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Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

An Examination of the Age Qualifying Criteria of the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme and Its Potential Implications for Access to the Free Pre-School Year and School Starting Age

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CARL Research Project



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Date completed:	21st

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CARL seeks to:

- provide civil society with knowledge and skills through research and education;
- provide their services on an affordable basis;
- promote and support public access to and influence on science and technology;
- create equitable and supportive partnerships with civil society organisations;
- enhance understanding among policymakers and education and research institutions of the research and education needs of civil society, and
- enhance the transferrable skills and knowledge of students, community representatives and researchers (www.livingknowledge.org).

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matter of record that many student projects have been completed to a very high standard and to the satisfaction of the Client Group.

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Abstract

This study is a Community-Academic Research Links (CARL) project managed between Cork Early Years Network, UCC Applied Social Studies Department and the researcher. The aim of this thesis is to explore whether the age restrictions of the Early Childhood Care and Education scheme have implications for access to the offer on a free preschool year and for school starting age. Through qualitative means the study uses professional interviews and a survey for parents to investigate and identify any concerns for the dual focus of research question.

The age limits of the ECCE scheme are a concern to early years' professionals but they do not present as a significant concern for parents, however, the scheme appears limited in its present offer as it only affords one free year of preschool to children as young three years and three months. The study found that many four year old children are still entering primary school even though a significant number of parents feel four is too young for school. The majority of parents would consider two years of preschool for their children, especially if their child was not ready or old enough for school and if provision was free or affordable.

The study concludes that it would be feasible to extend the free pre-school year offer in the ECCE scheme to two years.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Research Title

An examination of the age qualifying criteria of the Early Childhood Care and Education scheme and its potential implications for access to the free preschool year and school starting age.

Introduction and Background

The development of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policy is rather recent in Ireland (Hayes, 2006). As stated by Rush et al. (2006, p. 155, cited in Considine and Dukelow, 2009, p. 379) *'Ireland has traditionally subscribed to the "maximum private responsibility" model of childcare'*. A key policy initiative in the sector was introduced in January 2010 with the launch of the ECCE scheme, also referred to as the Free Preschool Year (FPY), which aims to provide one free year of preschool for three to four year old children prior to commencing primary school. A look back at developments in the sector since the 1990s provides a lens through which the ECCE scheme may be explored. During the 1990s Ireland experienced an economic boom which led to a rise in employment, a significant cohort of the newly employed were women with children returning to the work-place. This boom became known as the Celtic Tiger, during which unemployment fell from 15.9% in 1993 to 3.6% by 2001 with female employment rising at a faster rate than elsewhere in the OECD going from 40% in 1994 to 58% in 2005 (Hayes and Bradley, 2009; Sweeney, 2006). Despite the significant role of women's labour market participation in keeping Ireland's economy afloat, the government prioritised support of the market place and childcare arrangements remained the private concern of working parents (Hayes and Bradley, 2009). Lack of strategic ECCE policy action and support at the time gave rise to a makeshift sector, with a reliance on private and community provision, which primarily expanded to cope with the demand for childcare spaces for working parents. Fragmentation of responsibilities across different government ministries in Ireland led to the development of separate policies and a split system for the 'care' and 'education' of young children (OECD, 2006). While the Department of Education and Science targeted 'at risk' children by funding early interventions such as Early Start and Traveller preschools, no direct policy action was taken for ECCE outside of the formal schooling system, instead the focus was on the creation of childcare spaces (Hayes, 2006, Hayes and Bradley 2009). Parents received token gestures

in the form of cash payments like Child Benefit and Early Childcare Supplement to assist them towards purchasing childcare in the market place. However, without regulation the childcare market was one of high costs and wavering quality where access and quality of experience inside childcare settings was determined by affordability (OECD, 2004; Hayes, 2006; Hayes and Bradley, 2009). When the economic boom hit Ireland in the 1990s it brought changes to nation's demographic, economic and social circumstances which highlighted the need for public childcare and that is when the government began to exercise its political will to address the childcare issue (Hayes et al, 2005). This commitment can be seen in the escalation of government working groups assigned to report on the matter (Hayes and Bradley, 2009). The Expert Working Group on Childcare was set up in 1997 under Partnership 2000 and presented a *National Strategy for Childcare* in 1999. However, its concern was narrowly focused on the needs of working parents, which Hayes (2008a) asserts not only overlooked the wider benefits of childcare for children, their families and society generally but also provided the basis for reactive policy actions. In response to the demand for childcare spaces, large-scale national funding was set up to improve availability of childcare for parents participating in employment, training and education (Considine and Dukelow, 2009). The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP), an investment programme established under the National Development Plan (NDP 2000-2006) and its successor the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) injected capital into the sector to create more than 80,000 new childcare spaces. In addition significant investment and capital grants were directed towards the support of existing community based and private childcare providers (OMC, 2007). Much of the funding for the development of Ireland's childcare infrastructure came directly from EU funds, which paid for 73% of the €436.7 million invested in childcare providers (OECD, 2004). The childcare sector in Ireland also qualified for EU funding under initiatives like the New Opportunities for Women (NOW) programme which created local and community childcare schemes (Hayes and Bradley, 2009). Concurrently, the European Childcare Network called attention to the poor support that childcare received in Ireland in comparison to their EU counterparts (ibid.). It follows that the impact of EU reports alongside proposals from various working groups and the availability of EU funding led to pressure from interests groups, such as employers and unions, which caused a national demand for change (Hayes and Bradley, 2009). Internal

pressure to revise Childcare policy in Ireland was reinforced internationally by proposals made under the Barcelona Summit (ibid.). Under the Barcelona agreement Ireland settled on a target to provide childcare provision for 90% of children between the age three and the statutory school age (ibid.).

Yet, in spite of extensive funding, the matter of affordable and quality provision still remained (Considine and Dukelow, 2009). Research by Indecon (2013) shows that the cost of childcare in Ireland averages between €730 and €1,100 per month for young children which is the second most expensive in the OECD and may impact on labour-market participation. Furthermore, Fine-Davis (2004, p. 52, cited in ibid. p. 380) contends that *'childcare is not just about finding places for workers' children so as to provide workers for the labour market. It is also very much about children's developmental and social needs and the long-term social, and indirectly, economic effects for society*.' In an attempt to improve access to ECCE the Irish government provided for financial support in the form of universal payments such as increases in Child Benefit and the introduction of the Early Childcare Supplement (ECS[1]). Child benefit payments increased substantially between 2000 and 2005 when monthly payments for the first and second child increased from €53.96 to €141.60 and from €71.11 to €171.30 for succeeding children (Combat Poverty Agency (CPA), 2005). Figures continued to rise between 2006-2009 from €150 to €166 and €185 to €203 respectively (Department of Social Protection, 2013). Further demands to address and relieve childcare costs for parents led to the introduction of the ECS in 2006 (Ring, 2009). This was a yearly payment of €1,000 delivered to parents for every child dependent up to the age of six (the compulsory school starting age in Ireland) and reflected the states preference for the market place as the main means of supporting ECCE (Hayes and Bradley, 2009). However, '*there is no evidence that increasing cash payments to parents improves access, affordability or quality of early year's settings for children'* (Hayes, 2007, p. 10).

[1] The Early Childcare Supplement was introduced in 2006 by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, it was given as a quarterly payment of €250, which is €1,000 in a full year, to parents in support of childcare costs for each child up to the age of six. See http://www.dcya.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?DocID=199 for more details. The ECS was withdrawn by the end of 2009 and replaced by the ECCE scheme which was launched in 2010 to provide one year of free preschool to children http://www.irishexaminer.com/archives/2009/0409/world/1000-childcare-supplement-scrapped-88795.html.

ECCE policy following the collapse of Ireland's economy in 2008 saw cuts in public expenditure resulting in the shelving of capital grants and a withdrawal of the ECS in 2009 (Hayes and Bradley, 2009), along with reductions in child benefit rates to €150 per month for the first and second child and to €187 for subsequent children in 2010 (Department of Social Protection, 2013). The ECCE scheme was introduced in January 2010 to replace the supplement and to affect greater accessibility to preschool provision through 'free and equal access to all children' (Barnardos, 2010; Oireachtas, 2012, p.8), resulting in a cost saving for the government. This policy action followed a longstanding key recommendation of the NESF (2005) report which called for the establishment of a National Early Age Development (NEAD) Programme to support the needs of all children an essential part of which would be the provision of universal access to ECCE for all children: *"A State-funded high quality ECCE session – 3.5 hours per day, five days a week for all children in the year before they go to school."* (ibid. p. XV). In addition the proposed scheme was guided by strong research evidence of the value of ECCE for individual children, families and society, and has been largely welcomed by early childhood policy analysts and lobby groups like Barnardos (OECD, 2001; OECD, 2004; Oireachtas, 2012). The scheme provides a free Pre-School Year in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) to eligible children in the year before they enter primary school. Children who qualify for the scheme must be aged between three years and two months and four years and seven months on the 1st of September each year (DCYA, 2013a). There are no exceptions to the lower age limit; however, the upper age limit may be extended in certain circumstances, for example, in the case of older school enrolment policies or children with special needs (ibid.).

> Now in its fourth full year, 94% of eligible children are availing of the free pre-school year; that means there are almost 68,000 preschool children in 4,300 services for the academic year 2012/2013
>
> (Former Minister for Children and Youth Affairs Frances Fitzgerald TD, 2013 as cited in Children's Rights Alliance Report Card, 2014, p. 19).

Rationale

This research project is community-based research and was undertaken through the Community-Academic Research Links (CARL) at University College Cork (UCC). CARL represents a research strategy founded on the 'Science Shop' model which aims to connect a Civil Society Organisation (CSO) and academia in participatory research.

This study was motivated by a concern of the Cork Early Years Network (CEYN) which is the umbrella group for the early years' sector in Cork. The Network had a dual concern which is related to the age qualifying criteria of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme. Specifically, the Network wanted to find out if the age restrictions of the scheme compromise access to the free preschool year for particular groups and if it has implications for school starting age. The CEYN were worried that individual children may lose out on the offer of a free preschool year due to their eligibility status. If, for example, children are just three years of age on the 1st of September they will not be eligible for the ECCE offer again until the following year when they are also eligible for entry to primary school. This concern emanated from anecdotal evidence that some children, particularly those from lower socio-economic groups, were being disadvantaged by the scheme's age restrictions and were entering school at a young age having not experienced preschool provision. While perusing the CARL database for research suggestions, the researcher was touched by these concerns. As a Steiner inspired early years' educator, the researcher upholds the Steiner viewpoint which values early childhood as a unique time in terms of growth and development where;

> young children benefit from an unhurried and stress free environment where there is time to discover the world around him/her and to master social, physical co-ordination, speech and other life skills before abstract learning is introduced'
>
> (Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship, 2014, p. 4).

The Steiner philosophy believes that early childhood encompasses the first nought to seven years of a child's life and as a supporter the researcher believes all children should have the opportunity to access high-quality ECCE prior to entering primary school. Furthermore, the mandatory age for entry to primary school in Ireland is six which the researcher maintains is a more suitable school starting age, and is concerned about the practice of four year old

children entering infant classes in the Irish primary school system. The researcher and the Network are aware of the value and far-reaching benefits of quality preschool for children's social, emotional, behavioural, cognitive and language development (all of which are associated with child wellbeing); their families and society at large which has all been evidenced in a wealth of ECCE research (DJELR, 2002; StartStrong, 2009; StartStrong, 2010; Oireachtas, 2012; Sylva et al., 2004). For all these reasons, the researcher was highly motivated to carry out this study by investigating the concerns of the CEYN.

The network wanted to investigate whether some children are entering primary school without a preschool experience and are in formal education at the young age of four. They are anxious that the ECCE scheme, because of its age restrictions, may continue the practice in Ireland of four year old children entering primary school in spite of criticisms asserting that early formal learning can be detrimental to the child (Elkind, 1987; Elley, 1994; Katz in Curtis, 2007; Oireachtas, 2012) and the arguments in favour of delaying formal learning until children are six or seven years of age (Alexander, 2009; O'Connor and Angus, 2012).

Research Question

This research aims to explore whether the age restrictions of the ECCE scheme have implications for access to the free preschool year and for school starting age.

Aims and Objectives

- To examine the benefits of ECCE for children and society
- To document the rationale for the introduction of the ECCE scheme in Ireland and its age qualifying criteria
- To examine whether the age qualifying criteria of the ECCE scheme restricts access to the Free Preschool Year
- To explore whether the age qualifying criteria of the ECCE scheme have implications for school starting age

The primary purpose of the research is to investigate the opinions of early childhood experts along with the views, needs and experiences of parents of pre-school aged children in order to gain an understanding of any issues they may have with regard to the ECCE scheme and the conditions attached. To this end, the research will evaluate and critique the ECCE scheme in terms of its offer, specifically with regard to any possible consequences for individual children arising from the age qualifying criteria. The analysis of the data collected will help determine whether there are any significant issues and if there could be any case made for changing the schemes offer. Such information could help to argue whether it would be reasonable and/or of value to extend the scheme to two years and/or amend/remove the age limitations. By fulfilling these objectives it is hoped that CEYN can understand the effect of the scheme in its current conditions and discern whether the information gathered should act to influence any recommendations for change.

Methods

The methodology is mixed method combining qualitative inquiry in the form of 101 parental questionnaires, six professional interviews and a review of the literature.

Triangulation

Combining research methods is known as triangulation. For this study the researcher is using intra-method triangulation *'which employs two or more techniques of the same method'* to gather data (Sarantakos, 1998, p. 168). For instance this study employs a qualitative approach to analyse the data from two methods of data collection, the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews using two different sources: parents of preschool children and early childhood experts. The purpose of these methods, which explore parent's experiences and professional perspectives, is to draw on two different stakeholders experiencing the ECCE scheme policy initiative. The data generated by these methods will be analysed qualitatively to identify the relevance of any emerging issues to the research question. Triangulation is used for many purposes (Weyers, Strydom and Huisamen, 2011), its purpose for this study is to obtain a range of data on the same subject or issue (Sarantakos, 1998). By gathering two

perspectives on the matter, those of the parents and those of experts in ECCE policy and service provision, it is thought that the data findings will be enriched.

Literature Review

Neuman (2003) maintains that the purpose of a literature review is to show an understanding of existing knowledge in the researchers' field of study and to obtain reliability. To begin with it is important to note that little research has been done on the ECCE scheme in Ireland to date, therefore, the researcher reviewed material suitably connected to the concerns of the CEYN which guided the aims and objectives of the research question (see section above on pages six and seven). In view of the Network's concern that the scheme's age qualifying criteria may result in some of the most vulnerable children going to school too young and without a preschool education, the literature review appropriately directs its attention to the value of quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in relation to societal benefits, benefits for children's overall development, readiness for school, school success and beyond and, for reducing educational disadvantage. This direction also fulfils the requirements of the first aim highlighted above. In their original proposal, the Network presented numerous research questions for consideration. On the one hand they were most concerned with the issue of restrictive access to the free preschool year especially in regards to children from disadvantaged backgrounds while on the other hand they were also keen to know whether children are starting school too young in Ireland and whether children are ready to learn when they go to school at such a young age. However, not being able to accommodate all their research queries in one project, the literature review serves as a tool for researching some of their additional concerns. Accordingly, the review includes a discussion on school readiness and school starting age.

The DCYA (2013a, n.p.) maintain that *'Children who avail of pre-school are more likely to be ready for school and a formal learning and social environment.'* For this reason the literature review presents the *"overwhelming evidence that ECCE can produce sizable improvements in school success."* (Barnett 1995, pg. 40). Additionally, the review presents a historic overview of ECCE policy and provision in Ireland from the 1990s up to recent developments in the

sector including the ECCE scheme. This aims to briefly chart the political and economic landscape in the lead up to the introduction of the ECCE scheme and to contextualise the initiative in the wider context of ECCE policy action. In general, then, the literature review aims to capture the importance of the development of the ECCE scheme in Irish early years' policy as well as to examine what is known about the value of preschool, appropriate school starting age. Furthermore, the information gathered will help with interpreting the findings from the parents and professional data (Bryman, 2012).

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were the means adopted for interviewing professionals because they allow the researcher to obtain a greater understanding of social events (Gill, et al, 2008), for example the progression of policy in a context social circumstances. Six early years' professionals actively working in the field of early childhood representing academia and ECCE specialists/policy experts were selected for the purpose of this study. According to Bogner, Littig and Menz (2009, p. 11) experts *'have internal organisational experience and know-how….they are in a position to provide qualified information on internal knowledge structures and constructions.'*

Survey

Interview data, above all, is presumed to be chiefly qualitative, while data generated through postal questionnaires is for the most part quantitative (Beckett and Clegg, 2006). However, the above authors found that due to the absence of the researcher postal questionnaires were a success, they facilitated privacy, rich data and removed the probability of power imbalances. The postal questionnaire facilitates an easy convenient approach to respondents and yields fast results (Sarantakos, 1998). It was used in this research and was designed to incorporate a number of open-ended questions to gather rich data from a wide number of respondents. Using open-ended questions allows respondents to answer in their own terms or in a way that reveals their own perceptions (Frey, 2004). Furthermore, Cork Early Years Network is a group comprising representatives of organisations involved in supporting the Early Years Sector in Cork City and has representation on Cork City Childcare Committee and it was

through their connections with preschool settings and early years organisations that the widespread delivery of questionnaires was made possible.

Ethics

According to Bryman (2012) ethical issues centre on the way in which participants are treated and acceptable research actions, both of which surface at different stages in social research. The researchers' course of action is effected by moral values and principals which is why much research is guided by professional associations and ethical committees (ibid.). Infamous cases of ethical transgression in social research like Humphrey's study of homosexual encounters in public toilets in 1970 and Milgram's 1963 laboratory experiment into obedience are less likely to occur today due to greater ethical awareness and guidelines (ibid.). This study is guided by the four ethical principles in social research with human subjects which relate to harm, informed consent, privacy and deception (Diener and Crandall, 1978).

Theoretical framework/conceptualisation

In the main, social researchers use three main theoretical frameworks as a basis for their enquiry, these include Positivism, Interpretivism and Critical Social Science (Neuman, 2003; Sarantakos, 1998). This study will be guided by both Interpretivism and Critical Social Science. Interpretativism values subjective meanings and is concerned with understanding the actions of people within a social context (Bryman, 2012; Neuman, 2003). The Interpretivist approach for this study will be that of Phenomenology. The object of phenomenological inquiry is to elicit descriptions through qualitative means about a circumstance as it is perceived by and reflected upon by the individual experiencing it (Baker et al., 1992). The researcher will also use the Critical Perspective to reflect a belief that reality is not only dependent on subjective interpretations but it is also influenced by actual conditions in the broader and long-term context (Neuman, 2003). Critical social science views social science;

> as a critical process of inquiry that goes beyond surface illusions to uncover the real structures in the material world in order to help people change conditions and build a better world for themselves
>
> (ibid., p. 81).

The general understanding of the phenomenological method is that it acquires descriptions of other people's experiences through semi-structured interviews (Ray, 1985). In phenomenological studies collecting data free from presumptions is paramount which is why the researcher chose to use qualitative open-ended questionnaires. Moreover, in line with Neuman (2003) and Bryman (2012), the researcher's interpretations are not conclusive or presented as generalised findings.

Research Process

Scientific knowledge is acquired through a series of steps or a research process which uses scientific methods to transform ideas or questions into knowledge (Neuman, 2003). This study followed Neuman's (ibid., pp. 13-14) seven step process:

Step one: Choose a topic

At the outset of the process a topic is selected. The author of this study choose a topic from the Community-Academic Research Links (CARL) database at UCC. The Cork Early Years Network, a Civil Society Organisation, sought to examine the implications of the age limit on the ECCE Programme arising from concerns that the most disadvantaged children are missing out on their free pre-school year

Step Two: Focus the Project

This step involves narrowing the focus to a researchable area. As a result of having anecdotal evidence which suggested that there is a poor uptake of the free preschool year in two disadvantaged districts of the north-side of the city in Cork, the Network were keen to investigate the implications of the schemes age restrictions on disadvantaged children. However, it is too difficult to track these children for logistical reasons as they could be attending preschool in other districts or attending other programmes. Because of this limitation the study has narrowed its focus to exploring whether the scheme's age restrictions compromise access to the free preschool year and the school starting age. The decision to explore how restricted access to the scheme may impact on school starting age comes from the Networks original proposal which highlights a concern for vulnerable children entering school too young and how these children are coping at school without having a preschool experience. At this stage an extensive literature review was carried out to establish validity by

drawing on the growing body of research into the value of quality Early Childhood Care and Education for society and children and focusing on the key areas of concern for the Network, these include educational disadvantage; school readiness and school starting age.

Step Three: Design the Study

The researcher decided to survey a sample of parents of pre-schoolers to see whether they had experienced any issues with the ECCE schemes age restrictions and to investigate the factors which influence their decisions about preschool and school starting age for their children. In addition early years' experts were to be consulted so that their professional know-how and insights could be explored in an attempt to critically evaluate the offer of the scheme and deepen the discussion on school starting age.

Step Four: Gather the Data

The data was collected through 101 qualitative postal questionnaires and six professional semi-structured interviews. The questionnaires were distributed amongst parents of preschool children attending settings which are participating in the ECCE scheme in various areas of Cork city and county. Parents were asked questions relating to whether their child was availing of the scheme; their preferred preschool and school starting age; as well as the factors that influence their decisions about preschool and school for their children. The semi-structured interviews acquired data from six early childhood experts on how well the scheme's offer accommodated children; policy agendas and rationales for the scheme's introduction and age qualifying criteria and school starting age in Ireland; school readiness and proposals for changing and extending the scheme's offer. This study uses this triangulation or combined approach to acquire a range of information on the research object (Sarantakos, 1998).

Step Five: Analyse the Data

The researcher used qualitative thematic analysis to examine the data. According to Aronson (1994, n.p.) *'thematic analysis focuses on identifiable themes and patterns'* of experiences and opinions. Emerging themes are then combined to thoroughly document collective impressions and experiences (ibid.). The researcher also read any available material which addresses matters relating to ECCE and policy development arising from the interview data.

Step Six: Interpret the findings

This step gives meaning to the themes that emerge from analysing the data (Neuman, 2003). These themes will be explained and clarified through a meaningful discussion which is grounded in the literature and policy reviewed in chapters three and four of this study. A well founded discussion will be presented by weaving the literature into the findings (Aronson, 1994) and verbatim quotes from the two data sets collected will be used to enrich this portrayal of the studies' findings.

Inform others

The researcher will submit the thesis to the CARL website as the research contract between Cork Early Years Network, the student and CARL/University declares that the study's results must be made public. Free dissemination of research results is our commitment. A copy of the thesis will also be located in Special Collections at the Boole Library in UCC which will be available for perusal by request. The Department of Applied Social Studies at UCC will also be submitted with a copy.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter Two: Methodology

The methodology chapter provides an overview of the research process and methods used to carry out this inquiry. This section also discusses the study's theoretical underpinnings and the researchers' perspective in relation to ontology and epistemology and how these positions effect the choice of methods applied to pursue the objective of the research. In addition the chapter includes a section on sampling, ethics, reflexivity and the limitations of the study.

