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An Evaluation of the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme using Policy Design Theory

Bernie O'Donoghue Hynes and Noirín Hayes[1]

This paper utilises Policy Design Theory to evaluate policy tool design and selection in Ireland in order to look beyond policy goals and rhetoric to the meanings and assumptions within policy design. A review of the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme (CCSS) reveals it to be an 'incentive' tool that is structured around a negative social construction of the target populations as 'dependants' with little capacity to solve their own problems. While immediate policy objectives are met through the design of the CCSS, if viewed in a wider context of overall national policy objectives a range of negative side-effects are evident amongst all policy target groups.

Key Words: policy design, policy tools, social construction, behavioural impact, policy target groups

Introduction

A review of the childcare question in Ireland reveals that it is a relatively new and politically complex problem for the State (Kennedy, 2001). It is an arena where the values of family vie with those of equality, employment, education and social inclusion which continues to be embedded within the debate about who shall look after the children, and why children should be looked after outside the family (Hayes, 2002). The difficulty is that "policy makers have to tread a fine line between providing for those who wish to purchase childcare and not undermine those parents who wish to care for their children themselves" (Daly and Clavero, 2002, p. 61). This complexity and lack of clarity about the rationale for investment in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) impacts upon the policy tools selected to support

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ECEC in Ireland. It is within this framework of complexity and conflicting agendas that the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme (CCSS) is positioned.

Methodology

This interpretive research study considers text and language alongside numeric and statistical data in an attempt to reveal meaning in what policy makers and target populations *do*, rather than what policy *says* (Yanow, 2007). A key element of this approach to the evaluation of policy content is the integration of normative and empirical analysis. Empirical research includes "not only technical aspects of a policy but also its implicit ideas, values and broader meaning in society" (Schneider and Sidney, 2009, p. 112). Policy Design Theory (PDT) advocates that an empirical investigation of policy design is possible because there are several dimensions, both rational and normative, that are observable: problem definition, benefits and burdens to be distributed, target populations, rules, tools, implementation structure, social construction, rationales and underlying assumptions (Schneider and Ingram, 1997).

This paper focuses on two specific areas within the PDT framework; the social construction of policy target groups, and the behavioural impact of the CCSS policy tool on parents, children and Community Service Providers (CSPs). This exploration and evaluation of the CCSS draws on findings from research undertaken with CSPs and parents in Dublin City in April 2009, literature prepared by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) and reports prepared by Community and Voluntary (C&V) organisations assessing the potential impact on target groups of the CCSS.

The literature of the OMCYA was reviewed in order to develop a picture of the social construction of target populations, as theories developed by policy tool design theorists have determined that these social constructions have a key bearing on how policy tools are designed (Schneider and Ingram, 1993; Ingram and Smith, 1993; Schneider and Sidney, 2009). A comparison of the design of the CCSS with the Free Pre-School Year in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme allowed a comparative review of the social construction of two distinctly different target populations, revealing the impact social constructions have on programme design.

In focusing on the behavioural outcomes, the literature of the OMCYA was once again accessed to determine where in the typology of policy tools the CCSS sits and what behavioural assumptions are associated with these tools (Schneider and Ingram 1990). The actual behavioural impact on parents, children and CSPs was captured through the administration of a parental questionnaire in ten Community Childcare Services across Dublin City to sixty two parents and through interviews with the nine CSPs Managers (one Manager had responsibility for two services). These actual impacts were compared with the behavioural impacts anticipated based on an interpretation of the OMCYA literature in order to assess whether policy 'does' what it 'says' it will do.

Policy Tools and Behavioural Assumptions

The CCSS is an incentive tool designed to support community-based childcare providers to "provide quality childcare services at reduced rates to disadvantaged parents" (OMCYA 2008a). The reduced fees are designed to support parents "who are in receipt of social welfare payments or are engaged in education, training or work experience programmes where an

underlying entitlement to a social welfare payment is established, and for persons in receipt of Family Income Supplement (FIS)" to avail of childcare services (OMCYA 2008a).

