies for Change’, a cross-national research project that strives to gain understandings of the *processes* of change in early childhood education and care from a systemic perspective; treating the participating countries as complex, individual *cases* (as opposed to objects of comparison).

In the third section, I want to dwell on the experiences of the Irish partners in the ‘Strategies for Change’ project in particular. Again, as outlined above, this chapter is more about insights into complex developments and subjective voices of participants than about definite ‘truths’ about the Irish ECCE sector.

The fourth section deals with *sustainability* of change; with the importance of initiating and supporting continuous processes rather than providing quick fixes. It discusses possibilities for moving on beyond individual efforts and towards creating a *learning community* throughout every layer of the ECCE system. As an excursus more than an example, this section draws on experiences from Aotearoa/New Zealand, a country with many similarities to Ireland. Although the context of a prosperous liberal economy provides comparable starting conditions, and both the social context and the ECCE sector are as diverse as they are in Ireland, Aotearoa/New Zealand has developed a significantly different approach to early childhood policy, practice and professional development (Dalli, 2005).

To conclude, I want to suggest we think and act differently in early childhood research and practice. Not out of date at all, Paulo Freire’s (1993; 2004) concept of *conscientisation* offers a powerful transformative approach to critically reflective practice and the practice of research.

2. The ‘Strategies for Change’ Project

Context

The thoughts I am sharing in this paper are a first outcome of an international research project that is interested in exploring ‘Strategies for Change’ in early childhood education and care systems. The research is situated in a dynamic policy context, in Europe and beyond, which, in recent years, has been paying unprecedented attention to institutions for young children and their families. Early childhood education and care has moved up national and international policy agendas over the past decade, driven by common concerns about employment, competitiveness and gender equality. As the OECD points out in the recent report on ECEC policies in twenty participating countries, factors for turning governments’ attention to institutions and services for young children are obvious:

The wish to increase women's labour market participation; to reconcile work and family responsibilities on a basis more equitable for women; to confront the demographic challenges faced by OECD countries (in particular falling fertility rates and the general ageing of populations, and the need to address issues of child poverty and educational disadvantage.

(OECD, 2006:12).

It is in this economic and political climate, that the European Union expresses the need to increase the *numbers* of childcare places and, at the Barcelona summit in 2002, has agreed on providing fully subsidised childcare places for 33% of children aged 0-3 and 90% of children from 3 to mandatory school age by 2010. To date only five countries² have reached these targets according to OECD figures.

The main concern, at least from the perspective of governments of countries we regularly refer to as being 'developed', is that 'economic prosperity depends on maintaining a high employment/population ratio' (ibid), and policies to bring more women into the workforce have been put in place in most OECD countries.³ It is questionable, however, whether it is legitimate to speak about services *for children* when the driving factors for investing in them are so clearly economic in the first place. But there are other rationales, too, and they offer other possibilities of thinking about policies, practices and institutions. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) argue that early childhood services, or institutions, and the way we conceptualise their role in society are not necessities. Being social constructions, they cannot be taken for granted and there are different ways in which they can be constructed and thought about. A *service*, designed to deliver a product (childcare for working parents) and to achieve a predetermined outcome (e.g. early education towards school readiness) is only one end of the spectrum. An *institution* as a locus for relevant 'ethical and political practice' (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005) and interaction between children and adults lies at the other. Conceptualising institutions for young children as services, then, leads to early childhood settings as sites 'for technical practice, seeking the best methods and procedures for delivering predetermined outcomes' (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005:2). Other connotations of this conceptual approach, which, as the authors argue, appears to be natural and inevitable are

a stable, defined and transmittable body of knowledge, but also implicitly a particular subject, today the autonomous and flexible child. The defining question for this possibility is 'What works?': which technical practices will most effectively ensure the desired outcomes?

(ibid)

There are, of course, other rationales that have moved early childhood institutions onto policy agendas (as well as onto electoral agendas in many countries, as the OECD report points out). Besides being a condition for gender equality in an economy dominated society, the expansion of early childhood institutions is seen as crucial for educational attainment, as the fundament for lifelong learning and social inclusion and equity. Concurrently, the policy

² Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, France, Norway and Sweden (OECD, 2006:78).

³ From a pragmatic point of view, *any* argument that helps placing early childhood high on governments' agendas should be welcome. But there is another side to the coin of the economic rationale, too: policies to increase female labour market participation, being introduced in times of economic growth, are at risk of being abolished as soon as the economy faces a deceleration or decline. Not only are the unsustainable – they are also a highly effective means of governing, or controlling, women's, men's and children's participation in the society on the whole: Fundamental rights to participation in a democratic society are in effect granted or denied according to rationales of an increasingly globalised economy that lack any democratic legitimation.

context includes a new international and national attention to children's rights and participation framed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and recognised explicitly in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

Widespread policy commitment to more ECEC provision is also combined with a recognition that provision has to be of good quality.⁴ There have been important European and national discussions on what quality entails, including the publication in 1996 of *Quality Targets in Services for Young Children* by a European Commission expert network. It is further generally acknowledged that more and better ECEC services require substantial investment. Where there is no consensus, however, is how to bring about change in ECEC – in what ways services should develop and how to bring about this development. Internationally, a multitude of strategies and actions can be identified, expressed in an increasing number of national policy documents and initiatives for achieving the common policy goals of more services of better quality.

It is generally recognised and supported by research that the workforce is central for achieving the policy goals of increasing both quantity and quality of provision (Dalli, 2003, , 2005; MacNaughton, 2005; Oberhuemer, 2005; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, & Muttock, 2002). But most countries face major workforce challenges. In many countries, the workforce is split between early childhood *teachers* and *childcare workers*, reflecting a deep institutional split between early childhood education and childcare that is increasingly questioned by researchers and policy makers. Childcare workers are typically poorly educated and badly paid, raising questions about the quality of this part of the workforce and recruitment and retention. The work itself is also recognised to be changing and increasingly demanding, because of increasing diversity among children and families and the complexity of the work in the institutions set up to serve them (OECD, 2001; Woodhead, 1996). Early childhood workers have to address not only the need to provide care, but also broader requirements – educational, social and cultural – e.g. collaborating with parents from diverse backgrounds and with diverse local communities (cf OECD, 2001).

The issue of *who* the future worker should be becomes increasingly important, as well as how the workforce should be structured. Recent research on understandings of professionalism carried out in one European country (Scotland) identifies as many as eleven job titles for working with young children (Adams, 2005). This reflects how conceptualizations of the workforce differ to a great extent. As Oberhuemer and Ulich (1997) have pointed out, there is no consensus on the role of people working with young children in institutional settings in Europe.

Internationally, an emerging discourse on professionalism in early childhood emphasises the importance of critical reflectiveness (cf. Mac Naughton, 2003; 2005), autonomy (Urban, 2005) and professional habitus (Urban & Murray, 2005) over the mere acquirement of skills and techniques. At the same time, early childhood practitioners in many countries are facing a parallel and increasingly influential discourse on outcomes, assessments and other means of regulation that leaves them with a fundamental dilemma: They are expected to achieve predetermined and ambitious outcomes in a working context that is increasingly diverse and less predictable.

⁴ It is obvious that the concept of 'quality' itself is highly problematic. It has been widely challenged by authors for its implicit relatedness to notions of universality, technocratic manageability and measurability (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Pence & Moss, 1994; Urban, 2003, , 2005). While we need to be critical about 'quality' and its implications for EC practice, in a broader policy context, though, insisting on 'better' quality can be an effective driving force for the public and political debate.

Differences and uncertainties about conceptions and self-conceptions of the early childhood profession reflect wider differences and uncertainties about the services in which they work: social constructions of the worker are linked to social constructions of the settings in which they work. Understandings of early childhood institutions are ‘... *deeply influenced by underlying assumptions about childhood and education*’ (OECD, 2001:63). Early childhood institutions may, as discussed above, be understood as *services* (for working parents) or means of *social intervention* (e.g. delivering targeted programmes for disadvantaged areas); as pursuing *educational tasks* (preparing children for compulsory school) or serving the local community as ‘*forums in a civil society*’ (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999:7).

