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Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland: Getting it Right for Children

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Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland: Getting it Right for Children

Proceedings of

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FOREWORD

The Centre for Social and Educational Research (CSER) at the Dubin Insitute of Technology has a long track record as an independent research and policy body. A key research focus has been Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) which continues to attract international policy attention reflecting growing understanding of its pivotal role in providing all children with an equal start in life, improving child outcomes, reducing child poverty, enhancing gender equality, maintaining and sustaining economic growth and enhancing social cohesion. Ireland's ratification of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (1992), triggered a similar evolution in child policy, strengthened through the *National Children's Strategy* (2000) and the establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC) (2006).

The impetus for the research project ***'Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland: Towards a Rights-based Policy Approach'***, funded by the Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences [IRCHSS], emerged from our analysis that the basis for childare policy development in Ireland continues to be predominantly economic. Substantial investment and financial incentives, aimed at increasing childcare capacity, have been prompted by unprecedented social, economic and demographic changes rather than as a response to the rights and needs of children. The literature suggests that such a market-led approach may effectively undermine the democratic rights of children and fail to ensure equality of access to quality services (Moss, 2006). As such, it contrasts with 'rights-based' policy trends pursued elsewhere in Europe, which position ECEC as a public good and responsibility. These differences highlight a tension between the aims and assumptions of Irish government ECEC policy, which requires rigorous consideration and debate.

The central focus of the research project is a comprehensive review and analysis of current ECEC policy. Using the life cycle approach (NESC, 2005) as its starting point, it will identify the extent to which Irish policy coincides with international policy trends. The research comprises four pillars:

- a comprehensive literature review of contemporary early childhood development and ECCE policy in an international context;
- a critical analysis of Irish ECCE policy identifying its discursive foundations;
- a wide-ranging survey of ECCE stakeholders to identify barriers and constraints to implementation of a rights-based, child-centred approach to ECCE in Ireland;
- and the development of a comprehensive, over-arching rights-based policy model for the sector.

As part of its work the research team at the CSER hosts regular seminars on ECEC Policy Issues. Its second seminar in this policy series was held in January 2008 and focused attention on politics and early childhood from two very different perspectives. In the first presentation Professor Peter Moss from the Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London argued the case for bringing politics back into the nursery. In his paper *'Beyond childcare, markets and technical practice – or repoliticising early childhood'* he makes a strong case for refocusing the policy attention on childcare away from the largely technical questions of 'what works' towards more ethical and political questions such as 'what is our image of the child' and 'what are ECCE services for?' By contrast the second paper *'Irish Approaches to ECCE – keeping politics out of the nursery'* presented by Maura Adshead and Gerardine Neylon, Department of Politics and Public Administration,

University of Limerick took a comprehensive look at mainstream Irish politics and sought to explain the current policy focus from the analysis provided.

Both papers challenged participants to consider the meaning and implication of democratic political practice within an early years context at both the societal and individual level. The seminar was intended to generate debate and this it did in good measure. I would like to thank the key speakers for their provocative presentations, which acted as an excellent discussion platform.

It gives me great pleasure to introduce the proceedings of the January 2008 seminar.

Dr Nóirín Hayes
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Research Project Principle Investigator

October 2008

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BEYOND CHILDCARE, MARKETS AND TECHNICAL PRACTICE – OR REPOLITICISING EARLY CHILDHOOD

Peter Moss

ABSTRACT

The English-speaking world is locked into a way of thinking and practicing early childhood services: a separation of childcare and education, childcare as a marketised private commodity, strong systems of managerial regulation, practitioners and researchers as technicians, the search for the one correct way ('what works?'). This presentation will argue that early childhood, like education, is first and foremost a political subject not a technical problem, facing society with alternatives and collective choices. It will explore one of the alternatives, early childhood services working with an inclusive and holistic concept of pedagogy (education-in-its-broadest sense), with democracy as a core value and provided as a universal entitlement and a public responsibility. This has clear implications for provision and providers, the workforce and the role of research.

> *A democratic society is precisely one in which the purpose of education is not given but is a constant topic for discussion and deliberation…The current climate in many Western countries has made it increasingly difficult to have a democratic discussion about the purposes of education…What is needed, in other words, is an acknowledgement of the fact that education is a moral practice, rather than a technical or technological one*
>
> (Biersta, 2007, pp.18,10)

The primary questions facing us in early childhood education and care (ECEC) today are, in my view, not about means and methods; they are not technical questions of the 'what works?' variety. They are political and ethical questions about purposes and understandings; 'what is our image of the child?', 'what do we mean by care and education?' 'what are ECEC services for?' Instead of searching for the one 'evidence based' answer to the 'what works?' question, our starting point should be the many alternative purposes and understandings both in education in general and in ECEC in particular, requiring collective political choices through democratic discussion, deliberation and decision making. In this paper, I want to explore two alternatives for ECEC policy and services, involving different purposes and understandings - whilst acknowledging that there are others available for consideration. The challenge facing democratic societies, as Gert Biersta says, is to make the purpose, and therefore the means of implementing purpose, into "a constant topic for discussion and deliberation".

I have termed the two approaches 'market standardisation' and 'democratic experimentalism'. 'Market standardisation' is the dominant ECEC approach in the English-language world

today. It is characterised by a **split** system of services and an understanding of ECEC as, first and foremost, **technical** practice to achieve predetermined (and standardised) outcomes (discussed further below); **marketisation** of services that emphasises a purchaser (parent)/provider relationship, competition and individual choice; and an increasing **standardisation** through detailed procedures and goals (these may take various forms, ranging from detailed state-prescribed curricula and regulations through to voluntary systems of accreditation, best practice, quality control or other 'benchmarking' technologies).

There is an apparent contradiction between marketisation and standardisation, between a rhetoric of choice and diversity on the one hand and an emphasis on tight governing of practice and outcome on the other. But while there is a certain tension here, there are reasons for these apparently strange bedfellows. Writing about education, Michael Apple has suggested that this mix reflects a potent coalition of the Right, bringing together neoliberalism, with its belief in markets and a vision of the weak state, and neoconservatives, with a "vision of the strong state in certain areas…[especially] over standards, values and conduct, and over what knowledge should be passed to future generations" (Apple, 1996, p.29). He notes that the rightist coalition has been able "to connect the emphasis on traditional knowledge and values, authority, standards, and national identity of the neoconservatives…with the emphasis on the extension of market-driven principles into all areas of our society, as advocated by neoliberals" (ibid., p.31)

A feature of market standardisation specific to the ECEC field is the way the system is split, both conceptually and structurally, three ways:

- 'childcare', seen as being for working parents and treated as a private commodity traded in the market between purchasers (parents) and providers, the role of the state being limited to market regulation and rectifying market failure, for example by subsidising lower income families who otherwise could not afford to purchase services;
- targeted services, seen as being for poor families, funded by the state as a means of ameliorating a raft of social problems;
- 'early education' for children aged 3 or 4 up to school age, seen increasingly as a public good and general entitlement, but positioned as the junior partner to compulsory schooling, offering shorter hours and/or location within primary school, understood as a means of preparation for school proper and for bolstering school performance.

Despite years of discussion about the inseparability of 'care' and 'education' (and indeed of other purposes such as 'family support'), and despite politicians increasingly talking this talk, market standardisation system continue to be based on the care/education split. This reflects a certain atomistic way of thinking at the heart of the 'market standardisation' approach, a propensity to govern life and people by separating them into component parts, which can be calculated, differentiated and managed. It enables, too, a line to be maintained between private responsibility (childcare) and public responsibility (education), the former growing as parental employment grows, the latter limited to a modest 'schoolification' of children over 3 years of age.

The split in the system is, in part, conceptual: it is about how we think, talk and understand services. But it is also structural. Split systems have split structures: typically different administrations; different services with different functions and users; different access, funding and cost to parents; and different workforces. In the latter case, there is typically a small

group of well educated and paid teachers, working mainly in early education, and a large and growing body of poorly educated and poorly paid 'childcare workers', working mainly in childcare services, whether in nurseries or as family day carers. The OECD *Starting Strong* report describes this situation clearly and succinctly: "Low status, low rates of pay and high staff turnover are features of child care positions. Trade union representation for child care workers does not exist…Work conditions for teachers are much better" (OECD, 2006).

