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Introduction: Children at the Centre of Practice

Nóirín Hayes

INTRODUCTION

There have been significant changes in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Ireland over recent decades. Responding to the increasing demands for provision, there has been unprecedented investment in the expansion of places and the infrastructure to manage such developments. The growth of local childcare support networks and improved co-ordination across the national voluntary organisations has given an increased visibility to the sector that was missing in the 1990s. The establishment in 2011 of the Department for Children – incorporating the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) – should further enhance cohesion and integration across the variety of policy issues, including early years provision, that impact directly on young children's lives.

To a somewhat lesser extent there has been investment in supports for services to enhance the quality and sustainability of provision. This can be seen in the various financial supports available to childcare settings, including the introduction of the free pre-school year. Furthermore, the publication of *Stolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE 2006) and *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA 2009) creates a rich basis for considering practice in services for young children. Finally, attention to the quality of staff working in the sector is captured by the commitments on training reported in the Workforce Development Plan (DES 2009) and offers an opportunity to follow other countries towards supporting and developing a graduate-led, diverse professional base to enhance the quality of service provision and the experiences of young children.

A number of international and national developments can be seen as directly influencing the daily work of practitioners in early childhood settings. Hayes and Kernan (2008) identified these developments as including:

- 1 The professionalising of the early years sector with expanded provision of higher-level training and the associated development of standards of good practice and ethics.
- 2 The growing heterogeneity of societies.

- 3 The almost universal ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- 4 The notion of ECEC settings as sites of democratic practice where children and adults can participate collectively in interpreting experiences and shaping decisions affecting themselves (Moss 2007).
- 5 The centrality of the principles of social inclusion and respect for diversity in good-quality early childhood education.

These developments have been accompanied by a growing recognition of the importance of quality early childhood education experiences for all children in providing lasting educational, developmental and social benefits; and a view that access to quality ECEC is a right for all children.

EARLY YEARS PRACTICE

This chapter considers how theory and processes inform early years practice at a time when more young children are now spending more time in a range of settings outside the home. Evidence shows that the most effective early childhood practice is that which has a sound theoretical base. We know that the adult, and their style of engagement, has a profound impact on the learning experiences of children and sets the scene for their sense of engagement with the world. We also know a great deal about how children develop and learn and we recognise that early childhood experiences are important to children in their day-to-day life and into their future. Children are the social group most affected by the quality of early childhood services. While this seems like a truism, there is relative complacency about what actually happens to children in their everyday experiences and an assumption that by just attending early years settings they will develop and progress positively. In fact the quality of everyday experiences in the early years – wherever children are – has a profound influence on them. They are not merely recipients or consumers of a service but are deeply influenced, individually and collectively, by their early years experiences. The National Children’s Strategy (DoH 2000) recognises that children are active agents in their development and that they affect and are affected by the environments within which they grow. They are active participants in our society and have a right to expect that early childhood settings will challenge and excite them, provide safety and security and enhance their overall development and learning. It is useful to review current understandings of how early childhood practices impact on children. Such a review can act as a stimulus for practitioners to reflect on their practice and the quality of provision for young children so that the experience of early childhood settings will be a positive and affirming one for all those involved.

Children develop in the midst of many different and interacting systems. Whilst the family is recognised as the central space for early development, an increasing number of families share the early care and education of their children with various

types of service. These services grow and are supported as part of the wider society and have, to a greater or lesser degree, contacts with other educational, social and cultural settings in the wider community. They thus provide an important bridge for children and parents alike, particularly useful where services are provided for minority or marginalised parents and their children. While focusing on the role of the practitioner in respect of children attending settings it is also important to recognise the important potential of early childhood settings in creating these links across various systems.

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN CHILDREN, ADULTS AND ENVIRONMENTS

The interactions between individual children, the adults in their life and the various early years environments are critical spaces for learning. In Ireland ‘early childhood education’ refers to the development and learning of young children from birth through to the age of 6 years. This period of life has been defined internationally as the first stage in education. The contemporary view of children as active agents in their learning is an important one. It requires practitioners to recognise and respond to the reality that even the very youngest children contribute to the context and content of their own development. This is not to underestimate the dependence of the child or the very powerful protective role of the adult. It does, however, challenge adults to reconsider practice and to take account of the rich and diverse nature of each child when planning early education and care, designing learning environments and providing learning opportunities.

