



Public Consultation to inform a National Strategy for Migrant Integration

Submission

30 November 2023

Contents

Introduction.....	2
Early Childhood Ireland.....	2
Migrant children in Ireland	2
Children of migrant origin are less likely participate in formal Early Years and School Age Care.....	3
Early Years and School Age Care is a public good and a space for migrant integration and inclusion.	4
Linguistic diversity in the EY and SAC sector	4
Diversity, Equality & Inclusion training, and support programmes.....	5
Better Data and Research	5
First 5 and the whole-of-government approach	6
Recommendations	6
Bibliography	7

Early Childhood Ireland is pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the public consultation on the Migrant Integration Strategy published by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

Introduction

Irish society has been greatly enriched by the increase in immigration flows to Ireland.

One in eight of us is a non-Irish citizen (Central Statistics Office, 2023) and while immigration remains a high-profile issue in Ireland, migrant integration must remain high on the policy agenda.

The integration of migrants and their children helps to build inclusive societies. It enables our new communities to fully participate in society and to achieve the same social and economic outcomes as the native-born population.

Early Years care and education is often cited as a powerful intervention that can reduce educational inequalities, particularly for people with a migrant background. It is also an opportune moment to impact migrant integration in real ways.

This submission will refer to recent research about migrant children in Ireland, including their participation in the early learning and care system. It will conclude with recommendations from Early Childhood Ireland on how we can improve the integration of migrant children and their families in the Early Years (EY) and School Age Care (SAC) system.

Early Childhood Ireland

Early Childhood Ireland is the leading children's advocacy and membership organisation, working in partnership with 4,000 members nationwide to achieve quality experiences for every child in Early Years and School Age Care settings. We advocate for an effective and inclusive early years and school age care system which values, supports, and invests in childhood, children, and services.

Early Childhood Ireland holds an image of the competent child at the centre of all that we do.

Our vision is that every young child is thriving and learning in quality Early Years and School Age Care in centre-based and childminding settings.

Our mission is to champion quality for all children in Early Years, School Age Care and Childminding settings, through our work with our members and on the system.

Early Childhood Ireland believes that childhood is a critical period for the nurturing of each individual child's curiosity, resilience, creativity, confidence, and potential.

Migrant children in Ireland

A recent study published by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), *Children of Migrants in Ireland: How are they faring?* (Darmody, et al., 2022), investigated whether migrant-origin children differ from children with two Irish-born parents in terms of their English language development at three, five and nine years of age, and their self-concept at nine years. It found that:

- Parental region of origin and linguistic background can make a difference to migrant-origin children’s cognitive and socio-emotional development.
- Children with a migrant background were somewhat less likely than those with Irish-born parents to have attended centre-based childcare at age three, prior to enrolment in the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (ECCE).
- Children with both parents born abroad started school at an earlier age than those with one or both Irish parents and were much more likely to attend a Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) school.
- At age three, 60 per cent of migrant-origin children were in the bottom quintile on the English vocabulary test (including those who had insufficient language skills to take part in the test). By age five, this had declined to 52 per cent and by age nine, 26 per cent were in the bottom quintile for reading. This suggests considerable progress in English-language development between ages three and nine for migrant-origin children living in Ireland.
- Having no native English-speaking parent in the household was associated with a lower self-concept score and this was mediated through fewer socioeconomic resources.

The report concludes that “the findings highlight the importance of facilitating access to quality early learning and care for migrant-origin children, as participation in early learning and care at age three is lower for them than for Irish origin children, despite earlier research showing that children from non-English speaking backgrounds benefit more from participation in centre-based care than their Irish-origin peers (McGinnity, et al., 2015a).”

Children of migrant origin are less likely participate in formal Early Years and School Age Care

The report, Differences in childcare use between Irish-born and immigrant households in Ireland (Sprong & Skopek, 2023), found that:

- Compared to children of Irish-born households, children of migrant descent were more likely to be in formal care relative to informal care.
- However, children from non-English speaking immigrant households were less likely to be in both informal and formal care than parental care.
- Children from English speaking immigrant households were also slightly less likely to be in informal care than parental care, although there was no difference in how often they were in formal care relative to parental care.

The findings indicate that differences in Early Years care and education usage by migration background exist and that they partly reflect other dimensions of disadvantage, such as lower income and less social support.

Children of migrant origin are less likely to be exposed to the beneficial effects of ‘formal childcare’ which may also affect their mother’s labour force participation.

