

Recent Policy Developments in Early Childhood Education (ECE): A jigsaw with too many pieces?

Dr. Thomas Walsh, Department of Education, Maynooth University

Abstract

In recent years, there have been a myriad of policy and practice developments in the field of early childhood education (ECE). These developments emanate from a range of government departments and agencies, including the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), the Department of Education and Skills (DES), and the Child and Family Agency (TUSLA). This paper examines recent key policy developments and profiles the government departments and agencies responsible for their development and implementation. One of the key conclusions is that a clearer vision is needed for the sector to ensure that policies are coherent, consistent and manageable for those with a responsibility for their enactment.

Introduction

The ECE sector in Ireland has experienced a period of rapid policy development since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Overall, this development has filled the legislative and policy vacuum that previously existed and has provided a structure and framework for the sector to operate within. However, the locus of policy development has been varied and diverse in these decades and policy responsibility has been transferred and shared across a range of government departments and agencies. The complexity of the ECE policy development space has become more pronounced in recent times as various departments and agencies develop policy on specific aspects for the sector, often with insufficient examination of the overall totality of expectations and

requirements. It also has had the effect of reinforcing the traditional split system of 'care' and 'education' that has characterised ECE development in Ireland as policy development is often delineated along these lines. This paper explores recent policy developments in ECE in Ireland, examines the departments and organisations responsible and posits a number of recommendations for future policy development for the sector. It is argued that a clearer vision and a more focused centralised departmental leadership are required to ensure that ECE policy is coherent, consistent and manageable for those with a responsibility for its enactment

A list of acronyms used is included at the end of the paper.

Origins of ECE policy development in Ireland

Historically, there has been a State reluctance to intervene in family matters or to directly deliver services in the pre-school sector (Kiernan and Walsh, 2004). Moreover, policy responsibility has been passed between and shared among a large number of government departments and agencies in the last two decades, with a heavy reliance on private, voluntary and community providers alongside limited direct State provision. Increased recognition of the value of ECE for all children and the increased participation of women in the workforce were the two main drivers of policy attention on ECE from the 1990s. Hayes (2010) argues that both structurally and conceptually, a distinction has been made between childcare and early education with childcare considered to be part of the equality and labour market agenda and early education used to combat educational disadvantage.

In 1997, Hayes and O'Flaherty with Kernan (1997:12) stated that there "...is no national policy to coordinate early childhood services" in Ireland, delineating the ad hoc range of services delivered by the Department of Health and Children (DHC), the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and private, community voluntary sector providers. The lack of co-ordination and the split nature of the system were key themes of the National Forum for Early Childhood Education in 1998; with the DHC largely responsible for children aged birth to three/four years and the DES¹ responsible for children aged three/four to six years of age (Coolahan, 1998:27). As early as 1998, there was general consensus as to the need for a single co-ordinating agency for ECE and the debate had begun as to

¹ The Department of Education and Science was renamed the Department of Education and Skills in 2010. However, the role of the Department remained largely the same in relation to ECE. The 'DES' is used in this article to relate to both the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Education and Skills depending on the year involved.

which government department or newly established interdepartmental agency might be most suited to this role.

Issues of co-ordination were also central to The White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999). Recommendations in the White Paper included coordination among and within departments, agencies and organisations at national, intermediate and local levels. It proposed the assignment of policy responsibility for ECE to the DES and the creation of an Early Childhood Education Agency to take responsibility for administrative/executive issues. Such a need for greater co-ordination for policy and service delivery has been a recurring theme in policy documents in the early years of the 21st century (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2004; National Economic and Social Forum, 2005). To date, no one department or agency has assumed ultimate responsibility for ECE policy development in Ireland.

Three main government departments shared policy responsibility for ECE in the early years of the 21st century – the DES, DHC and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR). Moreover, the role of in excess of ten different government departments in the development and implementation of ECE policy is well documented (see Duignan and Walsh, 2004; Walsh and Cassidy, 2007). The DJELR involvement in ECE was largely in relation to its remit around equality and women’s participation in the workforce. The *National Childcare Strategy* (DJELR, 1999) was developed to integrate and develop the delivery of childcare and early educational services, with a major focus on the provision of places. The DJELR was instrumental in the establishment and implementation of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (2000-2006). This was succeeded by the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) (2006-2011) and collectively these programmes represented the largest investment ever seen in the sector.