A split system is dysfunctional and divisive – but very resistant to change. For example, the English government has taken the necessary step of integrating the administration, curriculum and regulation of ECEC services. Yet a decade after responsibility for 'childcare' was moved into education, the English system remains deeply split, both conceptually (we still think and talk about 'childcare' as a commodity to be purchased by working parents, we have 'childcare services', 'childcare workers', a 'childcare' tax credit system) and structurally, with 'childcare' and 'early education' differing on every major structural parameter, including access, funding, type of service and provider and workforce. In short, the 'wicked issues' remain largely untouched.

'Market standardisation' makes technical practice first practice. The ends and purposes are known and taken for granted: services are producers of marketised commodities (e.g. 'childcare' or, these days 'quality childcare') and predetermined outcomes (e.g. developmental and learning goals). The focus, therefore, is on means to efficiently produce commodities and outcomes, on the techniques and methods that will deliver the goods, assuring quality and value for money. In this context, practitioners are technicians applying these techniques and methods – 'human technologies' - to specified ends. Research has an important supporting role of defining and refining effective technologies ('evidence-based practice'). Biersta, once again, catches the spirit:

> On the research side, evidence-based education seems to favor a technocratic model in which it is assumed the only relevant research questions are questions about the effectiveness of educational means and techniques, forgetting, among other things, that what counts as 'effective' crucially depends on judgements about what is educationally desirable (Biersta, 2007, p.5).

Democratic standardisation may dominate the English-language world today, but that does not mean it is inevitable or necessary; it is important to recognise the strong political and economic forces at play without assuming no alternative is available or possible. New Zealand provides an interesting and surprising exception to the general picture, having developed a reform of ECEC services that confronts the split system and the dominance of technical practice. While there are many elements of the market apparent, including a large for-profit sector, New Zealand has also opened up to diversity, most obviously in its innovative early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki.*

New Zealand has developed a national framework, which brings some coherence to the system around issues of equity and access. One ministry (education) is responsible for all ECEC services; there is a single funding system for services (based on direct funding of services rather than parents); a single curriculum; and a single workforce, which by 2012 will consist of early years teachers, educated to graduate level. Underpinning these structures, and perhaps the most radical change of all, New Zealand has an integrative concept that encompasses all services - 'early childhood education' , a broad and holistic concept that covers children, families and communities, a concept of 'education-in-its-broadest-sense' in

which learning and care really are inseparable and connected to many other purposes besides. New Zealand has, in short, understood the need to rethink, as well as restructure, early childhood education and care.

New Zealand's concept of education has much in common with the concept of 'pedagogy' as understood and practiced in many parts of continental Europe. Pedagogy's distinctive identity has frequently been lost in translation, pedagogy and pedagogue usually being translated into English as 'education/science of education' and 'teacher'. It represents

> an approach to work with people in which learning, care, health, general well-being and development are viewed as totally inseparable, a holistic idea summed up in the pedagogical term 'upbringing'. The pedagogue as practitioner sees herself as a person in relationship with the child as a whole person, supporting the child's overall development (Boddy et al., 2005, p.3).

Here is another example of an integrative concept that can underpin movement from a split to an integrated ECEC system. It appears, for example, in the Swedish preschool curriculum, which states that "the preschool should provide children with good pedagogical activities where *care, nurturing and learning together form a coherent whole*" (Swedish curriculum for pre-school, emphasis added).

I want to turn now to consider the second approach to ECEC services: democratic experimentalism. This approach is characterised by: a system **integrated** in concept and structure; **socialisation** (used in the sense of being opposite to marketisation), with a strong emphasis on relationships between citizens (children and adults) and between citizens and society, services as a public responsibility, and values of solidarity and collective choice (democracy); **diversity** of thought, practice and outcome combined with a **coherent** national framework defining certain common entitlements, values and goals; and an understanding of ECEC as, first and foremost, **political and ethical** practice.

Let me explore in more detail the two key concepts in this approach, starting with 'democratic'. The final report of the major OECD thematic review of ECEC policies, *Starting Strong*, recognises the potentiality of ECEC services as sites of democratic practice when it concludes that:

> ECEC systems [should aspire to] support broad learning, participation and democracy…The vision of early childhood services as a life space where educators and families work together to promote the well-being, participation and learning of young children is based on the principle of democratic participation (OECD, 2006, pp.218, 220).

At a national level, the importance of democracy is recognised in the Swedish national preschool curriculum, which states that

> Democracy forms the foundation of the pre-school. For this reason, all pre-school activity should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values (Swedish Ministry of Education and Science, 1998, p.6).

Democracy as a fundamental value is central not only to formal political life but in everyday life and relationships; it is "primarily a mode of associated living…a personal way of individual life:…it signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life" (Dewey, 1939, p.2). From this perspective, ECEC services can be understood as sites of 'everyday democracy', forums or meeting places in civic society, places for the nourishing and practicing of democracy, by children and adults alike. I have written about 'democracy in the nursery' at greater length elsewhere, but here touch on some possibilities for democratic practice including children, parents and educators:

1. **Decision-making:** children and adults can participate in decisions about the purposes, practices and environments of services, on the principle enunciated by John Dewey that "all those who are affected by social institutions must have a share in producing and managing them". There are many examples of people and places working to enhance the participation of children and adults in this way, but one must suffice here. The work of Alison Clark, using the Mosaic approach, a multi-method tool for enabling children's participation, has vividly demonstrated how even the youngest children can be actively engaged in the design of nursery environments (cf. Clark, 2005; Clark and Moss, 2005).

2. **Evaluation:** participatory methods can enable widespread participation, again by children and adults, in deliberating on practice and learning, and its meaning, in short making judgements of value about the pedagogical and other work of the ECEC service. Again to give just one example, pedagogical documentation is now a widely used method of participatory evaluation (for fuller discussions of pedagogical documentation see Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2007; Rinaldi, 2005).

3. **Learning:** some methods of learning, such as a pedagogy of listening (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Rinaldi, 2005) that emphasises children as both individual and group learners involved in the co-construction of knowledge, are intrinsically democratic, unlike those that involve the transmission of predetermined information (what Paulo Freire referred to as the 'banking' system of education, in which facts are deposited by teachers into supposedly empty child minds). Democratic methods of evaluation and learning also mean that the knowledge co-produced in pre-schools (or schools) is shared and owned collectively by the community.

4. **Confronting dominant discourses**, contesting what Foucault terms regimes of truth, which seek to shape our subjectivities and practices through their universal truth claims and their relationship with power. This democratic political activity seeks to make core assumptions and values visible and contestable. Yeatman (1994) refers to it as 'postmodern politics' and offers some examples: a politics of epistemology, contesting modernity's idea of knowledge; a politics of representation, about whose perspectives have legitimacy; and a politics of difference, which contests those groups claiming a privileged position of objectivity on a contested subject. But we could extend the areas opened up to politics, that are re-politicised as legitimate subjects for inclusive political dialogue and contestation: the politics of childhood, about the image of the child, the good life and what we want for our children; the politics of education, about what education can and should be; and the politics of gender, in the nursery and home. These and many other subjects can be the subject of democratic engagement within the early childhood institution, examples of bringing politics into the nursery.

5. **Opening up for change,** through developing a critical approach to what exists and envisioning utopias and turning them into utopian action. For as Foucault also notes, there is a close connection between contesting dominant discourses, thinking differently and change: "as soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult and quite possible"

The concept of 'experimentalism' leads to an idea of innovative services, open to and generating new ideas, new knowledge, new perspectives. The Brazilian social theorist Roberto Unger captures the concept and its relation to democracy when he says that

> The provision of public services must be *an innovative collective practice*, moving forward the qualitative provision of the services themselves. That can no longer happen in our current understanding of efficiency and production by the mechanical transmission of innovation from the top. It can only happen through the organisation of an *experimental collective practice* from below…
>
> Democracy is not just one more terrain for the institutional innovation that I advocate. It is the most important terrain (Unger, 2005, p.179).