Chapter Three: Literature Review

The literature review affords a context for the study in terms of providing it with a comprehensive background comprised of existing knowledge relevant to the research question (Bryman, 2012). Because there has been little research done on the ECCE scheme in Ireland since its introduction in 2010, the review looks primarily at research into the value of quality Early Childhood Care and Education for society and children and focuses on the key areas of concern for the Cork Early Years Network, these include educational disadvantage;

school readiness and school starting age. Ultimately, the content of the literature review facilitates the later interpretation and discussion of the findings.

Chapter Four: Policy Review

Chapter four documents and discusses the development of ECCE policy in the Irish context and locates the ECCE scheme within the broader policy agenda. This section gives a historical account of policy developments from the 1990s up until the ECCE scheme was introduced in 2010. It tells the story of Ireland's changing social, economic and demographic circumstances which drove the need to address Ireland's childcare issue and examines the reasons why a split system of 'care' and 'education' was borne and impeded upon the development of coherent ECCE policies. The review captures the significance of the introduction of the ECCE scheme in the landscape of Irish early years' policy.

Chapter Five: Findings and Discussion

In this chapter the findings will be reported and presented as interpreted by the researcher in a discursive fashion using themes obtained from the data sets by way of qualitative thematic analysis. The findings will be summarised under three key themes which document, examine and explore the following: the rationale for the introduction of a free preschool year with age restrictions; whether there are any implications of the age criteria of the ECCE scheme for access and; whether there are any implications of the age criteria of the ECCE scheme for school starting age.

Chapter six: Conclusion

This section will summarise the groundwork for this study and will review the key findings of the research. Additionally, recommendations of the ECCE scheme going forward and proposals for further research will be included.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Introduction

The overarching aim of this study is to explore whether the age restrictions of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme compromise access to the Free Preschool Year (FPSY) programme and school starting age. This will be approached through a review of the literature and through primary qualitative research investigating the opinions of early childhood experts along with the experiences and views of parents of pre-school aged children. The intention of this chapter is to provide an overview of the research process used to satisfy the aims of the study as well as to discuss the conceptual framework underpinning the study's design and choice of research tools.

Paradigms and Theoretical Underpinnings

According to Neuman (2003, p. 68) *'Research methodology is what makes social science scientific.'* The theoretical frameworks underpinning this research are Interpretivism and Critical Social Science (ibid., Sarantakos, 1998). Research methodologies consist of an ontology (a world view) and an epistemology (how we come to know about the world) and these theoretical frameworks guide the research methods.

The Ontological Perspective of the Researcher

The researcher believes that there are many ways to make sense of the world. During the process of analysing the data, the importance of context became apparent in unfolding phenomena and meanings. For this study the world view or ontological orientation is influenced by that of Phenomenology and the Critical Perspective, given that the researcher accepts that reality is dependent on both subjective interpretations and objective realities. According to Bryman (2012) phenomenology is interested in how people interpret the world and *'attempts to see things from that person's point of view'* (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, pp. 13-14). Critical theorists *'believe that although subjective meanings are relevant and*

important, objective relations cannot be denied' (Sarantakos, 1998, p. 36). The purpose of this study is to explore how the age restrictions of the ECCE scheme may have implications for children's' access to the free preschool year programme and the age at which they start school. This will be realised by examining the decisions parents make with regard to their children's early years education to see if any light can be shed on these concerns. Applying the phenomenological perspective here is justified as the study attempts to understand and make sense of the reasons parents attribute to their decisions and to appreciate the frame of reference guiding their choices. Bryman (2012, p. 30) captures the role of the phenomenologist in saying that '*it is the job of the social scientist to gain access to people's 'common-sense thinking' and hence to interpret their actions and their social world from their point of view.'* The researcher will use phenomenology to describe both common and noteworthy experiences of the surveyed parents whose children are attending preschool in settings offering the ECCE scheme. The same approach will be applied to the findings from the professional interviews, the data collected from those who experience the phenomena as well as from those who have knowledge about its introduction and its development in the context of social conditions and policies will provide grounds for insightful findings discussed.

The critical perspective and critical researchers like to take account of the actual conditions in the broader context of peoples' lives, for instance, it considers *'that actors are confronted by socioeconomic conditions that shape their life;'* (Neuman, 2003; Sarontakas, 1998, p. 38). For this study the researcher conducted an analysis of early years' policy and its development in the context of Ireland's historic, social, economic and political motives from the 1990s up until the introduction of the ECCE scheme. This analysis contemplates the significance of conditions in the lead up to the development of, and rationale for, such a policy action. The literature review gives an account of existing research into the benefits of ECCE and also discusses school readiness and school starting age with the intention of informing the researcher of the complexity of these subjects and their relevance for young children and their early years' education and care. Referring to the literature on these topics will assist with the interpretation of the findings (Bryman, 2012).

The Epistemological Perspective of the Researcher

Epistemology is concerned with which knowledge is considered acceptable (ibid). Epistemological considerations are either objective, in the case of Positivism, or subjective, in the case of Interpretivism (ibid.). This study is interested in having meanings described and in understanding how social and objective conditions may affect beliefs, values and the decisions people make. With this end in view the researcher aligned with Interpretivism and Critical Social Science. Interpretive social science is concerned with understanding peoples' behaviour (Bryman, 2012). To arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their own worlds requires a qualitative method of inquiry (Neuman, 2003; ibid.). In critical social science *'Bourdieu argues that social research must be reflexive…and it is necessarily political…the goal of research is to uncover and demystify ordinary events'* (Neuman., 2003, p. 81). According to MacKenzie and Knipe (2006) this Transformative Paradigm uses an assortment of methods for investigation. Interpretivism is taken into account given the belief that people construct their own realities in a social condition; *'the social world is largely what people perceive it to be…social life exists as people experience it and give it meaning'* (Neuman, 2003, p. 77). Critical Social Science is important because the researcher believes that people may *think* they make sense of their world but are subject to social norms or moreover, the social policies that forge those norms; *'They [people] operate on the basis of untested assumptions and taken-for-granted knowledge…'* (ibid., p. 77).

And so it is accepted that to explore social phenomena one must understand people's choices in the context of underlying structures that affect the practices we consider to be normal. For instance, this researcher is of the belief that parents' choices for their children's early education and care are subject to social circumstances, as well as societal norms and policies all of which affect individual choices. So there are subjective and objective realities. The researcher accepts that realities exist in people's interpretations as well as within conditioning external forces. These values must be investigated and understood by qualitative means. In qualitative research data takes priority, the role of researcher in this study will not only

describe and interpret people's experiences of the phenomenon being studied but will present the broader and long-term context within and from which the phenomenon developed.

This combination of theoretical approaches was chosen as it allows the researcher to interpret the personal choices, values and perceptions of parents on the one hand while investigating the possibility of underlining agendas and policy rationales on the other. Paying respect to this world view and the investigative nature of the study the application of a qualitative method to the research approach was deemed necessary.

Research Methods

This research is part of the Community-Academic Research Links (CARL) programme at University College Cork (UCC) and a collaboration in participatory research between the researcher and the Cork Early Years Network. The CARL initiative at UCC is based on the 'Science Shop'[2] model. The model is used by research institutes to deliver a service to local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) by responding to their concerns with independent, participatory research support.

The process involved an initial meeting with the CARL co-ordinator, the research supervisor, members of the Cork Early Years network and the researcher at which point some possible research areas were discussed. The Cork Early Years Network had approached UCC with a proposal including the following suggested research questions:

1) Whether the ECCE age limit is resulting in children going to school too young and without a preschool education.
2) Find out the factors that influence parents' decisions about preschool for their children.
3) What happens to these children? Are they ready to learn when they go to school at such a young age?

[2] The science shop provides science and expertise by way of research and guidance to support CSOs with the groundwork of their inquiry http://www.ucc.ie/en/scishop/whatscishop/

4) Are children starting school too young in Ireland?

The Network were especially interested to find out the implications of the ECCE schemes age limits on disadvantaged children as they had a concern that the restrictions may result in the most vulnerable children missing out on their preschool experience and going straight into primary school. The Cork Early Years Network, were aware of a poor uptake of the free preschool year in two districts of North City Cork, however as it is difficult to track these children this information cannot be used to inform the study. The tracking difficulties are logistical as these children could be travelling to other districts to attend preschool or it may be that they are attending other programmes, for example, The Early Start Programme, The Childcare Education and Training Programme and The Community Childcare Subvention Programme. However, these districts do represent the most vulnerable children from disadvantaged families and so the decision was taken that the literature review would consider the effects of quality early education and care on educational disadvantage. Because of this limitation in accessing this specific cohort it was decided at the second meeting with the Network that the study would narrow its focus to exploring whether the scheme's age restrictions compromise access to the free preschool year and influence school starting age. A working title was agreed and refined over time. The group and the researcher met on two more occasions following the completion of the field research. The researcher, Network liaison person and one other member of the CSO attended the third meeting where the data collected was examined and relevant themes were established, it was felt that a fourth meeting should be held with the entire group so that there could be a consensus around which findings would be the focus of discussion for the findings chapter. During the fourth meeting the group and the researcher re-examined the findings to ascertain the strongest and most relevant themes to focus on. Further correspondence was kept throughout the process by email where the research methods, data collection and analysis were discussed with the main liaison person.

Given the overarching aim of the study, it was decided that a qualitative questionnaire would be sent to parents of preschool children attending settings which are participating in the

ECCE scheme in various areas of Cork city and county including Ballyphehane/Togher (South City), Mayfield/Glen (North City), Douglas (South City), Holyhill/Knocknaheeny (North West City), Farranee (North City), Youghal (East Cork) and Clonakilty (West Cork) which represent a purposive sample of early years' settings. It was decided also that semi-structured interviews would be conducted with a number of early years' professionals actively working in the field of early childhood representing academia and early childhood/ early years' education specialists. The purpose of these interviews was to explore people's views on the ECCE scheme as a policy initiative and to discuss issues arising from the parent data relevant to the aims of the research. The questionnaire was chosen as a means to gather data because this form of data collection makes it possible to include a wide number of respondents and enable the researcher to collect the required data for the study, as Sarantakos (1998, p. 224) says *'the use of questionnaires promises a wider coverage, since researchers can approach respondents more easily than other methods.'* It is also a convenient method which yields fast results (ibid.), an advantage for this study due to time constraints. Furthermore, Cork Early Years Network is a group comprising representatives of organisations involved in supporting the Early Years Sector in Cork City and has representation on Cork City Childcare Committee and it is through their connections with preschool settings and early years organisations that the widespread delivery of questionnaires was made possible.

Semi-structured interviews were the means adopted for interviewing professionals because interviewing allows the researcher to gather a greater understanding of social events (Gill, et al, 2008). The researcher wanted to explore the lead up to the introduction of and critically evaluate the ECCE scheme Semi-structured interviewing gives the researcher the opportunity of probing ideas and responses for more detail and also offered the possibility of finding out what is important to the professionals in the area of early years' policy and practice (ibid.). This method of interviewing is often engaged for social reform purposes (Sarantakos, 1998).

This combination of research methods is known as triangulation. Specifically for this study the researcher is using intra-method triangulation *'which employs two or more techniques of the same method'* Sarantakos (1998, p. 168). For instance in this study the researcher is

employing a qualitative approach to analyse the data from two methods of data collection, the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Triangulation is used for many purposes, the purpose particular to this study is to gain a diversity of information on the same subject or issue (Sarantakos, 1998). It is thought that by gathering two perspectives on the matter, those of the parents and those involved in policy and service provision, the data will be enriched.

Additionally a literature review was performed to ground the study in a collection of available material which addresses matters relating to ECCE. This enables the researcher to gather information from previous research fostering a greater understanding of the research object (ibid.). Furthermore, the literature review provides a reference for discussing the results of the study thus giving it greater credibility (ibid.). Little research has been done on the ECCE scheme in Ireland to date, and so the literature review for this thesis looks at research into the wide range of benefits of high quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for children, especially those suffering from disadvantage, their families and society at large with an additional focus on school readiness and school starting age. It was felt that these topics suitably connected to the concerns of the CEYN which centre around the scheme's age qualifying criteria which they feel may impede access to the free preschool year and may result in some of the most vulnerable children going to school too young and without a preschool education. Therefore, the literature review appropriately directs its attention to the value of quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in relation to societal benefits, benefits for children's overall development, readiness for school, school success and beyond and, for reducing educational disadvantage while it also features a section on school readiness and the school starting age debate. The review captures the importance of this initiative in Irish early years' policy through documenting the development of ECCE policy in the Irish context and locating the ECCE scheme within the broader policy agenda. By contextualising the development of the ECCE scheme in such a manner one can get a sense of priorities of Ireland's social policy agenda and the motivators for such policy action. This analysis enriches the discussion as it sheds light on the history and nature of early years' provision and policy in Ireland from the early 1990s in the lead up to the introduction of the ECCE scheme. Reviewing policy development in this way allows for a critical discussion of the rationale for the recent policy development and any issues that may

arise from the studies' findings in relation to the ECCE schemes implementation. The outcomes of this research will be discussed in the context of this literature review.

Sampling

The participating early years' settings were selected by way of purposive sampling. Cork Early Years' Network provided a list of settings which they support, covering a wide geographical area of Cork City and County. The researcher selected eight centres from the list being careful to choose a balanced geographical spread & a diverse socio-economic spread. On contacting the owners/managers of the settings by either phone or email it was arranged that questionnaires would be posted or emailed and that they would continue the sampling process by administering the questionnaires to a selection of parents of preschool children in their settings. All of the centres operate the ECCE scheme. The managers directed the process at this stage and took control of how many questionnaires to disseminate among their service users, for this reason the researcher does not have the number of questionnaires administered, except in the case of two centres where the questionnaires were sent by post. Though all questionnaires have an identifier indicating which centre the response comes from: sixteen responses come from Ballyphehane/Togher (South City), nineteen from Mayfield/Glen (North City), twenty-nine from Douglas (South City), fifteen from Holyhill/Knocknaheeny (North West City), four from Farranee (North City), while none were returned from Youghal (East Cork) despite numerous follow ups and eighteen from Clonakilty (West Cork). Centres and parents were selected this way because of their relevance to the research, *'the goal of purposive sampling is to sample cases/participants in a strategic way so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions that are being posed'* (Bryman, 2012, p. 418). However, it would have been appropriate also to sample those parents with children in the preschool age range who were not sending their children to ECCE, but this was not feasible because of the difficulties in locating this group. Altogether, it was a very straightforward process that ran into no delays or issues. This step in the sampling process was made easy through collaboration with the Network as their familiarity with the centres played a vital role in assuring a quick and positive response.

Purposive sampling was also used in the selection of professionals for interview. Six professional participants were chosen for their expertise in early childhood include and come from a range of ECCE backgrounds including those who specialise in young children's early years' education and care, policy-making, the academic world of early years' education to community childcare co-ordination and development experts. It was felt that their expertise would gather insightful information on the research object and provide an understanding of the role and the rationale of policy action in the early years' sector in Ireland, primarily focusing on the ECCE scheme, compulsory schooling age and school enrolment policies. Additionally, this method also provided an opportunity to discuss subjects like school readiness; the value of early years' education and care and school starting age as well as to critically evaluate the new scheme in terms of its rationale and the concerns outlined in the aim of the study. The network liaison person provided the researcher with some contact details and the remaining participants were selected in consultation with the study's supervisor. All participants were contacted directly by the researcher via email and telephone. The professionals selected were enthusiastic about the study and interviews were arranged at different locations at the convenience of the interviewees and one interview was conducted by phone for logistical reasons.

Data Collection

According to Bryman (2012) the data collection stage of the research involves accumulating information from the sample in order to provide answers for the research questions. The following section details how this was achieved for this study.

Parents' Questionnaire

101 questionnaires were completed by seven of the eight centres who then returned them to the researcher by post. Perhaps the number of participants would have been higher if the researcher met with the parents to discuss the project and complete the surveys through face to face interviews. However, this was not possible given the number of centres and potential parent participants involved. This was offset, however, by the co-operation of the centre managers in facilitating the research process. In fact, with the exception of two centres who received printed questionnaires and cover letters by post, all centre managers printed out the

material and gave them to any parents interested in taking part in the study. The parents then took them home to fill them out and returned them to the centre manager who then sent them back, along with signed consent forms, to the researcher by post. Because the target audience is affiliated with the Network, these centres' managers were found to be most helpful and the centres returned the surveys promptly within a timeframe of two weeks with the exception of one centre who did not return any questionnaires despite follow ups. The questionnaire contained twelve questions, five of which were open questions (Appendix 1-Parents Questionnaire). This was felt to be important as it allowed the parents freedom to answer in their own words. Bryman (2012, pp. 714 and 247) defines an open ended question as *'a question employed in an interview schedule…* meaning that *'respondents can answer in their own terms'*. The advantages of using open questions in a self-completion questionnaire are that they permit interesting responses; the respondents' beliefs or attitudes can be understood or interpreted by the researcher; striking commonalities or differences in attitudes can be captured, they are also helpful in investigating new phenomena or areas unfamiliar with the researcher (ibid.).

Seven closed questions were used, a closed question is described as *'a question employed in an interview schedule or self-completion questionnaire that presents the respondent with a set of possible answers to choose from'* (ibid., p. 709). (Appendix 1-Parents Questionnaire). Closed questions are used to simplify the processing of answers and are quicker for the respondents to fill out (ibid.). The questions were developed to examine parents' choices, decisions and opinions in relation to their children's early years' education and care. For example: 'is your child availing of the ECCE scheme at the moment?'; 'If not, does your child qualify for the ECCE scheme next year?'; 'how old was your child starting her/his preschool year?'; 'what age would you like your child to start preschool?'(although the target children were already attending preschools who were participating in the ECCE scheme this question was asked in attempt to ascertain whether parents of ECCE children had a preference for start dates outside the qualifying age criteria of the scheme); 'what do you hope your child will gain from preschool?'; 'are you aware of the compulsory age for starting school?'; 'would you consider sending your child to school at the age of six?

The purpose of the parents' questionnaire was threefold: to collect the information required to complete the study; to identify themes from the data which represent parental views especially with regard to the factors that influence the choices they make for their children's early education and care and to explore these themes with respect to the study's aims; to discover the extent to which these themes are expressed and to note anything striking in the parents' responses (Sarantakos, 1998).

Semi Structured Professional Interviews

According to Sarantakos (1998) semi-structured interviews contain both structured and unstructured elements but vary in degrees. He claims that feminist researchers value the open and qualitative nature of this type of enquiry and deem it useful for *'social reform purposes'* (ibid., p. 246). The researcher conducted six semi-structured interviews in order to collect data from Early Years' Professionals regarding social policy and trends in the area of ECCE; their interpretation of the rationale for ECCE policy development and to explore the impact of such policies including the ECCE scheme. This method allows for a more open form of data collection, it welcomes emerging themes and ideas which will help to structure the research findings. *'Semi-structured interviews are used so that the researcher can keep more of an open mind about the contours of what he or she needs to know about, so that concepts and theories can emerge out of the data'* (Bryman, 2012, p. 12). This method was chosen precisely for this reason. As the interviews advanced, the research questions became more like topics for discussion, as emerging themes naturally guided the conversation.

Questions/topics for discussion were generated for the above purposes and the interview schedule was revised and amended from interview to interview as required (see Appendix 3-Professional Interview Guide and see Appendix 4-Amended Professional Interview Guide). The type of subjects addressed included their understanding of the rationale for the introduction of the Free Preschool Year in Ireland; the schemes age criteria; school entry polices in Ireland, the value of early years education and care, school readiness and school starting age. Throughout the process both the interviewer and participants were able to clarify meanings and examine concepts further. The interviews were conducted over a one month period between 27th of April, 2013 and 21st of May, 2013. They were not held to a

specific time schedule, and were generally short ranging from sixteen to thirty-eight minutes, this flexibility allowed for topics to be developed and to suit the interviewees own timetable. Five of the participants consented to having their interview recorded by way of Dictaphone, while one preferred the researcher to take hand written notes alone.

The Literature Review

Reviewing the literature is an important stage in the research process as *'using the existing literature on a topic is a means of developing an argument about the significance of your research and where it leads'* (Bryman, 2012, p. 98). The search for literature was guided by the study's research question and its aims and objectives. Given the Networks' concern regarding some children's access to a preschool experience, it was decided to ground the study in what is already known from research of the benefits of ECCE for children and society. This basis became a central feature of the literature review. In order to thoroughly examine this issue the researcher, in collaboration with the study's supervisor, felt it was important to analysis the four component parts of the Networks concerns as laid out in their original proposal (detailed on page four).

This is how the themes were developed for the literature review, by unpacking the original proposal concerns (listed above) into areas that fit the purpose of the study's exploration and these are: the value of ECCE for society and children with a particular focus on educational disadvantage; school readiness and school starting age. Literature on the benefits of quality ECCE for children suffering disadvantage was focused on as it highlights the importance of access to the free preschool year for this group. The discussion also refers to the targeted versus universal debate as prior to the universal offer of the ECCE scheme the Irish government only intervened with targeted provision for those at risk of poverty. The debate details the advantages that universal provision for this group of children.

It was felt that a section on school readiness was important to include as in many ways it is closely related to the topic of school starting age. The literature describes how readiness goes beyond the child arriving at the required age for starting school and involves the

developmental needs of the child. The section on school starting age was included as it looks at the implications of early formal learning for four year old children and it reports on the inquiry which examines the optimal age at which children should commence into primary. Sub-themes developed out of this topic which were included to contextualise the phenomena of early school start in Ireland. The literature review includes interesting contextual elements including research on the development of ECCE policy in Ireland was reviewed to provide the study with some background information on the context of the development of early years' policy in Ireland from the 1990s up until the ECCE scheme was introduced. This will lend a greater understanding of the circumstances in which policy actions such as the ECCE scheme are determined and, like the literature reviewed, it will be interesting to consider the drivers of key policy actions when developing an argument about the importance of this study. It also includes a review of research on the value of play and early education practices within the infant classroom of Irish primary schools and concludes with a focus on Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework for children from zero to six years of age. It was felt that these sub-themes would add value to the overall content of the review.

The Network and my supervisor recommended some government and non-governmental reports which got the process of selecting the review material going. Further references were obtained from such reports. The initial search for material also began by locating the work of several key authors in the field of Early Years' research to interpret their writings and findings so that the researchers' viewpoint could be supported. Research on the ECCE scheme is scarce, however, a basic web-search unearthed one Master thesis by Ozonyia (2012) and a conference paper by Dr. Neylon (2012). Although the focus of each is unique, it was found that some content was relevant to this study. For instance, they both analyse the Free Pre-School Year in the ECCE scheme offer from the perspective of early years' educators while one also includes that of policymakers. This study took the perspective of early childhood professionals and the researcher thought it would be insightful to gather data from a secondary source who gathered perspectives from another groups. Ozonyia (2012) discusses the rationale for the introduction of the scheme and the consultation process in the lead up to its launch, while Neylon (2012) talks about the move from market-led provision to

government contract and includes a piece on information for parents. Their findings provide some groundwork for this study's findings discussion.