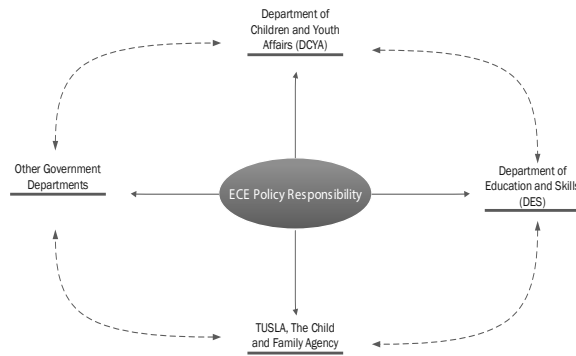
The split system between care and education in Ireland has long historical roots and is deeply embedded at a structural and conceptual level. This division has been reinforced by recent policy developments such as targeted ECE schemes and the Free Pre-school Year, which further accentuates the delineation between provision for children under and over three years of age. The lack of co-ordination has remained a policy debate up to the present day. In early 2015, the Chief Executive of TUSLA, Mr. Gordon Jeyes, expressed concern at the fragmentation of relationships within the early years sector and the lack of co-ordination around the ECE regulatory system, where multiple agencies

were involved without strategic consideration for the sector. He stated “[T]hese new schemes [education-focused inspections], coupled with the introduction of new standards and regulations are leading to confusion and will burden the system with extra administration and interaction with multiple agencies. It is essential that the full range of welcome Government initiatives in this sector are strategically complementary” (Irish Times, 2015a).

Key Influences on ECE Policy

A growing recognition of the social and economic value of ECE, the availability of EU funding and increased female labour market participation made ECE policy an international and national priority. This has led to the involvement of a wide range of contributors to the ECE policy development arena. These include government departments and agencies, the national childcare organisations (NCOs), professional bodies, international influences (such as the European Commission, the United Nations and the European Council) parents and other key stakeholders. However, the primary focus of this paper is on the policy development role of key government departments and organisations on ECE, most particularly the DCYA and the DES, and their associated agencies. The paper also focuses on agencies and organisations that have a greater role in policy implementation than policy development, namely TUSLA and Pobal (see Figure 1).

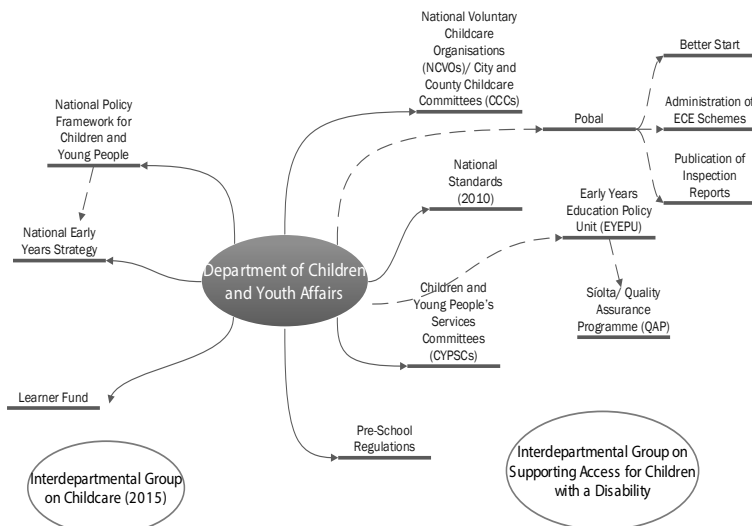
Figure 1: Key influences on ECE policy



Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)

The DCYA was established in 2011 and “...focuses on harmonising policy issues that affect children in areas such as early childhood care and education...” (DCYA, 2015a). It was preceded by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) which was a unit of the DHC with a policy co-ordination role for children and young people (Children’s Rights Alliance, 2008). The OMCYA was one of the first efforts at co-ordinating the sector, centralising and co-locating policy responsibility from the DJELR, the DES and DHC. The key functions of the DCYA are delineated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)