Viewing children as participants in the early childhood process allows adults to work with children as well as provide for them. It provides a context within which children can be seen as contemporaries and can be valued in the here and now. While it is important to consider the future – and practitioners are contributing to the foundations of future learning – it is the immediate, day-to-day experiences that are of most relevance: these are the experiences that matter. Children learn from the world around them; the ordinary has the potential to be extra-ordinary. The adult can contribute in making the experience of the ordinary a rich learning experience through expanding children’s language, thinking and understanding.

Children trust adults and look to them for protection and guidance. Children are motivated to learn, to seek meaning in their world, and they expect that the adults they meet will assist them in this endeavour. They bring to the learning situation their own capabilities and will develop, through their experiences, the dispositions for learning that will contribute to their overall success among their peers and in new social environments. It is at this stage in their development that children come to understand their world. Their curiosity and desire for knowledge is evident in their play, their exploration, their questions and their behaviour. The adult has a valuable contribution to make in this regard. To make the most of the early years, children need adults who trust them, adults who are excited, inspired and challenged

by them. The child becomes the centre of practice and the curriculum reflects this. Good practice requires that adults actively include children in the experiences of the early years setting, engage with children and learn from them as well as enhance the learning opportunities for them. This pedagogical approach is informed by a belief in the active nature of child development and includes the child as a partner in development.

The extent to which practice is responsive to learning opportunities in even the most mundane activity, such as nappy changing, transition from one space to the next or tidy-up time, will influence the quality of the experience for the child. Settings which recognise that learning is an ongoing process will engage children in day-to-day activities, will include them in planning and will expect them to contribute. The challenges of this approach to practice are recognised. It is not sufficient to make a plan for the day and follow it; the dynamic and interactive nature of development requires that practitioners are responsive and reflective throughout their engagement with children. The design, organisation and resourcing of the early years setting is central to the early learning process. Settings, both indoor and outdoor, should be safe whilst also providing rich and varied opportunities for exploration, play and risk-taking. Children thrive where they feel part of the learning environment and feel that they belong, and adults need to consider how best to make settings welcoming and familiar for all children, irrespective of their background. The planning necessary for such quality provision requires the creation of learning opportunities in a risk-rich, content-rich and language-rich environment. Such practice is most effective when it is relational and responsive to the child. This refocusing of practice requires a significant shift in approach away from the traditional styles.

THEORY TO PRACTICE

In research, the role of the early years setting in modern societies is under review. It is no longer seen as simply a safe place to have children minded while parents work. Rather, it is recognised as an influential institution for children, one where their rights and needs can be met in a way that recognises and respects them. Within such settings children have the opportunity to develop a sense of belonging beyond the immediate family group, a sense of contributing to a new social system. The quality of these opportunities can influence their sense of identity; the view they form of themselves. This reality places an obligation on adults to be alert to the immediate environment whilst at the same time remaining sensitive to the background experiences of children and the valuable contribution of such experiences, even for very young children.

Research continues to illustrate that successful early education facilitates the child in active learning in environments that are well planned, where staff are well trained, confident and supported in their work. Quality models of early education are characterised by underpinning principles which present a view of the child as an active partner in the integrated and ongoing process of learning, reflecting a strong

commitment to developing the social and affective dimensions of learning as well as the more traditional emphasis on cognitive development. This reflects the views expressed by many (Bruner 1996; Hayes 2008; Hayes and Kernan 2008; Hayes and Bradley 2009; Sylva *et al.* 2004) that the most important learning in early education has to do with the affective and difficult-to-measure aspects of development such as aspirations, social skills, motivation, organisation, learner identity and confidence.

Rather than attending to the implementation of a given curriculum, research suggests that it is more effective to have a well-trained workforce, familiar with child development and subject material, who recognise and respond to the dynamic and individual nature of development in the early years and who can work with an emerging curriculum which is driven by the interests and experiences of the children and the opportunities afforded by the environment (OECD 2006). Cultivating positive learning dispositions and feelings in young children leads to positive outcomes in social, linguistic and cognitive development and the skills necessary for later school success. It is a holistic, adaptive and, ultimately, more effective approach to early education.

One of the difficulties in translating research findings into practice, however, is that practice happens in the real world and learning is a far more dynamic and messy process than any text can capture. Contemporary research and literature confirm the importance of attending to this dynamic and messy process and informing such attention by reference to our increased knowledge about and understanding of the components of the process and their interdependence. Early education models of practice have been guided by principles derived from the study of development and pedagogy, by societal values and by the aims that policymakers have for education.

