Early Childhood Ireland is a national, member organisation that promotes quality care and education for young children. As a national organisation, Early Childhood Ireland has a growing membership base of 3,330 members, representing 75% of all early childhood care and education (ECCE) services throughout the country. This represents 101,565 children and families who access ECCE services on a daily basis.

Feelings run high in early childhood care and education because people care and are passionate about their work with children and families. Those practitioners who currently have at least one child with additional needs in their services (now estimated to be about 71% of services*) are frustrated by a system that does not adequately, consistently or in a timely manner resource and support good outcomes for children. We in Early Childhood Ireland, an organisation representing 75% of providers in the country, hear the stories of challenge, of disappointment, of frustration, but also of persistence, of partnership and of success in supporting children. This short article reflects the realities of a sector that is struggling with sustainability but is committed to improving the everyday experience for children with additional needs.

Why Pre-school is Good for Children with Additional Needs
Playgroups, pre-schools and day care services have grown and thrived over recent decades, not merely because parents require childcare but because high quality provision is good for children. Children coming into our services are young and staff in early childhood settings work hard at providing consistency of care, cultivating relationships with parents and locating play at the core of their curriculum. In many communities, the early childhood service is a hub within the locality, a place where parents connect with each other sharing information and tips, where practitioners and parents connect and tell stories of what happened during the day (celebrating successes or considering emerging challenges no matter how small) and where guidance can be offered in informal ways that respect and recognises the primacy and knowledge of the parent.

Each child coming to pre-school brings with him a unique set of experiences and capabilities. Each child, regardless of their individual needs, has strengths. Early childhood staff members must have positive and open images of children, and recognise them as having rights and competencies. Children communicate their interests in many ways, both verbally, through their words, and always through their bodies. They communicate through
what Loris Malaguzzi (Reggio Emilia) calls the ‘hundred languages’ and it is up to adults is to notice, recognise and respond to the child’s expressions.

**Pre-School Curriculum**

The cornerstone of the early childhood curriculum is play, which is universal and open to every child, irrespective of ability. Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, suggests that children’s play possibilities can be enhanced over time with the right kinds of support and that ‘children who are impulsive or get into many conflicts, children who are withdrawn or isolated, children whose first language is neither English nor Irish, children who have speech delays and children with physical or sensory impairments often need specialised or focussed support from the adults’ (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009). With understanding and support, everyone can take initiatives to join in the play.

Consider Diarmuid (IPPA, 2004), who at three years is a quick learner with an engaging personality. His favourite play theme is re-enacting meal time and making cups of tea. Diarmuid does not always manage to play with the group, but he certainly knows the rituals and routines of tea time and is an expert player when it comes to the home corner. With support from the adults, Diarmuid has a valuable role when it comes to playing ‘teatime’. Regardless of other needs he has, Diarmuid demonstrates his competencies and is just one of the group in the home corner.

With rich possibilities for play, pre-school settings create opportunities for children with additional needs, promoting participation, supporting identity and belonging, while enabling a sense of success and mastery.

**The Problem with Labels**

Young children, like Diarmuid above, are growing, developing and learning at an unprecedented rate from (and before) birth. By three years of age, their brains are 80% developed but that is only part of the story. As they enter pre-school with a broad range of capabilities and needs children are learning to be confident in letting go of mum or dad (even temporarily), how to manage with others in a group context, how to self-regulate and be independent. Learning and developing is not uniform and tidy, it is messy and non-linear, dependent on the child, their context, culture and environment. Observations are important in early childhood services and help in understanding children, allowing patterns and trends to emerge over time in situations that are meaningful and real to them.
Sandra arrived in playgroup at three years of age. She was withdrawn, slow to make eye contact with adults, found it difficult to engage with other children and did not manage change well. Sandra was slow to warm up. Through observation, planning and lots of discussion with her mum, staff worked hard over time to help Sandra participate in activities and created opportunities for her to shine (she was a great gardener as most of her time was spent with her Granddad up in the allotment).

There are many lenses through which we see children and ultimately time is needed to know the whole child before judgements are made. Labelling the child can, in some cases, ‘open the door’ (Wilson, 1998) for appropriate interventions, but it may also restrict possibilities (no, he wouldn’t be able), create low expectations (that’s as much as she can manage) and unfortunately lead to self-fulfilling prophecies.

The pre-school door is open to children and families with an understanding that each child develops at his own pace, has capabilities to be harnessed, interests to be followed, skills to be developed and learning opportunities to be supported. The possibilities for early identification of need, and for making timely, early interventions (in partnership with parents), lie within the quality early childhood setting.

Issues and Developments
Two relatively recent developments have impacted on the sector and specifically in relation to their work with children with additional needs and their families.