The concept of an *incentive* tool is derived from a typology of policy tools identified by Schneider and Ingram (1990). They identify five tools, each of which is based on assumptions about behavioural characteristics. There are two underlying assumptions when looking at public policy from this perspective. The first is that the programmes or initiatives will attempt to make or enable people to do things they may otherwise not have done, while the second assumption is that policy tools can be designed to influence or manipulate the decision to take action (Schneider and Ingram, 1993).

Authority tools are tools that grant permission, prohibit or require action in specifically identified situations and they range from voluntary through to compulsory. They assume that people are motivated by their commitment to obey the law.

Incentive tools induce action through the use of tangible payoffs and can take the form of positive or negative devices. Inducements offer positive payoffs and are usually associated with socially acceptable behaviour unlike negative devices such as charges, sanctions or force which tend to be reserved for actions that policy wishes to stigmatise. There is an assumption that individuals will make choices that serve their own best interests and incentives can render irrelevant the influence of cultural values or a reliance on the trial and error methodology of 'decision heuristics'.

Capacity tools recognise that utility maximisation will not always drive the decision making process. In situations where behaviours continue because of insufficient information, capacity or resources, additional strategies are called upon to influence decisions. Outreach or

mobilisation programmes, information campaigns, training or financial investment may be used to ensure people are properly informed and have the resources to make decisions that pursue the actions as prescribed or advocated by policy.

Symbolic and Hortatory tools assume individuals rely on decision heuristics and hold preferences based on intangible values that are culturally defined and beyond influence by incentives alone. Their overall aim is to alter perceptions of the policy-preferred actions through the use of images, symbols and labels to persuade target populations that the behaviour is consistent with their beliefs.

Learning tools assume target populations and agencies can assist in developing tools to solve problems that are not fully understood. They provide for wide discretion to experiment with different approaches and based on evaluations and experience select from other tools the most effective option (Schneider and Ingram, 1990).

While many programmes and initiatives do not fit neatly into the definitions outlined above, as they many contain characteristics of more than one tool, it provides a useful framework against which to review the CCSS. The CCSS is an *incentive tool* that utilises inducements to ensure providers adopt a sliding scale of fees which attract parents with a welfare entitlement to place their children in community based childcare centres. The State does not attempt to structure the policy tool to be a *capacity tool* which would seek out those that are entitled to participate in the scheme. There are practical reasons to explain why this option is not pursued such as the level of investment that would be needed to provide adequate places for all those entitled to a subsidised place. Nor is there an attempt by the State to structure the policy tool as a *symbolic or hortatory tool* that would aim to align the action of choosing to use formal early childhood education and care with the value systems of the target groups.

This may be because the State is wary of advocating for the benefits of ECEC services for children while the work/care dilemma remains unresolved. However, Schneider and Ingram's (1993) work on the social construction of target populations offers an alternative method of viewing policy tool selection that may explain the preference for selecting an *incentive tool* rather than other tools to deliver this social inclusion measure under the National Childcare Investment Plan.

The Influence of Social Construction of Target Groups on Policy Tool Selection

A policy design approach examines how constructions of target populations become institutionalised into policy design and the impact this has on policy tool selection. Patterns emerge in which certain tools tend to be used with reliable frequency for certain target groups (Schneider and Sidney, 2009). In order to investigate whether this is true for the CCSS, four different types of target populations are identified based on the perception of their level of power, particularly in relation to elected politicians, and how positively or negatively the electorate's construction of the target groups is (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). The four categories are:

1. **Advantaged** are politically powerful and are positively constructed as deserving.

2. **Contenders** while also powerful are negatively constructed as being somehow undeserving.

3. **Deviants** are also deemed to be undeserving, while having little or no power.

4. **Dependants** have little power to influence policy design or define problems but the construction of these groups as deserving is positive, although not complimentary (Ingram and Smith, 1993).

The dependant target groups tend to include mothers and children, the key target population that ECEC policies are directed at. Typically policy tools for dependants tend to take the form of subsidies but eligibility requirements often involve "labelling and stigmatizing recipients" and rather than outreach to attract target groups in, end users are required to "present themselves to the agency to receive benefits" (Schneider and Ingram, 1993 p. 339).

