Early Childhood Policy and Provision: A Digest to Inform a National Book Gifting Programme

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Early Childhood Policy and Provision:
A Digest to Inform a National Book Gifting Programme

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The contents of this paper do not necessarily represent the views of Children’s Books Ireland
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Executive Summary

The purpose of this paper is to provide a broad and up to date account of early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy and to investigate if a national book gifting programme can fulfill the need of current policy. Due to the immediacy of emerging policy and provision in the field this paper can only present what is understood currently. By the end of 2013 two developments: The Child and Family Agency and The National Early Years Strategy will be completed. Both of these developments may have relevance for a book gifting programme.

Background to the Development of ECEC Policy in Ireland

In this paper the term ‘early childhood education and care’ (ECEC) is deliberately used to foreground that children are learning from birth while also acknowledging the inextricable link between education and care and to favour the OECD terminology. Early childhood in Ireland refers to the years between birth and 6.

The 2011 Census recorded 486,242 children aged up to 6 years living in Ireland. We currently enjoy the highest birth rate of 27 European Union nations. Approximately 74,500 babies were born in Ireland in 2011.

There have been unprecedented developments in ECEC legislation, policy, and programmes since the mid-1990s. Up to that point, parents were seen as the primary carers and educators of children with ‘inalienable’ rights and duties in the Irish constitution (Bunreacht na hÉireann). Historically in Ireland, both the care and education sectors have developed independently with limited dialogue. Legislation and policy initiatives were driven by three main policy agendas. The agendas were the protection of children, labour force equality, and early childhood education. These were led respectively by the Department of Health (now two departments: Health and Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA]), the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (now Justice and Law Reform [DJLR]), and the Department of Education and Science (now Education and Skills [DES]).

The development of ECEC policy in Ireland was ad hoc and fragmentary arising in response to a variety of political agendum and rarely underpinned by legislation. To date there has been a lack of a national vision and direction for ECEC.

In December 2005, the Government announced the welcome establishment of a Junior Minister with responsibility for children with a seat (but without voting rights) at Cabinet, housed in the Office of the Minister for Children, and Youth Affairs (OMCYA). This was the first significant initiative towards co-ordination of ECEC policy.

Investment in ECEC

In the past state investment has been focussed on supply and demand in the childcare infrastructure. The investment in the supply of childcare places (supply measures) includes: wage supports for community childcare; direct capital funding for community, voluntary and private sectors; thirty three local County and City Childcare Committees (CCCCs) and tax
exemption for childminders. The investment in creating opportunities for parents to access childcare (demand measures) includes Child Benefit and more recently the Free Pre-School Year (FPSY) Early Childhood Care and Education Programme. However, by comparison, Ireland’s investment in the early childhood sector lags far behind other countries.

The case has been made in Ireland to target expenditure where the returns are greatest; a rationale that is equally relevant to a book gifting programme. The greater children’s experiences of books in early childhood, the greater the chance of reading fluency and associated educational and societal benefits.

**National Policy on Children**

National policy on children is informed by the Government’s vision, articulated by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, that: ‘growing up in Ireland means that you have the best start in life available anywhere in the world’. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and the Department of Education and Skills are the main departments in relation to ECEC.

**Significant Developments in Relation to Book Gifting**

There are current and emerging policies which have relevance to book gifting. The most relevant is Literacy and numeracy for learning and life: The national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy among children and young people 2011-2020 developed by the Department of Education and Skills in 2011. The implementation of Aistear (the early childhood curriculum framework) and its relationship to the revised infant curriculum is also of relevance. One universal programme of certainty at this point is time is the universal free pre-school year. The Bounty Pack universal scheme to expectant and new mother has ended. However, the ‘patient services’ department within maternity hospitals may offer universal delivery of supports to expectant and new mothers/parents. While this paper can only present what is understood of the current details; two emerging developments The Child and Family Agency and The National Early Years Strategy will potentially provide other pathways to book gifting. It is unclear at the moment whether the role of the Public Health Nurse which was a direct universal route to families will change with the move to the Child and Family Agency. At a local level there are clear synergies with the Fingal County Council Libraries’ Division who are developing an Early Literacy Strategy, which includes exploration of a book gifting programme.

We know that the greater children’s experiences of books in early childhood (being read to, having access to a large number and broad range of books and attending a library regularly) the greater their scores of early literacy (narrative production, receptive vocabulary, and emergent literacy) and later reading fluency. Therefore, all and any of the policy and provision pathways outlined above are worth exploring.
Literacy and numeracy skills are crucial to a person’s ability to develop fully as an individual, to live a satisfying and rewarding life and to participate fully in our society. Ensuring that all young people acquire these skills is one of the greatest contributions that we can make to achieving social justice and equity in our country. (Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn, TD in DES, 2011, p.51)

Introduction

This is an important moment in early childhood policy. By the end of 2013 two developments: The Child and Family Agency and The National Early Years Strategy will be completed. The purpose of this paper is to provide a broad and up to date account of early childhood education and care policy and to investigate if a national book gifting programme can fulfill the need of current policy.

The paper begins with a section outlining the academic and political background to early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Ireland. The section starts by setting out the relevant terminology in the field, defining the terms according to history and within the paper. It then goes on to provide statistics on the target population of children from birth to six years. An in-depth history of the development of ECEC is then presented.

Following the background section there is a review of the current state investment and national and departmental policies with a rationale as to why we should invest in young children. The final section comprises of the significant developments in policy which are relevant to a book gifting programme.

The Appendices include: an explanation of some programmes in disadvantaged areas; how early childhood literacy is highlighted in national documents; an outline of some current national programmes which are related to literacy and relevant Government Departments.

Due to the immediacy of emerging current development in the ECEC field this paper can only present what is known currently. However, the paper hopes to provide a broad understanding of education and care policies.

1. Background to the Development of Policy in Early Childhood

1.1 Terminology

For the past decade ‘early childhood’ is defined as the period from birth to 6 years in Ireland2,3. The terms ‘early years sector’, ‘early childhood sector’, ‘childcare sector’ or early care and education sector’ refers to the care and education of children in this age range.

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In this paper the term ‘early childhood education and care’ (ECEC) is deliberately used to foreground that children are learning from birth while also acknowledging the inextricable link between education and care and to favour the OECD terminology.

It has been acknowledged that ‘care and education are inextricably linked elements in a child’s holistic development’ (Department of Education and Science, 1999, p. 34; Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform [DJELR], 1999, p. 45). In various policy documents in Ireland, the term early childhood education and care is sometimes referred to as: ‘early childhood education’ (DES, 1999); ‘childcare’ (DJELR, 1999) and ‘early childhood education and care’ (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2006). More recently a consensus seems to have emerged on the term ‘early childhood care and education’ (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2006a; OMCYA, 2009) or ‘early care and education’ (Start Strong, 2010). This is manifested in the title of the Free Preschool Year which is also known as the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme. In Ireland the term ‘pre-school’ is used rather than the OECD term ‘pre-primary’.

1.2 Target population
The 2011 Census recorded 486,242 children aged up to 6 years living in Ireland. This represents 42% of the child population of 1,148,867, which in turn represents 25% of the total population. Ireland has the highest percentage of children in the EU, where the average is 19%. We currently enjoy the highest birth rate of 27 European Union nations. Approximately 74,500 babies were born in Ireland in 2011 far exceeding the birth rate of

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53,614 in 2000 when the Babies Love Books scheme (2000-2002)\textsuperscript{11} was operating. Ireland has more children under the age of six years than at any time since 1896 (CSO, 2009)\textsuperscript{12}.

1.3 History of ECEC development – legal and policy context

How countries approach ECEC is influenced by: their social and economic traditions, their understandings of families and young children and by accumulated research on the benefits of quality early childhood settings (OECD, 2006).

There have been unprecedented developments in ECEC legislation, policy, and programmes since the mid-1990s. Up to that point, the state’s role in early childhood was non-interventionist. The state only intervened in exceptional cases where children were at risk, particularly in the early years (birth to 6) prior to formal education. Parents were seen as the primary carers and educators of children with ‘inalienable’ rights and duties in the Irish constitution (Bunreacht na hÉireann). Historically in Ireland, both the care and education sectors have developed independently with limited dialogue.

