

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND

DATE

January 30th 2023

AUTHORS

Helen Russell
Emer Smyth
Frances McGinnity
Sarah Curristan



Introduction

- Early childhood is a key developmental stage - a period of rapid cognitive, social and emotional development (Waldfogel, 2006).
- High quality **Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)** can influence later outcomes in life:
 - Including school performance, labour market participation, and physical and mental health (OECD, 2021a).
 - Benefits of high quality ECEC are particularly evident for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Ruhm and Waldfogel, 2012; Blossfeld et al., 2017).
- Childcare provision also enables parental employment, which in turn raises income and reduces child poverty (Waldfogel, 2006; Cattan et al., 2022).

Research Questions

- How do key features of ECEC policy compare in Ireland and Northern Ireland?
- What are the main challenges in both systems and what solutions have been applied?
- How does participation in ECEC differ between Ireland and Northern Ireland?
- What is the scale of social inequality in child outcomes (cognitive and non-cognitive) among pre-school children in the two jurisdictions?
- Are there opportunities for learning and collaboration?

Data and Methods

- Desk-based analysis of policy.
- Qualitative interviews with stakeholders and expert consultation event.
- Quantitative analysis of participation in ECEC.
- Analysis of child outcomes in the early years using Growing Up in Ireland and the Millennium Cohort Study.



Key Policy Developments & Stakeholder Perspectives

Stakeholder Interviews & Consultation

Stakeholders included those involved in: Policymaking, Advocacy, Curricular Development, Oversight, Practitioner Support & Development, Academia.



