Contents

Introduction to Policy in the ECCE Sector

ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Our concept of what childhood is, how childcare is defined and thought of, is influenced by many different strands. According to Hayes (2002, p. 21), 'Childhood is both a biological reality and a social construct. It is defined not only by biology, but also by a particular society at a particular time in a particular way which represents the view that society has of childhood.'

This quote illustrates that the society we live in influences how we think of, define and behave in relation to a given topic. For instance, in Victorian times children were thought of as 'mini-adults', a view which doesn't recognise that childhood and children have unique characteristics, separate and distinct from the characteristics of adulthood. Nowadays we understand that there are distinct differences between how children and adults feel and think; we recognise childhood as an important time which shapes the adult we become. The importance of supporting children and childhood is seen as fundamental, which is reflected in the numerous policy documents on how best this can be achieved.

Yet is this attitude a relatively new one? In looking back at Ireland's history and attitudes, and the policies and legislation that encapsulated them, we will see that before

the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) the prevailing view did not see children and childhood as we do now. We will track the development of childcare policy and legislation from the early 1990s onwards and the different influences and factors that came to shape it. This will help us to make sense of what can be an overwhelming volume of policies and legislative developments. First let's look at the UNCRC, which Ireland signed up to in 1990 and ratified in 1992, marking a watershed in Ireland's approach to children and the development of relevant legislation and policy.

International Influence: the UNCRC

It can be hard for us to imagine a time when children's 'rights' weren't recognised. Even the idea that a child should be respected and bestowed individual rights would have seemed unbelievable to those who either saw children's rights as part of, and not separate from, those of their parents or family. Indeed it is only very recently, with the outcome of the Referendum on Children's Rights (2012), that our Constitution (Bunreacht na hEireann) conferred upon children individual standing and rights. Before then a child did not have separate rights as a citizen of Ireland; instead, their rights were contained within the 'family' unit. This anomaly was highlighted in the case of 'Baby Ann', in which the rights of the baby's birth and adoptive parents were considered by the Supreme Court. No consideration of the best interests of the child could be given at that time, as under the Constitution such rights did not exist for the child.

When examining the history of childhood we see children considered as mini-adults in Victorian times, and children thought of as property, a phenomenon still all too common. It is against this backdrop in Ireland, a landscape where the idea of children's 'rights' was virtually non-existent, where the vulnerable (such as those in poverty or with disabilities) were treated with a charity-based approach. It is this backdrop that makes the UNCRC all the more remarkable.

The seeds of the UNCRC were sown by the work of Janusz Korczak, a doctor and pioneer of children's rights. We can see his influence in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which is **rights**-based rather than charity-based. This means recognising the inherent dignity of a person and treating them with respect, not out of charity or kindness but as a right.

The UNCRC is the most widely ratified treaty: in 2010 it had been ratified by every state in the world with the exception of Somalia and the USA. In signing up to the UNCRC, countries agree and are bound to meet its provisions and obligations. The treaty represents a commitment to uphold the rights of the child in all spheres – cultural, political, social and economic. It is a manifesto demanding that governments act in 'the best interests of the child', an aim reflected in its 41 articles. The articles themselves, the product of ten years of negotiation, are wide-ranging and all-encompassing. While the articles are not weighted in terms of importance, recognising the inter-relatedness

of each article to the other, four general principles emerge as paramount, and it is these principles around which all other articles revolve.

Four General Principles

- *Article 2:* All the rights guaranteed by the Convention must be available to all children without discrimination of any kind.
- *Article 3:* The best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning the child.
- *Article 6:* Every child has the right to life, survival and development.
- *Article 12:* The child's views must be considered and taken into account in all matters affecting him or her.

Ireland and the UNCRC

How well has Ireland engaged with and implemented the Convention? Ireland signed up to the UNCRC on 30 September 1990 and ratified it on 28 September 1992, in doing so committing itself to protecting and advancing the rights of the child. The UNCRC was a product of ten years of negotiation and consensus-seeking, and its mutuality is arguably where its strength lies. This shared approach is witnessed in its monitoring mechanism, which assesses how well – or badly – the states that signed up to the Convention are implementing it.

1998 UNCRC Assessment

In its first assessment, in 1998, the UNCRC monitoring committee found a 'fragmented' approach to the adoption of the UNCRC in Ireland. The committee recommended that Ireland remove all constitutional barriers to the implementation of the Convention; and that it put in place a range of measures to promote children's rights and to put the Convention into practice, including appointing an ombudsman for children and establishing an inspectorate for residential units.

2006 UNCRC Assessment

In 2006 Ireland's performance was reviewed again by the monitoring committee. According to Emily Logan, Ombudsman for Children, 'The general principles about which the UN Committee raised most concerns with Ireland at that time were: **discrimination**; **the best interests**; and **the right to hear their views**' (Logan 2012, pp. 3–4).