An abundance of policy documents, emanating from both statutory and non-statutory agencies, relating to ECEC were produced. Eleven different government departments were involved in the management of policies relating to ECEC in Ireland in 1999\textsuperscript{13}. At that time legislation and policy initiatives were driven by three main policy agendas. The agendas were the protection of children, labour force equality, and early childhood education. These were led respectively by the Department of Health (now two departments: Health and Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA]), the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (now Justice and Law Reform [DJLR]), and the Department of Education and Science (now Education and Skills [DES]).

1.3.1 Protection of children

The process leading to Ireland’s ratification of the United Nation’s (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child UNCRC (UN, 1989)\textsuperscript{14} in 1992 was the stimulus for the creation of policy whose main mission was the protection of children. This was made manifest in the Child Care Act 1991 (Ireland, 1991). The then Department of Health was charged with implementing the Act. Part VII of Child Care Act, 1991 (published in 1996 and amended in 1997) which relates directly to early childhood settings in the voluntary, community and private sector. It has been argued that this established ECEC as a serious policy matter.

\textsuperscript{11} Babies Love Books aimed to give every child born in the year 2000 and again in 2002 a gift pack of five quality books, with guidelines on how best to share books with babies. The pack was compiled by local libraries and distributed to children by the Public Health Nursing Service at local health centres when each baby was attending for its nine-month developmental check. See O’Neill, S. (2002). Babies love books: Evaluation report. Commissioned by the In-Career Development Unit, Department of Education and Science.


It was certainly the first time that a context for regulating these settings was established and an attempt made to apply national standards by the Department of Health through the (then) Health Boards. However, there was quite a time lag from the publication of the Act (1991) to the delivery of the regulations which related to early childhood settings (Child Care [Pre-school Settings] Regulations, DH, 1996).

1.3.2 Labour force equality

Concurrently a further significant policy development occurred. Partnership 2000 for Inclusion, Employment and Competitiveness (1996 – 2000), provided for the establishment of an Expert Working Group on Childcare. This was precipitated by the increased participation in employment by women which created a subsequent demand for childcare places. The Group, established in 1997, was chaired by the DJELR in order to devise a National Framework for the Development of the Childcare Sector. The outcome of their work was recorded in the National Childcare Strategy (DJELR, 1999). The strategy concentrated on stimulating supply (of childcare places) and supporting demand (affording parents opportunity to access childcare settings). Programme funding was obtained from the EU (in the context of equality) and was overseen by the Childcare Directorate (DJELR) and named the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000 to 2006 (EOCP).

The main aim of this programme was to enable parents to avail of training, education and employment opportunities through the provision of childcare supports. This was necessary as some communities and areas designated as disadvantaged are characterised by families who may experience unemployment, a high risk of poverty and low educational attainment. All of these characteristics may have persisted over many generations (Kellaghan, 2002). The EOCP has been replaced by the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) which is now exchequer funded.

1.3.3 Early childhood education

The National Forum for Early Childhood Education was convened by the Minister for Education and Science and took place in March 1998. It was a consultative process for all interested groups to engage in dialogue towards the development of a national framework for early childhood education. This led directly to the creation of Ready to Learn: White Paper on Early Childhood Education (DES, 1999). The provision of education and care for children in the age range from birth to six years of age was under consideration. According to the National Forum Secretariat (1998) this was consistent with international and

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national thinking. As stated in the *White Paper* leading to the *Education (Welfare) Bill, 1999* (Ireland, 1999) children in Ireland are obliged to attend school in their sixth year.

In order to pursue the objectives of the *White Paper*, the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was launched in 2002 (www.cecde.ie). The aim of the CECDE was to develop and co-ordinate early childhood education and to advise the Department of Education and Science on policy issues in relation to children younger than six years. The CECDE was to be the forerunner to the anticipated Early Childhood Agency. The CECDE developed *Síolta*, the *National Framework for Quality* (CECDE, 200619). Parallel to this initiative an early childhood curriculum was proposed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. *Aistear*, the *Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* was published online in 200920 and in hard copy in 2010.

Early childhood education and care, excluding families and the junior and senior infant classes in primary schools, is provided by the private, voluntary and community sector. This results in a great diversity of service provision which includes nurseries, crèches, playgroups, grúpa naíonraí, childminders and pre-schools21. Different settings operate within different philosophies such as Froebel, High/Scope, Montessori, Steiner, and play-based philosophies, while others such as infant classes draw on an eclectic mix of theories, for example, through the Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 199922).

1.3.4 Summary and of ECEC development to date

As can be surmised from above, including the lack of clear terminology, development of ECEC policy in Ireland was ad hoc and fragmentary arising in response to a variety of political agendum (NESF, 200523; NESC, 200924) and rarely underpinned by legislation (Hayes & Bradley, 200925). To date there has been a lack of a national vision and direction for ECEC. In December 2005, the Government announced the welcome establishment of a Junior Minister with responsibility for children with a seat (but without voting rights) at Cabinet, housed in the Office of the Minister for Children, and Youth Affairs (OMCYA). This was the first significant initiative towards co-ordination of ECEC policy. In 2011 a full Ministry for Children and Youth Affairs was established by the Fine Gael and Labour coalition providing greater opportunities for the alignment of ECEC policy and provision.

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2. State investment in ECEC for young children

In the past state investment has been focussed on supply and demand in the childcare infrastructure. By the end of 2010 both the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme and the National Childcare Investment Programme programmes have created up to 90,000 new childcare places (a combination of full and part time places), with the objective of assisting parents to access affordable, quality childcare. The investment in the supply of childcare places (supply measures) includes: wage supports for community childcare; direct capital funding for community, voluntary and private sectors; thirty three local County and City Childcare Committees (CCCCs)26 and tax exemption for childminders. The investment in creating opportunities for parents to access childcare (demand measures) included Child Benefit27 and the Early Childcare Supplement28 introduced in 2006 and withdrawn in 2009. The programme was delivered at local level through the CCCCs under the coordination of Pobal29.

The EOCP and the NCIP programmes reflect the biggest investment in childcare in Irish history. The main thrust of ECEC policy development to date has been on equality measures to provide childcare places in order to support women’s participation in the workforce. In policy and practice “quality within settings... received minimal attention throughout the period of rapid market growth” (Hayes & Bradley, 2009, p.35). In comparison to Child Benefit and the Early Childcare Supplement, both the EOCP and NCIP were limited in monetary terms. There was no guarantee that the Supplement, which was a direct payment to families, would be spent on enhancing the quality of young children’s experiences, though this was the intention. The resistance to directly invest in high quality ECEC provision (as opposed to generous direct payment to parents) reflected the Irish Government’s reluctance to favour those who chose to share the care for their children over those who care for their children fulltime (National Women’s Council of Ireland, 2005)30. It also reflected a lost opportunity to really make a difference to the quality of ECEC and place children at the centre of policy making.

Consequently the announcement of the abolition of the Early Childcare Supplement, and its replacement with a Free Pre-School Year (FPSY)- Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme

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26 City and County Childcare Committees are the first point of contact for the public in applying for grant assistance under the National Childcare Investment Programme. Their role is to encourage the development of childcare locally.
27 Child benefit is an allowance for every child up to the age of sixteen or eighteen years if in fulltime education administered by the Department of Social Protection. CB had increased by 400% over 10 yrs to 2009, faced a reduction of €16 euro per month per child in 2009 (Minister for Finance, 2009), and is threatened with further reduction if not abolition (McCarthy, 2009).
28 Early Childcare Supplement was an annual grant to every child under the age of five years, intended to pay for childcare should families require it.
29 Pobal is a not-for-profit company with charitable status that manages programmes on behalf of the Irish Government and the EU to support communities and local agencies toward achieving social inclusion, reconciliation and equality.
(see more detail later on in *Significant Developments*) in the Supplemental Budget in April, 2009 was unexpected but broadly welcomed by the sector (Start Strong, 2009; Hayes & Bradley, 2009). It demonstrated for the first time the State’s commitment to recognise the value of early education, albeit in strictly economic terms. In his announcement the Minister acknowledged “Pre-primary education significantly enhances the subsequent educational achievement of students and in turn increases the return for State investment in education” (Minister for Finance, 2009, p. A.12). However, we invest significantly less in the early years compared with countries that have robust and successful ECEC systems as exemplified by the following figures.