Semi-Structured Interviews



19 Participants



11 from IE, 8 from NI



Jun-Aug 2022



Online Consultation Event



36 Participants



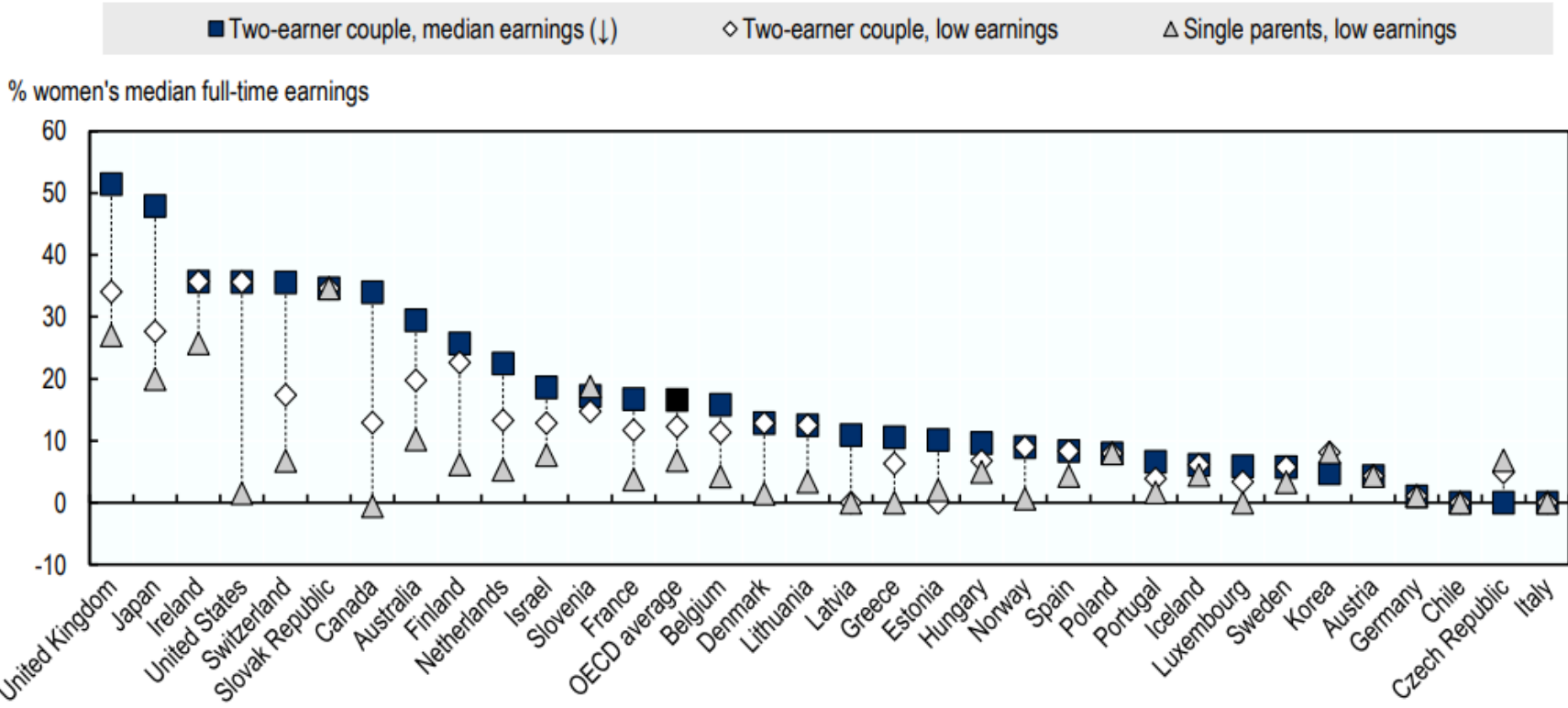
July 2022

ECEC Policy: Access

- Private (non-state) providers play key role in both systems.
 - In NI, direct state provision through nursery schools.
 - Very small number of state-run services in IE.
- Largely market model of childcare in both for under 3s.
- Expansion of universal preschool provision in IE/NI in last decade, albeit low hours (15/12.5 hours per week).
- Childcare costs to parents in IE/NI among highest in Europe for dual worker families (OECD, 2021). Recent initiatives have increased support for low income households.
- National Childcare Scheme to address costs in IE. Parental support through Universal Credit and tax system in NI.

Comparative Childcare Costs, 2019

Typical net childcare costs for two children in full-time care, 2019, in % of women's median full-time earnings, by family type and in-work earnings



Source: OECD 2020, Is Childcare Affordable?

Access: Common Challenges

1. Affordability

- Costs as a barrier for low income families (IE, NI).
- In NI, support available through Universal Credit and tax credits.

*“For single family parents and for parents then who are on a low wage, [...] childcare is becoming increasingly unaffordable, which is further **trapping those people within poverty**, and we do know that poverty and socioeconomic status is one of the biggest predictors of outcomes for young children” (Stakeholder, NI)*

*“if you’re on Universal Credit here like it's a benefit you can claim up to 84% of your childcare allowance. Now the problem with it is **it's paid retrospectively**. So you're always in arrears. And at the minute we're finding that **obviously families that are claiming Universal Credit are finding it very difficult, particularly whenever their household bills have gone up.**” (Stakeholder, NI)*

Access: Common Challenges

2. Availability

- Particularly for places for children under 3 (IE, NI).
- Challenges of availability in urban areas (IE) and rural areas (NI).
- Issues in flexibility of provision.

*“We know that some parents are experiencing challenges accessing places, **particularly, you know, for baby places or you know places for children under three. In urban areas like Dublin there are particular challenges in getting a place.**” (Stakeholder, IE)*

*“It has been identified that rural areas suffer [...] in Northern Ireland **if you're in a larger town or a city, there's more provision available naturally.**” (Stakeholder, NI)*

*“in the main, **most children are experiencing at least two different transitions** in that sense, you know I mean? Something before they attend and then something afterwards.”
(Stakeholder, NI)*

ECEC Policy: Quality

- In IE, new focus on qualification upgrading among staff (Nurturing Skills, 2021).
- Professional support and development initiatives:
 - IE: Better Start – professional dev., mentoring, coaching.
 - NI: Early Years – mentoring, leadership support, practice support.
- Dual systems of inspection (education-based and setting compliance):
 - IE: Dept. of Education & Tusla’s Early Years Inspectorate
 - NI: Education and Training Inspectorate & Dept. of Health
- Childminders – more registration and regulation in NI; in Ireland plans to increase regulation under National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028.

Quality: Common Challenges

1. Pay and conditions of the workforce.
 - High turnover of staff in the sector (IE, NI).
 - Low remuneration relative to qualifications (IE, NI)
 - Potential of the ERO / Core Funding to improve pay in IE.

*“The actual **staff pay is still at a very low rate relative to qualification levels.** So I think the retention of staff and has become **a massive, massive issue** for the providers.” (IE)*

*“We know that roughly 80% of costs in the delivery of childcare are towards staffing. And we also know that **if we want high quality childcare**, then again, we’ve known this for 20 years, **it's the level of qualification of the staff, their remuneration, and terms and conditions that limit turnover that have most impact on the development of young children.**” (NI)*

Quality: Common Challenges

2. Staff Qualifications

- In IE, push towards having a graduate-led workforce.
- ...But need to encourage existing staff to avail of CPD.
- In NI, less visible progress. A 'two-tier system' of pay disparity, with highly qualified staff in nursery classes but very low qualifications in private/voluntary sector.