One of the criticisms made by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2006 was that these general principles had been imperfectly integrated into Irish law. In particular, the UN Committee expressed concern that the 'best interests' principle was not fully integrated into all legislation relevant to children and that insufficient provision

was made for children to be heard in judicial or administrative proceedings affecting them. 'Although these principles are clearly not absent from the Irish statute book, implementation of these principles will need to be improved if Ireland is to comply in full with its international obligations' (Logan 2012, pp. 3–4).

Policy Document	Rights	Needs
National Childcare Strategy	58	119
'Ready to Learn'	5	125
National Children's Strategy	50	125
Commission on the Family	120	160

Source: Kiersey & Hayes 2010, p. 7

As we can see, in ratifying the UNCRC Ireland agreed to implement the Convention's articles and to follow the UNCRC's rights-based approach. Up to this point Ireland had very little legislation and very few polices pertinent to children; in adopting the UNCRC the government was forced to adopt strategies and policies that reflected the goals of the UNCRC, which is why we have seen an explosion of developments in the area of child policy, including childcare. (For more information on the UNCRC, please see Appendix A.)

We will examine legislative developments in greater depth in Chapter 2, but it is worth noting here that the Child Care Act 1991 was enacted a year after Ireland signed up to the UNCRC. The title of the Act can be deceptive – it covers the care of children in general, not just childcare (part VII refers to this) – but its concern is the welfare of children, and it places a duty on the HSE to identify children who are not receiving adequate care and protection. In addition, the Act also allows for the provision of family support services.

Before we go any further, now is a good time to examine how legislation and policy are defined before we look at them in relation to childcare.

POLICY
What is Policy?

Every day our lives, personal and work, are impacted upon by policy, even if it is not obvious to us. Whereas the impact of legislation is clearly in our minds – for example, if I drive through a red light I am breaking the law and am liable to be prosecuted by the State – policy does not necessarily have the same observable impact. While legislation is created and mandated by the government and is enforceable, policy at its simplest can be thought of as an agenda or ideas informed by research and best practice to improve outcomes or lives.

What Does 'Policy' Mean?

According to Hogwood and Gunn (1984), cited in Jones and Norton (2010), policy can be described as any, or all, of the following:
- a field of activity (e.g. economic or childcare policy)
- a general intent (e.g. a drive to make the world a healthier place)
- a specific proposal
- something that requires formal authorisation or legislation
- implementing a programme of action.

These definitions are broad, highlighting the relationship between a 'problem' and the strategies needed to solve it. If we take this approach and apply it to childcare as the 'problem', we might decide that the 'problem' is that childcare is fragmented, under-resourced and unregulated. Having identified childcare as the problem, we might then develop strategies and policies to improve childcare by looking at best practice in other countries and by research. As we will see later in the book, in Ireland this approach led to a number of 'policies' being developed to address this issue. Throughout the book we will see how research continues to inform policies, as does the evaluation of how policies are being implemented.

FIGURE 1.1 POLICY FORMULATION
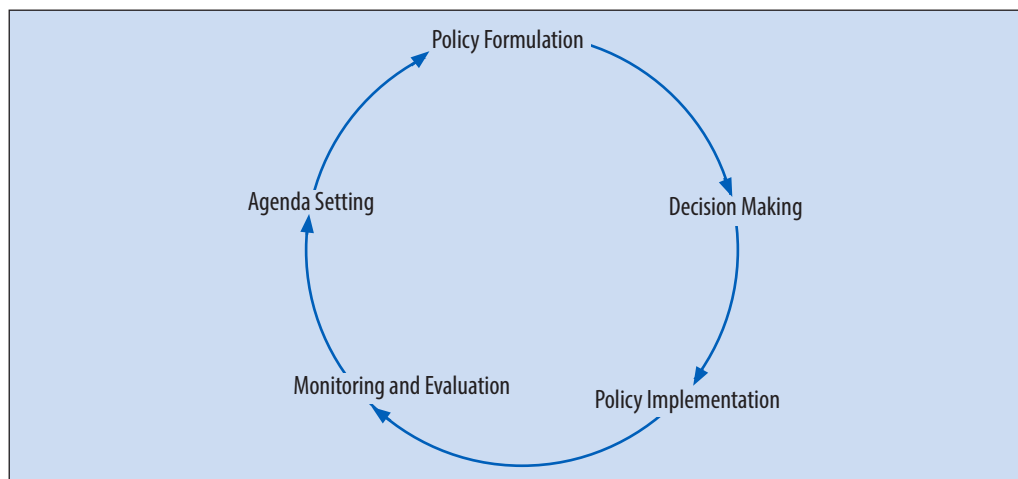
Who Develops Policies?

