

Chapter 3 The National Picture

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Chapter roadmap

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the education and care of young children in Great Britain and Northern Ireland is complex, as four countries together form the United Kingdom. As a result of the Union, separate regulations apply to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. This book aims to discuss the Early Years Foundation Stage as it is applied in England. After reviewing the historical developments in early childhood policy in England and the implementation of EYFS, however, it is important to consider the bigger picture as a way to investigate what happens not only in the constituent parts of the UK, but also within the entire British Isles (which also include the Republic of Ireland). Thus this chapter examines early childhood education and care in the British Isles and aims to help you:

- have an overview of the early childhood education and care in the British Isles;
- develop an understanding of the implementation of different curricula;
- develop an understanding of the role of policy in curricula implementation;
- make comparisons via your own reflections through the case studies from each country.

Early childhood education and care in Northern Ireland

Glenda Walsh

Historical perspective

Northern Ireland, the smallest of the four devolved nations within the United Kingdom with a population of approximately 1.5 million, is a country slowly emerging from a troubled past, when from the late 1960s to the mid-1990s it was fraught with political and sectarian violence. Peace was finally restored as a result of the paramilitary ceasefires in 1994 and subsequently the Belfast Agreement of 1998, which provided Northern Ireland with its own devolved government and enabled it to start on a journey towards a peaceful society and a better future for its children and young people (Walsh and McMillan, 2010). Presently such power-sharing negotiations appear stable.

Pre-school developments

3–4-year-olds

Pre-school education still remains a non-compulsory phase of education, but since the publication of the Learning to Learn Framework (2013), it is now deemed to be part of the Foundation Stage in an effort to ensure smoother transitions for young children. The government in Northern Ireland is still committed to making available at least one year of pre-school education to every family that wants it, reiterating the requirements of the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme – PSEEP (DENI and DHSSPS, 1998) – designed as a partnership between the statutory and voluntary/private sectors. The PSEEP incorporated a number of features such as the adherence to a common

curriculum in all settings in line with the Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education (CCEA, DENI, DHSSPS, 2006)¹ and a quality assurance mechanism whereby all funded settings are inspected by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), features which are still being practised today. It is important to note that voluntary and private providers who wish to offer funded pre-school places must also be registered with a Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT). As a result they are also subject to inspection by HSCT inspectors in addition to the ETI.

A recent statistical review conducted by Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI) in February 2015 suggests that there are presently almost 24,000 pupils (equating to 91% of all three year olds in the population) in funded pre-school education in NI, the highest figure on record and the number of schools with reception classes (considered to be a less suitable form of pre-school provision) has substantially decreased to 70 this year (i.e. 2015)². With regard to the quality of pre-school provision, the Chief Inspector's Report for 2012-2014 (ETI, 2014) indicated that the overall effectiveness of 83% of the pre-school settings inspected was evaluated as good or better (an improvement of seven percentage points in comparison with the settings inspected during the last reporting period). Despite this favorable result, however, fewer settings in general were evaluated as very good or outstanding, indicating that there is still some work to be done. To ensure improvement, the Department (DENI, 2013: 27) intends to "establish appropriate support mechanisms to achieve the highest standards

¹ The Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Provision embraces a child-centred and play-based pedagogy, premised on six discrete themes, namely the arts; language development; early mathematical experiences; personal social and emotional development; physical development; and exploration of both the indoor and outdoor worlds. While the guidance recognises that children learn and develop in different ways, it emphasises the need for a programme where children get the opportunity to progress their learning and reach their full potential.

² As part of the Learning to Learn Framework (DENI, 2013), the Department is legislating to remove the ability of primary schools to admit underage children to reception.

for pre-school provision through collaboration and dissemination of best practice”. For example the Department anticipates “creating a number of pilot Early Years Education Support Clusters to raise standards by making greater use of the teaching expertise in nursery schools and units, special schools, expertise across other relevant providers and early years specialists” (DENI, 2013:27).

Within the pre-school sector, there is still the on-going debate about who is best placed to ‘teach’ young children in pre-school. Much has been written about the link between a graduate workforce and quality (see McMillan, 2008 and Nutbrown, 2012) and according to McMillan and McConnell (in press) the language within recent policy in Northern Ireland (in particular the Learning to Learn framework, DENI, 2013) implicitly acknowledges the argument for graduate leadership in early years childhood and care, but fails to make any explicit move to actually achieving it in practice. ETI (2014) has emphasized the variation that presently exists particularly in the private/voluntary sector in the quantity and quality of support available to promote improvement, which might be overcome, it could be argued, if a graduate leader/teacher were in place. However the conundrum of whether a trained teacher is best has yet to be unraveled.

0–3-year-olds

The government in Northern Ireland has also committed an annual budget of approximately 3 million to a Sure Start developmental programme for 2-3 year-old children from socio-economically deprived backgrounds. This initiative began in March 2006 as part of the Children and Young People’s Package and was developed in February 2007 when *Early Years: The Organisation for Young Children* won DENI’s tender to develop a suitable programme for 2-year-olds and accompanying training for

Sure Start practitioners to deliver the programme, commencing in 2008. According to the DENI (2013) there are currently 142 programmes in place, offering a service for approximately 12 children per programme.

The Programme for 2 Year Olds aims to “enhance the child’s social and emotional development, build on their communication and language skills, and encourage their imagination through play” DENI (2013: 4). Although evidence from an ETI evaluation showed that satisfactory to good progress has been made in the early development of the Programme for 2 Year Olds, there is still much work to be done in terms of strategic planning, better training, higher levels of qualifications, appropriate accommodation and resources, effective support and access to specialist support when required and more developed collaborative working practices (ETI, 2010). In an effort to respond to such requirements, the Department initially intends to lead a review of the programme to assess the extent to which the investment is helping to secure improved wellbeing and development outcomes for children and families in the most disadvantaged areas (DENI, 2013). Then in light of the findings, the Department will develop potential options for the expansion of the programme and in turn will ensure that all settings delivering it are subjected to an area-based inspection process.