*“We have a commitment to have a 50% of the workforce graduates by 2028.[...] **that's going to increase the quality or improve the quality of experience for children.**” (IE)*

*“**the challenge is how to upskill the current workforce** who will not participate in those degree programmes with those skills. And that's going to depend on CPD. [The] Department of Children are looking at a significant CPD programme as part of the workforce development plan that was published in the Nurturing Skills document, **and it will certainly be needed. If we want to ensure that the current workforce gains the skills they need to deliver on that education remit.**” (Stakeholder, IE)*

*“our statutory nursery schools being taught by teachers who are receiving a teacher's salary and then in the voluntary private sector [...] **are not receiving anywhere near the same salary as what a teacher is receiving. So that equality across the board isn't there.**” (NI)*

ECEC Policy: Targeted Supports

- Efforts in both jurisdictions to improve quality and participation among disadvantaged groups, but greatly different approaches taken.
- With the report, we examine provisions for:
 - Children from ethnic minorities.
 - Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds.
 - Children with special educational needs.

Targeted Supports: Minority Groups

- Lower uptake in ECCE among some children from minority groups.
 - In IE, lower uptake among Traveller (77%) and Roma children (72%).
 - In NI, Toybox programme for children from a Traveller or Roma background identified as a good model for inclusion.

*“the population on average it's 95, 96% come from preschool setting. But when you break that down by ethnicity, you'll see that you know, **participation rates among Traveller children or among Roma children, or among other ethnic groups that are much lower than the population on average.** So we know that the participation rates are not kind of universally high.” (Stakeholder, IE)*

*“It is **a programme that works from pre birth with Traveller families and with the objective of supporting families through home, visiting and home based learning.** Also engaging families, Traveller families with Sure Start to preschool.” (Stakeholder, NI)*

Targeted Supports: Socioeconomic Disadvantage

- Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds:
 - In NI, low socioeconomic areas targeted through Sure Start.
 - ... But need to avoid 'postcode lottery' (NI)
 - Consideration of a DEIS-type model for early years welcomed (IE).

*“Sure Start is a program birth to four, working with young children and their parents. It's a fully funded and well-funded and well-resourced program here in Northern Ireland. **I don't really think there's an equivalent as such in the Republic of Ireland.**” (NI)*

*“while some people who don't need it live in that area and can avail of it, equally so **there's some parents who probably could do with the support and unfortunately don't live within that postcode.**” (NI)*

*“Clearly, **parenting support, parental engagement, preschool home liaison – all of those things are really important.** And they are the kind of things now we're going to be looking at in the context of that DEIS type model.” (IE)*

Targeted Supports: Children with Additional Needs

- Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)
 - Doesn't require formal assessment.
 - Linked to ECCE programme – so only available during ECCE hours and limited to children 3 and over.
 - No similar initiative in NI.

*“[AIM is] a kind of a whole suite of supports, universal and targeted supports for children to engage in preschool. And you know it's won awards nationally and internationally.
It's been a real success.” (Stakeholder, IE)*

*“I think in terms of the AIM model there is varying levels that you can come on to the model from very mild forms of additional needs right up to level 7, which is high level of additional needs. [...] **The good thing about the model is that it's you don't have to be diagnosed or have a 'statement' is what they would call it [in] Northern Ireland to be able to access it.**” (Stakeholder, IE)*