These different social constructions of services and their workforces are a potential influence in strategies of change. But they are produced and influenced by broader social, political, cultural, economic and historical contexts and welfare regimes, which also shape directions and strategies of change. For example, differing welfare regimes lead to different roles being given to the state (and to different levels of government), markets and families, and to public or private providers; while the existence of a pedagogical or an educational tradition in the ECEC system may influence whether strategies for change are based on an integrated or split ECEC system.

Methodological remarks

While large scale comparative studies – e.g. the excellent ‘Starting Strong’ study on early childhood education and care in 20 countries (OECD, 2001, , 2006), or the recently published Education for All Global Monitoring Report ‘Strong Foundations’ (UNESCO, 2007) – provide essential overviews and powerful tools and arguments for both policy and profession, they are also limited by their very nature. With their bird’s-eye view on policies and structures they are, and not only metaphorically, at risk of losing ground, or, as Peter Moss (2001) states succinctly in his address to the launch of the first ‘Starting Strong’ report in Stockholm, ‘cross-national studies of early childhood can lose sight of the child’. Their distance from actual contexts and processes, he argues, contributes to re-producing notions of universality. They create

an image of the child as a universal and passive object, to be shaped by early childhood services – to be developed, to be prepared, to be educated, to be cared for. There may be little sense for the child as a social actor, situated in a particular historical and spatial context, living a childhood in these services, and making her own meanings from the experience.

(ibid)

It can be one of the pitfalls of *comparative* approaches to describing complex entities like early childhood education and care systems, that, in order to manage the complexity, researchers may feel tempted to reduce it. Thus, for reasons which only too often, are accepted as pragmatic, comparative research methodologies may contribute to constructing a comparability of its subject, hence to constructing the subject itself. The challenge for any comparison of institutions and practices in social systems is to explore their embeddedness in local contexts, histories, cultural patterns etc. – which may well make them *incomparable* in some of their characterising and most interesting aspects.

Most critical thinkers would agree that the appropriateness of any universal framework in early childhood has to be challenged and many authors have indeed done so – Martin Woodhead (1996:17), for example, contests the powerful discourse that has shaped the notion of the universality of quality as it inevitably leads, he argues, to a ‘world of uniformity’ with little regard to the (cultural, local etc.) context of practices, experiences and knowledges:

Implementing contextually-inappropriate standards [...] will prove more disruptive than constructive in fostering children's development.
(ibid)

The authors of 'Starting Strong' are well aware of these pitfalls and, although calling their report 'comparative', they refer explicitly to the contextual, *specific*, hence *diverse* and *controversial* aspects of their subject, which, in consequence, may make simple comparison impossible:

From this perspective, ECEC policy and the quality of services are deeply influenced by underlying assumptions about childhood and education: what does childhood mean in this society? How should young children be reared and educated? What are the purposes of education and care, of early childhood institutions? What are the functions of early childhood staff?
(OECD, 2001:63)

These are crucial questions – which have to be addressed and debated openly in the public and political sphere rather than kept within the limitations of the EC setting. By acknowledging their importance the authors of the OECD report actually offer a perspective that reaches far beyond the simplistic comparison of structural data: they introduce the notion of *localised meaning-making* to the realm of cross-national comparison.

The diverse discourses on young children and their families, on the institutions set up to serve them, and their policies and practices tend to be increasingly globalized and, although providing a wealth of information, comparative research in these contexts, by its logic, contributes to *constructing the comparability* and therefore to constructing its subject in a very particular way – and it is most likely that there are other possibilities. Hence, it is important to bear in mind that institutions, policies and practices – in early childhood education as well as in research – are social constructs which, as Michel Foucault (1973) has taught us, need to be contextualised and framed. It is this necessity for cultural-historical contextualisation and localisation, along with the processional characteristics of *change* in early childhood *systems* that led to the methodological approach of the 'Strategies for Change' project. While recognising and embracing the possibilities offered by cross-national, or, as I would suggest to call it, *cross-contextual* research, 'Strategies for Change' also aims at the micro-processes, at the *here* as opposed to the generalisation. Peter Moss (2001) succinctly summarises the benefits of linking the *macro-* to the *micro-*layers of EC systems as he writes

Taken for granted assumptions and understandings of childhood can become visible, and so subject to deliberation and confrontation. In this way, for example, cross-national work can contribute to making childhood contestable. But for this to happen, *the starting point for cross-national work needs to be, how is childhood constructed here? What is the image of the child here?*
(italics M.U.)

Early childhood education and care is a messy business – in day-to-day practice as well as in politics and I want to suggest that any research that aims at developing an understanding of *what is actually going on, and why, and for whom*, needs to embrace, rather than to avoid the messiness of its subject and to reflect the spatialised nature of knowledge in this field which, in effect, is a 'motley' (Turnbull, 2003).

Ethnographers, since Clifford Geertz (1973) see *comparison* in stark contrast to studying the particularities of the individual case and as

actually competing with learning about and from the particular case. Comparison is a grand epistemological strategy, a powerful conceptual mechanism, fixing attention upon one or a few attributes.

(Stake, 2003:148)

However, as the author rightly concludes, this grand epistemological strategy ‘*obscures case knowledge that fails to facilitate comparison*’ (ibid, italics M.U). Not only can messy, complex, unique and vital *case knowledge* be obscured, by methodological decisions, and for the sake of keeping comparison manageable. The risk is, that the focus of interest will, perhaps involuntary, shift from the ‘thick of what is going on’ (ibid) to the comparison itself.

In the ‘Strategies for Change’ project, the participating countries are treated as *freestanding-but-related cases*. Each one of them has their own *narrative* of early childhood and its institutions. Many different *actors* are involved in the processes of change we are interested in – e.g. practitioners in different early childhood settings, scholars, administrators, and policy makers at various levels of government. They all are *narrators*, telling their individual and often distinct versions of the story. By doing so, at the same time, they are *embedded in* and *contributing to* the greater narrative of childhoods and families, institutions and professions in complex socio-cultural contexts.

‘Strategies for Change’ deliberately refers to the project participants as *actors*, or *narrators*, thus acknowledging the active role they take in the change-processes that are in the focus of the inquiry as well as in the research process itself. Treating the participating countries as *cases* allows for exploring the complexities and dynamics without reducing them to their *comparable* aspects. But the study – as any piece of research – shares a perspective on its *cases* as well. Not only are the *cases* related, in general, in that they are all situated in the broader context of discourses on *institution*, *profession* and *change* in early childhood. There is also a relation that is constructed by the particular design of this study, which is interested in processes of, factors contributing to, and possibilities for facilitating the transformation of a stagnant system into one that is dynamic and that is developing a momentum of constant evolution. The special attention, paid to the workforce and its conceptualisation – the roles assigned to early childhood practitioners / professionals as effective change agents – construe another relationship between the individual *cases* in this study. Asking similar questions in otherwise different contexts therefore creates a *structural equivalence* (Burt, 1982)⁵ that allows for a shared discussion between the participants, and between the participants and the researcher. It facilitates the creation of a space for *shared thinking*, *critical reflection* and, hopefully, informed *action*.