School developments

It is in the area of school developments that early childhood education and care in Northern Ireland has seen the most significant change over recent years, with the compulsory implementation of the Foundation Stage Curriculum for all 4–6-year-old children in Years 1 and 2 of primary school from September 2007 and September 2008, respectively (CCEA, 2007). Northern Ireland has the youngest statutory school starting

age of all the devolved nations³ and concerns about the inappropriateness of a formal curriculum for young children led to a pilot study being conducted that espoused a child-centred and play-based approach known as the Early Years Enriched Curriculum. The findings from the Early Years Enriched Curriculum project were principally positive where the learning experience on offer in the play-based classrooms was much superior in terms of children's learning dispositions, social development and emotional well-being (Walsh et al., 2010). To ensure effective challenge and progression for young children, however, a more balanced and integrated pedagogy known as playful structure has been recommended where adults initiate and maintain a degree of 'playfulness' in the child's learning experience, while at the same time maintaining adequate structure to ensure that effective learning takes place (Walsh et al., 2010; Walsh et al., 2011).

These findings were pivotal in the subsequent and recent introduction of the Foundation Stage (FS) curriculum (CCEA, 2007), where children in their first two years of schooling should 'experience much of their learning through well-planned and challenging play' (CCEA, 2007: 9) and their learning should be supported by early childhood practitioners who are 'committed, sensitive, enthusiastic and interact effectively to challenge children's thinking and learning' (CCEA, 2007: 16).

The shift towards play as pedagogy in practice has been problematical, it seems, where according to Hunter and Walsh (2014), despite the political endorsement of play as pedagogy in the new NI FS curriculum, the complexities involved in implementing high-quality challenging play in practice do not appear to have been fully resolved. Comments from the Chief Inspectors Report (2014:43) reiterate such findings,

³ Children in NI who have attained the age of 4 on or before 1st July will start primary school at the beginning of the September that year

highlighting that teachers in Years 1 and 2 “need to build upon children’s pre-school learning, set higher expectations for all children to write independently and to develop their thinking skills through numeracy, literacy and play-based activities”.

Indeed Hunter and Walsh (2014:15) call for an upskilling on the part of practitioners in Northern Ireland to ensure that “they have a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the meaning of play as pedagogy in EY classes, necessitating a high level of expertise on the part of the professionals”. To this end, the Department (DENI, 2013) also acknowledges this need and has committed to creating a programme of continuous professional development for early childhood practitioners, teachers, principals and staff with a focus on the pedagogy of play.

Next Steps

The way forward for early childhood education in the context of Northern Ireland certainly augurs well in light of the Department’s recent publication of the Learning to Learn Framework (DENI, 2013), which clearly articulates the political vision for early years education and learning (0-6 years) in Northern Ireland over the next number of years. The overarching aims of such a Framework are reflective of the overall DENI vision that “every young person achieves to his or her full potential at each stage of his or her development” (DENI, 2013:16), focusing in particular on:

- Raising standards for all; and
- Closing the performance gap, increasing access and equality.

However against this backdrop of progress and development, is a seriously constrained economic climate⁴ which will present, it appears, a detrimental impact on the strategic planning and delivery of education across the entire community, including early childhood education and care. Although, it is claimed by the Department that the Minister aims to protect frontline services as far as possible, “maintaining all core services at current levels will simply not be deliverable” (DENI, 2014: 4). In this way the policy rhetoric for may never be fully realised in our NI early childhood settings and classrooms.

CASE STUDY STARTS HERE:

Case study: The story of Ethan

Ethan was born on 29th July 2009. Both his parents work full-time – his mother is a secondary school teacher and his father is a joiner. Ethan spent the first year of his life at home with his mum and then he was cared for full-time by a registered child-minder until he turned three and was able to attend the local playgroup on a part-time facility from September to June from 9-11:15am, three days per week. In the September after his fourth birthday, he began the local full-time nursery school, where he was taught by a trained Early Years Teacher. His parents were nervous that he might not get a place in the chosen nursery school as the admissions criteria had just changed that year, no longer favouring July/August born babies. They were so delighted that he received a place and he attended on a full-time basis (9am-1:15pm), being able to have his lunch

⁴ The Department for Education faces a 4.9% resource reduction and 19.7% capital reduction in the budget for 2015-2016 on top of a 2011-2015 budget which incurred a Resource reduction of 13.6% (see DENI, 2014)

on the premises – something that is becoming more rare in nursery education in Northern Ireland. Ethan really enjoyed his pre-school experience and learned greatly from it in terms of learning to socialise with children of his own age, having been used to playing with two older brothers. His parents also were very pleased with Ethan's progress, particularly as he was one of the oldest children in his class, but they felt on occasions that their own needs as parents could be better catered for. Any training opportunities or indeed appointments to learn of Ethan's progress, tended to take place during the day, which made it extremely difficult for both of his parents to attend as they were working. Ethan started primary school on 1st September 2014, the oldest child in his class, having turned five earlier that year on 29th July. He settled extremely well, probably due to the more play-based curriculum that was being practised. However his parents were a little concerned with the lack of challenge that he was experiencing. They were certainly not against the new ideas of the Foundation Stage curriculum, but as Ethan was one of the older children, they felt that, at times, the teacher was not building on the profitable experience he had received during pre-school and extending his learning in playful ways. As the year now draws to a close, they certainly have seen progress on Ethan's part, particularly in terms of how learning disposed he is. They feel that more training should be offered to parents, however, to enable them to be more fully equipped to support their children in the home, using more playful and age-appropriate methods.

