

# Review of Occupational Role Profiles in Ireland in Early Childhood Education and Care

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## 1. A core profile for the early childhood profession in Ireland

### A common profile for all members of the profession

The aim is to develop the Irish early childhood care and education sector into a genuine *Competent System*. A central requirement for achieving this goal is a shared orientation for all practitioners working with children from birth to eight years, regardless of occupational status, job title and level of formal qualification.

The concept of *Competent Systems* in early childhood has been developed by the CoRe project – an international study that investigated *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care* on behalf of the European Commission (Urban, Vandenberg, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2011).

Central to a competent system is that shared orientations are not only required of practitioners 'on the ground' but of all professionals and institutions that together constitute the early childhood system: early childhood settings, training and professional preparation, research, regulation and governance, inspection and evaluation.

### A generic rather than prescriptive profile

Professional competence unfolds in interactions and relationships *between* practitioners carrying out different roles in the system. Therefore, according to CoRe data, professional profiles *should be framed in general terms, rather than in detailed lists or descriptions* (Urban et al., 2011).

## Knowledge(s), Practices and Values: the three dimensions of the professional profile

These three aspects are inseparable and mutually inform and support each other. They are used here in plural to emphasise that in working with young children, families and communities in diverse contexts there will always be more than one way of understanding (knowing) or acting (professional practice). It is a particular characteristic of the early childhood profession that each practitioner will be able to *critically reflect* on their practice. The question to ask ourselves on an ongoing basis is:

**Am I (are we) doing the right thing?**

This is fundamentally different to asking

**Am I (are we) doing things right?**

## What kind of knowledge?

The foundation for all professional practice in early childhood, regardless of the setting or occupational role is sound knowledge relating to

*Working with  
children*

*Working with  
families*

*Working with  
other professionals*

*Early childhood in  
the wider local, na-  
tional and interna-  
tional context*

Holistic understanding of children's development and learning from birth in diverse and changing contexts and in all its physical, emotional, social, cognitive and spiritual dimensions

Critical understanding of the social, cultural and political context of growing up in Ireland and globally – including diversity and (in)equality, poverty and marginalisation

A thorough understanding of children's rights

A critical understanding of one's own role as a professional, team worker, critically reflective practitioner, and continuous learner (regardless of one's level of formal qualification, experience, or occupational role)

A critical understanding of the Irish early childhood education and care system and its institutions, including their policies, regulation and evaluation, administration and management

Awareness of early childhood education and care in other countries

## What practices?

Working with children, families and diverse communities not only requires a body of knowledge but the ability to translate that knowledge into action. Practices and skills that characterise a competent early childhood practitioner focus on

*Working with children*

*Working with families and communities*

*Working with other professionals and institutions*

Anti-discriminatory and Anti-bias practices with children, families and local communities, and co-workers

Democratic and participatory practices with children, families, local communities and co-workers

Pedagogical practices that are appropriate for working with children from birth: caring, empathetic, child-led, and play- and exploration-based

Practices that are open-ended and explorative (there always is more than one way of doing things)

Practices that are *critically reflective* and appropriate for working in highly complex, unpredictable, constantly changing and diverse contexts

## Which values?

Professional and personal values are the lens through which we interpret professional knowledge. They orient our making sense of the world and underpin our practices. Values that underpin competent professional practice with young children, families and communities are grounded in

*Children's and human rights* to orient towards right's-based pedagogies and practices with *all* children, families and communities

*Democracy* as the basis for meaningful participation of *all* children, families and communities

*Respect for diversity* as the basis for working towards social justice and more equitable outcomes for *all* children

*Empathy*

Early childhood as a *public good* and *public responsibility*





**In the Irish early childhood education and care context, these generic areas**

## **Knowledge(s), Practices and Values**

**are specifically shaped through the three interrelated guiding framework documents**

### **Aistear – Síolta**

## **Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines**



## 2. Note on Terminology

In the Irish context, the acronyms ECEC and ECCE are both used to refer to the early childhood sector, sometimes interchangeably. This can be confusing, as ECCE is also used to refer to the so-called ‘free preschool years’ or ‘ECCE scheme’. In an international context, however, it is widely accepted that early childhood services should be conceived for ‘all young children at birth and throughout infancy, during their pre-school years, as well as during the transition to school (below 8 years)’ (European Network of National Observatories on Childhood, 2008). That means the early childhood sector caters for *all* children from birth, the free preschool / ECCE scheme does not. In the interest of developing a coherent early childhood sector that integrates education and care for all children from birth, this confusion should be avoided. Except for direct quotations from Irish documents we use the term ECEC in this document to emphasise the need for such an integrated system.

## 3. Introduction and background

### 3.1. A constantly changing Early Childhood policy context

From John Coolahan’s 1998 *Report on the National Forum for Early Childhood Education* (Coolahan, 1998), which led to the publication of the white paper *Ready to Learn* (Department of Education and Science, 1999) and the *National Childcare Strategy* (Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform, 1999) to the review of national education and training provision in Early Childhood Care and Education planned for 2017, the Early Childhood sector in Ireland has been subject to constant and substantial policy changes for almost two decades<sup>1</sup>. Like in other countries, early childhood policy developments in Ireland have responded to, and reflect, wider societal and socio-economic processes both in the national and international (e.g. European Union) context. In Ireland, these have been two decades of unprecedented efforts to develop, expand and sustain better quality for children and families in a highly fragmented sector with a multitude of actors following diverse practice and policy agendas, and pursuing often contradictory interests. As recently as 2004 the Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD) found that ‘*National policy for the early education and care of young children in Ireland is still in its initial stages*’ (OECD, 2004). Not surprisingly, the OECD report concludes that much needed to be done:

*Significant energies and funding will need to be invested in the field to create a system in tune with the needs of a full employment economy and with new understandings of how young children develop and learn.*  
(OECD, 2004)

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<sup>1</sup> Policy milestones since 1998 include: National Forum for Early Childhood Education (1998); White Paper Ready to Learn (1999); National Childcare Strategy (1999); National Children’s Strategy (2000), Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development (2002); Síolta. National Framework for Quality (2004); National Economic and Social Forum Early Childhood Care and Education report (2005); Diversity and Equality and Inclusion Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education (2006, revised 2016); Aistear. Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009).

The challenges at hand are confirmed by internal experts who took part in the international study *Strategies for Change* in 2004/2005 (Urban, 2006, 2007). To give just one example:

*The 'Early Childhood Care and Education' (ECCE) Sector in Ireland is as interesting as it is bewildering in its evolution, structure, diversity, quality, inequality, key players and controlling interests.*

(Murray, 2006)

In 2015, a European Commission report on the macroeconomic context in Ireland still paints a picture of major challenges, especially from the perspective of working parents trying to access childcare services of acceptable quality in the private and voluntary sector:

*The scattered provisions for childcare support are complicated and difficult to navigate. The shortcomings of current provisions relate mainly to a combination of low payment rates for childcare providers, limited knowledge of the scheme and practical obstacles to accessing after-school care (geographical or administrative). In an attempt to increase the quality of services, a new National Quality Support Service will commence in 2015 with a limited budget and small staff. No budget was allocated to up-skill childcare staff beyond minimum qualifications. Childcare programmes generally fail to have a significant impact on increasing access to affordable and quality childcare, particularly for low-income families. The recently set up inter-departmental group on childcare might be seen as a platform to develop more comprehensive solutions to this problem.*

(European Commission, 2015, pp. 60-61)

### 3.2. Progress in key areas

Despite this rather bleak analysis considerable progress has been made in some key areas: the general *regulation* of the sector (Office of the Minister for Children, 2006), the framing of quality of provision (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006), *content* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009) and more recently in relation to *quality assurance* (Better Start, DCYA, 2015, Early Years Education Inspectors, DES 2016) and the *development of the workforce* as laid out in the call for proposals for this project. However, as another informed view from within the Irish sector argues, *rapid change* does not necessarily result in *sustainable transformation* (Wolfe, O'Donoghue-Hynes, & Hayes, 2013).

### 3.3. Systemic challenges

Any revision of professional roles and profiles in early childhood can only be meaningful if undertaken from a perspective that takes the entire early childhood system into account (European Commission, 2011) and interrogates the ability and willingness of that system to transform itself into a *competent system* (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2012). Therefore it is pertinent to keep in mind the central systemic challenges the Irish Early Childhood System will have to address. All of them have immediate impact on the role, professional identity and (self) perception of the early child workforce:

**Governance:** The CoRe project (Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care) has shown that competent professional practice can only unfold in an environment where *knowledge, practices* and *values* are coherent across all lev-

els of the system, including governance and administration. It is challenging to see how this can be achieved in a context where ‘a myriad of institutions’ (Murray, forthcoming, with reference to Dr Thomas Walsh, National University of Ireland, Maynooth) – i.e. ten different government Departments - share responsibility, in one way or another, for the early childhood sector<sup>2</sup>.

**Resourcing:** Despite increases in government spending, the Irish early childhood sector remains under resourced and in the past there has been a tendency to prioritise short-term incentives for parents over structural investment in services. This has led to unsustainable working conditions and levels of pay for staff, as well as to services that are unaffordable for users.

**Fragmentation of services:** Despite attempts to develop coherence across service provision for children and families, the sector remains divided between childcare and early education services. They follow different logics and interests and make it difficult to develop individual and collective professional identity and representation across the sector.

**Marketisation of services:** the reliance on private-for-profit providers, especially in the so-called *childcare* part of the sector puts significant strain on public finances without delivering quality for all (Lloyd & Penn, 2012; OECD, 2001, 2006). It also maintains a fundamental dilemma for the formation of the roles and identities of service providers, many of them owner-managers of small services: *Childcare – Business or Profession?* (Start Strong, 2014).

### 3.4. International policy context

Internally, policy developments in the Irish Early Childhood sector have responded to rapidly and dramatically changing demographics in Irish society including much more visible diversity (McGreil, 1997; Murray & Urban, 2012), and a shift from economic boom to bust and slow recovery in the wake of the *Celtic Tiger* followed by the collapse of public finances (banking crisis). However, there is an external dimension, too. The development of Irish early childhood policies can only be understood in the context of a developing European Union, OECD and wider international early childhood policy context. At EU level, key documents and initiatives that have influenced (and continue to influence) Irish developments include (among others) the *Council Recommendations on Childcare* (Council of the European Communities, 1992), the 2004 *Barcelona targets*, the 1996 *Quality Targets in Services for young Children* (European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile Employment and Family Responsibilities, 1996), the *EU Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care* (European Commission, 2011) and the recent European Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Children and Youth Affairs; Department of Education; Department of Finance; Department of Public Expenditure and Reform; Department of Health; Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform; Health Service Executive; Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht; Department of the Environment Community and Local Government; and Department of Social Protection

The last two documents are of particular relevance for the proposed review of occupational role profiles because they explicitly state that professionalising the early childhood workforce requires *systemic approaches to professionalisation*. Both documents draw on the concept of *competent system*, developed by the author of this proposal based on the findings of an international research project funded by the European Commission: *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care (CoRe)* (Urban, Vandebroek, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2011a; Urban et al., 2012). The dimensions of professional competence developed in this project – *knowledge, practices and values* – will serve as a starting point for the proposed review.

The concept of *a competent system* developed in the CoRe project has been met with favourable reception and interest in a wide range of international contexts. It has informed local (e.g. City of Utrecht, The Netherlands) as well as national (e.g. Germany, Colombia) Early Childhood policy developments. The Early Childhood Research Centre (ECRC) at the University of Roehampton, London, in collaboration with a research team based at Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá, has recently conducted *CoRe-Colombia: a review of professional profiles for an integrated workforce in Colombia* (Floréz Romero et al., 2013).

We (ECRC) are currently conducting an international, 11-country research project on ‘competent systems in early childhood’ that investigates aspects of governance and professional competence in early childhood systems in countries in different regions of the world: Colombia, Chile, Uruguay, Mongolia, Italy, The Netherlands, Bulgaria, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Germany, New Zealand.

We envisage that the review of the Irish occupational role profiles will benefit from being carried out in the wider context of these projects.

### 3. Methodology and data sources

#### 3.1. Data sources

The review of Occupational Role Profiles in this report is based on several sources of information:

1. A review of relevant international literature. The review draws on sources identified in the original CoRe project (Urban et al., 2011a; Urban, Vandebroek, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2011b). In addition, it takes into consideration sources relating more broadly to topics like the relationship between professionalism, professional qualifications, professional development and governance in early childhood systems. This facilitates a framing of the review and revision of Irish Occupational Profile Roles in the context of recent and ongoing research, and to draw conclusions for the Irish sector based on up-to-date international experiences.
2. A content analysis of pertinent Irish policy documents. The focus of the analysis is in particular on what each document has to contribute to the debate on workforce development. Themes and categories derived from the analysis have been used to code the interview transcriptions (see below) in order to support cross-referencing.

3. Conversations with key stakeholders. We conducted interviews with a number of selected actors in the Irish ECEC sector, in order to collect and document different professional perspectives on the ECEC workforce.
4. Feedback gathered at (preliminary) consultation event. On Saturday, 19<sup>th</sup> November 2016 the Department for Education and Skills, Early Years Policy Unit, hosted a consultation event in Dublin Castle. Approximately 100 participants took part in the event. Participants represented a broad diversity of actors in the Irish ECEC sector: practitioners, provider-owners, provider- and professional associations, education and training, policy.

### 3.2. Data analysis

We gathered data from four sources (see above), which we analysed in overlapping stages:

1. The review of international literature provided a lens for the analysis of the Irish policy context
2. The analysis of Irish policy documents resulted in themes and categories that were subsequently applied to the interview transcripts
3. Feedback gathered from roundtable discussions at the consultation event provided additional information that supported the identification of key aspects of the Occupational Role Profiles that we suggest require revision.

### 3.3. Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance have been sought from the University of Roehampton's ethics committee, and all activities of the project have been carried out in accordance with the University's ethics policies and procedures available on <http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/Research/Ethics/>.