Firstly, in January 2010, the introduction of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme saw the provision of a free year of care and education for all children between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months, regardless of family income or ability to pay. It was a great achievement for our children, but the system required tailoring for those children with additional needs. With strong calls from Early Childhood Ireland and others in the sector, children with additional educational needs became eligible to avail of this scheme over two years, with the number of hours and funding per child equating to a single year. This scheme is hugely successful with 96% of eligible children participating. The numbers have increased significantly with more children than ever attending pre-school but it is not clear how many of the 96% represent children with additional needs. What is known is that the Census of Population (Central Statistics Office, 2006) showed 3 per cent of the population (aged 0-18 years) as having one ‘long-lasting condition’, while the most recent census of the population recorded 66,437 children with disabilities, which represents 5.8% of the total child population in Ireland (Central Statistics Office, 2011). More sector specific, the 2011 Pobal Annual Survey stated that a total of 4,679 children with disabilities were accessing early childhood services in Ireland, with 47% of services reporting to have at least one child with additional needs in attendance (Pobal, 2011). A latest an unpublished Early Childhood Ireland survey conducted in 2012 paints yet another picture, showing that 71% of services reported having at least one child with additional needs.

Secondly, following Budget 2012, subvention rates to services across Government funded programmes dropped by 3% and the adult:child ratio for those children in the ECCE scheme rose from 1:10 to 1:11. This small change in the ratios of one extra child per adult may seem
insignificant until the demands on practitioners and the requirements to ensure that the needs of each child are met and the relationship with each child nurtured are considered. Combined, these developments highlight increased demands for places and consequently higher numbers of children with additional needs in the services, higher adult:child ratios and less income and financial discretion to bring in extra support for some children.

Despite the obvious need for quality early childhood services and recognising the possibilities they offer for engagement with families and early intervention, the sector is experiencing significant challenges.

‘There is absolutely no way we could take on a child with additional needs right now, I have never had to do that in the thirty years I have been running a playgroup but the way things have gone I have been left with no other option. We cannot meet their needs in the current climate.’ Community Provider

Specialised Support

The most significant challenge facing services is the lack of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs). Historically, the availability of SNAs to the early childhood sector has come through the HSE (previously the Health Boards), and arrangements regarding hours and funding for individual children differed by area. Currently, 49% of Early Childhood Ireland members report that they do not have access to an SNA. This is a huge concern given that 71% of services report to have at least one child with additional needs. SNAs are core to children’s participation in the life of the service. While funding for designated hours per child is available in some counties, it is evident to us in Early Childhood Ireland that services are frequently subsidising the provision of SNAs and often parents are funding or part-funding these posts to enable children take up their free pre-school year. Ninety five per cent of member services report that they, the service and the child would benefit from the presence of an SNA. Even when a service accesses an SNA there can be grey areas regarding employment, contracts and line management arrangements.

Across services, Early Childhood Ireland members tell us that speech, language and communication difficulties are among the most prevalent to be present but not yet diagnosed. During the early years of life, language is key in building relationships, developing social understandings, making meaning or sense of the world, sharing experiences, pleasures and needs. The ability to understand and use language forms the basis for literacy and successful reading.

So, for many of the children with additional needs in pre-school settings, minor interventions, delivered on site, can bring lasting improvements. Services identify that access to speech and language therapy (55%), occupational therapy (44%) and an educational psychologist (37%) would be helpful, but given the cutbacks and pressures within the system this wish list seems unlikely to materialise.
Assessment of Need – The Waiting Game

Without an assessment of need, a report which helps to build a profile of the child’s strengths and needs, families are unable to avail of any specialised support or intervention for their child. An assessment of need details the child’s health and educational needs and any services which may be required to meet these needs.

Early Childhood Ireland members report that waiting times and access to specialist support were among the biggest issues that services face today. Sixty-one per cent of children are currently awaiting assessment. The relatively large number of children with some form of additional need in ECCE services that have not had relevant assessments and/or diagnosis is a concern for the sector. On a positive note, there is a strong body of evidence to show that early intervention has significant beneficial outcomes for children with mild general learning disabilities in relation to cognitive, language and social development. Timing of intervention is therefore a critical factor in effectiveness and some of the most effective early intervention programmes have focused on children at or before 3 years of age. Consequently, the numbers of children who are believed to have mild general learning disabilities but whom have not yet had a relevant assessment is a cause for concern.

‘One of my biggest concerns at the moment is the number of children leaving play school without an assessment of need. The window of opportunity has been missed. We have parents, who can’t afford to pay for a private assessment, are now being forced to do so because the system has let them down. Something has to change.’ Community Provider

The story is somewhat different for school age children. Since September 2005, a general allocation model of resources for children with additional educational needs now operates in all primary schools. This model ensures that schools can make appropriate provision for children with mild general learning disabilities without a psychological assessment.