CASE STUDY ENDS HERE

Reflective Task:

Reflect on the areas of learning and development of the EYFS in England and compare it with the curricula approach to Northern Ireland. If Ethan was in England how would have been treated within the EYFS?

Early childhood education and care in Scotland

Sarah MacQuarrie

Historical perspective

Since devolution in 1999 education in Scotland is a devolved matter governed solely by the Scottish parliament, meaning that the UK parliament has no direct jurisdiction. The introduction of the “Standards in Scotland’s Schools Act” set out the guidelines for the free and compulsory schooling of all children between 5 and 16 years of age (Scottish Executive, 2000). Younger children were at that time covered in an earlier separate publication *Education of children under Five in Scotland* (SOED, 1994).

The philosophy of comprehensive education embedded in Scottish policy has long been recognised as a distinctive feature of provision in Scotland (Humes and Bryce, 2003). Scottish schools are holistic in their approach to pupils’ learning and development, exemplified by the revision and updating of inclusion policies (HM Inspectorate of Education, 2002, 2005a) and mirrored in the role and approach undertaken by the HMI (HM Inspectorate of Education, 2009). Decision making in Scotland is less centralised as schools and stakeholders play a major role in their own organisation and management. The comprehensive philosophy is most evident in the creation of a single body “Education Scotland” that brought together Learning and Teaching Scotland (which provided advice, practical materials and resources to

enhance the quality of learning and teaching) and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education.

A further distinctive feature relates to the provision of Gaelic Medium Education (GME), which spans pre-school, primary and secondary education where the Scottish curriculum is delivered through the medium of Gaelic. An encouraging picture is evident as the 2014 annual census showed there were over 2500 children enrolled in GME in 60 primary schools across Scotland (Summary Statistics for Schools in Scotland, 2014). Considering that GME was only formally introduced in 1986 these figures can be taken as an indicator of the demand (HM Inspectorate of Education, 2005b, 2011). A commitment to the provision of Gaelic within Scotland is noted by the publication of the first Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act in 2005, followed in 2007 by the National Plan for Gaelic⁵ and the subsequent Gaelic plans of a wide range of local and national organisations.

A key strength of Scottish education is collaboration between practitioners evident in the development of inclusion orientated strategies. The New Community Schools Initiative (later Integrated community schools) began in 1998 (SEED) as a component of the Scottish social inclusion strategy (HM Inspectors of Schools, 1999). Schools were obliged to introduce the child-centred strategy by 2007. It recommended that schools adopt an integrated approach, increase inter-agency working and take advantage of resources available in their communities and is visible as a central tenet within the Scottish Curriculum.

⁵ In accordance with the 2005 Act National Plans are to be released every 5 years.

Curriculum and Policy

Curriculum guidelines in Scotland support teaching with examples of good practice with teachers in Scotland having considerable autonomy (Leat, Livingston, and Priestley, 2013). In 1991 the Scottish Office Education Department (later SEED) developed a series of curriculum and assessment national guidelines covering the 5-14 curriculum, from the first year of primary school to the second year of secondary school. In Scotland these requirements and relevant support materials constituted a broadly agreed agenda for over a decade.

A curriculum review group was established in 2003, based on the findings of a national consultation on education, where the consensus was that a more engaging curriculum was needed (Education Scotland, n.d.-b). An extended period of development ensued (2005-2009) involving a wide variety of practitioners and research processes. Revised curriculum guidelines were published in 2009 ready for implementation. Scotland now has a single curriculum for ages 3 to 18 known as “A Curriculum for Excellence”. Further developments (largely pertaining to qualifications) are ongoing. The purpose of the curriculum is represented within “Four capacities” and through the curriculum each child should be a successful learner, a confident individual, an effective contributor and a responsible citizen. Attributes and capabilities that underpin each of the four capacities are clearly signalled and provide a straightforward resource for educators, allowing them to make provisions for learners’ progression. “Experiences and outcomes” are used within the Curriculum for Excellence to describe the nature of learning (experiences) and how they ought to be recognised (outcomes). “Experiences and outcomes” are referred to in four of the five levels of learning⁶, of particular

⁶ The fifth level refers to qualifications (Scottish Executive, 2010).

relevance is the “early” level that encompasses both pre-school and Primary 1. Educational settings are provided with guidance on how to ensure that all children in pre-school and primary school settings experience stimulating, effective learning in ways that are appropriate to their needs (example documents are Scottish Executive, 2007; Scottish Government, 2008a). Scottish schools and local authorities are encouraged to design a customised curriculum using input from stakeholders, teachers and parents as well as drawing on National Guidelines and support materials. Their aim is to meet the schools’ and local communities’ expectations and to ensure each child acquires the four capacities of Curriculum for Excellence.

Children younger than 3 are covered separately within the publication *Pre-birth to Three: Positive outcomes for Scotland’s children and families* (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010). This national guidance is in line with the principles and philosophy which underpin the Curriculum for Excellence and is supported by the Early years framework (Scottish Government, 2008b). The framework presents a ten year strategy that aims to enable those caring for children younger than 3 to develop a child’s social and interactive skills, so that a child is supported and able to achieve its full potential. The framework spans the interests of children from pre-birth to the age of 8 and proposes 10 elements of transformational change, each supported by examples of good practice. These examples (taken from actual practice within Scotland) reflect key elements of the framework including a focus on children’s play, experiential and holistic approaches to learning and supporting children’s progression and transition. The early childhood collaborative signals an interesting approach. This inter-agency collaboration was launched in October 2012 aiming to support implementation of policy and encourage practice to develop across Scotland. This approach to developing

and leading change Scotland-wide is a hallmark of the early childhood framework and it is encouraging to see that the commitment to such collaboration has been extended beyond its initial two years of activity.