The DCYA is responsible for the administration of the €260 million spent annually on early years and school-age care and education services (DCYA, 2015c:27). It

is also responsible for the roll out and administration of a number of childcare and ECE programmes, including the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (Free Pre-school Year). Introduced in 2010, this is the first universal State funded provision (three hours per day over 38 weeks) of ECE in Ireland for children in the year prior to attending the infant classes of primary schools. Its popularity is evident in that in excess of 68,000 children (approximately 95% of eligible children) attend the 4,200 services participating in the scheme annually (DCYA, 2015c:27). The scheme costs €175 million annually. Participation by ECE settings in the scheme has required them to sign contracts stating that they "... provide an appropriate educational programme for children in their pre-school year which adheres to the principles of *Síolta*, the Childcare Quality Framework, and *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework..." (DCYA, 2014b:10). Higher capitation is paid to services that meet enhanced staff qualification criteria, with 28% of ECE services eligible for this payment in 2014-15 (DCYA, 2015c:66). One of the perhaps unintended consequences of the scheme is that the payment of higher capitation has led to a concentration of staff with higher qualifications working with children over the age of three to the detriment of children under age three. From September 2016, provision has been extended to include children from age three to five-and-a-half, allowing children to avail of up to eighty-eight weeks of provision in pre-schools prior to enrolment in primary schools into the future (DCYA, 2015e).

The DCYA is also responsible for the administration of two other targeted national childcare funding programmes, namely:

- The Community Childcare Subvention Programme (CCS) which provides places for approximately 25,000 children annually in 900 community childcare services. The annual cost of the scheme is €45 million (DCYA, 2015c:27)
- The Training and Employment Childcare (TEC) programmes collectively provides places to approximately 8,000 children annually through three schemes:
 - Childcare Education and Training Support programme (CETS)
 - After-school Child Care Programme (ASCC)
 - Community Employment Childcare Programme (CEC) (DCYA, 2015b)

These programmes are administratively complex with strict eligibility criteria for the services, children and/or parents participating. €246 million of the DCYA budget is spent on the aforementioned schemes (DCYA, 2015c:27).

The regulations governing pre-school services are formulated by the Child Welfare and Policy Unit of the DCYA. Since 2013, the DCYA has been working on developing and enhancing the regulatory system for the ECE sector in conjunction with the DES and TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency. At present, both the Childcare Regulations (DHC, 2006) and the National Pre-school Standards (DHC, 2010) are under review by the DCYA and revised drafts are not expected until 2016. The revised Early Years Regulations will replace the existing childcare regulations from 2006 and these, and the National Standards which will replace the 2006 guidelines, will provide the basis for regulation into the future. Collectively, these documents will provide the framework in which statutory inspections will take place by the Pre-school Inspectorate of TUSLA. Moreover, these regulations and standards will now need to be cognisant of the education-focussed inspection framework that will be used to undertake inspections in settings operating the Free Pre-school Year (see section on DES). The DCYA chairs an Operational Alignment Group comprising the DES and Tusla Inspectorates, Pobal and Better Start with a view to reduce any unnecessary burden on providers, to minimise duplication and to co-ordinate inspection, quality support and compliance visits. Considering the complexity of this regulatory space, the Operational Alignment Group has an onerous task to simplify the process and procedure for the sector.

The DCYA is responsible for the preparation and implementation of the government's Children and Young People's Policy Framework 2014-2020, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* (DCYA, 2014a), the successor to the National Children's Strategy. This is the first overarching national policy framework for children and young people (0-24 years of age) and its purpose is to co-ordinate policy across government departments to improve outcomes for children and young people. A National Early Years Strategy (NEYS) has been proposed by a wide range of national and international agencies in order to provide a guiding vision for the development of the sector in Ireland. This is planned to be an integral element of the Children and Young People's Policy Framework 2014-2020 and "...an innovative and exciting blueprint for the future strategic development of Ireland's Early Years Sector" (DCYA, 2012). The NEYS is being informed by the report of an expert advisory group (DCYA, 2013), and is expected to be launched in early 2016. This Strategy has the potential to bring cohesion to a sector that to date has operated in the absence of an articulated core vision.

Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSCs) are being established by the DCYA at county level to promote the co-ordination of services and supports through local and national interagency working of statutory,

community and voluntary providers of services to children and young people (see <http://www.cypsc.ie/>). Their overall purpose is to improve outcomes for children and young people, particularly through the realisation of the national outcomes set out in the Children and Young People's Policy Framework 2014-2020 (DCYA, 2014a). A number of CYPSCs has been established to promote the local co-ordination of services and supports for children and families as part of the Policy Framework. In many instances, City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) are part of the membership of CYPSCs.

The Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme 2013-17 is a prevention and early intervention initiative to provide an area-based approach to improving outcomes for children by reducing child poverty. Thirteen sites are involved in the delivery of services in areas such as child health and development, children's learning and parenting. The ABC Programme is overseen by a cross-departmental and interagency Project Team. This programme is co-funded by the DCYA and Atlantic Philanthropies and is administered by Pobal (DCYA, 2016).

A number of NCOs are supported by the DCYA to promote quality and to deliver services within the ECE sector. These include Early Childhood Ireland, Barnardos, Childminding Ireland, the Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association and the St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland. A network of 31 CCCs is also funded by the DCYA. These were established in 2001 to offer a variety of services at a local level, including services to parents and ECE settings. They are also centrally involved in the administration of national ECE schemes and in the quality improvement agenda. The DCYA provides funding of approximately €14 million annually to the NCOs and the CCCs, as well as Better Start, the Learner Fund and Childminder Development Grants (DCYA, 2015c:27).

In July 2015, the Interdepartmental Working Group on Childcare reported after being established to "...identify and assess policies and future options for increasing the affordability, quality and supply of early years and school-age care and education services in Ireland" (DCYA, 2015c:7). The report notes the tension between the drivers of reform in ECE, including supporting children's outcomes, supporting parents and facilitating labour market participation. It makes a number of recommendations for the future development of childcare and ECE but the report surprisingly makes little reference to issues of co-ordination. Crucially, the report recommends further investment in the supply side of the sector as opposed to tax breaks and this will accentuate the need for policy co-ordination between the various departments and agencies with a responsibility for ECE.

Better Start is a national initiative established by the DCYA, in collaboration with the EYEPU of the DES, to bring an integrated national approach to developing quality in ECE for children aged from birth to six years in Ireland. It is hosted by Pobal on behalf of the DCYA which involves Pobal acting as the employer and providing office accommodation and organisational support for Better Start staff. However, the National Manager of Better Start reports directly to the DCYA. Better Start co-ordinates and extends the supports and services relating to quality already provided through CCCs and the NCOs (see www.betterstart.ie). The service involves a cadre of 30 highly skilled and experienced Early Years Specialists working directly in a mentoring capacity with ECE services. The *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA, 2015]) is being used by Better Start as the core document for its work with services.

While the DCYA brings together a number of policy and provision responsibilities for children, crucially many important policy areas remain outside its remit, particularly within the DES. To address this, the EYEPU has been established and this unit is co-located between the DCYA and the DES. Among other responsibilities, the EYEPU is responsible for the *Síolta* Quality Assurance Programme (QAP), targeted interventions for children living in areas designated as disadvantaged and the implementation of the Workforce Development Plan (DES, 2010). To support the implementation of the Workforce Development Plan which aims to standardise training and promote the flexible delivery of training, a Learner Fund was created in late 2013 by the DCYA to support staff to meet higher qualification requirements. The Learner Fund is administered by Pobal with the support of the CCCs and is directed at ECE professionals becoming qualified up to Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications. In autumn 2015, the DCYA published a list of recognised qualifications for the regulations and for the various ECE schemes operated by the Department (DCYA, 2015f).

Pobal

Pobal is a not-for-profit organisation established in 1992 that manages various funding programmes on behalf of the Irish Government and the EU (see www.pobal.ie). *Pobal* is instrumental in providing a range of services to and on behalf of the DCYA in the area of ECE, including the administration of schemes such as CETS, CCS, the Free Pre-school Year, the Learner Fund, capital funding and the management of the NCIP. In most instances, *Pobal* undertakes compliance visits to services and organisations that are being funded by the DCYA to ensure the terms of the programmes are being met. Funding for the CCCs,

