

**An Analysis of the Free Pre-School Year in Early Childhood Care  
and Education (ECCE) scheme – from a Practitioner’s Perspective**

**Dr. Gerardine Neylon**  
**[gerardinneylon@gmail.com](mailto:gerardinneylon@gmail.com)**  
**Department of Politics and Public Administration**  
**University of Limerick**

## 1. Abstract

Irish pre-school provision is undergoing changes in policy and pedagogy as a result of the introduction of the Free Pre-School Year in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme (January 2010). This shift to universal pre-school provision explicitly acknowledges a vast body of research that argues investment in quality early childhood education is vital. Investment needs to rise in the so-called “Dora the Explorer” years of early childhood relative to the so-called “Facebook” years of later childhood (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2009).

Irish pre-school services have been provided by competing sectors across; the private sector, commercial, community based and the state sector. Attendance fees, staff pay-rates and pedagogical approaches were not uniform. This market-led approach has been contested from a children’s rights perspective as it did not ensure equality of access to quality pre-school services for all young children (Hayes, 2005).

The new scheme radically changes both employment and pedagogical practices. Now pre-schools are contracted by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (MCYA). Acceptance on the scheme is contingent on agreeing to implement new pedagogical quality and curriculum frameworks *Síolta; the Early Childhood Quality Framework*, (Centre Early Childhood Development Education, 2006) and *Aistear; the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009).

This paper describes the scheme and sets out the rationale used by the state in making the change. The paper reports on a phenomenological study which captures the response of sixteen pre-school practitioners to the scheme. It argues that competing sectors have been affected in a different ways by the change.

### Keywords

Keyword 1, Education 2, Pre-school, 3, Phenomenology, 4, *Aistear* 5, *Síolta*

## **1. Introduction - The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme**

The new ECCE scheme directly pays pre-schools to provide a place for one year per child between the ages of 3 years 3 months and 4 years 6 months at September 1<sup>st</sup> each year at a weekly rate of €64.50. A higher rate (€74.50) is available as an incentive to encourage graduates with a relevant third level degree in early childhood to work in the sector. Certain stipulations for entry into the scheme apply such as agreeing to implement the new early childhood curriculum *Aistear* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009) and *Síolta* (Center Early Childhood Development Education, 2006). Compliance with regulatory issues such as notification to the Health Service Executive (HSE) and Tax Clearance certificates are required. Pre-schools participating in the scheme were given until September 2012, to hold a nationally accredited major award at Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (or equivalent) in childcare/early childhood care and education.

The scheme replaced The Early Childhood Supplement (ECS), which was a direct payment to families with children under 5 years of age. Under the ECS parents had the choice as to how to spend the €1,000 annual supplement. The payment of the supplement by the state directly to parents did not guarantee that children of pre-school age would attend pre-school services.