The CCSS Evaluation using PDT

This paper is structured to look firstly at the social construction that emerged for each of the target groups: the child; parents; and CSPs. The paper then moves on to explore in more detail two unresolved issues that impact upon the target populations: the continuing struggle of CSPs to address the dilemma between quality and affordable ECEC; and the range of dysfunctional behavioural impacts that have resulted from the introduction of the CCSS.

The Invisible Child

The OMCYA literature (OMCYA, 2008a; OMCYA, 2008b, OMCYA 2008c), produced to provide basic information on the CCSS, appears to reveal three target groups: the CSPs that are being financially incentivised to provide affordable fees for qualifying parents; the

qualifying parents that are being incentivised to place their children in community childcare services; and the children of qualifying parents who will avail of the community childcare services. However, a review of the literature developed to promote and explain the scheme makes little mention of the children despite including the word 'childcare' in the name of the scheme. This contrasts with the treatment of children under the new Free Pre-school Year in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)[2] scheme where eligibility focuses on the child as "the ECCE is open to all children aged between 3 years 3 months and 4 years 6 months on 1 September each year" (OMCYA, 2009a). The rules for qualification focus on the child unlike the CCSS where rules are used to focus on the parent's welfare status as the qualifying criteria, avoiding any focus on or mention of the child.

The Free Pre-School Year (ECCE) scheme, which is most likely to be accessed by higher social economic (*advantaged*) groups (Sylva, Melhuish et al., 2004; OECD, 2006), moves beyond outlining details on the mechanics of 'how' the scheme works (which is the focus of the CCSS literature), to providing information on 'why' the scheme can benefit children. The child remains a dependant in this scenario but the aims and objectives in terms of the behaviour of children are clear:

> Participation in a pre-school programme provides children with their first formal experience of early learning, the starting-point of their educational and social development outside the home. Children who avail of pre-school are more likely to be ready for school and a formal learning and social environment. (OMCYA, 2009a)

[2] The OMCYA often use the acronym 'the ECCE' in their literature (and in presentations) rather than using 'the Free Pre-School Year' to refer to this scheme which can be quite misleading as 'ECCE' has been understood internationally to refer to *all* Early Childhood Care and Education services for children ranging from birth to school age (OECD 2002). This could be interpreted as a *symbolic* attempt to associate the name of the scheme to a term that has a broader and more comprehensive remit than that of the scheme.

This is in line with expectations of the types of policy tools normally reserved for more powerful and deserving groups. These beneficial policies tend to "emphasize capacity building, inducements, and techniques that enable the target population to learn about the results of its behaviour and take appropriate action on a voluntary basis" (Schneider and Ingram, 1993, p. 339).

Interestingly, this particular emphasis on the child demonstrates the State's focus on the **future** child rather than the child **now**, giving an insight into the evolving rationale for investment in ECEC. This focus on children as "human becomings" rather than "human beings" (Qvortrup, 1994) reinforces the dependence that children have on adults where the key is to prepare them for adulthood and future productivity. While the concept of 'child as citizen' (Dahlberg et al, 1999) in which children are valued and appreciated as social actors in their own right has influenced the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, Síolta (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) there is no indication that this concept is influencing the design of ECEC policy tools.

The Dependant Parent

While children and parents would be expected to be the proximate target for the CCSS, the design of the scheme is such that they are a secondary target as funding goes directly to the CSPs. The parent, on whose welfare status the funding is dependent, is not treated as responsible or self reliant (Ingram and Smith 1993). The rules for qualifying for the subsidy, in which parents provide information to CSPs who in turn pass it on to the OMCYA, further

distances the parent from the State. The 'indirect' element of the design facilitates the State distancing itself from the problem, a technique often utilised when States deal with controversial issues (Salamon, 2002). An opaque policy design is evident when trying to identify the rationale behind the scheme. When reviewing the OMCYA's web-site and the 'Fact Sheet' explaining the CCSS (OMCYA 2008a), it is difficult to ascertain the reasons why parents should avail of ECEC services or what benefit there is for children taking up a place in a community childcare facility. The focus for this *dependant* group is on **regulating** access rather than **promoting** a beneficial policy for parents and children.