A strength of the framework is its commitment to the promoting and upholding of children's rights as defined by the UN Conventional on the Rights of the Child - UNCRC (UN General Assembly, 1989). A series of vision statements refer regularly to UNCRC articles in order to illustrate the aims of the framework. Of particular relevance is the emphasis given to valuing the child's voice "Children and families are valued and respected at all levels in our society and have the right to have their voices sought, heard and acted upon by all those who support them and who provide services to help them" (Article 12 of UNCRC); the provision of a range of learning opportunities indoors and out "Children are entitled to take part in physical activities and to play, including outdoors, and have an opportunity to experience and judge and manage risk (Article 31)." (Scottish Government, 2008: 11). These values were condensed and included within the recent Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 which includes noteworthy items such as increasing funded pre-school provision for children (including specific measures for vulnerable children) and establishing free school meals for children in primary 1 -3 (ages 5-7 respectively) across Scotland. Such developments mean it continues to be an exciting time for early childhood in Scotland.

CASE STUDY STARTS HERE

Case study:

Case study

Moving from England to Scotland: the voice of a mother

When my husband changed jobs and we decided to move from the Midlands to Scotland I had concerns about our children's education. I have a daughter who was 4 years old at the time and she would have attended the Reception class in England, but when we moved to Scotland she spent another year in nursery and she only moved to what they call in Scotland P1 (equivalent to English Key Stage 1).

When we first moved to Scotland she used to spend two and half hours daily in the nursery. Now she attends P1 and I have found that it has been extremely helpful. What they do in her school is to mix children from different classes and they do a lot of shared activities and lessons. I found that very helpful as it has helped her social skills. I was concerned when we moved that my daughter would have been held back in not starting school as it would have happened if we had stayed in England, but I am so pleased about this now. She had an extra year of playing with no 'structured' learning [*laughter*] although her teacher said to me that they do have structured learning although it does not seem that they learn letters, reading and writing as in the Reception class in England. When she moved to P1 she did not have any problems to do the Jolly Phonics, read and write and I feel lucky that she had the extra year of play in nursery.

My son was 2 years old when we moved. He was assessed in Scotland with Complex and Severe Disabilities and required additional support needs. I am not sure what support I would have had in England, but I am grateful to the Scottish system. He attends a nursery for only children with Complex and Severe Disabilities where he is in a class with only four children, one teacher and two learning support assistants and has one-to-one support. In this school there are also occupational health professionals, psychotherapists and any other services that we might need. As a parent of a child with severe disabilities I was worried, but his nursery had offered us a lot of support,

communicates with us regularly and I feel it has helped my son and us as parents. I feel as a parent that I am listened to and valued. Now my son's speech has improved, he has better interactions with others and I am very pleased with his progress. I am not sure I would also have this support in England, but I am pleased he goes to this nursery as I do not think he could have coped in a mainstream school. I have a friend in England that also has a child with disability and when we talk about what is offered to us it seems it is a struggle for her when I feel I am very lucky to have these services for my children.

CASE STUDY ENDS HERE

Reflective Task

Reflect on the case study and consider what difficulties this family might have faced during the move? Can you suggest some strategies to help them?

Early childhood education and care in Wales

Jane Waters and Natalie Macdonald

Historical perspective and context

Wales has a population of just over three million people (Welsh Government, WG, 2014a) and, of these, 18 per cent are children aged 0–15 years. In the 2011 census 19% of the Welsh population reported being able to speak Welsh (WG, 2012a), a drop of 2% from the 2001 census. The development of Wales as a bilingual nation is a central WG policy focus (e.g. WG, 2011) and the study of Welsh is compulsory in all maintained educational settings until learners are 16 years of age.

The Welsh Government (WG)⁷ came into being after the first Welsh general election on 6 May 1999, following a referendum on 19 September 1997 in which there was a narrow majority in favour of the devolution of Wales from UK central government. This signified the devolution of responsibility for education within Wales from the UK government in Westminster to the Welsh Government in Cardiff. Now administered by the Department for Education and Skills (DES),⁸ education policy for the first decade of devolution was informed by the vision document *The Learning Country* (NAfW, 2001) which set out the intention to ‘build stronger foundations for learning in primary schools with a radical improvement for early years provision’ (p. 12). The subsequent consultation document, *The Learning Country: Foundation Phase 3–7 Years* (NAfW, 2003), set out the proposals for a Foundation Phase curriculum framework for children aged 3–7 years to ‘create a rich curriculum under seven Areas of Learning for children in the Foundation Phase’ (WAG, 2008: 3). This radical overhaul of early childhood education and care in Wales signalled a shift away from UK central government education policy. It was also predicated upon a concern, supported by research

⁷ Previously the National Assembly for Wales (NAfW) then the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG).

⁸ Previously ACCAC (Awdurdod Cymwysterau Cwricwlwm ac Asesu Cymru: the Welsh Assembly Government department for curriculum and qualifications) and Department for Children, Education and Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS).

literature, about the ‘detrimental’ (NAfW, 2001a: 8) effect of an overly formal approach to early years education and care for children below the age of 6 years of age.