As with legislation, the government can create policies, and it often invites other stakeholders into the process of policy development (e.g. the National Children's Strategy). Groups other than the government can also develop policies, for example charities or advocacy groups such as the Children's Rights Alliance, Barnardos, hospitals, crèches and schools (e.g. anti-bullying policies). Policies can be informed by legislation;

for example, anti-discriminatory and equality and diversity policies that were developed in response to equality legislation (Equal Status Act 2000 and 2004). Conversely, policy can also influence and encourage the establishment or improvement of legislation. Fundamentally the policy process is best understood as an interplay of institutions, ideas and interests (John 1998).

Policymakers and their Role in ECCE settings

> Policy makers have recognised that access to quality early childhood education and care strengthens the foundations of lifelong learning for all children, contributes to equality of opportunity for women, and supports the broad educational and social needs of families. Research shows too that families operate best in a framework of security supported by services, and that young children develop well within quality early childhood services. (OECD 2004)

Definition of Childcare

The OECD definition describes early childhood care and education (ECCE) as 'all arrangements providing care and education of children under compulsory school age, regardless of setting, funding, opening hours or programme content. … It was deemed important to include policies – including parental leave arrangements – and provision concerning children under age 3, a group often neglected in discussions in the educational sphere' (OECD 2001, p. 14). Its focus, therefore, was on all children aged from birth to six years and it concentrated, for the most part, on education and care services for children outside their own homes.

As we can see from the OECD quote, childcare is recognised as fundamental in policy development to create and support wellbeing, not just for the child but also for their families and society. However, does policy play a direct role in the day-to-day administration and running of childcare settings?

In 1999, following extensive consultation, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR) used the following definition of childcare in its report on the National Childcare Strategy:

> [D]aycare facilities and services for pre-school children and school-going children out of school hours. It includes services offering care, education and socialisation opportunities for children to the benefit of children, parents, employers and the wider community. Thus, services such as pre-schools, naíonraí [Irish language pre-schools], day care services, crèches, play groups, childminding and after-school groups are included, but schools (primary, secondary and special) and residential centres for children are excluded. (DJELR 1999)

POLICY AND CHILDCARE PRACTITIONERS AND SERVICES

As we will see, here and in Chapter 3, policy plays an integral role in the day-to-day running of childcare services; it shapes how practitioners interact with children and supports children's development. In Chapter 3 we will look at specific policies and their impact on ECCE. For now let's consider why policy is important in general.

In order to give the best quality care possible, childcare practitioners must be guided by and implement standards, best practice and legislation. To help achieve this, childcare settings are required to maintain information in the form of their own policies and procedures to demonstrate that their services meet the required standards.

According to Willoughby (2008), 'policy' and 'procedure' can be defined as follows:

A **policy** is a statement of principles, values or intent that guides, or usually determines, decisions and actions to achieve an organisation's goals. Policies help to ensure that a consistent approach in line with the service's values is adopted throughout the service. They provide the basis for agreed, consistent and well thought through decisions.

Procedures spell out precisely what action is to be taken in line with the relevant policy and outline the steps to be followed or the way that a task is to be performed. Procedures can reduce the need to make decisions under pressure or to have to wait for a decision, they provide consistency and they allow everyone to know what is likely to happen in a given situation.

So how do we see policies at work in childcare services? The following is a range of policies that might be seen in childcare services:
* Intake/Admission Policy
* Positive Behaviour Management Policy
* Child Protection and Welfare Policy
* Personnel/Human Resources Policy
* Outdoor Play Policy
* Parental/Guardian Involvement Policy
* Accident/Incident Policy
* Out of School Care Policy
* Anti-Bias/Anti-Discrimination Policy
* Cleaning and Prevention of Spread of Disease Policy
* Food Safety Policy
* Confidentiality Policy.

Reviewing Your Existing Policies

It is essential that your service regularly reviews and monitors all its policies and procedures. This helps you to learn from experience, as your service grows and evolves.

As you strive to meet your clients' changing needs, your policies and procedures should change too. As policies and procedures are used daily you need to review them continuously.

Some issues that may require you to change your policies and procedures are:
- Changes in legislation relevant to childcare
- Other mandatory updates/amendments (ECCE, CCS Scheme, etc.)
- Requests from parents or staff
- Service developments that involve a change in structure and therefore have an impact on current policies
- Child Protection Policy
- Behaviour management
- Curriculum planning.

In addition, you should:
- Review your policies and procedures annually
- Analyse the appropriateness of your policies and procedures for the service you are providing. It is the responsibility of the manager/committee members to ensure that policies and procedures are reviewed and are amended/updated
- Regularly include a review of policies and procedures on the agenda for staff meetings
- Agree a process for informing all staff and parents of any new policies and procedures and any updates to existing ones. (Adapted from Willoughby (2008).)