## 4. Literature review

### 4.1. Systemic approaches to developing Early Childhood Education and Care systems<sup>3</sup>

In 2011 the European Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture published a document that aimed at bringing together key arguments and evidence about the benefits of Early Childhood Education and Care services for children, families and wider society for European Union member states – provided it is of 'high quality'. The EU Communication *Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow* (European Commission, 2011) adds one crucial perspective to an established international debate: In the light of the complex demands and requirements arising in

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<sup>3</sup> The following section is based in parts on an article published by the author in the European Journal of Education (Urban, M., Vandenbroeck, M., Van Laere, K., Lazzari, A., & Peeters, J. (2012). Towards Competent Systems in Early Childhood Education and Care. Implications for Policy and Practice. *European Journal of Education*, 47(4), 508-526)

early childhood education and care there is, the document states, a need for a ‘systemic approach to professionalisation’ (ibid, p. 6). The position taken by DG Education in this document has been endorsed by the European Council (i.e. the governments of all EU member states) (Council of the European Union, 2011). This resonates with the findings of an international research project that explored *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care* (Urban et al., 2011a). The CoRe project<sup>4</sup> concluded that in order to achieve *sustainable change* (Urban, 2007) in early childhood education and care systems a shift of focus is needed, from the individual practitioner to the systemic relationships *between* all actors and institutions. In consequence, the CoRe project refers to the possibility of building and maintaining a *Competent System* (Urban et al., 2011a, 2012).

There is a broad consensus among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers that the quality of early childhood services – and ultimately the outcomes for children and families – depends on well-educated, experienced and ‘competent’ staff. But what exactly makes a competent early childhood practitioner? How can *competence* be understood, and its development supported, in the highly complex and demanding field of working professionally with young children, families and communities? What approaches do different countries take, and what lessons can be learnt from practices developed by practitioners, training institutions and policymakers across Europe?

The study on ‘Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care’ (CoRe) explored conceptualisations of ‘competence’ and professionalism in early childhood practice and identified systemic conditions for developing, supporting and maintaining competence at all layers of the early childhood system. The European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture commissioned the research conducted between January 2010 and May 2011. In the light of the findings and intensive consultation with key stakeholders in ECEC in Europe, CoRe has developed *policy recommendations*. The CoRe research team was supported by an international expert advisory team and collaborated closely with three European and international professional networks: Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training (DECET), International Step by Step Association (ISSA) and Children in Europe (CiE). These networks represent the field of ECEC in all EU27 Member States and candidate countries. In addition, a fourth international professional network (Education International) brought its strong workforce and teaching unions’ perspective. Locally-based but internationally renowned researchers contributed to the project by providing critical insights into the policies of their countries and through case studies of practices in different European locations. The aim of CoRe was to provide policy-relevant information, advice and case studies with regard to the competences required for the ECEC workforce, and support competence development from a systemic perspective.

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<sup>4</sup> *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care* (CoRe) was jointly conducted by the University of East London, UK (lead institution) and the University of Gent, Belgium. It was funded by the European Commission, Directorate General for Education and Culture. Mathias Urban was the coordinator / Principal Investigator of the project for the University of East London. He has since moved to the University of Roehampton, London, UK.

## CoRe Project Rationale and Research Approach

The CoRe team conducted an original study grounded in international research on quality, competences and professionalism in early childhood. At European level, 14 Member States and one candidate country were included in a survey, and seven detailed case studies were conducted. Recommendations for action at the various layers of the early childhood system, including the level of European policy, were developed. The analysis of the literature, together with experiences gathered in the case studies and the survey of competence profiles for the ECEC workforce across Europe enabled us to ‘map’ areas of policy and practice where action can and should be taken. These were discussed with key actors in the field (as represented by the collaborators of this project) and have led to recommendations for policy and practice to:

- promote professionalism in early childhood across all layers of the professional system, including practice, management, qualification and training, and research
- improve pre- and in-service training of the ECEC workforce
- develop an understanding of qualification requirements for the ECEC workforce that shares common values and respects the diversity of approaches to realise them across Europe.

CoRe adopted a multi-method approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) in three project stages that mutually informed each other: a *literature review* of international policy documents and academic publications, a *survey* among experts in this field in 15 EU countries, and seven *in-depth case studies*.

### Definition of Key Terms

Exploring the relationship between *professionalisation* and *quality* in early childhood, CoRe inevitably deals with terms and concepts that are key to the academic and policy debate in the field, but highly contested. How to understand, define, develop and evaluate the *quality* of provision is certainly one of these contested terms (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007). Similarly, *professionalism* – more specifically who the professionals are and how they acquire their professionalism – has different meanings according to one’s background and perspective (and vested interest) in the debate (Urban, 2010). It is necessary, therefore, to provide some working definitions of how *quality*, being and becoming *professional* are understood in the context of this study:

*Quality of provision – systemic, dynamic and processual*

Current EU early childhood education and care policies recognise that the provision must be of high quality to be effective (European Commission, 2011; Eurydice, 2009). But what constitutes high quality in ECEC is a complex, and often contradictory matter (Penn, 2009). A rich body of literature provides evidence of an ongoing international debate that, since the 1990s, has argued about what the aspects of the quality construct are, how they are related, and how they can best be evaluated and developed (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Dahlberg et al., 2007; Pence & Moss, 1994; Penn, 2011). Any discussion about quality in ECEC should encompass the regular review of understandings and practices for the improvement of services in ever-changing societal conditions (Penn, 2009). Hence, quality needs to be



considered as a continuous *process*. Internationally, the OECD has been a main actor in drawing attention to the importance of quality early childhood services and systems. The Starting Strong reports (OECD, 2001, 2006) place the question of quality in the context of democratic ECEC governance and suggests a multi-dimensional approach to understanding, developing and assessing quality that takes into account the perspective of all stakeholders (OECD, 2006, pp. 127-129).

The CoRe working definition of quality strongly supports this view. From an explicit *systemic* perspective the authors argue that the acknowledgement of the importance of the *actors* (practitioners, children, families etc.) and their interactions for establishing *quality* on a day to day basis requires emphasis on the relational and processual aspects of *quality*. Hence, they consider *quality* to be a *multi-dimensional* and generic construct. It unfolds – and has to be proactively developed – in at least five dimensions:

- *experiences of and outcomes for children* (e.g. of belonging, involvement, well-being, meaning-making, achievement)
- *experiences of parents and carers* (e.g. of belonging, involvement, well-being and meaning-making, but also accessibility and affordability)
- *interactions* (e.g. between adults and children, between children, between practitioners and parents, between team members, but also between institutions, ECEC and local communities, professions, practice, research, professional preparation and governance)
- *structural conditions* (adult/child ratio, group size, space, environment, play materials, but also paid ‘non-contact’ time, continuous professional development, support for practitioner research and critically reflective practice)
- *systems of evaluation, monitoring and quality improvement* (e.g. internal and external evaluation, systematically including the views of all stakeholders, initiated and supported by service providers and local or central authorities).

A systemic, dynamic and processual definition of quality and an emphasis on dialogue and negotiation do not open the way to unconditional relativism (‘anything goes’) nor lose sight of ‘outcomes’. On the contrary, the CoRe authors insist that outcomes (for children, families, communities and the broader society) are crucial; they will be found in each of the dimensions outlined above. They need to be systematically evaluated and documented, but cannot be predetermined without negotiation with all stakeholders.

This conceptualisation of *quality* encompasses ‘values, implicit ideologies, subjective perceptions and social constructions reflecting different cultures [...] experiences, academic traditions, social needs and expectations’ (Bondioli & Ghedini, 2000). Quality in this field needs to be conceptualised as a result of a process of constant negotiation between all actors involved in ECEC institutions (Dahlberg et al., 2007; European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile Employment and Family Responsibilities, 1996). Universal, decontextualised approaches tend to result in technocratic and managerial procedures that are not appropriate for the complexity of early childhood professional practice.

However ‘while we need to remain critical about *quality* and its implications for practice, in a broader policy context, arguing for *better quality* can be an effective driving force’ (Urban, 2008, p. 138). The CoRe study relates the concept of *quality* to professionalism. It emphasises that it is concerned with the *economic, social and educational* functions of ECEC and that it unfolds at all four levels of a *competent ECEC system*.

#### *Professionals and practitioners*

Titles, job descriptions and profiles of those working with young children and families vary widely across Europe (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, & Neuman, 2010) and there is a corresponding variety of services and qualifications. Job titles include teachers, teaching assistants, educators, child care workers, with many different variations, even within one country (Adams, 2005). CoRe generally subsumes the different roles in the term *practitioner*, which includes all those who work in ECEC settings that provide non-parental education and care for children under compulsory school age. These services include childcare centres, nurseries, nursery schools, kindergartens, various types of age-integrated centres and family day care provided by home-based workers.

#### *Becoming professional: practitioner education*

*Practitioner education* in the context of the CoRe study refers to any form of professional preparation and continuous learning that enhance the competence of early childhood practitioners. These processes are usually referred to as *training*, a term which often conveys limited meanings of professional preparation and development. As Oberhuemer (2005, p. 7) notes, the term has ‘increasingly taken on a technical, competencies-and-skills connotation in the educational field and fails to do justice to the wider reaching aims of professionalisation as identified by the research community’. The ‘technical connotations’ of training point to a ‘particular concept of learning through instruction, repetitive practice, etc., it is about acquiring skills to deliver technologies. [...] Its connotations contradict the very essence of professional and educational practice as a transformative practice of mutual dependence and respect, co-construction and shared meaning making between human beings’ (Urban, 2008, p. 150). Instead, CoRe emphasises the transformative potential of professional practices, which are constantly co-constructed, de-constructed and reconstructed in the relationships with children, families and local communities. CoRe uses the term *practitioner education* as a generic term that includes *initial professional preparation* (qualifying or not qualifying professionalising routes undertaken before one is involved in practice) and *continuing professional development* (in-service courses, team supervision, tutoring, pedagogical guidance, counselling...).

## **4.2. Governance and the Early Childhood Profession**

A key aspect of the *Competent System* approach is the emphasis given to the *governance* of the early childhood education and care system. As this has particular relevance for policies concerning the professionalisation of the early childhood workforce, we include aspects of governance in education in this literature review. We focus specifically on the field of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and consider concepts of professionalism and leadership in ECEC, as well as professional identity of educators. Other issues that are explored are

discussions and international perspectives around qualifications for ECEC educators and Professional Learning and Development (PLD).

### **Governance**

The term governance can briefly be defined as the establishment of policies, and continuous monitoring of their proper implementation, by the members of the governing body of an organisation. It includes the mechanisms required to balance the powers of the members to enhance the prosperity and viability of the organization. Governance, as defined by the Council of Europe (2005:31) includes 'the processes and institutions by which revealed values and preferences translate into collective actions that enhance the security, prosperity and moral development of a group and its individual membership'. However as Noula et al. (2015) explain, the concept of governance is a complex concept to be defined, the Council of Europe committee of ministers (2010) stresses some additional concepts such as human rights, democracy and active participation in their definition, where teaching and learning practices should follow the promotion of human rights, values and principles fostering the empowerment and active participation of learners, educational staff, stakeholders and parents. Ball (2008) provides another definition of governance, not markedly dissimilar from the ones highlighted above but nonetheless interesting to consider, he illustrates how the meaning of governance implies the inclusion of all sectors, public, private and voluntary into action to solve specific problems faced by the community. Moreover, Bevir (2012) illustrates how the term governance in a more general sense is used to explain processes of governing originating from different sources such as governments, markets, networks, formal or informal organization focusing on social practices and activities. The term governance is strictly related to an important shift in public organization, with governments increasingly relying on private and voluntary sector actors to deliver services, a view that is particularly pertinent in the education sector and even more important for the ECEC sector because of its characteristic of extreme fragmentation (Bevir, 2012).

### **Governance in the context of education**

In the domain of education Neuman (2005) describes governance as a primarily endogenous process because of the influence that internal changes such as the different actors in the policymaking process and local governments shifts have on the system of governance in education. James et al. (2008), promotes the view of education governance as a network with the power of bringing individuals together both from within the educational system and from the wider community considering their capabilities, relationships and motivations. Networks as highlighted by James et al. (2008) as serving as policy devices, on one hand as means of implementing practical innovations and new sensibilities into areas that are considered resistant to change and adverse to risk and, interestingly, on the other hand as a way of piloting a move toward a form of post-welfare educational system in which the state monitors provision but does not actually deliver education services itself (Ball, 2008).

### **Governance in ECEC**

In recent years the governance of education systems around the world has experienced a series of major shifts and changes that have redefined its nature (Balarin 2014). As a result questions about the effects that this new understanding of governance in education is having on the role that education can play in developing citizenship, social justice and social co-

hesion have been raised and deserve some consideration (Robertson, 2009). The shift from government to governance can be interpreted as a shift from a unitary state to governance achieved by networks (Ball, 2008).

The majority of studies on education governance have not afforded ECEC the attention it deserves for a variety of reasons. On the one hand it could be argued that some ECEC services are seen as not being part of the educational field falling under the health and social arena of services for young children, on the other hand, the indifference toward ECEC reflects the reality that in many countries the pre-school period of education has not been considered to be a major force in the educational reform (Neuman, 2005). The study on *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care (CoRe)* has highlighted how a progressive shift in European political agendas has happened, whereas before the motive for investing in ECEC was principally driven by socio-economic apprehensions over employment competitiveness and gender equality, more recently questions of social justice, governance in Early Childhood systems, social cohesion and equality of educational opportunities have been come into power (Urban et al., 2011). This is also emphasised by Niron (2013) who argues that quality in ECEC services has made early childhood the target area for public policy about the role that governance plays in determining access, quality and equity in ECEC services in the international policy agenda.

Governance is a crucial component of ECEC systems because of its power to determine whether or not the services offered are consistent in quality, affordability, and pertinent to the local community (Neuman, 2005). A focus on governance in ECEC can help to ensure policy making coherency of cross-governmental agencies making the ECEC system easier to navigate for families (Neuman, 2005).

### Professionalism

In the discussion about what professionalism is it is important to differentiate between two important concepts: industry and a profession, the former aimed at providing returns to shareholders while the latter was concerned with the service performed and not the gain produced (Crook, 2008). In the 1930s Carr-Saunders and Wilson advised that what describes a professional is the possession of intellectual skills acquired through special training (Crook, 2008). Crook (2008) illustrates how professionalism is essentially an historical construct, ever-changing in its definition and traits, an artificial construct whose meaning varies over time.

Robson (2006) rightly argues that profession is a socially constructed and contested term with different meanings at different times attached by different people. Being a professional provides the individual and the community that belongs to the same field with a collective identity with agreed values, recognised responsibilities and acceptable or required behaviour in the field (Appleby, Pilkington, 2014). Within the professional community the individual constructs a personal identity providing a sense of belonging to others with shared or similar beliefs, in order to be accepted into a professional community the individual must qualify and be externally accepted by the group, however, once external validation is obtained, there might be little support or motivation to develop professionally in the chosen field of practice.