> The subsidies are available in respect of parents who are in receipt of social welfare payments … Subsidies are not available in respect of parents who are not in receipt of these payments. (OMCYA, 2008a)

Once again, a review of the Free Pre-School Year (ECCE) scheme reveals different roles for parents and service providers relative to the CCSS. Parents are facilitated in making informed decisions while being encouraged to actively recruit their current service providers into the scheme if not already participating (OMCYA, 2009a).

> If your child is already attending a pre-school service … you can ask the service provider if they plan to participate in the scheme (OMCYA 2009a).

This contrasts with how CCSS parents are addressed. They get little mention as most of the literature is aimed at the CSPs. However, a press release by the Minister encourages parents to complete their paper work on time so that they do not delay the funding process for CSPs:

> All parents with children in community childcare services … will be asked to complete the Declaration forms by 26 October 2007 … This information … will be the basis on which services will be funded so that they can provide reduced fees to the parents using their services (OMCYA 2007).

There is no suggestion that these targeted parents become involved in the development of the scheme as there is no *problem-solving* role designed into the scheme for dependant parents (Schneider and Ingram, 1993).

Community Service Provider as Gate Keeper

The CCSS was introduced to replace the EOCP Staffing Grant which provided an operational subsidy to CSPs in designated areas of disadvantage to cover a portion of staffing costs while assisting eligible local parents returning to work, education or training to access the service for their children. The shift from the EOCP Staffing Grant to the CCSS has resulted in a revised construction of the role of the CSP. Previously, they had discretion to meet local needs by providing subsidised places "based on ability to pay" (Minister for Health and Children, 22/04/2009). While the recommended mechanism for facilitating this was also a sliding scale of fees, the Minister for Health and Children, Mary Harney, points out in her response to a Dáil question that "many of them did not implement this requirement" (22/04/2009).

Only two of the ten providers surveyed had an extensive sliding scale of fees in place under the Staffing Grant scheme, however, providers outlined how they used discretion to reduce fees if there were siblings or there was particular hardship[3]. The role was one of *capacity*

[3] As the CSPs surveyed service large populations within designated areas of disadvantage, nine services reported that most parents accessing the service tended to be from relatively similar socio-economic groupings. CSPs reported that parents that were working, tended not to be in very highly paying jobs so CSPs structured the fees to reflect what the average resident could afford and made adjustments as needed based on individual circumstances. It is understood that in rural areas where the designated area of disadvantage is

building where they looked at individual circumstances to assess how best to support local parents. This would indicate a positive construction of providers, under the previous scheme, as having the capacity to assist in solving local problems and it gave CSPs an element of power to interpret policy tools and make adjustments based on their assessment of the problem locally, features associated with *capacity building* and *learning tools*. The CCSS has removed the discretionary element in implementation as it was not being used in a manner that the OMCYA recommended. The CSP is now charged with the task of acting as an intermediary for the State in gathering data from parents in order to gain access to funding thus positioning the CSPs as *gate-keepers*.

> [C]ommunity services … will need all parents using their services to complete the Parent Declaration forms which are being sent to services this week. The services need to return these forms to the Office of the Minister for Children not only to enable the funding for 2008 to be approved before the end of 2007, but also to provide the information his Office needs to carry out an impact assessment of the new scheme. (OMCYA 2007)

One provider reported that the focal point in conversations with parents about accessing the service had shifted away from a focus on what the service could offer the children to a discussion about the subsidy, and in turn the welfare status of the parent. The provider now becomes the agency to which parents present themselves to access services. However, CSPs interviewed were striving to maintain their capacity building relationship by organising information evenings for parents about the CCSS, 'translating' information provided by the OMCYA for parents into a more user friendly format and encouraging and assisting parents to apply for additional benefits, e.g., Family Income Supplement, medical cards, etc.

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considerably smaller and there is more opportunity to attract a more diverse social mix of children, the sliding scale becomes more relevant for ensuring equitable access.