Figure 1 Comparative investment in early care & education (including Junior and Senior infants) (2009 data, source: OECD Family Database Oct 2012)

Figure 2 Comparative investment in early care & education (preschool only) (2009 data, source: OECD Family Database Oct 2012)

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31 Start Strong was originally founded in 2004 as the Irish Childcare Policy Network (ICPN), a coalition of organisations and individuals interested in progressing childcare and early learning policies in Ireland. The ECEC policy advocacy group evolved into Start Strong in 2009.


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Equally the universal provision of the FPSY will not in itself guarantee positive outcomes for children, unless the quality of provision is high. The standard of quality in the early childhood sector is variable. While a small proportion of staff are graduates of degree programmes in early childhood education and care, the standard qualification level (Further Education and Training Awards Council [FETAC], now Quality and Qualifications Ireland 5) is low and 24% of staff are below this level\textsuperscript{35}. Certainly some provision is of a high standard, but there are clear indicators, both in terms of professional training and the lack of implementation of our practice frameworks to date (\textit{Síolta} and \textit{Aistear}) that standards fall on a spectrum from excellent to very poor and potentially damaging. Both the Departments of Children and Youth Affairs and Education and Skills have committed to focus their work on the implementation of quality frameworks (\textit{Síolta}) and curriculum (\textit{Aistear}) over the coming years. In addition, a workforce development plan has been published\textsuperscript{36} to up skill and increase the standards of education and training of practitioners and educators across the sector.

2.1 Why we should invest in young children

There is a sound research basis for investing in young children. Studies demonstrate that for all young children, but particularly those living with the injustice of poverty and social exclusion, high quality education and care can lead to better school achievement, higher cognitive test scores, less special education placements and higher school retention rates (Reynolds, Wang & Walberg, 2003\textsuperscript{37}; Schweinhart et al., 2004\textsuperscript{38}). Robust research from England (Sylva et al., 2012\textsuperscript{39}) has shown that the benefits of high quality early care and education persist to at least age 14 in relation to both academic outcomes (literacy, maths and science) and social-behavioural outcomes (e.g. motivation, self-confidence, empathy, impulsiveness, anti-social behaviour).

2.1.1 Reading and literacy

We know that the children most at risk of reading difficulties in the primary classes are those who began school with less verbal skills, less phonological awareness (awareness of the sounds that make up words), less letter knowledge and less familiarity with basic purposes and mechanisms of reading\textsuperscript{40}. We know that “Children are most likely to

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experience conversations that include comprehensible and interesting extended discourse and are rich with vocabulary when their parents obtain and read good books and when their teachers provide classrooms with a curriculum that is varied and stimulating”  

In a seminal research project children who were read to frequently by a variety of people, had access to a large number and broad range of books and who used a library regularly scored highest “on all three measures of early literacy (receptive vocabulary, narrative production, and emergent literacy)”  

We also know that there is a high correlation between vocabulary size at age three and language test scores at ages nine and ten in areas of vocabulary, listening, syntax (sentence structure, grammar, language rules) and reading comprehension  

Well-designed early education programmes are shown to engender benefits for the participants themselves, government and society (Karoly & Bigelow, 2005). These benefits are reported to outweigh the costs (Heckman, 2006). “A number of longitudinal studies have shown rates of return from $4 to $17 for every dollar invested” over the life cycle (National Economic & Social Council [NESC], 2009, p. 24). The rates of return to the same investment made in a person of a given ability at different ages are demonstrated in Figure 3 below.

![Rates of return over the life cycle](image)

**Figure 3** Rates of return over the life cycle


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The case has been made in Ireland for “targeting expenditure where returns are greatest” (National Competitiveness Council [NCC], 2009, p. 20); a rationale that is equally relevant to a book gifting programme. The greater children’s experiences of books in early childhood, the greater the chance of reading fluency, and associated educational and societal benefits.

3. National Policy on ECEC relevant to a Book-Gifting Programme

National policy on children is informed by the Government’s vision, articulated by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, that: ‘growing up in Ireland means that you have the best start in life available anywhere in the world’

In Ireland, the performance of post-primary students in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has declined in the area of literacy and numeracy. PISA 2009 demonstrates that almost one in five of all Irish fifteen year olds and almost one in four teenage boys lack the literacy skills to adequately function in today’s society. Similarly, one in five Irish teenagers did not have sufficient mathematical skills to cope with everyday life. The PISA 2009 results are also demonstrated how students across the OECD who attended one year of pre-school performed significantly better than students who did not, with the highest attainment in countries with high quality, inclusive early education systems, supported by high levels of public investment. In response to these findings the Government has developed a literacy and numeracy strategy (DES, 2011).

A further aspect of Government policy is the commitment to ‘tackling Ireland’s economic crisis in a way that is fair, balanced, and which recognises the need for social solidarity’. Addressing poverty and child poverty in particular, is an important aspect of this: ‘A new approach is needed to break the cycle of child poverty where it is most deeply entrenched. We will adopt a new area based approach to child poverty, which draws on best international practice and existing services to tackle every aspect of child poverty. Initially, we will focus on areas that are most severely impacted’.

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this model will be rolled out to up to ten of Ireland’s most disadvantaged communities, in cooperation with philanthropic partners to co-fund and manage the project\(^{52}\).

A book gifting programme has the potential to impact on educational disadvantage and offset the negative impacts of child poverty. The evaluation of *Babies Love Books*\(^{53}\) identified that significant efforts may be required to achieve universal distribution of the scheme in particular to engage with hard to reach families, who typically (though not exclusively) live in areas designated as disadvantaged. Therefore attention to the area-based approach to child poverty may be required for successful distribution of the books in any book gifting programme.

The area-based approach to child poverty builds on the existing area-based *Prevention and Early Intervention Programme* (see Appendix 1 for explanation) in three sites Tallaght, Ballymun and Darndale and is now being extended to another three areas. The budget for this programme in 2013 is €2.5 million and is expected to rise to €4.75 million by 2015. Policy responsibility in relation to ECEC remains primarily with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the Department of Education and Skills. The functions of the HSE in relation to ECEC were through the Department of Health but appear to be moving to the Child and Family Agency\(^{54}\) (see more detail in Significant Developments later on).

### 3.1 Department of Children and Youth Affairs

The OMCYA has now been consolidated into a Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) which was established on 2nd June 2011. “A range of functions that were previously the responsibilities of the Ministers for Health, for Education and Skills, for Justice and Law Reform, and for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs” have now been rationalised (DCYA, 2012, p.2\(^{55}\)). The DCYA now brings together a number of key areas of policy and provision for children and young people, including the OMCYA, and responsibility for the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB), the Family Support Agency (FSA)” (DCYA, 2012, p.2\(^{56}\)). The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA 2012, p. vi) is “a dedicated

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\(^{53}\) *Babies Love Books* aimed to give every child born in the year 2000 and again in 2002 a gift pack of five quality books, with guidelines on how best to share books with babies. The pack was compiled by local libraries and distributed to children by the Public Health Nursing Service at local health centres when each baby was attending for its nine-month developmental check. See O’Neill, S. (2002). *Babies love books: Evaluation report.* Commissioned by the In-Career Development Unit, Department of Education and Science.


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Department to drive delivery of key commitments in relation to children and young people. The Programme for Government commitments [relevant to ECEC] include:

- The establishment of a Child and Family Agency on a statutory basis in order to fundamentally reform the delivery of child protection services and remove responsibility for these from the Health Service Executive (HSE) (see later on in Significant Development).
- Maintaining the free pre-school year and improving its quality as resources allow.
- Investing in a targeted early childhood education programme for disadvantaged children, building on existing targeted pre-school supports for families most in need of assistance, such as the ‘youngballymun’ project.”
- Pre-school regulation and inspection services are currently operated by the HSE, but are to come under the auspices of the soon to be developed Child and Family Agency within the DCYA.  