The role of the adult in early childhood education is crucial and multi-faceted and has been characterised as a combination of listener, questioner, adviser, demonstrator, actor, sympathiser, negotiator, assessor and guide (Athey 1990). I would go further and contend that the adult in early childhood settings must also recognise their role as a 'learner', a reflective observer of children who learns from observation and uses this as the basis for pedagogical practice (Hayes 2008). To have a positive impact in the lives of young children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, requires understanding and respect for the fact that children are active agents and participants in their development. Recognising the child's active contribution to the process of learning reflects the rise in attention to children's participation in education that has emerged from psychological, sociological and rights research (Dahlberg and Moss 2005) and calls for a new pedagogical approach. Such a pedagogy presumes that all minds are capable of holding ideas and beliefs: and, through discussion and interaction, it can be moved towards some shared frame of reference and is child-sensitive, less patronising and more respectful of children's own role in their development. In the early years, understanding the dynamic development of individual children is critical as it presents insight into the varied levels of cognitive, affective and social development that are more typical than in later years; normative development affords a valuable benchmark against which to check the dynamic development of individual children, should such checks be necessary.

A NURTURING PEDAGOGY

If adults are to nurture children's learning as part of a caring educative process, they must develop skills of observation and reflection to allow for the non-intrusive planning and provision of a learning environment that supports and extends children's own learning and provides quality interactive opportunities. To nurture requires an engaged, bi-directional level of interaction and confers on the early years practitioner an enhanced educational role. Despite many recommendations highlighting the value of balancing the care and education elements of early education, there is a tendency to underestimate the educative role of caring. A significant shift in understanding the role of care in practice requires an explicit acknowledgement of the critical contribution of the interpersonal aspect of early education, the realisation in practice of the proximal process, the engines of development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998). To emphasise this, it has been argued that there is a value in reconceptualising care as nurture in order that its status as an educative dimension be enhanced (Hayes 2006, 2008). Considering care as nurture gives it an active connotation, placing a responsibility on the adult to provide nurturance and foster learning rather than to simply mind or protect the child. Such a shift in emphasis would raise the expectations many have of early childhood care and education.

Reconceptualising care as nurture would strengthen the attention given to the educative value of care and allow for a more appropriate 'nurturing pedagogy' to emerge in early education learning environments (Hayes 2006, 2008; Hayes and Kernan 2008). Linking the term 'nurture' with pedagogy is intended to focus attention on the implications for practice. Although well known in educational theory through the work of authors such as Freire (1998/1970) and Bruner (1996), the term 'pedagogy' is a relatively new one in Irish early education discourse.

Pedagogy is a word that captures the multi-layered and dynamic practices necessary to support children's holistic development. The term 'pedagogy' is used to capture the integrated processes of caring, educating and learning alongside the principles, theory, values and approaches which underpin daily work with young children in the range of early childhood settings. Pedagogy encompasses the processes of children learning and adults creating learning opportunities and environments that engage, challenge and interest young children. It also focuses attention on the everyday learning in which adults themselves engage as they observe, reflect on and critically analyse the content and approach to their work with young children, alone and with other adults.

Central to a nurturing pedagogy are relationships and interactions: between children; between adults and young children; between adults and their colleagues and the parents of the children they work with; and between learners and the environments where learning takes place. A nurturing pedagogy is a style of practice that is explicit in engaging children, respecting them and integrating the learning opportunities provided across the care and education dimensions. It builds on the individual capabilities and dispositions of the child within the social context and

derives from the belief that it is the close interactions, the proximal processes, between children and between children and adults that drive development and learning. Examples include feeding and comforting babies, playing with young children, facilitating child-to-child interactions, comforting those in distress, making plans, acquiring new knowledge and know-how. Responding to our understanding of early childhood development requires that we prioritise relationships and interactions over direct instruction and teaching as the cornerstone of early educational practice.

Combining the word 'pedagogy' with the term 'nurture' is intended to strengthen the early years professional space. The word 'nurture' has quite a different tone to it from the word 'care'. In comparing the meaning of the two words, 'nurture' is more engaging and active than 'care'. The verb 'to care' is almost custodial in tone and caring requires a minimum of interaction; the adult merely provides for and looks after the child. To nurture, on the other hand, conveys a far more engaged level of interaction and requires the adult to actively nourish, rear, foster, train and educate the child through his/her practice.