The relationship between the CSPs and the OMCYA appears to be managed, although perhaps unintentionally, in a way that ensures CSPs remain distanced from each other and do not mobilise to address issues of concern. CSPs reported that administrative difficulties or queries that arose in relation to the operation of the scheme were dealt with by way of phone calls or emails directly to the individual staff members of the OMCYA. They were not directed to contact the City Childcare Committee that has a role in administering the scheme and could have fulfilled a representative role on behalf of CSPs in the City. This keeps issues dispersed and ensures no momentum gathers around any issue. This concurs with Ingram & Smith's (1993) contention that there is a view that when dealing with dependant groups leadership from within is not trusted. It is also in line with an international trend in which "power is being expanded and blunted at the same time" as community groups increasingly become involved with the provision of and contracting for services "offering them responsibility without [adequate] resources and power" (Craig, Mayo et al. 2000 p. 329).

Quality and Affordability – An Unresolved Dilemma for CSPs

As the proximate target of policy, literature focuses on the mechanisms through which the OMCYA supports CSPs "to provide ***quality*** childcare services at reduced rates to disadvantaged parents" (OMCYA, 2008a) [emphasis added]. While it is clear when reading the literature how the scheme operates to offer reduced rates through the mechanism of a sliding scale of subsidy, the reference to quality is what can be described as 'symbolic' as

there are no mechanisms identified in the operation of the scheme that address quality beyond the basic need to be compliant with regulations (Schneider and Ingram, 1990).[4]

The decision not to address quality is one of the severe criticisms of the scheme expressed by CSPs interviewed and C&V groups that have documented their concerns about the scheme (DCCC, 2008; ICPN 2008; McCarthy, 2008). CSPs continue to struggle to balance quality and affordability with little guidance or support from the State. Qualifications of staff have been identified as a key indicator of quality (OECD, 2006) but many CSPs do not have adequate funds to invest in qualified staff. Many settings continue to rely on State funded Community Employment (CE) staff to deliver services. The correlation between reliance on CE staff and fees charged, presented in Table 1 below, is evident in the research sample investigated. Table 1 reveals the full-time and part-time fees charged in the ten Community Services surveyed. While all services utilised CE staff, the staff ratios capture information on the number of CE staff working along with directly paid staff, based on full-time equivalents. CE staff working in administrative capacities, maintenance, cooking or cleaning were excluded from the calculation. As is evident in Table 1, the services with the lowest fees, Service Provider 1, had the highest reliance on CE staff working directly with children with two CE full-time equivalent staff for every one directly paid full-time equivalent staff member. The most expensive fees were associated with Service Providers 9 and 10. They had no reliance on CE staff working directly with children. While other factors such as rent and capacity to attract additional financial support explain part of the variance in fees, CE has the most significant impact on fees being charged.

[4] In 2010 the OMCYA are inviting all CCSS services to apply for the Free Pre-School Year if not already providing it and under this scheme CSPs will be asked to adhere to the principles of Siolta and Aistear and provide details of staff qualifications (OMCYA 2010a).

Table 1: Ratio of Community Employment Staff to Directly Employed Staff Ratio of Community[5]

Service Provider	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7***	**8**	**9**	**10**
Full-time weekly fee	€130	€140				€160	€100	€173	€175	€197
Part-time weekly fee	€65	€100	€90	€90	€70	€80	€60	€107	€105	€100
Ratio CE Staff: Paid Staff	1:0.5	1:0.5	1:0.66	1:0.66	1:0.85	1:1	1:1.33	1:4	0:1	0:1

* The fees for Community Service Provider 7 are subsidised with additional funding from a parent organisation so fees paid by parents are not comparable to other services

Symbolic rhetoric is frequently used for dependant groups even when the problem clearly requires a direct investment to tackle the issue; they permit a show of great concern but relieve the State of the need to allocate resources (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). This is particularly evident when reviewed against the conditions of funding under the Free Pre-School Year in ECCE scheme, which stipulates that services must adhere to the principles of Síolta – the National Quality Framework (2006), minimum staff qualifications of a Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) are stipulated for Pre-School Leaders and the per capita subsidy is increased by an additional 16% where the pre-school leader holds a qualification at a "Level 7 or Level 8 on the NFQ or equivalent" and Pre-school assistants in these services must hold a Level 5 or equivalent (OMCYA 2009b). The Free Pre-School Year Scheme, which is aimed at a less dependant and more powerful target group, moves beyond symbols and provides incentives to address the quality issues. This first attempt to link up the national quality initiatives with funding tools was delivered on foot of this powerful and deserving group losing a substantial direct cash payment, the Early Childcare Supplement (ECS), and being given access for their children to a free pre-school

[5] Rent was also a contributing factor as rate ranged from €0 to €30,000 p.a. but information for all services was not available.

place in its place. The financial incentives to employ highly qualified staff are clearly visible in this scheme.

