

**Training Students in Post-modern Pedagogies in the Field of Early
Childhood Education and Care (ECEC); Reconciling the Old with the New**

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Abstract

In the *National Children's Strategy* (2000) the Irish state has committed to a post-modern Relational Pedagogical (RP) approach. The strategy promotes the idea that “children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own” (Ireland, Department of Health and Children, 2000, p.32). In Europe the origins of Relational Pedagogy can be traced to the *Reggio Emilia* area of Northern Italy. The *Reggio Emilia* approach has influenced European and Nordic practice over the past sixty years (Dalberg and Moss, 2005, Edwards and Gandini, 1998, Gardner, 1991). New Irish quality and curriculum frameworks *Síolta* (translates as seeds) and *Aistear* (translates as journey) are informed by RP philosophy. In the new frameworks the child is regarded as an advocate in his or her own learning. In order to implement RP, Irish practitioners require contemporary ECEC training, to become ‘reflexive practitioners’ and develop collegial practice in keeping with European and Nordic approaches.

When Ireland is compared to European and Nordic states in the field of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) with regard to policy and pedagogy fundamental structural differences arise, such as training and governance. In order to explain the extent of these differences this paper traces the informal start-up of Irish ECEC services. In tracing ECEC growth over four decades a uniquely Irish mixed market model of service provision is revealed. ECEC services are found across family run, state, commercial and voluntary provision. It is this mixed market stakeholder base which is now targeted by the state for professional training to implement Relational Pedagogical practice.

The paper discusses the ECEC teacher education debate. It highlights the *Reggio Emilia* philosophy, traces the expansion of ECEC in Ireland and explains the policy processes that have led to the current training dilemma. The paper explains how Ireland's attempts in training and structural improvements in keeping with progressive international trends are stymied as the building blocks on which quality ECEC services are built have not been established. The paper concludes that due to historical policy and pedagogy governance issues, the implementation of RP pedagogies onto current Irish practice is easier said than done.

Keywords

Keyword 1, Early Childhood Care and Education, 2, Pedagogy, 3, *Síolta* and *Aistear* 4, Local Government, 5, Ireland - *Reggio Emilia*

1. Early Childhood Teacher Education Debate

The debate regarding best practice in pedagogy is centered between modern and post-modern paradigms concerning how the child is viewed and provided for. In the age of modernity systematic studies involved observations, studies on moral development and teaching methodologies were conducted by developmental psychologists and educationalists such as Jean Piaget and Maria Montessori. In the resulting pedagogical approaches “Children are assumed to pass through the same stages and to show the same age-related characteristics whether they live in remotes parts of Nepal or in Chicago” (Penn 2005, p.105). Now development psychology is seen a positivist science that claims universal truths.

The post-modern paradigm goes beyond systematic studies, drawing a great deal from philosophers such as Foucault and Derrida; they are concerned with issues of knowledge, power, equity, language, truth, freedom and ethics. Post-modern approaches in ECEC are more likely to see children as active contributors who can be creative partners with adults. Each child is valued for its individuality; this is based on a strong belief that no two children are the same and that context matters. This builds on Vygotskyian writings which reinforced an understanding of the importance of the social environment to foster learning (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory was extended in the 1960’s in the ‘Ecological Systems Theory’ which proposed that higher mental functions have their origin in social relations (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Consequently educational approaches wishing to mediate between society and the child’s mind must be simultaneously social, mental and meaningful.

In order to move into providing a RP approach the concern of the practitioner must shift focus from the child’s behaviour to the child’s thinking (Brownlee and Berthelsen 2005, p.2). This is a major change in pedagogical practice that calls for teacher training programmes to be of a high graduate level because Relational Pedagogical practice is a complex skill, which draws from a wide range of disciplines (education, care, philosophy, science and sociology). To help ECEC students develop reflexive practice and develop complex and integrated ways of viewing the world requires teacher training to go beyond merely presenting theory. Training must accommodate students to discuss and analyse personal theories (prejudices, likes, own ECEC experiences) as this will influence how students/practitioners structure learning environments. Professionals in ECEC believe that in order to challenge students to develop critical thinking the use of deep approaches to learning ought to be used; co-operative learning groups, case studies, linking content to personal experiences, reflective

journaling and assessments that focus less on surface learning. Training should offer assignments that encourage deeper learning across multi-disciplinary topics (O'Donoghue and Brooker 1996).