Project partners and participants

Three European countries have participated in the pilot phase of the research: Belgium (Flanders), England and Ireland. They have been chosen not only because of long standing work relationships with colleagues in academic and professional practice but mainly because

⁵ Admittedly, I am using the term ‘structural equivalence’ in a rather broad and open way. Informed by the theoretical framework of German sociologist Georg Simmel (2001), and coming from a sociological perspective that the identity of institutions, like that of individuals, can be only be understood as being *relational*, it is by no means restricted to a narrow sociological concept that, e.g. aims at *replacing* real individuals by ‘classes of structurally equivalent individuals’ (Lorrain & White, 1971).

they differ markedly with respect to key contextual factors (e.g. welfare regime, form of government) and their tradition of ECEC services, so presenting different starting points and strategies for change:

- *Belgium (Flanders)* is a federal state that has a classic split system with a tradition of early education (children entering schools at 3 years of age) and a diversified, underdeveloped and underprofessionalised childcare sector and strong commitment to develop the quality of childcare.
- *England* is a centralised state that has traditionally had an ECEC system split between early education and childcare. Recent policy, however, reflects an increasing recognition of the need for greater integration. Recent policy developments have also placed great emphasis on the role of markets and private providers, at the same time as a strong and centralised regulatory framework and the targeting of public investment on disadvantaged families and communities.
- *Ireland* has seen dramatic social and economic changes in the last decade. Shifting literally from an emigrant to an immigrant society has increased the need to develop adequate and equitable early childhood services in an unprecedented way. Although being a centralised state, Ireland has only recently introduced a government authority with responsibility for the mainly market focused early childhood sector. Concurrently, a decentralised structure (County Childcare Committees) has been set up, giving more autonomy to the local authorities. Like England and other fast growing economies, the early childhood sector is facing difficulties to attract a sufficient number of workers, mostly because of inadequate education and payment.

The project has also developed links and collaborations with New Zealand and Australia and – given the availability of funding – will aim at including partners from these countries in the next phase. Local partners include the city of Ghent, Flanders, management, trainers and staff of St. Thomas Early Excellence Centre in Birmingham, UK and, in Ireland, from Mayo County Childcare Committee.

The questions ‘Strategies for Change’ aims to explore are rather basic at first sight:

- What drives *change* at the macro- and micro- layers of early childhood education and care systems?
- What are the conceptualisations of, and the roles given to the workforce, the early childhood profession?

But like all basic questions, they tend to become increasingly complex, the closer you get. As outlined above, we have chosen countries as *cases* for the study and, within these countries, individuals in their institutional context as *participants*, *actors* and *narrators*. The *macro*, therefore refers to the national level of the participating countries where the focus of the study lies on strategies to further develop the ECEC system and how these strategies become manifest in professional and policy framework documents at this level: *Strategic plans*, *white papers*, *quality frameworks*, *national curricula* etc. The *micro*, as a complement, refers to local experiences and process of *change*, in day-to-day practice, in a particular community, a particular setting, or work context. Conceptualisations of the workforce – which are explicitly or implicitly manifest in the guiding documents at the *macro* layer, together with the experiences and self-perceptions of actors at the *micro*, or local layer open a perspective on the interrelationships between the *macro* and the *micro*.

Dimensions of change – a first interpretative framework

Following a first, explorative phase of the project⁶, where prospective partners were identified and first discussions held with colleagues from universities, training and practice development centres and local authorities in Belgium, England and Ireland, a first project meeting as held at the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU), at the Institute of Education, University of London. Participants were encouraged to tell their version of the story of *change* in ECEC in their countries. The presentations focussed on contextual and historical issues, on recent policy developments, on perceived achievements as well as on deficits, inequalities and contradictions in the three countries. From a group discussion – which was recorded and transcribed – a first, still sketchy image of a framework emerged, that, at this initial stage, helped to keep the discussion focused on the guiding question for this first encounter: What drives *change* in ECEC in Flanders, England and Ireland?

The framework has since proven to be fairly stable and it has been elaborated to serve as an interpretative frame or a means of *dimensionalising* processes of change. Five strands could be identified:

1. Advocacy

This dimension evolves around children's and families' issues in the broader societal context and the way the public is informed about these issues. While the discourses within the early childhood community are usually more advanced, they remain, too often, internal. *Change* seems to be more likely to happen, and to become sustainable where it is actively communicated as a matter of public interest, as *res publica*. Questions related to the *advocacy* dimension are, among others, 'How is public discourse informed about and by *children's rights* and *children's interests*?' 'Is *diversity* and *equality* within the horizon of the public debate on children and families?' 'Is there an informed debate about *socio-economic rationales* for investing in services for young children?'

2. Leadership

A second dimension of change would address issues of *leadership* – and the questions that arise within this dimension deal with *leadership* as a concept throughout the entire early childhood system as well as practical *leadership* (e.g. as a competence) in practice, politics and research. 'How is strong political *leadership* encouraged – on the different levels of government (national, local)?' This is only one of the questions that one might ask from a systemic perspective. Related questions can be asked about any aspect of a complex system: 'How is *leadership* encouraged and facilitated in day-to-day practice? In research and academic teaching?' And, most important, 'How is it resourced, to create and lead change?'

3. Change Agents

Early childhood and its institutions are deeply embedded in the complexities of society – and so is the early childhood community. It is one of the major weaknesses, in many countries, that the *community* of professionals, researchers and politicians who are committed to initiating and fostering change is too small and has too little impact compared to other interest groups competing for public attention and public resources. This is particularly true for Ireland today. The third dimension of change therefore draws attention to the actors, to the *agents* of change. Early childhood systems require a *critical mass* of change agents, if the initiatives to reform them are to keep their momentum and

⁶ This was facilitated by a small but at that stage crucial grant by the Bertelsmann Foundation, Guetersloh, Germany.

achieve sustainability. It is important, though, that the emphasis lies on the *critical* as well as on the *mass* – which is why this dimension is closely linked to the fifth.

4. *Institutional Barriers*

This dimension looks at the many obstacles that hinder the development of appropriate institutions and services for children – and at possible ways how they can be overcome. The split between *care* and *education* that characterises the early childhood systems in all of the countries participating in the pilot phase of the study is reflected regularly by split responsibilities between different government departments and agencies. Lack of coordination between different levels of government (e.g. local and national) is another major challenge in many countries. Institutional barriers also exist between the different elements of the early childhood community itself, raising questions about the appropriateness of the term. E.g. childcare workers and early childhood teachers may be educated in different institutions, to different qualifications and, as a consequence achieve different recognition, status and payment. Academic research may be estranged from practice and initial practitioner preparation may have no connections to further professional development.

5. *Links between Research, policy and practice development*

There is a particular dynamic that emerges in early childhood systems, whenever strong, reciprocal and equal links are established between proposed structural change (e.g. increased accessibility) and proposed changes in every-day-practices or pedagogies (e.g. a more integrative approach with a respect for the diversity of children, families and communities) on the one hand and developments in initial professional preparation, in-service professional development and a driving research (that is interested in, and relevant to practice) on the other. Each of the above represents a crucial element of a strong and profiled professional *community*. When *equal* and *reciprocal*, these relationships help overcome the divide between *thinking about*, *controlling* and actually *doing* early childhood practices – thus contributing to an ethos of inquiry and critical reflection throughout the EC system.

The chosen sequence of these five, still preliminary *dimensions of change* does not represent a hierarchy. From a systemic point of view, none of them, individually, is more important than any other and, therefore, none of them can be picked as a starting point to initiate change, with an expectation that the other dimensions will unfold as a consequence. They form, instead, a complex framework which – only in its *multidimensionality* – provides for the sustainability of change. In other words, although particular factors that foster or hinder processes of change and transformation can be identified, it is necessary to pay attention to all of them. In order to create sustainable change in early childhood education and care systems, we will have to begin with all dimensions simultaneously.

3. **Systemic Change in Ireland – a critical but sympathetic external perspective**

The early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector in Ireland is as interesting as it is bewildering in its evolution, structure, diversity, quality inequality, key players and controlling interests.