Data was sourced from a number of sites including EBSCO database through the UCC library. A search using the following terms ('benefits and cost' and 'preschool education'); ('preschool programmes' and 'school readiness'); ('preschool education' and 'school readiness'); ('early childhood intervention programmes' and long term outcomes'); ('crime prevention' and 'early intervention') yielded 50, 890, 370, 4 and 318 results respectively from which 1, 4, 1, 1, and 1 journal articles were selected from the order given following preliminary reading of a selection of these. They were selected for their relevance to the themes of the literature review. Additionally, further journal articles were located through the bibliographies of reports, books and basic internet searches.

Bryman (2012) notes that while basic web searches are useful as many academic publishers offer articles from their journals in full-text form through sites like Google Scholar it is important to be selective. He recommends selecting reliable sites using information in the URL for guidance. Further data was obtained by this means from government sites, educational institute sites, non-commercial sites, parliament media sites, media sites alongside printed publications and books. Here are examples listed to represent the above order: the Government of Ireland, Department of Education and Skills and Department of Children and Youth Affairs websites; National Foundation for Educational Research and Dublin Institute of Technology websites; the International Bureau of Education and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development websites; Start Strong; Oireachtas (Parliamentary) websites; RTE News, The Irish Times, Irish Independent and Irish Examiner websites; Barnardos and National Council for Curriculum and Assessment publications; books by Alan Bryman, Sotirios Sarantakos and W.L. Neuman provided the main source of information on research methods for the study. Other books by Robin Alexander, Dr. Mairead Considine and Dr. Fiona Dukelow were used for reference on inquiries into early education and Irish social policy on respectively. In the main policy reports from both government and non-governmental organisations provided the greatest source of information whereas books

featured less as the former source was found to plentiful and offered more up to date information.

Data Analysis

Professional Interviews

The data from the interviews was managed through the process of transcribing the content verbatim and thus transferring the raw data into a convenient readable document. Following this the researcher performed a thematic analysis of the data having first coded each transcript by breaking down the data and labelling each component part. *'Codes are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. Codes are attached to 'chunks' of varying size – words, phrases, sentences, or whole paragraphs, connected or unconnected to a specific meaning'* (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 56). The codes were then grouped into themes which were chosen for their relevance to the research questions, with some reference to the literature review where applicable. Important themes were felt to be 'the rationale for the introduction of a free preschool year with age restrictions'; 'implications of the age restrictions of the ECCE scheme on access' and 'implications of the age restrictions of the ECCE scheme on school starting age'. These topics arose in the interviews and will be discussed together with the relevant literature in Chapter three.

Parent Questionnaires

The considerable amount of data generated from the parents' questionnaire was managed through Excel. Entering the data into a spreadsheet format made for easy reading. The spreadsheet was then printed out and colour coded to tag common codes and identify themes using qualitative thematic analysis. This process was carried out manually, proceeding in this manner was beneficial as it familiarises the researcher with the data through the process of reading and coding.

Through the process of triangulation the themes were analysed across the different sets of data collected to enrich the discussion by noting any commonalities or contrasting perspectives and beliefs. According to Bryman (2012, p. 392) *'Triangulation entails using more than one method or source of data in the study of social phenomena.'* Researchers use this approach to double

check the examination of a phenomena by collecting data from multiple sources resulting in more valued findings (ibid.). Findings from the parents' questionnaire were then considered alongside the results of the semi-structured interviews so that the outcomes could be grounded in any concerns or issues which had emerged in relation to ECCE policy and trends. The role of the Literature Review was that it provided both a context and a comparator between the findings and previous research knowledge and concerns. For instance the factors that influence parents' decisions about their children's early years' education and care can be taken from the survey and weighed against the material from the literature review so that any concerns or issues can be explored and critically analysed. For example, when asked if they would consider sending their child to preschool for a second year fifteen of the parents said finances would affect their decision. This evidence is provided in the response made by parent no. 86 *'Cost is a big factor!'* Cost again appeared as a reason to explain why parents are sending their children to primary school at four years of age *'because I can't afford to keep [child] in preschool 'cause I will have to pay for a 2nd year'* (parent no. 41). In the literature O'Kane (2007) advanced some possible reasons for an early start to school in Ireland including the cost and affordability of childcare.

Ethics

In the opinion of Neuman (2003) ethical research relies on the honesty and values of the individual researcher. He says, ethical concerns are about finding a balance between valuing the pursuit of knowledge and valuing others' rights. With respect to the participants in the study, the researcher followed the four ethical principles which relate to harm, informed consent, privacy and deception (Diener and Crandall, 1978). As there was no direct contact with the parents' completing the survey, each was sent a letter informing them of the research intentions along with an informed consent form which was attached to the questionnaires (See Appendix 2 - consent forms). Only questionnaires that were returned with an attached signed consent form were used in the study. With regard to the professionals' interviewed for this research, consent was received either verbally or by email and each was made aware that they would be anonymised in the write up of the thesis apart from reference to the nature of their profession. Each was assured that their verbal data would be stored separately from the written transcripts. Furthermore, each professional was sent a copy of the transcript of their interview and given an opportunity to review and amend or delete material.

Reflexivity

'Reflexivity entails a sensitivity to the researcher's location in time and social space' (Bryman, 2012, p. 393). The researchers position is that of an early years' educator in a Steiner based preschool. The Steiner philosophy recommends an unhurried childhood for children in their early years which is believed to encompass the first nought to seven years, and endorses that abstract learning, the like of which is found in primary school, is better suited, developmentally, to older children (O'Connor and Angus, 2012). For this reason the researcher is against formal schooling for the very young and is in favour of children developing socially and physically in a play based active environment up until the mandatory school age of six. Subject to the researchers' positionality, it was imperative to be reflective of personal bias to ensure that it did not skew or bias the process of inquiry. To this end and to gather some distance from the personal position outlined above, all interview and questionnaire questions were investigated by the study's supervisor to ensure impartiality. This position was also clear in the mind of the researcher while interpreting the data during the analysis stage. The researcher was careful not to infer any assumptions from the findings based on the values held by a Steiner inspired early year's educator and advocate of a later school starting age. The intention of the researcher is simply to present the findings as they are in the words of the respondents with some reference to existing literature and research.

Limitations of the study

The Cork Early Years Network, were mindful of a poor uptake of the free preschool year in two areas of North City Cork, however it proved too difficult to track these children and so this information could not be used to advise the study. The study was therefore limited with regards to its sample. Also, the majority of the sample represent children who are participating in the ECCE scheme and only a tiny minority of three non ECCE children. Further limitations were acknowledged on revising the data collected from the participants especially with regard to the parents' questionnaires. It became apparent that a pilot questionnaire would have identified that some of the questions could have been formulated more clearly as some of the parents' answers were obscure. The researcher understood in hindsight that a more specific

question in relation to the take up of the ECCE scheme may have prevented this obscurity. For example the first two questions were worded as follows: *Is your child availing of the ECCE scheme at the moment? And, if not, does your child qualify for the ECCE scheme next year?* Three of the parents who said no to both questions did not offer any explanation as to why this was so which was the fault of the question and not the respondent. This is only 2.97% of the parents which is not a significant number but nonetheless is worth noting as a limitation. Moreover, question six and nine asked the parents to explain their choices in relation to how long they would like their child to attend preschool and what age their child will be starting primary school. However, on analysing the data it was found that for each of the above questions, many parents (twenty-nine and sixty-four respectively). This represents an incomplete response of 28.72% and 63.67% for questions six and nine. The remaining parents do offer interesting and insightful explanations but this is a significant limitation which shows the disadvantages of self-completion questionnaires over focus groups.

Consequently, although the Network and the researcher agree that the findings are interesting and useful to the aims of the research, it was felt that focus groups would have benefited this study as they would have provided an opportunity to dig deeper and get a better understanding of the parents' values and thoughts in relation to the decisions they make for their child's early years education and care. The possibility of facilitating focus groups was expressed at the earliest stages of meeting with the Network, nevertheless, it was accepted that time constraints would affect the possibility of using this method on this occasion. It was suggested later, at the final meeting between the researcher and the Network, that focus groups could be used as a continuation of the research. Further to these limitations, the study sample was relatively small and so findings cannot be generalised, though, it will be suggested that further study is needed as this is only the beginning of an investigation which requires more depth and a wider range of perspectives.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a step by step account of the research process. The philosophical and theoretical framework was explained so that the reader may understand the researchers' world view and belief of how knowledge is acquired. This explanation provided grounds for

the choice of research tools or methods used in this study. Additionally, the author discussed ethics, reflexivity and the limitations of the study in the attempt to be as transparent as possible so that the reader may fully understand the considerations addressed throughout this research process.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter presents a review of the literature on the value of high quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). It examines the societal benefits; the benefits for children with regard to their overall development, readiness for school, school success and beyond; and the potential of ECCE for reducing educational disadvantage. Early childhood is a pivotal time for children's development. The emergence of skills such as language, motor, psychosocial cognition and learning is greatly influenced by the quality and nature of the environment afforded to the child in their early years (Bowman, Donovan and Burns, 2001; Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007). Research invariably shows that the experience of quality early education and care benefits children's short term cognitive, social-emotional development and their long-term success at school and in later life (OECD, 2001; Barnett 2011; Blau & Currie 2005; Engle et al. 2007; Heckman & Masterov 2007; UNICEF, 2009). Besides, one of the greatest benefits of high quality ECCE is its potential for preventing social problems (Start Strong, 2011). For instance, its positive effect on children's social-emotional development means that problem behaviour is reduced and in the long term this impacts positively on crime levels in adulthood (ibid.). Allied to this, longitudinal economic and social analyses confirm significant returns on ECCE investment (Duncan et al., 2008). To illustrate an example of the possible economic returns on ECCE investment in Ireland: the annual cost of one free preschool year per child is €2,850 (Start Strong, 2011) compared with the cost of detaining a young person or an adult for one year, €281,000 and €65,404 respectively (DCYA, 2014).

In addition to their concern about possible restrictive access to the free preschool year, the Network were keen to know if children are starting school too young in Ireland. Furthermore, they question whether children are 'ready to learn' when they go to school at such a young age. Consequently, the review includes a debate on school readiness and school starting age. The discussion will also delve into the tradition of early formal education in Ireland and discuss curricula developments in the Irish primary school with a special focus on Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. Aistear is a high-quality curriculum which greatly mirrors the ethos of Steiner education and it has the potential to change the way early education is looked in the early years' of primary school in Ireland (O'Connor and Angus, 2012).

Hayes (2003) notes the importance of understanding how children develop and learn as this knowledge can be used to establish the type of environment most conducive to young children's wellbeing and holistic development. Furthermore, knowing how children develop and learn guides the nurturance of positive learning dispositions which are invaluable to children over the course of their life-long learning. It can also provide a strong basis for informing policy, for challenging current educational practices and for advancing a coherent early years system which is guided by child-centred objectives aimed at ensuring that a child's holistic development and full potential are realised in the early years and beyond.

The Value of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

Introduction

The growing body of research on ECCE (DJELR, 2002; StartStrong, 2009; StartStrong, 2010; Oireachtas, 2012; Sylva et al., 2004) has evidenced wide-ranging benefits including better overall child development (social, emotional, behavioural, cognitive and language all of which are associated with child wellbeing), solid foundations for lifelong learning, reduction of poverty, increased female labour market participation and better social and economic development in society at large. A number of key interests are served by ECCE, those of children in terms of their school readiness, cognitive functioning, language development, sociability and problem behaviour (Andersson, 1992; Helburn, 1995; NICHD, 2000; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000), parents who wish to enhance their child's development or need childcare to facilitate their own employment, and society as a whole with regard to

enhancing human capital (Pianta et al., 2009). These interests overlap to serve and benefit the other, for instance, children enrolled in early education benefit from having their learning and development advanced and parents are free to engage in work both of which are likely to support society (ibid.). Research drives the argument that ECCE serves the interest of the child by promoting and enhancing their development and competencies while also addressing inequities in society at large (ibid; Heckman and Masterov, 2007). ECCE should be a matter of priority for policy decisions concerning them, given the large body of evidence on the benefits of ECCE for their life chances, happiness and wellbeing (Start Strong, 2009).

Benefits to Society: The Human Capital Investment Debate and beyond

Central to the argument for investment in early childhood care and education is that education, unlike other goods, cannot be repeated and later investment does not fully compensate for or remedy previous loss of opportunity or neglect in the early years (Chevalier et al, 2006; NESF, 2005). Human capital refers to the value of people's knowledge, skills and creativity when translated into actions, products and services for a successful economy (Government of Ireland, 2008). It is achieved through individual abilities as well as family attributes like income and education (NESF, 2005). The differences later in life between individuals' human capital worth can be related to variations in any of the above achieving factors, for example, family type (ibid; NESF, 2006). It has been evidenced that when human capital investment is aimed at the young, economic return is high and cost-effective public spending is boosted because *"…skill begets skill and…younger persons have a longer horizon over which to recoup the fruits of their investments"* (Carneiro and Heckman, 2003; Heckman, 2006; Heckman, 2004).

Internationally, the most convincing evidence for the effect of preschool on the child and society at large comes from longitudinal studies of high quality early interventions programmes which target disadvantaged children (NESF, 2006). In spite of the strong social justice discourse supporting ECCE, there is an equally powerful argument in favour of it for reasons of economic efficiency (Oireachtas, 2012). Targeted interventions like the Chicago

Parent-Child Centres Programme and the Perry Preschool and evidenced high benefit-cost ratios and also high rates of economic return (NESF, 2006; Goodbody Economic Consultants, 2011). Using data collected from ECCE participants who were followed from preschool age to age twenty-six (Chicago Parent-Child Centres Programme and preschool to age forty (Perry Pre-School Project), these longitudinal US programmes demonstrate returns as high as 10.8:1 and 16:1 respectively (Goodbody Economic Consultants, 2011, Oireachtas, 2012). Drawing from this longitudinal data the above authors applied high-cost scenarios to estimate a cost-benefit analysis for ECCE in Ireland and conclude that the,

> …Children 2020 proposals for professionalising the workforce and extending pre-school provision would result in benefits that readily exceed the rate of return required by the Department of Finance in project or programme evaluations. Less cautious assumptions would result in estimates of benefits that far outweigh the costs, as has been noted in other cost-benefits analyses of ECCE (Goodbody Economic Consultants, 2011, p. 4).
>
> The case for investing in children and young people on both social and economic grounds is supported by a body of international evidence, across a range of policy areas, using a variety of evaluation methods and spanning different policy interventions.
>
> (Department of Health [UK], 2013 as cited in DCYA, 2014, p. 16).

With this in mind here are examples of financial returns on investment in young children:

> A euro (€1) spent on pre-school programmes generates a higher return on investment than the same spending on schooling
>
> (OECD, 2012 as cited in ibid., p. 16)

And for Ireland specifically:

> €7 return for every €1 invested arising from the provision of one year, universal quality pre-school service
>
> (NESF, 2005 as cited in ibid., p. 16)

The social impact of preschool has been linked with higher qualifications and earnings well into adulthood (Melhuish, 2011). Other social returns from early intervention programmes, according to Carneiro and Heckman (2003), include increased socialisation and integration of people from disadvantaged backgrounds into mainstream society, reduced criminal activity and the promotion of social skills or non-cognitive skills like motivation. Longitudinal

studies have evidenced social benefits which include improved health and a reduction in anti-social behaviour (Hassan, 2007). The value of investment in children through such interventions can be seen in the effect of increased levels in education on higher earnings which in turn effects economic growth and all of the other social and health benefits have a positive economic impact through reducing people's reliance on the state for supports (NESF, 2006).

High quality early childhood interventions influence cognitive and non-cognitive capabilities and skills such as social readiness and determination favourably affect outcomes and success in life (Heckman, 2007; Heckman, 2006). The nurturance of social skills, such as the ability to take-turns and share; positive interactions and attitudes with and towards others, have been especially noted to benefit the labour market (O'Kane and Hayes, 2010). For instance, those involved in high quality early childhood programs are liable to complete school and are unlikely to need welfare support or become teenage parents, that is, they are more likely to become 'productive adults' (Heckman, 2004). Early years' research from around the world consistently shows the beneficial effects of high quality ECCE for children's educational and social development. However, quality is the critical feature in determining this positive effect (Oireachtas, 2012). According to DCYA (2014, p. 53) features of high-quality contain the following characteristics:

- A highly qualified workforce;
- Practitioners are well paid and have ongoing professional development opportunities (which results in low staff turnover);
- Smaller teacher: child ratios;
- A professionally developed pre-school curriculum;
- Interventions with family units, such as supportive home visits;
- Monitoring and site visits by either Government or accrediting agency

Beyond quality the duration of the ECCE intervention is also an important contributory factor to the positive impact of pre-school (Goodbody Economic Consultants, 2011).

The long-term effects of ECCE reach beyond the area of education and into the labour market which feeds into the economy as well as society at large. The National Economic and Social

Forum (NESF) (2005, p.104) set out the arguments for state-funded universal pre-school provision in their report:

> …it can be readily justified as the longer term societal benefits that would accrue on the basis of this investment are at a ratio of 1:7 (or 1:4 using more conservative estimates).

More recently the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy (DCYA, 2013e, p. 8) also recommend such an investment given the very strong economic rationale for it, they maintain that:

> Even – or especially – in a time of austerity, it is an investment that makes economic sense, strengthening the foundations for the future of our economy and society.

The justification for state provision of or contribution towards ECCE, however, goes beyond economic arguments to those based on equality and emphasise its role in combatting inequality by enabling female participation in the labour market and by providing children with an equal start in life irrespective of their family's socio-economic status (NESF, 2005). Public investment in high quality ECCE provision reduces child poverty by minimising the barriers to work for their parents and promoting social mobility and social inclusion (Start Strong, 2009; Start Strong, 2010; European Commission's Expert Group on Gender and Employment Issues, 2009). In the opinion of Start Strong (2010, p. 14) *"high quality care and education services should be available and affordable for all young children as all children can benefit*." In recognition of the fact that some children and families may need more support the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy advocates for a universal system plus additional supports for disadvantaged children and those with extra needs, this is called Progressive Universalism and is a key principle of the group (DCYA, 2013e). A good example of the positive effects of universal state ECCE provision on equality is in the Nordic countries, where it is customary to have lower levels of child poverty, a modest gender wage gap and equitable educational outcomes across the different social groups when compared to the US and the UK (NESF, 2005; Barnardos and Start Strong, 2012). In conclusion, in terms of benefits to society relating to outcomes of human capital

investment, equality and other social impacts mentioned above, the case for state-funded universal high quality ECCE provision demands primacy on the political agenda.

Benefits for children

Heckman (2006, p.2) sums up why the early years are so important for later learning and social development:

> A large body of research in social science, psychology and neuroscience shows that skill begets skill; that learning begets learning…The earlier the seed is planted and watered, the faster and larger it grows.

Experiences in the early years of life are crucial for brain development, it is also a significant time for building strong foundations from which skills and dispositions essential to children's growth and development can be nurtured and advanced, this nurturance is important as it enables children to reach their potential in their succeeding educational experiences (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000 cited in Starting Strong 2010).

Life-long learning commences at birth and to some degree the foundations of future learning and social/emotional development are laid prior to starting school. Research has shown that high quality ECCE can encourage early learning and child development especially for children coming from disadvantage (CECDE, 2004a; DES, 1999b; Shonkoff and Philips, 2000; Oireachtas, 2012). Socially disadvantaged children who face school entry with learning problems are particularly vulnerable to poor health and psychosocial consequence (Geoffroy, et al., 2010).

Research has shown the valuable role of high-quality preschool programmes in improving children's overall development (Magnuson, et al., 2007; Sammons et al., 2007; Sylva, et al., 2004, 2010). The effect of early years' education and care has been documented in terms of its supporting role in school success (Geoffrey, et al., 2010). According to Melhuish (2011) the benefits of preschool education have been debated for a long time, although most

contributions to the discussion focus on the positive outcomes for disadvantaged children. However, general population studies tell us that preschool benefits all children regardless of social background. For instance, such studies in the US found that preschool education improved children's school readiness (Gormley, Philips and Gayer, 2008; Magnusson, Ruhm and Waldfogel (2007).

> School readiness in its broadest sense involves children, families, early interventions, schools and communities
>
> (Maxwell and Clifford, 2004, p. 42).

> School Readiness is an interaction: As children need to be ready to make the most of their school experience so too do schools need to be 'ready' to meet the diverse needs of young children and their families'
>
> (Murphy and Burns, 2002, p. 3).

Murphy and Burns (2002) assert that the multidimensional concept of 'school readiness' can be both beneficial and harmful to the child especially in the area of assessing readiness. They say that there must be a consensus, amongst experts who work with young children, on the vital qualities of readiness which go beyond cognitive accomplishments to that of social/ emotional abilities and learning dispositions. Characteristics of positive learning dispositions encompass enthusiasm, curiosity and persistence; communication skills, motor development and physical health (National Education Goals Panel, 1992).

Traditionally school-readiness was measured by chronological age, however research over recent decades has identified other areas of readiness. Cognitive readiness; social-emotional readiness; behavioural readiness and physical readiness are considered key contributors to a child's overall readiness for school (Furlong and Quirk, 2011). Preparing and supporting children is key as the transition to school affects a child's long-term outcomes (Sayers, *et al.*, 2012; O' Kane and Hayes, 2010). Findings from the EPPE and EPPSE Project imply that the high quality preschool experience supports school readiness and transitions to primary and secondary school by nurturing dispositions which enable children's independence,

concentration, conformity, cooperation and ability to form relationships with peers (Sylva, et al., 2003, 2012).

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Child Care Study, another example of a US general population study, gathered longitudinal data from a group of 1,300 children from a diverse range of backgrounds to ascertain the effects of attending preschool. Findings indicate the importance of high quality provision in outcomes for children. For instance, children from centres which met professional standards for quality had higher school readiness and comprehension scores and had less behavioural problems than those who attended poorer quality settings (NICHD, 1999). Other findings are reported briefly by Melhuish (et al., 2001) which reveal that children who attended preschool between the ages of three and five had higher scores in cognition at age five regardless of social background.

This was also evidenced in the UK through the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study (Sylva, et al., 2003). Moreover, building on the work of EPPE project, the Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education Project (EPPSE 3-14) found that high quality preschool continued to positively affect the academic outcomes and social behaviours of students at the age of fourteen (Sylva, et al., 2012). Long term effects of high quality preschool have also been evidenced in France where increased qualifications, employment and earnings at age thirty-three have been associated with preschool attendance (Dumas and Lefrance, 2010).

The EPPE Project was a major longitudinal study carried out from 1997 to 2004, it tracked a national sample of 3,000 children from a variety of early years setting at key stages from preschool to the end of compulsory schooling and beyond, the focus of which was to examine the effectiveness of ECCE on children's intellectual and social/behavioural development. Another focus of the project was to find out if and why preschools vary in their effectiveness. The findings from the preschool stage (three-seven years of age) convey the value of ECCE

for all children's cognitive and behavioural development. Improvements in these domains were found in all children who attended preschool in comparison with those who did not. Levels of effectiveness varied across settings some of which promoted greater outcomes in development. Despite these variances the control groups' attainments were still lower and beneficial effects were greater for children who started preschool earlier (younger than three years of age). Furthermore these benefits were found to persist into primary school. The settings that effected the greatest benefits used play-based instructive learning, had qualified trained staff with good knowledge of the curriculum and how children learn, and supported children's learning and ability to resolve conflict in the home (Sylva, *et al.,* 2003).