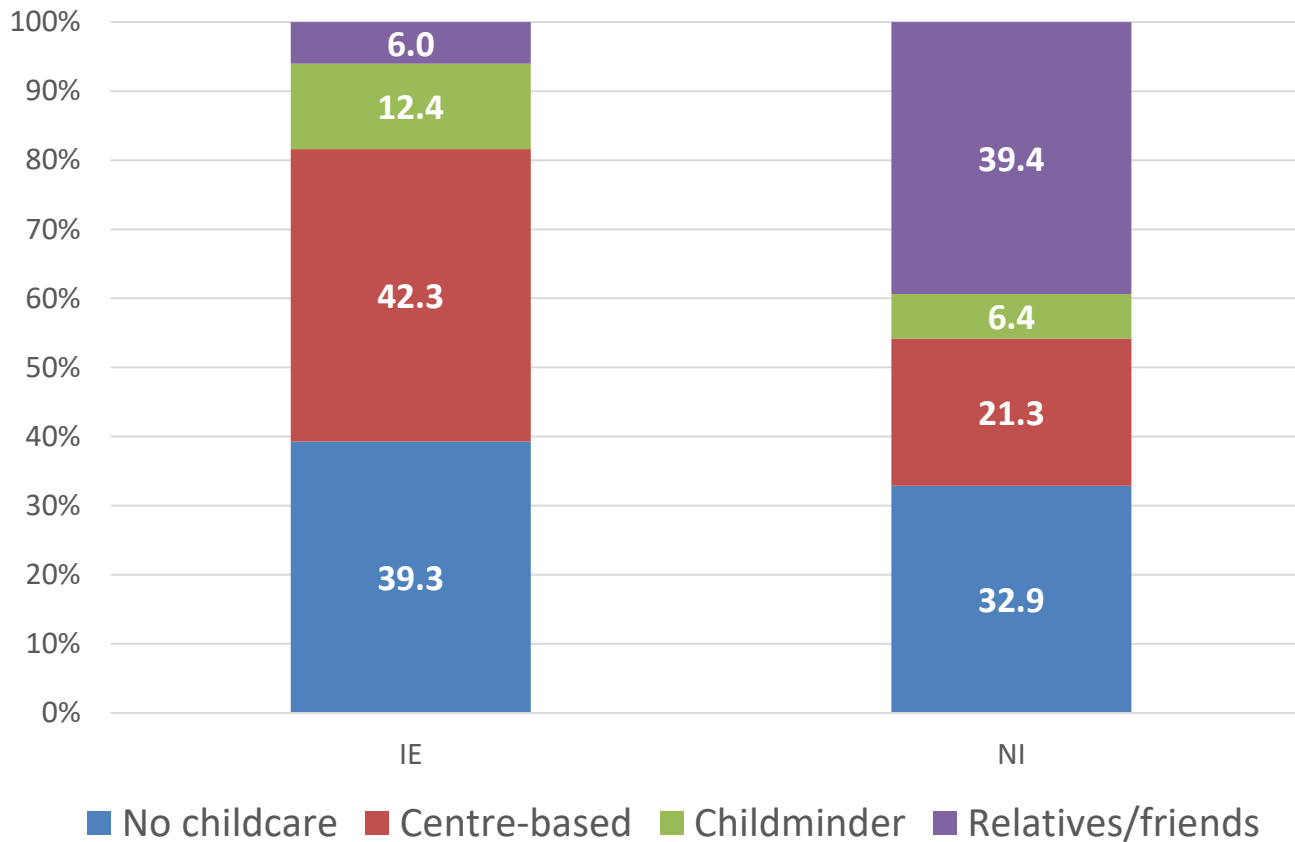
Participation in Early Childhood Education and Care

Measuring Participation in ECEC

- NI - Family Resource Survey 2018-2021
- IE - SILC 2019-2021
- Children aged 0-4 who are not in school
- Main type of care based on longest hours
- NI respondents asked about childcare used during the previous seven days
- IE are asked about arrangements in a usual week
- For total hours we combine all care types

