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Early Childhood Education in Ireland Policy, Provision and Practice

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INTRODUCTION

This paper identifies two major dilemmas that need addressing if policy making with respect to early childhood education is to progress and the rights and needs of Irish children are to met. The first dilemma for policy makers is the need to address the early childhood educational needs of children whose parents are working outside the home without being seen to discriminate against those women who choose to care for their children at home. The second dilemma is the persistence of the view that childcare and early education are two distinct, separate but related policy issues. While this latter dilemma is a common one for policy makers internationally, the former is particular to Ireland.

Ireland is heralded as one of the economic successes of the 1990s and has been characterised as a Celtic Tiger. The Irish economy has grown by an average of 8 per cent a year over the past six years and growth 2000 has accelerated. This economic growth has brought with it a number of new challenges. The unemployment level has plummeted, dropping from 17 per cent in 1994 to less than 4 per cent at current estimates for 2000. Purchasing power has increased and there has been an associated increase in demand for home and car ownership – indicators of economic boom. Increased consumerism has also led to a rise in inflation, which is a cause of concern to a number of economists.

The increased purchasing power has taken planners by surprise. There has been a lag in the growth of housing stock which has led to an increase in the cost of all housing, particularly in the Dublin region. This is forcing many young couples to move out into the surrounding counties, from where they must travel to employment in the capital city. The rail and road infrastructure is unable to meet these new demands. Ireland has moved from a situation of net emigration in the early 1990s to one of net immigration. This has also come as a surprise. Despite the increase in immigration, labour shortages still exist and have led to delays in infra-structural development bringing quality of life issues to the fore of political debate.

It is an exciting time to be involved in early childhood education in Ireland. For most of the twentieth century, unless attending classes in formal primary education, the care and education of young children was the private responsibility of the family. There has always been a number of private providers in the sector such as Montessori or Froebel pre-school services. However, they were only available to a small number of, in the main, privileged children. By the 1970s a growing number of private providers and voluntary groups began to emerge to make play-based provision available in the private and not-for-profit sectors. This growth in playgroups and Irish-medium pre-schools, along with a modest growth in crèche or full day-care facilities, reflected similar growth in the UK at the time. Unlike the UK however, Ireland did not have a system of nursery schools or classes within the mainstream education system. State responsibility for the education of young children was through the junior classes of the state primary, or national, school system. In certain exceptional circumstances where, for instance, there was concern about the welfare of the child or where a child had special needs, the state did provide some support for young children. Such support was limited to urban areas, to children of three-years or older and generally mediated through the Department of Health (Hayes, 1995).

THE CONTEXT

The situation began to change in the 1990s when a variety of

different lobby and interest groups converged in their calls for increased support for families and their young children. In the main policy was progressed by two separate strands, the recognition of the value of quality early childhood education for children at risk of school failure; and the childcare needs of working parents.

As the debate on childcare became more focussed and influential, the role of early education within the educational system, particularly in relation to children at risk of school failure, began to enter into policy debate. Education holds a very important place in policy development. Primary, secondary and third level education is free of fees to all children. Although the compulsory school age is six years, government statistics indicate that 57 per cent of Irish four-year-olds and 99 per cent of Irish five-year-olds attend primary school.

The Department of Education has funded a special early intervention project, the Rutland Street Project, since 1969. It has also grant aided a number of pre-school groups for young Traveller children. In 1994 the Department of Education and Science initiated a pre-school intervention pilot project known as the Early Start. The programme was designed to be a preventative rather than a remedial intervention. This project saw the establishment of eight pre-school classes for three-year-old children in eight disadvantaged regions. The following year this number was augmented to forty classes catering for 1,700 three-year-old children. All Early Start classes are located in designated disadvantaged primary schools and are staffed by primary teachers with the assistance of childcare workers.

While the value of early education to disadvantaged children is still influential in policy development, the main engine driving Irish government policy on early childhood education in the year 2000 was the equality agenda. While this fact owes something to the strength of the women's movement in Ireland, it owes more to the labour market shortages brought about by our current economic progress and success.

One important change that has resulted from Ireland's economic progress is the participation of women in the labour force and the associated demand for early childhood services. In all societies women predominate as the carers of children. In countries providing extensive childcare support women are

more highly represented in the labour force than in countries which do not provide such services. Childcare came on to the agenda in Irish politics when it became clear that the country was facing a critical labour shortage and had a population of well educated women who were unavailable for work because of the lack of affordable, accessible childcare. Female labour market participation rates have risen steeply in Ireland over the last decade. This is particularly the case among young mothers and mothers of young children.