According to Mazehoova and Kourilova (2006), becoming a professional happens on two levels, firstly it takes place at a structural level through formal education and entry requirements, secondly, it takes place on an attitudinal level or the sense of calling of the individual to the field (Mazehoova, Kourilova, 2006). According to Osgood (2008), the ethics of care and emotional labour which are considered to be cornerstones to practitioners' understanding of themselves, are being disregarded in dominant discourses of professionalism. According to Francis (2001) professional identity needs to be understood as a negotiated, shifting and ambiguous entity mediated by personal experience and beliefs about what it means to be a practitioner and what are the individual's aspirations for the future. If it is accepted that the notion of professionalism is socially constructed, then the role practitioners play in the construction also has to be understood in order to explore how and if they accept or resist external control (Osgood, 2008).

In a study conducted by Smedley and Hoskins (2015) professionalism was understood to be made of passion together with practical accomplishments. The version of professionalism emerging from the data formed three themes: the women's perception of themselves as practitioners, the effect of politics and the women's roles as advocates. The authors make a recommendation for a 'critical approach to professionalism (...) which enacts educators as interpreters rather than implementers of the statutory curriculum' (Smedley, Hoskins, 2015:14). The notion of professionalism for teachers is a political issue because, according to Smedley (1996), it should be based on reflection upon fundamental issues such as equality and social responsibility. According to Simpson (2010) to define professionalism we need to pay attention to individuals' dispositions and orientations.

### Professional Identity

The concept of professional identity is an important concept to discuss in this review of occupational role profiles in Ireland in Early Childhood Education and Care because it is closely related to concepts of leadership in the field and professional learning and development of educators.

Hall (1996) illustrates how identities are never unified thus being increasingly fragmented and fractured: identities are seen as being multiply constructed across different discourses, practice and positions. Because identities are created within the discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices by specific enunciative strategies (Hall, 1996). The concept of identity is negotiated, open and ambiguous, socially constructed closely related to the context, and subject to both cultural and political influences. Identity is one concept that makes sense both individually and collectively and because of this, the discussion about identity shifts and becomes instead more focussed on how can we relate individuals and collectives to each other so that neither is privileged, neither is reified or caricatured and, above all, we are enabled to understand better the real human word (Hall, 1996). Identification is always from a point of view, collective identities are usually located within territories or regions (Jenkins, 2008). Who we are and who we are seen to be can matter enormously, in order to be thinking about the issue of identity we must first decide how we define what identity is (Jenkins, 2008). As a very basic starting point identity is the human capacity- closely linked with language- to know who is who and, as a result, what is what (Jenkins, 2008). This in-

volves knowing who we are and knowing who we are seen to be by others looking at individuals as members of collectives. Jenkins (2008) sees identity as a process, as something we do, rather than something that we possess. Another important issue to consider is the role of interest in the process of identification, the fact that how an individual identifies himself has a bearing on how he defines his interests and how this individual identifies himself has a bearing on which interests he will choose to pursue (Jenkins, 2008). Thus, the process of identification can be defined as a basic cognitive mechanism that humans use to sort out themselves and their fellows, individually and collectively into groups, this baseline sorting is fundamental to the organization of the human world (Jenkins, 2008). An interesting issue to consider together with the meaning of identity is the sense of self, Jenkins (2008) proposes a definition of a reflexive sense of his or her own particular identity constructed with others, in terms of similarity and difference, without which she or he wouldn't be able to know who they are and how to act. Subjectivity is about our sense of self and the meanings of the experiences located in social and discursive contexts lead to the formation of identity, the concept of identity is argued to be ever changing, multi-faceted and fragmented (Burke and Jackson, 2007). The discussion around the concepts of identity and subjectivity is located in understandings of inclusion and exclusion, as notions of self are always tied to notions of others (Burke and Jackson, 2007). Precisely because identities are formed in a discourse context the concept and understanding of it is strictly linked to being produced in a specific historical and institutional sites (Burke and Jackson, 2007). The idea of internal self and external person is fundamental to the view of identity; identity without selfhood is implausible (Jenkins, 2008).

Foucault (1970 in Hall, 1996) illustrates that what we require in order to discuss what identity is and who needs identity is not a theory of the knowing subject but a theory of discursive practice, in order to develop this, Hall suggests that rather than to abolish the subject there is the need of a reconceptualization of it. Another concept closely linked with identity is the more subjective concept of discursive practices of *identification* (Hall, 1996). Semantically, the concept of identification is constructed on the back of recognition of some sort of common origins or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal linked to the natural solidarity or allegiance established on the foundation of identification (Hall, 1996). Identification is seen as a construction, a process that is never completed.

Hall (in Grossberg, 1996) offers different models of identity to provide a historical and strategic distinction: in the first model he assumes that there is some intrinsic and essential content to any identity which is defined by either a common origin or a common structure of experience or both. However, this model is concerned with trying to discover the original or authentic content of the identity, offering one constructed identity in place of another (Grossberg, 1996). The second model better encompasses the concept of identity that will be used in this research, it emphasizes the impossibility of such fully constituted and distinct identities, denies the existence of authentic and original identities based on a universally shared origin or experience (Grossberg, 1996). Identities are always in progress and incomplete they depend on the process of difference from the other. There is an emphasis on the multiplicity of identities and differences rather than on a singular identity. The fact of having multiple identities, according to Mercer (1992 in Grossberg, 1996) gives rise on the necessity of race, class and gender. If we take this position, the struggles over identity no longer in-

volve questions of adequacy or distortion but of the politics of representation itself (Grossberg, 1996). This model involve questioning how identities are produced and taken up through practices of representation, such a position sees identity as entirely cultural constructions.

### Teacher identity

According to Brindley (2015) teacher identity is constructed, and some tension that exists between whether teacher identity is a product of teachers' self-image or not. Sachs (1999 in Brindley, 2015) echoes Hall's (1996) ideas on identity presented above, illustrating that identity cannot be considered as a fixed 'thing'. It is instead a negotiated, open and ambiguous concept resulting from culturally influenced meanings and the power-laden enactment of those. Professional identity is not an individualistic matter, but rather, Bernstein claims, 'the result of embedding a career in a collective base' (2000:66). This statement views identity as socially constructed and to be seen and understood according to a specific political context. This qualitative study consisted of three stages in which interviews were performed and card sorts were presented to the participants. The card sort instrument consisted of four sets of statements on knowledge, professionalism, identity and teacher research; each set had five cards which expressed a range of views taken from scholars in the field (Brindley, 2015). Instead of asking teachers to respond to a question, the author asked them to order the cards, within the four categories, in ways which they felt offered a 'best fit' with their own views, and to talk the researcher through their decisions. The results show that no agreement on what constituted teacher knowledge, professionalism and identity emerged (Brindley, 2015). In fact, what emerged was quite the reverse, with answers demonstrating a spectrum of beliefs, all with quite different justifications and explanations attached.

Far from identity disappearing in contemporary society, it is reconstructed and redefined (Bauman, 1996). If the modern problem of identity was how to construct identity and keep it solid and stable, the postmodern problem of identity is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open (Bauman, 1996). It soon became clear that one of the main problems in history is not how to build identity but how to preserve it (Bauman, 1996).

### Social Identity

According to Laclau (1990 in Hall, 1996) the construction of a social identity is an act of power. Individuals negotiate their identities within the interaction order; they present an image of themselves for acceptance by others (Jenkins, 2008). Power is a central concept in understanding the formation of identity in relation to social differences and inequalities (Burke, Jackson, 2007). Power is closely related to social relations, the way certain discourses gain hegemony, the formation of policy and the ways certain identities are legitimated, valued and privileged within and across educational contexts (Burke, Jackson, 2007). Power operates at all levels of social life and identities are always tied to shifting power relations, on this subject Foucault's (1972 in Hall, 1996) theory of power is especially useful, Foucault conceptualises power as discursive and exercised rather than possessed and as always in circulation (Burke, Jackson, 2007). An individual's identification with shared social meaning constitutes identity formation and can be seen as a process of reality construction, it provides a mechanism by which individuals can make sense of their social practices (Chappell, 1999 in Burke, Jackson, 2007). Furthermore, identification is often a matter of imposition

and resistance, claim and counterclaim, rather than a consensual process of mutuality and negotiation (Jenkins, 2008). An emphasis on the demands that others make of us on the basis of our public image implies that others just don't perceive our identity; they actively constitute it (Jenkins, 2008). Trust, belonging, connectedness and knowing the rules of engagement/presentation are all part of the formation of social identities (Lynch et al., 2012). Identity is a form of situated social practice in which individuals perform roles that are relational and embedded in norms and expectations related to self and other (Lynch et al., 2012).

The concept of identity is more apt at answering questions such as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that influences how we might represent ourselves more than answering questions such as who we are and where we came from (Hall, 1996). Above all, identities are constructed through, and not outside, differences, the relation to what it is not and what has been called constitutive outside that identity can be constructed (Derrida, 1981; Laclau, 1990; Butler, 1993 in Hall, 1996). Identities can function as points of identifications and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude. The internal homogeneity which the term identity treats as foundational is not a natural but a constructed form of closure. Social identity is part of an individual's self-concept deriving from membership of a social group (Lynch et al., 2012).

The most persistent issue in social theory is the 'structure-action' problem, in other words the debate about 'structuration' (Parker, 2000). Identity is one of the concepts that makes sense both individually and collectively and because of this, the discussion about identity shifts and becomes instead more focussed on how can we relate individuals and collectives to each other so that neither is privileged, neither is reified or caricatured and, above all, we are enabled to understand better the real human world?

### Leadership

Preskill and Brookfield (2009) see leadership as a hegemony defined by gender, social position and capitalism. It is about preserving someone's existing powers over others; in contrast, other definitions of leadership involve authenticity, integrity and organization building (Hard, Jonsdottir, 2013). In the highly feminised context of ECEC there are both positional and informal leadership opportunities, however leadership remains a somewhat tainted notion possibly due to the interpretation of it through traditional masculinist models which do not fit in a context involved in the care and nurturing of others (Hard, Jonsdottir, 2013). Hard and Jonsdottir (2013) suggest that leadership in ECEC cannot be left to chance and that external models borrowed externally to the field will not suffice; in order to facilitate effective leadership in ECEC we must acknowledge the feminine heritage of the field. Dimmock (2007) suggests that there has been a neglect of cross-cultural aspects to research in the areas of leadership and management and acknowledges that such work is significant in the global economy as policy makers often draw on the same evidence base in making policy decisions. In addition such work can help researchers to learn much about their own culture through the examination of other cultures (Fleer, 2006).

In the Nordic context women are the leading figures in the early development of pre-schools, as Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003) suggest the development of children's services in Western societies has been linked to the societal structure and position of women in



society (Hard, Jonsdottir, 2013). Leadership has been a highly gendered notion and until the latter part of the twentieth century it was often considered as a male activity (Hard, Jonsdottir, 2013). In ECEC there has been a stereotypically feminine leadership style which emphasise relationships, communication, motivation and democratic participation (power for people rather than power over people) (Hard, Jonsdottir, 2013). However, the issue of leadership in ECEC is a somewhat rejected concept because of the apparent aversion to power and the reality of staff behaviours (Hard, Jonsdottir, 2013). Through the work of Abbott and Pugh (1998) and Smith and Langston (1999) Moyles (2001) maintains that a clear paradox exist between a shame and blame culture and a supportive, developmental culture in which everyone may benefit from sharing specialised knowledge at different levels. Additionally Moyles and Suschitzky (1995) found that qualified teachers in ECEC tended to work down to the level of their variously trained and qualified colleagues rather than raising the standards within the setting through acknowledgment of different roles, experience and expertise.

Hard and Jonsdottir's study (2013) was constructed through in-depth discussion between the authors on a period of two years discussing previous findings from interviews in Iceland in 2007 and a doctoral study in Australia in 2005. Both studies have identified the highly feminised nature of the field as a major factor in determining the workplace culture and have identified aspects that have been classified as caring and positive as well as reticence by staff to debate and discuss issues for fear of a open conflict (Hard, Jonsdottir, 2013). Both studies recognise that the nature of the ECEC field is heavily impacted by the mono gendered nature of the workforce (Hard, Jonsdottir, 2013). When leaders used more masculine styles of leadership in commanding and controlling they met resistance from the staff but using the more nice stereotypical feminine way did not seem to be successful either when wanting to promote change (Hard, Jonsdottir, 2013). Rather than working as a team the ECEC personnel appear to be flattening the field and avoiding potential diverse contributions individuals can make to the effectiveness of the workplace (Hard, Jonsdottir, 2013). According to Hard and Jonsdottir (2013) the notion of teams and teamwork does not articulate into an egalitarian workplace rather it proves problematic to effective leadership, this might also contribute to a culture that is adverse to difference, debate and discussion for fear of not being part of the team.

### **Professional Qualifications**

Increasingly, governments see life-long learning as the key to human capital formation, according to the OECD report (Bennett, Tayler, 2006). Training and working conditions for ECEC staff often contradict public rhetoric about the value placed on young children and the importance of their early development and learning. Across the countries reviewed by the OECD, staffs in settings serving the youngest children are more likely to have varied backgrounds, socially as well as educationally, ranging from no training whatsoever to a post baccalaureate 3-year professional education or a two-year college degree (Bennett, Tyler, 2006). A report by Urban and Rubiano (2014) highlights a specific issue for the ECEC workforce in Ireland where high quality of teaching is contrasted by low staff required qualifications, compared to primary education where all the teachers are graduates.

The evidence from the Start Strong report (2014) clearly highlights that initial and continuous training of the workforce together with pay and conditions are crucial factors in order to achieve quality ECEC provision. Although this is a widely accepted notion in the education sector, in the ECEC field training and staff requirements still need to be clearly specified (Start Strong, 2014). In terms of professional qualifications for ECEC staff, more homogenic requirements for the profession are particularly difficult to achieve, due to the fragmentation in the provision; costs for more skilled staff risk to be passed on to parents making the price of childcare beyond the means of many families (Start Strong, 2014). In addition to this, most private providers have already developed staffing policies with different organizational priorities in mind (Start Strong, 2014). One of the suggestions developed from the Start Strong report (2014) focus on developing financial regulations regarding the price of childcare for parents and establishing grants for staff willing to gain a new qualification (Start Strong, 2014).