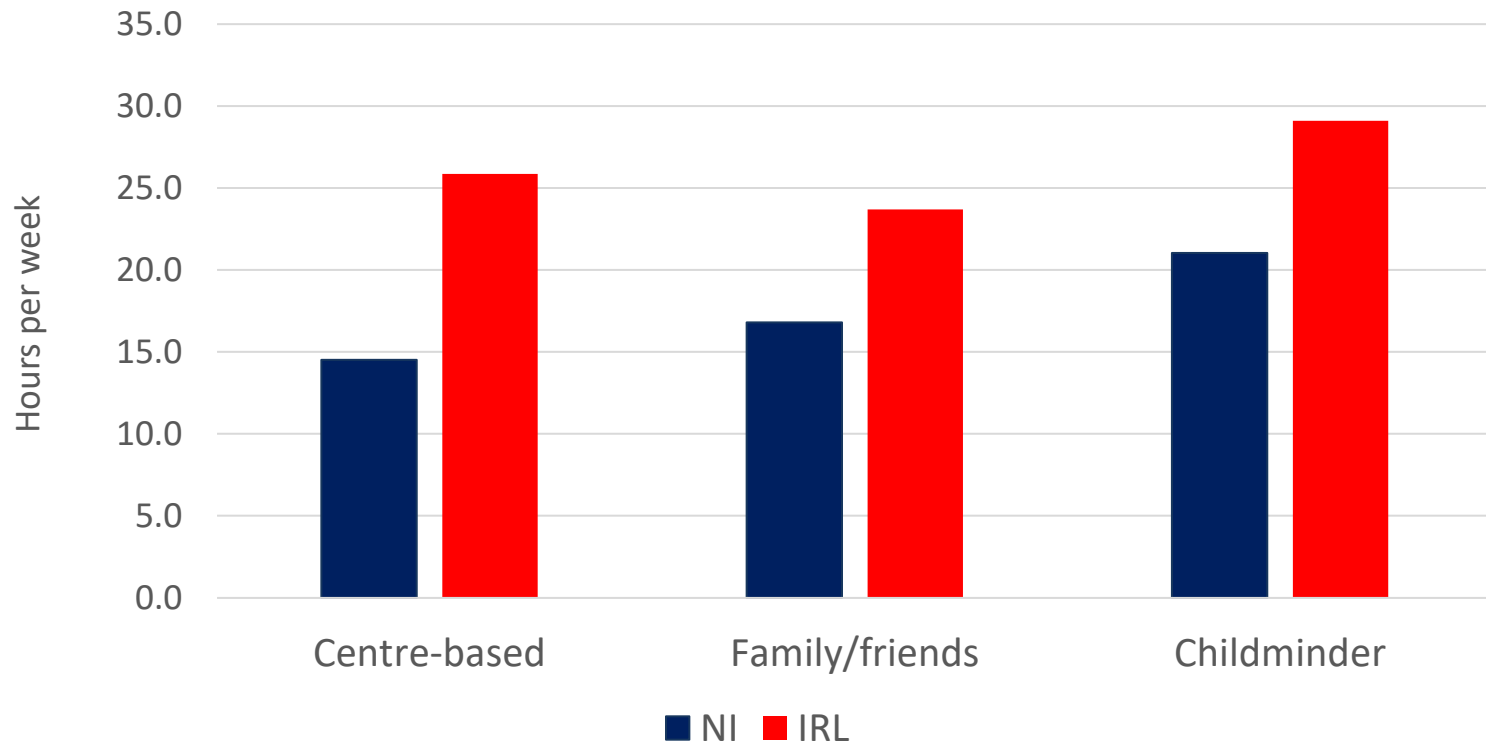
Main Childcare Type

Main childcare type for children 0-4 years not in school, NI (2018-2021) and IE (2019-2021)



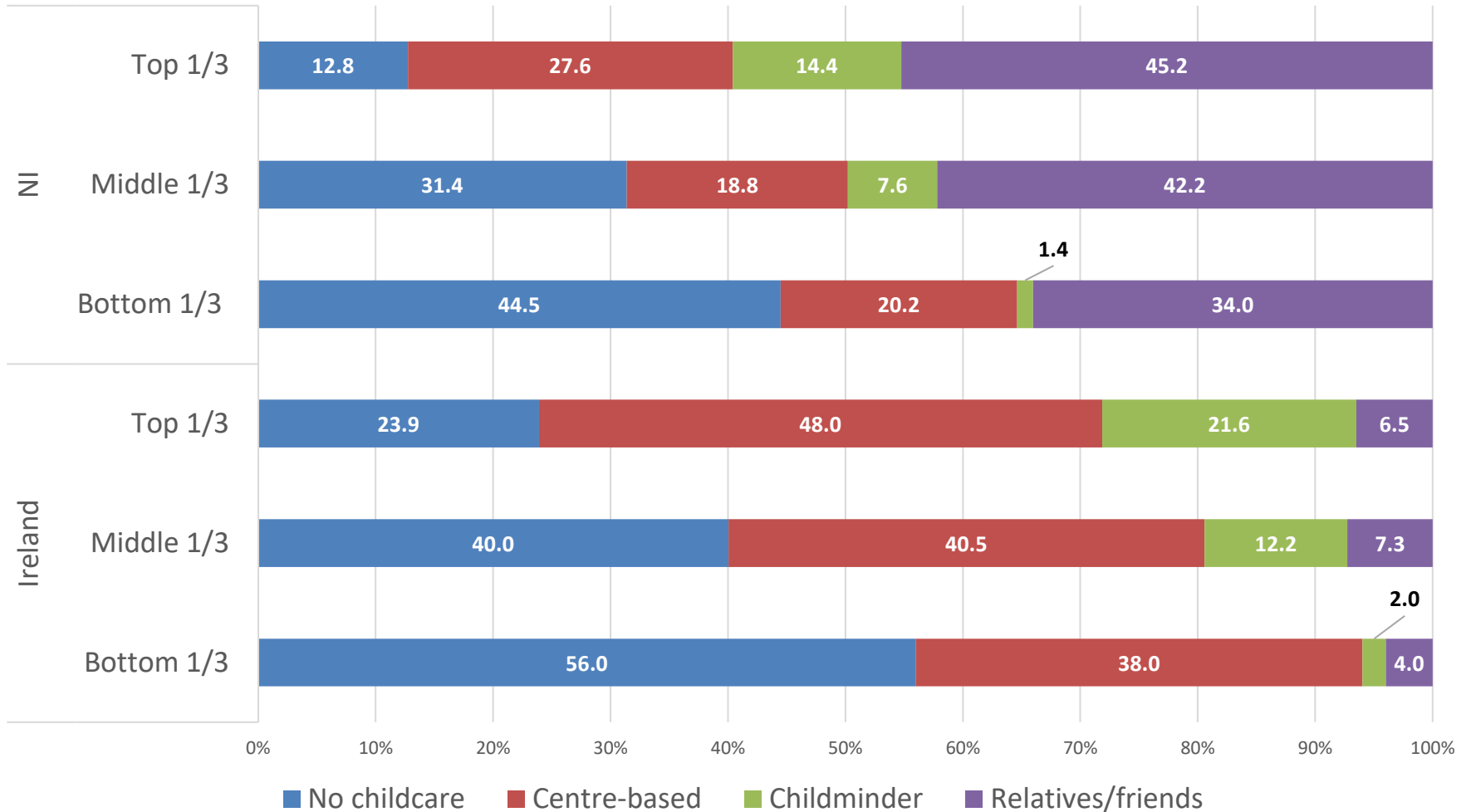
Mean Weekly Care Hours

Mean weekly care hours by main care type, for children 0-4 years.