Melhuish (2011) reviewed research on the benefits of preschool from France, Switzerland, Asia and South America. All children between the ages of three and four have universal access to free preschool in France. During the 1960s and 1970s the French state expanded preschool provision to afford access to 90% of all three year olds and 100% of all four year olds. Following evaluation, the data evidenced a huge and long lasting effect of preschool on children's success in school (ibid.), and outcomes were better for children who entered the programme earlier (Bergmann, 1996). Preschool expansion by the Swiss state also proved positive for intergenerational educational mobility in Switzerland (Bauer and Riphahn, 2009). Furthermore, the OECD found long lasting effects of preschool on school success, especially in countries where provision is not only widely used but is available throughout the year, lasts longer, has smaller ratios of pupils to teachers and where quality is maintained (OECD, 2010). Findings like these have implications for access to preschool for children as well as supporting and maintaining quality in ECCE as defined earlier. According to Melhuish (2004) there is enough dependable evidence that preschool provision for children over three years of age benefits the whole populace's educational and social development.

Benefits of ECCE for reducing Educational Disadvantage

According to Penn (2009) human capital theory is commonly used to justify investment in ECCE. The theory fixes on the '*economic productivity of individuals and the situations in*

which it might be maximized' (ibid., p. 27). Moloney (2014) asserts that this theory is based on the cost-benefit analysis of the three US longitudinal intervention programmes outlined earlier - Perry Pre-School Project, Chicago Child-Parent Centres Programme and Abecedarian Project - all of which vindicate the correlation between ECCE investment and long term personal and social outcomes. The Irish government has subscribed to this evidence by providing vulnerable children with targeted provision by way of the Early Start Programme and Community Subvention Scheme (ibid.). However, there is increasing doubt that targeted provision is a sufficient ECCE investment (ibid.). It is thought to stigmatise and socially segregate vulnerable children in their preschool years through to primary school where targeted provision is adjoined to the school (Penn, 2009). Furthermore, some vulnerable children and families may be excluded from targeted services due to problematic definitions of disadvantage, which in turn may result in the withdrawal of funds for these targeted services during times of austerity (Moloney, 2011).

Good quality early intervention is fundamental for children who start life disadvantaged as *'schools are generally ill-equipped to remedy a bad start'* (Esping-Andersen, 2007, p. 22). The US has provided a powerful body of research to suggest that ECCE programmes for disadvantaged children enable them to achieve greater educational outcomes essentially in test scores, grade retention and high-school graduation (Woessmann and Schutz, 2006 cited in Oireachtas 2012). High levels of education have been associated with positive social attachment, well-being and general success in life while ECCE has been found to support these outcomes (ibid.). Evidence shows that benefits are particularly strong when preschool provision is of high quality and contain groups that are socially mixed (Melhuish, 2004). Disadvantaged children benefit from preschool by improvements in their cognitive development, confidence, social skills and increased motivation. These improvements are evident in the reduction of school failure and reduced need for special education (ibid.). Educational success has been found to lead to employment success, social inclusion and reduced criminality in adulthood as referred to above (ibid.).

A widely known targeted intervention is that of the Perry Preschool Project which was carried out in Yipsilanti, Michigan, an area of significant deprivation in the US. The Project included an intervention and control group of three year old children with low IQs. The intervention group attended five half days of preschool and 123 of the sample were tracked into adulthood, the findings show positive long-term effects. Early effects demonstrated higher levels of academic achievement in school, and the long-term benefits included reductions in school drop-out, drug use, teenage pregnancies, crime, increased employment and a decrease in welfare-dependency (Schweinhart, et al., 1993).

Another example is the Abecedarian Project which was conducted again with a poor population in the US. The project recruited a randomised sample of children whose mothers' level of education was considered low. The sample consisted of two groups: one group attended an early childhood development programme from infanthood to school entry age, the other group received some social service support but no centre based childcare. The participating children demonstrated improvements in cognitive development, academic accomplishments and advances in behaviour which remained evident at age twenty-one and adult-hood when compared with the control group (Clarke and Campbell, 1998; Campbell et al., 2012). The intervention groups' likelihood of being retained a grade in primary school was reduced by 50% (Ramey, et al., 2000).

European evidence from France (Dumas and Lefranc, 2010; Bergmann, 1996) and Switzerland (Bauer and Riphahn, 2009) shows that preschool benefits disadvantaged children more, appearing to reduce socio-economic inequalities and improve intergenerational educational mobility. Similarly in Britain, the results of the EPPE 3-11 project show that the effects of preschool are greater for children from less advantaged backgrounds, though the project highlights the significance of high quality on effectiveness (Sammons, et al., 2007).

In the Irish context, the Department of Education and Science in Ireland established the Early Start programme within forty primary schools in areas of designated disadvantage in 1994

(DES, 2013a). It is a one year educational programme directed by a primary school teacher and a qualified ECCE worker aimed at meeting the needs of preschool children who are at risk of school failure (ibid.). (O'Kane, 2007). It is primarily concerned with the promotion of children's language and cognitive development, while broadly focusing on children's holistic development (Lewis and Archer, 2002). The existing forty Early Start units cater for 1,680 spaces (Oireachtas, 2012). In 2011, Lewis et al., found a high level of cognitive competence in their study of Early Start participants in junior-infant classes. Similarly, Martin (2000) found that academic attainment was enhanced and participants of Early Start were more likely to take honour-level subjects in the Junior Certificate.

According to the Northside Partnership (2007), a multi-disciplinary group working in three North Dublin communities of Belcamp, Darndale and Moatview, under half of the four and five year old children from these disadvantaged communities are not ready for school, and a bad start in school can lead to issues throughout childhood and beyond. The three communities contain poor housing and high rates of unemployment (one in every nine people are out of work) and are host to around 7,000 people 800 of whom are lone parents (ibid.). The Partnership have developed a plan to get more children ready for school (ibid.). The Preparing For Life (*PFL*) programme is a five year school readiness intervention that aims to advance school readiness by addressing the needs of children in these communities at each stage of their development starting from conception until they start school (ibid.). This experimental programme is the first of its kind in Ireland and is being evaluated by the Geary Institute to test the levels of school readiness in *PFL* catchment areas. The Report on Children's Profile at School Entry (2008-2011) found a compelling connection between participants of the PFL programme who attended centre-based childcare and school readiness, primarily in areas of social competence, language and cognitive development, communication and general knowledge (Doyle and McNamara, 2011). The length of time in centre-based childcare was positively associated with developments in the above domains of school readiness as well as with emotional maturity (ibid.). These findings are in keeping with the literature which persistently shows the benefits of high quality centre-based childcare for disadvantaged children's development (ibid.).

Research from general population studies contributes positively to the debate that universal free preschool benefits disadvantaged groups. For instance, one aim of The EPPE study in the UK was to investigate if preschool attendance reduces social inequalities such as educational disadvantage? The study stated that one in three children were at risk of educational disadvantage at the outset of the project, however, this number dropped to one in five at entry to primary school, indicating that preschool attendance can contribute to the reduction of social inequalities. The EPPE study shows that all children benefit from universal provision but disadvantaged children benefit the most, and the effects are greater where children from all social backgrounds are mixed together (Sylva et al., 2010). This complements the argument that inclusive universal provision for children regardless of social background is beneficial, as targeted provision cannot guarantee that all disadvantaged children are reached and it may also advance a two-tier system (Start Strong, 2009). Not all disadvantaged children live in disadvantaged areas and therefore guaranteeing their inclusion is not possible, also targeted intervention can stigmatise or segregate children to such a degree that take-up is reduced or outcomes can take a turn for the worse thus compounding disadvantage (Smyth and McCoy, 2009; Eurydice Network, 2009).

Furthermore, universal provision benefits all children and settings that integrate children from a mix of social backgrounds benefit disadvantaged children the most (Sammons, 2010). Moreover, there is a common assumption that targeted services are more cost effective in that they cost less to run and bring better economic returns than universal provision (ibid; Barnett, et al., 2004). Although targeted programmes cost less to implement, universal programmes reach more children and so have greater effect not only for disadvantage but also for middle-class children who have social and cognitive problems (ibid.), According to a UK charity and an independent think tank Action for Children and New Economics Foundation, (2009) investment in preventative social policies which include universal childcare services has the capacity to affect nearly £1.5 trillion of the cost of social problems which makes an economic case for universal preventative social policies. In a separate yet compelling argument for universality, Smith et al., (2000) underline the importance of government intervention in

ECCE for maximizing the potential returns to society. They assert that in an open market scenario parents will under invest in their children. Moreover, and according to OECD (2006, p. 225) research from top economic institutes and economists *(ESO/Swedish Finance Ministry Report, 1999; Sen, 1999; Urrutia, 1999; Van der Gaag, 2002; Vandell and Wolfe, 2000; Verry, 2000; Heckman and Carneiro, 2002, NEPI, 2004, etc.)* uses powerful social, economic and educational rationales to justify a public system of early childhood services.

> By establishing these services, significant employment is generated, tax revenues increased, and important savings made in later educational and social expenditure, if children – especially from at-risk backgrounds – are given appropriate developmental opportunities early enough in life, and careful academic programming is continued through primary and secondary schooling ibid. p.225).

School Starting Age and School Readiness

Introduction

School readiness goes beyond a child reaching the age required for starting school, a child must be able to sit, pay attention and be able to control the interaction of hand-eye movements, these physical abilities are connected to the *'maturation of motor skills and postural control'* (Goddard-Blythe, 2011, p. 2). Ogletree (1990) believes there is an appropriate time for children to start formal schooling, yet many schools worldwide use age as the entry criteria overlooking developmental needs.

The compulsory age for starting primary school in Ireland is six, yet a high percentage of children enter primary school in the September following their fourth birthday, *'nearly 40% of four year olds and almost all five year olds are enrolled in infant primary schools'* (DES, 2013, n.p.). Acknowledging the important aspects of quality and the argument that care and education are inextricably linked in the early years has real implications for the primary school environment which routinely accommodates four and five year olds in Ireland. Early formal learning has been criticised because it can be detrimental to the child (Oireachtas, 2012). Katz, for example, has argued that formal learning can put children off for life and maintains that it should be delayed until children are seven years old. (Curtis, 2007; Alexander, 2009; Elkind, 1987; Elley, 1994). The Cambridge Primary Review established

that children should not begin formal learning until they are six years old (Alexander, 2009). This report from the Cambridge Review, which is known to be one of the most thorough enquiries into British primary education, asserted that play-based learning of the like found in nurseries and reception classes should be maintained until the school age of six (ibid., O'Connor and Angus, 2012).

O'Connor and Angus (2012) address school readiness from a Steiner Waldorf Perspective which considers the needs of the developing human being as well as the environment and pedagogical approach most suited to the nature of young children's learning. They believe a later start to school is more valuable to children's aptitude for enthusiasm and formal learning in the long-term. They argue for delayed school entry until children have completed a six year period (from 0-6 years) of learning through a play-based holistic approach. They aim to demonstrate how a more fitting approach to learning in the transitional phase of four to six years can be achieved. They assert that children learn in an integrated way in the early years and that the scholastic approach used in primary schools which many Irish four year olds attend causes an educational divide which unnecessarily compromises and disrupts the natural learning process of a child.

Sharp (2002) argues that introducing children as young as four to teacher-led academic instruction was more likely to cause problems later in life when compared to children who experienced a play-based curriculum with opportunity for choice. This conclusion arises from the results of an international study carried out in 1992 which involved testing the reading standards of nine and fourteen year olds from thirty-two different educational systems, where school starting ages ranged from five to seven years. It was found that the top scoring countries had a starting school age of six and these generally were countries that have a comprehensive system of universal play-based early years' provision such as found in Nordic countries.

While there is much agreement on a later school starting age, some of the literature does suggest that entrance age does not predict academic failure or that age in itself is not the issue. For instance Morrisson et al. (1997) found that younger children in first grade progressed more than or at the same rate as older pupils over the course of the school year. On the other hand, Gredler (1980) argues that the concern for optimal school entry age is exaggerated, as age is a relational and not an absolute problem. He believes there will always be a younger cohort of children in a classroom doing less well than the older children (ibid.). In 1960 Jinks produced evidence that younger children's competence is not related to the age at which they enter school, it has more to do with how their capabilities are judged when compared to the older children in their class (ibid.). Graue (1993) asserts that the negative effect of age in a classroom is felt where there are older and younger children educated together and is not related to the age at which a child enters school. He argues that children do not change because of changes in age entry policies and asserts that these views treat readiness as a characteristic within the child. Graue (1998) emphasises that schools should be ready for children and readiness should be viewed in terms of the child being ready for success and not for school (ibid.). Sykes et al., (2009) advocate that readiness for school should be informed by developmental psychology and not chronological age criteria.

The legacy of early education policy for school starting age in Ireland

The practice of enrolling four and five year old children into primary school is a longstanding tradition in Ireland. In 1922 the Government of Ireland confirmed that free elementary education was the right of all its citizens (O'Kane, 2007). In 1937 the Constitution refined this proposition and stressed the supporting role of the state by acknowledging the rights of parents as primary educators (ibid.). Historically, state involvement in pre-school provision was largely to provide places for children 'at risk'. Early education policies led to targeted initiatives across the US, UK and Ireland (i.e. Head Start, Sure Start, Early Start) which have the purpose of reducing disadvantage through early educational interventions by combating school failure. This type of policy according to Hayes (2008a, p.18) *'impacts directly on the day-to-day reality of the early years' experience for children and the likely effectiveness of the service, particularly for poorer children and their families*.' She says policies that continue to

focus on one dimension fail to not only recognise the potential for inclusion but also neglect the possibilities of *'...high-quality, integrated early childhood care and education for all children, families, society and the economy'* (ibid., p. 19).

Outside of targeted early year's interventions, the family were responsible for their children's preschool arrangements (O'Kane, 2007). The early school starting age in Ireland may well be linked to the lack of free pre-school provision throughout Ireland's history (ibid.). Furthermore, the cost of preschool for parents may also have contributed to a culture of an early school start, with childcare costs accounting for 20% of the household income which is double the EU average (ibid; Nugent, 2008). According to DCYA (2013e, p. 15) OECD figures find that the cost of ECCE for parents in Ireland *'as a proportion of family income are among the highest internationally, and for lone parents are the highest in the OECD.'*

In the Starting Well Index, which ranks the circumstances of preschool in forty-five countries, Ireland's affordability status was positioned at 52.5%, placing them in twenty-ninth place (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012).

Additionally, shortage of ECCE spaces may have been a factor as with the rise of female participation in the labour market in the 1990s, demand for childcare spaces soared and were not adequately met (O'Kane, 2007). Traditionally childcare was the responsibility of the family, primarily women, but since the number of women in the workplace increased from 456,500 to 573,700 between 1990 and 1996 their changing roles meant that a lot more children needed care provision outside the family (ibid., OECD, 2004). 3,496 sessional places were available in preschool services in 1999/2000 and 1,124 services offered full time care (OECD, 2004). Given that there was no universal preschool provision (with the exception of targeted provision for the disadvantaged) it is quite possible that parents chose to send their children to school early because they needed some form of childcare provision (O'Kane, 2007). In a recent survey by Early Childhood Early (2012) 96% of the 421 participating ECCE providers felt that parents would support an extension of the scheme. Some respondents added; '*that parents would definitely avail of a second year as at present*

they can't afford it, even though they are fearful that their child is going to school when they aren't ready or old enough' (ibid., n.p.). O'Kane (2007) also notes the added incentive for parents to send their children to primary school at an early age was that the infant class session runs for longer than that of a sessional preschool at five hours compared to three to three and a half hours respectively.

In recognition of the importance of universal provision and of all children having a preschool experience, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs launched the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme in January of 2010. The scheme offers one year of free preschool to age-eligible children which can still facilitate a transition to school at four years of age. O'Kane and Hayes (2010) say that participating in a free preschool year should provide some kind of preschool experience for all children, however, children are arriving at the primary school classroom with a mix of preschool experiences due to variable quality. Furthermore, at primary school, children face the possibility of different teacher expectations as well as the challenge of attaining more academic goals whereas in the preschool environment their achievements are considered against previous performance (ibid.). Compared to preschools, Irish primary schools, especially designated disadvantaged schools, attend more to academic activities which are felt to be more teacher-led and contain more verbal instruction with a high concentration on literacy and numeracy (Hayes, O'Flaherty and Kernan, 1997; Wright, Diener and Kay, 2000; nicCraith and Fay, 2007; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta and Cox, 2000; Margetts, 2002). O'Kane and Hayes (2010) state that compared to the relative freedom and adaptability of the preschool environment, the primary school expects children to adapt to more formal routines; to regulate their behaviour; listen and follow instruction; and obey lots of rules which may be stressful and hard for a child, so much so that where a child fails to meet the expected standards a loss of affection for learning is likely (Myers, 1997).

In Britain, historic reasons for an early start to primary school date back to the 1870 Education Act when five became the compulsory school starting age. Explanations for this early start not only suggest the need to protect poorer children *'from exploitation at home and*

from the unhealthy conditions on the streets' but also imply political interests in the creation of a young workforce which insinuate that an early school start had much to do with societal needs rather than the needs of the child (Sharp, 2002, p.3; Woodhead, 1989). Today, compulsory schooling still begins at five in the UK, yet children as young as four are admitted into primary schools. Sharp (2002) looked at the current rationale in Britain for admitting children as young as four into primary school and found the most common argument to be *'...that it could help boost children's academic achievements'* (ibid. p.8). Elkind (1987) claims that a theory for early learning finds its roots in behaviourist learning theories. Educational theorists such as Bereiter, Engelmann and Hirsch used these theories to establish early academic programmes. These rested on the assumption that the earlier children develop critical thinking skills the better but neglect the unique nature of early childhood and the developing abilities of children (ibid.). Those who favour an early start to school argue that children can adapt to learning the formal skills underlying the school curriculum and so starting young provides them with a head start (Sharp, 2002). Interestingly, Blake and Finch (2000) discovered that an early school start was popular amongst parents who were happy to transfer their children to school from preschool at four years of age. Furthermore, it is thought that an early start provides disadvantaged children with the opportunity to make up losses in their academic abilities (Sharp, 2002). Conversely, Sharp argues that children miss out on experiences important for their years and believes an early start to primary school may even damage the child which reiterates previous evidence indicating that an early school start may be harmful to children's development (Ames, 1980; Collins, 1984; Elkind, 1987; Gesell, 1928; Yarrow, 1964; Zimiles, 1985).

The Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander, 2009) maintains that children should continue to learn in a play-based environment typical of nurseries and reception classes until they reach the 'school age' of six, they found no evidence that an early start is beneficial to young children and advise against it on the evidence that it can do some harm, for example, the didactic delivery of activities was found to increase anxiety, reduce self-esteem and motivation to learn (Elkind 1987; Elley 1994; Alexander, 2009, p. 2). Focusing on symbols to teach young children numeracy and literacy acts against the natural love of learning inherent

in young children and may be damaging (O'Connor and Angus, 2012). Elkind (2001) states that in a developmentally appropriate classroom children are actively involved in hands-on learning by engaging and experimenting with their senses. He argues that in the absence of solid evidence supporting early academic learning it seems risky to disregard the guiding principles of age-appropriate practices associated with the philosophies of Froebel, Montessori, Steiner, Piaget, and Vygotsky who broadly concede to the formula of matching curricula and instruction to the needs, interests and developing abilities of the child (ibid.).

Early Education practices in infant classrooms: the value of play

According to Angus (2011, p. 60) the structure of Irish primary schools is shaped by Article 42.4 of our Constitution which states that the Government 'provides for' education thus leaving pedagogical decisions the private affair of individual institutions and absolving the Government of any legal responsibility for education. In the main Coolihan (1981) outlines that Irish primary schools are organized by church and state, the former owns and manages them while the latter provides for most of their costs and controls for curriculum and assessment.

In Ireland, play has been recognized as an important medium for early learning (Carswell, 2002; Hayes, 1995; Hayes et al., 1997; Ireland, 1999a, 1999b; Hayes, 2003; French, 2007), yet supporting the practical application of play and experiences of informal learning is not apparent in some observations of practices within the primary school classroom (Hayes et al., 1997; Horgan, 1995; INTO, 1995; Hayes, 2003; Murphy, 2004; Breathnach and Sturley, 2007). Hayes (2003, n.p.) asserts that this is not an unusual finding and says that early educationalists have expressed concern that play may be undervalued and viewed by primary school teachers as conflicting with the classrooms concern for 'real work' or formal education. Irrespective of the focus on the child as an active learner within the new primary school curricula of 1971 and 1999, which encouraged play and guided discovery activity-based learning as well as group and pair work in the classroom, it has been found that the use of workbooks and textbooks and whole class teaching still persists (Greaney and Close, 1989; Ireland, 1990; Murphy, 2004).

O'Connor and Angus (2012) find conflicting qualities in the 1999 Primary Curriculum which advocates an informal teaching method for infants while academic outcomes are defined and measured through standardized tests on their achievements. They say these academic outcomes are realized only by teaching literacy and numeracy formally (DES, 1999a), furthermore anecdotal evidence suggests that although infant teachers are aware of how best to work with young children they feel compelled to use formal learning because of pressure from parents, principals and colleagues from the classes above them (Angus, 2011). Situational constraints within the infant classrooms have been connected to the structure of the class and poor resourcing, for instance, high pupil-teacher ratios (25:1); multi-grade classes; inclusion of children with special needs; increase of children with English as a second language were seen as impinging on activity and play-based learning (Murphy, 2004; Breathnach and Sturley, 2007). Proshansky and Fabian (1987, as cited in Darmody, Smyth and Doherty, 2010, pp. 4-5) argue that,

> It is the school's emphasis on control of behavior and experience of the child that establishes the institutional nature of its physical setting...the most widely adopted strategy for teaching a large group is to match the uniformity of the physical setting with uniformity in behavior so that the children can be dealt with as a manageable unit rather than as a collection of very different individuals.

Murphy (2004) found control to be a factor in managing large numbers of children in the context of Irish infant classrooms, where the average ratio of 25:1 pupils to teacher seemed to hinder the simultaneous engagement of children in different activities. The role of play was observed as filling time as opposed to its important role in children's learning (ibid.). A lack of emphasis on play in the classroom was perceived to be connected to large numbers within the class; lack of teacher in-service development training and time constraints as well as lack of resources (ibid. Breathnach and Sturley, 2007). Hayes (2003) notes that although there is scant empirical research illustrating why play is so important; there is, however, a powerful consensus on the fundamental role of play in early learning.

She adds that,

> It is through play that children interact with, explore and extend their environment to gain in their understanding and mastery of it, influencing both their affective and cognitive development
>
> (ibid. n.p.).

Hayes maintains there are two ways to ascertain whether primary school is suitable for four year olds, one is to take the view of the child by considering what an optimal learning environment is for four year olds and does the primary school replicate this? The other is the view of the school who could ask should we actually have four year old children here. These are important considerations given that writers like David in 1990; Mills and Mills in 1997 and Pugh in 1996 have identified that;

> the single most educationally vulnerable group of children under five, in terms of later school and social success, has been identified as the four-year-olds in reception classes
>
> (ibid. n.p.).