Skills of observation and reflection are central to a nurturing pedagogy. They enhance practice and planning and are manifest in well-managed and yet reasonably flexible practice, and in the provision of a learning environment that includes children and supports and extends children's learning. This allows for increased attention to positive interactions between both child and adult and child and child. It also allows for planning by the adult for future opportunities that might extend the child's own learning, giving a key role to the adult which takes the child, rather than the content, as central. It encourages the movement away from the more traditional, organisational/management role of the practitioner and strengthens the focus on the adult's pedagogical role, which is sometimes absent in more play-based settings. A nurturing pedagogy fosters the processes of interaction, dialogue and planning, leading to the shared construction of knowledge, between children and adults, within the context of an emerging curriculum responsive to the child in the immediate now. This pedagogy highlights the importance of initial and continuing professional development for the adult.

In settings where the adult is observing and listening to young children and reflecting on these observations, the curriculum plan is based on an assessment of children's interests and developmental level as well as their needs and the aims of education. A nurturing pedagogy encourages reflective practice in which the practitioner creates rich, interactive learning environments. In addition, it facilitates early identification of difficulties in individual development and early action to address them, either in the context of the setting or through outside interventions and supports. Implicit in the concept of a nurturing pedagogy is the idea that pedagogy is a guide to an emergent and responsive curriculum and is in itself a form of assessment. Finally, a nurturing pedagogy extends the underlying idea of respect for the child as a participating partner in the learning process while at the same time recognising and articulating a mechanism for respecting the dual nature of early education as care and education in practice.

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The Development of Early Childhood Education in Ireland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Maura O'Connor

Learning Objectives

After studying this chapter the reader should be able to:

- Map the development of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Ireland from the nineteenth century to the second decade of the twenty-first century.
- Identify a number of factors influencing the advancement of ECEC services.
- Appreciate the changes and continuities over time in ECEC.
- Reflect on the historical and social constructions of the child and child-centred education.

INTRODUCTION

All the great educational systems of the past embodied some unchanging truths and therefore something from each of them must be found to-day in any system worthy of general adoption. (Fynne 1924:1)

This chapter provides a historical analysis of the growth and development of early childhood education in Ireland from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century.

The main aim of the national system of education which was established in 1831 was to provide a basic education for all the children of Ireland. No reference was made in the early years of the system as to the age at which children could begin their formal education in primary (national) schools. As a result, until 1884, children as young as two years of age could begin their schooling in primary schools. In that year it was stated that no child under 3 years could be enrolled in a primary school,

and no pupil aged over 7 years could be enrolled in an infant class. In 1934, the age of enrolment increased to 4 years.

CHILD-CENTRED EDUCATION

The evolution of the concept of the 'child' and 'child-centred education' that revolutionised the way the young child was perceived can be traced to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), Johann H. Pestalozzi (1746–1827) and Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852). These theorists, who are regarded as the pioneers of progressive education in Europe, contributed to new ways of thinking about teaching and learning (pedagogy), knowledge and curriculum, as well as the philosophy of education. They promoted the notion of a cultural or universal child, and regarded childhood as an important period in its own right and not as a preparation for any succeeding stage. The child was looked upon as being naturally good and naturally curious; consequently, his/her emotions, feelings and instincts were to be allowed full expression.

Pioneering educationalists in Ireland sought to modify and adapt the philosophies of these great educators to suit the particular needs of the Irish child. Richard Lovell Edgeworth (1744–1817) and his daughter Maria (1767–1849) were greatly influenced by the writings of Rousseau, and kept detailed records of their educational experiments and endeavours with the Edgeworth children in the late eighteenth century. These they published in a book entitled *Practical Education* (Edgeworth and Edgeworth 1798). The twenty-five chapters of the text represented a serious attempt by the Edgeworth family to put the psychology and the practice of education on a scientific basis.

Lady Powerscourt (1800–1836) established the first infant school in her estate in Enniskerry, County Wicklow in 1826 (Wilderspin 1832). Here she provided the young children with books, food, and a garden in which they could play. John H. Synge (1788–1845) was foremost among those in Ireland who were strongly influenced by the educational ideas of Pestalozzi. He was most impressed with what he witnessed when he visited Pestalozzi's school in Yverdon, and attempted in 1815 to introduce the Pestalozzian approach into this country when he set up a Pestalozzian elementary school in his estate in Roundwood, County Wicklow. He established a private press on which to print Pestalozzian textbooks and school charts and he prepared a detailed account, in English, of all he had learned from Pestalozzi and his educational endeavours (Synge 1815).