In 1992 female labour force participation was 34.1 per cent and this rose to 39.2 per cent in 1997 (CSO, 1998). Indications are that the participation rate of women, with or without children, continues to rise at a rate in excess of projections with an overall participation rate of 45.9 per cent in the period September to November 1997. A feature of the increased participation of women in the labour force, noted in the National Childcare Strategy (Ireland, 1999) is the participation rate of mothers. Figures from the 1996 Labour Force Survey indicate that 42 per cent of mothers with children under 15 years of age are in employment (28 per cent full-time and 14 per cent part-time). This compares with 24 per cent of mothers with children older than fifteen years (15 per cent full-time and 9 per cent part-time). A further analysis of the data reveals that 29.3 per cent of mothers with a youngest child aged 2-4 years are in full time employment compared with 34 per cent of mothers with a youngest child aged under twenty-four months.

Such findings are at odds with the general expectation. A report for the National Childcare Strategy noted that

[T]he traditional wisdom in Ireland has been that mothers of very young children are most likely to stay out of the labour market, while some mothers who left employment when their children were small are likely to re-enter the labour market as their children come to school going age. (Goodbody, 1998, p. 20)

This view may derive, to some extent, from the view of mothers articulated in the Constitution of Ireland. (Ireland, 1937). Article 41.2.1 of the Constitution states that 'the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the

State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved'. Article 41.2.2 states that 'the State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home'.

While this perspective on family life and the role of the mother is at odds with the reality portrayed by the statistics, it has a firm presence in Ireland. It is also a factor in the first dilemma facing policy makers – how to provide high quality, comprehensive, accessible and affordable early childhood services to children without being seen to favour parents (in reality women) who are working outside the home.

POLICY FORMATION IN IRELAND – THE PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

In analysing the factors contributing to the Irish economic success story commentators have highlighted the importance of the social partnership approach to broad economic and social policy development. Such an approach has been variously perceived as either functional interdependence, bargaining and deal making or solidarity, inclusiveness and participation (O'Donnell, 1998). Irrespective of which view of partnership represents the reality, partnership negotiations have, since 1987, resulted in partnership agreements, between the government, the employers, the unions and latterly the social partners, which outline policy commitments and wage agreements. These agreements have, to date, resulted in a stable industrial climate and a growing economy. In a 1996 report *Strategy into the Twenty-first Century* the National Economic and Social Council characterised social partnership as follows:

- the partnership process involves a combination of *consultation, negotiation and bargaining*;
- the partnership process is heavily dependent on a *shared understanding* of the key mechanisms and relationships in any given policy area;
- the government has a unique role in the partnership process. It provides the arena within which the process operates. It

shares some of its authority with social partners. In some parts of the wider policy process, it actively supports formation of interest organisations;

- the process reflects *inter-dependence* between the partners;
- partnership is characterised by a *problem-solving* approach designed to produce consensus, in which various interest groups address joint problems;
- partnership involves *trade-offs* both between and within interest groups;
- the partnership process involves *different participants* on various agenda items, ranging from national macroeconomic policy to local development. (NESC, 1996)

Getting any new item on to the policy agenda of a country – particularly where it might have ongoing financial implications – is difficult. Getting early childhood education on to the policy agenda has proved very difficult in Ireland. There are a number of reasons for this. In the first place there are permanent items on the agenda, such as health and education, which include children. Secondly, the lack of capacity within the sector has meant that there was no strong, single voice for policymakers to listen to. It has taken the coming together of a variety of sectional interests, in the context of partnership agreements at a time when the economy needed to recruit women into the labour market, to make an impact. The agents in the pressure have included women, employers, employees and their unions, child advocates and, to some extent, the sector itself.

As well as developing in the context of partnership negotiations, policy development on early childhood education is also occurring in response to a variety of international and other national and local influences. At the international level, the influencing factors include the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), ratified by Ireland in 1992, and the EU Quality Targets in Services for Young Children (1996).

Nationally there have been a number of policy reports recently published of relevance to early childhood education. These include *The National Anti-Poverty Strategy* (1996); *The Report of the Commission on the Family* (1998); *The Report on the National Forum for Early Childhood Education* (1998); *The National Childcare Strategy* (1999); *The White*

Paper on Early Childhood Education (1999); *The White Paper on Lifelong Learning* (2000) and *The National Children's Strategy* (2000). Other national reports of importance include *Partnership 2000 for Inclusion, Employment and Competitiveness* (1997), *The Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* (2000) and *The National Development Plan, 2000-2006* (2000).