In Practice

Where do we get the information to formulate these policies?
From legislation, policies and best practice guides. We will examine legislation and policies in depth in Chapters 2 and 3 and look at how they shape the policies seen in crèches and the work of childcare practitioners. As you read these chapters, take notes on what you as a childcare practitioner believe to be the most important policies and legislation.

So how did childcare policy develop in Ireland and what were the influences on it?

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDCARE POLICIES IN IRELAND

According to the White Paper *Ready to Learn* (DES 1999), 'The inextricable linkage between education and care means that early education comprises just one element in an all-encompassing policy concerning the rights and needs of young children.' It also outlines a number of factors that combined to bring early childhood issues to the top of the policy agenda in recent years:

1. There is growing recognition of the benefits for all children of good-quality early childhood education.
2. The importance of early education in addressing socio-economic disadvantage and the contribution of education to economic development have given rise to demands for improved early education for all children.
3. The needs of employers for greater numbers of workers, as well as increased participation in the labour force, have simultaneously increased the demand for and reduced the supply of childcare places.

These factors certainly provide an insight into why childcare policies developed, but other influences were also involved, including:
• international influences
• the changing role of women
• economic influences.

International Influences

> The Children's Act 1908 was a landmark document for the care of children in Ireland. It focused on the treatment, as opposed to the punishment, of children and bestowed a separate legal status on children. This Act was replaced by the Child Care Act 1991. The UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child (1958), the UN International Year of the Child (1979) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), ratified by Ireland in 1992, raised the profile and prominence of children as citizens in society. (Walsh & Kiernan 2004, p. 4)

In addition to the ratification of the UNCRC, discussed earlier, another international influence was Ireland's entry to the European Economic Community (EEC), now the European Union (EU). In joining the European community, Ireland began the process of bringing our laws, policies and, arguably, societal attitudes more in line with those of our European neighbours. This had a positive impact, particularly on women, those with disabilities and children, as legislation and policy began to reflect a more rights-based and egalitarian approach.

Taking the case of women, we can clearly see the impact that joining the EEC had on Ireland as it began to implement European directives. Previously in Ireland women who married were prevented from working in some areas (e.g. banks and the civil service), but the enactment of the Civil Service (Employment of Married Women) Act 1973 and the Employment Equality Act 1977 secured women's right to employment after marriage. In the arena of children, the influence of the UNCRC on the development of policy on children's rights and on early education and care cannot be overestimated. In light of the criticisms made in the UNCRC assessment (1998) the state undertook to implement some of the measures suggested, including the development of a **National Children's Strategy** (2000), which paved the way for the establishment of the **National**

Children's Office in 2001. We will look at both, along with other policy initiatives, in greater detail later in the chapter, but here we'll look at other influences that shaped the development of policy in relation to children and to childcare.

The Changing Role of Women

As we have seen, Ireland's participation in the EU prompted changes to legislation in an effort to become more compliant with EU directives and standards, and we saw that legislation was introduced to ensure women's right to employment after marriage. This change gives us an insight into how women were perceived and treated in Ireland. Traditionally a women's role was seen as homemaker and mother, reflecting the strong relationship between Roman Catholic Church and the State. Further, the Constitution – which encapsulates the guiding principles on which the State was founded – offered particular protection to families and the woman's role in the home. The following articles in the Constitution refer specifically to women:

> 41.2.1 In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.
> 41.2.2 The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.
> 45.4.2 The State shall endeavour to ensure that the strength and health of workers, men, women, and the tender age of children shall not be abused and that citizens shall not be forced by economic necessity to enter avocations unsuited to their sex, age or strength.

Note: The first draft of Article 45.4.2 of the Constitution included the words 'inadequate strength of women'. Women's organisations and many individual women considered the phrase very offensive. They wrote to Mr de Valera and met him by appointment. The wording was changed to read as it does above (Scoilnet).

As we can see, women's place in society reflected a particular perspective rooted in the idea of a woman as a wife and mother whose principal role in life was in the home. In such a society there was little need for childcare arrangements. That's not to say that women didn't work outside the home, rather that the number of working women was relatively small, especially when compared to other European countries.