Parental Reaction to CCSS

Moving beyond the OMCYA literature and looking at the behavioural impact of the policy tool, reports prepared by the Irish Childcare Policy Network (ICPN, 2008), PLANET, the Partnerships Network, (PLANET, 2008), Dublin Inner City Partnership and Dublin Inner City Childcare Providers Network (McCarthy, 2008) and the Dublin City Childcare Committee (DCCC, 2008) were consulted as they identified a range of anticipated behavioural parental reactions to the CCSS. This was supplemented with findings from the parental questionnaires and interviews with CSPs revealing the actual behavioural impact on parents and their children.

The C&V group reports anticipated that a number of parents who had access to local services under the EOCP Staffing Grant would no longer qualify under the CCSS and would experience particular financial hardship if they wanted to continue to use their community based childcare services.

Table 2: Weekly CCSS Subsidy Rates Paid to Service Provider by Band[6]

Add €30 per full-time baby reduced pro-rata (NOTE: this baby subsidy	**Band A**	**Band B**	**Band C**	**Band D**

[6] The fee for parents is calculated by subtracting the subsidy amount from the full cost of providing the relevant childcare place. Parents with no social welfare entitlement (Band D) pay the full cost of the childcare place.

will be terminated in September 2010)				
Full Day 5hr+	€100	€70	€45	€0
Part-time 3.5-5hr	€50	€35	€22.50	€0
Shorter hours 2.25-3.5hr	€33	€23	€15	€0
Half Session less 2.5hr	€16	€11	€7.50	€0

Within the research sample these parents, who became Band D parents under the CCSS [See Table 2], saw their fees increase on average from €89.67 per week to €125.67[7]. A review of the marital and employment status of the Band D parents revealed that all of Band D respondent reported being either married or living with their partner and 86% were employed (73% of them were working full-time, 13% part-time) with 7% looking for work. Under the EOCP Staffing Grant the children of these parents qualified for access based on the CSPs' criteria for access, which typically meant that parents were living or working within the local area, an area of designated disadvantage, and some assessment of their ability to pay was made by the provider to determine the fee. A major benefit of this approach was the services (in 50% of the cases reviewed) attracted a social mix of children with backgrounds that more accurately reflected the child's lived cultural experience. This integrated educational approach assists in recognising and respecting mutual interests and the development of shared understandings through shared activities (Dewey 1916; Clancy 1995). As the social mix of children diminishes in many services under the CCSS, a key concern of providers is that the segregation of children of Band A parents within designated community based services may result in labelling and stigmatising children, a feature commonly associated with subsidies directed as dependant groups (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). It is these negative consequences

[7] For Married/Living with Partner, the average fee is calculated for 23 full-time places, 16 part-time places and 4 sessional places. For Single/Separated Parents, the average fee is calculated for 8 full-time places, 21 part-time places and 2 sessional places.

of segregation that have prompted national policies focused on the travelling community to support more integrative approaches to service provision in education (DES, 2006).

Half of the ten CSPs interviewed reported a switch in users with Band A parents (in receipt of the full subsidy amount) taking up places for their children that Band D parents were forced to give up due to what they perceived as a financial penalty. The view of parents about why this happened was revealed in the parental questionnaire when asked to give a concluding comment on the CCSS:

> *I feel the bands are unfair to married couples*
>
> *Huge financial difficulty for working families*
>
> *No benefit to us as a family. It changes the mix of children – ghetto childcare. Unfair that even though we have similar (sometimes less) income to those on benefit (after mortgage/rent, etc.) we pay €100 more*
>
> *I can't understand how the govt went about intro new scheme. Just because we can't tick a box to quality for A or B we're exempt. Don't consider families outgoings, how many children they have, etc.*
>
> *Because I'm married I don't qualify regardless of income*
>
> *Because I don't think it's fair on working mothers or fathers*