The partnership process has been central to identifying early childhood education as a policy issue. Tracking the components of different agreements since 1987, one first encounters early education (under education policy) and childcare (under equality policy) in the 1997 agreement, *Partnership 2000*. The fact that the same policy issue, early childhood education, appears in two policy areas is one of the features of policy development in early childhood education in Ireland.

POLICY DEVELOPMENTS –THE EQUALITY ENGINE

As part of the national partnership agreement, *Partnership 2000*, in the context of equality, an Expert Working Group on Childcare (EWG) was established in 1997. The terms of reference were to develop a strategy 'which would integrate the different strands of the current arrangements for the development and delivery of childcare and early educational services'. (p. iv). The definition of childcare agreed was:

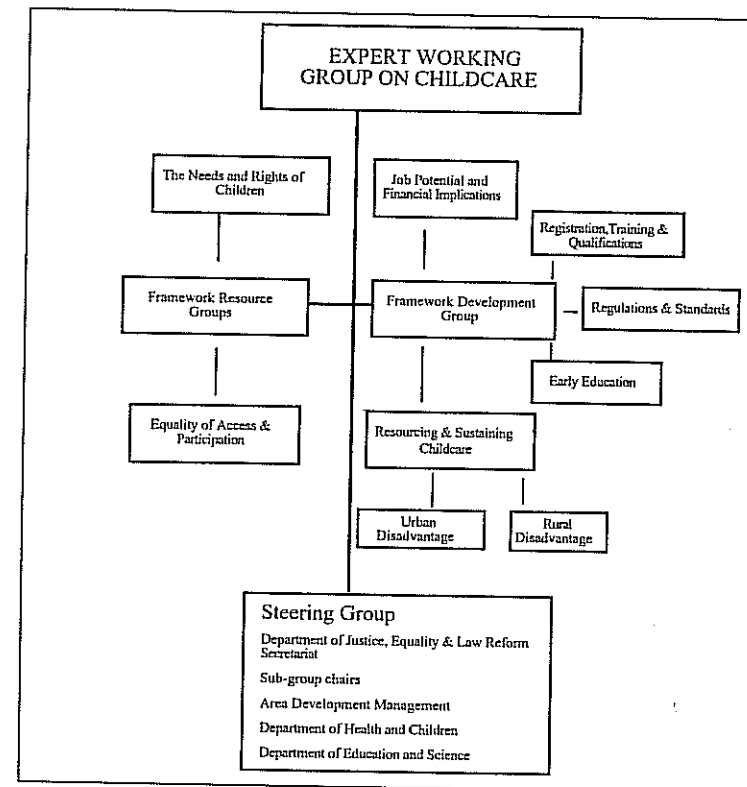
Services offering care, education and socialisation opportunities for the benefit of children, parents, employers and the wider community. Thus, services such as pre-schools, naíonraí (Irish medium playgroups), day-care services, crèches, playgroups, childminding and after-school groups are included, but schools (primary, secondary and special) and residential centres for children are excluded. (p. xxiii)

The group was chaired by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. Although deriving from an equality agenda, the EWG did identify a number of key considerations, which were to guide policy development. These included:

- agreement that the needs and rights of children should be a primary consideration
- recognition that the terms of reference of the group were not directed to parents who choose to care for their own children and that the needs of such parents may require a different policy solution
- the need to meet EU requirements for Employment Guidelines and Structural Funds
- the desirability of building on existing structures and services for delivery of childcare services, in a cost efficient partnership approach
- the need to develop childcare as a legitimate business and the consequent concept of 'receipted expenditure' which is fundamental to the Expert Working Group's recommendations for development of the sector (p. iv).

Although the first consideration noted is for the needs and rights of the child, it is the second consideration above which has presented a difficulty with respect to the full implementation of the policy proposed by the EWG. In restricting actions to those services meeting the needs of working parents specifically, it excludes the possibility of an integrated approach. This has emerged as a real blockage to finalising a cohesive, integrated policy for early childhood education. Government is loath to address early childhood education developments unless this is done in a way that does not discriminate against women who choose to remain at home to care for their children full-time. This is one of two central dilemmas to be faced in policy making in this sector and is one of the weak features of an equality driven, labour market participation approach to policy making in early childhood education.