Source: Family Resource Survey (2018-2021) for NI, and SILC 2019-2021 for IE.

Main Childcare Type by Income, Children 0-4 years



Source: Family Resource Survey (2018-2021) for NI, and SILC 2019-2021 for IE.

Factors influencing ECEC participation

- Using **any non-parental care** is strongly associated with
 - Child aged 3-4 years (vs 0-2 years)
 - Higher family income
 - Mother employed (part-time or full-time)

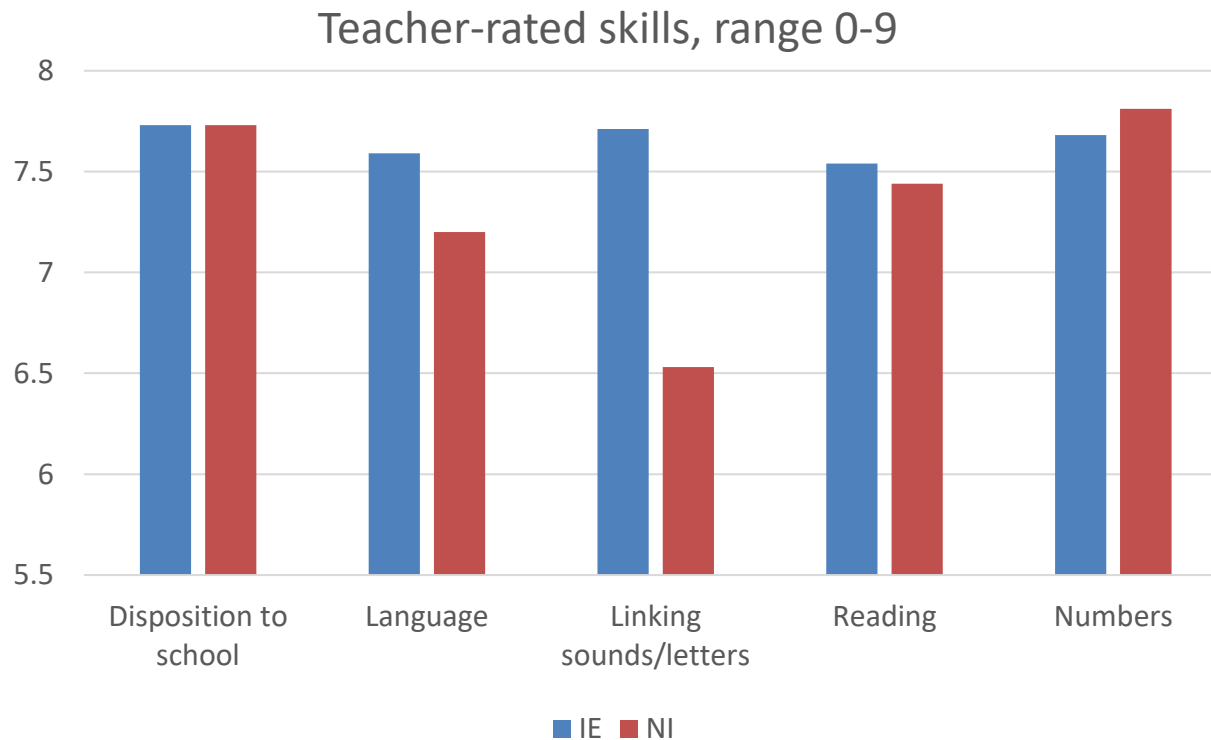
Additionally

- **Centre-based care** associated with
 - Being in the top 1/3 income group
- **Childminder**
 - Full-time employment (IE)
- **Family/Friends**
 - Lone parent families



Comparison of Child Outcomes

Cognitive Measures at Age 5



Direct vocabulary test shows no significant difference between children in NI and IE at 5 years or 3 years

Source: MCS in NI (collected in 2006) & GUI in IE (collected in 2013)

Early inequalities

- In both systems, children start primary school with different skills and competencies, depending on their family background.
- But the dimensions that matter for specific outcomes vary between IE and NI.
- Some of the differences in cognitive skills at age 5 reflect vocabulary differences at age 3, reflecting the longer term importance of early development.