3.2 Department of Education and Skills

In response to recommendations regarding early childhood education (National Forum Secretariat, 1998; OECD, 2004; NESF, 2005), the DES established an Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU) which is co-located within the DCYA. This was initially staffed by the two most senior employees of the CECDE (one remains). The EYEPU was charged with responsibility for targeted early intervention programmes such as Early Start, Traveller Pre-Schools, the DEIS initiative (DES, 2005) (see Appendix 1 for description of Early Start and DEIS); the Workforce Development Plan and implementation of Síolta (CECDE, 2006).

“A unique feature of the Department’s architecture is the co-location at its headquarters of the Early Years Education Unit of the Department of Education and Skills... This physical proximity facilitates close working relationships on key issues of mutual concern and common purpose” (DCYA, 2012, p. 3).

The DES includes early year’s education as a first goal in its Statement of Strategy (2011-2014): “Provide a quality inclusive school and early years education system with improved

learning outcomes”\textsuperscript{63}. Central to this goal is the national literacy and numeracy strategy which includes a wide range of actions to improve the skills of early childhood educators in this area and to support them to promote parental participation. The next section details some of those actions in addition to other specific policy initiatives that may be of relevance to book gifting.

4. Significant policy actions/developments in the ECEC sector relevant to Book Gifting

This is a critical moment in the provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Ireland with a policy focus on education and care for children generally in the years before compulsory schooling, and in particular children of three and four years of age.

This interest is manifest in the number of state bodies who are developing their own relevant early childhood strategies (for example a national Early Arts Strategy from the Arts Council (forthcoming) and a local Early Years Literacy Strategy from Fingal County Libraries’ Division [forthcoming] see below). Inclusion of early childhood education within the literacy and numeracy strategy was itself recognition of the importance of the earliest years. This section focuses on the following significant developments which could have relevance for the book gifting, in addition to some other possibilities:

- The literacy and numeracy strategy
- Implementation of Aistear (the early childhood curriculum framework)
- The universal right for children of three and four years of age to a Free Pre-School Year
- The forthcoming National Early Years Strategy (announced in 2012)
- The forthcoming Child and Family Agency
- Other possibilities (engagement with maternity hospitals and public health nurse services)
- The forthcoming Fingal County Libraries’ Early Years Literacy Strategy

4.1 Actions in the National Literacy & Numeracy Strategy

The following table outlines some specific actions within the \textit{Literacy and Numeracy Strategy} of potential relevance to book gifting (see also \textit{Appendix 2 Literacy in National ECEC documents}).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prioritise the implementation of an oral language development programme within pre-schools (including Early Start units) that act as feeder pre-schools for DEIS Urban Band 1 schools. This programme would consist of:</th>
<th>Responsibility for this action: DES and NCCA. The NCCA is currently revising the Primary Curriculum in the Junior and Senior infant classrooms on Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- A train-the-trainer programme in a proven oral language development programme</td>
<td>Indicative target date: 2013-2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Continuing professional development for pre-school staff to acquire the necessary skills in assessment techniques and in a proven oral language development programme</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure continuity between oral language development programmes in preschools and in Junior Infant classrooms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• Using Aistear as the curriculum framework, develop resources to expand the knowledge of parents in the techniques they can use to support the oral language development of children from birth to 6. (the NCCA have already developed tip-sheets for Parents on how to play with children)
• Provide parents with information leaflet/pack on literacy and numeracy activities that they can use to support their child’s reading at each stage
• Co-ordinate the distribution and provision of these resources with adult literacy provision by VECs and targeted to those in most need; for example, the disadvantaged and hard-to-reach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsibility for this action:</th>
<th>DES in conjunction with providers of education programmes for ECCE practitioners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indicative target date:</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Enable Schools and ECEC settings:
• provide or host sensitively-designed opportunities for parents to develop their confidence and their capacity to help their children at home in relation to literacy and numeracy
• inform parents of opportunities to participate in home literacy programmes as organised in local libraries or provided by VECs or community groups

Ensure that the literacy and numeracy plan required in all schools includes specific actions to inform parents about ways to support their children’s learning and how to understand reports about their child’s progress in school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsible for this action:</th>
<th>DES and schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indicative target date:</td>
<td>2011-12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• Continue to support family literacy initiatives in communities served by DEIS schools; in allocating support, priority will be given to projects (at early years and school level) that have been evaluated and proved to be effective through evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsible for this action:</th>
<th>DES and OMCYA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indicative target date:</td>
<td>2012-16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Education and Skills (2011) Literacy and Numeracy Strategy

4.2 Implementation of Aistear
It could be argued that if one were to pick a development with the greatest potential to accomplish the objective of enhancing the quality of young children’s experiences and extend their early learning and development in relation to literacy it would be Aistear.

Aistear, the Irish word for journey, was developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and launched in 2009. Aistear is the curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years and focuses on planning for the provision of enriching, challenging and enjoyable learning experiences for children. The development of Aistear was underpinned by consultation with the early childhood sector, commissioned research papers (Hayes, 2007; French, 2007; Kernan, 2007 & Dunphy, 2008) and portraiture studies of young children. These are all available on their website www.ncca.ie. This rigorous and

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inclusive approach has led to a framework for early learning which is soundly based in research and draws from the contributions of our diverse early childhood sector.

The on-line Aistear Toolkit (www.ncca.ie/aistearthoolkit) is continually under development and provides podcasts from recognised authorities in the field with a welcome focus on interactions which support early literacy, for example there is one on ‘language development in the preschool year’ (Anne McGough) and ‘critical thinking and book talk’ (Mary Roche). There are many snapshots and short films of early educators in practice categorised within the four themes of Aistear: Well-being; Identity and belonging; Communicating and Exploring and thinking (see Appendix 2 for details of these themes, all of which have relevance to early literacy).

The success of Aistear is manifested in its integration into national programmes such as the National Early Years Access Initiative (see Appendix 3), where each of the 11 projects must be underpinned by Aistear (and Síolta). The forthcoming revised primary curriculum for Junior and Senior Infants will seek to ensure “greater consistency with Aistear (NCCA, 2012, p.14”.

Having acknowledged the many positive benefits of Aistear, there is one major drawback; the weakness of its implementation to date. Whilst many resources and supports have been developed to support early childhood educators in their practice, Aistear is not underpinned by legislation, early childhood settings are not mandated to implement Aistear (unlike in Primary schools where the Primary Curriculum is implemented universally) and there are no specific and detailed implementation plans currently for the roll-out of Aistear in all early childhood settings. In addition, there is no funding currently available for the education and training of early childhood personnel in order for them to translate Aistear into everyday practice, planning and supervision. However, the new contract for the Free Pre-School Year (see below) state that settings

...are required to use ...Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009) to provide an appropriate educational and care programme for children in their pre-school year. Participating service providers may be supported in meeting the requirement by a range of designated support services and agencies including their local City or County Childcare Committee. Service providers must facilitate visits and use advice from support staff from such organisations. (DCYA, 2012)  

Furthermore the literacy and numeracy strategy contains many references to Aistear (see Appendix 2 for one example). These statements clearly suggest that settings should use Aistear and that organisations must be enabled to support early childhood staff. Successful implementation of Aistear could produce identifiable outcomes in relation to literacy. It is

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possible that one of the actions in the emerging National Early Years Strategy (see below) will be the implementation of Aistear. In which case there could be synergies between the development of a book gifting programme and implementation of Aistear.

4.3 Free Pre-School Year Programme (FPSY)

A Free Pre-School Year Programme (FPSY) was introduced with effect from January 2010. It is estimated that approximately 100,000 children participate in ECEC services in Ireland with up to 70,000 benefitting from the FPSY. All children aged more than 3 years 2 months and less than 4 years 7 months at 1 September in the relevant pre-school year are eligible for this scheme, which provides 3 hours of preschool, 5 days per week for 38 weeks a year. The programme is provided in both community and private crèches and it would appear that the vast majority of settings participate (4,500). The State invests about €175 million each year in the scheme.