William Perry studied the impact of ECEC training programmes on education practice. He found that over time students progressively found more complex and integrated ways of viewing the world as they progressed through their studies. He examined what he calls the development of 'epistemological beliefs'. These are the underlying assumptions students hold regarding the sources and development of knowledge; they are in essence how students view the world. He identified four progressive stages categorised as: dualism (naïve) multiplism, relativism and commitment (sophisticated).

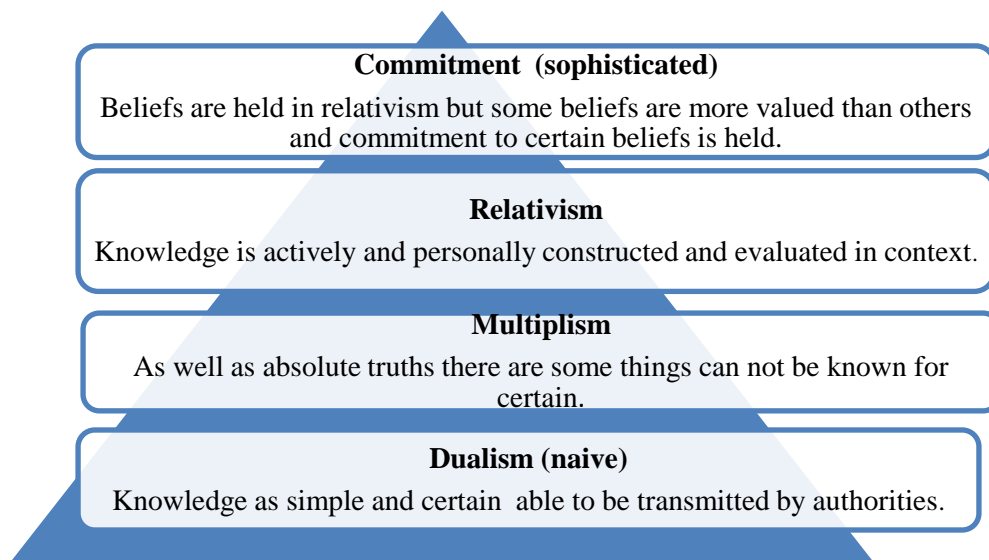


Table 1: William Perry Stages of Practitioner Practice (1970)

In the first stage (Dualism) the practitioner sees knowledge as simple and able to be transmitted by authorities. In the second stage (Multiplism), the practitioner understands that as well as absolute truths some things cannot be known. In the third stage (Relativism), knowledge is actively and personally constructed and evaluated in context. Finally, the practitioner reaches the highest stage of commitment to beliefs where believes are held in 'Relativism' but some beliefs are more valued than others and 'commitment' to certain beliefs is held over others.

Students with relativistic beliefs are reflective about their own knowledge. Those with sophisticated beliefs were more likely to see complexity in classroom problems and "seek out alternative viewpoints, including those of very young children, family and school, before deciding on a course of action" (Brownlee and Berthelsen 2005, p.4).

A practice example concerning a pre-school practitioner's response to a complex situation serves as an example.

At snack time the pre-school children usually sit together at one large table to encourage socialisation. During observation it was noted that an exception was made for two boys. They were encouraged to take a picnic away from the main group to another part of the room. They had made a private 'cubby' by draping a cloth over a table. In the cubby cars, trucks and diggers were set-up as a garage. In the privacy of their cubby they picnicked, giggled and chatted independently of the main group. The practitioner made it clear that "these two friends are having a picnic together".

Later, in discussion with the practitioner when asked about the exception she explained that one of the boys is unpopular; he is attending as a result of a referral from the local district health nurse. His behaviour is often rough and un-cooperative. He rarely sustains periods of extended play and suffers from enuresis (bed-wetting) resulting in bad odour, consequently, he is unpopular and rarely befriended. On this occasion, she noticed a new development - he had sustained play with another for some time. She chose to flex (snack time sitting down) rules to accommodate friendship. "I am happy and excited that this may be the first friendship he ever formed – friends are important" she said.

Table 2: Irish Pre-school Situational Sampling (Neylon 2011, p11)

With this response the practitioner demonstrated Relativism and a commitment to a belief the friendship matters over routine. This type of Reflexive practice is advanced in the *Reggio Emilia* philosophy.