The working methods of the EWG are outlined below at Figure 1.



The final, agreed report was published in February 1999 and proposed a comprehensive, seven year strategy for the management and development of the childcare sector. The report made twenty-seven recommendations. However, the key recommendations are those which focus on the management of the strategy and on stimulating supply and supporting demand in the sector. The report recommends the following six supply side measures and five demand side measures.

Stimulating Supply

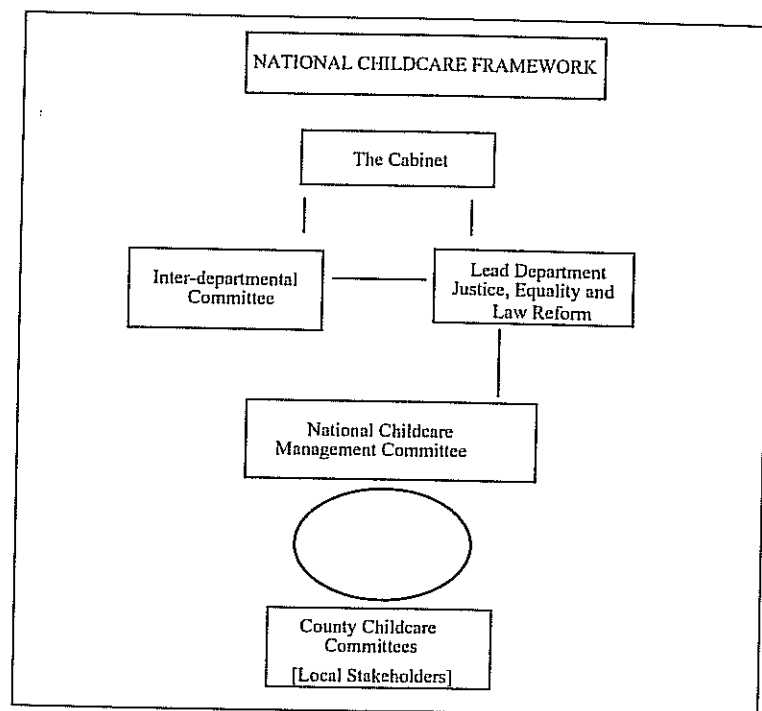
- Capital grants/relief for providers

- Tax allowance for childminders/family daycare providers
- Employment encouragement grants
- Tax relief for employers investing in childcare
- Funding for local level measures – including out-of-school provision
- Improved local authority planning guidelines

Support Demand

- Childcare subsidies to low income families
- Improvements in Family Income Supplement
- Increased ceilings for Lone Parent Payment
- Personal Tax Relief on receipted expenses
- Removal of the treatment of childcare as Benefit in Kind

In order to further these recommendations the report proposed the management framework for national and local level outlined in Figure 2 below.



To date a National Childcare Co-ordinating Committee (NCCC) has been established which reports to the inter-departmental group. The NCCC is not a permanent committee, as envisaged in the National Children's Strategy report. Rather it meets on three or four occasions annually and is chaired by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. It has a wide membership and has more of an information sharing function than a management function. In addition the NCCC has a number of sub-committees considering issues of training and manpower planning. These committees meet and conduct their work as necessary.

At county level a number of County Childcare Committees (CCC) have been formed although they have not yet begun to implement local strategy. The NCCC is anxious to ensure that all stakeholders in the sector are included within the membership of the CCCs. One area of difficulty, because of the centralised organisation and management, may be the representation of the education sector which has no regional or local education mechanism through which to nominate representatives. Such a lack may weaken the development of an integrated policy on early childhood education.

In relation to the measures identified by the Expert Working Group as needing immediate action, most progress has been made on the supply side measures.

There has been significant investment in the sector under the National Development Plan, with almost £300m allocated in capital and staffing grants for 2000-2006. The department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform has been given functional responsibility for the development of the childcare sector under the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness. The department also has responsibility for decisions regarding the distribution of the majority of funds. They do this in co-operation with Area Development Management Ltd.(ADM), a registered company appointed by government to distribute EU and exchequer funds nationally under a number of different programmes including the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006.