Eleonore Heerwart (1835–1911), who was trained as a kindergarten teacher by Froebel's second wife, opened a kindergarten and school in Dublin in 1862 to accommodate the needs of the children of the middle classes. Froebel coined the term kindergarten (*Kinder* – children; *Garten* – garden) to designate a garden where the child was presented as a human plant and the teacher as a careful gardener (Liebschner 1991). As well as endeavouring to educate her students according to Froebel's philosophies, in order to reach a wider audience Heerwart produced booklets offering guidance to those who wished to put Froebelian theories into practice (Heerwart 1883).

The private schools founded by the followers of the child-centred progressive educators of Europe could accommodate but a minority of children in the later decades of the nineteenth century. It was not until the creation in 1831 of a system of national education in Ireland, and the provision of mass schooling, that the majority of Irish children were afforded the opportunity of receiving any form of formal education.

THE NATIONAL SYSTEM OF EDUCATION (1831)

From the beginning of the national system it is evident that the value of infant education was recognised by members of the National Board of Education. In 1837, an Englishman named Samuel Wilderspin (1792–1866), who regarded himself as the ‘Inventor of Infant Education’, was appointed to introduce his system of infant education to Ireland, and to advise on the construction and appointment of the proposed model school and playground (McCann and Young 1982). In 1838, an advertisement inviting pupils for enrolment in the Model Infant School in Marlborough Street, Dublin, and outlining the rules of the school, appeared in the *Dublin Evening Mail* (O’Connor 2010:58).

Wilderspin, for a man of his time, had remarkable insights into the thinking and behaviour of young children. He had an appreciation of the part played by the teacher in supporting the intellectual development of the child. He recommended that instruction should be ‘interesting, lively and inspiring’. To achieve this he advised the use of the gallery ‘to teach the children simultaneously’, giving lessons which appealed to the senses, so that each child, ‘while literally at play’, was ‘acquiring a considerable amount of valuable knowledge’ (Wilderspin 1852:79). Wilderspin remained in this country for a year and was succeeded by his son-in-law Thomas Urry Young.

In 1852, Young was commissioned to prepare a manual on the theory and practice of teaching infant classes (Young 1852). He was cognisant of the fact that children as young as 2 years old had to be accommodated in infant classes with children who were much older, so he wisely suggested that ‘the Infant School legislates for its pupils in accordance with their age and state’ (Young 1852:6). From a perusal of the text it is evident, however, that he saw teaching as a skill that, if acquired, would achieve positive results for those working with young children. Equipping the educators with teaching tips and ready-made solutions was inadequate preparation for day-to-day school organisation and management. Despite Young’s best efforts, three decades after Wilderspin’s return to England, the neglect of young children in infant classes was regarded as one of the weakest points in the Irish education system.

THE POWIS COMMISSION (1868–70) AND ITS AFTERMATH

The Powis Commission, which was set up 1868 to evaluate the system of education in Ireland, was most critical of the inadequacy of the system of infant education in

this country. The Commissioners anticipated an improvement when the system of payment by results was introduced in 1872. According to the system a fixed sum of money would be paid for each pupil who passed an annual examination. The prescriptive programme for results–fees dictated the curriculum for the early years classes, and while the salaries of the teachers depended on the results their pupils obtained, the emphasis was to be on teaching rather than learning. Notwithstanding the best intentions of the Commissioners, the reports of the inspectorate in the 1870s continued to complain that young children were being introduced at an early age to a formal curriculum which prioritised reading, writing and arithmetic. Nevertheless, for many young children who had previously been ignored in school, this scheme meant an early introduction to literacy and numeracy.

Efforts were made in 1881 to introduce kindergarten into the infant programme when the Model Infant School in Marlborough Street, Dublin was organised along Froebelian lines (CNEI 1882). Prior to the introduction of the new approach, the headmistress of the Model Infant School, Miss Stephens, travelled to England to familiarise herself with this specialised method of infant education and organisation (CNEI 1884). In 1884, kindergarten became a component part of the programme for students in training to become teachers. In 1898, it achieved official recognition when it became a compulsory element of the curriculum for primary teachers. While its status was limited, it served to set the scene for future, more favourable, developments in ECEC.