(Murray, 2006:8)

Like in any of the countries participating in the ‘Strategies for Change’ pilot, particular aspects of the early childhood system that relate to one or more of the *five dimensions of change* can easily be identified in Ireland. Considering the dimension of *advocacy*, e.g., there

is an increasing public debate about childcare in general, and its accessibility and affordability in particular. Children's rights issues have moved up policy agendas as well – even a referendum is to be held on whether or not to include children's rights explicitly in the constitution. Tackling disadvantage has been, along with concerns about equality, from an early stage, a 'main factor for the development of early education services and the direction of research over the last 30 years in Ireland', reports Hayes (1998:76) almost a decade ago and, obviously, it still is. In this decade, a rapid and radical shift from an emigrant to an immigrant society has brought forth dramatic social changes and, in the context of a rapidly growing economy, has contributed to an enormous pressure on the early childhood care and education system. With the early childhood 'sector' still highly fragmented, underdeveloped and underresourced (OECD, 2004a, , 2006), a number of activities have been initiated and measures introduced that lay the foundations for building a coherent early childhood system in the near future. Again, these activities can be analysed within the multidimensional *change* framework.

The introduction of a new government body – the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC) – which brings responsibility for childcare to cabinet level and is co-located with the Early Years Education Policy Unit of the Ministry of Education has been praised as an important step towards coherence in a highly fragmented system (OECD, 2006). From the perspective of the suggested multidimensional framework, though, it can also be interpreted as a sign for an emerging political *leadership* in and for the Irish early childhood sector. Although a comprehensive Irish ECCE system is yet to be developed, and the sector is far from having secured the critical mass of *change agents* we have been referring to in the change-framework, there are a number of positive developments which, in the long run, may help to achieve sustainable change. As an institutional *change agent*, the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) has made a great effort to create a new dynamic in the sector. The consultation process to develop a national framework for quality – the core task of the centre – may well prove to have set the stage for the professionalisation of the sector and for encouraging individuals with an interest in early childhood to perceive themselves as being part of a professional community. Moreover, developments at the national level are mirrored by structural developments at the local level, which is an important step to overcome *institutional barriers*, which are manifold in Ireland. While, at national level, government departments and agencies have begun to collaborate more systematically, the City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) offer possibilities to do so at local level. Together, the National Framework for Quality (Síolta), the draft early years curriculum (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2004) and the proposals and strategies to further develop the early childhood workforce including the 'Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development' (Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform, 2002) can be seen as three pillars in the fifth dimension of change, as they require strong *links between political strategies, research* (to underpin as well as to explore and evaluate them) and *practice and professional development*.

Apparently, systemic change is on its way in Irish early childhood care and education and, along with an increasing societal pressure, the developments are accelerating as well. Three years ago, the OECD thematic review of early childhood care and education policy in Ireland (OECD, 2004a) could only identify 'initial stages' of a national policy. In 2006, however, the Starting Strong II comparative report acknowledges that recent developments 'are designed to address the issues of fragmentation [...] and respond directly to related recommendations in the White Paper on ECE and the OECD review of ECE in Ireland' (OECD, 2006:353).

Among the plenitude of policy documents that address the need for change in Irish early childhood care and education, 'Ready to Learn' the White Paper published by the Department of Education and Science in 1999 is of particular importance. It outlines, for the first time, a coherent strategy for developing the ECCE sector and it recognises the need for action across the whole system, 'including curriculum, training [...] and the quality and quantity of inputs

(resources, M.U.)’ (Department of Education and Science, 1999:43). The White Paper elaborates the systemic approach as it states

...early childhood intervention is effective when it provides a high quality, intensive and clearly articulated programme, delivered by highly skilled and carefully trained personnel in contexts of small group and individual instruction, and designed to specifically address individual, identified needs.

(Department of Education and Science, 1999:84)

Although committed to holistic or systemic development in ECCE, from a critical perspective it should be highlighted that the White Paper remains within a narrow conceptual framework of early intervention which comes with the notion of early childhood services as problem solvers. The notion of every child’s right to education, ensured by accessible, well resourced high quality early childhood institutions has yet to be developed.⁷ This may, to a large extent, be due to another phenomenon in Irish society. While there appears to be an informed debate on the importance of early childhood institutions, their programmes, resources and staff at policy level, the public discourse on children and contemporary childhoods is only beginning to take shape. A key issue until now, as identified by a recent analysis is

the lack of comprehensive public debate about the nature and necessity of early childhood care and education. While there have been discussions at departmental level and limited consultations within the sector, the broader public debate on children, childhood and the function of ECCE has generally been absent. (Murray, 2006:31)

To summarize, there is, in general, a new coherence of policies and practices that emerges in Irish early childhood care and education. While this is promising, the picture presented to external observers it is not always reflected by the self-perceptions of actors at the various layers of the Irish ECCE sector itself – and the contradictions multiply when the frame of attention is widened from the national to the local level.

Talking with early childhood actors at the local level in Ireland⁸, we could clearly identify awareness for key factors of sustainable change. Practitioners as well as staff with administrative or managerial roles referred to their own responsibilities at local level, but they made clear connections to the developments at national level, too. E.g. informing the public discourse on childcare is a key aspect of the dimension of *advocacy*, as discussed above. There is a clear understanding that the CCC’s should play an important role in shaping this discourse by ‘building up the local profile on childcare and informing [...] all the stakeholders [...] that childcare is an important issue’ (Strat4Change Ireland)⁹. But readiness to take responsibility for shaping the discourse on early childhood at local level links with a necessity to ‘organize’ the sector, or the EC profession, which is clearly expressed with regards to the political aspects of early childhood practice.

... unless the issue becomes political and unless the sector gets organized and becomes political, I don’t see that change filtering down.
(Strat4Change Ireland)

There is, apparently, a tension between the perceived own role as change agent at local level and expectations and requests to national government to take political *leadership* and to

⁷ A more detailed critique of the White Paper, considering its developmentalist focus and the noticeable absence of issues of diversity, social injustice and discrimination can be found in Murray (2006).

⁸ Interviews have been conducted with practitioners from various EC settings and with staff of the County Childcare Committee, Castlebar, Co. Mayo.

⁹ As interviewees will not be named in this paper, quotations are referred to as ‘Strat4Change Ireland’.

enable local developments through adequate resources and funding. *Leadership*, in particular, is seen as problematic by a local actor who states that ‘the lack of coordination at national level creates all sorts of problems at the local level’ (Strat4Change Ireland). In general, the impression is that interviewees at local level have little knowledge of the agencies, strategies and developments at national level – a perception that is not shared by actors at national level.

Lack of *leadership* is also perceived in relation to another core aspect of this dimension of change: although early childhood has been put on the political agenda, from a local perspective there is still a lot to be done to secure adequate resources. Not surprising, but remarkable from a systemic perspective, practitioners identify clear links between political strategies to develop the services and the need to professionalize the sector. Public investments, they state, need to be secured for structures (EC provision) as well as for the people who bring the structures to life:

... down the road, all preschools should be funded by the government *to professionalize childcare and proper pay and conditions for everybody*. (Strat4Change Ireland, emphasis added)

The broad area of professionalism is of high relevance for those directly involved in developing early childhood institutions at local level. A core aspect of quality, and identified by the White Paper as key to ‘effective EC intervention’, the requirement to develop a highly educated workforce is reflected by practitioners who argue that ‘...in order to provide an integrative service [...] everybody [should] have a qualification’ (Strat4Change Ireland). And even more specific, practitioners refer to the content of professional learning: ‘the anti-bias programme needs to be part of any training for childcare workers’ (Strat4Change Ireland).¹⁰

Considering their role as *change agents*, local actors also express a clear systemic view on possible future developments towards sustainable change in Irish early childhood care and education. If a public discourse on the possibility of different childcare services of better quality can successfully be created, it will lead, in consequence, to parents acting as change agents themselves, thus adding momentum to the change process:

...if parents knew to ask for more, then I think the services would start providing that more [...] and *our role will be to educate the parents so that they start asking [...]* and the providers start asking for training. (Strat4Change Ireland, emphasis added)

...and then there would be almost a push on demand of these types of quality around for the childcare in the country, whereas at the minute that isn’t really there. (Strat4Change Ireland)

Advocacy, *leadership* and *change agents* as dimensions of change are clearly addressed by actors on both the national and the local level in Ireland and there is a clear awareness that many *institutional barriers* have yet to be overcome. From the critical-but-sympathetic perspective of an interested external observer, it seems to be clear that the process to create a coherent early childhood care and education system has begun. The wheels have been set in motion and it does not seem likely they can be stopped again. Nevertheless, valuable initiatives at different layers of the system, as well as actions taken at different levels of government still appear to be fragmented and individualised. For those driving the change agenda in Irish ECCE, it remains a challenge to create a spirit of *community* and to bridge contrasting interests and competition. As sustainability of change has yet to be achieved,

¹⁰ The anti-bias approach has been developed by Louise Derman-Sparks (Derman-Sparks, 1989). It has been introduced and adopted to the Irish context of diversity and equality in early childhood by the *éist* project (Murray & O’Doherty, 2001). The *éist* project is the Irish partner of Strategies for Change.

