

## Article for Education Matters

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### BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE MODEL FOR EARLY YEARS PROVISION

#### Introduction

According to Danish sociologist Esping-Anderson (2008), “it is only quite recently that we have come to realise that the foundations of learning, as well as the chief mainsprings of inequalities, lie buried in the pre-school phase of childhood and that schools are generally ill-equipped to remedy a bad start.”<sup>1</sup> Over the past half century, our investment in children has been almost exclusively directed at school based education and has ignored the international research telling us that investment in pre-school offers a better financial return to the State and society than investment at any other life stage.<sup>2</sup> We are increasingly aware that experiences in children’s earliest years lay the critical foundations for future learning and social and emotional development. Despite this knowledge, the early care and education (ECE) sector in Ireland remains woefully under resourced. At 0.3% of GDP,<sup>3</sup> Ireland’s investment in ECE falls well short of the 0.8% average investment across the OECD, and the UNICEF international benchmark of 1% of GDP. Despite some improvement in State spending on ECE in recent years, the level of investment is inadequate to catch up and this has had a detrimental effect on the sustainability of the sector.

#### The situation for the ECE sector at a glance

The ECE sector is grappling with a number of interconnected challenges. Well qualified staff are essential for the delivery of a quality ECE service to children. The increasing difficulty faced by services in retaining and recruiting well qualified staff will not be resolved without dealing with the low pay and poor conditions in the sector. Low pay cannot be addressed without proper funding that also supports sustainable business models for childcare provision. The viability of services depends on such funding and ultimately, there can be no positive progression in any of these areas without significant investment by Government.

We must ensure that all investment, new and existing, is building a model of early childhood care and education in Ireland that is fit for purpose and can deliver:

1. The best **quality** care and education for children in the most formative years of their development;
2. Viability and **sustainability** for both early childhood services and their staff;
3. Access and **affordability** for parents to childcare facilities and services.

#### The current trend in early childhood care and education

However, a recent report by Early Childhood Ireland, *Doing the Sums: The Real Cost of Providing Childcare (September, 2016)*, has identified worrying trends to the contrary. A major finding of the report is that the State’s focus on the Early Childhood Care and

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<sup>1</sup> Esping-Andersen, G. (2008) ‘Childhood investment and skill formation’, International Tax and Public Finance, 15: 19-44.

<sup>2</sup> See The Heckman Equation on the rate of return to human capital investment by Nobel prize-winning economist Professor James Heckman <http://heckmanequation.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> When expenditure for young children in primary school education is excluded.

Education (ECCE) programme, which offers two free pre-school years to children aged 3-5½ years and receives by far the largest proportion of funding of all ECE programmes in the sector, is causing displacement and shifting capacity of providers from birth to 3 years provision. This is negatively impacting the financial viability, and thus availability and affordability for parents, of wider childcare services, such as year-round full daycare and care and education for the under 3s. The report further finds that the average ECE service in Ireland, whether private or community run, urban or rural, operates on a breakeven basis and simply cannot afford to pay staff for the invaluable and highly professional job that they do.

### **Staff Pay in the ECE Sector**

According to Early Childhood Ireland's report, the average Early Years Educator, who requires a minimum QQI Level 5 in Early Childhood Care and Education, is earning €11.12 per hour. This is below the living wage in Ireland of €11.50 per hour. The average Room Leader, who requires a minimum of Level 6 on the NQF and a bachelor degree in Early Childhood Studies/Early Education in order for its service to receive the higher ECCE capitation payment, is earning €12.30 per hour. This is just over €1 extra per hour for having completed third level education and compares very badly to the average wage in the education sector of €33.90.<sup>4</sup> In addition to poor pay, , Early Years Educators engage in a significant amount of unpaid non-contact time. The work done in this time is absolutely essential to the delivery of a quality pre-school experience for children and includes: planning and evaluating curriculum; engaging with the national quality frameworks Aistear and Síolta; working with parents; participating in staff meetings; completing required recording and documentation, including for inspection purposes; and supporting good governance. With the more recent introduction of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), early years professionals also work with parents to identify the needs and supports of children with additional needs participating in ECCE programmes.

While Budget 2017 made much welcomed provision for limited paid non-contact time, the measure did not go far enough to tackle pay and conditions in the sector in a meaningful way. This is a major strategic challenge for the sector, which cannot deliver on the Government's policy to expand ECE if it cannot retain and attract the qualified staff needed to provide quality services to children.

### **Ensuring quality for children**

We know that early childhood care and education matters to children and communities and that investment in early years is a cost effective way of promoting economic well-being. We also know that there are no returns on investment if quality in early childhood services is not maintained.<sup>5</sup> The ECE workforce is one of the most influential determinants of quality in the sector.<sup>6</sup> It is the quality of relationships, the nature of the interactions and the ability of the adult to support children's early learning that matter and impact on children's social, emotional and cognitive outcomes. High quality adult-child interactions are most often found where the people working with children are highly qualified and where wages are sufficiently high to minimise staff turnover and to reward staff for the investment they make in their education and training. The qualifications of the whole staff team are key to quality provision.

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<sup>4</sup> As stated in the Earnings and Labour Costs Quarterly, Q1 Final, Q2 Preliminary Estimates, CSO, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Melhuish, E. (2011) 'The Early Years and Later Development-Evidence and Social Policy' Presentation to Growing Up in Ireland Conference. Dublin, December 2011.

<sup>6</sup> CoRe Report of the European Commission (2011).

The EU recommends a 60% graduate led ECE workforce by 2025.<sup>7</sup> However, only 15% of educators working in Ireland's childcare sector currently hold a degree at Level 7/8 in early childhood education and care (Pobal, 2015). This is hardly surprising when the ECE sector continues to be characterised by low wages, additional unpaid work, low social status, a heavy workload, a lack of career progression paths and a lack of incentive to professionalise. This inevitably impacts on staff retention and attracting new staff into the sector, which is crucial to the expansion of the ECE sector.

### **Conclusion**

There are three major and interconnected challenges facing the ECE sector: quality for children; sustainability for services and their staff; and affordability for parents. Nothing short of a significant injection of investment into the sector will be sufficient to address all these challenges and it is essential that the investment is targeted and strategic in nature.

Low pay and poor conditions in the sector is causing increasing difficulty in the recruitment and retention of staff, which in turn impacts the quality of services for children. Two targeted initiatives the Government can undertake in this regard are to:

- 1. Work with the sector to agree recognised salary scales for early years educators.** Additional investment in the sector needs to take account of the need to increase salaries, where Government works closely with the sector to develop agreed salary scales in the medium term.
- 2. Initiate a new 'Early Education and Care Workforce and Professionalisation Plan'.** Government should conduct research and engage with the sector to develop a Workforce Plan that sets out a realistic assessment of the number of early childhood professionals that are needed, and where, over the next 5-10 years, including their levels of qualification and how we recruit and retain them.

The sector looks forward to playing its part and working constructively with Government and policy makers to build a sustainable model of early childhood care and education that provides children with the best possible start in life.

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<sup>7</sup> Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health and Children (January, 2016) 'Report on Affordable and Quality Childcare.' p.25.