Policy makers have, however, been less successful in addressing the demand side measures, only one of which – the Benefit in Kind measure, has been implemented. There has been a reluctance to meet the demand side supports in the way

proposed by the National Childcare Strategy. This reflects, in part at least, the fact that they relate specifically to the childcare needs of working parents only and any measures brought in could be seen as discriminating against women who remain at home to care for their children. One of the areas of particular tension currently is whether there should be a specific childcare payment to parents using childcare or an increase in universal child benefit. Most commentators consider the latter as being of little value to developing early childhood services and it was rejected as a mechanism by the EWG. In line with commitments in the most recent partnership agreement – *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* – policy makers are reviewing ways to make access to affordable, quality services a reality for those parents who need it while at the same time ensuring that they are not seen to discriminate against women in the home.

POLICY DEVELOPMENT – THE EDUCATION ENGINE

During the development process leading to the National Childcare Strategy, the Department of Education hosted a separate National Forum on Early Childhood Education. The aim of this forum was to bring together all those in the sector to identify how best to move forward with policy for early education. The age range covered by the term early childhood education was identified as birth to six years. The drive behind the forum was the enhancement of the early educational experiences of young children prior to entry into the primary school. Unlike the National Childcare Strategy it was not focused on developing services for parents or the market place.

In a background paper to the forum (Coolahan, 1998) it was noted that

[T]he Secretariat of the National Forum regards early childhood education as based on a number of child development and educational considerations whose aim is to provide opportunities for the development of the child's personality. Though child development is wider than education alone, early development programming is seen by

the Department of Education as a major supportive strategy in its effort towards educational reform. The improved quality of children coming into the primary education system and the prior attainment of high levels of social and cognitive skills can be a guarantee of real progress in the crucial early years of primary school when numeracy and literacy are acquired. Investment in early development and education is also seen by the Department of Education as a response to the growing marginalisation of certain categories of children within the Irish economy and hence to their capacity to benefit from education. (pp. 157-159)

The above illustrates a focus on early childhood education which emphasises its role as a preparation for primary school, a preparation which can have differentially positive effects on those children at risk of later school failure. The background paper identified a number of tasks for the forum, including the status of early childhood education and key guidelines of approach, curricular issues, styles of pedagogy and pupil-teacher relationships. A central concern noted was how best to promote early childhood education in situations of severe, socio-economic disadvantage and how best to support young children with special needs.

The forum report did not make specific recommendations but laid the foundation for the White Paper on Early Childhood Education – *Ready to Learn* – which was published in 1999. The focus of this report was the broad early educational needs of young children, birth to six years of age. Needs are considered across a wide spectrum of settings. These include – the development needs of very young children in the home; the supports necessary for parents concerning how best to help their children learn; the wide range of supports necessary for private providers and voluntary /community groups and the need to develop a strategy to enhance the quality of infant education in primary school. The White Paper recognises that

A number of factors combine to make the development of appropriate structures in the early childhood education area a difficult task. These include the comparative lack of development in the early childhood education area, the wide range of proposals in the White Paper and the need to deal

with co-ordination problems and other weaknesses of the existing system. (p. 129)

The issue of co-ordination has been highlighted by all reports published in this policy area. The White Paper is no exception and it proposes a new structure to facilitate co-ordination at three levels: within the Department of Education and Science, between departments, agencies and providers, and at a local level. To further these proposals the department has been allocated £74m under the National Development Plan.

A number of difficulties face the Department of Education and Science in achieving its objectives. In the first place, it is a centralised department with no departmental representation at local level; this will compromise co-ordination opportunities. The recommendations of the National Childcare Strategy offer a framework for this level of co-ordination through the county childcare committees. If the departments co-operate – as they recognise is essential – there is a real likelihood of improvement in co-ordination with an associated improvement in the quality of services available to children. Such co-operation is more likely now that the Departments of Education and Science, Health and Children, and Social, Community and Family Affairs are all members of the inter-departmental group to which the NCCC reports.

While the resolution to the difficulties identified in both the White Paper and the National Childcare Strategy are outlined in structural terms, there is a deeper and a more abstract difficulty evident in the subtext of the different policy documents. This is the second central dilemma for policy development in early childhood education in Ireland at the moment – the perceived division between care and education at policy making level. It is articulated explicitly in the White Paper where it is observed that

The focus of the Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group is on childcare in general, whereas this White Paper deals specifically with early childhood education. However, the need for seamless provision of both early education and childcare is a continuing theme of the White Paper. The structure devised must, therefore, facilitate provision of care and education in an integrated manner and must enable co-ordination of strategy and exchange of information between the main players. (p. 131)