The free preschool year has been widely welcomed and been very successful in terms of take up. About 95% of eligible services and 94% of the target population, equating to 63,000 children participated in 2010 from the outset. This universal service could be an excellent entry for book gifting. Recent statements by Minister for Children and Youth Affairs Frances Fitzgerald, Minister for Education Ruairí Quinn, and Minister for Social Protection, Joan Burton indicate recognition of the value of early childhood education and a proposal that there could be a future extension of the provision to two years duration.

This would be welcome as there is a gap for children in the earlier years. With the exception of Primary care services such as the Public Health Nurses, or occasional home visiting schemes (such as Community Mothers, Lifestart and Home Start) services for children aged birth – to five years are mainly focused on daycare provision including childminding for working parents. Local community services such as parent and toddler groups, and parent support groups are largely ad hoc and often comprise self-organised by groups of parents or community groups on a sessional, daily or weekly basis.

4.4 National Early Years Strategy

On the 25th January 2012, at an OECD conference of ECEC held in Norway the Minister Frances Fitzgerald at the Department of Children and Youth Affairs announced that she will develop Ireland’s first National Early Years Strategy in consultation with key stakeholders. She said “I have therefore asked my Department to prepare, in collaboration with key experts and stakeholders, Ireland’s first National Early Years Strategy. I want this to be an innovative and exciting blueprint for the future strategic development of Ireland’s Early

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Years Sector”\(^{71}\). Her announcement was warmly welcomed by the sector\(^{72}\). In fact the primary focus of Start Strong’s\(^{73}\) work has been campaigning for a national plan for children’s early care and education. Ireland’s first Early Years Strategy (EYS) is being developed during 2013. Issues for inclusion are:

- Enhancing the quality of early childhood care and education and of childminding;
- Improving educational outcomes including progressing the objectives of the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy*;
- Improving health and physical fitness outcomes including in response to findings from the ‘Growing up in Ireland’ Study showing the worrying problems of overweight and obesity among Ireland’s 3-years olds;
- Examining approaches to providing targeted early childhood programmes for disadvantaged children;
- Increasing positive parental engagement in early childhood care and education;
- Also labour market activation and childcare, especially school-age.

“The Early Years Strategy will cover all aspects of children’s experiences in their early years including health, family support, care and education and will identify the structures and policies needed to improve early year’s experiences in Ireland”\(^{74}\).

The Strategy is the continuation of and the replacement for the National Children’s Strategy 2000-2010 and will be written in the context of the Children and Young Peoples’ Policy Framework which will set out objectives, principles and outcomes that will underpin the age cohort or other strategies that are developed in relation to children. ‘The new policy framework will provide a seamless, whole-of-childhood approach to policy making. It is intended that it will be the overarching framework for the future development of policies and services that will improve children and young people’s outcomes. The policy framework will focus on the key developmental periods for children and young people;

- Prenatal, infancy, early childhood (0 to 6 years)
- Middle childhood years (6-12 years)
- Adolescence and early adulthood (12 plus years)

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\(^{71}\) Start Strong, Presentation on the National Early Years Strategy by Toby Wolfe at the Consultation meeting: 12 December 2012, Gresham Hotel, Dublin.

\(^{72}\) Start Strong, 26 January 2012, press release, ‘Start Strong welcome announcement of preparation of Ireland’s first National Early Years Strategy.’

\(^{73}\) Start Strong was originally founded in 2004 as the Irish Childcare Policy Network (ICPN), a coalition of organisations and individuals interested in progressing childcare and early learning policies in Ireland. The ECEC policy advocacy group evolved into Start Strong in 2009.

\(^{74}\) Start Strong, Presentation on the National Early Years Strategy by Toby Wolfe at the Consultation meeting: 12 December 2012, Gresham Hotel, Dublin.
It will have a specific focus on the aspects of growth and development that are unique to each time period and the policies and services that are required at each stage to secure good outcomes for children and young people. Desirable outcomes, to do with children and young people being healthy, involved in learning, being safe, economically secure, part of positive networks and participating in society, will be central to the development of the new policy framework. It will be the platform for three further detailed strategies – which will drive down into deeper detail in respect of actions relevant to early years, middle childhood and youth - to be developed by the Department over 2012 - 2013. All three strategies will be developed through this single policy framework.75

The Early Years Strategy will, therefore, set out plans to address a range of issues that affect young children and will focus on improving the lives and outcomes for all children from birth to 6 years, particularly through the provision of universal services.

It is unclear at the time of writing precisely when the National Early Years Strategy will be published, as the first consultation draft has yet to be produced. The Strategy will be of relevance to book gifting.

4.5 Child and Family Agency

The Child and Family Agency Bill 2013 is currently before the Dáil. The new agency should directly provide or commission the following core services:

- child protection,
- family support,
- public health nursing,
- speech and language,
- child and adolescent mental health,
- psychology,
- educational welfare,
- children in detention schools, domestic and sexual violence.

The precise details on how the new Agency will engage with early childhood services have yet to be finalised. However, the strategic objectives of the DCYA are available.

A Book-gifting programme can fulfil some of the strategic objectives of the DCYA (DCYA 2012, p. 6), specifically to: “1. Develop, strengthen and align policies, legislation and resources in order to achieve better outcomes for children and young people and provide support for parents and families...[and] 6. Collaborate with stakeholders, including across Government, in monitoring and promoting the physical, emotional and economic well-being of children and young people and reducing inequalities”.

From evidence reported in O’Neill (2002) a book gifting programme is an early intervention and prevention measure. The DCYA have a focus on prevention and early intervention. Their Statement of Strategy acknowledges that “While many resources are currently and necessarily deployed to secure moderate remedial outcomes (often too late in a child’s life), significant research evidence indicates that in many cases targeted earlier interventions would result in much improved outcomes...The DCYA is committed to meeting the twin strategic challenges of improving effectiveness in terms of existing arrangements while actively planning and implementing change to bring about more significant transformation” (DCYA, 2012, p. 477).

It is unclear at the moment whether the role of the Public Health Nurse which was a direct universal route to families will change with the move to the Child and Family Agency. The key focus of the Agency appears to be on child protection rather than early childhood education.

4.6 Other possibilities

The Bounty Pack universal scheme to expectant and new mother has ended. However the ‘patient services’ department within maternity hospitals may offer universal delivery of supports to expectant and new mothers/parents.

Engagement with libraries is mutually beneficial. The Libraries fall within the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government. There are library development units within Local government. There is a new library unit in the Department of Education and Skills. However, a scheme which supported schools to borrow from the libraries is discontinued. The following is an example of one local level initiative.

4.7 Fingal County Council Libraries’ Division Early Years’ Literacy Strategy

Through the formulation of a specific literacy strategy, Fingal County Council Libraries’ Division are seeking to raise awareness of the importance of early literacy. They also wish to explore collaborative opportunities to enhance early literacy with local further education agencies, early childhood settings, schools and colleges. They aim to be a catalyst for an enriched level of literacy in the community. Fingal Libraries are thus developing specific actions to underpin their strategy with a view to supporting the literate child. One of their 10 key actions are to “Explore the possibility of a Book Gifting Scheme.”

The following table attempts to map the two main government departments and their agencies and programmes/responsibilities which are relevant to ECEC and therefore potentially book gifting.