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

In 2009 the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in Ireland, who created the 1999 Primary School Curriculum, published Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework for children from zero to six years of age. It was specifically developed, in consultation with a range of stakeholders, for the Irish context and is informed by International research and the curriculum experiences of countries New Zealand and Sweden (Start Strong, 2010; NCCA, 2009). The framework is guided by goals in relation to children's early learning and development and can be used as a resource for teaching children in a range of settings including infant classes in primary schools. Aistear reflects recent advances concerning how children develop and learn by acknowledging the central role of play and is set to enable infant teachers utilize active learning which is at the core of the Infant Curriculum (NCCA, 2009). In general it is felt that Aistear is an excellent model for meeting the needs of children but there is concern about the extent of its implementation in primary schools as it is viewed as merely a framework and not a curriculum and so its status is questionable (O'Connor and Angus, 2012; Start Strong, 2012; NCCA, 2009a). Some frustrations have already been noted with regards to meeting the needs of young children

given the child: adult ratios in infant classrooms *"This week in play school it can be 1:10 and next week, let's face it, in primary school it can be 30:1 and they still have the same needs"* (nicCraith and Fay, 2007, p. 214; Angus, 2011, p.107).

Angus (2011) notes important distinctions between Aistear and the Primary School Curriculum: the former advances a practice-based approach while the latter is guided by theory; Aistear refers to the development of children's learning dispositions as well as knowledge skills and attitudes while the Primary School Curriculum only delivers on the latter two; Aistear gives prominence to integrated holistic learning, on the other hand the Curriculum divides its content into theme-based subject areas which are allotted a specific time; Aistear promotes play as a central role in children's early learning while the Curriculum pays limited attention to play as a means for learning; finally, the Curriculum is concerned with preparing children for the next stage of learning whereas Aistear, although it recognizes the importance of laying foundations, *'celebrate(s) early childhood….as a time of being rather than becoming'* (ibid, p. 107; DES, 1999, NCCA, 2009a). Angus (2011) is concerned that the descriptive nature of Aistear's priorities may lead to misinterpretation and could result in abstract learning being featured in the infant classroom.

Conclusion

There is a large body of research evidencing the wide-ranging benefits of ECCE which include improvements to children's overall well-being, solid foundations for lifelong learning, reduction of poverty, increased female labour market participation and better social and economic development in society at large (DJELR, 2002; StartStrong, 2009; StartStrong, 2010; Oireachtas, 2012; Sylva et al., 2004). International early years' research agrees that quality is a critical factor in determining the positive effect of ECCE on children's social and educational development (Oireachtas, 2012). This literature review has highlighted that children's interests must be a matter of priority for policy decisions relating to them as the evidence outlining the benefits of ECCE for all children including those at risk of educational disadvantage is indisputable (Start Strong, 2009).

These results have been well established and form a reliable source to inform policy which has the power to realise positive changes across the early years' sector in Ireland. The evidence all points to the importance of investment in ECCE as opposed to funding remedial policies which provide less returns on investment (Carneiro and Heckman, 2003; Heckman, 2006; Heckman, 2004). It conveys how the long-term effect of ECCE stretches beyond education and into the workforce thus benefitting the economy and therefore society at large. The case for publicly funded universal quality ECCE provision has been well founded and deserves priority on the political agenda (Start Strong, 2009; Start Strong, 2010; NESF, 2005; 2009; OECD, 2010).

According to International practice, early childhood covers the age range from birth to six years which covers the preschool years (Start Strong, 2013). Therefore, conceivably and by international standards the infant classrooms in Ireland would by the very presence of four and five year olds be characterised as pre-primary education. The majority of other European countries provide two years rightful access to pre-school for three-five year old children, while in Ireland the State provides just one year outside of the primary school system (Oireachtas, 2012).

The argument for a later starting school age of six seems to be backed by its efficacy for children's long term learning potential and fulfilment in success at school, however this is a disputed point (Morrisson et al., 1997; Gredler 1980; Graue, 1993). Nevertheless, those who support an early start to school and refute the concern for school entry age must consider the type of environment most conducive to children's early learning experiences. The most suitable learning environment is said to be play-based while a harmful environment is understood to be where activities are delivered formally through didactic instruction (Elkind 1987; Elley 1994; Alexander, 2009). A didactic curriculum is thought to cause anxiety, reduce self-esteem and a motivation to learn (Sharp, 2002). Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) found that the most effective early years pedagogy was in settings that encouraged 'sustained shared thinking' and had equal balance of child/adult initiated activities involving a mix of free play and more focused group activities (Sharp, 2002).

Addressing what has been noted as an optimal environment for young children has implications for the practices that have been observed in infant primary school classrooms. Should early entry to primary school persist in Ireland it is imperative that the structural and practical concerns noted by Horgan, (1995); Hayes, (2003), Murphy, (2004) and Darmody, Smyth and Doherty, (2010) be addressed. This Chapter has attempted to review the literature on the value of ECCE in terms of its benefits for children, society and in reducing educational disadvantage with a special on school readiness which supports the argument in favour of starting school at the later age of six or suggestion to fully implement Aistear in the Irish primary school infant classroom (Oireachtas, 2012; Curtis, 2007; Alexander, 2009; Elkind, 1987; Elley, 1994; Sykes, et al. 2009; Sharp, 2002; O'Connor and Angus, 2012).

Chapter 4: Early Childhood Care and Education Policy Development

Introduction

According to Hayes (2008b) the development of ECCE policy is relatively recent in Ireland. Government focus on ECCE as a key policy action was informed by the increased demand for childcare spaces along with recognition of the value of quality childcare as a young child's right through research and evidence regarding the benefits of early intervention (Hayes and Bradley, 2006; Considine and Dukelow, 2009). In a statement to the Seanad in 2013, the former Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Frances Fitzgerald, demonstrates how political interest in early intervention is being shaped by early years' research in the fields of neuroscience, genomics, sociology and economics (DCYA, 2013b). In particular her speech focused on the economic returns of ECCE investment as illustrated by the work of the Economic Scientist, Heckman and, the National Economic and Social Forum (ibid.). Irish policy for ECCE is also driven by a growing body of evidence from early years' research in social policy and childhood disciplines which shows the economic and societal return from investment in early years' interventions (ibid.). Furthermore, findings from the UK study Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (*2003 and 2004*) and Irish research on Children's Profile at School Entry (2008-2011) are highlighting the importance of good quality preschool for later educational and developmental returns (ibid.). This chapter will discuss the development of ECCE policy by locating the introduction of the ECCE scheme in Ireland's political and economic landscape which aims to contextualise the initiative in the wider context of ECCE policy action.

The early context of ECCE policy development in Ireland

Prior to the 1990s most early years provision was small-scale and arranged voluntarily or through publicly funded interventions along with some private enterprise (Douglas, 1994; Hayes, 1995; Hayes and Bradley, 2009). Childcare was seen as the private responsibility of the family and so public investment has always been low. Ireland invests 0.4% of GDP per annum in ECCE services, which is low compared to the OECD average of 0.7% of GDP (OECD, 2013). International studies use the figure 1% of GDP as the benchmark level required to bring high-quality to ECCE services (DCYA, 2013e).

In Ireland the Department for Justice Equality and Law Reform, the Department of Health and the Department of Education and Science were all responsible for some specialised childcare provision, but early years' education has primarily been associated with primary school infant classrooms under the direction of the Department of Education and Science. Historically, childcare and early education have been provided for through this 'split model' approach where care and education were treated independently of each other administratively and in the development of policy (Hayes and Bradley, 2006; CECDE, 2004b). In a split model system childcare is typically a private commodity involving a trade between providers and parents while education is largely a public responsibility (Moss, 2008).

The disconnection between care and education

In Ireland there has long been a disconnection between care and education. In its 2004 Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland, the OECD criticised the Irish government for not giving complete responsibility to one Department to initiate action towards the integration of policy and the unity of various childhood agents and services (Hayes, 2010). Two important documents in the development of the ECCE sector in Ireland the White Paper Early Childhood Education: Ready to Learn (DES, 1999b) and the National Childcare Strategy (Ireland, 1999) reflect these separate concerns for 'early education' and 'care' as each focuses on different aspects of ECCE.

With the establishment of the Office of Minster for Children (OMC) in 2005, later becoming the Office of Minster for Children Youth Affairs in 2008 and finally the formation of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) as recently as 2011, important structural developments have occurred. For example, the newly formed Department unifies a range of activities which were once split into separate responsibilities for the Minister for Health, the Minister for Education and Skills, the Minister for Justice and Law Reform and the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (DCYA, n.d.). However, the co-location of the Early Years Education Policy Unit between the DES and the DCYA means that policy decisions relating to early childhood education and care are still divided between two departments (Kiersey, 2009). Over the past twenty years, the sector has endured a state of

uncertainty about its role and its identity. This uncertainty is reflected internationally and in Irish policy discourse which uses many terms for the sector: early years' education, early childhood education, childcare, early childhood care and education and early childhood education (ECEC) in recent EU and OECD documents.

The legacy of reactive policies in ECCE

Lack of policy facilitated the growth of a makeshift ECCE sector which developed to respond to shortages in childcare spaces arising from employment growth as Ireland's economy boomed in the 1990's. This dearth of strategic policy in ECCE gave rise to an unregulated community and private sector until the Childcare Act (1991) introduced Preschool regulations in 1996 covering all preschool provision for children under six years of age, focusing mainly health and safety aspects of quality (O'Kane, 2005). While these were significant for the creation of minimum standards and their regulation across ECCE settings nationally, they did not address the need for high quality early education. Policy at the time was driven by the need for 'childcare' spaces for working parents (Ozonyia, 2012; Hayes & Bradley, 2009).

Hayes & Bradley (2009) conclude that the lack of direct action in childcare provision results from Ireland's Constitutional restrictions and the political drive to avert public and universal provision in favour of the marketplace. The Irish Constitution, underpinned by the principle of subsidiarity, distances the state from involvement in child care and education and instead places the responsibility at the local level within the family:

> The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious, moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children
>
> (Bunreacht na h'Eireann, 1937, Article 42.1)

Article 41 instructs women in the private sphere (the family) to care for children, this directive was enforced through the marriage bar, which barred married women from working in civil service posts, until it was removed in 1973 (Hayes & Bradley, 2009). Moreover, Article 42 stresses the subsidiary role taken by the state in relation to children's education by declaring parental rights as *'the primary and natural educator'* by guaranteeing that *'parents*

shall be free to provide this education in their home or in private schools….' (ibid., p. 22). Nolan (2007, p. 501) maintains that this constitutes a firm *'separation of the public power of the state from the private relationships within the family in nearly all circumstances'.*

During the 1980s financial crisis the Irish government began to 'roll-back' the state and rely heavily on community and private partnerships to cope with the 'social aspects' of need (Hayes & Bradley, 2009, p. 26). Larragy (2006) notes that during this time Ireland moved from centralised government policy decision making to a model of 'social partnership' under which massive spending cuts were made including a 7% reduction in education expenditure (Powell, 1992). Following neo-liberal policies adopted in the UK and US, the states preference for personal liberty and market-based responses not only resulted in an unwillingness to engage in the care and education of young children at a time when increased numbers of women were entering the labour market, but also affected the course of state action in childcare policy (Hayes & Bradley, 2009, p. 25). One major funding programme, the Equal Opportunities Child Care Programme, exemplifies the role of a non-interventionist state which favours the delivery of capital grants to private, self-employed and community childcare providers rather than centrally organising collective provision (ibid.)

Emerging needs: the driver of developments in ECCE policy in the 1990s

Over the last fifteen years a number of reports investigating the childcare and early education issue, prompted by the need to enable more women to participate in the workforce, were commissioned by the Irish government (Hayes, 2008b). The Report of the Commission on the Family (1998), The National Childcare Strategy (1999), the National Children's Strategy (2000), Ready to Learn, the White Paper on Early Childhood Education (1999), the OECD Report on Early Childhood Education and Care (2004) and the NESF Report on Early Childhood Education (2005) together emphasised how quality early years services benefit children and their families (ibid.). These documents helped to organise modern ECCE policy in Ireland. Over the decade from 2000 – 2010, the Irish State invested almost €1.139.7 billion in the development and enhancement of the ECCE sector (Moloney, 2014).

The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform launched the National Childcare Strategy in 1999 presenting the findings of the Expert Working Group on Childcare which was set up to examine the need for developing access to and quality of childcare in Ireland. This focus was in response to both the supply and demand side needs of childcare in Ireland at the time (Hayes, 2006). The Strategy has been criticised for centring its' focus on the needs of working parents instead of specifically favouring children (Hayes, 2008b). However, it was the first time that afterschool and preschool provision featured on the policy agenda (ibid.).

The National Childcare Strategy led to the formation of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006 and was part financed by the European Union Structural Funds under the National Development Plan (2000-2006) (ibid.). The EOCP represented the largest investment in childcare in Ireland when €438.8 million in funding was allocated to the creation of childcare spaces for working parents (French, 2008). Under the DJELR, the EOCP set up County Childcare Committees to manage the impact of the Programme and to develop local strategies (Hayes, 2008b). The National Childcare Investment Programme (2006-2013) later replaced and built upon the work of the EOCP. The NCIP apportioned €358 million out of a total €575 million to Capital investments, the aim of which was to make quality childcare affordable and accessible to parents (French, 2008). Together these Programmes account for the creation of an estimated 90,000 early education and childcare places nationwide (French, 2008). Although these are significant milestones in the development of ECCE in Ireland, Hayes (2008b) proposes that the practical interests for investment in childcare may have led to the limited focus of the Strategy which was to increase the number of childcare spaces for working parents with the help of capital grants. This, she suggests, made way for a fragmented policy response which does not recognise childcare for its wider benefits to children, their families and society. Consequently, investment in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECCE) has been driven by policy objectives which value equality and labour market demands over the needs and rights or outcomes for children (Hayes and Bradley, 2009). However it is worth noting that in 1997 the above Expert Working Group on Childcare emphasised the significance of play, care and

education for the developing child and promoted equality of access to childcare services regardless of family background (Moreau, 2005).

In 1999 a White Paper on Early Childhood Education, Ready to Learn was produced by the Department of Education and Science and it focused on the educational needs of children from birth to six years of age across the whole range of early childhood services, specifically looking at disadvantage and special needs (Hayes, 2003). This White Paper represented an important shift in ECCE policy acknowledging the need for change in ECCE in Ireland and recognising the value of connecting care and education *'for young children education and care should not be separated but provided in a complementary, seamless fashion'* (DES, 1999b, p.11). However, Kiersey (2009) points to a key flaw in that it fails to recognise ECCE as the right of all children but rather addresses the need to develop childcare spaces referring only to targeted direct provision. It lacks any clearly framed policy and appears more of a discussion document surrounded by '*conceptual indecisions'* especially in terms of locating care and education, for example,

> The developmental age level of the child across the spectrum can be important in regard to whether the focus is principally on care or education. It can never be exclusively on one or the other.
>
> (Kiersey, 2009, p.8).

The Paper influenced the formation of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) in 2002. The CECDE were entrusted to draft a quality framework for the early years; its other responsibilities included making plans for both special needs children and those at risk of educational disadvantage, aiding research in the field of early education and paving the way for setting up the Early Childhood Education Agency (ibid.). The CECDE launched Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education in 2006. This was the first time that quality had been focused on in a policy context since the Childcare Act (1991) introduced Preschool regulations in 1999 which focused on the structural elements of care (Moloney, 2014) and therefore merely set minimum quality standards relating to health and safety. Siolta's quality principles, standards and components are shared across the five settings where children under six are in

attendance, including child-minding, sessional services, part and full time day-care and infant classes in primary schools (French, 2008). The Early Years Policy Unit became responsible for its roll out when the CECDE was closed by the Department of Education and Science in 2008 (DES, 2013b). Hayes & Bradley (2009, p. 27) see the closing down of a supportive initiative like the CECDE as indicative of a *'fragmented commitment to children in ECCE policy'*.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) was established in 2001 to advise the Minister of Education and Skills on matters relating to curriculum and assessment from early children education through to post-primary (ibid.). The NCCA launched Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in 2009. Aistear represents the first such Curriculum Framework which lays out general learning and development goals for children aged 0-6 and can be extended across a series of settings where these children are in attendance. However, with the exception of the *Aistear in Action* initiative run by City and County Childcare Committees and Early Childhood Ireland *'there has been no national, co-ordinated plan to support services in using the curriculum framework to guide their work with children'* (NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland, 2013, p. 6). These two frameworks for quality and curriculum, Siolta and Aistear, mark an important milestone in the development of ECCE in Ireland and serve as a strong foundation for improving/standardising quality and integrating care and education in services for young children (NCCA, 2009). However, according to Barnardos and Start Strong (2012) these frameworks have not been rolled out nationally resulting in variable levels of quality.

Goodbody Economic Consultants (2011) evaluated the Siolta Quality Assurance Programme, a pilot study limited to just a small number of high capacity services, and found a notable variation in quality. Services may participate at two levels with the framework either on an informal or formal basis, the former is structured and intensive but remains a pilot trial and the scope of the latter is very limited (Start Strong, 2012). The fact that the instruments have been rolled out separately and are the responsibility of different institutions surely impacts on partnership in quality assurance (ibid.). The call now is to have them rolled out in

conjunction with each other nationally and for full implementation within individual services while making sure that workforce training and inspections are ingrained in the two frameworks (Start Strong, 2010; ibid.). However, following the RTÉ *Prime Time* investigation, 'A Breach of Trust' the issue of quality in services ECCE has become the concern of the public and the media (DCYA, 2013e). The expose revealed significant flaws in the inspection system (Moloney, 2014). The programme uncovered controversial issues relating to how staff treat children and manage their behaviour but services also widely vary in how they contribute to children's early learning and development (DCYA, 2013e). The Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years' Strategy are pleased by the new series of measures under the Pre-School Quality Agenda yet there is still no plan to roll out the two pillars of quality Aistear and Siolta (ibid.).

The NESF established a plan of action to realise productive policy in the area of ECCE (NESF, 2005). Crucially, the NESF report went beyond the idea that 'childcare' facilitates women's participation in the labour market to better understand the comprehensive value of 'childcare' in the short and long term, significantly in terms of child development outcomes when care and education are linked (ibid.). The report recognised the link between investing in ECCE and the shared societal benefits (ibid.) and recommended a policy framework for ECCE which included the issue of appropriate state investment alongside universal access and provision. Their recommendations were informed by International trends. They note;

> The current EU and international trend is to provide at least two years of publicly-funded care and education before beginning compulsory schooling. In countries like the UK and the US where, in the past, the approach was to limit public provision to those children considered 'at risk', there is increasing support for more universal access. (ibid., p. 21)

EU pressures on policy reform

The importance of childcare provision as a means to facilitate full employment was recognised by the EU, for example at the Barcelona Summit in 2002 where targets were set in relation to state expenditure and provision of childcare. Consequently, the European Council settled that*:*

> Member States should remove disincentives to female labour force participation and strive to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90 % of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33 % of children under 3 years of age.
>
> (Plantenga and Remery, 2009, p. 7)

In 2002/2003 participation rates of three to six year olds in full time education in Ireland totalled 49.6%, well below the Barcelona Objectives with much of this accounted for by those children attending the junior cycle of primary school (NESF, 2005). The government responded to the crisis in childcare through building the infrastructure (provision of childcare spaces) and cash benefits including real increases in child benefit and the introduction of the Early Childhood Supplement in 2006 to parents of children under to enable greater access to childcare. Such initiatives, however, were piecemeal and did not represent a significant effort to meet the Barcelona targets until the launch of a free preschool year in 2010. Ireland's funding of preschool services came following the findings of *'The Childcare Transition' - A league table of Early Childhood Education and Care in Economically Advanced Countries* (Neylon, 2012; UNICEF, 2008). Upon analysis of ten Early Childhood Education and Care standards across twenty-five OECD countries it was found that Ireland only delivered on one of ten suggested standards (Standard six: '*50% of staff in accredited early education services tertiary educated with relevant qualification'*, UNICEF, 2008, p. 2). Ireland did not meet the other nine suggested standards which include:

> parental leave of 1 year at 50% of salary; a national plan with priority for disadvantaged children; subsidized and regulated child care services for 25% of children under 3; subsidized and accredited early education services for 80% of 4 year-olds; 80% of all child care staff trained; minimum staff-to-children ratio of 1:15 in pre-school education; 1.0% of GDP spent on early childhood services; child poverty rate less than 10%; near-universal outreach of essential child health services
>
> (ibid., p. 2).

Furthermore, in the same year Volume One of the Annual Irish Competitiveness Report entitled: *'Benchmarking Ireland's Performance'* reported that less than 5% of Ireland's three year olds were attending preschool programmes compared to the situation in nearly all European countries where four year olds were guaranteed a preschool place in which 80% of

the staff were trained (ibid.; National Competitiveness Council, 2008). It was evident that Ireland needed to take action to enhance these results (Neylon, 2012).

The age criteria of the new ECCE scheme initiative launched in January 2010 (children qualify for the scheme if they are between the ages of three years and two months and four years and seven months by the 1st of September of a given year) successfully satisfies one of the goals of the European Council by affording older age-eligible children with access to childcare while simultaneously providing a means to delay school entry until children are nearer to Ireland's mandatory school age which is six.

Earlier developments in 2005 suggest progression in policy, for example, the establishment and placement of a Junior Ministry for Children at Cabinet housed in the Office of the Minister for Children, later changed to the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in 2008 (French, 2008) and subsequently, the appointment of a full Minister and Department for Children and Youth Affairs in 2011. The new department unified various departmental responsibilities and amalgamated vital areas of policy and provision with regard to children and young people comprising the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA), the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB), the Family Support Agency (FSA), the Irish Youth Justice Service (IYJS) as well as the Adoption Authority of Ireland and Office of the Ombudsman for Children (OCO) (DCYA, n.d.). Additionally, the co-location of the Department of Education and Skills' Early Years Policy Unit within the Department of Children and Youth Affairs is said to guarantee a more deliberate action for developments in the early childhood sector (ibid.) although this co-location has been criticised (Kiersey, 2009). To ensure transparency in public policy relating to children the recently published report of the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy recommend that the DCYA have a lead role in coordinating mechanisms across departments (DCYA, 2013e). They maintain that while this separation of responsibilities makes administrative sense, it does not always ensure that the best interests of young children are supported. For example, in Ireland, responsibility for the funding of early care and education services (including the Free Pre-School Year) lies with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, while the Department of Education and Skills has policy responsibility for much of

what determines the quality of those services (including the Síolta quality framework, the Aistear curriculum framework and the development of the workforce), as well as the Early Start programme.

Recent policy developments in ECCE and challenges to reform

The latest policy development in the sector is the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme, also known as The Free Preschool Year (FPY). In January 2010 the Department of Children and Youth Affairs launched the ECCE scheme with the intention of giving children access to a free year of preschool prior to starting primary school. It has been noted that

> participation in a pre-school programme provides children with their first formal experience of early learning, the starting-point of their educational and social development outside the home. Children who avail of pre-school are more likely to be ready for school and a formal learning and social environment
>
> (DCYA, 2013a, p.1).