Irish change agents have been exploring successful processes and policies in other countries (e.g. Schonfeld, Kiernan, & Walsh, 2004). Writing this paper from an international research perspective, I would like to encourage this approach and share some aspects of a ‘story of success’ – as one of the narrators of this particular story calls it (Dalli, 2005) – that I consider to be most relevant for the Irish context.

4. Sustainable change: Establishing a community of ‘critical friends’

Aotearoa/New Zealand is a country with many interesting similarities to the Republic of Ireland. Following a longer period of recession, the liberal economy has been thriving in the last decade and the country has turned into a full employment society. Women’s participation in the labour market has been encouraged – for economic reasons – and labour shortage has encouraged increasing immigration and work migration from Europe, Asia and the Pacific Islands. The notion of New Zealand as an all white society, dominated by mostly English and Scottish settlers proved untenable in the second half of the 20th century and the country has since struggled to create a strong national identity as a bi-cultural society. The nation building process involved reconciliation and reciprocal acknowledgement between the white/English (Pakeha) and the Maori community. Policies to promote Maori language and culture in public life and public institutions have been put in place since the 1980’s. Not unusual for policy led identity building, the process of (re-)inventing Aotearoa/New Zealand led to a neglect of the diversity of the society: the two dominant cultures reinvented themselves while a number of communities (e.g. Pacific Islanders, Japanese, Samoans) were excluded from the process. From an external perspective, moreover, ‘othering’ cultural and ethnic groups became what I would call the dark side of creating an identity as a nation. Today, immigration for economic reasons is increasingly challenging the notion of a bi-cultural society. It remains to be seen whether this will lead to a recognition of diversity as an asset for the whole society.

The early childhood sector in Aotearoa/New Zealand is market-based and there are many for-profit services. But while the sector is as diverse – or fragmented – as it is in Ireland, policy has taken significantly different approaches to expand, develop and govern the services for young children.¹¹ The attention that early childhood developments in Aotearoa/New Zealand has been, and still is, enjoying in the global EC community is mostly due to the introduction of the *Te Whāriki* bi-cultural early childhood curriculum in (Ministry of Education, 1996) which is referred to in EC documents and frameworks in many countries including Ireland. Scarcely recognized in the debates is that *Te Whāriki* has to be understood not as an independent document – but in the context of a comprehensive strategy to develop the early childhood system. This strategy involves joint action from government departments, universities and professional bodies. It comprises long term goals for investment, professional development and participatory action research which are outlined in a 10-year strategic plan (Ministry of Education, 2002). The roles of the various *change agents*, and the responsibility taken by the universities in particular are being explored in the ‘Strategies for Change’ project.¹²

For the Irish context, which has always been relying on consultation as base for any development, it is interesting to see how consultation can result in real collaboration in order to create sustainable change. Or, as one interviewee from a university has put it:

[It] was action that was grounds-up from the childcare field but working together with researchers and academics and policy makers behind the scenes. And that has been a

¹¹ For a detailed overview and discussion of current issues in EC in both Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia see Keesing-Styles and Hedges (2007 ed.).

¹² See Dalli (2005) for an overview.

story that (has) maintains that collaboration of all parts of the early childhood field, that the practitioners and academics and policy makers; that's how we have achieved the changes.
(Strat4Change NZ)¹³

Recognition of the crucial importance of collaboration is accompanied by openness to systematically create spaces for reflection and for acknowledgement of local knowledge and experience. Academic scholars, committed to participatory action research, describe their role as facilitators, and sometime as scribes for practitioners who they see as

[...] creative people, who are change agents, because the people on the ground have the opportunity to reflect, they get assistance with people alongside them doing additional support of their normal work so that they can stand back and reflect, write up, disseminate what they're thinking about.
(Strat4Change NZ)

But this 'ethos of reflection', as one participant calls it, can only create sustainable change when it is supported by a stable framework: it needs to be backed-up by policy and it requires adequate resources. One elaborate example of how to construct such a framework is the 'Centres of Innovation' (CoI) initiative which, as I want to suggest, could be of high relevance for the Irish early childhood sector. The CoI initiative is as simple as it is effective – but it can only be so because it is well resourced and it does not attempt to implement a distinct solution in a top-down process. Instead, it provides resources and a secure framework for the development of local responses to local requirements – which are then employed to inform changes of the EC system on the whole. Centres across the country are encouraged to apply for this initiative. In order to do so, they have to illustrate practices they consider to be innovative and which they want to explore and further develop in an action research project. For this action research they have to identify a 'research associate' (a researcher from a university) who will accompany them over a three year period.

[...] the government has allocated certain moneys put aside to support the identification of early childhood centres nationally that see themselves as doing some innovative work, and what the government has done is called for these centres to come forward and put forward proposals to make visible to the broader early childhood sector what it is that is innovative about their practise. And they do this by putting a proposal that comes from the centre forward, but then they identify a researcher whom they would like to work with, who would be sitting alongside them as their *critical friend*.
(Strat4Change NZ, emphasis added)

An ethos that embraces innovation, reflection and inquiry, and systematic communication of local knowledge is the base of the Centres of Innovation initiative. But it is obvious, that the spirit has to be brought to life by concrete political action – and here lies the key to success for the initiative, which participants are well aware of:

Now, the thing about this; this proposal is one that comes with a lot of money. That comes with money to buy computers and cameras and add-on offices and things and it also comes with an obligation to communicate what we are doing more widely in a lot of forums.
(Strat4Change NZ)

The difference to traditional approaches to research is that the research question – the focus of interest – is developed by the practitioners, in collaboration with their research associate. It is

¹³ Interviews with practitioners, scholars and representatives of professional associations in Aotearoa/New Zealand were conducted in 2005 and 2006.

a bottom-up approach to writing a national research agenda and it is highly effective. Participating centres become part of a multidimensional network, allowing them to share their questions and findings with other practitioners as well as to inform policy and, through the links to academia, contribute to generating theory.

It is indeed one of the most interesting experiences in the 'Strategies for Change' project in Aotearoa/New Zealand to observe the dynamic and synergy that develop when the collaboration of individuals – practitioners, researchers, policy makers – moves on from being accidental and arbitrary to being systematic as result of a choice. We are, as one participant says '*on the cusp of a different way of leading the sector forward.*'

5. Ways forward: transformative approaches to research and professional learning

It was Kurt Lewin who insisted that there is nothing as practical as a good theory and it was Donald Schön who explained how thinking and acting become inseparable in practice. It is the cyclical process Schön (1983) refers to as *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*, respectively, which shapes the creative and reflective nature of professional practice. But it was Paulo Freire, the educator, activist and critical thinker who first suggested – and practiced – this critical reflectiveness as core of an emancipatory approach to changing social reality through a process he calls *conscientization*. Freire's political and pedagogical practice and theory is grounded in the fact that human nature is (being) socially and historically constituted, rather than pre-existing (Freire, 2004). The ways in which we live, learn and practice can not be taken for granted, as they are the manifestation of human action, competing interests and power relationships in our society. Becoming conscious of these social constructions of reality and their impacts on real people's lives is then of high pedagogical relevance as it opens possibilities not only to understand but to change the world. Change is possible, Freire argues, and there is reason for hope, but the vision needs to be grounded in practice:

