

**Emma Byrne-MacNamee - Experiences within the Irish Context**

***Early Childhood Workforce Initiative Webinar***

**on**

**'Early Childhood Practitioners as Activists and Advocates'**

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So, to sufficiently reflect on any aspect of our work and build meaningful professional discourse, I believe that we always need to start with ourselves, as individuals.

My own background is as an Early Childhood Educator, whose main goal in choosing this profession was to seek to impact on children's lives in a positive way. Setting this out here and having recently listened to first year Early Childhood Education Degree students articulating their professional motivation in very similar ways, I am struck by how simplistic this sounds as an objective, but yet how complex it is to achieve. Activism and advocacy was always a feature in my own life as I was brought up by a mother who had no problem challenging inequality and injustice, in both the personal and political context.

I know that I started my professional life with a comparatively narrow focus on the child alone, but as I became a more experienced practitioner, I learned about the importance of working in partnership with parents, to be able to enhance and enrich their ability to support their children's needs and experiences. I am pleased that this is now a component of Early Years professional practice which is regarded as essential.

Many years later, I find myself in a training and development role, engaging with a range of Early Childhood Practitioners who work in settings in some of the most economically disadvantaged communities in Ireland. The challenges for them seem very similar to those of thirty years ago and there are even some new and additional ones.

There are more than 25,000 Early Childhood Practitioners, mostly women, working in Ireland. Fees paid by parents to access ECEC in Ireland are among the highest in Europe, at an average of over €750 per child per month. However, the average annual salary for Early Childhood practitioners is actually below the average industrial wage, even where those practitioners may have attained college degrees in their field.

In my experience as both a practitioner and a leader within our profession, the dichotomy between care and education which has been identified in so much literature and analysis relating to ECEC exists both within settings (with those who nurture the youngest children getting the least recognition) and within society, where the disparity continues between status, terms and conditions of employment of those employed in the statutory sector as teachers and those employed in non-statutory (community, voluntary and private) services for young children.

I believe that this inequality both constructs and constrains our professional identity and determines to some extent, that any emergent advocacy will focus mainly if not wholly on improving these areas, rather than enabling us to be true to the roots of our profession, and engage in ongoing critical activism through our daily practice, for the advancement of children's needs and rights.

Feelings of dissatisfaction among practitioners have become more apparent within the last couple of years in Ireland in particular and now momentum is building towards attaining better salaries, terms and conditions for Early Childhood Professionals. We have two Trade Unions involved in this movement and organised events and campaigns are now increasingly bringing practitioners into public activism, to assert the vital importance of their profession. What is interesting and also encouraging is the involvement of parents in some of these events, who are openly expressing solidarity with practitioners in an effort to jointly seek “affordability” for families, “sustainability” of early year’s services and “adequacy” of pay and conditions for practitioners.

Now, back to the individual journey...

In the programmes that I have been privileged to lead with practitioners over the past number of years we begin at the foundation stage of our work, by asking individuals to examine their own motivation and vision for deciding to enter the Early Childhood profession.

In this context, we have encouraged practitioners to examine perspectives on the nature and value of their work with children and families. For some people, this might be the first time they have been facilitated to reflect in this way, as the training they have undertaken has usually if not always focused on increasing their knowledge and skills, rather than contemplating or building on the vision they hold for their role, or how they plan to effect change.

This process can lead to a valuable articulation of the values that individuals (and teams) bring to their work and in some cases, it has resulted in practitioners beginning to actively use enhanced terms, such as ‘early childhood professional’ to publicly describe their occupation. This, in itself can be regarded as a type of advocacy, which has the potential to advance a better understanding and appreciation of our profession, and demonstrate the importance of our engagement with children and families. We hope to then create greater potential for Early Childhood practitioners to act as ‘agents of change’ themselves, by realising their own role in positively impacting on experiences and outcomes in early childhood, within communities where they may have grown up themselves.

I consider that any analysis of our own professional role and responsibilities requires us to critically question (as we almost never do in the Irish context), whose needs or interests are actually being met by the ECEC system and to be courageous enough to challenge assumptions which may underpin historical and contemporary constructions of Early Childhood Education and Care.

While I believe that a lack of affordable childcare inevitably acts as an economic barrier for parents, particularly those who are more susceptible to poverty and therefore its provision is an essential element of society’s support for families, it has long been my fear that framing early childhood care and education only as a service to allow parents to access employment (which has historically been the case), threatens the centrality and quality of the child’s experiences, as much as it undermines the professional status of the Early Childhood Practitioner, setting the parameters for the role of practitioners as ‘looking after’ children in the place of their parents.

Taking an alternative perspective which primarily emphasises the importance for every child, of having access to the enriching experience of early childhood care and education, serves to highlight the significance and complexity of the role of ECEC Practitioners while also affirming the entitlement of parents to access the best possible services for their children, but this construction does not seem to fit as easily within public discourse, particularly in Ireland.

At government level in Ireland, we have had an almost frenetic focus on 'quality' in recent years, which arose mainly from a television 'exposé' of practices in a number of private settings, which could be considered potentially harmful to children and certainly did not represent the core ethos or the best view of our profession. The experience of having these events discussed and debated on a national level proved very negative for our profession, particularly for some individual practitioners who reported being verbally abused by members of the public if they were identified (by uniform) as workers in Early Childhood settings.

What was undertaken by the State in response to this lack of professional practice mainly involved an increase in regulatory requirements, setting of a minimum standard of qualifications for staff and the creation of a new national mentoring service, to develop 'quality'. Some of these measures may be delivered within supportive and enabling contexts, but curiously, none of them really has the power to prevent a reoccurrence of the unacceptable practices which were previously uncovered.

In my opinion, this can only be addressed by providing strong pedagogical leadership to sustain quality within settings and by firmly grounding practice within a children's rights framework. By maintaining an Early Years sector which is not appropriately resourced and sustained, the risk of unmotivated workers expressing their own subjugation through oppressive practices with children will remain. This is where I believe advocacy and activism to achieve better terms and conditions for practitioners could lead to meaningful, positive change for our profession.

There are some hopeful developments however:

New approaches to offering families support which recognise the value of involving early childhood practitioners are affording opportunities for practitioners to draw on the roots of our profession, to advocate with and on behalf of children and families. Whereas our Early Childhood Curriculum Framework has helped to shift a national public focus onto "celebrating early childhood as a time of being, and of enjoying and learning from experiences as they unfold". Our ECEC workforce has embraced these developments, even though there has been limited training and no additional remuneration for their endeavours and they have served to further enhance a collective vision for young children, between practitioners and parents.

Philanthropic and state investment which has been made in projects such as the one in which I have been involved, which have prioritised the need to support and enrich the practice of Early Years professionals working in specific communities has had another positive effect. We now have senior experienced practitioners emerging from our profession, who have had opportunities to design interventions, gather data, develop research and engage with the sector at every level, who are increasingly moving into leadership roles, through which activism and advocacy can be productively and positively focused, to represent the best interests of our sector and those with whom we engage. I hope and believe that all of these developments combined, offer real possibilities to enhance the view, status and standing of our profession, at senior policy level, in a National context.