2. Post-modern Relational pedagogy in practice Reggio Emilia and beyond

The RP approach found in the Integrated (crèche and pre-school) Municipal ECEC services in the *Reggio Emilia* area of North Italy has been promoted as a place to see and understand the practice. The approach has gained currency in pre-school pedagogy in Europe and in many parts of the world. The services are now well established having developed over the past 60 years "Money to begin the construction would come from the sale of an abandoned war tank, a few trucks, and some horse left behind by the retreating Germans" (Edwards and Gandini, 1998, p. 43). The services offer universal access; they were set up especially to offer high quality and be free from charitable and religious tendencies. A key founding member of the *Reggio* philosophy was the teacher and sociologist Loris Malaguzzi. He encouraged 'reflective practitioners' to be removed from the modern theory of developmental certainties assuming instead responsibility to choose experiment and discuss. He envisioned knowledge not in a linear way but rather as a "tangle of spaghetti - with no beginning or end, no linear progression but always open to new possibilities" (Edwards *et al.* 1998, p.156). Rather than

having a set curriculum, practitioners seek to find ways to hear and sustain each child's spontaneous curiosity at a high level. The curriculum combines planned pedagogical objectives with emergent objectives. The emergent objectives are identified by the practitioners called *Pedagogistas* by means of listening to the voice of the child and "working collegially with a second professional the *Atelierista* (artist) who visits a classroom each day to interpret and respond with activities, experiments and projects for the senses" (Vecci, 1998, pp. 119-127). The method is also known as 'the listening pedagogy'. The *Reggio* ideology is born of a post war aspiration that children, their families and teachers are subjects of rights that can produce culture. Central to this approach is the conviction that the traumatic fascist intolerance experienced during the war years would be addressed in the classroom.

Gunilla Dahlberg of the Stockholm institute of Education is a founding member of the 'Stockholm project'. In the early 1980's was inspired by Malaguzzi's philosophy. The 'Reggio' philosophy Dahlberg suggests was easy to transfer to Sweden, due to striking similarities between Sweden and the Emilia Romagna region in North Italy. Both have undergone somewhat similar processes of modernisation. Both regions have high levels of parental employment and high standards of living. Although the expansion of the Swedish ECEC system was dominated by concern about providing enough places to care for children with working parents, there was still space for an important and continuous discussion about pedagogical philosophy. Parents, politicians and universities, were included in a network, which has expanded throughout the city and onto other areas in Sweden. The management of the schools and the payment of pedagogues is the responsibility of municipal government, with pedagogues/teachers paid at professional levels (Dalberg *et al*, 2005).

3. Irish ECEC from Makeshift to a National Childcare Strategy

The Irish experience at that time instead was not marked by a traumatic event such as the devastation of war but rather a continuation of generations of poverty and emigration. Unlike *Reggio*, religious institutions continued to dictate pedagogy at all levels from training to practice in Ireland. The development of ECEC services can be traced to 1969 when the Irish Pre-School Playgroups Association (IPPA) was formed, seven years after the formation of the English Pre-School Playgroup Association (PPA). The playgroup movements grew from a self-help spirit and a 'can do' philosophy. Services developed in a variety of settings; Parish halls, private houses, Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) dressing rooms and even in church sacristies. In both countries The Departments of Education remained professionally at a distance from the pre-school parent self-help groups (Crowe 1983, Neylon 2011). In the

1970's and 1980's the expansion of ECEC services in the UK came under the governance of local authority's who took responsibility for structural supports concerning, safety, quality provision child protection and. The standard of premises, training and employment were advanced and national guidelines on a variety of issues were developed (as in EU and Nordic countries). Not so in Ireland, as local government was un-resourced and unable to commit to providing structural support. The removal of domestic rates (1977) starved local government of funding. Chubb describes Irish local government as "a jungle of administrative areas that is both impenetrable to the ordinary citizen and frequently inconvenient for any kind of business" (Chubb 1992, p. 263). Thus, Irish ECEC was without a local structural support. In the final decades of the 20th century Irish ECEC was largely in the realm of the voluntary sector. The expansion of ECEC settings and training of practitioners was supported by the IPPA and the Irish Country Women's Association (ICA). Later, third level institutions began to offer graduate training in the field of ECEC. It was not until 1996 that minimum legalisation in the field of ECEC was first implemented.

By contrast since the end of the Second World War EU and Nordic countries have worked both nationally and locally to develop ECEC services (Whitbread 1972, Edwards and Gandini, 1998). In these countries as a result of sustained investment, a high level of expertise and specialism in the field of early childhood studies, research, provision, employment and pedagogical know-how has been established. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports that in these countries ECEC has been integrated into local and national policy "Active, integrated policy units can also be seen at work in the UK or in the large Nordic cities, which continuously improve their provision, structures, adapting them to new needs and challenges" (Start Strong 2006 p. 441). Unfortunately for Ireland when the OECD compares members ECEC practice Irish provision is consistently found inadequate (OECD, Start Strong, 2006, Innocenti Report Card 2009). Ireland joined the European Union Single Market in 1988. Funding for ECEC issues at both local and national levels became available.