The Foundation Phase Framework for Children’s Learning for 3–7 Year Olds in Wales

Following an evaluation of the two year pilot period (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2005), the Foundation Phase Framework (WAG, 2008a) was introduced for school children aged 3–7 years (Nursery, Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 classes) and those children aged 3 and over in maintained and non-maintained settings, in an annual roll-out over the period from 2008 to 2011. The statutory curriculum document advocates the adoption of a play-based approach to early childhood education within the context of a balance of adult-directed and child-directed activity. Educational settings are required to provide children with access to ‘indoor and outdoor environments that are fun, exciting, stimulating and safe’ and to ‘promote children’s development and natural curiosity to explore and learn through first-hand experiences’ (WAG, 2008: 4). In addition, children are to interact with adults with whom they should share episodes of sustained and shared thinking and adults are to ‘build on what they [children] already know and can do, their interests and what they understand’ (WAG 2008a: 6). The Foundation Phase Framework requires, therefore, that practitioners, in part at least, engage flexibly and contingently with child-initiated activity in order to support learning indoors and outdoors. This requirement is situated within the broader context of the Welsh Government’s overall vision for children and young people which is based around seven core aims developed from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (see WAG, 2006, 2008: 3). The Foundation Phase sits within this overarching

and emancipatory vision for children with an emphasis on the personal development and well-being of the child:

Children learn through first-hand experiential activities with the serious business of ‘play’ providing the vehicle. Through their play, children practice and consolidate their learning, play with ideas, experiment, take risks, solve problems, and make decisions individually, in small and in large groups. First-hand experiences allow children to develop an understanding of themselves and the world in which they live. The development of children’s self-image and feelings of self-worth and self-esteem are at the core of this phase. (WAG, 2008a: 6)

Seven areas of learning are identified, the first of which is situated ‘at the heart of the Foundation Phase’ (WAG, 2008a: 16):

- Personal and social development, well-being and cultural diversity;
- Language, literacy and communication skills;
- Mathematical development;
- Welsh-language development;
- Knowledge and understanding of the world;
- Physical development;
- Creative development.

There is a specific directive for ‘a greater emphasis on using the outdoor environment as a resource for children’s learning’ (WAG, 2008a: 4). During the pilot stages research indicated that some schools may have missed the opportunities for children’s learning that the policy initiative offered (Maynard and Waters, 2007), though recent evaluation indicates positive development in the use of the outdoors (WG 2014b). The implicit emphasis in the Foundation Phase documentation on ‘proactive and intentional pedagogy’ (Wood, 2007b: 127) has been recognised as providing the potential for

Welsh practitioners to ‘develop the integrated approaches that are advocated in contemporary play research’ (Wood, 2007a: 313). However, two sets of disappointing PISA scores for Wales (OECD, 2010; WG, 2010; Wheeler *et al.*, 2013) have heralded an intense focus on pupils’ development in literacy and numeracy throughout the Welsh education system. A national literacy numeracy framework was made statutory in September 2012, and is now incorporated into revised curriculum orders for September 2015. The associated imposition of national tests in literacy and numeracy for 7-year-olds may pose a threat to the play-based, child-initiated aspects of the Foundation Phase initiative despite continued Ministerial support for the initiative (WG, 2013)

Looking to the future

Since the introduction of the Foundation Phase the Welsh Government has re-emphasised its education priorities, breaking the link between poverty and attainment is now central to policy development (WG 2012b; 2013). There have been two evaluations of the Foundation Phase curriculum initiative. The first to report was a review of progress or ‘stocktake’, undertaken by Siraj and Kingston (2014) at the request of Welsh Government. The stocktake highlighted that where the Foundation Phase was working well the outcomes for children appeared to be good (Siraj and Kingston, 2014: 18-19). However, the report emphasised that there was significant variation in the experiences of children in Foundation Phase within and across the maintained and non-maintained sectors.

The Welsh Government also instigated a 3-year evaluation of the Foundation Phase which reports in more detail, though with similar headline findings (WG 2015). This evaluation highlights the warm support that the Foundation Phase receives from stakeholders and that children experiencing Foundation Phase pedagogy are engaged

and achieving well. The variation in provision across Wales remains a significant issue, however. Maynard *et al.* (2012) undertook a review of the curriculum documentation as a part of the 3-year evaluation and highlighted possible tensions within the Foundation Phase framework, for example, tension between the play-based pedagogy, underpinned by a developmental approach, and detailed statutory curriculum expectations especially for Years 1 and 2. Such tensions have been recognised within Wales and a review of the curriculum and assessment in Wales has been undertaken and has recently reported. The Donaldson review, ‘Successful futures’, suggests a radical overhaul of the Welsh curriculum for 3-16 year olds (Donaldson, 2015). The implications of the review for the Foundation Phase remain unclear at the time of writing though it would be fair to say that the proposals would support the ongoing development of the Foundation Phase in line with recommendations from the recent evaluations.

Importantly, the evaluation reported that ‘The Foundation Phase is associated with improved attainment for pupils eligible for free school meals, but the evaluation has found no evidence to suggest it has made any observable impact so far on reducing inequalities in attainment at the end of Key Stage 2’ (WG 2015 p.3). Welsh Government is seeking to respond to research that suggest that improvements to the Home Learning Environment and positive transition experiences to the early years in school are critical to making an impact on the attainment of children who live in poverty (*e.g.* see the EPPSE study findings <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/research/4586.html>). The Welsh Government recently published its 10 year plan for the future of Early Years and Childcare (2013), acknowledging that provision for the sector, particularly for children aged 0-3 years, is variable and currently lacks coherence. The plan includes six key themes:

- children’s health and well-being;
- supporting families and parents;
- high-quality early education and childcare;
- effective primary education;
- raising standards.

The aim of the plan is for ‘all of our children to have a flying start in life; be well-educated; enjoy the best possible health; live in a decent home; have access to an enriched environment including play, leisure, sporting and cultural activities; be listened to, treated with respect and feel safe’ (WG, 2013 p.2).