The perception exists amongst parents and providers that married and working parents were being burdened by the new scheme, while benefits accrue to single and non-working parent. Band D parents have reduced access to regulated, formal childcare due to a financial penalty. The negative impact on working and married parents in this sample may have been unintended but the actions elicited amongst these parents are in direct conflict with social inclusion and employment policies which actively encourage employment as a means of tackling social exclusion (Ireland, 2006), while family policy aims to support and encourage stable long term relationships (Ireland, 1998).

Other behaviours have been elicited amongst the target group that run counter to actions encouraged under other national policies. One provider noted the decreased visibility of fathers dropping off and collecting children from the service amongst parents that qualify for a subvention. The incentive to hold onto the one parent family payment has increased since the introduction of the CCSS which could be perceived to be a *reward* rather than *assistance* for parents. Again, this poses difficulties for policy on the family. Another provider reported Band D parents reverting back to using unregulated informal care, as was anticipated by the C&V organisations' reports (McCarthy, 2008; PLANET, 2008). This behavioural adjustment runs contrary to national policy within the OMCYA itself which strives to increase the number of children using regulated care (Ireland, 2000).

However, one of the unanticipated impacts that emerged from the research was the level of animosity felt by some Band D parents against parents qualifying for support. This was evident in some of the comments made by parents and in interviews with CSPs. One Manager reported on a meeting that was held to inform parents about the new scheme. One Band A parent attended but reported feeling very intimidated by the level of anger of Band D parents and was careful not to let other parents know she qualified for Band A during the meeting. General comments made by parents on the questionnaire included the following:

> *Spend more of your time looking at the people who cheat the system and not the people paying taxes, etc. Very annoying*
>
> *My sister qualifies and I don't. Have other expenses for children, this is an additional expense I could do without. Everyone wants access to playschool to get kids ready for school*

The divisive rhetoric distracts attention away from the State's responsibilities to parents and children (Ireland, 2000; UNCRC; Bunreacht na hEireann, 1937) and reduces the mobilisation efforts of support agencies, thus ensuring communities do not organise and gain power.

Placing burdens on less powerful groups is facilitated when there are no channels of consultation or influence open to these groups (Ingram and Smith, 1993).

A key complaint in the C&V reports analysed was the lack of consultation prior to and during implementation of the CCSS (DCCC, 2008; McCarthy, 2008) as they believed they had information that could usefully inform the design of the CCSS so that it could more effectively meet the needs of both the target population and the policy developers. Consultation and opportunity for feedback are features normally associated with *learning tools* where the target group are viewed as having the capacity to engage in problem-solving (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). This lack of consultation and inability of the target groups or the C&V groups advocating on their behalf to influence the process reflects a paternalistic approach in which the State decides what is best for community providers, parents and indirectly, children. This inculcates a sense of helplessness amongst parents as they have no channel of communication but must accept what is presented to them and diminishes the role of intermediaries in engaging in problem-solving in partnership with or on behalf of target groups.

While the dependant groups are viewed as being unable to do things for themselves (Ingram and Smith, 1993) community development practices focus on challenging these stereotypes by empowering, mobilising and advocating with and on behalf of socially excluded target groups (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993; Diamond 2008). In two of the ten services, parents did mobilise, with the support and assistance of their CSPs. They wrote to the Minister to protest about the changes and the impact it was having on them but as a politically weak group (because of low voter turnout in the designated areas of disadvantage the community

services in Dublin are located in) these isolated actions proved ineffective and yielded no response thus potentially discouraging future protests.