It is through democracy, through people in all their diversity being able to participate and bring their ideas and experience to the table, through the encounters with difference that arise, that innovation happens. Of course, there may still be some need for some predetermined outcomes, certain values and goals that democratically elected government determines are needed. But there should, and can be, much space left over for the unexpected, the surprising, the amazing.

If ECEC services in market standardisation are understood as factories or production units where technologies can be brought to bear to produce predetermined outcomes, in 'democratic experimentalism' they are understood very differently: as a public forum and cooperative workshop. As a public forum, the ECEC service is a public responsibility and space for all children and families (not just for children whose parents have jobs or families labelled as disadvantaged), a place of encounter between citizens - younger and older – imbued with democratic values and practices. And as a cooperative workshop, an ECEC service has the potential of many purposes, projects and possibilities – social, cultural, political, ethical, economic, aesthetic etc etc. Here are just a few, to which many more could be added:

- Collective production of knowledges, values and identities (education in its broadest sense)
- Collective researching, e.g. children's learning processes, 'outcomes'
- Building solidarity and offering support
- Cultural sustainability and renewal
- Economic development and activity
- Promotion of gender and other equalities
- Practice of democracy and active citizenship.

Thinking of ECEC services in this way – as workshops of unlimited potential - transcends the dualism of care/education, the limited and limiting concept of ECEC services.

The practitioner in the ECEC service understood in this way is, herself or himself, understood not as a technician whose main purpose is the application of 'human technologies', but as a democratic and reflective professional, who is:

- a critical thinking
- a researcher
- an experimenter
- a co-constructor of meaning, identity and values – always in relation with others.

This idea of the practitioner can be found in these words of Aldo Fortunati, from the Italian commune of San Miniato, writing in his book (note the title well, for it encapsulates the idea of ECEC as a democratic practice) "The education of young children as a community project".

> [The early childhood worker needs to be] more attentive to creating possibilities than pursuing predefined goals… [to be] removed from the fallacy of certainties, [assuming instead] responsibility to choose, experiment, discuss, reflect and change, focusing on the organisation of opportunities rather than the anxiety of pursuing outcomes, and maintaining in her work the pleasure of amazement and wonder (Fortunati, 2006, p.37).

Research has a distinctive role in 'democratic experimentalism', with a strong emphasis on knowledge acquired through reflective experimentation, and widespread participation in this process – by children as well as adults, by practitioners and parents as well as academics. Research can and should take place as much in the classroom and by teachers as in the university and by 'academics'. As Carlina Rinaldi from Reggio Emilia puts it:

> The word 'research', in this sense, leaves – or rather, demands to come out of – the scientific laboratories, thus ceasing to be a privilege of the few (in universities and other designated places) to become the stance, the attitude with which teachers approach the sense and meaning of life (Rinaldi, 2005, p.148).

Research should also be concerned with ends as well as means, with critical thinking and reconceptualisation

> [Dewey argued] we should not only be experimental with respect to means but also with respect to ends and the interpretation of the problems we address. It is only along these lines that inquiry in the social domain can help us find not only whether what we desire is achievable but also whether achieving it is desirable (Biersta, 2007, p.17).

Biersta develops this theme further to make an important distinction between technical and cultural research: in the former, research acts as a producer of means and techniques to achieve given ends; in the latter it provides a different way of understanding and imagining social reality

> [Researchers and practitioners] should [not] only focus on the most effective means to bring about predetermined ends. [They] should also engage in inquiry about ends, and this in close relation to the inquiry into means (ibid.).

The point, perhaps, is not whether to opt for technical or cultural research, but to recognise the existence and potential value of both, indeed how research needs both forms – but the technical always connected to the cultural.

I will conclude with four suggestions that might lead away from repeating old mistakes and lead towards realising the enormous opportunities available to us from ECEC services.

First, it is time to say farewell to 'childcare' as an organising principle – and welcome to 'education in its broadest sense', in which 'childcare' finds its rightful place as just one of many possibilities that public institutions can provide (for a fuller discussion of why it is time to say farewell to childcare, see Moss, 2006).

Second, we should put technical practice and research in its place - subsidiary to critical questions and cultural research. Evidence, by itself, cannot tell us what to do, anymore than we can find an objective answer to the question 'what works'. We must always first find and ask the critical questions - about paradigm, about purpose, about understanding.

Third, we can learn *with* other countries, and not just the English-speaking ones (which in general have a poor record on ECEC and children) – the encounter with diversity can help make the familiar strange, so provoking critical questions, and create genuinely new knowledge, ideas and perspectives. As a good first step, put *Starting Strong* to work!

Finally, we must renew the politics of early childhood – there are alternative understandings and values and purposes and structures, for preschools and schools. Deciding which approaches to adopt should be the very stuff of democratic politics.

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IRISH APPROACHES TO ECCE – KEEPING POLITICS OUT OF THE NURSERY

Maura Adshead & Gerardine Neylon

ABSTRACT
In this paper, Moss's (2007) suggestion that ECCE institutions can – and should - be understood as 'forums, spaces or sites for democratic political practice' is presented as an ideal type in order to examine the Irish experience of ECCE. Following from this, the paper explores four central tensions apparent in relation to state responsibilities towards childcare and the facilitation of democratic practice in ECCE, namely: between ECCE as market provision and as democratic practice; between the state acting as guarantor of high standards in ECCE and allowing decentralisation and diversity to flourish; between modernistic and post-modern paradigms of care; and between domestic, European and international levels of governance in the increasingly multi-levelled governance system in which ECCE is now placed.

Introduction

For the political scientist, the proposition that 'institutions for children and young people can be understood, first and foremost, as forums, spaces or sites for political practice, and specifically for democratic political practice' (Moss, 2007: 1; Dahlberg and Moss, 2005) holds within it implicit assumptions about the nature of the state. If this ideal is to flourish, it will be in a state that holds a high degree of responsibility (for social policy, social engineering, political education etc), and where there is a well-developed notion of citizenship that typically entails recognised rights and contingent responsibilities. This is not some ECCE utopia, but more conventionally some form of ideal-typical social democratic welfare regime.

In this paper we explore briefly how alternative state welfare regimes can be expected to impact upon welfare policies in general and ECCE in particular. We look at recent attempts to conceptualise the Irish welfare state with a view to explaining the broader ECCE policy context and environment in Ireland. On the one hand, we explain why attempts to typolgise Irish welfare state have proven problematic and on the other hand, why this has important implications for our understanding of the ECCE policy environment and the politics of ECCE provision. We demonstrate how the 'hybrid' nature of the Irish welfare state incorporates varied and sometimes contradictory policy tendencies, which themselves are often sustained by variable and contradictory social and political attitudes. These shape a policy environment for ECCE where government action is guided by the primary desire for consensus and where political caution and ambiguity are the leit motif of government policy in ECCE. The consequence is a lack of decisive policy action and a situation where significant policy tensions are left untackled.

The remainder of this paper is divided into five parts. Part one looks at welfare regime characteristics and Ireland's place in international comparison. Part two characterises the emergence of alternative state policy regimes and their impact on ECCE, culminating with the

advent of 'partnership government' in 1987. In part three we examine the politics of partnership and their particular significance to ECCE. Part four, examines the impact of all of these on ECCE and the contradictory tensions that emerge in the ECCE policy arena as a result. In part five we conclude that Irish approaches to ECCE are some distance from Moss's ideals – a situation that persists not because of a lack of specialist knowledge or professional expertise, but as a consequence of the broader political context within which the ECCE policy arena is placed.

Welfare Typologies And Their Links To ECCE

In his now classic comparative study of state welfare systems, Gosta Esping-Andersen (1990: 26-29) argued that welfare states vary considerably with respect to their principles of rights and stratification. This results in qualitatively different arrangements among state, market and family. These differences notwithstanding, Andersen argued that welfare state variations are not singular, but clustered around three central regime types: 'liberal'; 'social democratic'; and 'corporatist-statist'; the so-called 'three worlds of welfare'.