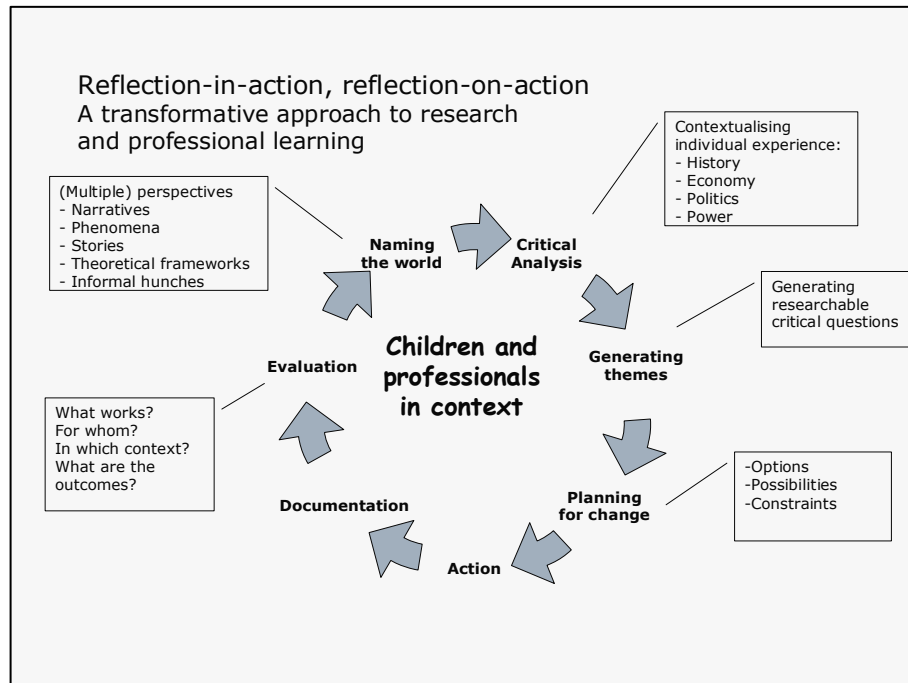
Hope, as an ontological need, demands an anchoring in practice. As an ontological need, hope needs practice in order to become historical concreteness. That is why there is no hope in sheer hopefulness. The hoped-for is not attained by dint of raw hoping. Just to hope is to hope in vain.
(Freire, 2004:2)

Being well aware that educational institutions – in any society – are at the core of this process of defining social reality, Freire urged for their reform:

I am completely persuaded of the importance, the urgency, of the democratization of the public school, and of the ongoing training of its educators, among whom I include security people, cafeteria personnel, and custodians, and so on. Their formation must be ongoing and scientific. Nor should it fail to instil a taste for democratic practices, among which should be an ever more active intervention on the part of educants and their families as to which direction the school is going.
(Freire, 2004:14)

In the context of this seminar I want to suggest we replace public school by *early childhood sector* and educants by *practitioners* for a thought experiment. I am going to argue that, in order to create a dynamic, holistic and *just* early childhood system we need to explore alternative ways of organizing professional learning. We need to create a community of learners that comprises practitioners, children, parents, researchers, trainers and policy makers at local and national level. The notion of a community of learners, the members of which are systematically encouraged to ask questions – this is the core of critical reflectiveness – is, obviously, a challenge to the knowledge hegemony that usually underlies our concepts of

‘training’, ‘implementation’, ‘research’, ‘evaluation’ etc. But as it provides a space for asking and pursuing questions that are relevant to real people and their experiences, it is more likely to succeed in the long term. Examples from many countries – not only the ones that participate in the ‘Strategies for Change’ project – show that it is possible to model professional learning, participatory research and decision making as well as day-to-day practice in early childhood settings on a cyclical process that Freire refers to as *conscientization*.¹⁴ It is outlined below and I want to suggest we explore its transformative potential for early childhood research, policy and practice – its potential for developing alternatives to current practice that might be more equitable and fair for all.



For any complex problem there is a simple solution.
And it is wrong

Umberto Eco, Foucaults Pendulum

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¹⁴ In the Irish context, e.g. this circle of conscientization underlies the ‘Anti-Bias-Approach’ (Derman-Sparks, 1989) which has been adopted and introduced to training of EC practitioners and students by the *éist* project (Murray & O'Doherty, 2001).

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"The development of Childcare Policy in Ireland during 1996-2006"

Sylda Langford

Introduction

I would like to thank the Centre for Social and Educational Research (CSER) for inviting me here today to address this Childcare Policy Seminar entitled "A Decade of Reflection: From the Introduction of the Child Care Regulations 1996 through to Present Day".

1996 to 2006 has indeed been a critical decade for childcare in Ireland. At its outset, an understanding at Government and official levels was just beginning to form of the need to quickly establish a coherent Childcare Policy to respond to the changing patterns of work and childcare and, with the increasing participation of women in the workforce and the growing reliance of parents on childcare outside the home. How this would be done would take time to establish and would be incremental in approach given that responsibility for areas relating to children's policy and services was spread across Government Departments and agencies. In many ways it could be said that it has taken the length of the decade and a lot of work to get us to the position we are now at.

As a senior Government official in the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform from 1997 to 2005, I have been directly involved in developing the childcare infrastructure in terms of service provision. Often with emerging issues, the initial solutions are housed in existing related policy areas. This was my experience and the first childcare investment programmes, under the EU co-funded Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme banner, were developed as equal opportunities measures to support women's participation in employment and social inclusion for other, marginalised groups. However, at the same time we recognised that the longer term objectives for childcare must be developed as part of an overall strategy with a child-centred approach. This recognition led to the publication in 1999 of the National Childcare Strategy, the blueprint for going forward and our first attempt at a coherent approach to the range of issues involved in early childhood care and services.

While the key focus of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform's Equal Opportunities Childcare Programmes was to channel major investment funding into childcare services, to develop the supply of childcare places to meet the needs of working parents, inevitably - and with the help of the framework provided by the National Childcare Strategy - these objectives increasingly moved towards and made inroads into the broader context of childcare. As the programmes came into effect, more fundamental issues related to quality of service provision, training and standards issues and infrastructural supports and linkages emerged and, as far as possible, were incorporated with the programme's core objectives. In this way, I think it is fair to say that from an early stage of the process, the work on the ground began to reflect the fact that early childhood care and education are parts of the same whole and that the quality of early years services very often sets an essential foundation for a child's subsequent interaction with and experience of State services.

The way in which the EOCP was implemented to achieve these broad objectives included the creation of new infrastructural supports, including the establishment, at local level, of 33 City and County Childcare Committees. The establishment of the National Childcare Co-ordinating Committee as a single forum to consider childcare issues provided an important focal point for the sector. For the first time, officials, theorists and practitioners from across the sector worked together and this has resulted in much good work, including the publication of the Model Framework for Training, the Report on School Age Childcare and the Guidelines on Diversity and Equality and Guidelines for Childminders that are due to be launched in the coming weeks.

The completion of the review of the Child Care Regulations resulting in the new 2006 Regulations which will come into effect on 2 January, 2007, is another marker of the changes that have taken place between 1996 and today. While the new Regulations seek to improve the current standards and requirements in place, we should remember that the introduction of the Child Care Regulations in 1996, to implement the requirements of the Child Care Act 1991, was a welcome first step in the regulation of care and education services provided for children aged under 6 years. For the first time Health Board inspectors were required to inspect and report on these services. The coincidence between the implementation of the Child Care Act under the Regulations and the introduction of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme, was timely and the funding available under the programme enabled many existing services to be brought up to standard and to comply with child/staff ratios.

Rather than giving an account of the various achievements under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme, I would like to focus on the broader context of the changes it promoted or introduced and how these developments interacted with developments in children's policy areas across Government Departments, such as the Departments of Health and Children and Education and Science, and more recently within the Youth Justice area of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. I would like to look at how these developments have culminated in the bringing together of all of these key areas in the new Office of the Minister for Children, the OMC, under Brian Lenihan T.D. as first Minister for Children and under myself as Director General of the OMC.