THE COMMISSION ON MANUAL AND PRACTICAL INSTRUCTION (1897) AND THE REVISED PROGRAMME (1900)

In 1897, a Commission on Manual and Practical Instruction (the Belmore Commission) was set up to carry out wide-ranging enquiries into contemporary educational trends in Britain, Europe and America. Its general report reflected much of the child-centred movement, and particular emphasis was placed on the importance of educating children from their earliest years. A significant feature of the *Final Report of the Commission* (1898) was the recommendation that early childhood education should be accorded a much greater prominence than heretofore. It was advocated by the Commission that the Froebelian system of education be adopted in a modified form in the proposed new programme for primary schools. This would involve an intermixture of kindergarten with the work of reading, writing and arithmetic, while infant instruction should approximate as nearly as possible to the kindergarten ideal.

The introduction of the Revised Programme in 1900 heralded a whole new concept in Irish educational practice in relation to early childhood education, and presented a radical shift from the old didactic system of the nineteenth century. A new curriculum was now being introduced wherein reading, writing and arithmetic would remain as the core of a programme and attention would be given to the

practical elements of the practical subjects, while at the same time new subjects would be guaranteed.

The prescribed occupations for junior and senior infant classes outlined by the Revised Programme (1900) were consistent with the Froebelian notion of quality kindergarten practice. Froebel's first, second, third and fourth 'Gifts' were to be introduced, while drawing, singing, school discipline and physical drill, cookery, laundry work and needlework were also placed on the syllabus. The programme in English included reading sections from the First Book, copying letters of the alphabet, and spelling words of two letters. In arithmetic, the numbers one to ten were to be explored using concrete materials on slates or paper (CNEI 1900).

As the Revised Programme (1900) was based on progressive theories, all those involved in early childhood education had to battle with such polarities as the education of the hand as distinct from the head, and the education of the child's body as opposed to his or her mind. In the early years of the twentieth century this proved to be a formidable task that demanded a major shift in mindset for teachers, inspectors, school managers and parents as they endeavoured to come to terms with the new concept of the young child and his or her needs and interests.

THE DALE REPORT (1904) AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

As early as 1903, Mr F. H. Dale, an inspector from England, was invited by the National Board to evaluate and report on the Irish system of primary education. His report offered some very descriptive information on the situation four years after the introduction of the Revised Programme (1900). Commenting on infant education, he complained that the teaching of the younger children was one of the weakest parts of Irish primary education. He saw an urgent need for an improvement in the education of young children in Ireland, advising that the intelligence of all children was largely determined by the education which they received in the infant classes (Dale 1904). The advice offered by Dale on improving infant education prompted the Board to action and steps were taken to implement his recommendations, with a greater emphasis being placed on early childhood education in schools.

In 1906, all schools with an average attendance of between thirty-five and fifty students were granted permission to appoint a junior assistant mistress, a new category of untrained female teacher who concentrated mainly on the instruction and care of the youngest children in school. It was anticipated that she would prove to be particularly valuable 'in regard to the care and education of children of very tender years' (CNEI 1905–06:20).

Miss Edith O'Farrell, who had received her education in a Froebelian college in England, was appointed as a kindergarten organiser in 1903. By 1912, the number of such organisers had increased to six (CNEI 1911–12). The organisers were largely responsible for the development and dissemination of kindergarten principles in the early decades of the twentieth century. While their efforts to improve infant education were almost heroic, their work was to a great extent hampered by the lack

of resources available to infant schools as well as the inadequate accommodation and school furniture provided for young children. Nevertheless, they laboured tirelessly to propagate Froebelian theories by offering practical hints and suggestions to teachers of young children. The trajectory of the growth and development of kindergarten methods in this country would have been very different without their work in the early years of the twentieth century.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN THE IRISH FREE STATE

The process of implementing the Revised Programme (1900) was interrupted in the early 1920s with the onset of independence for Ireland. The primary focus of the education policy of the Irish Free State in 1922 was centred on the restoration of the Irish language and in consequence the introduction of a child-centred curriculum was pushed to the background. A new programme, which evolved from the First National Programme Conference of 1921–2, recommended that in the two grades of infant classes all the work should be done through the medium of Irish. This was a rule that affected nearly 250,000 children whose home language in over 90 per cent of cases was English (Ó Cuív 1969).