Researchers stated that Early Years care and education can only contribute to reducing educational inequalities if it can reach a large enough group of children with a migration background.

The report suggests that it may be helpful to provide additional support to immigrant homes to ensure that children with a migration background benefit from formal care not only in theory but also in practice. It also suggests that it would be worthwhile to explore how the participation rate among this group could be increased.

In response to the above research, Early Childhood Ireland recommends the implementation of a communications campaign to ensure that migrant families are aware of their entitlement to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme, and of the availability of other support schemes.

Please see Better Data and Research below for further recommendations on how we can improve migrant integration in Early Years and School Age settings.

Early Years and School Age Care is a public good and a space for migrant integration and inclusion.

“Evidence shows that children, especially those who are disadvantaged, who attend early childhood education and care are more likely to succeed, first at school then as adults in the labour market. Early childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is even more important for the children of immigrants, who have weaker ties with the host-country language in early childhood.” (OECD/European Commission, 2023). Investing in Early Years and School Age Care also provides economic benefits to individuals and society.

Ireland recognises that Early Years (EY) and School Age Care (SAC) is a public good. It acknowledges the [Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems \(2019/C 189/02\)](#), which states that all children have a right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality, and it has obligations under the [European Child Guarantee](#), which aims to prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing the access of children in need to a set of key services, including early childhood education and care.

Early Childhood Ireland recommends that the Migrant Integration strategy gives recognition to EY and SAC settings as sites of migrant integration and inclusion and develop its new strategy with policies and supports for settings to implement inclusive practices for the benefit of all children and their families.

We recommend that the EY & SAC system should explicitly include asylum and refugee children in their planning and budgeting and to fund the expansion of EY& SAC places for these families, where the demand and need exists.

Linguistic diversity in the EY and SAC sector

Linguistic diversity is one indicator of the diversity in Irish society.

According to the latest available data from Pobal, 65% of Early Years and School Age Care settings had at least one child for whom neither English nor Irish was a first language. (Pobal, 2022)

There is also linguistic diversity amongst our Early Years and School Age Care educators. [Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022-2028](#) states that “while there is no data on language-proficiency in either English or Irish in the ELC and SAC workforce, anecdotal evidence suggests that not all staff have high levels of proficiency in English, and that proficiency in Irish in services described as naíonraí is varied.” The plan includes the consideration of introducing actions to support language-proficiency for non-native speakers in both English and Irish.

Early Childhood Ireland recommends the introduction of actions to support language-proficiency for non-native EY and SAC educators in both English and Irish, in Early Years and School Age Care settings, as suggested in [Nurturing Skills](#).

Diversity, Equality & Inclusion training, and support programmes.

In 2016, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, published a [Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education](#). The guidelines “aim to support and empower all those working in the early childhood care and education sector to explore, understand and develop practices and approaches that embrace diversity, equality and inclusion and, through this, to create an inclusive culture where all children can flourish and realise their potential.”

Based on these guidelines, County Childcare Committees (CCCs) deliver “Diversity, Equality & Inclusion Training” to Early Years and School Age Care practitioners, however, data is not available on how many practitioners are receiving this training, and we have anecdotal evidence of some CCCs finding it difficult to source affordable training venues.

Given the importance of an inclusive Early Years and School Age Care experience for all children, Early Childhood Ireland recommends that the new Migrant Integration Strategy includes a commitment that all educators working with children and their families have Diversity, Equality & Inclusion training.

Early Childhood Ireland also recommends that this training be strengthened with national supports and services to EY and SAC educators and care providers to enable them to provide greater integration and higher-quality experiences for migrant children. e.g., CPD for pre-school educators to nurture culturally and linguistically responsive environments to support refugee and migrant children’s integration.

These supports should include integration programmes to support the inclusion and participation of all children in Early Years (EY) and School Age Care (SAC) settings, for example the use of age-appropriate play- and arts-based multilingual approaches to discrimination prevention.

Better Data and Research

Monitoring the progress made on the integration of migrants and their families in EY and SAC settings, and identifying the challenges that lie ahead are essential for an effective Migrant Integration Strategy.

The collection, publication and availability of data on children’s integration and their integration outcomes in EY and SAC settings, assists the State to remain compliant with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (see [Article 2](#)), and provides the State with data that can be used to monitor the effectiveness of the new Strategy.