'Liberal' welfare states are characterised by means-tested assistance, modest universal transfers, or modest social insurance. This form of welfare state mainly caters for low-income, usually working-class, state dependants. It is a model in which, implicitly or explicitly, the progress of social reform has been severely constrained or circumscribed by traditional, liberal work-ethic norms. Entitlement rules are strict and often associated with stigma. Benefits are typically modest. In turn the state encourages the market, either passively by guaranteeing only a minimum, or actively by subsidising private welfare schemes. Archetypal examples of this model are the US, Canada and Australia.

'Social Democratic' welfare states by contrast comprise those countries where welfare provision is extended to all – including the middle classes – as a matter of entitlement. Most usually associated with the countries of Scandinavia, this group is the smallest taking its name from the "social democratic" model of government that has prevailed in Nordic states since the 1930s. Rather than tolerating a dualism between those catered for by the market, and those by the state (the middle and working classes), Social Democratic governments in these states pursued a welfare state organisation that helped promote *equality of the highest standards*, as opposed to the provision of minimal needs elsewhere. Under this system, manual workers enjoy the same social rights as those of the salaried middle classes. All strata of society are incorporated under one universal insurance system, though benefits are graduated according to accustomed earnings. This model essentially replaces market provision and so engenders a universalistic solidarity behind the welfare state. All benefit, all are dependent on it and so, presumably, all feel obliged to pay/support it.

'Corporatist-statist' welfare states, such as Austria, France, Germany and Italy, comprise those states with historical corporatist tendencies that were "upgraded" in the post-war period. In these states, the liberal obsession with markets and market efficiency as a means of providing goods is not as prevalent as in other more liberal regimes but the maintenance of status differentials, so that social rights are strongly attached to class and status is an important feature. Corporatist regimes are also typically shaped by the Church, and hence strongly committed to the preservation of traditional family hood. Social insurance typically excludes 'non-working' wives and family benefits encourage motherhood. Day care and similar family services are conspicuously underdeveloped and the principle of 'subsidiarity' underscores the fact that the state will only interfere when the family's capacity to service its members is exhausted. The consequence for such corporatist regimes was that hierarchical

status-distinctive social insurance cemented middle class loyalty to a peculiar type of welfare state.

Although Esping-Andersen's work presented a path-breaking analysis of welfare states and regimes of provision and quickly became a main point of reference for many subsequent studies, applying the typology to the Irish case is fraught with difficulty since, as a number of scholars have demonstrated (Ragin, 1994; McLaughlin, 1993; Peillon, 2001), studies of Irish welfare policies tend to draw contradictory conclusions depending on which part of the welfare system they examine. Peillon (2001:143-157) notes, for example, that some policies promote class stratification, whilst others reduce it; some benefits are universal, whilst others are residual. The decommodifying effects of some social programmes are high (unemployment benefit for example), yet for others (such as pensions and sickness insurance) they are low. Moreover, in some areas the state accepts full administrative responsibilities, in others none, and in some cases social services are provided by a partial state or state sponsored body (Peillon, 2001:152-3). In consequence it argued that 'Ireland's mix of means-tested, insurance-based and universalist income support and service arrangements' have produced 'a mongrel welfare system of mixed parentage' (NESC, 2005: 35).

Whereas studies of other states are able to show clear patterns in how, for example, Denmark and the Netherlands have evolved whilst maintaining solidaristic welfare systems (Madsen, 2002; Visser and Hemerijck, 2001, 1997), the most recent major study of the Irish welfare system made a point of acknowledging that even 'describing it as a 'system' risks implying the ensemble has more internal logic than is the case' (NESC, 2005: 35). Commenting on the fact that different parts of Esping-Andersen's (1990) study (dealing with different data sets) were able to place Ireland in all three of his central typologies, Cousins' (1997: 226) declared that: 'The Irish welfare state is obviously a highly movable feast but not one which Esping-Andersen attempted to digest'. Presumably the location of the Irish case was not of central significance to Esping-Andersen's (1990) work. For scholars of the Irish system, however, acknowledging the 'hybrid' nature of the welfare state is a crucial first step to understanding politics of welfare policies.

The fact that Irish welfare policies evince contradictory tendencies - to the left and to the right - reflects the political environment where there is no clear consensus about approaches to welfare and welfare reform and, perhaps more importantly, where there is no great political ambition for creating one. Historically, the two major parties, *Fianna Fail* (Soldiers of Destiny) and *Fine Gael* (Tribe of the Gaels) are distinguished according to the side they took in the civil war following independence. Although it is possible to discern some policy traits that distinguish these parties according to more usual socio-economic cleavages, in fact as the significance of civil war politics has receded both parties have moved closer to the 'middle ground'. This trend was further encouraged by a number of developments within the party system throughout the late 1980s: first, as Labour and Fine Gael moved closer together, so as to present a viable alternative government to Fianna Fail (Mitchell, 2003b: 130); later in Fine Gael's agreement to support the economic reforms proposed by minority government Fianna Fail (Tallaght Strategy); and finally, by Fianna Fáil's decision to ditch the principle of never entering a coalition, by going into government with the Progressive Democrats (Mitchell, 2000:131).

The historical lack of ideological differentiation is further cemented by the Irish electoral system. Ireland's Single Transferable Vote (STV) method of proportional representation (PR), which allows voters to mark as many preferences as there are candidates in multiple seat constituencies, not only obliges candidates of the same party to compete against each

other, but also offers the opportunity for voters to switch between parties, according to their preferences. The result is a highly personalised and localised electoral competition, where issues of national policy often take second place (or may be considered equally important) to issues of local concern. From the politicians point of view, the prevalence of both inter and intra party competition at local level makes it perfectly rational for politicians seeking to maximise their votes to develop a consensus relating to macro policy issues (in order to avail of vote transfers from candidates from a variety of parties), whilst differentiating themselves in relation to local issues. One consequence of this lack of left-right differentiation between political parties is the relative absence of either overtly liberal or social democratic positioning in electoral competition or votes. In the most recent election of 2007, for example, even though the Labour Party and Fine Gael prioritised health in their campaign, the discourse was largely about 'better management' rather than a 'radical restructuring'.

In short, Irish politics is pragmatic, not principled (Adshead, 2008). The art of political success is to be all things to all men, to bundle constituencies and, wherever possible to avoid, or at least fudge contentious issues in a bid to maintain as much support as possible (Marsh and Mitchell, 1999). In this political environment, garnering support for welfare reform is not easy. The 'system' such as it is, or 'ensemble' of policies (NESC, 2005: 35), reflects the cumulative composite of electoral bargains, discrete government initiatives and single issue reforms that have taken place over a number of years. It is in this context that we position our examination of ECCE. The following examination of policy regimes in Ireland demonstrates both the contradictory tendencies in welfare and dominance of 'catholic conservatism', both of which are central to explaining the context of contemporary ECCE.

ECCE Policy Context – Irish Policy Regimes 1922-87

In this section we characterize the hybrid nature of Irish welfare provision in order to portray the key influences in the development of ECCE and associated policies (women's rights, employment, etc). We do this by looking at evolution of state policy regimes throughout the post-independence period (see: Kirby, 2007: 1-9).