The rationale for the implementation of the ECCE scheme was made public by the then Minister for Children Barry Andrews who stated in a press release that this move;

> ....*demonstrated* our commitment to our children's social and educational development

While also acknowledging it as;

> …a key building block in the realisation of our plan for a smart economy.

He added:

> pre-primary education is a key determinant of student performance at all levels of education, as it leads to improvements in students' skills levels, motivation and the propensity to learn, which in turn raises the private and social returns from all future investments in their education
>
> (DCYA, 2009, n.p.).

However, it is important to take cognisance of the savings the government made from the roll-out of the scheme. The ECCE scheme replaced the Early Childcare Supplement (ECS) which cost the government €480m on average per year, while the ECCE scheme costs in the

region of €166m annually (Oireachtas, 2012). This represents a yearly saving of more than €300m for the government, so arguably the rollout of the scheme during Ireland's economic crisis may indicate a dual incentive to save on capital funding as well as meet the early care and education needs of young children. Nevertheless, Hayes is reported in the Starting Well Index (Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), 2012, p. 23), as saying *"The childcare supplement was going straight into parents' pockets, with no guarantee it was going to the early years' sector [anywhere]."* Neylon (2012) and Ozonyia (2012) also suggested that as parents were free to choose how to spend this direct payment the supplement could not guarantee that children would attend a preschool service. In addition, Harmon (et al., 2006) asserted that in order to ensure the uptake of attendance, ECCE should arguably be publicly funded and compulsory as otherwise children depend on parents to take the decision which may result in an under-consumption of ECCE.

The ECCE scheme targets access to pre-school children aged between three years and two months and four years and seven months on 1st of September in the given preschool year, that is, they must be born between 2nd of February and 30th of June to qualify (DCYA, 2013a). Capitation grants directly finance early years' settings to provide one year of preschool to children who are age-eligible. Conditions of the grant scheme aim to standardise workforce qualifications. Under the new policy all ECCE settings taking part in the FPY must ensure that room leaders are qualified to at least FETAC Level 5. The grants are set at two rates: a basic weekly rate of €64.50 per child and a higher rate of €74.50 per child is issued to services where graduates with a relevant third level degree are employed (Neylon, 2012).

The scheme is now in its fourth year and is accommodating 94% of age-eligible children, which means that nearly 68,000 preschool children are attending 4,300 settings in the academic year 2012/2013 (Former Minister for Children and Youth Affairs Frances Fitzgerald TD, 2013 as cited in Children's Rights Alliance Report Card, 2014, p. 19). The high take up rate has been associated with the *'free and equal access to all children*' (Oireachtas, 2012, p.8). Ozonyia (2012, p. iii) has found a number of positives associated with the scheme including*: '...equality of access, quality provision, qualification*

standardisation as well as professionalisation of the ECCE sector and its workforce in Ireland'. Yet, although there is a higher capitation rate for settings managed by personnel with three years' experience who hold an appropriate Level 7 bachelor degree (Moloney, 2014), department figures for 2011 show that as little as 14.6% of the total 4,162 settings contracted to deliver the FPSY met the higher capitation criteria, with the majority of settings (85.4%) meeting only the basic criteria[3] (DCYA, 2012b). However the scheme was rolled out nine months after its announcement in the supplementary budget in April 2009 and the speed of its launch took practitioners by surprise (Neylon, 2012). The fast roll-out did not leave much time for contracting settings to meet the new requirements. Outside of the FPSY there are no staff qualification requirements (Moloney, 2014).

Furthermore, the scheme offers thirty-eight weeks of provision at three hours per day and therefore is not regarded as a full-time service. The sessional nature of the scheme is an issue for parents in paid employment. Significantly the scheme does not greatly offset the costs of childcare for parents needing full-time childcare (Horgan et al., 2014). Moreover, emerging issues following the RTE *Prime Time* Investigation: 'A Breach of Trust', in May 2013 which exposed a poor inspection system and mal-practice in a number of Dublin crèches challenges the need *'...to improve quality standards and workforce capacity in all sectors of childcare and early years services'* (DCYA, 2013d). Following the expose the Health Service Executive (HSE) plans to bring about a new inspection model which focuses on outcomes for children (in et al., 2014). Yet, attempts at improving quality through professionalism improvements are less advanced (ibid.). Furthermore, under the austerity programme budget cuts to the ECCE scheme came into effect from September 2012, whereby the State sanctioned a 3% reduction to the weekly capitation grants, reducing the €64.50 and €75 contributions to €62.50 and €73 accordingly (DCYA, 2011). In addition, the staff/child ratio was increased to 1:11 from 1:10 because it was agreed that labour is the highest cost for ECCE services, (ibid.). Further criticisms made in relation to increasing the number of children per staff member were underlined by concerns for children's needs and welfare (ibid; Sure Start, 2011; Early Childhood Ireland, 2012a; Oireachtas, 2012).

[3] *'The playgroup leader must hold a nationally accredited major award at Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications in childcare/ early childhood care and education (www.dcya.gov.ie)'* (Moloney, 2014, p. 9).

The Government's decision to reduce the capitation fees was defended by the Minister for Children, Frances Fitzgerald, who said the changes were *'minimal'* and necessary to maintain the free preschool year as resources were scare (O'Brien, 2013). The decision to reduce capitation fees was criticised because the higher rate was set to incentivise graduates into the sector (ibid.). The Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years' Strategy sets the development of a graduate led sector as one of their five peaks (DCYA, 2013e). Service quality is reliant on a number of indicators one of which is highly qualified staff (Oireachtas, 2012). Up until the Free Pre-school Year was introduced in 2010 staff were not required to have any childcare qualifications, however since 2012 staff at participating centres must be qualified to FETAC level 5 which is some progress but this is considered to be a low level qualification[4] (Start Strong, 2013b). However, from September 2014 all team leaders must hold a level 6 qualification (Moloney, 2014). Some features of high quality ECCE include well paid staff who are qualified to degree level and are in receipt of constant professional development plus smaller teacher-child ratios (Oireachtas, 2012). Therefore, any concerns regarding the quality of provision under the ECCE scheme are justified in light of these high quality indicators. Furthermore, in 2007 Ireland was behind the UNICEF goal of 1% GDP investment in public spending in ECCE (ibid.), since then Ireland has cut public spending and saved on the roll-out of the scheme, this raises questions about the quality levels within the scheme and suggests that the only positive is its free universal nature.

Eligibility for the Free Pre-School Year under the ECCE scheme

Although the scheme is accommodating more than 95% of eligible children, Ozonyia (2012) found that some children fell through the cracks of the age qualifying category. For instance, children who do not qualify at the lower end of the age limit are more likely to start primary

[4] Further Education Training and Awards Council (FETAC) awards are positioned within the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) which consist of ten levels where Level 1 is the lowest and Level 10 is the highest (see The College of Progressive Education website http://www.progressivecollege.com/AboutUs/AssociatedCollegesAwardingBodies/FETACAwardsExplained/tabid/176/Default.aspx). Fetac Level 5 matches the NFQ Level 5 which profiles the award holder as an Intermediate Practitioner, the Advanced Practitioner (NFQ Level 7/8) is deemed to have "…the broadest range of skills and competences." (see DES, 2009, p.13 at http://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Early-Years/eye_background_discussion_paper.pdf)

school the following year and consequently not avail of their free preschool year (ibid.). The rationale for providing children with a year of preschool prior to starting school may be lost as result of this age restriction. Furthermore, the restrictive upper age measure limits choice for parents who are aware of the value of early childhood care and education and, who wish for their children to start school at an older age (for example, closer to six years). These parents find that the child is too old to avail of the scheme due to the upper age restriction and if they wish to avail of preschool at a later age must pay for the service.

The rationale for targeting the scheme to a specific age group, as reported by the DCYA, is

> ...to make early learning in a formal setting available to children before they commence primary school. To achieve this, participating services are expected to provide age-appropriate activities to children. This requires targeting the pre-school year at a particular age cohort limited by minimum and maximum age limits. To extend the age range would undermine the ability of services to provide appropriate age-related activities to all children in the pre-school year
>
> (DCYA, 2013a).

According to Ozonyia (2012) the Department of Finance are against extending the qualifying period because of the financial pressures associated with more children qualifying while policymakers wish to maintain the category because its fifteen month range allows for parents to send their children to school at an older age. In Ireland, children are not obliged to start school until the compulsory age of six, though four year olds can be enrolled in primary infant classrooms (DES, 2013). Currently*, 'nearly 40% of 4-year-olds….attend primary school'* (ibid. n.p.). Therefore, the access criteria of the ECCE scheme appears limiting considering that children can begin formal schooling at both four and six years of age.

As communicated by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, grounds for the lower age limit of the scheme is informed by international research,

> when evaluating the most appropriate age range for eligibility to pre-school programmes, we must consider the significant body of evidence provided by international research, which points to the fact that children who start school at a younger age perform at a lower level than children whose entry into the education system is at a later age.
>
> (O'Neill, DCYA, 2013, see Appendix 5 for communication).

This decision is influenced by Birthdate Effects' literature from 1990 onwards by Sykes et al (2009) among others who considered the negative impact of formal schooling on the very young. However, the Department of Education allows for the practice of sending four year olds to formal primary school. This seems to indicate that two government departments making decisions on children's educational experiences are not providing a co-ordinated or coherent system in support of the child's best interests, holistic development and school readiness.

The need for policy reform

NESC (2009, pp. xv and xxi) stated that *'Ireland's early childhood care and development infrastructure is still comparatively underdeveloped and is one area of critical importance for the future of our children, our society and our economy.'* In recognition of the need for policy reform in Ireland, Start Strong published a policy brief which was influenced by the 2009 NESC report. The brief entitled Planning for the Early Years (2010) aims to establish national early childhood provision which is devoted to the developmental needs and rights of all young children in Ireland. In order to bring Ireland's early care and education up to the highest International standards they called for the development of a 10-year plan and their manifesto for growth calls for *'...investing in the growing child and for investing in the future growth of the economy'* (ibid., p. 70).

Children's Rights and ECCE?

Although the value of ECCE has been recognised by the Irish government, Ireland's action towards provision of a universal free preschool year occurred in the context of international pressure to improve our commitment to early childhood education and care (UNCRC, 2005, 2006) accompanied by economic pressures. The economic collapse has driven austerity and

with it the need to design a Smart Economy. Early years' research has long been available to support the wider values of ECCE, yet the timing in Ireland suggests that pressure from the OECD and the UNCRC and UNICEF has affected its recognition of the need for action. The public discourse on investment in the early years is dominated by economics and the wider benefits of ECCE. There is a clear absence of children's rights throughout the discourse. Children are seen as assets, national treasures, a means to recover our economy, not far removed from the days when the earliest Department of Education insisted that our youngest children be taught through the medium of Irish so that Ireland could return to the business of nation building through cultural revival.

In the present climate, the concern for economic revival seems to dominate discourse in the area of ECCE:

> Ireland cannot afford to leave anyone behind in the drive to improve the skills and competencies of our work force and to ensure that workers possess the skills required to service a Smart economy. This effort starts with pre-school education, which has been demonstrated as a very effective intervention with proven and social benefits, and extends throughout the formal and informal educational system
>
> (Government of Ireland, 2008, pp. 73-74).

Hayes and Bradley (2009) found evidence of in an extensive policy analysis and discovered that economic and equality agendas are prioritised in the development of ECCE policy in Ireland. Also much of the discussion on investment in the early years focuses on three to four year olds, the preschool age group, yet little attention is paid to the nought to three year olds and less again on the five to six year olds. For this reason the development of a National Early Years Strategy, announced by Government and due for publication in 2014, is welcomed by the ECCE sector. It represents the first National Early Years Strategy to focus on the whole age range of early childhood from nought-six years and is being developed in consultation with key stakeholders (DCYA, 2012a). Submissions to the Strategy emphasise quality and inclusivity (the entire early years spectrum including the nought-threes, preschool and primary school infant classes and the continuity in between these stages), as well as '*the*

rights of all the nation's children for quality education and care' (Start Strong, 2013a, n.p.). The Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years' Strategy outline the need to overcome five important challenges over the next five years to ensure realisation of the Strategy's transformative recommendations, labelled *'5 peaks over 5 years'* (DCYA, 2013e, p. 5) they are as follows:

1. Increased Investment by increments over the next ten years to reach the high-quality international benchmark of 1% GDP. The strategy ought to ensure that we meet the OECD investment average of 0.7% of GDP within the next five years. This is necessary to ensure higher-quality through professionalising the sectors workforce, increased accessibility and affordable provision
2. Extending paid parental within the next five years to obtain paid leave for one year following the birth of each child and two weeks paternity leave at the time of the child's birth.
3. Strengthening child and family support to give unified support from the relevant professionals to parents and children across the ante-natal and early years.
4. Insisting on good governance, accountability and quality in all services to drive better standards for all children and to ensure no child is let down by the state.
5. Enhancing and extending quality early childhood care and education services by extending the free pre-school offer so that from their third birthday children can avail of a free part-time place until they enter primary school.

Political interest in extending the free preschool scheme had been gaining ground within the context of Ireland's fiscal crisis. Minister for Social Protection, Joan Burton, made reference to the Scandinavian Childcare Model which developed from their 1990s banking crisis and offers free childcare provision to every child between the ages of three to five:

> People there set targets for things that should be fundamentally reformed and among those was helping women, regardless of relationship status, to be active in the workforce, to boost their own income and their families' incomes.

(Holland, 2012, n.p.).

Ms Burton notes the success of the Irish scheme in place since 2010 and says:

> I think we should seek to expand that. To that end there is an inter-departmental working group between my department and Frances Fitzgerald's department [DCYA].
>
> (ibid. n.p.).

The Minister of Children and Youth Affairs at the time Frances Fitzgerald and Minister for Education and Skills Ruairi Quinn welcomed the debate on the issue (DCYA, 2013c; RTE News, 2013a). Minister Quinn stated that *'a second year of preschool education would have 'a "dramatic effect on the life chances of children from disadvantaged homes'* (RTE News, 2013a). He spoke about redistributing some of the child benefit fund into the extension of the scheme and matters of quality (ibid.). On the same day Minister Frances Fitzgerald recognised the need to improve quality and said '*...that measures to support quality assurance and workforce development must go hand-in-hand with any extension of the free pre-school year'* (DCYA, 2013c). However, in light of the poor practice evidenced in Prime Times' *A Breach of Trust,* such plans to extend the ECCE scheme to two years have been ruled out for the near future. Key ECCE advocacy groups like Early Childhood Ireland and the Children's Rights Alliance have been recommending workforce development and quality assurance for a number of years. Former Minister for Children, Frances Fitzgerald, says higher standards must first be introduced to the early years sector (RTE News, 2013b). In the Pre-School Quality Agenda she summarises the measures needed to improve qualify which include supporting services to implement Aistear and Siolta; modifying the inspection system in accordance with that of the primary school system and to ensure early years' practitioners have access to a professional training system capable of delivering quality training suitable to required standards (DCYA, 2013f).

Conclusion

The former Minister for Children Frances Fitzgerald announced that investing in Early Years is doing right by children:

> Because doing what's right for Ireland means doing what's right for our children; especially now, at a time when we have more children than ever. In 2010 we had the highest number of births ever recorded. Our preschool population has increased, according to our 2011 Census, by nearly 18% since 2006. This is a massive resource, a national treasure; offering immense potential; but which of course, a huge impact in our planning for the future.
>
> (DCYA, 2013b, n.p.).

There has been a progression in early childhood policy from the 1990s which saw the advancement of the National Childcare Strategy, The White Paper on early childhood education: Ready to Learn, Siolta and Aistear and more recently the free preschool year under the ECCE scheme. These advancements signify some progress but represent weaknesses in terms of focus and/or implementation.

For instance, the National Childcare Strategy was criticised for prioritising the needs of working parents over the needs and rights of children (Hayes, 2008b). It was seen to make way 'for a fragmented policy response to childcare' as it failed to recognise childcare as a system with the potential to widely benefit all children, their families and society at large (Hayes, 2010, p.70).

Likewise the White Paper on Early Childhood Education was seen as a seminal document because it emphasised, and developed a plan for, quality across the whole early years' sector. On its advice the frameworks Siolta and Aistear were developed yet they have not been rolled out together nor fully implemented on a national level which has implications for limiting the quality of early years' services (Start Strong, 2012).

According to Kiersey and Hayes (2010) discussions on childcare and early education lack vision and for the most part reflect a concern for the allocation of places. The Free Pre-School Year is the most recent ECCE policy development in Ireland, it responds to access rather than affordability or quality. Furthermore, there is a worry that the scheme's restrictive age-limits may affect some children accessing the free preschool year.

Chapter 5: Findings

Introduction

In this chapter the findings from the data collection stage of the research are presented and interpreted. The findings are summarised under the following themes:

The rationale for the introduction of a free preschool year with age restrictions

Implications of the age criteria of the ECCE scheme for access

Implications of the ECCE scheme for school starting age

The findings will be presented and the researchers' interpretations of the results will be discussed with reference to the literature and policy documents reviewed in Chapters three and four. The purpose of referring to the background material is to give added support to the findings. The researcher will use verbatim quotes from six professional interviews and 101 questionnaires completed by parents of preschool children which comprises the full data set. In social science, researchers do this *'to reinforce or illustrate points they are making about the themes they extracted from their data'* (Bryman, 2012, p. 697).

The Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this research is to unearth any implications that the age restrictions applying to the ECCE scheme may have on preschool aged children accessing the free preschool year and also whether the age eligibility criteria has any effect on the age at which children enter

primary school. The intention is to investigate the concerns of the Cork Early Years' Network in this regard (as outlined in Chapter two).

The first set of results will provide an understanding of the fundamental reasons for this policy initiative from the perspectives of key professionals working within and researching the sector. It explores the rationale for the introduction of the ECCE scheme with a particular focus on the age restrictions. The next set of results will examine the implications of the schemes strict age restrictions. This discussion will be developed with reference to the professionals' reflections as well as the responses from the parents' questionnaires. The terms ECCE (Early Childcare and Education) and FPSY (Free Pre-School Year) will be used interchangeably throughout the discussion.

The rationale for the introduction of a free preschool year (FPSY) with age restrictions

It is important to understand the rationale for a specific policy action as this information may provide a valuable insight into the motivations for the design and delivery of a social policy mechanism. For this reason the researcher selected the above category from the professionals' interviews as a topic for discussion in this chapter. The study's findings are confirmed by the content in Chapter 4: Early Childhood Care and Education Policy Development which discusses the work of Hayes and Bradley (2009); Neylon (2012) and Ozonyia (2012) on matters relating to policy rationales. Examining the reasons for the introduction of a programme like the ECCE scheme allows for its critical evaluation. The data to be presented indicates that there may have been a number of complex and interacting factors associated with the introduction of a free preschool year and for its age qualifying criteria.

From the outset of most of the interviews, the professionals acknowledged the positives of the introduction of the ECCE scheme. All of the professionals mentioned how the scheme afforded access to a high number of preschool children, in particular children from lower socio-economic groups:

> we have had a very high uptake…over 90%" (Early Years' Professional #3), "we always had children that couldn't get to preschool… and we saw the numbers rise immediately, and that was fantastic. We're at about 94% in the city [Cork] attending preschool so that's great. We noticed immediately that children who had to go to specialist services like COPE could now also go to their preschool… in particular where parents were having to pay for extra supports for children with disabilities it meant they could also now go to preschool. It also meant that very easy things like twins got to go to preschool and probably they didn't before because the cost was prohibiting… (Early Years' Professional #4).

The high cost of childcare in Ireland is well documented and the research indicates that parents' face monthly childcare costs ranging from between €730 and €1,100 (Sheehan, 2012; Indecon, 2013). According to DCYA (2013e) OECD figures reveal that the cost of ECCE for parents in Ireland compared to income are one of the highest internationally and are the highest in the OECD for lone parents.

A feature on parenting in The Irish Times stated;

> ...that a family with two children in Ireland spends 40 per cent of the average wage to meet childcare costs, compared with an OECD average of 12 per cent
>
> (Wayman, 2014, n.p.)

Another positive highlighted by one professional was how the scheme affords providers with some security in relation to their client numbers and income,

> It's wonderful that we have it, you know that's the positive, we have it. The providers know that they have so many children who are eligible for this, they also know how much money they can bring in with that, and how does that fit as regards their overall financial situation. We never had that before, at times going back if children didn't arrive some of them might not pay and you were down money. So at least the children who have it, they have their five days and the provider knows how much they're going to bring in and you know you might say that maybe it's not that important but it is, because out of that they have to look at their own pay… looking at equipment and materials and everything else that goes with that: insurance, so you know it is it's wonderful that we have it (Early Years' Professional #3).

A distinct set of reasons for the introduction the ECCE scheme emerged from the professional data gathered. Three of the five professionals who commented on the rationale for its introduction depicted economic and political motivations contributing to its inception;

> …politically I think the rationale was really that they were taking away €1000 a year per child under six for each parent and they had to give something for that, if you like, and so they withdrew that childcare supplement and utilised a third of that supplement… they put the remainder into the exchequer and then used a portion of it to provide the free preschool year. So there was a political and an economic rationale as well (Early Years' Professional #5).

Other research identifies the abolition of the Early Childcare Supplement as a prime example of the immediate cuts made as the economic crisis struck Ireland (Ozonyia, 2012). Another professional commented;

> … there was a policy flaw and that was the introduction of a €1,000 a year for the under sixes… it was Celtic-Tiger-throwing-money-at-people kind of policy and I know that Michael Martin [then Minister for Education] knew that it was a flaw… they knew they weren't getting a good result for it. So they had an amount of money that was being wasted and they had to do something with the money that had a really good basis in research and rationale so it was very easy to transfer the money… and the policy flaw became a good policy
>
> (Early Years' Professional #4).

This seems to suggest that the ECS was found to be a misuse of public monies and so the government redirected investment into a more appropriate policy action supported by research. Investing in direct cash payments to families has been criticised for encouraging higher use of informal, low quality and unlicensed childcare, plus a market place of disorganised growth resulting in an array of un-standardised small-scale licensed providers (NICHD, 1997; Fuller et al., 2005; OECD, 2006). Now the Irish government is in a position where they can impose quality conditions on the direct funding contracts held with over 90% of the sector who are participating in the ECCE scheme (Hayes et al., 2013). Ozonyia (2012) and Neylon (2012) claim that the ECS offered no assurance that preschool aged children would attend a preschool service as parents could choose how to spend the annual supplement. Indeed, Harmon (et al., 2006) believe that an argument for publicly funded and compulsory ECCE may be justified because otherwise children must rely on parents to take

the decision which may lead to an under-consumption of quality ECCE for children whose parents do not realise its benefits. Additionally, research reveals that cash payments impede women's participation in the labour market (Lewis, 2006).

Most of the professionals acknowledged that the ECCE scheme was a positive policy development as it showed that the Government were considering children and the value of a universal preschool year for children – an issue on which the sector had been lobbying for over a number of years. As one professional put it, the schemes introduction;

> [followed] Years of lobbying from the ECCE sector regarding the importance of investing in early childhood services…[and] recognition by policy makers of the significant body of both national and international research evidence supporting the importance of investing early in children's lives
>
> (Early Years' Professional #1).