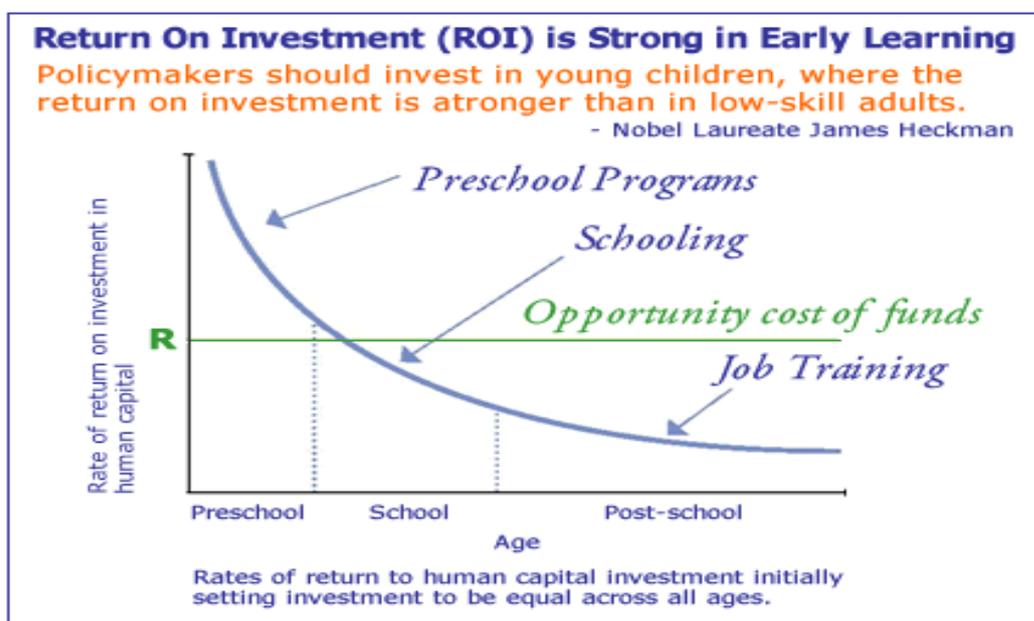
## **2. Why invest in Pre-school?**

Ireland's change in investment in pre-school services can be seen as a response to the findings of *The Childcare Transition' - A league table of Early Childhood Education and Care in Economically Advanced Countries* (UNICEF, 2008). The report evaluated and compared ten Early Childhood Education and Care standards in 25 OECD countries. Ireland's performance was dismal, achieving only one standard. The report found that most European governments already guarantee a pre-school place to all four year olds and 80% of all staff were trained (UNICEF, 2008, p.2). The annual Irish competitiveness report of the same year revealed that the number of children of three years of age attending pre-primary education programmes was less than 5%. Both reports agreed in principle "that pre-primary education rather than childcare is found to have significant individual and social return" (Forfás 2008, p.106). It was

clear from an Irish perspective that action to improve the results was a matter of urgency.

International longitudinal research has established the value quality pre-school provision. The HighScope Perry Preschool Project in the Ypsilanti Public Schools in Michigan argues the financial sense in directing support to early year's services. This research showed that less money is required to finance family, social and remedial educational support in the teenage and later years (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997).

Heckman, advocates for increased investment in young children as set out in Figure 1.1 below.



**Table 1.1 example of return of investment in young children**

Heckman shows the rate of return to investment in educational and developmental resources to be much higher for children aged 0-5 than at a later stage. The development of a child's skills builds on skills developed previously. In children's earliest years, they develop essential skills or dispositions, such as self-control, interest and determination – skills that are both important in themselves and that help children make the most of their later education.

### **3. Operational and Pedagogical issues in Irish Pre-school Provision**

Up to the introduction of the scheme pre-school services were funded through a combination of both grant aid and parent's contributions. The introduction of new direct pre-school payments and new pedagogical approaches had to be applied across: community, private, state and commercial pre-schools. The scheme now operates locally and is managed by the City and County Childcare Committees (CCC's). Currently 96% of eligible children partake in the scheme (about 65,000 pre-school children).

In terms of pedagogical approaches the variety of pedagogies in use included Montessori, Steiner-Waldorf, Naíonra (Irish language groups) HighScope and Play based Groups. In order to agree one national pedagogical approach the variety of existing pre-school approaches (Montessori, Steiner, Play based and Naíonra) had to be honoured. This has been achieved by the development of national overarching quality and curriculum frameworks *Síolta* (CECED, 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009). They expertly use interconnected themes Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating and Exploring and Thinking, to facilitate the established pedagogies to operate within the broad frameworks. Training in *Síolta* and *Aistear* builds on the traditional pedagogical approaches and through exploring the interconnected themes instil post-modern relational pedagogy and rights based approaches into practice.

The rationale for the state's structured investment in pre-school education (ECCE scheme) is an attempt to address the results published in *The Childcare Transition' - A league table of Early Childhood Education and Care in Economically Advanced Countries* (UNICEF 2008). Since the implementation of the ECCE scheme Ireland is now on its way to reaching two more standards as set out in the UNICEF league table (universal pre-school access and trained pre-school staff). Beyond these measures further standards will be reached as trained and experienced graduates in Early Education continue to be incentivised to work in the sector.

In practice the introduction of the scheme came as a surprise to pre-school practitioners who had to change work practice. It was also a blow to parents who had to forego direct payment of €1,000 annual Early Childhood Supplement. The scheme was announced in the supplementary budget of April 2009 and put into practice in

January 2010. The interviews capture this as they were conducted through November 2009-May 2010 during the transition when the scheme was being rolled out. It was a timely occurrence and consequently the practitioners were interested in talking about the changes brought about by the scheme.

#### **4. Methodology**

This research set out to 'give voice' to those who work directly with young children. It used a phenomenological qualitative method of inquiry to find out what is it like to be a pre-school practitioner. Phenomenology sets out to discover and understand the lived experience (Creswell, 2005). It aims to find the meaning individuals make of their situations through an exploration of common experience shared. The study's main aim was to find the common experiences of individuals working directly with children in a pre-school setting.