CASE STUDY STARTS HERE

Case study: Going to ‘Big School’ in Wales

The Welsh Government Flying Start initiative was set up in 2007 aimed at reducing the impact of poverty on educational achievement targeting families with children below four years of age, giving children a flying start in life and providing early intervention; and includes enhanced Health Visiting program, parenting support programmes, early language development and free high quality childcare.

Dafydd is now three years and two months old, Dafydd lives at home with mum in a low super output⁹ area of Wales, mum is a single parent and they live in a Flying Start catchment area. Mum and Dafydd have been in receipt of an enhanced health visiting service through Flying Start since birth and Dafydd attended Flying Start childcare setting based in a purpose built centre within the catchment primary school attending for 2.5 hours per day, five days a week.

⁹ **Super Output Areas** are a geography for the collection and publication of small **area** statistics. They are used on the Neighbourhood Statistics site and across National Statistics.

Transition and parental engagement into school in Wales begins when their child reaches age two when they become eligible for Flying Start Childcare. Dafydd's mum was contacted by the childcare setting and a home visit was arranged. During the home visit mum and Dafydd had the opportunity to meet the childcare manager, child's key worker at the setting, complete all necessary paperwork and to allow mum to ask any questions she may have.

During Dafydd's time in Flying Start, Dafydd was immersed in the Foundation Phase environment; within the classroom the areas of learning, planning, enhanced provision and development trackers all follow the Foundation Phase ethos. Mum attended regular parent meetings, parent events, language and play groups and open days throughout Dafydd's time in Flying Start building good relationships with Flying Start staff.

Dafydd's Flying Start class was involved in all the elements of school life including joint events such as sports day, concerts and school trips. His mum was able to meet the staff, mums and children in the nursery class long before the formal transition process began and felt that she and Dafydd were very much part of the school before moving on to the Foundation Phase at age three.

In the term before turning three and moving up to nursery he began weekly visits to 'big school' where Dafydd enjoyed playing in the new environment, building new relationships and friendships with the nursery teacher and children, and getting to know the routine!

Dafydd began to love the trips to 'big school' and would proudly tell mum 'I've been to big school' at the end of the sessions. Mum felt these visits lessened her anxiety about the move up to nursery as she could see his excitement grow.

Mum also attended the school readiness program run by Flying Start in conjunction with the nursery teacher. These sessions allowed mum to meet the new staff, the environment, new routines and times and discuss any concerns. Mum was able to visit the nursery with Dafydd and see for herself how relaxed and confident Dafydd was in the new environment.

Mum didn't have to worry about Foundation Phase staff having to learn all about Dafydd, all of his progress, development tracker and information had already been shared with the teacher by the Flying Start Childcare manager before moving up. The new teacher knew Dafydd's strengths; things he enjoyed and even how to comfort D when he was upset!

On his first day in nursery Dafydd's Flying Start key worker was there as a friendly face and he walked confidently in and over to his favourite area, Mum walked off confident that Dafydd would enjoy the first day in 'big school'.

CASE STUDY ENDS HERE

Reflective Task

After studying Chapter 11, reflect on the case study and compare this with the EYFS. Do you identify any similarities or differences? After studying Chapter 13 discuss how the team can work with the parents in order to support the child and the mother?

Early childhood and care in the Republic of Ireland

Elizabeth Dunphy

Historical perspective

Ireland, one of the smallest countries in Europe, has a population of about four and a half million, with a large and growing population of young children under six years of age. There are now approximately half a million children in this age cohort.

Current provision of early childhood education and care

Birth to Three

There is at present no state provision for children under three years of age and, except for some voluntary and community provision, it is largely provided by commercial interests and paid for by parents. Data about mothers' return to work and childcare choices for infants from the *Growing up in Ireland Survey* (McGinnity, Murray and McNally, 2013) reveal that at nine months, just under 40% of infants were in regular non-parental childcare. Of children in non-parental childcare, 42% were cared for by relatives (mostly grandparents); 31% by non-relatives (mostly child-minders) and 27% were in centre-based care. As in many other countries (e.g., Dalli et al., 2011), the quality of care for infants in group-based early childhood services is an issue of public concern. Indeed the last few years has seen some worrying media features exposing undesirable and potentially harmful practices in some settings providing early childhood education and care.

Three- to four-year old children

Since 2010, the Government provides what is referred to as a *free pre-school year* for all children in the year prior to enrolment in primary school (3 hours a day, 36 weeks of the year). The objective of the programme, provided by a range of service providers (community, voluntary and commercial), is to benefit children in the key developmental period prior to starting school. The OECD Ireland Survey Report (2011) recommended that budget funds be reallocated to lengthen the duration of the day in pre-school. An increase in the provision of pre-primary education to children under the age of three was also recommended, with a lowering of the entry age to primary also envisaged. The Government has indicated, however, that any increase in universal pre-school provision is contingent on achieving significantly higher quality standards in

care, in pedagogy and in curriculum. The preparation and training of the workforce is generally seen as a key factor in achieving higher quality (e.g., Start Strong, 2014). Within the primary school system the Department of Education and Skills (DES) provides targeted provision (*Early Start*) for some (1,600) 3-year-old children identified as at risk because of economic and social disadvantage.

School-aged children

Statutory school starting age in Ireland is 6 years, though in practice traditionally about half of all 4-year-old children and almost all 5-year-old children have attended infant classes (Junior and Senior) in primary school. There is poor structural support for early childhood education in primary schools. Changes in the pupil-teacher ratio in primary schools have resulted in increased numbers of children in infant classes, some with excess of 30 children. Cuts to additional support for young children with special educational needs have also impacted on provision. There is some relief for schools in areas of economic and social disadvantage where the *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DEIS) programme extends additional support to teachers and schools.