> Married female labour force participation had been notoriously low in the 1960s and '70s, by Western standards. Only 5.2% of married women were employed in 1961 and this had only increased to 7.5% by 1971. However, from 1971 to 1981 the rate more than doubled to 16.7%. This created the impetus for

convening the first Government Working Party on Childcare Facilities for Working Parents in 1981. (Fine-Davis 2007, p. 3)

Ireland's entry into the EU and the subsequent legislation relating to women's right to work, as discussed earlier, marked a shift in the role of women in Ireland and opened up greater opportunities for women to work and particularly to continue working after the birth of children. This was facilitated through the increasing secularisation (moving away from the control or influence of religion) of Irish society and gender equality reforms. Another major impact on female participation in the workforce was the 'Celtic Tiger', which saw the economy grow rapidly, resulting in increasing numbers of workers needed to fuel it. Below is a table which highlights the significant upsurge in married women's participation in the workplace.

MARRIED WOMEN'S LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION IN IRELAND, 1961–2001 (%)

	1961	1971	1977	1981	1989	1994	1997	1999	2001	2004
All ages	5.2	7.5	14.4	16.7	23.7	32.4	37.3	45.3	46.4	49.4
Ages 25–34	4.8	8.8	16.7	21.6	39.0	54.5	58.2	66.3	64.7	65.5

Figures from Fine-Davis 2007, p. 4.

Economic Growth and Changing Employment Patterns

It is important to recognise the impact of economic growth on early childhood education and care. The rapid and significant economic changes that occurred in Ireland from the mid-1990s – the Celtic Tiger – had a profound effect on the country and both demanded and facilitated changes in family life. The 1980s and early 1990s had been marked by a period of recession with high unemployment. Taking the perspective that the role of childcare is to meet the needs of working parents, high unemployment will clearly have an impact on the need for childcare. Of course, we know that the purpose of childcare is more diverse than that. Nonetheless, the economic situation did play a role in the development and proliferation of childcare policies. The substantial growth that the Celtic Tiger brought in its wake thrust into the spotlight the need for structured and supported childcare services to meet the needs of working parents.

As alluded to earlier, the White Paper *Ready to Learn* acknowledged the growing recognition of the positive impact of ECCE on children's outcomes, this forming a further rationale for policy developments tackling the lack of childcare provision. According to Fine-Davis (2007, p. 3), childcare has increasingly become a subject of political and social debate. Between 1983 and 1999, seven reports deliberated on the issue of childcare, yet no significant government initiatives were forthcoming until

in 2000 the government finally created a childcare policy – the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) (DJELR 2000).

Let's take a look at some early developments in policies to support children's needs.

EARLY POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

The Child Care Act 1991 and the ratification of the UNCRC in 1992 marked the beginning of a period of focus on children's wellbeing, including childcare. In 1999, as part of its commitment 'to put the family at the centre of all its policies', the government launched the Families Research Programme in recognition of the lack of research available and with the hope of informing future policy directions. In this section we will explore the development of policies and structures put in place to develop initiatives aimed at supporting and improving children's development.

- **1998:** *Strengthening Families for Life: Final Report of the Commission on the Family* (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (DSCFA))
- **1998:** *Report on the National Forum for Early Childhood Education* (Department of Education and Science (DES))
- **1999:** *Ready to Learn*: White Paper on Early Childhood Education (DES)
- **1999:** *National Childcare Strategy: Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare* (DJELR)
- **2000:** Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP)
- **2000:** *Our Children – Their Lives: National Children's Strategy* (Department of Health and Children)
- **2001:** National Children's Office (NCO)

Strengthening Families for Life (1998)

The first initiative we will examine is *Strengthening Families for Life: Final Report of the Commission on the Family*, published in 1998. Its scope was wide, incorporating original research, including a national survey of over 1,300 families with children aged 12 or under on childcare arrangements made by families. Research also included an overview of family policy and examined fathers and their role in the family. Analysis of issues affecting families was outlined and some forty recommendations made across several different policy areas.

Core Themes

The Commission's main findings and recommendations are presented in terms of desirable outcomes for families. These outcomes form the core themes of the report. They relate to:
- Building strengths in families (Part 2)
- Supporting families in carrying out their functions – the caring and nurturing of children (Part 3)

- Promoting continuity and stability in family life (Part 4)
- Protecting and enhancing the position of children and vulnerable dependent family members (Part 5).

Strengthening Families for Life marked an important development as research and, especially, policy became more geared to considering the needs of families and children. This can be seen in its conclusion:

> [T]he institutional framework which is recommended must aim to **put families centre stage** at political, executive and administrative levels. In this context, the Commission recommends that 'family well-being' should be singled out as an area of critical importance for Government in the years ahead.

The Commission further suggested the establishment of a Family Affairs Unit whose purpose would be to 'co-ordinate family policy, pursue the findings in the Commission's final report and undertake research and promote awareness about family issues'. We will see how this unfolded through the following policies, which reflect the growing importance given to families, children and childcare.