The OMC is I believe, a major development for policy and services for children bringing together as it does all of these, other than health and school education services, in one cohesive unit. An early example of the reality of this change is that as well as having input to the development of early education and Youth Justice services, the Child Welfare and Protection Section from the Department of Health and Children, which prepared the updated Child Care Regulations recently signed by the Minister for Children, is a core element of the new Office alongside the Childcare Directorate which has responsibility for the new childcare programmes and the former Children's Office which is responsible for the National Children's Strategy 2000-2010.

The creation of the OMC is an important milestone in the journey from 1996 to 2006. I believe the OMC will be a cornerstone of developments in early childhood care and education services over the next 10 years. This is reflected in the new Partnership Agreement "Towards 2016" which covers this period and which adopts a life cycle approach to the State's role and how it will best meet the needs of its citizens. In the chapter dealing with children, the overarching role of the OMC in terms of co-ordinated delivery of services is very clearly set out.

As a half-way point between where we came in, in 1996, and where we are aiming to be in 2016, 2006 is clearly a pivotal year for early childhood care and education for a number of reasons. In 2006, the OMC and the new National Childcare Strategy 2006-2010 were launched. A key element of the new Strategy is the new National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2010 which succeeds the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programmes. The new Programme is building on the achievements to date, most obviously in terms of adding a further 50,000 childcare places to the 40,000 places which will have been created under the EOCP. However, because the additional places and the supporting infrastructure of the City and County Childcare Committees have been created and are in place, we are now in the position of being able to design a programme which targets key objectives, such as pre-school places and school age childcare, more specifically.

As my previous remarks have indicated, in our work of the last decade, rather than taking a narrow focus on childcare provision, a deliberate attempt was made to adopt a broader focus

which promoted change and interacted with policy areas across the various fields of Government provision. The childcare programme worked with the major national voluntary childcare organisations to promote training and standards in childcare provision and childcare workers. The City and County Childcare Committees worked with the Childminding sector to promote quality awareness and training and to encourage voluntary notification of services. They also promoted the important local linkages with bodies such as the HSE, FAS, the VECs, local authorities and so on.

These linkages and the growing awareness of a holistic approach to early years care and education, were also fostered at national level. As a result, the years 1996-2006 saw many key developments across a number of areas, including the establishment under the Department of Education and Science of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) and its recent publication of *Siolta*, an excellent new National Framework for Early Education. Together with the new curriculum for early education which is expected shortly, this will provide the first real framework for early learning in Ireland. This work, and the delivery of the early years part of the Department of Education and Science's DEIS programme, are now formally interlinked with the OMC to ensure a cohesive approach to the care and education services for young children.

The Department of Education and Science's linkage to the OMC will also be instrumental in delivering the new Childcare Training Strategy launched in 2006 and currently in development. This will build on work done to date under the EOCP to develop a national framework for training. It will focus on bringing a united approach to the delivery of training to improve and increase the services currently available in a co-ordinated strategy. Our objective is to provide 17,000 additional training places between now and 2010 and to see 8,000 additional trained childcare personnel in place to help to meet the needs of this expanding sector and to provide a foundation for quality, training and standards going forward.

While in the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, I was given the opportunity to work on the establishment of a new Youth Justice Service. This Service is in the final stages of being established and will, I believe, revolutionise our services for young offenders, the principle aim of which should be to intervene early and well and minimise the need for detention. The establishment of the new Youth Justice Service is particularly crucial as it will enable us to fully implement the Children's Act. This Act is a comprehensive and progressive piece of legislation which crosses the services of Health, Justice and Education. Again, it is appropriate that the oversight of the Service is assigned to the OMC, bringing the full range of intervention services together.

It is also important that these practical steps and the overarching role of the OMC are set in the context of high level aims and objectives which focus on the needs and rights of children. I believe this context is provided by the inclusion within the OMC of the broad policy perspective provided by the National Children's Strategy 2000-2010 which was developed by the National Children's Office. The establishment of the National Children's Office in 2000 signalled a recognition of the fact that children's issues were emerging as a specific area of policy and high level goals. Its integration into the OMC provides a further dimension and direction to the Office as we go forward to 2016.

In taking stock of the progress made to date and the issues we need to address going forward, I think it would be useful to look at what the OECD recently had to say in regard to early childhood education and care in Ireland in its Report "Starting Strong II". When consideration is taken of the fact that the data and the findings in the Report reflect the position during 2002-2004 and do not record or reflect the more recent developments I have outlined, I believe they show a strong convergence between OECD and Irish Government policy in this area. Each of the participating countries in the review were found to have made

mixed progress despite, by and large, being developed economies with high standards of public services. I think it is also interesting to note, in view of the direction taken by Ireland, that the OECD suggests that policy in this area should not be elaborated from outside but should be based on consensus-building within the country. Each will have individual factors and levels of historical development and require tailored solutions.

The OECD identifies the need for a systemic and integrated approach to be taken to early childhood care and education involving a co-ordinated policy at central level, the appointment of a lead Office, co-ordination between central and local administrations including links across services, and a collaborative approach. I believe the first steps towards this approach were set in motion under the EOCP which embraced the creation and support of quality childcare places alongside a more structured approach to training for childcare workers and the establishment of local structures. The EOCP also fostered a collaborative approach to achieve consensus and maximise progress. The OECD recognised these efforts to address access barriers to childcare services, especially for low-income families, and to address supply-side barriers in low-income areas.

I believe these steps are being built on and broadened by the NCIP 2006-2010 which includes a range of measures to address training and qualifications, to link with curricular and early learning development and to improve maternity leave and financial support for parents of young children. The new co-ordination of service delivery will be supported by a National Implementation Group (NIG) headed by the OMC and by new structures at local level, in the form of Children's Services Committees, participated in by each of the key statutory agents for children's services including the HSE, local authorities, FAS and the education sector. These are important developments for children's services and represent important commitments going forward under Towards 2016. I believe they provide the systemic and integrated approach described by the OECD as "a well-conceptualised national policy with, on the one hand, devolved powers to local authorities and, on the other, a national approach to goal setting, legislation and regulation, financing, staffing criteria and programme standards".

The OECD suggests that universal access to early childhood care and education for children aged 3 to 4 years should be linked to a strong and equal partnership with the education system. Early learning is an on-going process and the OECD's recommendation for a more unified approach between childcare settings, pre-school services and school infant classes, is an important one. I believe the OMC, acting in partnership with the Department of Education and Science, is well placed to help in addressing these issues. The NCIP has a specific target to create 10,000 pre-school places and is also designed to support early learning for children aged 0-6 years through a focus on quality, a child-centred approach, and the development of better training and standards for childcare personnel. In the education sector, the establishment in 2002 of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) under the Department of Education and Science, and its publication in May of Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, is an example of these linkages. Siolta will provide a framework which will inform practitioners in children's services in both childcare and school settings.

The linkage between the investment strategy and our school system, which is available to all children from the age of 4 years, is also reflected in DEIS, the Department of Education and Science's programme for educational inclusion. As with many other of our recent initiatives, DEIS is not taken into account by the OECD Report. DEIS is introducing an early learning programme for children, initially by reference to 180 disadvantaged schools, in a targeted approach. The OMC will work closely with the Department of Education and Science to support the implementation of DEIS through appropriate linkages with services in the childcare sector. This will be a further step towards uniting these sectors in a new approach to early learning for children aged 1 to 6 years.

The OECD's main finding on the issue of public investment in early childhood care and education, is that while it is necessary for both affordability to parents and for the quality of services, the particular model used for investment is not the issue provided the services are regulated within a coherent policy framework and provided sufficient government funding is provided either directly to services or in the tax/benefits treatment of parents. While the expansion and improvement of our childcare infrastructure is being achieved at a remarkable rate, with the targeted creation of 90,000 additional childcare places between 2000-2010 under the EOCP and NCIP, Ireland's National Childcare Strategy has from the outset adopted an approach founded on a commitment to the importance and value of early childhood care and education.