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### Departmental Map Responsibility/Programmes for ECEC with reference to young children living in areas designated as disadvantaged

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Children and Youth Affairs</th>
<th>Education and Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main Policy Agenda</td>
<td>Protection of children</td>
<td>Education and educational disadvantage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children Act, 2001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(forthcoming) is one of three age related elements</td>
<td>- DEIS Early education strand (DES, 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Prevention and Early Intervention Initiatives/Area-based Child Poverty Initiative</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Working Together for Children - Children Services Committees</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Responsibility</td>
<td>- Regulation of pre-school facilities (voluntary, community and private sector )</td>
<td>- Measures for children at risk of educational disadvantage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Provision of childcare places for children from families under stress</td>
<td>- Funding, managing and inspection of infant classes in primary schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Support services for children with disabilities</td>
<td>- Funding, managing and inspection of specific measures to address educational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Implementation of Children and Young Peoples Policy Framework</td>
<td>disadvantage in primary schools including children up to 6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sections / Structures (see Appendices 4 and 5</td>
<td>- Policy and innovation</td>
<td>- Primary Section(s) Inspectorate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for personnel)</td>
<td>- Child welfare and legislation</td>
<td>- Social Inclusion Unit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Department: Children and Youth Affairs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Responsibility of DCYA</th>
<th>Education and Skills (Co-located Early Years Policy Unit)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Oversee Free Pre-School year in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme</td>
<td>▪ Workforce Development Plan to meet the target of providing 17,000 childcare training places by 2010;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) Programme</td>
<td>▪ Implementing the recommendations of the Traveller Education Strategy in moving towards integrated provision for Traveller pre-schools;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Childcare Education and Training Support Programme (CETS)</td>
<td>▪ Early Start Programme incorporating the Rutland Street Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ To fund and support the City/County Childcare Committees in enhancing the quality of childcare in Ireland</td>
<td>▪ Implementing the DEIS action plan for early childhood education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ To implement the Child Care (Pre-School Services)(No2) Regulations 2006</td>
<td>▪ Implementing <em>Síolta, the Early Childhood Quality Framework</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Childminders</td>
<td>▪ Liaising with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in relation to <em>Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ National Voluntary Childcare Organisations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Childcare Initiatives</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Childcare Directorate</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Chair of National Co-ordinating Childcare Committee</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Children First - Child Protection Guidance</td>
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</table>

## Agencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agencies</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Health Service Executives</td>
<td>National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (advisors to DES)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Forthcoming Child and Family Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Principal Family Support and ECEC Programmes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Family Support and ECEC Programmes</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Community Mothers Programme</td>
<td>▪ Early Start Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Home-Start/Lifestart</td>
<td>▪ Rutland Street Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Family Support Workers</td>
<td>▪ Traveller pre-schools (now disbanding)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Community Child Care Workers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Pre-and After-School Nurseries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ National Children’s Strategy research - Longitudinal Study of Children in Ireland (10,000 children from birth, 8,000 from 9 years to adulthood, joint responsibility with Department of Social and Family Affairs)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ <em>Ready Steady Play</em> National Play Policy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Prevention and Early Intervention Programme</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ National Early Years Access Initiative</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion
This is an important moment in the development of early childhood policy with a renewed focus on early childhood education and care in general and literacy in particular. The purpose of this paper is to provide a broad and up to date background to early childhood education and care policy and to investigate if a national book gifting programme can fulfill the need of a current policy. The paper addresses the ad hoc and fragmentary nature of ECEC policy development and state investment in the early years with a rationale for investment.

In conclusion there are current and emerging policies which have relevance to book gifting. The most relevant is *Literacy and numeracy for learning and life: The national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy among children and young people 2011-2020* developed by the Department of Education and Skills in 2011. The implementation of Aistear (the early childhood curriculum framework) and its relationship to the revised infant curriculum is also of relevance. One universal programme of certainty at this point is time is the universal free pre-school year. The Bounty Pack universal scheme to expectant and new mothers has ended. However the ‘patient services’ departments within maternity hospitals may offer universal delivery of supports to expectant and new mothers/parents. While this paper can only present what is understood of the current details; two emerging developments the Child and Family Agency and the National Early Years Strategy will potentially provide other pathways to book gifting. It is unclear at the moment whether the role of the Public Health Nurse which was a direct universal route to families will change with the move to the Child and Family Agency. At a local level there are clear synergies with the Fingal County Council Libraries’ Division who are developing an Early Literacy Strategy, which includes exploration of a book gifting programme.

We know that the greater children’s experiences of books in early childhood (being read to, having access to a large number and broad range of books and attending a library regularly) the greater their measurable early literacy skills (narrative production, receptive vocabulary, and emergent literacy) and later reading fluency. Therefore, all and any of the policy and provision pathways outlined above are worth exploring.
References


McKeown, k. & Haase, T. (Forthcoming). *Quality and outcomes in early years services: Evaluation of staff capacity and child outcomes in the 2012/13 Free Pre-School Year in Ireland*. Dublin: Department of Children and Youth affairs.


Start Strong, 26 January 2012, press release, ‘Start Strong welcome announcement of preparation of Ireland’s first National Early Years Strategy.’


Appendix 1 ECEC in Areas Designated as Disadvantage

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)
In May 2005, the then Minister for Education and Science, Mary Hannifin, launched DEIS – Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools: An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion. In the plan it is stated that the Department’s particular contribution to early childhood education provision (for children in the year before they start school) “…will be to provide funding or part-funding for the educational dimension of provision, where new [childcare and education] places are involved, and on supporting the further development of an educational dimension in the case of existing childcare provision” (DES, 2005, p. 33). Measures to embed quality early learning experiences for children within childcare provision are advocated in DEIS. This also involves “delivering education-related professional support and training to existing providers, together with a curriculum and quality framework for early childhood education with the assistance of the NCCA and the CECDE” (DES, 2005, p. 33). According to DES (2005, p.34) the “Department will aim to add value to early childhood provision in communities served by the urban/town primary schools with the highest concentrations of disadvantage by supporting the implementation of a quality early education dimension”. It is advised the guidelines for the Early Start programme “identify good practice in this regard”.

In relation to the early childhood education measure “the DEIS Action Plan will be extended to the urban primary school communities with the most immediate and pressing needs by 2010. This measure will continue to be extended to encompass the remaining schools in the urban primary strand of DEIS after 2010”. To date settings have received Dormant Account funding “for quality improvement measures linked to Siolta” (http://www.omc.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?DocID=1233&ad=1&mn=earh&nID=4) and a research project “aimed at coordinating, enhancing and evaluating educational provision for children aged three and four years of age in one cluster of DEIS early childhood education settings” has commenced (http://www.cecde.ie/english/TargetedECEOProvision.php).

Early Start
The Early Start Pre-School Project was (OECD, 2004, p. 32) launched by the DES in 1994 as a one year targeted intervention for three year old children considered most at risk of not reaching their potential within the education system for reasons of socio-economic disadvantage. Two classes of fifteen children attend pre-school each morning from 9.00 to 11.30am and a similar number of children attend in the afternoon from 12.00 to 2.30pm. Coolahan (1994, p. 108) referred to the debates on the “intensity” that an effective early years intervention could have. It was imperative that “adequate resources and training for teachers/leaders” should be provided in addition to suitably “enriched and effective curricula and pedagogies”.

The Early Start pilot project is the most significant publicly funded preschool intervention scheme that currently exists in Ireland (NCC, 2009). Whilst acknowledging that the benefits
of this kind of provision are longitudinal, to date evaluations of Early Start have proved disappointing (Educational Research Centre, 1998; Kelly and Kellaghan (1999); Lewis and Archer, 2003). It has remained a pilot programme to this day.

**Prevention and Early Intervention Programme**

The ten year social partnership agreement *Towards 2016* (Ireland, 2006) committed the Irish Government to improving the lives of our children. The need for innovative and rigorously evaluated measures to respond to emerging needs of children and to provide an opportunity for learning about new, more integrated ways of designing and delivering settings was recognised. The Irish Government is co-funding a €36m project with Atlantic Philanthropies (from 2007-2012). Entitled the *Prevention and Early Intervention Programme* it aims to avert children succumbing to the risk associated with disadvantage as well as providing children with the resilience to overcome those risks. The initiative was implemented in three locations – Tallaght (the Tallaght West Childhood Development Initiative), Ballymun (Young Ballymun) and Northside Partnership (Preparing for Life). Evaluations are becoming available. This initiative has become a model for the developing area based approach to child poverty.