According to Healy (2016), the employment rate for the Republic of Ireland reflects a shortfall in female participation. The employment figures for women continued to decrease after the recession and stood at 55.2% in 2012 but increased in the following two years arriving at 55.9% in 2014 (Central Statistics Office, 2013). Female participation in the labour market fell during the last recession and has not fully recovered yet in spite of improved male employment rates. The reasons for this gap are varied but mainly concern a lack of affordable and accessible childcare (Healy, 2016). By providing better remuneration, qualifications, training and professional development, we are not only raising the standards for the profession but changing the view of the ECEC workforce as valued professionals with an important status in society (Urban, Rubiano, 2014).

### **Professional Development**

Due to the rapid development and change of the ECEC sector, professionals have to constantly adjust to their multifaceted roles in caring and educating young children, this is only possible with a solidly educated and innovative workforce that regularly upgrades and improves its knowledge (Hmelak, 2010).

According to the OECD (OECD, 2006:158), staff training is one of the determining factors for quality in ECEC together with fair working conditions for practitioners in the sector. The OECD (2001) states that:

‘Staff working with children in ECEC programmes have a major impact on children’s early development and learning. Research shows the links between strong training and support of staff – including appropriate pay and conditions – and the quality of ECEC services (Bowman et al., 2000; CQCO Study Team, 1995; EC Childcare Network, 1996; Whitebook et al., 1998). In particular, staff who have more formal education and more specialised early childhood training provide more stimulating, warm, and supportive interactions with children (CQCO Study Team, 1995; NICHD, 1997; Phillipsen et al., 1997, EPPE 2004)’

The concept of professional development consist of a varied range of experiences and activities that directly benefit the individual, group or setting and that contribute to the quality of practice (Day, 1999). Professional development is seen as a social, discursive and reflective

process that is situated around practice (Appleby, Pilkington, 2014). In this process practitioner's review, renew and extend their commitment as agents in the particular system of early education developing knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence critically in order to enhance their professional thinking and planning (Day, 1999). The process of professional development is understood as being a lifelong process lasting through each phase of the practitioners' teaching lives (Day, 1999). The definition above heavily focuses on the practitioners' will to implement change and motivation to enhance their existing skills and knowledge a focus that can be found also in the following discussion. Friedman et al. (2000:4) expand the definition of professional development beyond teaching, defining it as 'the systematic maintenance, improvement and broadening of knowledge and skill and the development of personal qualities necessary for the execution of professional and technical duties throughout the practitioner's life'. Friedman et al. (2000) illustrates how professional development involves more than just "learning" activities, which have come to be associated with taking courses and passive receiving of information, development therefore takes place in a number of contexts and through a variety of activities. Colmer et al. (2014) illustrates how in educational contexts professional development has predominantly been offered as a one-off workshop type session and conferences but according to Burgess et al. (2010) and MacNaughton and Hughes (2007) the effectiveness of this type of professional development is questionable.

The OECD report (OECD, 2006) discusses how staff with the lowest levels of initial training in ECEC have been found to have the least access to in-service education including family day carers. An interesting international perspective on the subject of professional development can be found in Korea where a statutory requirement exists on the local authorities to fund a minimum level of staff development (OECD, 2006). Similarly, in Hungary, every pedagogue has the personal obligation to take 120 hours of professional development each seven-year period, paid for by the State, the local municipalities will also frequently provide in-service sessions for their staff (OECD, 2006).

Traditionally, in England, educational processes aimed at practitioners' PLD were guided from the outside whereas new concepts of PLD are more kindergarten orientated with educational activities required from kindergartens' requirements with a focus on practitioners' participations in the planning process producing knowledge to be tested in practice with versatile contents in order to accommodate different techniques, values and beliefs (Hmelak, 2010). The traditional concepts of education are directional and concentrated on the individual, the role of teachers is for the most part played by external experts and lecturers where recipients have a passive role whereas new concepts of education employ internal as well as external experts as lecturers and recipients are active (Hmelak, 2010). More importantly, the employee's motivation in traditional concepts is mostly external, in the form of promotions or reduction of work obligations while in new concepts the intrinsic motivation is most important to tackling employees' desire for professional growth (Hmelak, 2010). Professional development according to Fekonja et al. (2002 in Hmelak, 2010) is intended to upgrade existing knowledge and strengthen professional competences of educators together with being aware of new alternative forms of work and of thinking in children's development and new technologies. Professional development is supposed to be based on experiential learning to activate the educators' experiences. According to Reay (2001) in-

creased participation in education and training with a focus on reflexivity can be a way to increase professionalism, although Osgood (2008) stresses the importance to engaging in professional development activities that enable self-awareness and improve self-confidence rather than the pursuit of training to improve practice and gain in professional confidence. The content and delivery of professional development should enable practitioners to build on their existing knowledge and expertise and include space for critical reflection not just on their role as practitioners but on the social and political context in which they work (Osgood, 2008).

A study conducted by Lightfoot and Frost (2015) illustrate how English educators demonstrate a commitment to making a difference in their profession but also express frustration with some of the forms of PLD that were available to them. Participants in the study state that the courses did not address their professional development and were seen as a 'wasted morning' (Lightfoot and Frost, 2015:414). These findings from England are validated by international findings of the CoRe project: short-term courses that are not rooted in coherent policies are questionable at least and contribute little or nothing raising the competence of learners (Urban et al., 2011). Appleby and Pilkington (2014) also arrive at similar conclusions illustrating how one-off learning sessions have a limited capacity to transfer knowledge into wider long term practice, in isolated training the professional development is seen as a staff obligation to fulfil organisational requirements and it is experienced as little more than a tick box exercise. Hmelak (2010) with a study researching Slovene kindergartners' motives for choosing in-service training coupled with an investigation on different methods of in-service training also validate the above information from different studies. The results showed that the length of employment, level of education and status of the kindergarten did not have an effect on the responses while the kindergarten location did have an effect (Hmelak, 2010). It is reported that educators working in a city kindergarten prefer study groups and workshops promoting experiential learning while employees working in suburban kindergarten prefer lectures, among the motives for in-service training professional motives were found to be the more dominant ones, this, in turn, led to the conclusion that professional development of educators is oriented more towards experiential concepts of education with the prevailing methods of teaching used being study groups, pedagogy workshops or seminars where active learning and two ways communications are present (Hmelak, 2010).

Bentara (2005) presents similar findings to the one detailed above. He illustrates how change in many areas, including education, appears for the most part imposed. It is top down and not bottom up and therein lays the difficulty of initiating change. This top down scenario provokes distrust in the recipients of change (Bentara, 2005). The DfEE (2001 in Bentara, 2005) reports that for many teachers, CPD is still seen as a one-off event or short courses, often away from school, of variable quality and relevance, delivered by a range of external providers. This thesis hypothesizes that continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers has more impact if led by the principal within the framework of school effectiveness and school improvement. The results show similar findings from other studies discussed above, some of the teachers in this study didn't see the point for CPD if they already gained a qualification previously, the author refers to this as an instance of early rejection because it was a new venture perceived as involving additional time spent at training sessions and its gains were unknown (Bentara, 2005). In a similar study Fukkink and Lont

(2007) illustrate that caregivers with higher educational levels have been found to provide better care, be more sensitive, are more involved with children and have more knowledge of developmentally appropriate practice with children than caregivers with lower educational levels. Moreover, recent studies have shown that it is not only the general educational level of caregivers that is a significant and strong predictor of quality caregiving but also the specialized caregiver training once in the job that can provide more sensitive and stimulating interactions between the caregiver and the children (Fukkink, Lont, 2007). In contrast to earlier studies Philipsen et al. (1997) were able to conclude that both formal and informal training contributes to quality in childcare. Norris (2001) also illustrates that child care providers who continuously participated in training offered higher quality care than providers who attended training only sporadically or never participated in any training. Both education and training appear to be better predictors of childcare quality than practitioner's age, work experience or professionalism (Fukkink, Lont, 2007). Furthermore Sun et al. (2013) study of teacher professional development suggests that teachers with a greater breadth of expertise may help their colleagues more, Bridwell-Mitchell and Lant (2014) show that there can be substantial differences between how much male and female principals seek out others for advice. Even the way districts and schools structure routines for professional learning could have an influence on the depth and strength of teachers' interactions (Coburn & Russell, 2008 in Bridwell-Mitchell et al., 2016).

The rise of women in employment can be partly explained by an increase in the percentage of mothers in work, coupled with government's policies aimed specifically at encouraging women, especially single parents, to work (Tomlison, 2011). The backing from the government for women to enter the labour force is closely linked with human capital theories that all individuals should contribute to helping the national economy being competitive in the new global economy (Tomlison, 2011). The increase in women's employment at all levels, has gone towards achieving wider European Union's aims at providing more equal social and economic opportunities for women (Tomlison, 2011). According to Hagemann et al. (2011) the notion of gender is an influence in the policies that are created for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in different contexts as the dominant notions of the gender-specific division of labour have an influence in the economy, society, politics and the related family model. This is also echoed by OECD, where the considerable gender imbalance within the ECEC profession is seen to 'reflect deeply-held cultural beliefs about child-rearing and the roles of women and men in society' (OECD, 2006:158). Moss (2006) argues that gendering in the workforce in early childhood education cannot be explained in terms of low pay, more likely this is a result of the combination of how the work is seen in society and of how education and employment are structured in ways that reproduce gendered workforces. Gendering reinforces the notion that child-rearing is essentially "women's work", with the traditional reflex of paying the profession less and regarding their work as being of small importance (OECD, 2006). An issue of extreme political relevance together with the need for a state-founded, flexible, full-time childcare is the reconciliation of family and work responsibilities on a basis that is more equitable for women (Hagemann et al., 2011). Different understandings and concepts of childrearing and education produce highly divergent policies and this is an important consideration because it produces different national policies for childcare and education on the basis of different cultural traditions (Hagemann et al., 2011).

## 5. Policy Review

This policy review includes the following documents:

(2010) *A workforce development plan for the early childhood care and education sector in Ireland.*

(2014) *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: The national policy framework for children & young people 2014 – 2020.*

(2015) *Report of Inter-Departmental Working Group: Future Investment in Childcare in Ireland.*

(2016a) *A Guide to Early-years Education-focused Inspection (EYEI) in Early-years Settings Participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme.*

(2016b) *Survey of Early Years Practitioners: Consultation for the Review of Education and Training Programmes in Early Years, May 2016.*

(2016c) *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019.*

(2016d) *Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016*

And reference to the *Better Start* website

<https://www.pobal.ie/BetterStart/Pages/Home.aspx>.

The focus is particularly on what each has to contribute to the debate on workforce development.

The starting point for this policy review is the 2010 Department of Education and Skills *A workforce development plan for the early childhood care and education sector in Ireland* (hereinafter referred to as Workforce Plan). This plan is reviewed below in 1, followed in 2 by commentary related to the points made in 1.1 and 1.2, drawing on a range of post-2010 documentation (an annotated bibliography of these is included as Appendix 1).

### 5.1. The current plan

#### **A workforce development plan for the early childhood care and education sector in Ireland (2010)**

This paper both sets out a picture of the situation in 2010, and formalises a requirement for review every five years, under the control of the Early Years Education Policy Unit (2010: 5).

##### 5.1.1. What is meant by quality?

#### ***Workforce, frameworks and investment***

For the sector, quality is seen as a three-armed combination of the development of a skilled workforce, the *Síolta* and *Aistear* frameworks, and sustained financial investment (2010: iii). The underlying premise is that protection of resources and investment ‘will result in the availability of a skilled qualified workforce capable of delivering high quality ECCE services’ (2010: 16).

## ***Qualifications***

For workers the emphasis is on the 'skills, knowledge, competencies, values and attitudes' needed to deliver high quality. These are seen as realised through the achievement of qualifications (2010: 2).

## ***Occupational profiles***

The Occupational profiles from the Model Framework identify 5 levels of practitioner, from 'Basic', through 'Experienced' to 'Expert' (2010: 20). These are then mapped onto NFQ levels, with an accompanying comment. This approach to nomenclature confusingly equates level of qualification with level of experience. This may negatively impact on practitioners, particularly those with considerable experience but either low levels of, or no recognised qualification.

### **5.1.2. How can a quality workforce be developed and sustained? Who is involved?**

#### ***Collective view***

The foreword by the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs states that there is a shared, collective idea of the destination for workforce development.

#### ***Career paths and progression routes***

The Foreword by An Tánaiste and Minister for Education and Skills emphasises the role of the plan in identifying career paths and progression routes. It is axiomatic that these are linked to status and also often to terms and conditions of employment. However, these are seen as outside the scope of the plan. This, combined with the fact that the plan does not include routes and Occupational profiles for those working in school settings (2010:1), increases the likelihood of unevenness of opportunity and disparities in pay and conditions. Taken together, these factors militate against a shared view of quality and quality workers across all types of provision for young children birth to six years.

#### ***Individual activity***

The plan highlights two main categories of ECEC worker: 1) new entrants; 2) existing workers, either currently unqualified or qualified but wishing to progress to higher levels. The needs and opportunities of these different groups are addressed here, in particular the barriers to upskilling of existing workers as a result of the lack of programmes that enable workers to simultaneously work and study, and the lack of funding, particularly for part-time courses. A range of solutions is identified. These focus mainly on increasing opportunities for individual workers, with less emphasis on the ways in which further training and upskilling might be focused on a setting as a whole/groups of settings working together, thus affording opportunities for systemic change.

#### ***Barriers to training***

The limited take up of progression routes, particularly by mature students, is attributed to the difficulties such workers may have in combining work and study, and the difficulty of

accessing such courses for workers with no nationally accredited qualification. There may also be a further element: if enhanced qualifications are not linked to terms and conditions of employment, those concerned may see little value in pursuing further study, demanding of their time and energy.

### ***Diversity of providers***

The range of different providers of training is identified as a challenge, particularly the different approaches to quality assurance of courses, and the variability in the skills and qualifications of training providers (2010:11). These different training providers are also responsible to different bodies/departments, with the potential this has for a) different approaches to quality and quality assurance; b) confusion for workers and settings; c) extra work for settings in liaising with a range of providers for different staff in a setting.

### **Three key points arising from this are:**

1. The identification of the necessity for clearly articulated professional pathways, and an agreed set of national standards, is both highly appropriate and worthwhile. However, the current approach does not encompass all of those working with young children, and may not be either materially or psychologically supportive for particular sectors, for example experienced workers with low levels of, or no, qualifications.
2. The emphasis in ensuring a quality workforce is on individual skills and knowledge, with little focus on the potential of more systemic approaches to preparation and upskilling of workers. This could be seen as a missed opportunity for developing quality.
3. The variety of training providers and accountable bodies makes it difficult to ensure consistency, and may result in confusion and extra work for settings.