Early Childhood Ireland, therefore, recommends that the new Migrant Integration Strategy includes a commitment to collect and publish disaggregated data on migrant children’s participation in EY and SAC settings as a monitoring indicator for the new strategy. The collection of this data may be sourced via the annual Pobal Early Years Sector Profile.

Better Data requires research and to gain an understanding of our migrant communities and their integration challenges, Early Childhood Ireland recommends conducting research into the following:

- a) gain an enhanced understanding of the remaining barriers to integration in early childhood education and care that migrant children are experiencing compared to Irish-heritage children,
- b) explore how the participation rate in Early Years and School Age Care among Ireland's migrant population could be increased, and
- c) to explore service providers' experience of provision of Early Years and School Age Care to migrant children.

First 5 and the whole-of-government approach

First 5, A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families, commits to:

1. A broader range of options for parents to balance working and caring
2. A new model of parenting support
3. New developments in child health, including a dedicated child health workforce
4. Reform of the Early Learning and Care (ELC) system, including a new funding model
5. A package of measures to tackle early childhood poverty.

To ensure a whole-of-government approach to the new Migrant Integration Strategy, Early Childhood Ireland recommends that the commitments to children and their families in First 5 are taken into consideration.

Recommendations

Early Childhood Ireland recommends the following to improve access to and integration within Early Years and School Age Care settings for migrant children, so that they can participate on an equal basis with Irish-heritage children.

1. High-quality Early Years (EY) and School Age Care (SAC) provision must be available to and accessible for all children living in Ireland.
2. Implement a communications campaign to ensure that migrant families are aware of their entitlement to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme, and of the availability of other support schemes.
3. Give recognition to EY and SAC settings as sites of migrant integration and inclusion and develop the new Migrant Integration strategy with policies and supports for settings to implement inclusive practices for the benefit of all children and their families.
4. The EY & SAC system should explicitly include asylum and refugee children in their planning and budgeting and to fund the expansion of EY& SAC places for these families, where the demand and need exists.
5. Introduce actions to support language-proficiency for non-native EY and SAC educators in both English and Irish, in Early Years and School Age Care settings.

6. A commitment that all educators working with children and their families have the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Training provided by the County Childcare Committees.
7. Provide national supports and services to EY and SAC educators and care providers to enable them to provide greater integration and higher-quality experiences for migrant children. e.g., CPD for pre-school educators to nurture culturally and linguistically responsive environments to support refugee and migrant children's integration.
8. Provide integration programmes to support the inclusion and participation of all children in Early Years (EY) and School Age Care (SAC) settings, for example the use of age-appropriate play- and arts-based multilingual approaches to discrimination prevention.
9. A commitment to collect and publish disaggregated data on migrant children's participation in EY and SAC settings as a monitoring indicator for the new strategy. The collection of this data may be sourced via the annual Pobal Early Years Sector Profile.
10. Conduct research to:
 - i. gain an enhanced understanding of the remaining barriers to integration in early childhood education and care that migrant children are experiencing compared to Irish-heritage children,
 - ii. explore how the participation rate in Early Years and School Age Care among Ireland's migrant population could be increased, and
 - iii. to explore service providers' experience of provision of Early Years and School Age Care to migrant children.
11. To ensure a whole-of-government approach to the new Migrant Integration Strategy, Early Childhood Ireland recommends that the commitments to children and their families in First 5 are taken into consideration.

Bibliography

- Central Statistics Office, 2023. *Census 2022 Profile 5 - Diversity, Migration, Ethnicity, Irish Travellers & Religion*, Cork: Central Statistics Office.
- Darmody, M., McGinnity, F. & Russell, H., 2022. *Children of Migrants in Ireland: How are they faring?*, Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute.
- Government of Ireland, 2021. *Nurturing Skills, The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, 2022-2028*. s.l.:s.n.
- McGinnity, F., Russell, H. & Murray, A., 2015a. *Non-parental childcare and child cognitive outcomes at age 5*, Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- OECD/European Commission, 2023. *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In*, Paris: OECD Publishing.
- OECD, 2021. *Starting Strong VI: Supporting meaningful interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care*, s.l.: OECD Publishing.
- Pobal, 2022. *Annual Early Years Sector Profile 2020/2021*, Dublin: Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth.

Sprong, S. & Skopek, J., 2023. *Childcare utilisation by migration background: Evidence from a nationally representative Irish cohort study*, s.l.: Economic and Social Research Institute.