Schneider and Ingram (1993) contend that less powerful groups tend to be more passive recipients of services from the State and are used to admitting their dependency. This may explain why, when parents were asked if they objected to passing on details about their welfare or employment status to providers, an overwhelming 96% of Band A parents had no objection. This grouping of predominantly one parent families are treated as a dependant group in that their primary form of interaction with government or agencies is as "applicants or claimants who are applying for services to bureaucracy" (Schneider and Ingram, 1993, p. 342). There was more resistance amongst Band D parents with over 50% objecting to handing over information to providers but the comments revealed that they were frustrated at not qualifying for the subsidy after giving details to providers. Band D parents were very strong at expressing their anger but of the Band A parents, all of whom had experienced significant fee decreases only one parent surveyed gave an overall positive comment that:

> *It's been a huge benefit*

This may indicate a level of passivity amongst Band A parents, who are conditioned to accept more support, despite the fact that many of them were managing to pay the fees before the subvention. Band A parents may construct themselves as undeserving and fear drawing attention to the positive impacts of the scheme in case the financial safety net is withdrawn from them. In 50% of services surveyed there was no significant change in parents taking places for their children. The Band A parents, 75% of whom avail of part-time or sessional places, experienced an average decrease in fees of €20.71 to €43.23 within this Dublin sample.

As the safety net of financial support expands for parents, they face the potential of falling deeper into the welfare trap. Within the design of the system, efforts have been made to counteract this pitfall and encourage parents into work or training through a 'gradual reduction' of the subsidy. Band A parents continue to be entitled to the subsidy at a Band B level for a year after they take up employment (OMCYA 2010b) and they can avail of support through the Free Pre-School Year Scheme once their child meets the qualifying age. However, respondents to the questionnaire indicated that the financial impact of the subsidy being lost or reduced was a key consideration when thinking about their employment options. When asked whether parents would consider the impact on their CCSS Band of taking up employment, 60% of respondent indicated they would take it into consideration, 63% of these parents worried about a potential increase in their fees. Comments on this question included:

> *Hindered future potential to work and make money*
>
> *If it decreased my subvention I would not take up employment*
>
> *Well if I went part-time I'd be entitled to help*

Summary

Overall, the dual policy objectives of the CCSS to firstly ensure targeted welfare dependant families are gaining access to community based childcare services and secondly that a tiered fee structure is put in place in each service to facilitate this, are clearly realised but the actual behavioural changes have yielded some negative impacts for parents, service providers, children and other national policies. Parents that have benefited financially from the additional support face the possibility of an increased dependence on the State as they face a financial burden if their employment or marital status changes, actions being advocated in

policy documents promoting social inclusion, employment, equality and family. Band D parents that are no longer eligible to receive a subsidy have been financially burdened, they believe, because of their marital or work status. This divisive measure is combined with a revision in the role of CSPs from local problem solver to administrator and gate keeper of the scheme. This creates an environment that is not conducive to organisation or mobilisation ensuring power remains dispersed so little pressure is brought to bear for a more equitable definition of, or solution to, the problem. Parents present themselves to providers as an applicant rather than a parent seeking the support of a locally run community based service. The State distances itself from the problem and uses symbolic rhetoric rather than investment to address quality of service provision which has a direct impact on children using the service. A paternalistic approach is adopted by the State where it decides on the design and implementation of the scheme with minimal consultation. This contrasts with the apparent capacity building approach adopted when designing the Free Preschool Year where *advantaged* parents are encouraged to participate in the action, adequate resources are available to realise the actions and parents are constructed as being capable of problem-solving.

Conclusion

This investigation demonstrates that the CCSS is an *incentive tool* that is structured based on a negative social construction of the target groups as dependant and with little capacity to solve their own problems. The policy tool does little to address or reverse this construction but rather reinforces stereotypes and ensures target groups remain powerless which can "inculcate a sense of incapacity, lack of deservedness, and culpability for their own

problems" (Schneider and Ingram, 1990, p. 523). This attempt at looking beyond "policy goals at their face value and toward examining the meanings and assumption within policy designs" (Schneider and Sidney, 2009, p. 114) as well as the social, economic and political impact is a move towards policy evaluation that tries to understand the full complexity of social problems. It reveals the array of unintended consequences that remain concealed by narrow evaluations of initiatives. The need to adopt a broader vision for children which would guide the evaluation of ECEC programmes is critical if the State wishes to move beyond words to effective action in order to realise the objective of the Children's Strategy (Ireland, 2000) to develop quality supports and services that focus on children's needs.

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