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Appendix 2 Literacy in National Documents

The table maps pertinent links to early childhood literacy in the following national documents\(^\text{82, 83}\):

- **Aistear**: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009)
- **Síolta**: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006)
- **Child Health, Welfare and Development Assessment Guide: Regulation 5** (Health Services Executive, 2011) of the Child Care (Pre-School Services)(No 2) Regulations (Department of Health and Children, 2006)
- **Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011–2020** (Department of Education and Skills, 2011)

It should be noted that in common with the national documents there is an assumption that children’s basic needs are met, direct relationships with the children and relationships with all who are connected with the children are built on and supported, an appropriate physical learning environment is provided and that an holistic approach to children’s learning and development is in existence.

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Connecting early childhood literacy to national documents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priniciples &amp; Theme – Well-being</th>
<th>Aims</th>
<th>Priniciples &amp; Theme – Identity &amp; Belonging</th>
<th>Aims</th>
<th>Priniciples &amp; Theme – Communicating</th>
<th>Aims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Rights of the Child</td>
<td>Ensuring that each child’s rights are met require that she/he is enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her/his own development and learning.</td>
<td>3. Parents and Families</td>
<td>Valuing and involving parents and families requires a proactive partnership approach evidenced by a range of clearly stated, accessible and implemented processes, policies and procedures.</td>
<td>4. Play</td>
<td>Promoting play requires that each child has ample time to engage in freely available and accessible, developmentally appropriate and well-resourced opportunities for exploration, creativity and meaning making in the company of other children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Environments</td>
<td>Enriching environments, both indoor and outdoor (including materials and equipment) are well-maintained, safe, available, accessible, adaptable, developmentally appropriate, and offer a variety of challenging and stimulating experiences.</td>
<td>5. Interactions</td>
<td>Fostering constructive interactions (child/child, child/adult and adult/adult) requires explicit policies, procedures and practice that emphasise the value of process and are based on mutual respect, equal partnership and sensitivity.</td>
<td>6. Play</td>
<td>Promoting play requires that each child has ample time to engage in freely available and accessible, developmentally appropriate and well-resourced opportunities for exploration, creativity and meaning making in the company of other children.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**ECEC provide good literacy skills.** That is the development of: children’s communication skills such as their awareness of verbal and non-verbal communication; their knowledge of sound, pattern, rhythm and repetition; their awareness of symbols such as print and pictures... Improve attitudes to literacy and communication and enhance oral-language competence.

Parents and communities enabled to support children’s literacy. The period from birth to three years is of crucial importance in the child’s development. The role of parents and families is critically important in these years, particularly in the development of children’s language and emergent literacy and numeracy skills. Partnership with parents and families plays a central role in nurturing this development and in laying the foundations for further learning.

Educators’ professional practice improved in area of literacy by encouraging and supporting the up-skilling of early childhood educators in the area of literacy (which presupposes a focus on language).
### Aim 2
Children will use language.

### Aim 3
Children will broaden their understanding of the world by making sense of experiences through language.

### Aim 4
Children will express themselves creatively and imaginatively.

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### Principles & Theme – Exploring & Thinking

#### Aim 1
Children will learn about and make sense of the world around them.

#### Aim 2
Children will develop and use skills and strategies for observing, questioning, investigating, understanding, negotiating, and problem-solving, and come to see themselves as explorers and thinkers.

#### Aim 3
Children will explore ways to represent ideas, feelings, thoughts, objects, and actions through symbols.

#### Aim 4
Children will have positive attitudes towards learning and develop dispositions like curiosity, playfulness, perseverance, confidence, resourcefulness, and risk-taking.

Note that of all the Guidelines (for Parents, Play, and Assessment) have relevance, in particular Interactions.

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### Curriculum

- **7. Curriculum** – Encouraging each child’s holistic development and learning requires the implementation of a verifiable, broad-based, documented and flexible curriculum or programme.

- **8. Planning & Evaluation** – Enriching and informing all aspects of practice within the setting requires cycles of observation, planning, action and evaluation undertaken on a regular basis.

- **11. Professional practice** – Practising in a professional manner requires that individuals have skills, knowledge, values and attitudes appropriate to their role and responsibility within the setting. In addition, it requires regular reflection upon practice and engagement in supported on going professional development.

- **13. Transitions** – Ensuring continuity of experiences for each child requires policies, procedures and practice that promote sensitive management of transitions, consistency in key relationships, liaison within and between settings, the keeping and transfer of relevant information (with parental consent), and the close involvement of parents and, where appropriate, relevant professionals.

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### Planning & Evaluation

- **3 (b, e)** The indoor (and outdoor) environment provides a range of developmentally appropriate, challenging, diverse, creative and enriching experiences for all children... that support all areas of development.

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### Professional practice

- **4 (a)** Play
  - Language development (singing; variety of books, tape recorder / tapes / dancing / singing / rhymes; story telling; conversation / word games; puppets)

- **4 (b)** Each child is enabled to participate actively...in conversations

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### Transitions

- **5. Curricular practice** – Practising in a professional manner requires that individuals have skills, knowledge, values and attitudes appropriate to their role and responsibility within the setting. In addition, it requires regular reflection upon practice and engagement in supported on going professional development.

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### Assessment

- **Children with additional learning needs** achieve their potential by continuing to provide free early childhood education and care in socially, economically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.

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### Source


Appendix 3 Some National Approaches to Early Literacy

The following are some approaches to early literacy which have been developed nationally. The key questions answered in relation to each are: What is the programme or its aims? Who developed it and where is it located? What are the components? Where can I find more information?

Clare Family Learning Project
This programme was set up Co Clare, Ireland, in response to identified needs of the high number of immigrant parents in schools who were not familiar with the Irish education system or how their children were taught but were anxious to support their children’s learning. It is delivered in the most disadvantaged primary schools. The target group are immigrant parents and those identified by the Home School Community Liaison teacher as being disadvantaged with literacy (and numeracy) needs. The project was initiated by the Clare Adult Basic Education Service.

The programme aims to encourage parents to see themselves as their child’s first teacher and value the home as a learning place. The aims of the programme for the children are to increase parent and child interaction time on literacy and numeracy based activities in and around the home and to have fun learning together.

The programme takes place during school terms and is made up of 3 x 2 hour sessions each week over the school year. Learners choose different units depending on the needs and interests of the families to make the total hours of the course. The units include Fun Maths, Games to make and play (dads and children evening class), English and Bilingual Storybags. Literacy and numeracy are embedded in the course activities.


Doodle Den (Childhood Development Initiative [CDI])
Doodle Den is an afterschool programme which provides intensive support aimed at improving children’s literacy. The programme was developed by St Patrick’s College, Drumcondra and a consortium of people living and working for children living in Brookfield, Fettercairn, Jobstown and Killinarden in Tallaght West, Dublin. The programme is targeted at children in Senior Infant classes in the local primary school. The programme aims to achieve: moderate improvements in children’s literacy, improvements in children’s regular school attendance, improvements in children’s broader engagement in learning outside the school through improved literacy, increased confidence and improved home environment relating to literacy; and, enhanced relationships between the child and their family and
peers for example through increased parent/carers involvement in supporting their child’s literacy development and increased family use of library services.

Doodle Den is delivered three times a week for one and a half hours after school in line with the primary school calendar. The design of the Doodle Den child component allows for combining a series of fun activities to engage the children and to deliver literacy activities through a balanced literacy framework. The parent component of Doodle Den comprises six sessions across the year. These are a mixture of active learning, modelling best practice, discussion and active interaction with materials/games/books. The family component of Doodle Den includes opportunities for parents to sit in on child sessions, shared reading activities and one organised family activity per term such as a visit to the local library and story-telling sessions. This programme has been evaluated. See http://www.twcdi.ie for further information.