Many teachers disagreed on educational grounds with this principle of teaching young children solely through Irish when that was not the language of the home. A small concession was made as a result of the Second National Programme Conference of 1926, which allowed instruction in English before 10.30 a.m. and after 2.00 p.m. With the publication of a *Revised Programme of Instruction* in 1934 (Department of Education 1934), the English language was once again diminished in infant classrooms at a time when it was the vernacular of the majority of the young pupils. In 1948, teachers of early years children were permitted to teach their pupils through the medium of Irish for half an hour daily. In 1960 each teacher of junior classes was given the right to choose between using Irish as a medium of instruction in such classes, and teaching Irish as a subject only.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, teachers of young children in Irish schools were not, as yet, fully aware or convinced of the value of early childhood education. They were moved, however, by their own common sense and empathy with young children, and they were beginning to realise that the education of the young child, if it were to be constructive, could not be authoritative and dictatorial, but must certainly be focused on the young child's needs, interests and natural urge to play. During the 1940s, the nucleus of a conceptual framework for the reintroduction of the more child-centred curriculum was developing alongside the all-Irish policy in schools.

1948–1971: THE INFANT CLASSES GIVE THE LEAD

The publication of two policy documents – the *Revised Programme for Infants* (1948) (Department of Education 1948) and *An Naí-Scoil: The Infant School – Notes for Teachers* (1951) (Department of Education 1951) – marked a turning point in the

history of infant education in Ireland. The *Revised Programme* (1948) placed less emphasis on nationalistic ideas and concentrated more on an activity-based, child-centred curriculum, as had been advocated in the *Revised Programme* of 1900. The designers of the programme wished to ensure that each child developed an oral competence in both Irish and English. It acknowledged that young children were most receptive to language acquisition, and that they could acquire two languages without apparent effort, provided they were in a suitable learning environment. Stress was placed on the use of play, handwork, art, number, songs, dance and music.

During the 1950s and 1960s an infant programme which was crucially important in its own right was implemented in the primary schools. This new curriculum offered a whole new concept of what constituted early childhood education. Its introduction was less revolutionary than the previous programmes of 1900, 1922 and 1926. Further, as had been the case in the early decades of the twentieth century, teachers of young children were supported in their endeavours to implement the programme by a group of female organising inspectors who travelled around the country offering professional development courses on classroom organisation, teaching approaches and methodologies, while focusing also on the holistic development of the child.

The advice and practical guidance provided by the organising inspectors seems to have been accepted and implemented by the teachers, because their pioneering work, and that of their more progressive colleagues, was acknowledged in the Primary School Curriculum of 1971 (Department of Education 1971), which stated that one of the most significant developments in the years after the publication of *An Naí-Scoil* in 1951 had been the application of these principles beyond the infant classes (Department of Education 1971:15). According to the curriculum of 1971, the junior and senior infant programme was to be extended upwards and outwards to incorporate all the classes of the primary school. It was suggested that the process should be gradual, systematic and organic, with no sharp wrench for the child between one stage of his or her development and the next. Teachers of junior and senior infants were advised that early childhood education, if it were to be successful, must be based on the child's instinctive urge to play, talk, imitate, manipulate materials, and make and do things.

The child-centred curriculum of 1971 was superseded by the 1999 Primary School Curriculum (Government of Ireland 1999). Like its predecessor, it placed greater emphasis on child-centred and quality education. In a socio-cultural environment, young children are encouraged to speak, to be active in their learning and to construct meaning with knowledgeable others.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ECEC SERVICES FROM THE 1970S TO THE PRESENT

While innovations were taking place in the primary school system from the 1950s, in terms of provision and practice little state provision was made for the education and well-being of the pre-school child. This was perhaps because until the late 1960s the majority of children were cared for at home, primarily by the mother, until they

attended primary school. Until 1940, there were only three day nurseries in Ireland (Cowman 2007). These included the Liberty Crèche, which was founded in 1892, Henrietta Street Nursery (1923), and St Brigid's Nursery (1939) (Cowman 2007). In the absence of state assistance and support, movements began from the late 1960s to provide services on a private or community basis (Douglas 1994). Such services included childminding, nurseries, community playgroups, grúpaí naíonraí and pre-schools. From small beginnings the movements grew and prospered.