## **5.2. Policy messages since 2010**

### **5.2.1. What is meant by quality?**

#### ***Workforce, frameworks and investment***

The Workforce Plan (2010) identifies three elements: a skilled workforce, implementation of the *Síolta* and *Aistear* frameworks, and continued investment. The first of these (a skilled workforce) is looked at below in *Qualifications*. With regard to *Aistear* and *Síolta*, the *Action Plan for Education* (2016c) emphasises the importance of continued support for the implementation of both frameworks. Evidence from the *Survey of Early Years Practitioners* (hereinafter referred to as *Survey*) (2016b) suggests the need for this. 42 percent of FE course members and 44 percent of HE course members reported they had not felt well prepared for *Aistear*, with figures of 46 percent and 50 percent respectively on preparedness for *Síolta*. The top three areas of interest they identified for further study were *Aistear*, *Síolta* and behaviour management. In the same survey, when asked to identify the curriculum followed in their settings, 45 percent identified *Aistear* and 12 percent cited *Síolta*. Two issues arise from this: a) neither is a curriculum, they are frameworks, suggesting levels of uncertainty in the workforce; b) the high percentages suggest that practitioners may lack confidence and



be uncertain about what they are doing. These factors suggest the need for a review of how Aistear and Síolta are reflected in the core knowledge element of the Occupational profiles.

*Better Outcomes Brighter Futures* (hereinafter referred to as BOBF) (2014) sets out a government commitment to increasing investment, subject to resources being available. A priority for investment is a further ECCE year: no specific mention is made of investment in training or CPD, although the Report (2015) identifies a DCYA Learner Fund for 2014-15 of €3m in order to support the existing workforce to achieve a mandatory NFQ level 5 or 6. This is significant, given the statistics in the Survey (2016b) that 69 per cent of practitioners report they had fully funded their own training, with only 16 per cent fully subsidised. However, this may only address the funding needs of a specific group of workers.

### **Qualifications**

The emphasis on qualifications as underpinning quality continues across policy documents. The Survey (2016b) identifies qualification requirements in place, partly in relation to ECEC, as a lever to quality. The *Report of the Interdepartmental Working Group* (hereinafter referred to as Report) says that ‘the need for a better recognised and qualified workforce was a common theme across the parental and public consultation process’ (2015: 8). Higher qualification profiles are also linked to professionalism, with professionalisation of the workforce seen as a key proxy for quality (Report, 2015). BOBF (2014) expresses concern over the low percentages of formal-based staff at Level 7 or above (14.7 per cent in 2014, in contrast to the CoRe benchmark of 60 per cent). One identified way of building capacity is funding for ECCE programme which incentivises staff through higher capitation grants to settings where lead staff have an appropriate degree. Note: the Report (2015) records a lack of consensus over minimum levels of qualification, ranging from Levels 6 to 8. The *Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016* (2016d) sets a minimum at level 5.

Implicit in the emphasis in the Workforce Plan (2010) on practitioners’ skills, knowledge, competencies, values and attitudes is the need for currency. Along with lack of confidence in their knowledge of Aistear and Síolta, practitioners felt a lack of preparedness for working with children from disadvantaged backgrounds, with special needs, and with English as an Additional Language (Survey, 2016b). The AIM initiative partly addresses this, along with the training of 900 preschool staff as inclusion coordinators (Action Plan, 2016c), but this will also impact on the core knowledge elements of the Occupational profiles, as well as the content of education and training programmes. Approximately half of all respondents also felt unprepared in relation to their awareness of ICT as a learning support (Survey, 2016b), which may again need to be reflected in the core knowledge element of the Occupational profiles, and education and training programmes.

A key addition to policy documentation is an emphasis on inspection and regulation, seen as part of professionalisation, and thus quality. The Survey (2016b) identifies education-focused inspections, introduced in 2016, as a further lever to quality. It asserts there is overwhelming support from practitioners for a regulatory body. However, the question asked was about the need for a professional standards body that promotes and regulates childcare, similar to the role played by the Teaching Council. This is different to a purely regulatory body.

Whilst EYEI evaluations are not designed to be a professional competence inspection (*A Guide to Early-years Education-focused Inspection*, 2016a), it is clear that initial training and CPD will need to take account of the new framework for inspection. This may impact upon content of the core knowledge areas of the Occupational profiles. However, this framework also only applies to settings offering the ECCE programme, suggesting that there may be a need for individual practitioners and settings to be competent and confident in managing the expectations of more than one inspection regime, eg the Tusla Inspections. (EYEI Inspection reports are typically 5-6 pages, whilst a sample of 19 Tusla Inspection reports viewed in October 2016 were 18-76 pages in length, averaging 38 pages.) This could be reviewed, with a view to developing one inspection framework to meet requirements for inspecting all types of setting (this could still have the potential to have different foci within it, but would ensure coherence in inspections, and be most time effective for practitioners and settings).

### ***Occupational profiles***

With regard to the Occupational profiles, the *Action Plan for Education* (2016c) identifies the synergies needed between the specifications for these and the content of education and training programmes, scheduled for review in 2017. This suggests that it is the content of the Occupational profiles which will influence training programme content: it may be valuable to consider how providers from all levels, along with other stakeholders, can be brought together with the Early Education Policy Unit to collaborate in this area.

#### **5.2.2. How can a quality workforce be developed and sustained? Who is involved?**

##### ***Collective view***

It is difficult to infer a collective view about destinations from the available policy documents. One area in which there seems to be growing consensus is in the need for a better-recognised and qualified workforce and incentivising professionalisation of childcare providers. A large number of all respondents (including parents, NGOs and academics as well as workers) referred to the workforce as undervalued and underpaid (Report, 2015).

##### ***Career paths and progression routes***

A major theme is the perceptions of workers in the sector of being undervalued, manifesting itself in aspects such as low pay, lack of full-time, secure employment and lack of clear career structures. Current data records 71 percent of respondents to a national survey as feeling undervalued or not valued at all (Survey, 2016b), and over 3370 childcare workers signed on to the Live Register during June to August 2014 (Report, 2015). There is a theme running through participants' responses in the Survey of being 'second class' to teachers, with comments around lack of respect in society for their role, lack of non-contact time, and a perception that teachers had better conditions for CPD (and thus for career progression) as most CPD for early years workers was outside of work time (Survey, 2016b).

##### ***Individual activity***

Individual access to affordable training and CPD continue to be seen as underpinning quality (Report, 2015). However, there is also some evidence of the need for a more collective ap-

proach to upskilling, with a commitment to establish peer-learning networks (BOBF, 2014), and the Better Start Quality Development Service. However, as the Report (2015) identifies, this is contingent upon continued investment in the service.

Sixty six percent of workers report training part-time (Survey, 2016b), noted in the Workforce Plan (2010) as often under-funded. Future provision will need to consider a) how part-time courses can be provided, eg at different times/online/distance learning etc; b) how these can be funded to ensure access.

### ***Barriers to training***

These continue to be similar to those identified in the 2010 Workforce Plan. As noted above, the majority of workers are funding their own training, in their own time, and often working full-time as well. The amount of time required, and lack of appropriate courses of study, were frequently cited as barriers. This includes lack of opportunity for RPL, which may particularly impact on experienced workers with low levels of qualification. There is a perception that, whilst workers are generally positive about the quality of education and training they received, completing courses might have little impact on their salary or conditions of work. Related to this were calls for a national pay scale (Survey, 2016b).

### ***Diversity of providers***

A range of providers continue to be involved. As before, these providers may also report to different departments. The Action Plan (2016c) emphasises the importance of departments working together: 'We will work closely with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to improve initial and continuing professional development opportunities in this important sector' (2016c: 31). There may be much value in efforts to bring responsibility for all types of provision, and all training, under a single umbrella body, reflecting the emphasis on coordinated provision in the National Early Years Strategy (BOBF, 2104), and the aim of Better Start, to establish a cohesive approach to quality across the Early Childhood Education and Care sector. It is worth noting the diverse range of departments listed in government commitments in BOBF (2014), each with its own approaches and priorities, albeit that a lead department is identified for each commitment.

There is evidence of diversity of practical experience on programmes, with 20 percent of further education students and 11 percent of higher education students reporting no practical experience, and high levels of variability in the number of placements undertaken as part of a course. This impacts on individual trainees' feelings of competence and confidence, and also more widely on the sector, and their views about new staff quality. This is potentially an area in which national guidance could be valuable, in managing variability in course organisation.

Concerns are expressed about the difficulties of providing training which reaches all child-care workers, particularly those in non-formal, non-relative care, such as childminders. There may be value in looking to the experiences of other countries, such as the UK in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where childminders were often successfully engaged in training as a result of their involvement in local children's centres.



## 6. Stakeholder interviews

Individual and group interviews with representatives of organisations and institutions in the Early Childhood Care and Education sector were conducted during visits to Ireland and over the phone, beginning in September 2016. The interviews followed a semi-structured schedule, aiming at providing a space for participants to engage in a focused conversation rather than answering a set of predefined questions.

At the beginning of each interview participants were informed about the purpose of the conversation, which was to provide contextual information to support the review of the ECEC Occupational Role Profiles. They were then encouraged to start the conversation by addressing their general perspective on the Irish Early Childhood Care and Education system and, more specifically, their views on the workforce, on requirements for working with young children in the Irish context, and on the existing Occupational Role Profiles.

In a second step, the interviewer encouraged participants to talk about their own role (individual or organisational) in processes of developing the early childhood workforce. The conversations developed around questions of participants' *agency, responsibility, and contribution to professionalism and professionalisation*.

In the third and final stage of the conversation participants were asked to name the most urgent systemic challenges, as well as systemic opportunities for the ECEC sector.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed to facilitate analysis.

We analysed the transcripts applying the codes (categories and themes) that emerged from the analysis of Irish policy documents (see previous section). We aggregated the themes we identified across all interviews. This was a deliberate step taken to ensure the anonymity of contributions against the background of a small sample.

### 6.1. Analysis of interviews

Interviews were conducted with 12 professionals (academics, policymakers, practitioners) including representation from:

- Department for Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)  
Better Start (inspectorate)
- Early Childhood Ireland
- Pre-school service provider
- Programme providers and education institutes (Blanchardstown, Cork, Trinity College)
- Association of Childcare Professionals (ACP)
- Department for Education and Skills (DES)  
Early Years Inspectorate
- Childcare and childminding

These were coded using categories established in the Policy Review, to support cross-referencing.

## 6.2. What is meant by quality in an Irish Early Childhood context?

The Workforce Plan (2010) identifies a skilled workforce, the Síolta and Aistear frameworks and sustained financial investment as the three key elements of a quality service.

### 6.2.1. A skilled workforce

Development and sustenance of a skilled workforce includes a view of what counts as 'skilled', that is, qualifications, and the incentives for practitioners to continue upskilling and to remain in role. However, it crucially also includes concepts and values about what it is to be a professional and part of a profession. This, in turn, is linked to ideas about how a body of workers are regulated.

#### 6.2.1.1. Qualifications and upskilling

The potential linkage between qualifications and quality is acknowledged by a number of participants, but with a caveat that this may be more at a systemic level, rather than at the level of individual settings, and an awareness that pursuing qualifications may be driven either by funding incentives or regulatory requirements.

- There are concerns that the emphasis on level of qualifications in the 5 levels of the Occupational Role Profiles may lead to less recognition for the value of experience.
- There is debate about required levels: the statutory minimum level 5 is described as 'very low level';
- A tension is identified between the 'big push' of investment in upskilling to levels 5 and 6, at the same time as university programmes are focusing on graduates at levels 7 and 8. However, one participant highlights the potential for 'capturing' students who come in to train at level 6 and moving them on to level 7 and 8 programmes;
- Upskilling individuals may benefit the service they work for, but may not always result in enhanced salaries for the individuals concerned.

#### 6.2.1.2. Professionalism and professionalization

This was a major theme for all participants, and was seen as an area of considerable development since the publication of the first iteration of occupational role profiles, albeit that professionalism was still seen by many as at an emergent level in Ireland. A number of participants measured the early childhood sector against 'traditional' attributes of a profession, including self-determination and agency, the existence of a professional body with responsibility for setting out core requirements and expectations, and shared codes of practice. These were cited as valuable in creating a professional identity and also in supporting a career structure. The following themes were discussed:

- Early childhood professional identities may be multiple, and include those working in services for children under three and those for children over three, and those working in the early years in primary schools: such fragmentation may militate against a coherent professional identity and ideas of professional practice;
- Irish cultural traditions may work against early childhood workers being seen as professionals (this may particularly affect childminders and those working with children under three): this may lead to them feeling both excluded and ambivalent about their professional identity;
- A sense of feeling undervalued impacts on early childhood workers' sense of identity, leading to feelings of disempowerment;

- Poor levels of pay may be equated with a sense of early childhood as not a profession ;
- The Occupational Role profiles were seen as potentially (and positively) influential on professional practice and professional identity;
- A growing number of qualified and experienced early childhood workers are recognising and valuing themselves as professionals, and are beginning to be more proactive in their advocacy for early childhood;
- The introduction of EYEI may impact on professional practice and ideas of professionalism by a) introducing regulatory frameworks, often seen as a hallmark of professionalism; b) creating a new occupational role of early years inspector, drawn from early years graduates, with power to influence aspects such as 'relational pedagogy'.

### 6.2.1.3. *Inspection and regulation*

This area was discussed by the majority of participants, particularly in light of the introduction of new EYEI inspections this year.

- Introduction of EYEI was generally seen as positive, particularly given the emphasis on recruiting inspectors from within early childhood practice. One respondent stated: 'I know that my childminders want more of a Department of Education style inspection...they want to be inspected, they want to be seen as professional'. At the same time, one participant noted that there was still some resistance to inspection, even when workers were assessed as having met the criteria.
- EYEI were seen by as having the potential to impact positively on practice, and for the process of inspection to be more consultative;
- A concern expressed by many was with regard to the phenomenon of multiple inspections in early years, and what was seen as a lack of integration across the different inspection regimes. The cost of implementing both health and education inspection systems was cited as potentially resulting in less money for other parts of the system. The situation was also compared unfavourably to the education sector, in which 'the teacher is accredited with common sense...and to do things professionally, whereas it appears the childcare sector are not completely trusted'.
- Concerns were raised that inspection and regulation could become overly prescriptive, and potentially lead to practitioners becoming more cautious and risk averse. Aistear was seen as positive in the potential for it to be interpreted at local levels, and participants were keen for this to continue, and to avoid narrowing of practice, and an orthodoxy developing;
- Potential problems related to inspection also included the requirement to complete large amounts of paperwork, and the need to avoid a 'box ticking' approach, and the way in which inspection could be more logistically challenging for some parts of the sector than others, for example, childminders who are sole providers.