Affordability

The issue of affordability has arisen as a key issue for both parents and providers in recent years. Indeed the European Commission, in its 2014 recommendations for Ireland, strongly advised that the Irish Government tackle this issue. In January 2015 the government agreed to set up an inter-departmental committee (comprising of representatives of seven different departments) to develop proposals for developing more affordable ‘childcare’.

National Frameworks

Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education

Síolta is the Irish word for 'seed'. *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006) presents 12 principles related to quality. See <http://www.siolta.ie>.

Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Aistear is the Irish word for 'journey'. *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009) is a curriculum framework for children from birth to 6 years of age. It supports educators, including parents, in planning learning experiences for young children. It describes the learning that takes place in early childhood education and care in terms of the development of dispositions, knowledge, skills, values and attitudes. Importantly, it provides guidelines in four key areas: play, assessment, interactions and partnerships with parents. The framework presents learning and development using four themes: well-being; identity and belonging; communicating; and exploring and thinking (see: www.ncca.ie). There is no requirement for any specific content, programme or philosophy with the framework, rather the intention is that practitioners will judge how best to work with the themes to enable the children they work with to reach the goals of the curriculum.

Improving Quality of Services

Issues related to quality are the responsibility of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (www.dcy.gov.ie)

In recent years the improvement of quality has been the major concern for all involved with the provision early childhood education and care in Ireland. Research has shown the quality to be variable with many services below-standard on a number of measures (http://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Report_on_the_Quality_of_Pre-school_services.pdf). The following areas have been targeted by government as a means of promoting and enhancing the quality education and care for children aged birth to 6 years.

Inspection of preschools

There is now a dedicated team of inspectors who will work to improve and enhance educational standards the free pre-school year. Their work, overseen by the DES, complements inspections undertaken by *Tusla*, The Child and Family Agency. This agency is responsible for inspecting pre-schools, play groups, nurseries, crèches, day-care and similar services which cater for children aged 0-6, under the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006. This two pronged approach to inspection has met considerable resistance within the sector, where the demand seems to be for an integrated inspection system.

Development of the workforce

The Early Years Education Policy Unit, which is co-located with the DCYA and DES, was responsible for the development of what was termed ‘a childcare training strategy’ (www.dcy.gov.ie). This was deemed important in order to meet the target of providing 17,000 childcare training places by 2010. A workforce development plan for the early childhood education and care sector in Ireland identified a range of flexible education and training opportunities for the development of the current workforce (Department of Education and Science, 2010).

Support of Educators

At present there is a programme of support for teachers using *Aistear*, working with 4–6-year-old children in primary schools. This is delivered by specially trained *Aistear* tutors through the network of Teachers' Centres. Educators can access resources to support their pedagogy, including examples of *Aistear* in practice, on the NCCA website (www.ncca.ie). A major thrust of the support programme has been towards promoting an increase in play and playful learning in infant classes.

In 2014 *Better Start: A National Early Years Quality Support Service* was established. The aim of the service is to enhance the quality of practice in settings. The support service works in partnership with practitioners in implementing the guidance contained in the *Síolta* and *Aistear* Frameworks.

Review of qualifications

Qualification levels of those working in settings remain low by international standards. Only about 15 per cent of practitioners working in services have degree-level qualifications or equivalent and most have much lower levels of qualifications. Research demonstrates the marked impact that quality environments and attuned adults have on the development and learning of children in the first years of life (National Research Council, 2000). The first major review of education and training programmes that lead to qualifications in the early childhood education and care sector is now underway.

An Integrated, High Quality System of Early Childhood Education and Care

Late in 2012 an Expert Advisory Group was established to advise on the preparation of Ireland's first *Early Years Strategy*. The advisory group addressed the needs and opportunities for children from birth to six years. Their report, published in September 2013, set out a vision for an integrated, high-quality system of early childhood education and care addressing all aspects of children's experiences including health, family support, care and education. (see: <http://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/policy/RightFromTheStart.pdf>). In December 2014 a new *Early Years Advisory Group* was formed. This group is a formal structure to provide advice to the Minister on education issues in the early childhood sector (0-6). The Group will help to develop policy in the sector in the coming years and is inclusive of the range of experience and expertise across the sector.

Summary

The early childhood education and care sector in Ireland is an increasingly complex and challenging environment which is constantly evolving. The sector is marked by great diversity in relation to quality of provision, underpinning philosophies and levels of qualifications. Recent concerns have focused on the issue of quality. The lack of accountability regarding the quality of the provision for children under 3 years 3 months is of serious concern. The prohibitive cost of provision for this this age cohort is an enormous burden and concern for parents who need to make use of it. The old divide between education and care appears still to persist in the minds of policymakers at least. The development of separate inspection systems related to education of children and to childcare is testimony to the fact that these are seen as separate undertakings and, as such, can be examined separately even within the same provision.

CASE STUDY STARTS HERE

Case Study: Sam's early childhood education and care in Ireland (2010-2015)

Sam is 4 years 6 months. He is an only child and his Mam works full time and his Dad is now a part-time/shift worker and he looks after Sam the rest of the time. Sam was in a crèche (8am to 6 pm) for about 18 months when he was a baby, but his Mam described this time as *not a happy experience* for either Sam or his parents. They were not confident that it was the best arrangement for Sam who seemed to his parents to be a happier, more outgoing baby at the weekends. Also, the cost of the care was very high and when they did the sums it seemed that the best arrangement for all was for Sam's Dad to avail of the opportunity to do shift work on a part-time basis. Sam was cared for at home by his Dad full-time for about a year and then when he was four he started to attend a local pre-school which offers the *Free-Preschool Year*. Sam's Mam brings him to pre-school for 9 and his Dad collects him at 1pm five days a week. Since the scheme covers only three hours a day, Sam's parents pay the additional 125 Euro necessary each month. The pre-school closes during official school breaks (e.g. Christmas, Easter, Mid-term Breaks) so for each of those weeks there is an additional cost of 64 Euro. Sam will start primary school in September so his parents will pay for the additional weeks that exceed the 36 allowed under the scheme because they believe that it is best for Sam, as an only child, to be with other children on a daily basis.