Increasing Ratios – What About the Other Children?

Another area of major concern for services that have children with additional needs is the increased adult:child ratios from 1:10 to 1:11, with services ‘feeling under huge pressure’. Early Childhood Ireland is hearing from services that for the first time ever have had to turn children away. In the current climate, services feel they are running a risk of not being able to provide an adequate service to children with additional needs, as they are unsure of the support they will receive from HSE and when it will be received. Additionally, many services feel that they ‘have also made a commitment to the other children in their care’ – without support they cannot continue to cope and fear that they will be operating at a low custodial level rather than delivering a quality service for each and every child. These experiences in the sector very much echo the research which tells us that when classes are smaller and ratios are more favourable, practitioners engage in more stimulating, responsive, and supportive interactions and to provide more individualised attention.
Working with Families – Partnership with Parents

The case for partnership between parents and early educators is now well established and a partnership approach is widely agreed to ensure best outcomes for children. It has been reported that when parents and educators work in partnership in early childhood services, children’s long-term development and learning can be enhanced. With support from the child’s family, practitioners begin to make progress in knowing the child and attending to her needs and following her interests. Parents are the people most aware of their child’s strengths, abilities, needs, and challenges, and, as a result, they play a vital role in the education of their child. Most services have faced challenges, however, in working with parents.

‘We were having huge issues trying to get parents recognise that their child may have additional needs. It was only when we changed our policy back in 2010, to clearly state that we need parents to work in collaboration with us for the best interest of their child, that things started to change and we started to make progress.’ Private Provider

Josh arrived in playgroup unable to mix with others. He gravitated towards one staff member and constantly looked to her as a reference point. Josh needed structure, he needed to be certain about what was coming next and he didn’t like anything out of the ordinary. New faces or visitors to the group caused him huge anxiety; spontaneous activities which others loved were for him a nightmare. One morning, a few weeks before Christmas, Jane took out the Christmas decorations to check on what they had. This out-of-routine action posed a real problem for Josh over the morning. Staff decided to develop a picture book for Josh, which guided him through the morning’s routine and identified what was coming next. Josh could hold his book with him and staff referred to it in preparing him for transitions. The manager spoke to Tina, Josh’s Mum and suggested that the book might be helpful at home and that they would be sure to put it in his bag. Tina was very annoyed at the suggestion that Josh would need any extra support, she too was quiet as a child and never liked change – Josh was like her and would grow out of it in time. In this case, Tina did not see that Josh would benefit from more support.

Quality of Provision and Continuing Professional Development

Findings from the National Survey of Parental Attitudes and Experiences of Local and National Special Education Services (National Council for Special Education, 2010) suggest that parents view [primary school] teachers as the lynchpin of SEN provision. There is no research to support this for the early childhood population; however it is likely that the same applies to the sector.

The vast majority of practitioners welcome children with additional needs and work closely with them and their parents irrespective of having SNA support or not. Currently, through the national funding programmes there is no recognition for accredited training or qualifications specific to this work and no support for continuing professional development (CPD). Yet skilled practitioners make a significant contribution to the well-being and development of children with additional needs and in the process support their parents.
Next Steps…The way forward

There are a number of serious concerns relating to the quality of existing provision for children with additional needs. These concerns arise in relation to staff:child ratios, staff training and qualifications, specialised support and inter agency work as well as family partnership. Services are burdened with increased administration and bureaucracy, lower income, increased expectations from parents, higher requirements from Government, diminishing supports and resources for children with additional needs.

‘Providing an adequate service for children with additional needs is timely and requires a lot of planning. Our link worker really supports this but there are 20 other children who must be cared for; the increasing ratios make this difficult – it’s almost impossible to do any work on a one-to-one basis.’

Private Provider

It is clear that providers of early care and education are facing challenging times when it comes to the provision of ECCE for young children with additional needs. However, despite the challenges faced by the sector, positive work has and continues to be undertaken. There is a strong commitment to inclusive practice and the significant developments made to date must be acknowledged. Practitioners have been resourceful when it comes to caring and educating the children in their care in a way that’s inclusive for everyone.

Early Childhood Ireland has and continues to call for the provision of SNAs in pre-school and has advocated for the allocation of a minimum of three CPD days per year to facilitate staff training and development. Research is adamant that the higher the qualifications and training of the adults, the higher the quality of provision. We believe that it is time we cared not just for the children with additional needs but for the adults who work with and for them.

* Statistics and data are drawn from Early Childhood Ireland Additional Needs Survey 2012/2013

References