Report on the National Forum for Early Childhood Education (1998)

The National Forum for Early Childhood Education, held in 1998, was a week-long consultation process which took place as part of the process of preparing *Ready to Learn* (DES 1999). It is particularly noteworthy that this was the first national forum on early childhood education to be held in this country. The aim of the forum was 'to provide an opportunity for all interested groups to engage in a full exchange of views, to put forward their own particular concerns and objectives while, at the same time, taking account of the objectives and concerns of the other partners in the process' (Daly & Forster 2009). Issues raised included concerns over the lack of a national curriculum for young children outside the primary school sector, including those aged under 3. From this forum sprang *Ready to Learn* and the seeds of **Aistear** (the early childhood curriculum framework for children from 0 to 6 years). We will look at Aistear in depth in Chapter 3, but in the meantime let's look at the result of the consultation process that led to Aistear, *Ready to Learn*.

Ready to Learn White Paper (1999)

Ready to Learn was the result of a consultation process aimed at developing a White Paper on early education. It addressed in particular concerns about the absence of a curriculum for children aged under 6. Its aim was to ensure that early childhood provision would be structured, developmental and of high quality. Further, the White

Paper drew attention to target groups such as 'the disadvantaged and those with special needs', proposing that early support should be provided to families of children with special needs.

Its guiding principles were:
- Quality will underpin all aspects of early education provision.
- The State will build on existing provision and use the existing regulatory framework, where possible.
- Implementation will be undertaken on a gradual, phased basis to allow all the participants in the system to prepare adequately for the challenges that lie ahead.
- Progress will be achieved through a process of consultation, dialogue and partnership. (Citizens Information)

The focus of the White Paper on Early Childhood Education was not only supporting the needs and development of the under-6s in childcare settings, whether private providers or community groups; supporting parents to help their children learn and a strategy for improving the quality of infant education in primary schools were also included. **Quality** of provision was emphasised and a strategy set out to increase standards in terms of professional competencies, curricula and methodologies. The need for inspection and evaluation to support providers achieve high standards was recognised and structures to facilitate the effective co-ordination of provision, regulation and improvements in quality were outlined.

One of the clearest ramifications of the *Ready to Learn* paper was the establishment of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) and, in the long term, **Síolta**. One of the objectives of *Ready to Learn* was the establishment of a body to advise the Department of Education and Science on policy issues relating to early education and care. To this end, in 2002 the Minister for Education and Science appointed Dublin IT and St Patrick's College, Drumcondra to jointly establish CECDE.

Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) (2002)

The scope of CECDE was extensive, focusing on all care and education settings for children aged from birth to 6 years of age. It attempted to bridge many of the traditional divides between education and care and between early years settings and the formal education system.

Within this broad framework, the objectives of the CECDE included:
- Developing a National Framework for Quality (NFQ) for early childhood education
- Developing targeted interventions on a pilot basis for children who are educationally disadvantaged and children with special needs
- Preparing the groundwork for the establishment of an Early Childhood Education Agency as envisaged by *Ready to Learn*.

CECDE was instrumental in informing policy and initiatives aimed at improving early childhood education. The National Framework for Quality for early childhood education is better known to us as **Síolta**, which was published in 2006. We will explore Síolta in depth in Chapter 3 and throughout the book consider its prominent and guiding influence in ECCE. We will also discuss the concept of **quality**, which is integral to the development and delivery of childcare in Ireland.

The government ceased funding CECDE and it closed at the end of 2008, marking a retrograde step in the development and promotion of early education and care.

National Childcare Strategy: Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare (1999)

The Expert Working Group on Childcare was set up in 1999, in light of what it referred to as the 'crisis' in childcare, under the wing of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. You may wonder why a group looking at childcare came under the aegis of the Department of Justice: it's because Partnership 2000 was interested in the topic of equality and it looked at the provision of childcare from this perspective. According to the Partnership 2000 agreement, 'child care is clearly an important issue in promoting equality for women and especially in promoting equal opportunities in employment'. The establishment of the Expert Working Group on Childcare was arguably a response to economic demand to provide for mothers entering the workforce and the increase in productivity that would result. Regardless of why the group was established, the resulting *National Childcare Strategy 2000* marked an important step forward in childcare policy and the development of a structured, supported and regulated childcare system.

Members of the Expert Working Group were drawn from many bodies, including government departments, statutory organisations, non-governmental bodies and parents, to develop a strategy for the delivery of childcare and early education services. In developing a national childcare strategy the group was guided by the following principles:
- the needs and rights of the child
- equality of access and participation
- diversity
- partnership
- quality.

(Chapter 6 will explore in depth the theme of equality and diversity in childcare.)

The government saw the National Childcare Strategy as the third prong of childcare policy, along with the report of the Commission on the Family (*Strengthening Families for Life*) and the report of the Forum for Early Childhood Education. These three policy developments reflected government recognition of the necessity for childcare provision. The National Childcare Strategy was initially implemented through EOCP.

Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) 2000–2006

We have seen that the emerging need for childcare services was identified as a key policy issue in the late 1990s, resulting in the development of the *National Childcare Strategy*. EOCP evolved in response to the strategy and provided the financial impetus to support it. EOCP was an EU/exchequer co-funded investment programme with a total allocation of €499.3 million over its seven-year span; of this sum, just over €180 million came from the EU.

The objectives of EOCP were:
- to improve the quality of childcare in Ireland
- to increase the supply of childcare places by 50 per cent (or about 28,000 additional centre-based places) to enable parents to remain in or return to employment, education or training
- to introduce a more co-ordinated approach to the delivery of childcare.

EOCP proposed three key elements to meet these needs:

1. The provision of capital grant assistance to community-based not-for-profit groups and, in a more limited way, to private childcare providers to support the creation of new and enhanced childcare facilities;
2. The provision of grant assistance towards the staffing costs of community-based groups which are located in areas of significant disadvantage, and finally;
3. The provision of supports for quality enhancement. The funding stream set aside for each of these elements is €155 million; €195 million and €83 million respectively, while about €18 million will be required over the seven years of the Programme to meet the elaborate administrative arrangements necessitated in delivering an EU Programme of this magnitude. (Moreau 2004)

The €83 million invested in quality enhancement supported a number of initiatives, including the creation and support of the **City and County Childcare Committees** (CCCs). Under EOCP, the primary focus of County Childcare Committees is to facilitate parents in availing of training, education and employment opportunities through the provision of quality childcare supports.

In Chapter 3 we will examine the subsequent investment programme financed by the State, the **National Childcare Investment Programme 2006–2010**.

Before continuing, let's pause and take a look at one childcare initiative that focuses on the care of children in the home by childminders.

In Focus: National Childminding Initiative and Guidelines

According to the National Childminding Initiative (NCMI), childminders represent the largest type of childcare for families of pre-school children in Ireland today, with over 73,000 families around the country using childminders as their favoured mode of childcare.

Following the report of the *National Childcare Strategy*, a number of initiatives were implemented, including the establishment of the NCMI, to provide supports for childminders and for people interested in becoming childminders. The NCMI is administered locally by the CCCs, which are responsible for supporting the implementation of the NCMI at local level.

The NCMI is made up of a number of different elements, including:

1. *National Guidelines for Childminders* (OMC 2008)
2. Childminding Development Grant (CMDG)
3. Quality Awareness Programme (QAP)
4. Information, training and networking opportunities for childminders
5. Voluntary notification of childminders.

In relation to the last element, Daly (2010, p. 8) says in her evaluation of the NCMI that the report of the Expert Working Group (DJELR 1999) noted that 'childminding is the most common (childcare) arrangement among women with paid jobs and the second most common overall', taking place largely outside the formal economy. Though it was recommended that 'All those providing childcare services for one or more children, in addition to their own, including persons employed by the parent/s of the child, either in the child's home or in the childminder's home, should be required to register', this recommendation has yet to be implemented. Over a decade later, several other recommendations of the group have also not been implemented, illustrating that while those producing policy and strategies may make recommendations, these recommendations don't legally have to be implemented.

In relation to legislation and notification relating to childminders, the NCMI outlines the following:

What legislation governs childminding?
- Childminding is governed by the Childcare (1991) Act and the Pre-School Regulations (2006). Childminding is regulated only where four or more children – unrelated to you or each other – under the age of six are minded.
- A single handed Childminder can mind up to five pre-school children.
- A Childminder can mind no more than two children under the age of 15 months (except in the case of siblings).

- Childminders must notify their local Health Service Executive if they mind four or more children (excluding their own) pre-school children.
- Childminders who are not required to notify the HSE may voluntarily notify their city or county childcare committee and sign up to a voluntary code of good practice, including insurance and training.
- There is no regulation at present of school age childcare services. However, the Report 'School Aged Childcare in Ireland' published by the National Co-ordinating Childcare Committee, recommends a ratio of one adult to eight children. (www.childminding.ie)

National Guidelines for Childminders

As mentioned earlier, one of the strands of the NCMI is the *National Guidelines for Childminders* (OMC 2008), which assist childminders by providing guidance for good practice in the area. They include details on:
- Nationally agreed guidelines for good childminding practice
- Detailed information on Statutory Notification to the Health Service Executive (HSE) and Voluntary Notification
- Services provided to childminders by the CCCs, the childminder advisory officers and Childminding Ireland.

