



STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
A College of Queen's University Belfast

Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland and Northern Ireland

A response to the ESRI Study

by

Dr Glenda Walsh

30/01/23

Congratulations!

- Thank-you to authors
- Innovative
 - First of its kind in recent years
- Balanced
 - Aims
 - Data collection
 - Key messages
- Rigorous and robust
 - Strong mixed-methods study
 - Recent and relevant evidence based
 - Data analysis thorough
- Forward-thinking
 - Policy implications
 - Opportunities for 'shared' collaboration



Focus

Investment in ECEC

Educational Disadvantage

Quality of the Experience

Transitions (horizontal and vertical)



Investment or lack of 'adequate' investment in ECEC

In comparative terms, the level of expenditure on ECEC in Ireland and the UK lags behind the average for the EU27 (OECD, 2021b).

The average spend per child in the EU was \$5,500 USD adjusted for purchasing power parity, while the figure was \$3,200 for Ireland and \$3,600 in the UK (no separate data are available for NI). This places Ireland fifth lowest among EU countries and the UK ninth lowest.

After taking into account any childcare subsidies or tax credits families may be eligible for, typical net childcare costs in the UK are around 29 per cent of average earnings in 2021 and 31 per cent of average earnings in Ireland for an equivalent couple

- What does this say about how much we value young children in the 21st century across the island of Ireland?
- We know what the evidence has been telling us about impact on children, families, economy and society at large, yet.....
- 'Education at a Glance' (OECD, 2021) - the Scandinavian countries are still leading the way in terms of expenditure invested per child in ECEC services. Across OECD countries, the share of national resources devoted to 3-5 year-olds ranges from 0.3% of GDP in Greece and Ireland to 1.0% or more in Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, Norway and Finland.

Deep-rooted educational disadvantage

Our analysis of data from *Growing Up in Ireland* and the Millennium Cohort Study demonstrates that inequalities in cognitive outcomes can already be present at three years of age.

The social inequalities in cognitive outcomes at age five are largely predicted by such outcomes at age three in both contexts, suggesting that interventions and supports before age three are important for mitigating later inequality.

The home learning environment (such as being read to) has a much clearer positive association with skills at age five.

The analyses show that children start primary school with different skills and capacities, differences that will likely impact on their subsequent educational development.

- According to Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC (UN, 1989; 2001), all young learners, irrespective of their race, class, creed, ability or gender have the right to a high quality, equitable, accessible and inclusive education.
- ECEC settings can't do it on their own.
- Support vulnerable mothers/families from conception
- "...early childhood services as hubs for family supports"
- Rhetoric must become a reality

Quality of the ECEC Experience: High quality, affordable ECEC.... But how?

Northern Ireland: Persistent 'split system' of statutory (relatively well-paid) qualified early years teachers and less qualified voluntary/private sector childcare workers on poor pay

Ireland: There has been significant staff qualification upgrading in recent years. Yet low pay and poor working conditions in the sector mean high staff turnover and recruitment difficulties (Moloney, 2015). High turnover impacts negatively on consistency of care for children and also presents challenges to employers and service managers.

- Archer and Merrick (2020) argue that ensuring the quality of provision is as important as increasing access to early years provision and in order to do this, a well-qualified and resourced workforce is paramount.
- Not possible to provide high quality services needed in a modern society with poorly paid, undervalued, and in many cases low-qualified staff in a market-driven society.
- Truly investing in the workforce matters!

Effective Management of Transitions

A child has to make those horizontal transitions in any given day, which, really to me, does not support the needs of the child by any means, nor the families and we really need to have provision whereby, you know, the children are supported. ... There's evidence to suggest that those transitions can be really challenging for a child. (Stakeholder, NI)

Children leave early learning and childcare – very small ratios 1 to 11 children, play-based, whole child-led curriculum, quite a lot of freedoms, and then they start school and it could be 1 to 29 children in the classroom. It's not play based necessarily. And there was a different pedagogical approach. So I mean, that is quite a challenge for children. It's quite a difference. (Stakeholder, IE)

Children in the entry/reception class are rated as having more positive attitudes/dispositions than the next class level by their teachers. This seems surprising ...

- Towards a system of 'wrap around' provision.
- Continuity in vertical transitions as children progress into primary school
- Effective translation of playful pedagogies into practice in early years classroom
- Continued dominance of didactic approaches to teaching and learning not meeting with children's needs and interests

Concluding Comments

“There are few things more important for a country than improving the well-being and life chances of its children and young people” (NIE, 2021)

The time is ripe therefore for all involved in early years education and care, i.e. families, early years educators, practising teachers, academics and policy-makers to be ‘key actors’ (Ryan and Northey-Berg (2014, 212) in ensuring that our children are placed right at the heart of our society – North and South.

Surely our youngest children and their families deserve it!

Space

Voice



Audience

Influence