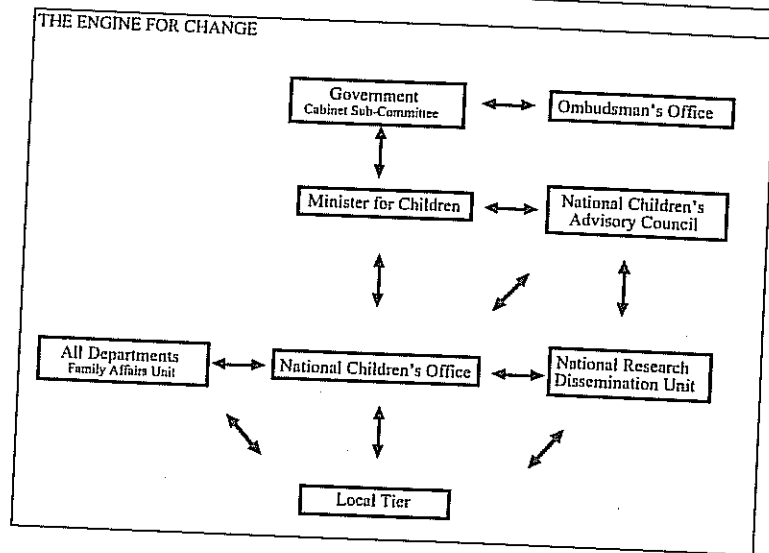
Notwithstanding the acknowledgement that cross-departmental co-operation is necessary to progress policy in early childhood education, the strong departmental differences that exist with respect to mechanisms for progressing policy are well recognised. In this regard, however, a proposal that the Department of the Taoiseach (the Irish Prime Minister), as the lead government department, might be best placed to lead developments in this complex policy area for the short term (Hayes, 1995, 1998) has been rejected in the White Paper.

The Forum considered that co-ordination would be best served by allocating a lead role to a single organisation ... Views differed on the choice of an appropriate home for such a unit and several options were considered. Locating the unit in the Department of the Taoiseach would place early education in the spotlight and at the centre of power and influence. However, since this particular department had little engagement or experience in the provision of services to families and children such a move was seen as a short-term option. (p. 130)

As an alternative the Department of Education and Science was identified as the most appropriate lead department.

From the above review, it is clear that there has been much progress in developing the early childhood education sector in Ireland over the last few years, particularly in relation to funding and supply. However, the fact that policy is being driven by different agendas is hindering the development of an integrated policy for the support of high quality early childhood services for all young children.

A recent, broader policy initiative may hold the resolution to bringing about a coherent and integrated national policy for early childhood education. This is the newly launched National Children's Strategy. This strategy is explicitly driven by the rights and needs of the child and was developed, in part, as a result of the report of the UN Committee on Children's Rights in their concluding comments to Ireland. The structures proposed under this strategy will be charged with ensuring that children have a voice in policy and practice, targeting special groups as necessary and bringing coherence to services for children.



The proposed National Children's Office will have a role in calling different departments together on complex crosscutting issues, such as early childhood education, with a view to developing and implementing integrated policy. Its potential in this specific area was noted in the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness*. In this way it may bring about the cohesion necessary to provide national leadership in the context of meeting local needs which has so far been absent. However, the National Children's Office is part of the portfolio of the Minister of State for Children rather than a full Minister. The power of the former is less than that of the latter and this may limit the practical influence of the office.

PROVISION

Having spent so much time on policy, I would like now to turn, very briefly, to the other issues for discussion – provision and practice.

At the last census, in 1996, there were 305,557 children in Ireland under the age of six years (CSO, 1997). Division by age is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Number of Children aged 0-6 years in Ireland

	0	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Number	48,854	48,574	49,011	50,563	53,392	55,163	305,557
Percentage	15.98	15.89	16.04	16.55	17.47	18.05	99.98

Source: Census of Population 1996

In the main, early childhood services, with the exception of the junior classes of the primary school, have developed in an ad hoc manner. Provision takes a variety of forms and there is limited data on numbers of services or numbers of children attending. The following forms of care for children under six are the most widespread:

- *Parental Care*: The family, almost always the mother, looks after the child at home. This is the most common arrangement, particularly for children up to the age of two years. (ESRI, 1998)
- *Informal Care*: Parents use other family members or friends on a voluntary basis; this represents between 5-10 per cent of children 0-2 years. (ibid)
- *Childminding/Family Day-care*: The child is looked after in the home of the carer. Under the Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations, 1996 such services must notify the health boards of their existence when they care for three or more children under the age of six years – excluding their own. As a result, there are no accurate figures for the number of childminders in Ireland
- *Early Primary Education (Infant Classes)*: educationally based services within the primary school. Some 57 per cent of four year olds and 99 per cent of five year olds attend school.
- *Special Pre-school Initiatives*: A small number of 3-5 year olds attend Department of Education and Science supported pre-school services. These include the Early Start classes and pre-school classes for Traveller children.
- *Social Service Nurseries*: The Department of Health and Children grant aid a small number of pre-school services for children who are considered to be 'at risk' through circumstances of social or economic disadvantage.