Quality improvement and assurance is a cornerstone of the National Childcare Strategy and is another key area identified by the OECD. The National Childcare Strategy 2006-2010 crosses Departmental boundaries and includes all relevant early childhood education and care issues. As well as Siolta, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is expected to shortly bring forward a national framework for early learning and development. This is being designed to be relevant and useful across the various settings of childcare and early learning including school settings. The new Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006 which will come into effect during 2007, have a stronger focus on developmental issues which are at the core of early care and education.

A further issue identified by the OECD is the need to improve data collection and systems monitoring in the early childhood education and care field. The decision reflected in Towards 2016, to set up the National Data Strategy Group under the OMC, will build on data collection undertaken under the EOCP and built into the more recent NCIP, and is intended to specifically address these issues. In addition, the need for long-term research and evaluation in this area will be addressed by the undertaking by the OMC of the first Longitudinal Study of Children in Ireland, a development particularly welcomed by the OECD.

I believe the National Childcare Strategy incorporates most of the key principles identified by the OECD and that progress is already well underway or at least has been started towards. We have developed the framework through the OMC to deliver an integrated vision of early childhood services across Government Departments, key State agencies and service deliverers, as well as local childcare structures and providers. I have not mentioned ancillary developments which are also very relevant to parents, such as the increase in the paid maternity leave entitlement to 6 months by March 2007 which with other unpaid leave entitlements will make it possible for parents to care for their child themselves through the important first year of life, or the increased financial supports to parents through the Early Childhood Supplement and further increases in the substantial levels of Child Benefit. All of these measures will assist parents by increasing their options for meeting the care and education needs of their children.

Towards 2016 contains a number of significant commitments in relation to ECEC which must be carried out between now and 2016 and, importantly, which will be reviewed and responded to as we achieve better and more integrated early childhood services. Going back to our starting point in 1996 and the beginnings of the EOCP, the NCIP will build during 2006-2010 on the strides in childcare made under the EOCP. I have no doubt that it will be followed by a successor programme which will build on this work going forward to 2016. As the OECD concludes "each country has its own strengths and its own concerns and in general, sufficient expertise, to address the major challenges confronting its early childhood services".

Thank You.

**The Irish Childcare Policy Network (ICPN),
A new force for influencing increased Government investment in children's care and
education from birth.**

Denise Mc Cormilla

The Irish Childcare Policy Network or ICPN was given birth in 2004 following a national conference organised by the BCCN on Investing, Sustaining, and Supporting Early Childhood services: Writing Ireland's future success story.

The desire from all present at the conference to work better together in the best interests of children, parents/families, communities and the sector itself was strongly felt and has sustained many of us since, in times when the going got tough and even the very tough among us felt like going.

The increasing interest in childcare throughout society is very much reflected in the diversity of the ICPN membership which is increasing all of the time. Members are drawn from across Ireland through the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations, the 33 City and County Childcare Committees, Partnership Companies, BCCN, the Border Counties Childcare Network, Irish Rural Link, National Women's Council of Ireland, OPEN, the One Parents' Exchange Network, High Scope Ireland, Lifestart, Home Start and individual members with a keen interest in Early Childhood Care and Education. The increasing membership reflects the diversity of opinions on childcare throughout Ireland and this is perhaps one of the networks greatest strengths as it has led to challenging discussions but also the achievement of consensus on a definition of 'childcare' that is shared by all ICPN members. For the ICPN, 'childcare is the care and education of all children in all settings, including the home /extended family, childminding, pre-school, daycare/crèche and after school services'.

The overall aim of the network is to influence Government to develop policies that will lead to the provision of increased funding to help both parents and the Early Childhood and After School sector. Funding is required to ensure:

- Free sessional pre-school services, meeting national quality standards, for all 3-5 year olds
- Increased information and support for parents in their role as children's first and most important teacher,
- Delivery of parent support programmes such as Lifestart and Homestart
- Paid parental leave so parents are in a position to care for and educate their own children in their first year of life.
- Support for parents within the community such as Baby and Toddler clubs, Drop in Centres
- Direct funding to daycare/crèche and after school services to subsidise the cost of services to parents and ensure the attainment of national quality standards

The importance of parents in promoting children's care and education is felt strongly by all in the ICPN as is the value of early childhood and after school services in enhancing children's development and learning. Recent reports from US Economist and Nobel Laureate, Professor James Heckman (2000) highlights the importance of increasing investment in parents so they can develop sound parenting skills to better promote their child's development thereby ensuring children have a firm grounding in parental love, positive role modelling and guidance. This more than extra curricular activities or academic commitments impacts on

children's character development and the type of person they are and will become in the future.

Heckman also highlights the importance of those working in a range of childcare services and argues that staff are central to the attainment of quality standards and the quality of experiences and learning for children. He goes further and argues that quality standards are only possible if there is stability within the childcare workforce. Stability within the childcare workforce is only possible if there is appropriate remuneration linked to training and qualifications. Funding from the EU and Irish Exchequer has increased substantially in recent years both for childminding and centre based services and there has been an array of exciting new policy developments impacting on children. These include the establishment the Children's Ombudsman, the City and County Childcare committees and the Office of the Minister for Children, increased investment in training, information provision, facilities, staffing grants for community managed services and a range of additional quality support measures. However, the majority of services do not receive Government funding for staffing costs and we are still a long way from seeing Government devise the policies required to ensure equality of access to quality services for all children.

Influencing Government to devise a policy that will allow for direct subsidies to services is a key objective of the ICPN. The funding allocated through the EOCP and the NCIP for staffing, combined with the increases in child benefit and the €1000 for each child under six is insufficient to cover the real cost of childcare for many parents. The current funding policies to assist with the cost of childcare have also led to an annual drain of over €90,000,000 per year leaving the country to families from other countries not resident in the state through the provision of child welfare benefit and the €1000 Early Years allowance (Crawford, 2006).

Parents are still faced with payment of high fees for services especially for full daycare services because services require a lot of funding to be sustainable and meet high running and staffing costs. The Government believe that increasing the supply of services will ensure services are competitive and low in cost is not and never will be the case, as the greatest cost of childcare services is the cost of staff salaries. This will always increase rather than decrease.

Without Government developing a policy to provide direct financial assistance to childcare services, some services throughout the country will close, many will never be sustainable, staff will continue to be poorly paid, problems will increase and we will never achieve the stability and professionalism within the childcare work force that is so desired and needed. Too many poorly trained and poorly paid staff will remain involved in the delivery of services and increasing problems of recruitment and retention will abound with little access to progression paths in training and employment. This is a situation that all within the ICPN want to see addressed.

In aiming to influence Government we need also to influence Mr, Mrs and M/s General public that:

- Quality childcare is in everyone's interest within society
- Childcare services need to be part of the social, cultural and economic fabric of their communities,
- Services also need to serve a variety of connected purposes in relation to childcare, education, family support and community cohesion,
- They need to be accessible to all children and families in their communities and valued as part of the local infrastructure in which there is strong public as well as private interest

There are many arguments and recommendation from various sources such as the OECD's Starting Strong 2 (2006) which will help our cause as will arguments put forward by experts like Peter Moss in the UK. In his role, in devising the European Commission Network's 40 quality targets for Childcare, Moss argues that:

- Access to Early Childhood Care and Education needs to be an unquestionable right for all children and families.
- Services need to act as a holistic pedagogy of health care, loving care, education and life long learning.
- Government subsidies need to go directly to all services notified to an agreed local/regional body, involving the provision of a core period of free attendance each day plus a system of income related parental fees for longer periods of attendance.

Were these policies to be implemented, provision of funding could be linked to quality improvements in a broad range of services which in turn would build the capacity of the work force and truly improve early childhood care and education in this country with long, medium and short term benefits for all. This, combined with increased support to parents would do much to improve children's care and education and ensure all children reach their full potential.

Thank you.

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