Sam loves his time at the pre-school and gets on very well there. His parents really value what it offers him in terms of social skills, routine, and opportunities to play with other children. On the other hand, Sam's Mam commented on her disappointment at the lack of opportunities offered for interactions with the environment (trips to the playground, walks and so on). She wondered if this was to do with issues like adult-child ratios or perhaps regulations or even curriculum. She compares the provision unfavourably with her expectations of what pre-school would entail and what she

knows of the experiences of her nieces and nephews attending pre-school in another country. She would love Sam to have more experiences outside, more visits, more exciting opportunities to learn. She also commented on the fact that they have only ever been invited into the preschool on one occasion, at Christmas.

CASE STUDY ENDS HERE

Reflection task

- Reflect on the areas of learning and development of the EYFS in England and compare it with the curricula approaches in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland. Is there a dichotomy between officially, centralised, pre-described concepts of what quality is, on the one hand, and of what quality is at a local level, on the other, based on discussions between practitioners, parents or guardians and the child?

Chapter Summary

Examining the early childhood education and care provision in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland helps to put into perspective the developments in the sector. As can be seen in all four countries, there are attempts to develop a coherent policy and curriculum framework in an effort to improve quality. Quality as portrayed in the government policies, however, is 'fixed' and 'limited' to standardised outcomes and outputs. A common theme is that policies attempt to improve quality by placing emphasis on assessed standards. These standards appear to be the 'official approach' to quality, characterised by an objective reality that can be defined measured, evaluated, assured and inspected (Moss and Pence, 1994; Dahlberg et al., 2007). A key common element in curricula approaches is that these standards of

quality are related to children's development. There is now a shift of concern on what is learned in terms of children's interests, as these will be translated into the child's assessment and children's performativity, outcomes or outputs in order that we can ensure that quality in early childhood education and care is achieved. On a positive note, all the countries examined here reflect the idea that there is now discourse taking place as to what constitutes good, effective practice.

Key points to remember

- Attitudes towards improving early childhood education and care can be identified in all countries of the British Isles. A common element is that these changes have resulted from political changes and, in the current era of economic instability, we can see a cut in funding across the sector.
- Key themes to all the curricular approaches are an emphasis on play and play-based activities, bridging the gap between parents and settings, with observations as a tool to inform planning, inform assessment and to open communication with families and other services. Integration is the concept that all curricula seek to embody.
- Integration hides its problems, however, as there are complex issues to be overcome, such as the professional and financial boundaries, variations in training, the creation of a common work culture, and a lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities. Practitioners are asked to overcome these problems in order to meet the individual children's needs and to promote children's development and learning.

- The emerging role of the early childhood workforce across all curricula appears to be more complex than ever. Meeting standards or competences is not the only challenge they face. The role of practitioners in curricular implementation is becoming multi-dimensional, requiring a good understanding of the theoretical aspects of children's development, as well as its pedagogical aspects. It is also necessary to develop a good understanding of the curriculum.
- It is argued that it is equally important for practitioners to voice their own opinions about curricular implementation. These voices need to be informed not only by a knowledgeable, theoretically grounded workforce, but also by effective practice. Practitioners are required to develop a range of skills in order to be able to promote a pedagogy based on flexible planning, driven by children's interests, and informed by on-going observation of children and evaluation of practice. Dialogue requiring listening to children's interests and needs will become the starting point, in order to communicate with parents, staff and other necessary, related services.
- Another important aspect is recognition that in early childhood education and care effective practice cannot be seen in isolation from the community and the family environment. Considerable emphasis is placed on the role of parents in children's activities, assessment and observation.

Points for discussion

- Compare the early childhood education and care among these countries and try to identify the similarities and differences in their curriculum practices.

- What are your personal thoughts on curriculum developments in early childhood in the region in which you are studying/working?
- What do you think about the role of play in curriculum implementation in early childhood education and care?

Further reading

Books

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Papatheodorou, T. and Moyles, J. (eds) (2012) *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Early Childhood*. London: Sage.

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Useful Websites

Northern Ireland early childhood provision:

www.deni.gov.uk

Scotland early childhood provision:

www.educationscotland.gov.uk

Wales early childhood provision:

www.wales.gov.uk

Republic of Ireland early childhood provision:

www.siolta.ie

www.ncca.ie

SAGE JOURNALS

For an international perspective of other curricula these are some interesting articles:

1. 'Time for Being': Why the Australian Early Years Learning Framework opens up new possibilities
 - o Marianne Knaus

Journal of Early Childhood Research, 1476718X14538601, first published on August 4, 2014

2. Space for toddlers in the guidelines and curricula for early childhood education and care in Finland
 - o Niina Rutanen

Childhood, November 2011; vol. 18, 4: pp. 526-539., first published on August 11, 2011

3. Examining the Rhetoric: A Comparison of How Sustainability and Young Children's Participation and Agency are Framed in Australian and Swedish Early Childhood Education Curricula
 - o Eva Årlemalm-Hagsér and
 - o Julie Davis

Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, September 2014; vol. 15, 3: pp. 231-244.

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