- *Private Nurseries/ Creches*: This is private sector. In 1998 there were approximately 400 nurseries, catering for approximately 13,000 children aged between 0-6 years registered with the National Children's Nursery Association.
- *Playgroups*: Playgroups offer care and education, mainly on a sessional basis, to children aged 3-5 years. It is the most widespread form of early childhood education. Some 80 per cent of playgroups are privately run.
- *Naíonraí*: These are Irish language playgroups. In 1998 there were 254 naíonraí operating. They offer services to children aged 3-5 years.
- *Other*: There are a number of Montessori and Steiner groups operating throughout Ireland. They mainly provide a sessional service to children aged 3-5 years.

Data on the use of different services is very difficult to find in Ireland. A 1994 report (McKenna) reviewed the distribution of children 0-6 by type of early childhood service (see Table 2).

Table 2: Distribution of Children 0-6 by type of care/education*

Cohort	0-1	1-2	2-3	3-4	4-5	5-6	Total
Early primary	53,044	52,947	52,722	56,086	58,944	60,321	334,064
Social Services				764	32,708	59,466	92,938
							28%
Private nurseries	875	1,662	1,925	1,925	1,925	438	8,750
							2.6%
P/groups Naíonraí	825	1,856	1,856	1,856	1,856		8,250
							2.5%
Work based			4,465	8,931	8,931		22,327
							6.7%
	68	129	150	150	150	34	680
							0.2%
TOTAL	1,768	3,647	8,396	13,626	45,570	59,938	132,945
	3.3%	7%	16%	24%	77.3%	99%	39.8%

Source: McKenna, A. (1994) * (excluding parents, relatives and childminders)

McKenna compiled the data on the basis of statistics available from different organisations. Her data does not include information on informal childcare arrangements or on the use of childminding/family day-care. She found that 3.3 per cent of 0-1 year olds; 7 per cent 1-2 year olds; 16 per cent 2-3 year olds; 24 per cent of 3-4 year olds; 77.3 per cent of 4-5 year olds and 99 per cent of 5-6 year olds were in some form of early childhood education at the time of the study. The largest sector, numerically for children under six years, was that of primary school (28 per cent) reflecting the fact that a high proportion of Irish four and five-year olds attend school.

A more recent study (ESRI, 1998) found that, overall, the most widely used form of childcare among mothers working outside the home is childminding in the minder's own home (see Tables 3a and 3b).

Table 3a: Percentage Usage of Childcare by Maternal Employment Status (Youngest 0-4)

Type of childcare	Mother at home	Mother at work – f/t	Mother at work – p/t	Mother unemployed	All
No paid childcare	82	22	47	75	62
Nursery/	16	14	21	25	17
pre-school*	17^	24^	29^		21^
Minder in her home	1	45	18		14
Minder in child's home		11	9		4
Paid relative		8	5		3
N	376	155	106	26	663

*The ESRI survey did not distinguish between full day services and sessional services

^Used nursery/pre-school and other, not specified, childcare
Source: ESRI (1997)

Table 3b: Percentage Usage of childcare by Maternal Employment Status (Youngest 5-9)

Type of childcare	Mother at home	Mother at work – f/t	Mother at work – p/t	Mother unemployed	All
No paid childcare	99	68	84	94	91
Nursery/pre-school			1		
Minder in her home		10	8		3
Minder in child's home	1	19	3		5
Paid relative		3	4	6	1
N	309	89	82	13	495

Source: ESRI (1997) – Mothers youngest child 5-9 years

This survey was the first national survey of childcare usage which gathered data from parents themselves. While the survey had a number of limitations – for instance, it did not distinguish between full time and part time care arrangements and the ages were banded rather than by year – it provides the first picture of childcare usage at a time when female labour market participation rates were just beginning to rise significantly.