The pre-school practitioner was purposely defined in this research as an individual who works directly with children between the ages of three to six years of age in a pre-school setting. Polkinghorne suggests that "no more than 25 and no less than five individuals who experience the same phenomenon make a suitable study cohort" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p.41). A cohort of 16 therefore was a practical number of interviews to work with, and offer variety. The pre-school services spanned the widest possible variety of types of services across private, commercial and community based. While it is not the intention of the research to focus on pre-school as a female gender dominated service the reality is that all practitioners in the study were female.

A semi-structured conversational style interview was developed to capture the pre-school practitioner's experience, views and beliefs. Flick (2005) advocates that the optimum sequence of questioning begins with an un-structured question, followed by a semi-structured question and finally a structured question. Consequently the questioning sequence started with the un-structured question 'how did you come to be working as a pre-school practitioner?' Followed by a semi-structured question that defines the issue but the response is left open such as 'How do you feel your work is understood and appreciated in the community?' A structured question where both issue and reaction are defined for example 'When the Free Pre-School Year in Early

Childhood Care and Education scheme was introduced in the most recent supplementary budget did you think it was a positive policy development?’ The response to this final (structured) question is reported in this phenomenological study.

The conversations took place in the pre-school at the end of the days work and when all the children had departed. The interviews produced a wealth of data from which to draw textural and structural descriptions; moving the findings towards a better understanding of the essence of the experience of being a practitioner.

### **5. Findings - The Voice of the Pre-school Practitioner in the Changing Pre-school Landscape**

The following key themes emerged: the move from market-led approach to government contract, curriculum, consultation issues, staff qualifications, positive finance, negative finance, uniformity, information for parents, and administration. The following key passages are representative of the practitioner’s response.

#### **Move from a market led market-led approach to Government Contract**

I think that the Early Child Supplement was taken from the parent to fund the scheme. I think it is better that the money comes to the preschool not to the parents because parents, who were getting that other money (ECS) may not have spent it on pre-school. Is good that the money comes directly to us.

It is the right way to go – remember when they (the Government) gave Early Childhood Supplement €250 grant every few months that was silly.

It was supposed to be bringing in all the children who mightn’t get a chance of education to pre-school; I’ve had no phone calls from anybody like that. I don’t know I suppose we’ll know in a year or so.

I have not had any people that I thought were needy, maybe they are going to community playgroups. I think that the government saved themselves a lot of money.

#### **Curriculum**

It’s good to bring it all (pre-school services) under one roof. Under education and the one educational programme being use or being held in common - yes it’s good.

### **Consultation issues**

There was absolutely no consultation with any group. None of the childcare committees were involved – it was decided up in Dáil Éireann by a couple of men.

Everything (implementation of scheme) was just up in the air there was nothing definite and the fact that we were not consulted was not great either.

We have been all the time running pre-schools we just don't know why did the department just ask the people?

I suppose I'm still trying to understand it (the ECCE scheme), like most people are trying to understand it, it's very confusing because they keep changing the ages.

I was really annoyed that nobody was consulted none of the organisations never mind ourselves so they didn't even know what was viable or workable or anything like that the whole think was brought in without any consultation so that was pretty ignorant.

### **Staff Qualifications**

It was badly done a lot of what they are looking for as in qualifications will knock a lot of us older ones out of it... I'm bemused by it.

I am very disappointed I am have loads of experience and we work very hard and we put an awful lot of finance back into the school and the girl that works with me – one of them has a degree and Montessori... I mean I've reared eight children fifteen grandchildren, loads of experience and I was very disappointed to be graded down rather than up. We are just one measure (on the NQF) short; we got the sixty five euro rather than the seventy five euro. I have looked around at other people that got the, fuller rate; they would not have the experience.

### **Positive Finance**

It's excellent for us to be guaranteed money and we are all getting paid a decent wage now. Up to this it was whatever was in the kitty you had to make do with that.

Whereas we are guaranteed our money and no more issues of parents not paying.

It puts a cap on what different schools are charging.

### **Negative Finance**

I am not happy because the capitation fee is way less than I was charging. I keep

thinking oh my God how am I going to cope?

I am delighted because from my personal point of view it will bring more children, who would not normally come here but having said that it's not enough money.

The standards are being upped now we must qualify and go up to a level and then they are telling you we'll get €64.50 and with a degree get €75 that is bad when the average I was charging was about €90 that's bad.

It's partly to do with government saving but it doesn't add up if they are paying €64.