However one interviewee suggested that despite this dual motivation, at a public level the rationale was presented as being child centred;

> …in the speech made by the Minister for Children at the time he…invoked all the good things about early years and how important it was in children's development and how it would be very useful for…school readiness, so I think he also stressed the kind of educational dimension of the free preschool year… that's what I feel the rationale was…in terms of the publicity
>
> (Early Years' Professional #5).

Furthermore, although in the main the professionals interviewed seemed very happy about the new scheme, some criticisms were made about the nature and timing of its launch,

> … it was the first national acknowledgement of the huge importance of preschool in the development of a child… the roll out was very fast… The thinking within the Department was "oh my God if we don't use this money fast they'll [Government] use it for something else" and at that stage there still was not a very clear understanding at policy level about the importance of preschool…
>
> (Early Years' Professional #4).

Other research has found that the roll out of the scheme was fast and that educators did not feel informed as little time elapsed between the announcement and the implementation of the scheme (Ozonyia, 2012).

According to Childcare.ie (2009, n.p.),

> The scheme was introduced with absolutely no consultation with private childcare providers which has resulted in an unviable scheme leaving many providers facing financial crisis or even worse, closure.

Furthermore, it was found that parents had to consult with ECCE settings directly regarding eligibility criteria as they were not sufficiently informed initially (Ozonyia, 2012). Following the announcement of the scheme in April 2009 parents received an information leaflet in August, however since its issue changes were made to the age qualifying criteria without directly notifying the parents (Childcare.ie, 2009).

There was also the suggestion by two of the professionals that Ireland's position in the EU in terms of failing to meet the Barcelona Convention targets for childcare provision pressurised the government into policy action in the form of the ECCE scheme, "…*we signed up in 2002 to the Barcelona Convention and that really helped put pressure on to ensure universal provision…" (*Early Years' Professional #4*).* In 2002 the Barcelona Summit set targets for its Member States in relation to childcare provision as a way to facilitate full employment (Plantenga and Remery, 2009). The European Council concluded that by 2010 all member states should aim to provide childcare for at least 90% of children between the age of three and mandatory school starting age; a target of 33% was set for the provision of childcare for children under the age of three (ibid.). These targets aim to assist women's return to the workplace (ibid.).

One professional participant referred to the EU influence on Ireland's recent policy development as follows;

> …pressure on us from the Barcelona Agreement and it brought us up whereas we were well down the scale with regards early years in Europe… now we're

> up there … we have a large number of children now accessing a universal preschool year…
>
> (Early Years' Professional #2).

According to NESF (2005) in 2002/2003 participation rates of three to six year olds in full time education in Ireland fell well below the Barcelona Objectives and no definitive step was taken to meet these targets until the launch of the free preschool year in 2010. Ireland reaches the Barcelona Objectives now with 94% of age-eligible children taking up their FPSY in the fourth year of ECCE scheme (Children's Rights Alliance Report Card, 2014). Neylon (2012) made a similar assertion regarding Ireland's position in relation to ECCE standards and accessibility worldwide and claimed it was evident that action was needed to enhance our position and improve results.

According to Start Strong (2009) given the large body of evidence on the benefits of ECCE for their life chances, happiness and wellbeing, children interests should be prioritised in policy decisions concerning them. The findings from the professional interviews imply that the Government may have had several agendas to fulfil by rolling out a universal free preschool year. What is not certain is to what extent children were at the centre of this policy decision. This interpretation is supported by Hayes and Bradley (2009) who, while performing an extensive policy analysis just prior to the scheme, discovered that agendas including economics, and not children's rights, were prioritised in the development of ECCE policy in Ireland.

All of the professionals interviewed for this research appeared to welcome the introduction of the ECCE scheme primarily because it affords access to a high percentage of three and four year old children, many of whom may not have had the opportunity to attend a preschool service prior to this policy initiative. The researcher also believes that this is a positive move in the direction of universal preschool provision, however, children and service providers were not central in planning the scheme, which may result in some problems. For instance, and specifically related to the research question, there has been some suggestion that the roll

out was fast and that planning for the age qualifying criteria may have happened with little consideration for the age in which children can progress on into primary school.

In the next section the two concerns relating to the age restrictions of the scheme with regard to access and school starting age will be highlighted and discussed using both sets of data collected. The findings from the parents' questionnaires will be examined to ascertain whether or not the parents' are experiencing problems with the age qualifying criteria of the scheme. The decision to present and discuss the second and third themes together was made as there is significant overlap between the two concerns.

Implications of the ECCE scheme for general access and school starting age

Concern for the age qualifying criteria

According to the former Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 94% of age-eligible children have taken up their FPSY in the ECCE scheme, which is in its fourth year, meaning that almost 68,000 preschool children are attending 4,300 settings in the academic year 2012/2013 (Children's Rights Alliance Report Card, 2014). Although there has been a high uptake of eligible children it appears there is still some concern about the age restrictions and their implications for individual children and school starting age.

This concern has been expressed by the professionals interviewed for this study;

> …it accommodates a lot of children but if you are not coming into that category at the right time of year then you can miss out, so we're worried and we've brought that to the Department [DCYA] and they're looking at it, …
> (Early Years' Professional #3).

Early Years' Professional #2 expressed a concern that the lower age limit still provided for an early start to school and that possibly some children may be end up with no access to a preschool experience prior to entering primary school;

> …it [the scheme's offer] still falls short I think of the needs of children really, because it doesn't take into account their age and stage of development…Some are going in [to primary school] far too young…Others for whom they're too young [to avail of the scheme]…they're just under the age in September, they miss out [on preschool]… They go straight to school the next year because parents may not themselves, due to their own experiences with the whole school set up, be really convinced of the importance of the early years at all…

Ozonyia (2012) found that some children may fall through the cracks of the age qualifying criteria essentially because they may not get access their FPSY due to the restrictions of the age defining category and the inflexibility of the Department on this matter of eligibility. Excerpts from interviews held with early years educators in Ozonyia's study reveal possible implications of the age qualifying criteria on access and school starting age;

> Every year around 10 children misses out of having any FPY even though they are entitled to it… I have to tell the parents sorry I can't give you place because you might be one day out.
>
> Some children might not fit in into the age bracket by a few days and then in the school [primary] everyone starts school when they are four years old so if somebody misses the FPY by few days…that means that they are never going to get it.
>
> It is a little bit unfair to the children that they will not get [FPY] but they will all get to go to primary school the following year.
>
> (ibid., p. 32).

The issue of missing out on the free preschool experience by a few days was also mentioned by the Early Years' Professional #2 who disclosed that;

> …I came across a parent the other day and the child's birthday is the first day past the limit and the mother just cannot understand why they just can't overlook that… but now that child won't go to [preschool] because she can't afford to send the child so that child now will go straight into school next year…

Concern for early school entry

In Ireland, children are not obliged to start school until the compulsory age of six, though four year olds can be enrolled in primary infant classrooms (DES, 2013). Currently*, 'nearly 40% of 4-year-olds….attend primary school'* (ibid. n.p.). Most (four) of the professionals critiqued the qualifying age criteria of the scheme, particularly in relation to disadvantage and school starting age. Early Years' Professional #5 said;

> …I can kind of understand how someone sitting at a desk might make that decision, but it's proved very difficult for individual children… [the DCYA are] developing it in isolation without thinking through the kind of implications for primary school.

Some of the professionals expressed concern in relation to the scheme's lower age limit of three years and three months as it could function to facilitate early school entry given that the scheme's offer is limited to one year of free preschool. The rationale for the early qualifying age applied to the scheme was explained positively as follows by one of the professionals interviewed;

> …a significant research publication by the Cambridge Review identified that summer born children (in the northern hemisphere) are disadvantaged educationally if they start school immediately after they turn four years of age. Having the eligible age at three years three months in September should serve to reduce the number of very young children enrolling in primary school
> (Early Years' Professional #1).

However, the Cambridge Primary Review officially recognises that children should not begin formal learning until they are six years old and assert that play-based learning should be maintained until the school age of six (Alexander, 2009; O'Connor and Angus, 2012). The review, following a comprehensive inquiry into primary education in the UK, established that children younger than six should not begin formal learning (Alexander, 2009). No evidence was found to suggest that an early school start benefits young children and urge against it on the grounds that it can do some harm, for example, the didactic delivery of activities was found to increase anxiety, reduce self-esteem and a motivation to learn (Elkind 1987; Elley 1994; Alexander, 2009). Interestingly, the DCYA communicated that international research (for example, the Birthdate Effects' literature Sykes et al, 2009) provided the grounds for the age limit of the scheme,

> when evaluating the most appropriate age range for eligibility to pre-school programmes, we must consider the significant body of evidence provided by international research, which points to the fact that children who start school at a younger age perform at a lower level than children whose entry into the education system is at a later age
>
> (O'Neill, DCYA, 2013, see Appendix 5 for communication).

Sykes (et al., 2009) considered the negative impact of formal schooling on the very young, yet still a high percentage of children enter primary school in the September following their fourth birthday. Out of the 101 parents participating in this study thirteen said their child would be starting primary school between the ages of four years and four years and five months.

According to Ozonyia (2012) the Department of Finance oppose the extension of the age qualifying period because of the financial pressures associated with a greater number of eligible children qualifying, while policymakers wish to maintain the category as the fifteen month range gives parents the choice to send children to school at an older age. One professional surmised that some parents, especially for financial reasons, would be more inclined to avail of the lower age limit,

> [The Department] picked the age-groups on the assumption they'd [parents] keep the child till later age. It's not working out that way for those with the opportunity of sending a child of three years three months to free preschool, particularly if living on limited income. Many will opt for the younger age limit and this will have knock on effect of a child of four years being sent to primary school and being totally overwhelmed…If not for economic reasons, the children wouldn't be there
>
> (Early Years' Professional #6).

All of the professionals clearly stated their belief that four year old children are too young for primary school;

> …. Our primary school, which is formal education, is very formal and as an early childhood practitioner… I would be more in line with our European colleagues and suggesting that children coming into primary school should at least be six years of age…We need to currently review how our infant classes are structured and delivered and the offer that is there for children because

> they don't meet the needs of children from four years… A lot of children tend to enter into primary when they're four and, I think given the offer that's made for them currently, that's too young
>
> (Early Years' Professional #1).

Katz, cited in Curtis (2007) has argued that formal learning can discourage children for life and defends delayed school entry until children are seven years old (Alexander, 2009; Elkind, 1987; Elley, 1994).

The Effect of Non-Access to the ECCE Scheme on Early School Entry

Early Years' Professional #5 explained how the age bands for the FPSY in the ECCE scheme may cause problems for access and result in an early school start;

> …the age bands for the FPSY had not been thought through thoroughly as they limit the age in such a way that some children will either experience no FPSY or will attend the FPSY at the younger age and then be 'ready' to transition to school at quite a young age. Where it is not possible to make that transition [due to an older age requirement of a particular school] they may well have a year between the FPSY and the primary school where they will either attend a different service or no service.

The age eligibility criteria of the scheme restricts children who are younger than three years and three months on the 1st of September of the given year from qualifying for the free preschool year. A child in this situation will however qualify for both primary school and the scheme the following year, though depending on the parents' choice and understanding of the benefits of preschool and a later school start the child may not be sent to preschool at all and instead go straight into primary school.

This was the situation of Parent #23 whose child has an *'August birthday'* and *'will not go to ECCE'* but to school '*[at] four, as I think she would be ok in school.'* This child did however attend crèche from the age of ten months. The researcher found this response thought-provoking especially when considered alongside this parents' response to Question eleven: 'Would you consider sending your child to school at 6? Why? *'No, where would she go from four to five, five to six.'* This indicates that there are financial considerations at play for the

parent whose child is not eligible for the ECCE scheme but is accepted by their local primary school. There was the option of taking up the free preschool year a year later but this parent decided to send the child to primary school instead.

ECCE Scheme Take-Up

Data from the 101 parents' questionnaires show that in ninety-seven cases their children have taken up the scheme reflecting the national figures of a 95% take up rate. This high uptake challenges the Cork Early Years Network's concern that the age restrictions of the scheme affects access to the free preschool year. Of the four remaining children whose parents answered no when asked was their child participating in the scheme at the time of the study (ECCE year 2012-2013) or would their child be taking it up the following year (ECCE year 2013-2014) only one parent (#23) indicated the reason - that the child was August born. Therefore it is reasonable to assume that this child's access to the scheme was compromised by the age restrictions. However, it is worth noting that this child had been at crèche since ten months of age and as a consequence of this experience the parent seems satisfied that the four year old child will be 'ok' at school.

Parents views on starting school early

Historically, the Irish state's commitment to pre-school provision was largely confined to children 'at risk'. Beyond this, the family were obliged to provide for their children's preschool arrangements (O'Kane, 2007). The lack of free preschool provision in Ireland historically may well be linked to the early school starting age (ibid.). The Early Years' Professional #4 interviewed strongly expressed the need to inform parents against an early start to school;

> …we don't explain it to parents very well. So what we say is 'education is really important', so as a parent if I think 'oh education is really important so the sooner they start sure shouldn't that be better'. So we're not giving parents the full information… that's a mistake and … so parents think 'God… he's more than ready'… so that's one of the reasons that they go so early…

Parent #84's child is going to primary school at four years and six months because the parent feels the child needs to progress at this age; *"4yrs 6months, born in March is a very in-*

between age. Would prefer her bit older starting school but she needs to move on at this stage too."

In answer to question twelve of the survey: 'Do you think four year old children are ready for school? fourteen parents said that four year old children are ready for school. However, forty-six said that four was too young for school while forty parents were of the view that some children are ready at four and some are not because it depends on the individual child, one parent did not answer.

Parent #101 gave the following reason as to why four year olds are ready for school; *"... because the earlier they start to learn in school the better."*

Parent #3 said: *"...I feel that she would be eager to go... I believe my children need to be in a school environment."*

Parent #4 said: *"Yes, especially after being to crèche and preschool, great confidence for primary school."*

Parent #11 said*: "Yes, if they have attended preschool they should be able for school."*

Sharp (2002) looked at the motivation for admitting children as young as four into primary school and found the most common argument to be *'...that it could help boost children's academic achievements'* (ibid. p.8). Elkind (1987) asserted that educational theorists such as Bereiter, Engelmann and Hirsch used early learning theories to establish early academic programmes. Those who support an early start to school argue that children can adapt to learning the formal skills underlying the school curriculum and so starting young provides them with a head start (ibid). On the other hand, Sharp argues that children miss out on experiences important for their years and believes an early start to primary school may even damage the child (Sharp, 2002; Katz cited in Curtis, 2007; Alexander, 2009; Elkind, 1987; Elley, 1994; O'Connor and Angus, 2012).

The following represents a sample of answers from the forty-six parents who felt that four year old children are too young for school;

Parent #16 said: *"No, I feel children at that age are too to understand about school. At five my daughter is more prepared she knows her letters some spellings and can read a little, whereas at four she could do none of this"*

Parent #17 said: *"No, they are still just babies."*

Parent #5 said: "*No, it's too early, it's good time for preschool and learning through play."*

Parent #30 said: *"From my experience four years is way too young for children to start primary school. I know one of my other boys found it very hard."*

The following quotes are taken from the latter group of parents who felt it depends on the individual child whether they are ready to enter school at four years old;

Parent #2*: "Some are and some aren't, you know yourself whether he/she is ready."*

Parent #6: "While I would have preferred my child to be a bit older starting school, I have no worries where he is concerned. He will be younger than some kids in his class but I feel preschool has prepared him well. He is just as capable as older children to follow instructions, rules, etc., and has a very good level of concentration. I feel that 6 is too old for children and 5 would be the perfect age had I not registered for the ECCE scheme I would have waited another year. I think the age limit for the ECCE should change and possibly change it to two years too."

Parental Reasons for Sending Young Children to School

Owing to the concern for early school start, the next section will discuss the data from parents' whose children are entering primary school at an early age. Survey question nine asked; 'what age will your child be starting primary school? And Why? a total of sixty parents said that their child would be four years old starting school. Thirteen of this number are going to school between the age of four and four years and five months, the remaining forty-seven children will be starting school between four and a half years and four years

eleven months. Out of the parents who are sending their children to school at youngest ages, three gave specific reasons for this decision, some of which pertained to limited finance and having no other option.

For instance, Parent #6 said; *"Four years and two months, I registered too early for the ECCE scheme, could not afford crèche full time. I found the form for age limits confusing."*

Parent #19 also suggests that limited finances prevent them from extending the child's preschool experience; *"Four years and three months, she can't go to the (name omitted) Preschool 'cause I'll have to pay and can't afford it."*

In the same vein Parent #40 said; '*Four, because I can't afford to keep [child] in preschool 'cause I will have to pay for second year.'*

The other two parents who provided reasons for sending their child to school at the youngest ages felt that their child would be ready for school at four years and four years and three months respectively, the remaining eight parents gave no reasons for their choice. However, when the researcher analysed responses to other questions from these eight parents, it seemed plausible to interpret that some of these children's school entry ages were influenced by limited circumstances or choices.

For example, Parent #28 is sending the child to primary school aged four years and four months but would consider sending the child to primary school at six; *"...by then he would be more confident."* This parent also believes that two years of preschool are needed *"at least two years to help him develop his skills for primary school"* and that four year olds are too young for school. This dilemma for parents is discussed by one of the professionals interviewed;

> …that would be again going back in the absence of … there was nothing else there, and I think people probably had come to the realisation that children needed something. Obviously when they were coming up to four they needed something, so obviously the flood gates were opened for them just going into school now…
>
> (Early Years' Professional #2).

Additionally Parent #33 would consider sending the child to school at five and would send the child to preschool for two years on condition that the second year was free *"if I did not have to pay."* It struck the researcher that these parents may be open to, or perhaps would even prefer a later school start should there be a system of support to provide them with the means to make this a possibility through an extension of the scheme to a second year. To emphasise this point here is another quote from parent #6, taken from the response to the question, 'Do you think four year old children are ready for school?

> While I would have preferred my child to be a bit older starting school…I feel that six is too old for children and five would be the perfect age. Had I not registered for the ECCE scheme I would have waited another year [to enrol at school]. I think the age limit for the ECCE should change and possibly change it to two years too.

Of the group of forty-seven parents who sending their children to school between the ages of four and a half and four years eleven months thirty-nine gave reasons, some of which are detailed below:

Parent # 49 factors cost as part of reason for sending the child to primary at this age; *"I feel he is ready to start school. Because I work full-time and it's less expensive on me to pay a babysitter (sad I know, but it does come into the equation)."*

Parent #73 said: *"four years and nine months, waiting till he was five he would be in school with children who are a lot younger."*

Parent #74 said: *"four years and ten months, because he would be too old at five years and ten months, too young at three years and ten months."*

Parent #83 chose to send the child to school at four years and nine months because; *"she's ready and they all start in Aug/Sept."*

Limitations of the scheme

By combining the responses from one Parent #40 to questions twelve, six and nine, the researcher was able to get an impression of some of the concerns about the limitations of the scheme. When asked are four year olds ready for school this parent says; *"No, I think they*

are still babies at that stage and five would be a proper age. In my own case I would prefer if there was two years ECCE scheme."

This parent is sending the child to school at four because she cannot afford to send the child to preschool for a second year although this would be the preferred option which is clear from her response to the question 'how long would you like your child to attend preschool?', *"Two years, one year isn't enough for them to be ready for primary school*." (Her child qualified and started the free preschool year at three years and three months, this parent would have preferred her child to start preschool at the age of four and believes five not four year olds are ready for primary school). A total of sixty children, 59.4% of the total number represented in the survey, will be starting school at the age of four. Six of these children's parents would prefer if their children were older starting preschool; they would all prefer one and half to two years of preschool and believe that children should be older than four starting school. Three of these parents think that six is a good age to start school while two think that five is more suitable. From this data the degree to which the lower age limit may have implications for a premature school starting age appears to be related to its confinement within a limited offer of just one free year of preschool. This concern was emphasised by one professional:

> Sending babies at three years and three months into the free preschool year, and in more disadvantaged areas it's the younger children who will be entering at the earliest stage, there's no second year so they go to primary school because there is no free provision after that. Educational Disadvantage is perpetuated by early entrance to school and early school leaving... Many [parents] will opt for the younger age limit and this will have knock on effect of a child of four years being sent to primary school and being totally overwhelmed. If not for economic reasons the children wouldn't be there.
>
> (Early Years' Professional #6).

According to Oireachtas (2012) most other European countries provide three to five year old children with two years rightful access to pre-school. In relation to what this means in terms of benefits for disadvantage, Doyle and NcNamara (2011) found that when children from disadvantage backgrounds spent a longer time in centre-based children (on average 20.2 months) they showed greater levels of social competence, emotional maturity, language and

cognitive development. Furthermore, longer time in centre-based childcare was also associated with better communication and general knowledge outcomes (ibid.). The value of quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in relation to reducing educational disadvantage is widely evidenced in terms of encouraging early child development and learning (CECDE, 2004a; DES, 1999b; Shonkoff and Philips, 2000; Oireachtas, 2012); achieving greater educational outcomes (Woessmann and Schutz, 2006); advancing social skills and increasing motivation (Melhuish, 2004). The long-term benefits include combine reductions in school drop-out, drug use, teenage pregnancies, crime, increased employment and a decrease in welfare-dependency (Schweinhart, et al., 1993).

Interest in Extending the Preschool Offer

A significant number of parents said they would consider a second year of preschool under certain circumstances. Seventy-six parents suggested that they would consider sending their child to preschool for a second year. When investigating the reasons three responses related to the child needing more time or to improve social skills; twenty-one were in consideration of the child's readiness for school; fees or cost of preschool would be the deciding factor for fifteen parents; nineteen parents said their decision would be related to the child's age or dependent on whether the child was too young for school; the general needs of the child would influence eleven parents; special needs would impact on the decision of three parents; two parents said it would depend on what the preschool offered in terms of activities and finally practical or logistical reasons would determine the decision for two parents. Out of the remaining parents fifteen did not answer; six answers clarified that the FPSY was indeed the child's second year as they had been already attending preschool the previous year; one said if activities at preschool were different; one said they would not consider a second year and one parent is not sending the child to preschool at all.

Factors influencing parents decision for two years of preschool	**No. of parents**
Social skills/More time needed	3
School-Readiness	21

Cost of provision	15
Too young for school	19
General needs of child	11
Special needs of child	3
Activities on offer	2
Practical/Logistical concerns	2
Total:	**76** ***(75% of total number surveyed)***

The following representative quotes are taken from the parents' responses to the question, if you were to consider sending your child to preschool for a second year, what would influence your decision to do so? The quotes are grouped under the four main categories which emerged as influencing the parents' decisions. There is some overlap between the categories as some responses fall between cost and age for example.

School Readiness:

Parent #97; *"Immaturity to attend 'big school."*

Parent #50; *"If he was not ready socially and intellectually for school."*

Parent #51; *"Advice of teachers in playschool, if they felt my child wasn't mature enough yet for school. If I found my child was struggling to get used to school structure."*

Parent #58*; "If I thought she wasn't ready to start school then I would send her to preschool for a second year."*

Child's Age/Too young for primary school:

Parent #66 mentions age as an influence for considering a second year of preschool for the child;

> Age - my three old daughter will be starting [preschool] at three years and seven months. As she misses the cut-off point by five days to avail of the scheme the year she will be going [to preschool] for two years. There should be no cut off point. It should just be a free year before they start school.