More specific detail on provision and cost of early childhood education settings will be available shortly. A census of centre-based early childhood service is currently underway in Ireland. It is being funded through the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and directed by Area Development Management Ltd. To date data has been published for eighteen counties but national data is still incomplete. The Census will yield information on the quantity and quality of centre-based provision; numbers of children attending; the staffing levels; costs to parents and the cost of running the service; availability of service and demand.

PRACTICE

There has been very little research into what actually happens in early childhood education settings in Ireland. What information does exist relates primarily to children in the 3-6 year age range. There is virtually no research into the experiences of the very young child.

Most of the research that has been carried out has been survey rather than observational in nature. However, recent years have seen a developing interest in observational research (Douglas, 1993; Hickey, 1997; Hayes, O'Flaherty & Kernan, 1997). Hayes et al studied the experiences of four-year olds in both primary schools and pre-school settings nationally. Results indicate that children attending school settings are more likely to be in whole group structures (86.5 per cent) than children attending pre-schools (70 per cent) with whole group size being considerably smaller in pre-school settings. Children in school settings were observed in pre-academic activities (29 per cent) more frequently than in any other activity while those in pre-school settings were observed most frequently in physical activities (29 per cent). The range of activities observed in pre-school settings was greater than in schools. In addition there was more child-child interaction observed in pre-school settings with more teacher directed activities observed in schools. A series of studies carried out in the Cork region of Ireland (Douglas, 1993) also found low levels of child-child interactions in primary school settings but noted that the level of such interactions observed in general was low. An INTO survey (1995) of teachers of junior infants (four year-olds) found that teachers' preferred styles were often constrained by situational factors such as overcrowding and poorly equipped classrooms.

Curriculum

For children attending the infant classes of the primary schools there is a National Curriculum. This curriculum was developed in 1971 and has been recently revised. The aims of the primary curriculum are to:

- enable the child to live a full life as a child and to realise his or her potential as a unique individual
- enable the child to develop as a social being through living

and co-operating with others and so contribute to the good of society

- prepare the child for further education and lifelong learning.

The curriculum is designed to nurture the child in all dimensions of his or her life – spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical. In order to realise these aims 'the curriculum outlines a detailed and structured framework of content that is comprehensive and flexible. It promotes the active involvement of children in a learning process that is imaginative and stimulating. Its overall vision is to enable children to meet, with self-confidence and assurance, the demands of life both now and in the future' (Department of Education and Science, 1999, p. 6). It is, in the main, a subject-based curriculum covering English and Irish language; mathematics; social, environmental and scientific education; arts education; physical education; social, personal and health education and religious education.

There is no curriculum or curricular guidelines for early years services outside the formal school system in Ireland. Some settings provide a particular programme such as Montessori or High/Scope while others follow a broad play-based curricular approach. There have been a number of guides to good practice published by voluntary organisations in an effort to address issues of quality in practice with their members (French, 2000).

Training

Training is recognised as a key component of quality early childhood education. The regulations governing early childhood settings (1996) – excluding provision within the primary school sector – focus primarily on health and safety issues. There are no training requirements for early education staff specified in the regulations, they do however recommend that the service be provided by a competent adult.

All teachers teaching in the primary school system are required to complete a three-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) training programme. Teacher training is carried out in the context of the National Curriculum and there are currently in-service courses being offered to teachers to allow for

appropriate implementation of the revised curriculum. The BEd qualification allows teachers to teach children from 4-12 years of age.

There are a wide range of childcare training courses available in Ireland. They vary from a one year national certificate programme offered at a number of Colleges of Further Education and training centres through to a three year degree programme offered at the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). In addition, the National University of Ireland, Cork offers a three year BA in Early Childhood Studies and there is specialist training to degree level available in, for instance, the Montessori method.

The Certification sub-group of the NCCC is currently working – with technical assistance from the DIT's Centre for Social and Educational Research (CSER) – on a training and qualifications framework for the early years sector in Ireland. The project is building on the work of a previous training project funded under the EU New Opportunities for Women initiative (DIT/NOW 1999). It is aimed at providing a flexible and accessible route to training from foundation to degree level with associated career options. This initiative is also gathering data nationally, from parents and providers, on the values and principles that should underpin early childhood services. A report on this aspect of the work will be available in 2001.

There is a need for more systematic research into practice in early childhood education in Ireland. While it is the aspiration of most providers – and the concern of most parents – that settings provide maximum opportunity for high quality experiences for young children there has been relatively little debate about what this might look like. As early childhood education policy develops and the supply of services improves it is anticipated that greater attention will be given to these important issues.

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