Early Learning Initiative

The Early Learning Initiative (ELI) was established as a Community Based Educational Initiative aimed at addressing educational disadvantage through the provision, from birth, of an integrated programme of activities, training and supports, for children, parents, families, and child care and education providers. The ELI was developed by the National College of Ireland in conjunction with St. Patrick’s College, Drumcondra, and people who live and work in the lower Docklands north and south of the river Liffey. The ELI consists of a number of programmes for children, their parents and early childhood settings. Within Strand 1 Early Learning for children from birth to six years, one programme focuses on early literacy and play. The Parent-Child Home Programme (PCHP) was developed in the United States (see http://www.parent-child.org). The PCHP is a ‘learning through play experience’ for parents and their pre-school children. It is designed to strengthen the natural bond between parent and child and to encourage a love of learning. It employs a non-directive approach and encourages the parent as the child’s first and best teacher. This programme prepares children for later success in school. PCHP employs home visitors to model verbal interaction for the parent and child. Each week a new book or toy is introduced, and the home visitor models reading and play interaction for the parent and child. The books and toys are then left as a gift to the family. On the second visit of the week, the same book or toy is used again to encourage and promote use of the materials. A weekly report is written by the home visitor to record the child’s development. See http://www.ncirl.ie.eli for more information.

See http://www.twcdi.ie for further information.

National Early Years Access Initiative

The National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI) aims are: the improvement of the quality and coordination of local services to young children and families in a small number of demonstration sites; and the provision of an evidence-base to inform mainstream practice and policy with regard to the design and delivery of integrated services for young children and families and to leave in place a sustainable legacy for the future. It comprises of collaboration between The Atlantic Philanthropies, the Mount Street Club Trustees, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), the Early Years Education Policy Unit, the Department of Education and Skills, and Pobal. The Initiative is managed by Pobal on behalf of a Steering Group and with the support of two working groups. The primary target population is birth to six-year-old children and families residing in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. The secondary target population is early years service providers, Children’s Services Committees (CSCs), City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs), educational establishments, local, voluntary and community organisations and local communities. A number of the demonstration projects deal with early literacy and numeracy. This programme is being evaluated with final results available in 2014.

An example of one of these projects is the Early Years Language and Learning Initiative. The aim of this project is to enhance the learning and development opportunities for all children aged from birth to six years by working in collaboration with parents (in their homes) and with early childhood educators and teachers in early years settings and schools they attend. This will lead to a positive impact on children’s language and learning as well as significant improvements in their social and early literacy development. The project was developed by the Ballyfermot/Chapelizod Partnership in Dublin.

In relation to the consortium members and service providers, success will be based on the positive collaboration and the interagency process in implementing this project, building on the good practice that is in existence locally and working more effectively together both during the project and following completion of the project. Children who have participated in the project will be prepared for the demands of formal schooling and will achieve increased scores in standardised literacy tests administered in schools in subsequent years. The Ballyfermot/Chapelizod Partnership has commissioned a local level evaluation.

Many of the initiatives focus on language and literacy, the outcomes of the programme will have an impact on the future development of services, which may be of relevance to a book gifting scheme.

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**Tús Maith (Best Start – Barnardos)**

Tús Maith means good beginning. The Tús Maith programme is Barnardos’ early years care and education programme for children aged three to five years. The programme brings together the two proven programmes of HighScope and REDI (Research based Developmentally Informed programme – designed and developed by Dr. Celine Dominitrovich and Dr. Karen Bierman from the Prevention Research Centre in Penn State University USA) and integrates them using the Barnardos Quality Framework. The overall outcome for Tús Maith is to ensure that the children have the skills necessary to support them in school. The REDI programme was designed to fit with HighScope and Creative Curriculum and has been shown to achieve higher level outcomes in the domains of social and emotional competence and emergent literacy for three-four year olds. The REDI programme components address children’s pro-social skills, emotional competency, self-control and social problem-solving. It also has a language and literacy component, which aims to increase children’s vocabulary, phonological sensitivity (exposure to oral) and print awareness (exposure to written word).

The critical elements of Tús Maith include Pre-school Paths (where children are taught to recognise emotions and regulate their behaviour), dialogic reading (children getting involved in the story with adults and having a conversation about the story), sound games (to build phonological awareness) and an alphabet centre (to increase children’s letter recognition).

Tús Maith is operating in eight Barnardos centres. All centres offering Tús Maith are located in areas of high economic and social disadvantage. This programme is being evaluated by the Centre for Social and Educational Research (CSER), at the Dublin Institute of Technology (contact Barnardos for information on the evaluation).

For further information see [http://www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie).

**Write Minded & 3, 4, 5 Learning Years Service (youngballymun)**

Write Minded is the literacy support service aimed at children aged four to eighteen years, families, schools, education centres and community as part of youngballymun. youngballymun resources and implements services in partnership with community, voluntary and service providers in Ballymun, Dublin 9. The school strand of Write-Minded includes teaching and learning activities at primary and second level aimed at: oral language and literacy development; teacher training and capacity building to support teachers to provide time, focus, and expert practice in the development of children’s literacy skills and promotion of improved punctuality, school attendance, and participation in learning. The family and community strand of Write-Minded includes: creating opportunities to include parents in activities within the school that support and enhance children’s literacy and learning, providing opportunities across the community for parents to participate in their children’s literacy and learning, promoting the vital role that adult and community
education plays in family learning, raising the awareness across the community of the role
the community, daily, and school can play in promoting children’s learning; children’s
attendance in school; and making the transition to secondary school easier for young people
to manage.

Critical elements include a whole school approach to literacy, the development of DVDs on
teaching the four main components of the ‘Ballymun Literacy Framework’ – reading fluency,
reading comprehension, writing and word knowledge, supports to families over the summer
to continue their children’s literacy learning, Storysacks among other initiatives. This
programme has been evaluated\textsuperscript{87}.

Another programme with specific relevance to young children and with broad relevance to
early literacy is the 3, 4, 5 Learning Years Service was developed and evaluated\textsuperscript{88}. The
Service aims to improve holistic developmental and learning outcomes for children in early
childhood care and education settings in Ballymun by increasing the quality of service
provision through staff professional development and the provision of mentoring and
coaching support to enhance practice.

For further information see http://www.youngballymun.org/our_work/our_
services/write_minded/

\textsuperscript{87} SQW. (2012a). \textit{Evaluation of Write-Minded: A shared area-based literacy strategy}. Final report to
youngballymun Ltd. Dublin: youngballymun Ltd.

\textsuperscript{88} SQW. (2012b). \textit{Evaluation of the 3, 4, 5 Learning Years Service}. Dublin: youngballymun Ltd.
Appendix 4 Personnel and responsibilities in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Appendix 5 Personnel and responsibilities in the Department of Education and Skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secretary General</td>
<td>Seán Ó Foghlu</td>
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<td>Asst. Secretary</td>
<td>Peter Bolandwin</td>
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<td>Asst. Secretary</td>
<td>Pat Burke</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asst. Secretary</td>
<td>Ruth Carmody</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deputy Secretary</td>
<td>Mary Doyle</td>
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<td>Asst. Secretary</td>
<td>Martin Hanvey</td>
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<td>Asst. Secretary</td>
<td>Michael Keogh</td>
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<td>Asst. Secretary</td>
<td>Kevin Mc Carthy</td>
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<td>Asst. Secretary</td>
<td>Dermot Mulholland</td>
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<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Alan Wall</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chief Inspector</td>
<td>Harold Halpin</td>
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- **External HR**
- **Central Policy Unit**
- **Higher Education Unit**
- **Schools, Financial and VEC, Financial/Administrative Personnel**
- **Corporate Services**
- **Planning Building and PPPs**
- **NEPS**
- **International**
- **Inspectorate**
- **Further Education**
- **School Transport**
- **Public Service Reform**
- **Higher Education Policy and Skills**
- **Parents, Learners and Database Unit**
- **Finance Unit**
- **RIRU**
- **Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Policy**
- **NDP/EU Structural Funds and FAS Liaison and Training Estimates**
- **North/South**
- **Early Years Education**
- **Higher Education Research and Funding**
- **Teacher Allocation**
- **I.T.**
- **Special Education Unit**
- **Social Inclusion**
- **Special Education Litigation**
- **Teacher Education**
- **Pensions**
- **Statistics**
- **School Governance Policies**
- **Personnel**
- **Social Inclusion**
- **Social Inclusion**
- **Teachers, SENs, Terms and Conditions**
- **Press and Communications**
- **Payroll**

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