### **Uniformity**

It's good that it makes sense it is what is happening in other countries, it is what you expect in Canada or any other modern country.

It's very good it's going to promote Pre-school. It's going to help parents who can't afford it, so it's absolutely brilliant; five days for three hours are long hours though.

### **Information for Parents**

It's very confusing for the parents, because parents who thought they were eligible are not, in one instance the child missed the scheme by a week due to his age.

Ah excellent I have nothing but positive things to say about it.

### **Administration**

Its good news because you are guaranteed your money the government pays it. It's the paper work attached to it I'm not that fond of, but I suppose everything has to have paperwork attached to it.

## **6. Conclusions**

The lived experience of the practitioners and the meaning made of their situations during the interviews reveal that the pre-school providers felt vulnerable to outside forces. Practitioners were forced to be flexible to change concerning their employment status. Practitioners were stoical concerning new contracts and the increased work involved in drawing down new funding. After the surprise at the budgetary decision, they expressed hurt at not consulted on policy developments. They were both annoyed and bemused and questioned the short period between the

announcement and the implementation of the scheme. They did show an understanding of the need to rethink the fractious system in which they had worked.

During the period of transition captured in this study, concerns regarding both the payment method and capitation rate appeared as prevalent issue for the practitioners. For those charging €90 per week prior to the scheme it brought a negative financial outcome. For those in less well off areas where parents ‘were slow to pay’, the practitioner now benefits with ‘guaranteed pay’ a welcome move from ‘having to make do with what was left in the kitty’.

At a national policy level the ECCE scheme introduced coherence to the Irish pre-school system. The most radical change of all has been the move made by practitioners from working in the mixed market economy to formalising the workforce and the implementation of the early year’s frameworks *Síolta* and *Aistear*. Now one ministry (MCYA) takes responsible for pre-school services; there is a single funding system for services (based on direct funding of services rather than parents); a single curriculum; and a single workforce, which are financially incentivised to become early year’s teachers engaging in tertiary training.

## **7. Future Work**

The radical change to pre-school services has yet to be evaluated. By providing universal pre-school and implementing a national pedagogical approach there is an expectation to increase education levels, raise social returns and benefit to Irish society beyond those benefits to private individuals.

In the future a complete analysis of the rate of return on investment will require a longitudinal study to determine if investment in the so-called ‘Dora the Explorer’ years has promoted national educational attainment in the later years and beyond.

## **8. References**

- Creswell, J.W. (2005) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, California: Sage.  
Flick, U. (2005) *Qualitative Research – An Introduction*, London: Sage.

Forfás (2008) *Benchmarking Ireland's Performance*, Dublin: National Competitiveness Council.

Hayes, N. (2005) *An Accessible Affordable Childcare Equality Anti-poverty Model*, Dublin: National Women's Council of Ireland.

Ireland: Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2009) *The Free Pre-School Year in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme* Department of Children and Youth Affairs the Stationery Office, Dublin

Ireland: Department of Health and Children (2000) *National Children's Strategy: Our Children, Their Lives*, Dublin Stationary Office.

Ireland: National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (2009) [online] National

Ireland: National Council for Curriculum Assessment (2009) *Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, Dublin:

Levin, H. (2008) *The Economic Payoff to Investing in Educational*, Justice Educational Researcher\_Vol. 38, No. 1, pp. 5–20

Mac Naughton, G. Rolfe, S. and Siraj-Blatchford, I. eds. (2001) *Doing Early Childhood Research International Perspectives on Theory and*, Berkshire: Open University Press.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2009) *Doing Better for Children*, Paris.

Polkinghorne, D.E. (1989) 'Phenomenological research methods' in Valle, R.S. and Halling, S. eds., *Existential-Phenomenological Perspectives in Psychology*, New York: Plenum Press pp.41-60.

Start Strong (2012) *The Economics of Children's Early Years* [http://www.startstrong.ie/files/Economics\\_of\\_Childrens\\_Early\\_Years.pdf](http://www.startstrong.ie/files/Economics_of_Childrens_Early_Years.pdf) sourced [7<sup>th</sup> December 2012]

Schweinhart L Weikart DP (1997) *Lasting Differences: The High/Scope Pre-school Curriculum Comparason Study Through age 23* (Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 10 Yisilanti, MI: High/Scope Press

UNICEF (2008) *Report Card 8 Innocenti Research Centre A League Table of Early Childhood Education and Care in Economically Advanced Countries*, Florence: UNICEF.