Fiscal liberalism 1922-32

Echoing O'Higgin's comment that 'we were probably the most conservative-minded revolutionaries ever to put through a revolution' (White, 1948: 2), it is no surprise to note that the first ten years of government by Cumann na nGaedheal saw the party opting for 'continuity and caution in economic affairs' (O Gráda, 1994: 385). During this period, 'the role of the state was to keep out of the way of private enterprise, and keep taxation as low as possible and therefore, at least in the short-term, social services as meagre as possible' (Kirby, 2007: 2). Whilst it is true to state that the economic resources of the new state were simply not there to support any radical social policy, even if they were, the political desire seems equally lacking. The ideology of the new state was deeply conservative (Burke, 1999:26).[1]

Developmental nationalism 1932 – 59

The consolidation of democracy that came with the transfer of government from Cumman na nGaedheal to Fianna Fail and the adoption of the 1937 constitution made a conspicuous mark on the pattern of politics in the state (Adshead, 2008). Notwithstanding the fact that De Valera

[1] This view, typified by the Economics Minister, Patrick McGilligan's pronouncement that – in order to uphold economic policy - 'People may have to die in this country and may have to die from starvation' (Dáil Debates vol.9, p.562, 30 October 1924), is often referred to by contemporary historians as reflecting the prevailing orthodoxy of the time (Lee, 1989: 127; Ferriter, 2004: 318)

could have gone much further than he did to accommodate the Catholic Church in his drafting of the constitution (Fanning, 1988), still, the 'special position accorded to it'[2] and the specific references to the importance of the family, the ban on divorce, and the strong element of catholic social teaching in the 'directive principles of social policy' all testify to the Catholic flavour of newly consolidated democracy (Adshead, 2008: 64). Many state benefits *did* exclude 'non-working' wives and 'non-deserving' women and clearly social policy was designed to perpetuate a 'vision of the role of woman in Irish society as a full-time wife and mother in an indissoluble marriage, having a preference for 'home duties' and 'natural duties' as a mother (Scannell, 1988:125). As De Valera himself explained during debate over the adoption of the 1937 constitution, women would most generally be 'supported by a breadwinner who is normally and naturally in these cases when he is alive, the father of the family … able by his work to bring in enough to maintain the whole household' (*Dail* Debates, vol.67-8, col.67). Needless to say, day care and similar family services were conspicuously underdeveloped and the principle of 'subsidiarity' ensured that the state only interfered when the family's capacity to service its members was exhausted.

Liberalisation, industrialisation, modernisation 1959-73

In 1958, publication of the now renowned government paper on *Economic Development* (Government of Ireland, 1958) or 'Whitaker Report' (so called after the Secretary of Finance charged with its composition), marked a watershed for the Irish state (Adshead, 2008). The report, which identified trade liberalisation and state interventionism as the two main pillars of economic policy, was to be the precursor to significant expansion of state welfare, through the introduction of insurance and means-tested schemes for groups like the unemployed, deserted wives and unmarried mothers, as well as new benefits such as invalidity and death benefit (Kirby, 2007: 6). The period is marked by significant investment in education: a rise in spending on primary edcuation; the introduction of free post –primary education in 1967; as well as the expansion and development of third level institutions and studies. During this period, health care was also expanded so that 'if spending on education, health and housing is included, overall social expenditure increased from 14.5% GDP in 1962 to 20.5% a decade later' (Kirby, 2007: 7). Although this was a period of expansion, it was not one where ECCE provision received much consideration and the expectation that women would retain responsibility for childcare was exemplified in employment[3], tax and school system[4].

Debt and recession 1973-1987

Ireland's entry into the European Community (EC) in 1973 incurred a series of legal obligations, relating to non-discrimination and equality of pay, which began to challenge attitudes to women, the workplace and the family. Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome obliges member states to ensure, and subsequently maintain, the application of the principle that men and women should receive equal pay for equal work. This article's requirements are amplified by EC Directive 75/117 on equal pay and EC Directive 76/207 on equal treatment, which calls on all member states to end all sex discrimination in social security schemes that are work related. Up until this point Article 40.1 of the Irish constitution, declaring that 'all citizens shall, as human persons, be held equal before the law', had not been entirely successful as a basis for dealing with sex discrimination, since some conservative judges were

[2] Article 44.1 on Religion included a declaration that 'The State recognises the special position of the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church as the guardian of the Faith professed by the great majority of the citizens'. This was removed in 1972, together with Article 41.2, which gave reference (though no special position) to other Christian Churches in Ireland.

[3] the government's marriage bar - banning the employment of married women in the civil service – was widely copied across the public sector

[4] The relatively short school day (compared to other European states) seems largely to rest on the assumption that a mother or full-time carer will be available to collect and mind children after 2pm

able to interpret the 'as human persons' as a restriction on its application where other less conservative judges did not (Scannell, 1988:131). There was now, however, no doubt that the rights subscribed to in the Treaty of Rome could be used to take action on sex discrimination even where Irish constitutional rights proved ineffective.

Throughout the 1970s, individual women began to challenge the constitutionality of laws that discriminated against them. In this brave and expensive endeavour they frequently employed a young woman barrister, Senator Mary Robinson, who was counsel in most of the constitutional cases where women's rights were vindicated (Scannell, 1988:131). Many now sought redress in the courts for grievances that the *Oireachtas* had chosen to ignore. Between 1971 and 1987, there were 45 major challenges relating to sex discrimination and equal rights and a definite move on behalf of the judiciary to let the courts play a key role in outlining the scope of constitutional rights. Most importantly, the judges used the case of Gladys Ryan v. the Attorney General (1965 IR 294) as a basis for the view that constitutional rights of Irish citizens included those that were *implied* by Article 40 in consideration of the fundamental character of the society envisaged by the Constitution itself. This, combined with the emergence of Irish feminism and a belated acknowledgement from the government that action needed to be taken, led to a significant shift in attitudes and values.[5]

In economic terms, however, the state was struggling. By the late 1970s, Ireland was experiencing increased economic difficulties – reflecting structural adjustment to free trade, an increased need for social services, a turbulent international economy and recourse to foreign borrowing to fund both capital and current spending (O'Donnell, 2008: 74). With the onset of OPEC oil price rises in 1979 and the subsequent world recession, the economy faltered and a period of unstable, mainly negative, growth followed for the years 1982 to 1986 (Bradley, Whelan and Wright, 1993: 11). The consequence was that although socially Irish attitudes towards women and the family were beginning to budge, there was little evidence of this in policy developments as the state entered a period of welfare constraint and once more, ECCE was left unconsidered.

1987 Onwards And The Politics Of Partnership

'Since 1987, Irish economic and social policy has been conducted by a form of negotiated governance' (O'Donnell, 2008: 73), referred to in Ireland as 'social partnership'. At national level, Social Partnership refers to a governance process where representatives of employer organisations, trade unions, farmers and - since 1997 - community and voluntary sector (i.e. the 'Social Partners') work in common institutions[6] with government to deliberate about economic and social policy. At local level, the growing enthusiasm for partnership structures has led to the growth of a wide range of partnership structures. Some are community-driven,[7] some are motivated by funding opportunities provided by various EU programmes and initiatives

[5] In 1970, the Government appointed a Commission for the Status of Women. The report of the Commission, on which women and men were equally represented, contained 49 action areas for ending discrimination. The government did not rush to implement them, but slowly began to address the issues (Galligan, 1998).

[6] National Economic and Social Council, National Economic and Social Forum and The National Centre for Partnership and Performance, all of which are constituted under the umbrella of the National Economic and Social Development Office and the institutional arrangements to negotiate and monitor national agreements .

[7] such as the Community Development Projects and Local Development groups, operationalised by the Global Grant for Local Development - a form of assistance provided by the ERDF and ESF, and managed by and independent intermediary, Area Development Management (ADM) Ltd.

related to local development[8], and other community activities have been fostered by government initiatives[9] such as the creation of County Enterprise Boards and County Strategy Teams. In 1996, the publication of the *Better Local Government* (BLG) White Paper marked a significant watershed (Government of Ireland, 1996). Prior to the publication of the White Paper, the local social partnership landscape was populated principally by non or less state centred partnership structures/processes. After publication of the White Paper, the foundation was laid for a gradual evolution towards stronger state-centred partnership processes (McInerney, 2007).

Much of the recent fascination with the Irish 'government by partnership' suggests that the Irish case provides an exemplar of new modes of governance which is 'distinguished by a unique set of institutional innovations for creative, dynamic, and self-reflexive governance for social and economic development' (House and McGrath, 2004) - a theme taken up by a variety of different commentators (Hardiman, 2006; Larragy, 2006; Meade and O'Donovan, 2002; Murphy, 2002; O'Donnell and O'Reardon, 1997; O'Donnell, 2001; Sabel, 2002; Teague, 2006). It has been suggested that 'the willingness of successive Irish governments to relinquish their unique role in policy-making, for the inclusion of agreed 'social partners', demonstrates a changing attitude towards government - one which acknowledges the importance of inclusivity and partnership' (Adshead and Quinn, 1998). This alleged shift has been variously characterized: for some it represents a move towards more corporatist styles of policy-making (Hardiman, 1992; Taylor, 1993) involving new governance networks (Hardiman, 2005). For others (O'Donnell and O'Reardon, 1997, 2000), Irish Social Partnership offers something more than traditional quasi-corporatist arrangements, warranting its depiction as a new form of *post-corporatist concertation,* characterised by 'deliberation' and 'problem-solving' between a wider range of interests than the traditional confederations of capital and labour and where 'the capacity to shape and reshape parties' preferences are seen to be prominent features of the dealings between the social partners, interwoven into a process that also involves "hard-headed" bargaining' (O'Donnell and O'Reardon, 2000: 250).