### 6.2.2. *Aistear and Síolta frameworks*

Participants report very favourably about the value of both Aistear and Síolta, as 'absolutely fantastic' frameworks of 'a very high standard, at an international level'. However, there are also a number of concerns, that impact upon the content of initial training and cpd programmes, and the possible core knowledge element of revised Occupational Role Profiles. These concerns include:

- Ensuring continued rollout of formal introduction to Síolta and Aistear (this may be particularly relevant at FETAC levels 5 and 6, where content may differ across cours-

es), and that all practitioners can access it, both geographically and across the sector;

- The need to continue to look at how the frameworks translate into practice, for practitioners in all kinds of contexts, including childminders and childcare workers as well as teachers;
- Misunderstandings about the role of Aistear and Síolta as curriculum frameworks and not curricula;
- Differences in interpretation of the place of both frameworks, ranging from being seen as ‘overarching’ every aspect of practice to ‘doing my Aistear hour’ (relating to comment of a young teacher).

### 6.2.3. Investment

Investment was identified as a key concern by the majority of participants, at both an overall level:

*it's all down to costings but if you want quality service, if you want quality practitioners...*

and also in specific contexts, eg:

- Sustainability of ECCE year funding;
- Funding for children with special needs.

Participants were strongly motivated by trying to ensure quality, and were not unsympathetic to the difficulties government face in the current financial situation, but, as one put it:

*we don't want money at all costs, we want money for what's strategically planned out*

This linked to concerns about the importance of coordination and collective activity (see 6.2.1.).

### 6.2.4. Occupational Role Profiles

The current version of the ORP were seen by participants as a starting point, a ‘holding mechanism’ in order to have something in place. Emphasis on a competency model was seen as relevant to its time, but the approach is now seen as outdated and needing review.

- A starting point for review of the ORP and model framework needs to be located in a vision and strategy for early childhood services in Ireland, if it is to work for children and for those who work with children;
- The framework has the potential to be a useful tool to guide practice, and as noted in 6.1.2, to contribute to a stronger early childhood identity;
- Knowledge and use of the framework may not be even across all sectors: review of the framework needs to ensure widespread engagement with what is drawn up, particularly if this could then be used to support discussions about roles, and formulation of job descriptions;
- A criticism expressed by many was that, in their current form, the ORP do not reflect the reality of working in the sector. Structures were seen as flat, with promotion and career development often meaning a move out of direct practice and into management. Does this require a different form of framework?



*I think the model framework in terms of practitioners is interesting because it doesn't actually match with practice and it doesn't match with the potential career path if you could call it that for practitioners in practice, because there aren't those levels or gradation. In terms of progression, in terms of the workforce, what's available in terms of careers?*

- As noted in 6.2.1, there are concerns that the current framework emphasizes qualification levels, and shows less recognition for experience;
- Some of the terminology of the current framework was questioned, in particular if it led to someone seeing themselves as, for example, a 'basic' practitioner, with no need or incentive to move on;
- There is no relationship between salary levels and framework levels.

### **6.3. How can a quality workforce be developed and sustained? Who is involved?**

#### **6.3.1. Collective views**

There was considerable emphasis on the importance of collective views, arrived at collaboratively, and coordination of services. *Síolta*, for example, was cited as embodying a set of principles arrived at across the sector. The idea of a vision for early childhood was strongly emphasized. This was seen as tied to development of a strategic plan for the sector, and leadership:

Actually what matters is a vision. There is no vision for the early childhood sector that is respectful of the unique nature of early childhood education as a period of education from 0 to 6, or 8, which requires professional training and support.

- One participant set out the following agenda for developing collective views:
  - Identification of a strategic direction, based on a vision for what we want childhood education in Ireland to look like;
  - A strategic plan for early years, developed by all sectors and stakeholders;
  - Discussion of what is affordable;
  - Knowledge of what children in diverse communities need;
  - A workforce planning strategy, including estimates of capacity and the percentage of graduates we want working in the sector;
  - The place and role of child minding;
  - School and childcare provision.
- Participants favoured a more integrated, cohesive approach to policy, training and inspection. The current context means that professionals are encountering different approaches, and receiving different types of guidance from different bodies.
- Participants identified a range of potential ways forward, including:
  - More effective cross-departmental collaboration on policy;
  - A more integrated structure and joined up thinking to take account of, and value, all aspects of the system, for example work with under threes and childminding alongside settings and schools;
  - Locating all services under one umbrella body, in the interests of cohesion and to ensure that policies and frameworks are applied consistently. This might mean moving all services to the Department of Education, although there was also recognition of the role of the DCYA, particularly in the con-

text of aspects such as the non-formal sector, child wellbeing and integrated practice;

- Greater engagement of the sector in policy development.

### 6.3.2. Career paths and progression routes

#### 6.3.2.1. Qualifications and career structures

Participants emphasized the sheer amount of training, at both initial and cpd levels that the early childhood sector engaged in.

- Many practitioners are engaging in training that may have little impact on their overall qualification level, or recognize their achievement. This may be at real cost in terms of time and money, both personally and to the service or setting;
- The sector is characterized by a very flat career structure: this is seen as related to low relative investment in the sector. As noted in 6.2.4, the ORP framework as a result does not reflect the reality of many practitioners' experience;
- Promotion often acts to take practitioners out of direct practice, into specialist services, policy work etc.;
- Those with level 8 qualifications often move out of early childhood, either into primary teaching or out of the sector altogether, because of low wages, low status, and expectations;
- Those with lower level qualifications may move out of the sector because they are able to work in a less stressful area for similar money;
- Lack of security of employment for many workers, who are only employed for 38 weeks of the year, may influence retention.

#### 6.3.2.2. Perceptions of value

This aspect elicited the highest volume of comments from participants. A consistent theme running through their reflections was the perception of being undervalued, and the potential this had for negatively affecting a sense of identity. One participant reflected that 'if you don't value someone...they're not going to value their job' and, even more disturbingly, 'how are they going to respect the children?' if they do not feel respected themselves.

- Financial concerns were cited by many. These were at two levels: 1) low levels of investment and reductions in funding of the system impacted upon practitioners' feelings of being valued, and their capacity to provide high quality services; 2) low pay for practitioners contributed to them feeling undervalued, and perceptions of low status. This was particularly cited in relation to low pay for graduates. One participant posed the question: 'why would you go and acquire all these qualifications and end up being paid 12 euros an hour?';
- Retention was seen as a particular problem, especially in the context of low pay. This was seen as potentially providing a poor return on the investment of training, particularly at graduate level, and thus influencing quality provision;
- Perceptions of value at all levels influenced participants' comments. These included by society as a whole (including undervaluing the role of caring for children), government (related to low conditions of service) and parents, who may be seen as not wanting to pay sufficient for childcare;
- Participants compared the sector to the pay and conditions for teachers. There were consistent calls for early childhood practitioners to have similar conditions of service to teachers, particularly with regard to aspects such as non-contact, 'professional development' time, structures and systems to support and provide access to cpd,

and recognition of their skills and knowledge as on a par with that of teachers, as well as salaries. A perception that some early years workers may have chosen the sector as a 'second best' to teaching remains;

- The female nature of the workforce was cited as a potential contributing factor to the sector's low status.

### 6.3.3. Individual and collective activity

Participants commented on the individual nature of much cpd, but there was also a feeling that more could be accomplished when groups/teams of staff collaborated:

*going out and doing a one-off training or 3 sessions of training it needs more than that to embed it in practice and it needs it, you know it needs a whole group to come together. Often we have the manager that comes along and maybe it goes back, it's very dependent on the manager capacities to bring it back to the group, you know and basically that's what happens then, if the manager has a very good understanding and their will is there to do that it can happen very well, but in lots of instances we hear educators going back saying "Well we weren't able to do this because our manager didn't understand when he came back".*

However, this collective activity was made more difficult if staff were not paid for time outside of the session (see 6.3.4 below).

### 6.3.4. Barriers to training

The majority of participants identified significant barriers:

- A concern that perhaps more is being expected of early years workers than other sectors in their commitment to engage in professional development, including committing personal financial resources;
- On work-based training routes students are in full-time work and training 'from 6 till 10, 2 nights a week': at the same time, they are 'a joy to teach...and they will go out and make a difference';
- Lack of non-contact time, which one participant wanted to reconceptualise as 'professional development time' in an effort to recognize the obligations early years workers are under to 'raise their standards' and update their knowledge;
- The language used in the frameworks may not be accessible to all early years workers, although there is also acknowledgement that the practice guides are both more accessible and more practical;

The following quote highlights many of the tensions:

*in the national voluntary group, it went straight to what training can we provide for the practitioners. I was saying to them 'but they can't afford to get to the training'... this is like really the height of the recession and they can't afford to put the petrol or the diesel in the car to go to the training, they can't afford to pay the childminder to come in, if they have a child, so that they can go to training, they can't afford to take off the half hour early so they can get to whatever training and they can't afford the time... or if it's online maybe they don't have access to the internet or they can't afford a computer because of the way things are going. And they were saying oh yea and then going right, back to the training... this is what they need, they need training, they need training, they need training and it's almost like that's become the*

*agenda. We're going to provide professional development or we want to professionalise this sector it means loads and loads of training but actually were not going to look at the people directly involved*

### **Training providers and provision**

Comments here related to both providers and programmes.

- The importance of reviewing the range of training providers remains central to supporting high quality, and in ensuring fitness for purpose. This includes continued review of personnel, their backgrounds, qualifications and experience, with a view to quality assurance, accreditation and regulation of the sector;
- There is a continuing need to streamline the range of available qualifications if a competent system is to be developed, but also a recognition that this takes time;
- Whilst there is emphasis on 3-6 years, it is important to ensure a focus on birth-3 years;
- The experiences of individuals on courses at similar levels can be very different, depending upon where they take the course. There is an ongoing need for review of aspects such as course content, including attention to Aistear and Síolta, diversity and inclusive practice, the relationship of theory to practice, and contact time;
- There is a need to better embed Aistear and Síolta in programmes at all levels;
- The role of placement, including aspects such as the quality of placements and the role of mentoring and supervision, needs review to ensure that students have opportunities to experience quality practice;
- It would be useful to look at the extent to which programmes at all levels encourage and support students in developing (and reflecting upon) personal values, and developing a 'wider perspective' on early childhood.

## **6.4. Systemic challenges and opportunities**

Participants were asked to identify key systemic challenges and opportunities. A digest of their responses is included here:

### **Investment**

Appropriate levels of investment in order to ensure that expectations of quality can be met  
Appropriate pay for early childhood professionals to support viable career paths

### **The workforce**

Enhanced pay and status for the sector  
Reducing the turnover of the workforce  
Retaining good people

### **Professionalisation**

Early Childhood to be seen as a profession, with agency and self-determination  
The need for a professional body  
Enhanced conditions of service, consistent with other profession

### **Vision**

Building capacity around a vision of what early childhood education should look like in Ireland

### **Integration**

Integration of services at government level

**Quality**

Acknowledging the challenges of practice and recognising quality practice  
A focus on constantly improving quality

**Regulation**

Ensuring that regulation is supportive rather than prescriptive

**Training**

Recognising practitioner training and qualifications  
Ensuring that students are well prepared for practice  
Ensuring Aisetar and Sólta are embedded in practice  
Ensuring the sector has the capacity to respond to demand

## 7. Consultation and feedback

The Early Years Policy Unit, Department for Education and Skills, hosted a public consultation event on Saturday, 19<sup>th</sup> November 2016. The event took place at Dublin Castle, Printworks. The purpose of the event was to inform stakeholders about the ongoing review of Occupational Role Profiles, to present preliminary findings of the reviews of international literature and Irish policy documents, and to discuss key areas for revision of the Profiles (see appendix 1 for the programme of the day). Approximately 60 participants attended the day; they represented a wide variety of elements of the Early Childhood Care and Education sector including practitioners, provider-owners, representatives of professional associations, providers of professional preparation (HE and FE), inspection, regulatory and quality assurance bodies, City and county Childcare Committees and research.

The day was opened by Mr Gary Ó Donnchadha, Asst. Secretary, Department of Education & Skills, followed by a short introduction by Ms Maresa Duignan, Asst. Chief Inspector, Department of Education & Skills.

Professor Mathias Urban, University of Roehampton, London, UK, then introduced the brief given to the Early Childhood Research Centre, gave an overview of relevant international literature, and presented a preliminary analysis based on the review of Irish policy documents and stakeholder interviews.

Following the presentation, participants were invited to discuss three sets of questions concerning the Occupational Role Profiles during a roundtable discussion phase. The questions were grouped under the three *key areas for revision* of the ORPs that were identified from the policy review and stakeholder interviews. Participants were asked to discuss the following questions:

### **First key area for revision: Generic characteristics of the ECEC workforce**

What would you see as alternative approaches to *naming* the various levels of

- *formal qualification*
- *practical experience*

represented in the ECCE workforce?

### **Second key area for revision: Core knowledge areas**

The current Profiles do not mention recent guiding frameworks for the ECEC sector.

How can a clear orientation towards Aistear and Síolta, and respect for diversity and working towards equality (equitable outcomes for all children) be incorporated in the core knowledge and skills at all levels?

### **Third key area for revision: Pathways to professionalisation and systemic development**

How should practical experience (beyond, before, or outside of formal qualification) be documented and recognised?

How can the need for strategic leadership at systems level be reflected in education and training?

Key points arising from the group discussions were documented at each table and then collected in a shared power point presentation (see appendix 2) immediately after the roundtable discussions. The collective product provided the basis for the plenary discussion to round up and close the day.

## 8. Consolidated findings: towards a revised framework of Occupational Role Profiles

### 8.1. Consolidated findings

Based on the 2002 *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector*, the 2010 *Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector in Ireland* aspires to present a shared, collective vision for the development of the early childhood workforce. However, as we have outlined in the review of Irish policy documents, significant inconsistencies remain due to the structural characteristics of the Irish ECEC sector and the limitations of the plan.

Interviews with stakeholders from the early childhood care and education sector confirm the inconsistencies identified in the policy review. Our interview partners also identified a number of specific issues that will have to be addressed in the interest of a coherent, effective and sustainable development of the early childhood care and education workforce in Ireland. The points raised in the interviews go beyond the specification of roles for ECEC practitioners. They are important, though, as they provide background and necessary context for the revision. Systemic issues arising from the stakeholder interviews can be subsumed under the two broad categories of *professionalism, professionalisation and professional identity* and *evaluation, monitoring and inspection* (see section 6).