Core Requirements for Childminders

There are four nationally recognised core areas in which childminders should meet certain requirements:

1. *Suitability of the Person*
    The Childminder must be a person aged 18 or over who is genuinely interested in caring for children and is of suitable character to do so.
2. *Wellbeing of the Child*
    The Childminder must have a commitment to providing quality childcare which ensures that the wellbeing and development of child is paramount.
3. *Physical Environment*
    The Childminder's home should provide a secure and happy environment in which the health, safety and welfare of the child is assured and in which the developmental needs of the child are met.
4. *Health & Safety*
    The Childminder must provide evidence that adequate health and safety procedures are in place. (OMC 2008)

THE DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS

We shall conclude this chapter with an examination of the early days of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), which is the government's child and youth policy wing. It was established as a dedicated department in 2011 to oversee issues that had formerly been dealt with by a number of other government departments.

Our Children – Their Lives: National Children's Strategy (2000)

The National Children's Strategy is a ten-year plan with a vision of:

> An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential. (DoHC 2000)

The national goals of the strategy are:
- Goal 1: Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.
- Goal 2: Children's lives will be better understood; their lives will benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and the effectiveness of services.
- Goal 3: Children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development.

It includes a range of actions across a number of areas, such as giving children a voice so that their views are considered in relation to matters that affect them; eliminating child poverty; ensuring that children have access to play and recreation facilities; and improving research on children's lives in Ireland. The strategy is the first comprehensive national policy document for the full range of statutory and non-statutory providers in the development of services for children and is underpinned by the UNCRC.

National Children's Office (NCO)

The National Children's Office (NCO) was set up in 2001 to drive implementation of the National Children's Strategy. It is the only government agency that aims to improve all aspects of children's lives, as set out in the strategy. It now comes under the umbrella of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

The role of the NCO is to encourage co-ordination of policies and services for children at national and local level; it supports and monitors the work of different government departments in implementing the National Children's Strategy; and it liaises with state agencies, voluntary organisations, youth organisations, children and young people. In addition the NCO is responsible for commissioning research to gain further understanding of children and young people.

The NCO has lead responsibility for: increasing children's and young people's participation; research; and priority issues identified by the Cabinet Committee on Children. It works in the following areas:

- Children and young people's participation
- Research on children and young people
- Driving and monitoring implementation of the National Children's Strategy
- Supporting implementation of the Youth Homelessness Strategy
- Supporting Ireland's international obligations in children's policy
- Play and recreation policies
- Co-ordinating implementation of the Children Act, 2001. (NCO 2004)

In 2005 the National Children's Office became part of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMYCA).

Before we leave the NCO/OMYCA, let's take a look at the 'whole child perspective', which underpins policies in relation to meeting the needs of children.

In Focus: What is the Whole Child Perspective?

The whole child perspective, adopted by the National Children's Strategy, recognises the multidimensional nature of all aspects of children's lives. The recognition that all parts of children's lives are interlinked has, in turn, implications for public policymaking and the integration of services relating to children.

What is interesting about the 'whole child perspective' is that it takes an ecological approach (looking at the environment or context) in attempting to understand children's lives. This approach recognises that systems (or layers) of influence exist in a child's life, from close layers – the immediate family – to more distant influences, such as government policy. Looking at the illustration of the whole child perspective developed by the NCO, we can see that many and varied influences are included to gain an understanding of the child and the context of the child.

Think about it!

Can you see the whole child perspective in ECCE settings? How would you apply the illustration to the children in your care to help meet their needs? As we continue to examine policies, standards and guidelines in Chapters 2 and 3, see if you can recognise the influence of the whole child perspective at work.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS
SELF CARE
PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELLBEING
EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL WELLBEING
SOCIAL AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS
SOCIAL PRESENTATION
INTELLECTUAL CAPACITY
SPIRITUAL AND MORAL WELLBEING
IDENTITY

Children's Relationships

Formal and Informal Supports

FIGURE 1.2 ALL PARTS OF CHILDREN'S LIVES ARE INTERLINKED

CONCLUSION

As we have seen in this chapter, many influences shape and guide not just the development but also the implementation of policy. We have explored how childcare became an important issue for government, which developed childcare policies not just to meet economic and employment needs but also as an instrument to support families and vulnerable or disadvantaged children. A plethora of reports and policies were devised, which illustrates how lacking Ireland was in developing and supporting childcare within the State. Of course, this can at times be overwhelming for the reader as there seem to be so many reports and policies, but we hope that the journey through policy from the early 1990s has illustrated the flow of policies at that time and the influences that sparked them.

We will use the National Children's Strategy as a timely marker to leave policy for a while and concentrate in the following chapter on legislation. We will consider the Child Care Act 1991 and particularly the Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No. 2) Regulations and (Amendment) Regulations 2006, which had a direct impact on those working in ECCE settings. Once we have explored legislation and its implications for childcare, in Chapter 3 we will return to policy from 2000 onwards.

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