It is argued that the widespread shift to partnership modes of policy making has helped reinforce a broader paradigm shift in the organization of Irish public policy, which may be conceived of as the institutionalization of partnership approaches (Adshead and McInerney, 2008). Partnership governance is now a well-established *modus vivendi* for Irish policy making, supported by developments within and outside the state and reinforced by a recognizable set of norms and values (O'Donnell, Adshead and Thomas, 2007). Whilst this governance shift has largely been interpreted as an attitudinal and value shift *in favour* of partnership, still the involvement and approval of less well-established 'social partners' from the community and voluntary sector has been mixed. Social partnership clearly works for those amongst whom there is a shared vision and a shared understanding of the process and its objectives. For others, who do not enjoy this same synergy of perspectives but who see participation in partnership processes as important, the tangible benefits are less immediate (Adshead and McInerney, 2008). According to O'Riain (2008: 179):

> the extensions of social partnership itself have been damaged by the withdrawal, and subsequent exclusion, of some sections of the community and voluntary sector from partnership processes at the national level and the reassertion of central authority over the local partnerships (for example, in the reconstitution of Area Development

[8] Examples of these include, NOW - New Opportunities for Women, LEADER - Liaisons entre actions de developpement de l'economie rurale, and LEDA - the local employment development action programme (for details of others, see CEC, 1994).

[9] Including county childcare committees, Local Sports Partnerships, partnership-based urban and rural regeneration processes, local and regional drugs task forces and many others.

Management Ltd around a model of service delivery rather than community empowerment and the sidelining of the Community Workers' Cooperative).

These qualifications about social partnership are particularly important in the context of ECCE. On the one hand, it is argued that much of the impetus towards increasing social policy provision in subsequent social partnership agreements has been about 'building a public system', so that 'partnership involved creating systems for making, monitoring and delivering policy in areas where the Irish state was historically both weak and thin' (O'Donnell (2008: 89). This had led to partnership initiatives in local development, regional planning, training and many areas of social policy, particularly childcare, care of the elderly, health and disability (O'Donnell, 2008: 89). On the other hand, however, the withdrawal or absence of key community interests for national social partnership has left the negotiation of social policy arrangements in a policy-making environment where economic growth and competition are the key drivers for change. This has two important consequences for ECCE provision: first, consideration of ECCE was only seriously taken up by the state when it became an economic imperative to increase female participation in the labour force; and second, this has allowed childcare to be construed as an 'economic problem' rather than a pedagogical issue.

Partnership Governance and ECCE

At local level, the advent of social partnership coincided with a change of role for the health boards in Early Years Care and Education. Prior to social partnership the eight regional health boards were primarily responsible for state funding of ECCE provision (alongside a reasonably vibrant community-based provision). ECCE services had been supported by the Health Boards through a grant system which was agreed annually with national voluntary organisations such as the Irish Pre-School Playgroups Accociation (IPPA) and the National Childrens Nurserys Association (NCNA), as well as a plethora of regional voluntary organisations. Inspection of services were carried out by voluntary organisations, without any statutory remit and for the most part, those who worked in the sector were part of the informal economy (Neylon, 1994). Following the implementation of part VII the 1991 Childcare Act (Government of Ireland, 1996), however, a number of changes occurred. Health Boards were given responsibilty for inspection of ECCE services and some funding for voluntary organisations that had previously been allocated by central government was taken over by various European programmes offering training support to voluntary organisations (including for example the EU 'New Opportunities for Women' and other Commission inititatives). In line with the EU partnership principle, European programmes supported the inclusion of voluntary organisations in various County Childcare Committees in an attempt to involve them in policy making decisions with other policy stakeholders and more or less mimic the national partnership model (O'Donnell, 2008: 89).

At national level, members of the 'childcare sector' formed a high level social partnership group including agencies such as FÁS, (Irish training authority) and IBEC (Irish Builders and Employers' Confederation) in order to progress key childcare planning decisions[10]. The decisons made through this partnership process have had a powerful influence on how social services, training, and unemployment have been managed. As a result of agreements at this level, thousands of 'childcare places' have been developed. The EU Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme has since contributed to the establishment of 33,582 childcare places of which 14,799 are full time (Fitzpatrick Associates, 2007: 59). 1,280 full time staff and 1,568 part time staff have been part funded by the programme. By the end of 2006, €564.7mn had

[10] The National Childcare Strategy (1999) arose from the Report of the Expert Working Group in the lead up to the national social partnership agreement *Partnership 2000 (1997-2000).*

been allocated for investment in 'the development of childcare' (Fitzpatrick Associates, 2007: viii) .

Given the lack of previous investment or attention to ECCE, it is not hard to see how the incorporation of childcare policies into social partnership structures has generallly been considered a successful policy initiative. In this paper, however, we contend that there is a significant difference between 'childcare' as it tends to be understood in the structures and policy processes of Irish social partnership and 'ECCE' as it tends to be understood by early years educational specialists and ECCE professionals. The gap between Irish policy conceptions of 'childcare' and 'ECCE' is exemplified by four key tensions within current policy, namely: between ECCE as market provision and as democratic practice; between the state acting as guarantor of high standards in ECCE and allowing decentralisation and diversity to flourish; between modernistic and post-modern paradigms of care; and between domestic, European and international levels of governance in the increasingly multi-levelled governance system in which ECCE is now placed.

Market Provision versus Democratic Practice

In this section we take a broad look at the stakeholders in current ECCE service delivery, focusing in particular on those providing ECCE services. With regard to the former, it is clear that political aspirations to develop thousands of 'childcare places' point immediately to the market-oriented and economic dimensions of Irish ECCE policy aspirations. Notwithstanding the obvious issues about the over-riding pedagogical values governing ECCE provision that this raises (see below), this view of a 'childcare sector' creates a corollary view of a 'childcare worker'.

Table 1: Who works in ECCE?

Administrators Administrators and Development workers in County Childcare Committees; Administrators and Co-coordinators plus Advisors in Non Government Voluntary organizations; Administrators in Partnership programmes: Administrative Staff in the Dept of the Office of Minister of Children; Administrative staff in Pobal
Educationalists Directors, Administrators and Development workers in Centre Early Childhood Development Education CECDE; Lecturers and Administrators in Third level institutions; Tutors employed by various organizations such as Adult Ed. Partnership organizations. Vocational Educational Committee VEC staff.
Inspectors Administrators and Pre school inspectorate
Staff directly working with children Crèche Workers: Family resource centres; Crèche staff; ECCE workers providing home based care; ECCE workers in community based settings; ECCE workers working in privately owned services.

Table 1, which gives an overview of ECCE workers, divides the work of ECCE providers between administrators, educationalists, inspectors and those working directly with

children.[11] The staff working directly with children (unlike the others) do not enjoy the benefit of their work being placed on a national pay scale despite many calls over the past decade to rectify this situation (NESDO, 2005; Hayes, 2005; OECD 2004). They play in the 'second division' by comparison with other ECCE workers and are generally paid minimum wages or marginally above the minimum wage (Neylon, 2006: page36). These staff are also likely to be attending labour market reorganization training, such as Community Employment scheme (Neylon and Loftus 2000). In short, there is a clear dichotomy in employment for those who work directly with children and those who work in administration, inspection and policy development: clearly those who work directly with children are valued less.

For those in receipt of ECCE services, the existence of three different fiscal policies (tax individualized, targeted subsidiary and universal payments) exemplifies not only the contradictory tendencies in Irish welfare policies, but the uneven impact that these different policy regimes have on building a sustainable professional Early Years Sector.