#### 8.1.1. Professionalism, professionalisation and professional identity

This turned out to be a major theme for all participants, seen as an area of considerable development since the publication of the first iteration of occupational role profiles. Yet, professionalism in the ECEC sector is still seen by many as at emergent level in Ireland. Discussing the general situation of ECEC as a profession, participants tend to measure the early childhood sector against what some see as 'traditional' or generic attributes of a profession. They identify weaknesses in areas including

- *self-determination and agency*
- *the existence of a professional body with responsibility for setting out core requirements and expectations*
- *and shared codes of practice*

These were cited as valuable in creating a professional identity and also in supporting a career structure.

Closely linked to the general picture painted of the early childhood profession in Ireland are questions relating to individual and collective professional identity:

- Early childhood *professional identities may be multiple*, and include those working in services for children under three and those for children over three, and those working in the early years in primary schools;
- Such *fragmentation* may challenge a *coherent professional identity* and ideas of professional practice;
- *Irish cultural traditions* may work against *early childhood workers being seen as professionals* (this may particularly affect childminders and those working with children under three). This may lead to them feeling both excluded and ambivalent about their professional identity;
- *A sense of feeling undervalued* impacts on early childhood workers' sense of identity, leading to feelings of disempowerment;
- *Poor levels of pay* may be equated with a sense of early childhood as not a profession;
- *The Occupational Role profiles were seen as potentially (and positively) influential on professional practice and professional identity*;
- *A growing number of qualified and experienced early childhood workers are recognising and valuing themselves as professionals*, and are beginning to be more proactive in their advocacy for early childhood.

#### 8.1.2. Evaluation, monitoring and inspection

This area was discussed by the majority of participants, particularly in light of the introduction of new EYEI inspections in 2016

- Introduction of EYEI was *generally seen as positive, particularly given the emphasis on recruiting inspectors from within early childhood practice*;
- However, there is still some resistance to inspection, even when workers were assessed as having met the criteria;
- *EYEI were seen by as having the potential to impact positively on practice*, and for the process of inspection to be more consultative.

A concern expressed by many was with regard to the phenomenon of multiple inspections in early years, and what was seen as a lack of integration across the different inspection regimes. The cost of implementing both health and education inspection systems was cited as potentially resulting in less money for other parts of the system.

- The situation was also compared unfavourably to the education sector, in which *'the teacher is accredited with common sense...and to do things professionally, whereas it appears the childcare sector are not completely trusted'*;
- Concerns were raised that inspection and regulation could become overly prescriptive, and potentially lead to practitioners becoming more cautious and risk averse. Aistear was seen as positive in the potential for it to be interpreted at local levels,



and participants were keen for this to continue, and to avoid narrowing of practice, and an orthodoxy developing;

- Potential problems related to inspection also included the *requirement to complete large amounts of paperwork*, and the need to *avoid a 'box ticking' approach*.

These *systemic conditions* for the workforce (which are a key element of a *competent system* as identified by CORE) will have to be taken into consideration for any revision of the Occupational Role Profile.

## 8.2. Key areas for revised Occupational Role Profiles

Based on the consolidated analysis of *international literature, Irish policy documents, stakeholder interviews* and feedback given at the *consultation event* we identify three key areas for revision of the ORPs.

- **Generic characteristics of the ECEC workforce**
- **Core knowledge areas**
- **Pathways to professionalisation and systemic development**

### 8.2.1. Generic characteristics of the ECEC workforce

#### 8.2.1.1. Overcoming the tension between formal qualification and experience

The 2002 *Model Framework* emphasises the importance of growing experience and lifelong learning as key to developing consistency across a highly diverse workforce. For individual practitioners, two pathways for professional learning and development are identified:

*Practical (prior) experience and formal education and training*

Both pathways are seen as supporting a progression through five stages of occupational profiles:

*Basic practitioner – intermediate practitioner – experienced practitioner  
– advanced practitioner – expert practitioner*

The 2010 Workforce Development Plan maintains the five-tier system but has now a strong emphasis on the level of formal qualification (NFQ level) required at each level (QQI / FETAC 4 to 8/9).

This is an understandable shift considering the desire to raise the overall level of qualification of the ECEC workforce.

The WDP also acknowledges the difficult task of aligning the vast variety of experiences in the field, practical or other, with a qualification profile for the ECEC workforce:

*Of the ECCE workforce, the client groups that are already in employment present particular challenges for RPL systems (p. 10).*

Unfortunately, the terminology used in the 2010 revision can result in a conflation between levels of experience and qualification, suggesting that one equates the other. This becomes problematic when a small (but growing) number of graduates with level 7/8 qualification (e.g. BA ECCE) are expected to exert leadership and act as individual change agents in a sector that is dominated by practitioners with experience but low levels of formal qualification. It may also negatively impact on practitioners, particularly those with considerable experience but either low levels of, or no recognised qualification.

Naming professional roles in the early childhood sector is further complicated by conflicting messages from different departments. In 2016, the Department for Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) publishes a *List of Early Years qualifications recognised for the purposes of meeting the requirements of the Regulations and DCYA Childcare Programmes Contracts*. This document is an extensive list of national and international qualifications that are deemed acceptable for working with young children in Irish ECEC. While the eclectic nature of this document can be seen as a reflection of the reality of the Irish early childhood sector (and its incoherence!), its existence also underlines the need for a comprehensive workforce reform and development strategy covering the entire ECEC sector.

It has to be recognised that the tension between practical experience and formal qualification is not specific to the early childhood sector. According to Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the body responsible for overseeing vocational Education and Training (levels 4, 5, 6, with a limited remit at HE levels 7, 8, 9), other professions are facing similar challenges.

One way to address the tension is to improve the practical experience of those studying to gain a HE degree. QQI refer to an example of a Counselling and Psychotherapy course that systematically incorporates practice in years 1, 2 and 3. Focussing on more systematic and improved exposure to excellent practice during their studies would most certainly be beneficial for ECEC students. A systematic review and revision of the content and organisation of HE programmes could take that into account. However, the specific challenge for the ECEC sector appears to be a persistent difficulty to identify and provide practice placements that meet the requirements and expectations of students. The dilemma for an ECEC sector characterised by an 'emerging' professionalism (as confirmed in the interviews) is that current students are being qualified to lead on quality development and change in the very same services that would ideally expose them to high quality practice throughout their studies.

### 8.2.2. Core knowledge areas

At present, the stratified *generic characteristics* of the ECEC workforce are framed by six *areas of core knowledge and skills*:

*Child development – personal, professional development – social environment – health, hygiene, nutrition and safety – education and play – communication, administration, management*

These areas apply across all of the current five tiers of ORP. Such an approach is supported by the findings of CORE that emphasise the importance of shared and matching *knowledge(s), practices* and *values* across all layers of an early childhood system. We suggest that revised Occupational Role Profiles maintain the general approach.

However, the policy analysis in combination with themes emerging from the stakeholder interviews indicates that the six areas need updating:

1. The core 'knowledge and skills' of the ECEC workforce should have a clear orientation towards the two guiding framework documents for the sector, *Aistear* and *Síolta*.
2. Much stronger emphasis on working in contexts of *diversity*, *(in)equality* and *social justice* should be incorporated in the core knowledge and skills. Given demographic changes in society, this should include preparation for working with children with English as an additional language. This should draw on readily available resources in the Irish ECEC sector, e.g. resources developed by the *éist* project, the results of the government-funded preschool initiative for children from minority groups (2012) and the revised Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education (2016).  
In this context it is important to mention the most recent policy initiative, the *Access and Inclusion Model* (AIM / [www.aim.gov.ie](http://www.aim.gov.ie)). AIM addresses inclusion with a specific focus on disability and links disability to wider issues of diversity and equality through the document *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2016).
3. Professional and pedagogical leadership will have to become a key component of the knowledge and skills base. This is of particular importance because graduates of early childhood education and care degree courses will have to take on roles as change agents for the sector. At the moment there appears to be an emphasis on child- (and, to a lesser extent family-) related content in the curricula of HE programmes. While this is generally in line with findings in other countries (CoRe, 2011a), the Irish early childhood sector faces a particular pressure to adopt rapid change from within. Therefore it will be necessary to review programmes for aspects of *systemic leadership and evaluation*.
4. More emphasis should be placed upon preparation and continuing professional development knowledge and practice in the use of ICT for learning, reflecting rapid changes in this area since publication of the 2010 framework.
5. Clear reference or orientation towards the aim of building a *competent system* (CORE) should be made in the revised core knowledge and skills. It will be crucial to identify and *overcome* fractures and mismatches of knowledge(s), practices and underpinning values between actors and institutions at all levels of the system, including practice, professional preparation and development, evaluation and monitoring (inspection), research, and governance.
6. Recently introduced evaluation and inspection frameworks will have to be taken into account by initial professional preparation and professional development. A clear link should be made between critical (self-) reflection at all levels of practice and both internal and external evaluation and monitoring.

General emphasis should be placed on

- the nature of **knowledge** as
  - diverse (hence knowledge(s) )

- emerging in complex and constantly changing situations
- co-constructed between all actors in the ECEC system including children, families and communities, practitioners, researchers
- critically reflected (hence purposeful) **practices** rather than skills
- the importance to identify underpinning (and often non-explicit) **values** at all levels of the system, rather than openly demonstrated attitudes only

### 8.2.3. Pathways to professionalisation and systemic development

The current five-tiered ORP framework suggests career pathways that are currently not available to practitioners. We suggest that the revised ORP framework addresses the relationship between experience and formal qualification in the sector, emphasising that one does not necessarily equate with the other (see also 8.2.1.)

Building on existing orientations in the 2002 *Model Framework* and the 2010 Workforce Development Plan, revised ORP should explore a portfolio approach to recognising and accrediting prior experience. Experiences from previous attempts to develop such portfolio-based approaches should be carefully evaluated and revised.

(Re)defining the relationship between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ lies at the core of emerging initiatives to introduce apprenticeships into the Irish early childhood sector. In terms of the necessary systemic professionalisation of the sector, such initiatives should be approached with extreme caution. Compared to other sectors that use apprenticeships to transfer professional knowledge to future members of the profession based on established practices, the early childhood sector faces a different challenge: the dearth of excellent practice settings for apprentices and students on placement to attend (Murray, forthcoming). Instead of being inducted into best practices already widely established throughout the sector, new entrants (i.e. college graduates) will increasingly have to introduce change into the sector. This, to some extent, is a reversal of roles compared to other sectors that might render apprenticeships incapable of making a meaningful contribution to professionalising the sector.

If the Irish ECEC sector aims at orienting itself towards becoming a *competent system*, the content of the Occupational Role Profiles will have to be reflected more explicitly in professional preparation and training. That will require organised spaces (institutionalised structures) for collaboration between policy-making, education and training providers, evaluation and monitoring systems and research.

Given the diverse nature of the ECEC workforce covered by Occupational Role Profiles there is an obvious need for strategic leadership at both policy and practice levels. We suggest that revised ORP reflect this need more clearly and emphasise elements of leadership, systemic thinking, and critical reflection at level 7/8 qualifications. Graduates are increasingly faced with the question of how to effectively act as leaders and change agents in work contexts that are characterised by experienced but lower qualified practitioners.

Revised ORP should also address the tension between career progression and retention. Without a progression route in practice, the only option to gain promotion and appropriate pay is for graduates to leave the immediate work with children. The result is a ‘brain drain’ that is not sustainable.

Access to continuing professional development for those in work has been highlighted as often challenging in both time and money. We recommend a review of modes of delivery to ensure, where possible, greater opportunities for part-time, flexible, online and distance learning. In addition, development of a more systemic approach may be facilitated by training modes aimed at whole staff groups, or clusters of settings. This reflects current interest in Peer-Learning Networks, and may also have significant financial advantages as a result of economies of scale.

### 8.3. Occupational Role Profiles: towards a revised framework

Based on the findings of our review we have identified *key areas* that we strongly suggest should be taken into account for a new approach to framing professional roles (individual and collective) for the Early Childhood Education and Care sector (cf previous section). These key areas are a starting point for the development of more specific elements of a revised Occupational Role Profile framework. From this starting point, and *only if embedded in a more comprehensive workforce reform strategy*, a new framework should replace the implicit but unrealistic hierarchy with a pathway for career progression:

Instead of maintaining the implicit hierarchy (*basic to expert*), revised Occupational Role Profiles should adopt an alternative nomenclature to reflect the value of both experience and formal qualification. Consultation within the sector will be necessary in identifying appropriate terminology, but two possible ways forward are either numerical, i.e. level 1, level 2 etc. (an approach which also allows for further possible future iterations) or an approach which more explicitly relates levels to job roles, for example assistant practitioner, lead practitioner etc. The value of a numerical approach is that it facilitates mapping of all types of childcare provider, for example childminders as well as those working in centres, onto the framework.

A new framework should also take account of the changing roles at all levels of the early childhood system: A revised Occupational Role Profiles framework should take account of varying roles within the sector, for example practitioners in roles of pedagogic leadership as well as those with management leadership roles. More generally, there would be considerable value in delineating more explicit linkage between ORPs and career structures and progression routes. Requirements at each level should map how these are reflected in award levels as well as how they may be achieved through RPL.

However, it is important, at this point, to reiterate the main conclusion that can be drawn from both the documentary review and the findings of our investigation into the reality of the Irish early childhood workforce, as experienced by experts and stakeholders at all levels of the sector: *A narrow focus on the reformulation of one particular aspect (ORPs) in an extraordinarily complex and contradictory context (the Irish early childhood education and care system) carries the risk of being ineffective or even irrelevant.*

Development towards a *competent system* will require a much broader and comprehensive reframing of the entire ECEC workforce, understood as an integrated profession working with children from birth to 6 years of age, its conditions of service and work, its recruitment, pre- and in-service education and continuous professional development based on a shared

vision and understanding of the purpose of services for young children and their families in 21<sup>st</sup> century Ireland.