Collaboration and Policy Learning

Opportunities for Collaboration

- Existing examples:
 - Departmental contact via British-Irish Council early years sub-group.
 - Good relationship between inspectorates – e.g. cross-border shadowing.
 - Informal contact and information sharing

*“We worked very, very closely with Northern Ireland just in terms of our COVID response, how are they managing? **What are they doing? Can we learn? This is what we've done.**” (Stakeholder, IE)*

*“Pre pandemic **we would have met annually** and as a as a whole senior management team and **we also facilitate work-shadowing cross border** (Stakeholder, IE)”*

Opportunities for Collaboration

- Recognition of the possibilities for mutual learning.

“I do feel that early years in the South is taking wings and I really think there's great work going on there that we could learn from. There's no doubt and or our policymakers could definitely learn from.” (Stakeholder, NI)

*“Because there's so many things that are similar. There's so many similar problems that we have. [...] So there's definitely things that we should be sharing and looking at together and seeing you know, is there ways that we could work closer together.”
(Stakeholder, IE)”*

Policy Learning

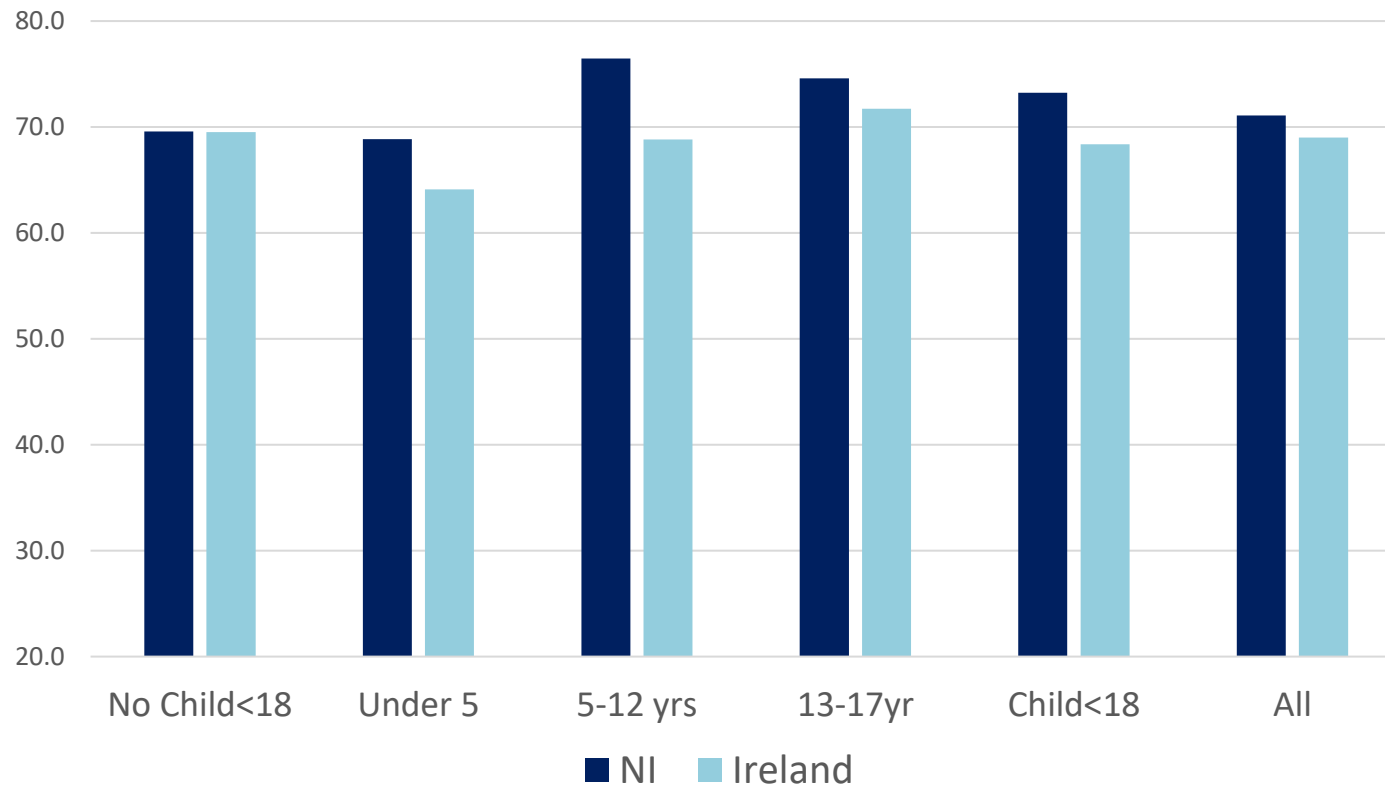
- Need to collect more harmonised data.
- Shared challenges around affordability, quality and low pay as well as inequalities in child development.
- Learning opportunities across the border – e.g. inclusion of childminders (NI); Sure Start wraparound services (NI); under 3 years curriculum (IE); AIM programme (IE); qualifications increase in IE
- In both, still scope to increase spending in line with other wealthy European countries, and reduce costs for middle income households
- Investment in high quality ECEC important for addressing disadvantage and child poverty

Thanks for listening and thanks to all those who contributed to the consultation.