In 1969, the Department of Education and the Van Leer Foundation initiated a pre-school intervention project in Rutland Street, Dublin (Holland 1979). During 1994 and 1995, the Department of Education and Science (DES) established a total of forty Early Start pre-schools attached to primary schools for children in areas of disadvantage. These were based mainly on the Rutland Street interventionist model. The Rutland Street pre-school continues to operate, as do the Early Start pre-schools. Primary school teachers and early years educators work closely with parents in these schools, which are funded by the Department of Education and Skills.

During the 1990s a consciousness in relation to children's rights was emerging. In 1992, the ratification by Ireland of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child marked an important milestone in this regard. In 2000, the *National Children's Strategy* (DoHC 2000), which was rooted in the positive vision for childhood outlined by the Convention, set out a ten-year plan of action to improve the quality of children's lives. With the increased participation of women in the workforce in the late 1990s, private crèches became increasingly popular with parents, often providing a readily available form of childcare. A crèche usually offers education and care to young children up to the age of 5 years, with some providing care for older children. Crèches generally operate from 7.30 a.m. to 6.00 p.m., reflecting the working day of many parents. They provide a range of services which include full- or part-time day care, playgroups and after-school clubs, while some collect and return children to their homes.

In the late 1990s, a wide range of policy documents and initiatives focusing on the needs of the young child were introduced, many of them as a result of the workings of the National Forum on Early Childhood Education (Coolahan 1998), which was held in 1998. This forum provided the first opportunity in Ireland for diverse groups and organisations with an interest in early childhood education to unite. It explored a broad range of issues related to the provision of early childhood education for children from birth to the age of 6 years old (Coolahan 1998; DJELR 1999). It was attended by organisations, including service providers, parents, teachers, teacher educators, care workers, statutory and voluntary agencies and social partners. The report of the forum provided the basis for the publication of the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn* (DES 1999). The establishment of a Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) in 2002, whose objective was to develop and co-ordinate early childhood care and education, accommodated many of the recommendations of the White Paper. In 2006, Ireland's first quality framework, entitled *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE 2006) was produced by CECDE.

In 2004, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's *Thematic Review*, reporting on practice in the early childhood education system of primary schools, declared that the approaches 'appeared to be directive and formal' (OECD 2004:58). One of its main recommendations was the formulation of a common quality framework that early years educators should follow. This led to the creation of *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA 2009), which sets out a curriculum framework for all children from birth to 6 years old across the range of early childhood settings. It provides ideas, suggestions and guidance to support all those engaging with young children.

In 2011, the National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative (NVCC: www.nvcc.ie) comprises eight national non-governmental organisations, each of which fosters and promotes childcare and early learning for young children by providing support, resources and education to those working with young children. The NVCC was created in 1999, with a view to establishing excellence and quality in Irish childcare services. The organisations comprising NVCC are the Irish Preschool Play Association (www.ippa.ie), Forbairt Naíonraí Teo (www.naoinrai.ie), National Children's Nurseries Association (www.ncna.ie), Childminding Ireland (www.childminding.ie), St Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland (www.montessorireland.ie), Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association (www.steinerireland.org), Children in Hospital Ireland (www.childreninhospital.ie) and Barnardos (www.barnardos.ie). Other supportive organisations which promote early childhood care and education and help shape educational thought in relation to young children are Start Strong (www.startstrong.ie), the World Organisation for Early Childhood Education (OMEP) (www.omepireland.ie) and the Children's Rights Alliance (CRA) (www.childrensrights.ie).

In 2009, the government announced a new programme to provide for a free pre-school year with effect from January 2010. In June 2011 the Department of Children and Youth Affairs was formally established. One of the key areas of interest of the Department is the provision of high-quality early childhood education and care. In spite of economic difficulties, it is stated that the free pre-school year is firmly established as an essential building block of early care and education (www.dcy.gov.ie).

The vital importance of educating young children from birth to 6 years of age is recognised to a much greater degree in the twenty-first century than it has been until now. However, it stills needs to be consolidated and in the future it will be crucial that what has been achieved is retained. History shows us that the sensitive, studied development of our young children is of vital importance. Those who are convinced of the great value of early childhood education should be active in highlighting the great benefits that derive from it.

Key learning points

- To develop an awareness of the chronology of events, debates and challenges in reforming ECEC in Ireland.

- To appreciate the influences on thinking and practices in ECEC.
- To recognise how the factors that influence policy and practice in ECEC interact and sometimes conflict.

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