4. EU Structural Improvements in Irish ECEC

A stipulation of drawing down EU structural funds led to the development of 'Social Partnership' processes which contributed to the involvement of a multiplicity of support agencies (local and national) in ECEC services. New agencies hitherto without pedagogical remit now entered the field of ECEC. These included the County Enterprise Boards, Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS), Health Service Executive (HSE) as well as the Further Education

and Training Awards Council (FETAC). To facilitate financing mechanisms and cohesive development of childcare places to meet EU stipulations the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCO) amalgamated into one group¹. Funding was distributed by a company called Area Development Management (ADM) set up in 1992 as an intermediary to promote social inclusion, reconciliation and equality through integrated social and economic development within communities. It is a not-for-profit company with charitable status that manages programmes on behalf of the Irish Government and the EU. In 2005 ADM changed its name to Pobal. The forces involved in expansion cast ECEC not in field of education and social care supported by local governance, but in the realm of social inclusion and economic development through labour market re-organisation administered through Pobal.

Local government districts saw the development of thirty three City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) established in 2001 to encourage the development of ECEC locally. The CCC's supported the development of additional places across a mixed market model of provision including Small to Medium Enterprises (SME's), Home based services, Community Based Crèches and Pre-schools, Private Crèches and Pre-schools, Commercial services, Specialist Pre-schools run by various government departments and Family Resource Centres (FRC's). The increase in childcare places (EU additionally) was significant. An examination of *The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006* for grants across capital (community based and private) and staffing (community based), show childcare places for children in full-time care increased by 10,627 and pre-school 16,333 places (Fitzpatrick Associates, 2007, p.p.53-56).

The nebulous statutory stance which allows “a sufficient number of suitable and competent adults working directly with the children in the pre-school setting at all times” (Ireland: Department of Health and Children 2006, p.37) allowed for untrained personnel to manage and work in ECEC. The mixed market approach benefited from a highly elastic labour force, encouraged into the field through, return to work training models promoted by FÁS and endorsed by weak statutory provision. The education associated with such models has been described as “deficit models the rationale for the intervention hinges on the aspiration to improve the trainee's opportunity for employment in the labour market” (O'Sullivan, 2005,

¹ These include: Barnardos; Border Counties Childcare Network (BCCN); National Child Minding Association of Ireland (NCMAI); Forbairt Naíonraí Teoranta (Irish speaking pre-schools); IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation; Irish Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Association (ISWECA); National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA) and St. Nicholas Montessori.

p.p.275-6). Irish ECEC provision is not rooted in the education or social care system; rather it crosses a variety of policy domains including, social, community and economic development, training/employment, family and child policy. Training is also found across a mixed market model of state, private and the voluntary sector.

In 2003 five types of established preschool provision (pedagogies) were identified as being on offer in Ireland: Montessori, Steiner-Waldorf, Naíonra (Irish language groups), Playbased Groups and HighScope (Ireland, Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform 2003, p.42). More recent studies show that “*Reggio Emilia* influenced pre-schools are now available in Ireland” (Neylon 2011, p.67). The pedagogy is promoted by the NVC0’s members².

5. Irish training and pedagogies - *The Model Framework, Síolta and Aistear*

In conjunction with the ECEC expansion process Ireland’s first endeavour to take in hand ECEC training issue was the publication of *Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning: Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform 2002). It identified ECEC occupational profiles as varying from that of basic practitioner to expert practitioner along the National Framework Qualifications (NFQ). Given the unique Irish ECEC variety of established pedagogies and new labour market trainees entering the sector the framework advances principles of flexible learning such as Work Based Learning (WBL) and Applied Prior Learning (APL). In APL the practitioner’s level of prior pedagogical experience and skills can be identified through a system of portfolio building and then mapped onto the practitioner occupational profile on the NFQ. Flexible learning options such as part time training courses which allow practitioners to continue to work while training and progress the variety of untrained and those holding some level of accreditation on the NFQ. It was envisioned that third level colleges would provide training and some regional colleges have gone on to run graduate full time training programmes in ECEC.