- Report available to download at www.esri/publications/....

Maternal Employment

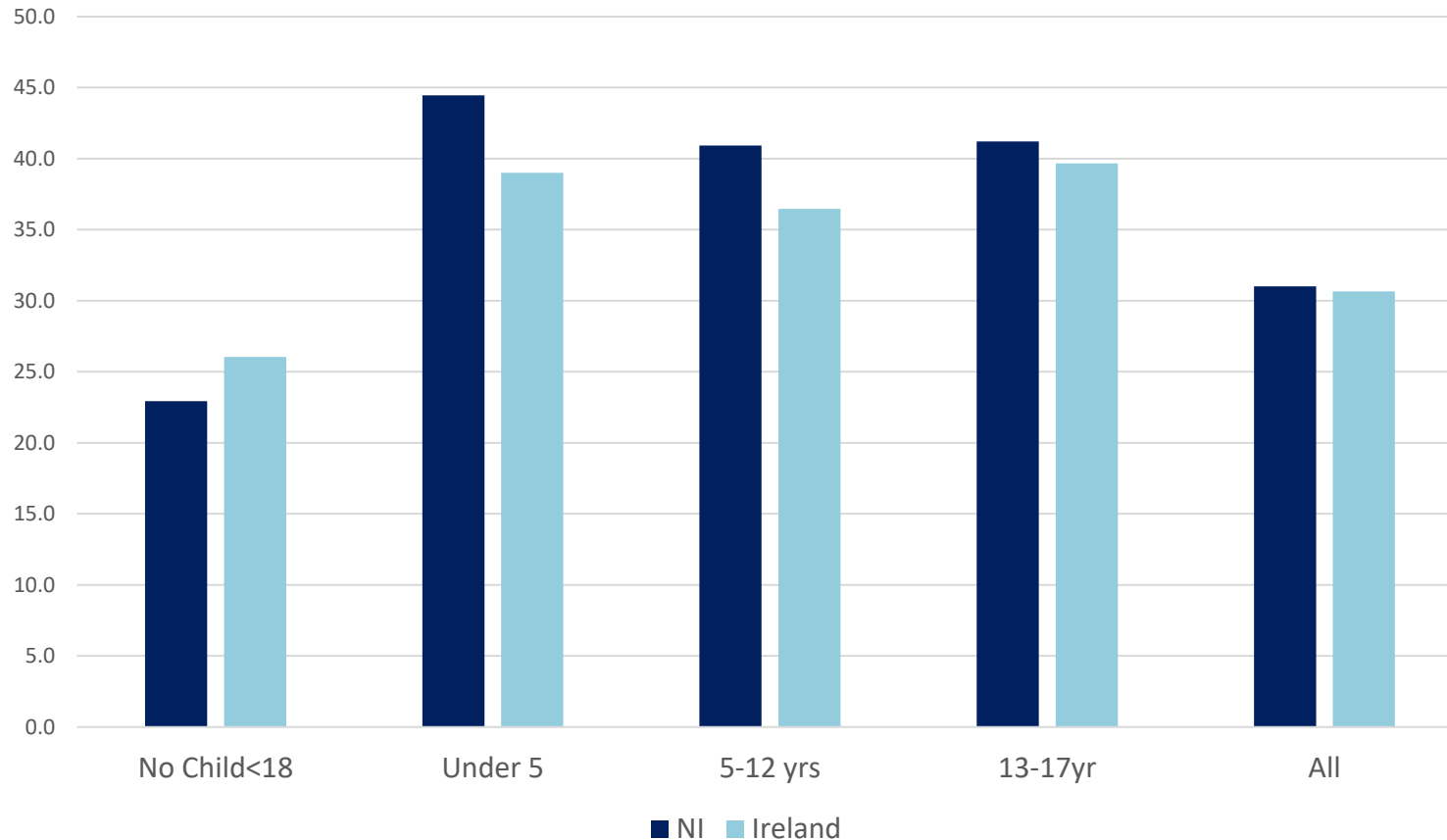
Female employment rate (%) by age of youngest child. Aged 20-64 years.



Source: EU Labour Force Survey, 2019

Maternal Employment

Employed women working part-time (%) by age of youngest child



Source: EU Labour Force Survey, 2019