Tax individualization

In the annual budget of 1999, the introduction of a stratified tax individualization by the then Minister for Finance, Charlie McCreevy, was accused of favouring women's paid employment over work in the home. After much dissatisfaction with the policy by individuals who stayed in the home, the Finance bill of 2000 unveiled an extra tax allowance for stay at home spouses which meant that they were allowed to earn £4,000, and continue get the home carer's allowance (*The Irish Examiner,* 22/01/08). A recent review of this policy by Byrne (2008) argues that the gap between women working at home and outside the home has now more than doubled since tax individualisation was announced. The policy did not offer financial incentive to encourage parents to stay in their homes to take care of their children. Condemning individualisation as a form of 'social engineering', the report argues that 'the current system actually traps spouses in the workplace by penalising a spouse for ceasing employment.' (Byrne, 2008: 15-16). Commenting on the report, the Labour Party's finance spokesperson, Joan Burton suggested that; 'The policy of individualisation has led to dramatic transfers from families with children to two-income households, many without dependents' (Byrne, 2007 : P1).

Targeted subvention

The most recent policy development of 'subvention' introduced by the OMC during the summer of 2007, targets children from financially disadvantaged households for a subsidy towards the costs of childcare. In order for the ECCE facility to gain the subsidy, parents must prove to the ECCE service that they are in receipt of Social Welfare or Family Income supplement. Parents are then grouped into various bands and the information on parental incomes forwarded by the ECCE service to the Office for the Minister for Children. (OMC 2007) Other categories of need, however, such as children experiencing rural disadvantage, intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, etc are not deemed eligible for subsidy in ECCE services. The worry is that a two tier system of public and private provision is inevitable from the subvention process. This development does not sit well with recent research findings reported as a result of a longitudinal study over a period of 1997-2003 and funded by the Department of Education and Environment in England in the area of 'Effective provision of Pre-school Education' (Sammons and Taggert, 2004). Their findings stressed the importance of all inclusive ECCE where children from a variety of backgrounds mix, rather than a segregated stratified system (Sammons and Taggert, 2004: 27). The recent Irish subsidiary approach clearly introduces a means tested liberal welfare paradigm in ECCE and has led to many calls from politicians and stakeholders in the sector to review the process (*The Clare*

[11] Also see Starting Strong II OECD Pg.160 for international table of ECCE workers.

People, 11/11/07). This review is needed in order not to continue to ghettoize provision of ECCE into a two tier system whereby those who pay can afford a private provision and the community sector cater for underprivileged children.

Universal payments

In addition to universal payments of child benefit to all citizens, an additional 'early years supplement' of €1,000 is paid to parents annually for each child under 6 years of age in four staged payments of €250 paid directly to parents. It has been argued that this is a crude measure that will do nothing to strengthen the ECCE sector, or improve or sustain quality (Hayes, 2007:7). This decision to commit €350m exchequer funding annually to ECCE is significant, however, in that whilst it certainly did the government's popularity no harm amongst the mass electorate, it was not popular amongst those who wished to promote ECCE quality measures and was regarded as a lost opportunity to develop the sector.

In summary, although ideally speaking given the partnership nature of current governance practices, we might hope that representatives from all parts of ECCE provision would be valued and consulted regarding their ECCE needs, this is not currently the case. Instead, we see a policy sector where those supplying ECCE are strongly divided between 'professionals' and 'workers' and where those in receipt of ECCE services (both parents and children) are divided according to their means rather than their needs.

State Regulation versus Diversity

In December 2005, the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC) was established within the Department of Health and Children with the aim of bringing greater cohesion to policy making in all aspects of children's wellbeing. One of the innovative approaches they use to try to fuse the care and education divide is the establishment of the Early Years Education Policy Unit in the OMC to facilitate 'joined up working arrangements'. The policy unit reports to the Department of Education and Science in an attempt to better coordinate policy. The relative absence of 'joined up' approaches stems essentially from the on-going and unresolved dichotomy in Irish ECCE between the provision of education (a task governed by the Department of Education) and the provision of 'care' (a task most usually governed by the Department of Health).

The Education Act 1998 deemed it the responsibility of the National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA) to advise the minister for education on 'Curriculum and Assessment of Early Childhood Education' (note absence of the term Care) historically again due to the fact that this policy is developed in the education environment. In fulfilling the extended remit of now having responsibility for early education, primary and post primary schools the NCCA began a consultation process which led to a consultation document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning,* published in May 2005. A committee including representatives from the national voluntary childcare organizations, the Irish National Teachers' Organization and others from the 'early childhood sector' was consulted in preparation of the document. This document built on the government's White Paper on Early Childhood Curriculum, *Ready to Learn* (Government of Ireland, 1999). The *Framework for Early Learning* will be completed by the end of 2007 and launched in late spring 2008.

Alongside the NCCA, another Irish ECCE organization – the Centre for Early Childhood Development Education (CECDE) – developed the 'National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education' or 'Síolta' (the Irish for Seeds). The educational philosophy of Síolta is reflective and contemporary and whilst it is not a curriculum *per se,* the fact that Siolta's

‘framework for quality practice’ stands beside the NCCA framework presents a peculiar arrangement of having more than one commonly agreed pedagogy. According to the National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA), Síolta is intended to interact with the National Qualifications Framework so that:

> *‘Síolta* and *The Framework for Early Learning* both support adults in improving the quality of children’s early experiences. The *Framework for Early Learning*, as its title suggests, concentrates on supporting children’s early learning and development and gives adults advice, information and tools to help them work towards improving their practice particularly in the areas of curriculum, partnership with parents and families, interactions, play, planning and evaluation. By doing this, the Framework will help settings meet a number of the standards set out in *Síolta’* .
>
> http://www.ncca.ie/ sourced 20th October 2007

Whether or not this approach is seen as duplicative or collaborative is a mute point. In December 2006, a Submission by the National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative (NVCC) to Mr. Brian Lenihan, Minister for Children, in relation to the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006 asked for clarification on Regulation 5 which states that:

> ‘a person carrying on a pre-school service shall ensure that each child’s learning, development and well-being is facilitated within the daily life of the service through the provision of the appropriate opportunities, experiences, activities, interaction, materials and equipment, having regard to the age and stage of development of the child and the child’s cultural context’ (NVCC, 2006: 12).

The explanatory guidelines for this regulation refer to (amongst other things) Síolta and the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, 2006. NVCC’s concern was twofold, relating first to the variety of possibilities of interpretation by untrained personnel of the said regulation, and second to the involvement of Síolta (which was yet to be professionally piloted). NVCC sought clarification as to the status of Síolta in the context of this regulation on the basis that these regulations reflect *compulsory minimum standards,* whereas Síolta is designed to provide *aspirational quality standards.* NVCC sought clarification as to the merit of including Síolta in the new Regulations and expressed the view that the inclusion of Síolta in the new regulations, warranted the inclusion of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment’s *Framework for Early Learning.*

Whilst the new ‘childcare sector’ awaits the outcome of a decade of discussion, however, the private sector has seen an opportunity to enter the ECCE ‘childcare market’. The ‘Bubbles’ childcare package is a perfect example of this. Developed in Ireland and even in receipt of government structural funding from the *National Development Plan* 2007-2013 (Government of Ireland, 2007: 69) as an emergent small to medium sized enterprise, the Bubbles curriculum is based on resource packs, that they state are linked into the Siolta curriculum. Typically, these resource packs include Care Provider’s Manuals filled with hundreds of practical group and individual activities, songs, games, stories, poems and riddles.

> ‘With an emphasis on play, Project Bubbles offers a huge collection of activities, games, stories and music to help you develop and enrich your curriculum plan. It incorporates and supports all the main principles of Síolta - The new National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education’
> http://www.projectbubbles.com/magico_builder/www/index.asp?wbid=159&aff=sourced 13th December 2007

Since its launch in March 2007, Project Bubbles has been adopted by hundreds of childcare facilities in Ireland. It is now being used in 22 counties nation-wide including all kinds of facilities.[12] On October 23rd Project Bubbles won the Category Prize at the 2007 Shell National Livewire Awards. This is the first time a *childcare product* has received this recognition. Project Bubbles has also won the 2007 Regional Enterprise Awards for a Co. Clare based company. The company is now setting its sights far afield and has begun to develop a successful export market.