The endeavour to develop a National ECEC curriculum (in keeping with the practice in EU and Nordic states) began with the publication of two frameworks, the *National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education Síolta* (Center for Early Childhood Development Education, 2006) three years later the national *Early Childhood Curriculum Framework: Aistear* (NCCA, 2009). The frameworks traverse ECEC and primary school infant class

² Training visits to the town of Reggio Emilia are now organised by the Irish National Children’s Nurseries Association (NCNA). They joined the ‘Reggio Children International Network in late 2009.

rooms and both distinguish the children's age ranges from birth to six years as: babies, toddlers and young children. *Síolta* was developed by the Centre for Early Childhood (now disbanded). *Aistear* was developed by the National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA). Yet the sum of both does not make one national curriculum nor do either not set out to provide theoretical pedagogical training for students and practitioners.

“The purpose of *Síolta* is to enhance all elements of early years practice while *Aistear* focuses exclusively on children's early learning and development” (NCCA, 2009 p.15). *Aistear* “contains information for parents and practitioners that will help them plan for and provide challenging and enjoyable learning experiences that can enable all children to grow and develop as competent and confident learners in the context of loving relationships with others” (Aistear User Guide NCCA 2009, p.4). It is acknowledged that “*Aistear* is a curriculum framework rather than a curriculum” (*Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and the *Primary School Curriculum Audit: Similarities and differences* NCCA, p.p. 4-5). Ireland is without an agreed national ECEC curriculum which is a fundamental requirement in developing quality ECEC training and service provision.

6. Conclusions and Future Work

For logistical and financial reasons third level colleges have yet to embrace the flexible life long learning routes recommended in the *Model Framework*. In the UK and Scotland a Graduate Training Fund (GTF) has encouraged practitioners to attend for tertiary training by paying for students to attend modular third level ECEC training through APL and WBL. Not so in Ireland where the Social Partnership practice continues to cast ECEC training in the FÁS and FETAC domain. However some colleges such as NUIG through their adult and continuing education department offer a BA, Certificate and Practice Diploma on an outreach basis in Early Childhood Studies and Practice. Students must pay their own fees. Issues of whether students graduating from such degree programmes are entitled to work in conventional infant classrooms has not yet to be clarified. The employment prospects for an ECEC graduate wishing to work directly with children is either to work in private sector or work for a community childcare group where the pay scale is low. The process does not encourage graduates to work directly with children. Further disappointment for the sector concern the roll out of *Síolta* and *Aistear*. Practitioners attending training run by the CCC and NVCO's are not awarded accreditation on the NCFE. The post-modern nature of the frameworks is difficult to teach and learn particularly for trainers, students and practitioners

without an underpinning in ECEC theory. No training for trainers in the frameworks is forthcoming.

Can Ireland meet the challenge to catch up on the lost decades when post-war Europe cultivated high levels of expertise and specialism in the field of early childhood studies, research, provision, and employment? Can the development of CCC and NVCO's promote local childcare structures in the absence of local government's involvement? These are the key issues to reconcile if Irish ECEC practice is to improve. National statutory ECEC curriculum and quality standards are the missing ingredient in Irish ECEC. Without statutory policy on training and standards for the sector the roll out of frameworks are tokenistic.

To emulate the *Reggio Emilia* RP a high level of graduate training is required. A graduate practitioner running a service should work with the equivalent of the daily visiting *Atelierista* to each classroom. This *Atelierista* role has been somewhat replicated in the UK where the trend for ECEC Early Years Consultants (EYC) is to actively engage in pedagogy (spending time in the settings). The Early Years Consultants are employed by local government. The *Atelierista*, *Pedagogistas* and the EYC are highly skilled and trained experts in the field of Early Childhood. Their existence has come about from sustained investment by the local authorities and now a high level of expertise, employment pedagogical training and specialism exists. Given Ireland's late arrival to ECEC and subsequent high level of unqualified and under qualified workforce pedagogical training that encourage students to develop critical thinking need to be developed in the sector. Whether voluntary organisations hitherto involved in ECEC expansion (CCC and NVCO's) now tasked with implementing *Aistear* and *Síolta* have the statutory power and pedagogical expertise to implement high standards needs consideration. Care should be taken in the roll out of frameworks, because beginning a policy processes not underpinned by statutory obligations can be easily dropped as exemplified by the *Model Framework's* (2002) experience.

However, Ireland can benefit from being a late comer, learning from other pedagogical positions through the advance of Information and Communication Technologies and newly developed self-assessment techniques for ECEC environmental quality (Harms *et al.* 1998, Sylva *et al* 2003). Background work such as the 'occupational profiles' mapped on the NFQ can be revisited along with suggestions that a system of APL and WBL. While other counties strive to move from modernist approaches toward post-modern pedagogies the central quandary for Ireland to reconcile is whether post-modern pedagogies can be implemented where modernist pedagogies may not have existed.

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