This child is availing of the scheme at four years and three months, but will attend preschool from three years and seven months until the child qualifies for the scheme.

Other examples from this category are as follows:

Parent #41 who said; *'Their age, they are too young to start school so a second year would make a big difference.'*

Parent #38*; 'He would only be four and two months and I would rather another year.'*

Parent # 72; *'Too young to commence school at 4yrs 4months, in my opinion.'*

Cost/Free offer:

The choice to send a child to preschool for two years may not be available to all parents as fifteen parents referred to cost or a free offer as factors that would influence their decision to send their child to preschool for two years. In 2012, Early Childhood Ireland surveyed 421 early years' service providers on the proposal to extend the ECCE scheme to two years and found that 98% of these providers were in favour of extending the offer. Some felt sure that parents would make use of a second year, but as it stands they cannot afford to keep their child in preschool despite them being afraid that their child is not ready or old enough to start school (Early Childhood Ireland, 2012b).

In this study Parent #44 would opt for a second year of preschool if it was offered for free; *'that there would be a second free year if you feel your child is not mature enough for primary.'*

Likewise Parent #82 said it would depend on *'ECCE - how much this would cost to send him.'* The decision for Parent #81 is centred on the child's age and needs as well as cost, *'How old is she; does she need it; cost involved.'*

Parent # 85 said that, *'Cost would be a big factor!'*

General needs of child:

Parent #47 would accept the advice of the early years' teacher in deciding whether to keep the child at preschool for a second year, *"If the teacher said it was in my daughter's best interest then I would do a second year."* Parent #28 expressed *"I now see the benefit of a second year for my son having sent my first son for one year."* This parent's child is starting the ECCE scheme at three years and four months and will go to primary school the following year despite the parent's knowledge of the benefits of preschool and the belief that four year old children are too young for school. In response to question twelve, 'Do you think four year old children are ready for school? this parent answers, *"No, they haven't the coping skills for primary school."*

Parent #27 said: *'If I felt she was finding it hard to adjust a second year would be good.'*

Parent #24 feels that boys especially need more time at preschool: *'As my son is a second child he needs extra time in preschool. From my experience boys need the second year.'*

Early Years' Professional #6 also supports two years of preschool for boys; *'I think they need a 2nd year [of preschool] especially for the younger children and boys.'*

Early year's expert Professor Katz maintains that early formal learning is more damaging for boys (Alexander, 2010).

NESF (2005, p. 21) considers that an appropriate ECCE policy framework should follow International trends:

> The current EU and international trend is to provide at least two years of publicly-funded care and education before beginning compulsory schooling…

Hayes (et al., 2005) detailed that children aged three to six are provided with free universal access to ECCE services in the majority of EU countries, while in Ireland the State provides just one year prior to primary school entry.

Concern for a Conflict of Offers

One professional expressed a concern about the possible effect of a conflict between the qualifying age criteria of the Early Start Programme and that of the ECCE scheme which may have implications for the exclusion of disadvantaged children in the free preschool year offer,

> …we have a difficulty with the Early Start programme, it clashes a bit…You can enter Early Start at three [years of age] and the Early Starts are in the disadvantaged communities. We have six full Early Starts in the city [Cork] and so that's a difficulty. So children are getting to start Early Start before [they have] access to the free preschool year. We have queries about the quality in Early Start, we have queries about the quality in the preschools too, but we've queries about the quality in Early Starts in relation to how "schooly" [school-orientated] they are, for a three year old (Early Years' Professional #4).

Further research on this matter brought a communication from the DES (2013) which stated that;

> The age band for Early Start was changed in March 2012 and is now three years two months to four years seven months. Prior to that, children between the ages of three and four could participate…The revision of the age criteria for the Early Start programme brought this programme in line with the universal scheme.

However, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs state on their website that,

> The ECCE programme is open to all children aged between three years and three months and four years seven months on 1st September each year (DCYA, 2013a).

The age bands appear to have a conflict of one month according the details above. This highlights the need for communication between the sector and governmental departments which facilitate and plan programmes as well as the need for harmonisation of early years' programmes for preschool children.

Conclusion

This chapter has described the results determined through analysing the data from 101 parent questionnaires and six professional interviews. The study was designed to explore whether

the age restrictions of the ECCE scheme had any implications for the access of three and four year old children to the free preschool year programme and on their school starting age.

The age limits of the ECCE scheme did not present as a significant concern for parents responding to the survey. 97 of the 101 parents who responded were participating in the ECCE scheme. However, what has emerged from the data implies that the scheme is limited in its present offer as it only affords one free year of preschool to children as young three years and three months. Should children participate at the youngest entry age they may advance to primary school at the early age of four years and three months regardless of their parents' preference for a later start to school. In fact, the majority of parents (76) suggested that they would consider sending their child to preschool for a second year. Sixty parents said that their child would be four years old starting school. Thirteen of this number are going to school between the age of four and four years and five months, the remaining forty-seven children will be starting school between four and a half years and four years eleven months. Four parents from the total sixty referred to costs as a factor for early school entry. Some parents may need to take the offer up as early as possible and compromise on their child's school starting age because they do not have the financial means to keep their child in preschool. Therefore it would appear than that the limitations of the current ECCE scheme offer has implications for school starting age but not necessarily for access to the free preschool year. Refer to overwhelming support for a second free year of preschool among the parents.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Introduction

This chapter draws the research to a close by summarising the thesis. This study had a dual focus which set out to explore if the age qualifying criteria of the Early Childhood Care and Education - ECCE scheme creates obstacles for children accessing the free preschool year and whether it has implications for the age at which children start primary school. Previous research by Ozonyia (2012) highlights a concern amongst early years' educators that, as a consequence of not meeting the lower age qualifying criteria for the ECCE scheme, children may end up missing out on a free preschool year and go straight to primary school the following year.

This research is a CARL project in collaboration with Applied Social Studies Department at University College Cork, Cork Early Years Network, and the researcher. In their original proposal, the Network identified numerous research questions for deliberation. Their biggest concerns, however, related to the issue of restrictive access to the free preschool year while at the same time they were keen to know whether the scheme has negative implications for children's school starting school age. It was impossible to address all of the issues presented by the Network, however, it was felt that the themes of school staring age and school readiness were relevant and it was decided that the literature review could include a discussion on school readiness and school starting age.

The findings from this study reiterate the concern found amongst early years' educators in Ozonyia's research. Some of the early childhood professionals participating in this research are worried that the lower age limit of the ECCE scheme perpetuates an early start to school and that some children who face ineligibility for the scheme because of its age restrictions may not access any preschool experience prior to entering primary school. The lower age limit of the ECCE scheme qualifies children who are three years and three months on

September 1st for one free year of preschool so potentially it could mean that children will continue to enter school at a very young age of four years and three months, albeit with preschool experience. Although children are not obliged to start primary school education in Ireland until they are six years old, four year old children can be enrolled into the system, and currently *'nearly 40% of four year olds…are enrolled in infant classes in primary schools…'* (DES, 2013, n.p.). This research found that 60% of children whose parents participated in this study will be entering primary school at the age of four following their take up of the free year of preschool. This raises questions as to the impact of the scheme on school starting age as it appears that the numbers of four year olds attending primary school is not significantly altered as a result of the scheme. The literature reviewed indicates the importance of preschool for children's school success and also establishes that the primary school setting is inappropriate for four year olds and delivers a convincing argument in favour of a later school starting age.

Themes from the Literature

The literature reviewed in Chapter Three verifies the importance of quality ECCE for children, their families and society. These benefits include: improvements in children's overall development, life-long learning and school readiness (particularly for those experiencing educational disadvantage); a reduction in the number of those at risk of poverty, the advancement of human capital and therefore the economic development of society. Chapter Three looks at studies of different types of provision which evidence the positive effects of ECCE. These include: longitudinal studies of targeted intervention programmes in the US; an evaluation of an experimental programme for disadvantage in Ireland; longitudinal general population studies in the US and the UK and appraisals of free state-run universal systems of provision in France and Switzerland.

Benefits for children: The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Child Care Study, an example of a US general population study found benefits of preschool for all children in terms of their school readiness, cognitive functioning, language development, sociability and problem behaviour (NICHD Early Child Care Research

Network, 1999 and NICHD, 2000). The Effective Pre-School and Primary Education (EPPE) and Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education projects (EPPSE 3-14) are examples of longitudinal general population studies in the UK and their findings indicate that school readiness and transitions to primary and secondary school are supported by a high quality preschool experience (Sylva, et al., 2003, 2012). Moreover, the latter project found that benefits of high quality preschool are long-term when participants of EPPE were found to have positive academic outcomes and social behaviours at the age of fourteen (Sylva, et al., 2012). Even longer term positive effects came from an appraisal of France's free state run universal system of provision where increased qualifications, employment and earnings at age thirty-three have been associated with attending high quality preschool (Dumas and Lefrance, 2010).

Benefits for society: Longitudinal studies and the large body of evidence which document the wide ranging benefits of high quality ECCE interventions and programmes provides a persuasive tool for informing policy. In the main though the cost-benefits analyses of US targeted programmes such as the Perry Pre-School Project, the Chicago Child-Parent Centres Programme and the Abecedarian Project in the US have been used to establish a strong argument for ECCE investment and as such these examples of targeted interventions are heralded as inspiration for the human capital theory for ECCE investment (Moloney, 2014).

Benefits for reducing educational disadvantage: The above three US longitudinal studies of targeted programmes have demonstrated the long term personal and social outcomes of high-quality preschool for disadvantaged children. In Ireland, The Preparing For Life (*PFL*) programme was found to greatly improve disadvantaged children's readiness for school primarily in areas of social competence, language and cognitive development, communication and general knowledge (Doyle and McNamara, 2011). In addition, systems of state run free universal provision of the like found in France and Switzerland evidence that benefits for children from disadvantaged backgrounds are especially strong when preschool provision is of high quality and comprise of groups of children from a mix of social backgrounds (Melhuish, 2004). Dumas and LeFranc (2010) and Bergmann (1996) also found

that the French system of universal preschool provision benefits disadvantaged children more, appearing to reduce socio-economic inequalities, likewise in Switzerland where it was found to improve intergenerational educational mobility (Bauer and Riphahn, 2009).

The evidence from general population studies and Free State run universal systems of ECCE from around the world thus inform the debate on targeted versus universal provision and build a strong case for investing in a high-quality free universal system of ECCE for all children from the age of three to mandatory school age. However, acknowledging that some children and families may need more support the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy argue for and ECCE sector underpinned by the principle of Progressive Universalism which delivers universal provision plus additional supports for disadvantaged children and those with extra needs (DCYA, 2013e).

The evidence signifies the importance of increased investment in ECCE as the cost of remedial policies are not justified by the returns (Cameiro and Heckman, 2003; Heckman, 2006; Heckman, 2000). The evidence shows the long-term effects of high quality ECCE which go beyond education and into the workforce thus benefitting the economy and therefore society at large. The case for publicly funded universal quality ECCE provision has been well founded and has begun to influence the political agenda (Start Strong, 2009; Start Strong, 2010; NESF, 2005; European Commission's Expert Group on Gender and Employment Issues, 2009; OECD, 2010).

With regards to school starting age it has argued that children should not enter primary school until they are seven years old as formal learning can put children off for life (Curtis, 2007; Alexander, 2009; Elkind, 1987; Elley, 1994). In particular the Cambridge Primary Review establishes that children should not begin formal learning until they are six years old (Alexander, 2009). Interestingly, the early school starting age in Ireland may well be due to the high costs of childcare and the lack of free pre-school provision throughout Ireland's history (O'Kane, 2007).

As discussed in Chapter Four, policies are developed in a political, economic, social and cultural context both nationally and internationally. In the Irish context the development of ECCE policy has been erratic and reactive in nature, primarily driven by the voluntary and community sector and latterly the private sector largely as a result of the non-interventionist stance adopted by the state with regard to the sector. The introduction of the ECCE scheme was strongly influenced by the EU targets to provide childcare for at least 90% of children from the age of three to mandatory school age by 2010 along with more expedient decisions by the Irish Government to redirect cash payments like the Early Childhood Supplement (ECS), which has been called a 'policy-flaw', to invest in a universal ECCE policy strongly favoured by research and recommended by a flurry of policy reports. Furthermore, the government took this action to provide a universal ECCE scheme in the context of an economic collapse when payments on child benefit and the ECS could no longer be sustained. The ECCE scheme replaced the ECS at a much lower cost to the government with surplus funds resulting in substantial savings for the exchequer. There is a well-established economic argument for investing in the early years especially in times of austerity (NESF, 2005; Heckman and Masterov, 2007; DCYA, 2013e) yet Ireland's current investment in ECCE is 0.4% of GDP which is much lower than the OECD average of 0.7% and it has been argued that in order to acquire a high-quality ECCE system an annual investment of 1% of GDP is needed (OECD, 2013; DCYA 2013e). As discussed in Chapter Three high-quality ECCE programmes correspond with the best outcomes for children and society. The majority of professionals interviewed for this study suggest that political and economic agendas took centre stage in influencing the introduction of the ECCE scheme rather than children's rights or best interest's motivations.

Methods

This study used mixed research methods to establish its findings combining a literature review with qualitative research in the form of a parent survey and interviews with ECCE professionals. Data was collected from early years' professionals in the form of 6 semi-structured interviews and from 101 parents of preschool children by way of a postal

questionnaire. The purpose of these methods was to explore the research question from two perspectives: the professionals' opinions drawn from their practice, observations and understanding of policy development and the effect of the schemes offer on parents' choices in relation to preschool and school starting age. The literature review provided the study with an insight on ECCE and grounded the findings in existing knowledge.

The findings of this study

Does the age qualifying criteria of the ECCE scheme restrict access to the FPSY?

This research found a concern amongst the early years' professionals interviewed regarding access to the scheme based on the restrictions of the age qualifying criteria. However, despite these restrictions the actual take-up figure from the parents surveyed does not reveal any particular problems related to access. The empirical inquiry found that 98% of the cohort accessed the ECCE scheme reflecting the national figures for take up which are currently at 94% (former Minister for Children and Youth Affairs Frances Fitzgerald TD, 2013 as cited in Children's Rights Alliance Report Card, 2014, p. 19). Out of the 2% of children who did not take up the offer of the scheme only one parent made reference to the child's age ineligibility.

As reviewed in Chapter Three the literature explains that high-uptake rates are associated with the inclusive nature of universal provision while it is thought that targeted interventions can cause stigmatisation and segregation (Penn, 2009, cited in Moloney, 2014), which may reduce take-up rates. In this research many professionals discussed the improved access and the high up-take of the ECCE scheme. They expressed their welcome for this policy action as the early years' sector has been lobbying for many years for universal provision. Yet, some felt that the age eligibility criteria, with a cut-off point at four years and seven months, combined with a one year offer is limited as it could serve to support early entry to primary school.

Is there any association between the age qualifying criteria of the scheme and early school entry?

This research did not find a strong association between the age qualifying criteria of the ECCE scheme and early school entry. The fact is that early school starting age is already well established in the Irish context. However, the findings do suggest that when this variable is considered together with the offer of just one year of free preschool, some children are entering school earlier than their parents would like them to. Some of the parents surveyed did find their choices in relation to school starting age restricted because of the limited free ECCE offer as they are not in the financial position to pay for a second year of preschool. This research found that a total of sixty of the 101 parents are sending their child to primary school at four years old. Thirteen of these children are particularly young (between the age of four and four years and five months). Of this group, in three cases the parents' decision was affected by limited finance. The other forty-seven children are slightly older (between the age of four and a half years and four years eleven months). One of their parents indicated childcare costs as one of the reasons for early entry to school. All in all, only fourteen of the 101 parents feel that four year old children are ready for school, forty-six say four is too young for school while forty parents have mixed views and say it depends on the child.

A significant finding of this research was that all of the professionals interviewed are in favour of children starting primary school at the mandatory age of six and would support having two years of free universal ECCE provision if measures were to be taken by the government to ensure quality provision. The majority of the parents (75.2%) would consider two years of preschool should under certain circumstances. In 72% of cases these circumstances are dependent on school-readiness, cost of preschool and if the child is too young to start school.

Conclusion

This study aims to explore whether the age qualifying criteria of the ECCE scheme in Ireland has any implications (negative or otherwise) for access to the scheme or for school starting age. This research reveals that the age qualifying criteria is not a cause of concern for parents

regarding access to the scheme, yet indirectly it could compromise the age at which parents send their child to primary school. It emerged that a small number of parents, whose children qualified for and took-up their place on the scheme at the lower age limit of 3 years and 3 months, would prefer a later start to school but cannot afford to prolong their child's preschool experience. Most parents stated that they would opt for two years of preschool if the offer was free and if they felt their child was not ready, or was too young, for school.

This research thus finds both strengths and weaknesses of scheme. The scheme is free and universal and more children are able to access preschool, as this study reveals a high take-up rate of 98% among the parent participants. The scheme offers just one free year of ECCE provision which when combined with the age eligibility criteria (with an upper age limit of 4 years and 7 months) could function to perpetuate the culture of early school age entry in Ireland. This study reveals that in some cases parents' preference for an older school starting age is compromised by this limited ECCE scheme offer.

Further Research

Based on the limitations of this study, it is recommended that further research be undertaken to include a much wider parent sample, as the cohort who took part in this case represent mostly those whose children are participating in ECCE schemes and only a tiny minority of non ECCE children and it does not involve children who are attending other ECCE offers.

Extension of Free Preschool Provision

The key finding of this research is that it would be beneficial to extend the offer of free ECCE provision by another year. This is in line with the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy, who recommend the extension and expansion of quality ECCE services so that children can avail of and benefit from two years free part-time provision from their third birthday until they enter primary school (DCYA, 2013e). Furthermore this would ensure that children are not entering primary school at the early age of four which most commentators argue is not in the best interests of children.

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Appendix 1 - Parents' Questionnaire

1. Is your child availing of the ECCE scheme at the moment?

2. If not, does your child qualify for the ECCE scheme next year?

3. How old will your child be starting the scheme?

(please state exact age in years and months, e.g. 4yrs 2mths, etc.)

4. What age was your child starting her/his preschool year?

(please state exact age in years and months, e.g. 4yrs 2mths, etc.)

5. What age would you like your child to start preschool?

(please state exact age in years and months, e.g. 4yrs 2mths, etc.)

6. How long would you like your child to be at preschool? Why?

7. What do you expect your child will gain from preschool?

8. If you were to consider sending your child to preschool for a second year, what would influence your decision to do so?

9. What age will your child be starting primary school? Why?

(please state exact age in years and months, e.g. 4yrs & 2mths, etc.)

10. Are you aware that the compulsory age for schooling is 6?

11. Would you consider sending your child to school at 6? Why?

12. Do you think four year old children are ready for school? Why?

Appendix 2 - Consent Form

I _____ have read and understand the content of the Information Sheet.

I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about and withdraw from the study at any time.

I understand that taking part means filling out and returning a questionnaire to the centre where my child is attending preschool.

I understand that my personal details but my name are not required, therefore I remain anonymous and the centre where my child is attending preschool will be profiled or known by type and location only.

I understand that the Cork Early Years Network and Mary Reid (the researcher) are in partnership through interest in the research topic and that the information within the questionnaire is for research purposes.

I understand that my words may be quoted in articles, reports or other research forums but no personal details will be used.

Name of Participant: _____ Date:

Researcher Signature: _____ Date:

Appendix 3 – Early Year's Professionals Interview Guide

1. How well does the Free Pre-School Year accommodate all children?

2. What changes would you make to it and why?

3. Do you think it would be beneficial to children to avail of two preschool years? Why?

4. What age do you think is most suitable for entry into preschool? Why?

5. At what age do you think a child should enter Primary School? Why?

6. What in your opinion defines school readiness?

7. What do you think is the rationale for entry to school at four given the compulsory age for starting school is 6?

8. Do you think a four year old child is ready for primary school?

9. What do you think school entry policies are guided by?

10. Do you think the primary school environment complements the holistic development of four year olds?

Appendix 4 – Amended Early Years' Professionals Interview Guide

1. What do you think is the rationale for the introduction of the FPY?
2. What do you think is the rationale for the age limitations?
3. What changes would you make to it and why?
4. Do you think children would benefit from an extended period in an early years setting? Why?
5. What age do you think is most suitable for entry into preschool? Why?
6. At what age do you think a child should enter Primary School? Why?
7. What in your opinion defines school readiness?
8. Do you think a four year old child is ready for primary school?
9. What do you think is the rationale for entry to school at four given the compulsory age for starting school is 6?
10. What do you think school entry policies are guided by?
11. Do you think the primary school environment complements the holistic development of four year olds?

Appendix 5 –

Copy of Communication from DCYA in 2013

On Tue, Jan 29, 2013 at 9:29 AM, <Marian_ONeill@dcya.gov.ie> wrote:
Mary

Further to your recent e-mail -

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme was introduced in January 2010 and provides a free pre-school year to all eligible children in the year before commencing primary school. Approximately 65,500 children, that is approximately 95% of children who are eligible, are availing of the ECCE programme in the current school year and €175 million has been provided to cover the cost of the programme.

All children are eligible to avail of the free pre-school year when they are aged more than 3 years 2 months and less than 4 years 7 months at 1 September in the year of enrolment. For example, children born between 2 February 2008 and 30 June 2009 qualified for the free pre-school year in September 2012. In situations where children qualify for the free pre-school year and are also eligible to commence primary school, it is a matter of choice for parents to decide on which option they wish to avail of.

The objective of the pre-school year is to make early learning in a formal setting available to children before they commence primary school. To achieve this, participating services are expected to provide age-appropriate activities to children. This requires targeting the pre-school year at a particular age cohort limited by minimum and maximum age limits. To extend the age range would undermine the ability of services to provide appropriate age-related activities to all children in the pre-school year.

As is the case of any programme introduced, cases will arise where individuals fall outside the conditions which apply and some parents have requested that exemptions be granted to children below the qualifying age. However the terms and conditions of the programme do not allow for this. The pre-school programme must be delivered within an age range which best supports the effective delivery of early childhood care and education and this requires a reasonably consistent age range of children attending.

When evaluating the most appropriate age range for eligibility to pre-school programmes, we must consider the significant body of evidence

provided by international research, which points to the fact that children who start school at a younger age perform at a lower level than children whose entry into the education system is at a later age. The emphasis now is on improving quality within the pre-school year as all the available evidence indicates that the quality of the provision is key to good outcomes for children. It is hoped to invest further in quality before any expansion to the programme could be considered.

There is also considerable international research available on the question of the Birthdate effect on the performance of children in the education system. Much of this research, which includes a University of Cambridge study entitled 'Birthdate Effects: A Review of Literature from 1990 on', points to the evidence that children who start school at a younger age perform at a lower level than children whose entry into the education system is at a later age.

A number of parents have requested that the lower age range for eligibility for the ECCE programme be reduced on the grounds that they wish to send their children to school when they are 4 years and 2 months of age or less. The matter was referred by some of these parents to the Office of the Ombudsman for Children. That Office found no reason to remove or amend the lower age range, accepting it as reasonable having regard to the various factors which apply.

Future developments relating to early years care and education generally will be considered during preparation of the new National Early Years Strategy which is expected to be completed in mid 2013.

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