On the one hand, given the extreme lack of training in ECCE, Bubbles materials have filled a lacuna in ECCE provision, providing ready-made activities and age-appropriate topics for ECCE workers to use. On the other hand, alongside the work of the NCCA and Siolta, we now witness a third significant attempt to develop appropriate pedagogy and frameworks for practice in Irish ECCE. That these pedagogically different and variable approaches to child-care can exist is testimony to the extremely decentralized approach to Irish ECCE which seems to support a high degree of diversity (in terms of quality practice and alternative pedagogies) with only minimal state regulation. Critics have argued that this reflects a government approach where 'there is a denial that good childcare is beneficial for a child's development – both for their cognitive, language and academic skills and for their wider social skills' (Allen, 2007: 109).

Modernist versus post-modernist approaches in Irish ECCE

Essentially, the difference between modernist and post-modern approaches to ECCE relates to the understanding of child development: in the former, development may be understood as a linear process from infancy through recognized developmental stages into complete adulthood (Bolby, 1956; Piaget, 1966; Dworetzky, 1995); in the latter, the child is recognized as a complete individual at all stages, where self development is encouraged and facilitated by individualized reflexive practice (Edwards and Gandini, 1998; Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). These differences, however, have significant practical implications for ECCE provision. Recognising, valuing and promoting development within a post-modern paradigm of care means that childcare must be understood as a continual reflexive practice (MacNaughton, 2005), which requires ongoing state support and which takes much more time and training than is the case with modern paradigms of care.

In terms of time, the primacy of reflexive practice means that post-modernist models of ECCE can be expected to invest a good deal of time in listening, observing and recording children's language, with a view to further understanding the child on their own terms and in their own developmental context. This contrasts with the modernist use of observation as a means to identify the developmental stage the child has reached, with a view to helping the child move on to the next stage and serves as a tool by which to identify if developmental delay may be an emergent issue. Implicit in this approach is the notion that children should reach - more or less – the same developmental stages at the same time. In the post-modern model, 'written reflection' is intended to specifically recognize the uniqueness of each child 'which brings forces and energies that can open up new possibilities, to the possibility of transformations – to difference' (Dahlberg, 2005: 119). Practically speaking, from the state's point of view, ECCE workers involved in reflective practice would have to be employed

[12] These include: Montessori; High/Scope; Crèche and Nursery; Family Resource Centres; Community Childcare facilities and playgroups; Government crèches; NCNA members (including Centers of Excellence); and IPPA members.

outside of contact time with children to reflect, and to then implement a fluid, changing, rolling curriculum, informed by listening to the children.

In terms of training, it is clear that contemporary approaches favour various metaphors of 'developmental stages' where, for example, all children are given the same lesson, based on their chronological age (Alderson and Penn, 2005: 128). Were a more reflexive post-modern approach to be introduced in Ireland, it would need to be underpinned by appropriate professional training at an agreed level on the national qualifications framework. This is currently one of the more problematic aspects of *Siolta*, which at the moment has no clear link to the national qualifications framework. In consequence, the existing dichotomy between 'teacher' and 'childcare worker', where the childcare worker is 'othered' into a low valued job, whilst the teacher enjoys full employment status is allowed to continue. This has implications not only for ECCE, but also for the status and employment of those working directly with children.

In summary, childcare in the post-modern context is a process, which necessitates continual reflexive practice. Although this is encouraged by Siolta, it is not professionally recognized or rewarded in terms of professional status or remuneration. Post modern philosophies would have serious cost implications in key areas such as payment of professional wages, reduction in ratios of children to adults, and the development of a national inspectorate. Moreover, its impact would be felt by other professionals: the role of the primary school teacher would change, to link with the pre-school playgroup.

Multi-level Governance and ECCE

Irish ECCE policy has come under increasing scrutiny as a consequence of Ireland's participation in various international organizations. The most conspicuous of these was the United Nation's Declaration on the Rights of the Child in 1959, to which Ireland is a signatory. This was followed, in 1989, by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which included protocols for the protection of children against exploitation and discrimination. Throughout this period, it is clear that states were beginning to acknowledge and address the idea that children have needs and rights as citizens and individuals. This approach to children's rights was further developed by the European Union, which, from an ECCE perspective is perhaps of more significance to Irish politics and policy, since it reflects the increasing importance of external agencies in the development of domestic policies.

In 1996, a European Commission Network on Childcare and other measures to reconcile the Employment and Family Responsibilities Proposals for a ten year action plan presented its report (CEC, 1996). The action plan set out forty targets under nine headings which addressed quality measures in provision of care for young children. From a pedagogical perspective, the identification of cross-national policy issues presented a challenge for European Childcare policy and provision. The plan was written by seventeen childcare experts from Spain, Portugal, Scotland, Ireland, France, Greece, Germany, Belgium, Sweden, and Holland and sets out clear targets in relation to the finance, pedagogy, training, employment of ECCE, as well as the issues of cohesion of ECCE and schools provision in daycare and infant classes. In this respect, the plan specifically stated that:

> 'all collective services for young children 0-6 whether in the public or private sector should have coherent values and objectives including a stated and explicit educational philosophy' (1996:16).

Clearly, the European action plan (which refers to '*Early Years Care and Education*' as opposed to 'childcare') envisaged greater integration between 'education' and 'care' in children's development. This is of course problematic in the Irish context, where the split system has ensured that the two remain distinct in terms of governmental responsibilities, training, and employment structures professional status. In the Irish context, although successive governments have been willing to take European funding, they have been less concerned with developing European ambitions for ECCE.

Conclusions

In our brief review of state policy contexts for ECCE since the foundation of the state, we have seen that during the post independence period, for a variety of political and economic reasons, welfare provision in Ireland developed without consideration of ECCE as an integral part of state welfare and, for other socio-cultural reasons, ECCE was not keenly sought or demanded. Even as attitudes (both social and political) began to shift in the 1970s and 1980s, however, the state entered a period of prolonged recession which once more stymied the development of ECCE and related social provision.

The consequences of this for policy developments in the 1990s were two-fold. First ECCE provision was limited in provision, primarily the work of voluntary, community and charitable organizations, and often carried out in the informal economy. Regulation was minimal, standards of care were hugely variable and where the state did intervene, it was often on the basis of some broader targeted intervention for the disadvantaged (whether geographically or socially determined). Second, the state's neglect of ECCE and the consequent haphazard provision of ECCE, together with socio-cultural (primarily Catholic) values about women's work and women's role in the home, helped to institutionalize a series of norms and values about ECCE in Ireland. These norms are best summed up by the Irish evolution of a 'split system' where 'education' is more narrowly defined and understood as an activity that largely begins in school and where 'pre-school care' is just as likely to be understood as the activity of 'child-minding' and 'baby-sitting' as it is to be conceived of education in its broadest (social and developmental) sense.

By the time that ECCE made it on to the political agenda, it had become an urgent policy imperative, propelled by twin political and economic drivers for policy change. In the political sphere, the demands from working parents for adequate childcare were becoming a significant electoral issue and in the economic sphere, the economic boom was fueling a labour shortage that pushed for increased female participation in the labour force. It was in this (largely reactive) policy context, that the government felt obliged to produce a response and child care was added to the range of issues being considered by Social Partnership. In committing childcare to social partnership the government simultaneously recognized the importance attached to the issue by a range of Social Partners and dispatched the 'awkward problems' of ECCE policy choices out of direct governmental control. ECCE was given over to a deliberative policy arena, in which the primary policy ambition is the production and maintenance of economic growth and competitiveness. We argue that the subsequent evolution of ECCE policy development in Ireland under social partnership raises a series of policy tensions in ECCE provision between: market provision versus democratic practice; state regulation versus diversity; modernist and post-modern paradigms of care; and multi-levelled governance and ECCE. To argue that social partnership is found wanting in addressing these policy issues is to set up a 'straw man'. Social Partnership was an innovative and radical governmental response to economic crisis: it was not designed as a policy instrument to address ECCE. What is now required is an equally innovative and radical governmental response to the equally serious and critical policy issues reflected in contemporary ECCE.

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