## 9. Towards a competent system: further considerations

As we have outlined in the introductory chapter, there has been significant progress in key areas of the Irish early childhood sector in recent years. However, our investigation underlines that the main systemic challenges remain unresolved. While the workforce is central to any development in the sector, it is only one (if crucial!) aspect of the cultural, political, economic and professional environment in which services for *all* young children and their families thrive. This points to the urgent need for a comprehensive review and reform of the entire early childhood system – which is beyond the scope of this review. However, we would like to suggest that such a process is more likely to achieve its goals if the following elements can be considered:

### 9.1. Leadership and coordination at government level

The importance of developing strong and courageous political leadership for better and more equitable services for all children has been repeatedly pointed out; it is central to the recommendations made by the OECD in the 2004 Thematic Review *Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland* (OECD, 2004). The findings of the international CoRe project (Urban et al., 2011a) confirm that *governance* is key to a comprehensive and *competent* early childhood system of high quality. Findings of ongoing research conducted in 11 countries ('Governance and Leadership for Competent Systems in Early Childhood Education and Care') underline the key role of governance for the development of all aspects of the early childhood system.

Despite an existing distribution of responsibilities between government departments – with the vast majority of funding, regulations, initiatives etc. being within the remit of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) – it is currently difficult to see, at least from an external perspective, a clear leadership at political / Department level. An alternative approach (that has been chosen by countries in similar situations) could be to create a new high-level interdepartmental group with responsibility for all aspects of early childhood provision for children from birth. The remit of this group would have to encompass all areas that are currently under the auspices of several departments and agencies. In order to fulfil its remit, the new high-level interdepartmental body will have to have budget autonomy. Resources for early childhood education and care that are currently divided up between Departments would have to be brought together.

### 9.2. Leadership and coordination at professional level

A situation where several professional associations, interest groups and unions compete for the attention of the early childhood sector is not sustainable and contributes to weakening the sector. Therefore, the establishment of an effective governance structure at policy level should be accompanied by encouragement and support for a unified professional body. This new organisation would have to be formed with and from existing sector representatives. It should play an important role in developing collective and individual professional identities,

and to setting professional standards for an integrated early childhood education and care sector.

### **9.3. Monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance**

It is encouraging to see recent initiatives to establish an inspection system that focuses on the educational experiences of children in early childhood provision. However, there is an apparent need to consolidate the existing approaches to inspection. The aim should be a single system conceptualised and designed as a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system that applies to all services and all age groups. The approach should combine the continuous collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. This monitoring and evaluation system should incorporate the existing inspection regimes. Such a system is a precondition for effective governance as it provides indispensable up-to-date information for strategic allocation of limited resources.

A unified monitoring and evaluation system is likely to be most effective if close links can be established with a strengthened quality assurance (QA) body for professional preparation, continuous professional development, and training. Such a QA body would have to operate on the basis of strong rapport with an Early Childhood Professional association. Systemic QA would have to apply to all levels of professional practice and to working with all age groups. This could be achieved by reviewing the remit of existing QA structures. The review should draw on existing expertise in bodies including QQI, PLÉ, and universities, all of which currently have a limited remit in relation to quality assurance for specific parts of the sector.

### **9.4. Comprehensive review of recent, current, and planned initiatives**

For any external observer, one of the most intriguing features of the Irish early childhood sector is the amount of policy initiatives and projects in the sector, and the number of actors developing and launching these initiatives. Experience in other countries shows that more initiatives don't necessarily lead to sustainable change, improved outcomes, or more effective use of resources. One way of addressing the situation could be to agree and conduct a thorough and comprehensive review of recent, current, and planned new initiatives and their impact on the early childhood system.

### **9.5. Investment in research infrastructure**

Ireland has experienced (and continues to experience) rapid social, cultural and economic change, resulting in changing requirements of children and families. The Irish early childhood sector has responded to the changing context. International experience shows that the role of services for young children and their families will become even more important in the foreseeable future. It will be crucial to invest in the continuous development of new knowledge in relation to all aspects of the early childhood system. Positioning itself as a laboratory for change and development, investment in a sustainable research infrastructure could place Ireland firmly on the map of world-leading research in early childhood, as well as providing the necessary knowledge context for building an early childhood system that is fit for purpose.

### **9.6. Support for professional identity**

Last but not least, a key concern at all phases of this study, and across all participants, was the notion of professionalism and professional identity. Whilst there are many contributory factors, as set out above, participants highlighted feeling undervalued by both parents and at central levels. There could be much value in a programme of more explicit recognition by relevant government departments of the professionalism of practitioners in the ECEC sector, and the promotion of work in ECEC as professional, including via publications and publicity, on social media, and in guidance given to careers advisers.



## The Early Childhood Research Centre (ECRC)

The Early Childhood Research Centre at the University of Roehampton builds on a long tradition of critical inquiry in the field. We investigate histories, policies and politics, pedagogies and practices in early childhood locally and internationally from a critical perspective that is informed by a shared interest in the transformative potential of collaborative research.

As a research centre we have initiated and are involved in numerous collaborative activities with local, national and international partners. These include international symposia, writing collaborations, and research collaborations with international and UK partners in a global network of collaborative sites. Partnerships include universities and research centres, local authorities and schools, professional associations, advocacy networks, government agencies and departments and international bodies.

With the research conducted at ECRC we position ourselves, and the study of early childhood, in a context of critical theory and practice, diversity and social justice. With our work we hope to contribute to building what Paulo Freire calls critical consciousness (*conscientização*) in the field.

We have a particular interest in the professional practices of working with young children (pre-natal to the age of ca. 8), families and communities. Professional practice in early childhood, we believe, is always relational, profoundly uncertain, and inevitably political.

We situate our work in the tradition of Friedrich Froebel, the 19th century Kindergarten pioneer, whose ideas we see as highly relevant for contemporary early childhood contexts. Froebel emphasised the unique potential of every child and the importance of play as the key to children making sense of the world. He conceptualised the education of young children as a public good and responsibility. His ideas and practices depended on highly qualified practitioners and the Froebel Kindergarten movement has made a major contribution to the professionalisation of women in the 19th and early 20th century. All of these ideas are, we believe, as relevant and radical now as they were then.

For more information on current and recent research and publications at ECRC, and for staff profiles see our website

<http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/Research-Centres/Early-Childhood-Research-Centre/>

### The research team

The study was jointly conducted by Professor Mathias Urban (Director, Early Childhood Research Centre) and Dr Sue Robson (Research Fellow, Early Childhood Research Centre). Valeria Scacchi (Research Officer, Early Childhood Research Centre) supported the team with the overview over international literature.

Mathias Urban oversaw the project as Principal Investigator and is the designated contact person for the Department of Education and Skills.

### Mathias Urban

**Professor Mathias Urban, PhD** is Professor of Early Childhood and Director of the Early Childhood Research Centre at the Froebel College, University of Roehampton, London, United Kingdom. He works on questions of diversity and equality, social justice, evaluation and professionalism in working with young children, families and communities in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

From 2010 to 2011 he coordinated the European CoRe project (*Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care*). His current and recent projects include collaborative studies on early childhood professionalism in Colombia (*Sistemas Competentes para la Atención Integral a la Primera Infancia*), studies on *Privatisation* and on the impact of *Assessment regimes*, and an 11-country project on *Governance and Leadership for competent Systems in Early Childhood*. Mathias is an International Research Fellow with the *Critical Childhood Public Policy Research Collaborative*, a member of the PILIS research group (*Primera Infancia, Lenguaje e Inclusión Social*), Chair of the DECET network (*Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training*), President of the *International Froebel Society (IFS)*, and a member of the AERA special interest group *Critical Perspectives on Early Childhood Education*.

### Sue Robson

**Dr Sue Robson** has worked as Principal Lecturer in Education, Early Childhood Studies, at the University of Roehampton, London for many years until 2015. She now is an Honorary Research Fellow in the Early Childhood Research Centre team, and is involved in a number of ECRC projects.

Her current roles and memberships of relevant organisations include:

- External Examiner MA Development and Therapeutic Play, MA Childhood Studies, BA Childhood Studies, Swansea University (2012-2017)
- External Examiner Bachelor of Early Childhood Education, St Patrick's College Dublin City University (2015-2019)
- Member of Early Childhood Research Centre, University of Roehampton
- Member of TACTYC
- Member of EECERA Special Interest Group: Children's Perspectives
- Trustee of Froebel Trust and Member of Council
- National Teaching Fellow (2009 -)
- Fellow of Higher Education Academy
- University of Roehampton Teaching Fellow (2008 -)

Her current and recent research projects include:

- Elfer, P., Robson, S., Greenfield, S. & Zachariou, A. (1/12/16-5/06/18) Developing close thoughtful attention to children and families in early years pedagogy: Evaluating the impact of work discussion groups as a model of professional development. Froebel Trust.
- Hargreaves, D.J., Robson, S., Greenfield, S. & Brogaard Clausen, S. (1/1/12-31/12/16) Froebel Research Fellowship: Young children's wellbeing. Froebel Trust.

- Robson, S. The relationship between responsibility for children’s choice of activity and evidence of self-regulation and Metacognition. PhD, awarded May 2014.
- Hargreaves, D.J., Robson, S. & Greenfield, S. (1/1/09-31/12/11) Young children’s creative thinking. International Froebel Education Institute Research Committee.
- Contributor to Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences, Vilnius, Lithuania Research Project: Development of Self-Regulation in Play, funded by Lithuanian government. (2014)

### Valeria Scacchi

**Valeria Scacchi** is a Research Officer and PhD student at the Early Childhood Research Centre. Her research focuses on questions of professional development. Valeria is a member of the international research team that investigates *Governance and Leadership for Competent Systems in Early Childhood Education and Care* in 10 countries. She is currently working towards her PhD: *Reconceptualising Professional Development*.

#### Her publications include:

Scacchi, V. (in press) ‘Archival research, different themes pursued drawing together the ‘Social and conceptual spaces – Froebelian geographies’ project for the Froebel Archive Collection located at the University of Roehampton’ in Bruce, T., Elfer, P., Powell, S., Werth, L., (in press) *Routledge International Handbook of Froebel and Early Childhood Practice*, Routledge: London.

APPG (2016) Play, a report by the all-party parliamentary group on a fit and healthy childhood available at [http://www.royalpa.co.uk/?p=the\\_appg\\_on\\_a\\_fit\\_and\\_healthy\\_childhood](http://www.royalpa.co.uk/?p=the_appg_on_a_fit_and_healthy_childhood)

Scacchi, V., Partidge, J. (2015) *A Different Story?* In *Nursery World* July-August Issue available at [https://www.academia.edu/20828235/A\\_Different\\_Story](https://www.academia.edu/20828235/A_Different_Story)

## Appendices

### Appendix 1 – Programme, Consultation event at Dublin Castle, 19<sup>th</sup> November 2016



#### **Programme – Early Years Education Forum**

**Printworks, Dublin Castle, Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> November, 2016.**

***“Building a Professional Future in Early Years Education”***

#### **Review of Occupational Role Profiles in Early Childhood Education and Care**

\*\*\*\*\*

**09.00** Tea/Coffee and Registration

**09.15** Welcome and Introductory Remarks:

- Gary Ó Donnchadha , Asst. Secretary, Department of Education & Skills,
- Maresa Duignan, Asst. Chief Inspector, Department of Education & Skills,

**09:30-10:15: Keynote Speaker – Professor Mathias Urban**, Professor of Early Childhood, Director, Early Childhood Research Centre, University of Roehampton, London.

*Presentation will include:*

- *a short summary of relevant international literature,*
- *preliminary review of Irish policy documents,*
- *and key aspects emerging from interviews with stakeholders.*
- **DRAFT OCCUPATIONAL ROLE PROFILES AS BASIS FOR DISCUSSION**
- *Key questions tbc*

**10:15-11:00** Round table discussions

**11:00-11:30** Break


**11:30-12:00** Feedback session/Key Findings

**12:00-12:30** Panel Discussion

**12:30-12:45** Next steps and wrap up.

# Appendix 2 – Feedback from discussion, Consultation event 19<sup>th</sup> November 2016

27/01/17



**"Building a Professional Future in Early Years Education"**  
Review of Occupational Role Profiles in Early Childhood Education and Care

*Discussion Feedback*

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SATURDAY 19<sup>th</sup> NOVEMBER 2016,  
PRINTWORKS, DUBLIN CASTLE

Key Question 1– Generic characteristics of the Early Years Workforce

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What would you see as alternative approaches to *naming* the various levels of

- formal qualification
- practical experience

represented in the ECCE workforce?

**Q1 Key Points:**

**KEY POINT – DO WE NEED SO MANY LEVELS?**

- \*Eliminate current terminology and create one all-encompassing term – collapse five levels\*\*\*
- \*One name and various levels of competences
- \*Generic skills, disposition & knowledge for all teachers in the sector
- \*Too many levels – some obsolete e.g. basic
- \*Interactive and continuous EC profession
- \*Level of occupational profile V NQF level?

**Q1 Key Points:**

**KEY POINT – MORE ACCESSIBLE TERMINOLOGY:**

- \*The term "workforce" needs to encompass all those working in the totality of the system and not just those working directly with children
- \*Current terminology e.g. basic, intermediate etc. of role profiles is not in use in ECEC services currently\*\*\* "who uses these terms?"
- \*Terminology of occupational profiles needs to change and be agreed
- \*Terminology needs to be accessible for children and families

**Q1 KEY POINTS:**


**KEY POINT – WHAT NAMES DO WE USE TO DESCRIBE PEOPLE WORKING IN THE SECTOR?**

- \*Revise names to early years professional/job titles with equality of emphasis given to care and education
- \*Consider name as practitioner/educator/for teacher [early years]\*\*\*
- \*Suggestions: Basic: Assistant Practitioner, Intermediate: Lead Practitioner, Experienced: Teacher, Advanced: Teacher, Expert?
- \*Name the position e.g. Pre-School Teacher, Early Years Teachers, Early Years Practitioners, Early Years Educator, Pedagogue
- \*Teacher used by child and also eases transition for child and define levels within this – democratic process within sector, no differentiation in title of teacher
- \*Do not use practitioner to distinguish between profiles, Practitioner as a term?? ECEC professional.

**Q1 Key Points:**

**KEY POINT – WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE/BE INCLUDED IN PROFILES?**

- \*Absence of role of educative role of care within profession
- \*Integrative and continuous EC profession
- \*Reflect "roles" rather than "people" & role evaluation and allied responsibilities
- \*SECD references should be included
- \*Don't link level of qualification to role profile
- \*Take out descriptive narrative in occupational profile
- \*Profiles need to be based on combination of qualifications/experience and CPD\*\*\*
- \*Practical experience should be acknowledged



**"Building a Professional Future in Early Years Education"**  
Review of Occupational Role Profiles in Early Childhood Education and Care

*Discussion Feedback*

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