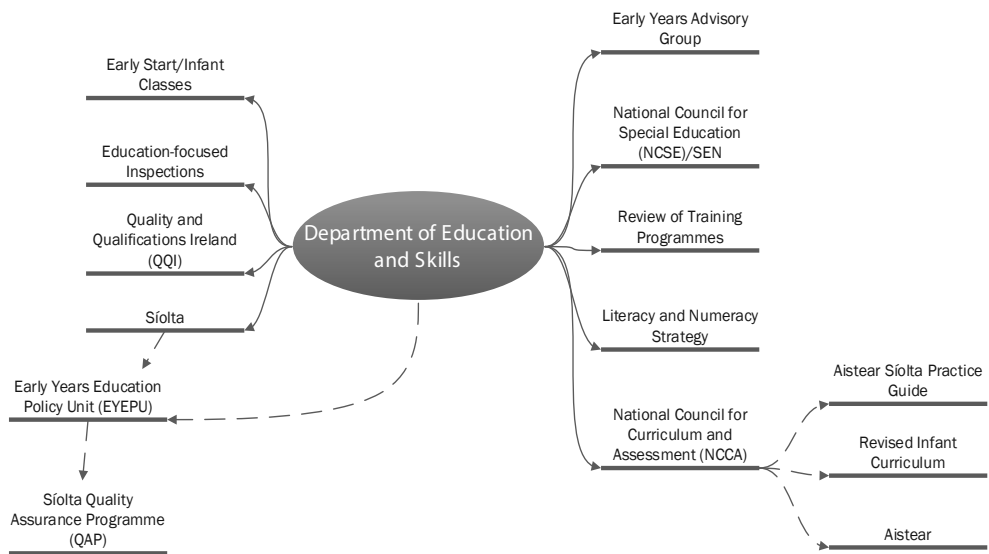
the NCOs and *Comhairle na nÓg* is also managed by *Pobal*, which oversees their work, supports their development, and carries out on-site checks to ensure investment by the Department is appropriately spent. A Programme Implementation Platform (PIP) is used by *Pobal* to streamline the administration of the three national childcare funding programmes (ECCE, TEC and CCS) for service providers and other stakeholder organisations such as the CCCs.

Annually, *Pobal* issues an Annual Early Years Sector Survey based on responses from ECE settings participating in the three national childcare funding programmes (ECCE, TEC and CCS) to support policy development for the sector (see for example *Pobal*, 2014).

Department of Education and Skills (DES)

The DES has a traditional involvement in ECE through the infant classes of primary schools and by specific targeted initiatives relating to educational disadvantage, such as the Rutland Street Project and Early Start. While the compulsory school starting age is six years of age, approximately half of all four year olds and almost all five year olds attend the infant classes of primary schools annually. In the school year 2014-15, nearly 100,000 four- and five-year old pupils attended the infant classes of primary schools and 1,262 pupils attended Early Start settings (DES, 2015a). A review of the primary school curriculum is underway, with a specific focus on aligning the approaches and methods in the infant classes with those of *Aistear* as recommended in the national Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011). However, the remit of the DES in the broader sphere of ECE has always been greater than may be immediately apparent and this has continued to expand in recent years, particularly around training, qualifications and quality (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3: Department of Education and Skills (DES)



The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was established by the DES in 2002 to develop and co-ordinate ECE in pursuance of the objectives of the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999). The work of the CECDE culminated in the development of *Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006). However, the CECDE was closed in 2008 before a comprehensive roll-out of the *Síolta* framework was possible. While many settings are aware of *Síolta*, very few have engaged systematically with the framework in the absence of support. Through the EYEPU, a *Síolta* QAP was initiated. The Pobal Annual Early Years Survey reported that only 2% of ECE services, mostly high functioning services, were formally engaged in the *Síolta* QAP in 2013 (Pobal, 2014:79).

The NCCA is a statutory agency with a remit to advise the Minister for Education and Skills on matters relating to "...the curriculum for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools..." (Government of Ireland, 1998: Section 41 (1)(a)). From an ECE perspective, a long research, consultative and development process led to the publication of *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009). This represented the first curriculum framework in Ireland for all children aged birth to six years of age. Since its publication, there have been many positive examples of its use in ECE settings supported by a number of agencies and organisations. However, its adoption has been impeded by a lack of a strategic implementation plan or adequate resourcing (French, 2013).

What is perhaps surprising is that two frameworks (*Aistear* and *Síolta*) were developed for the ECE sector largely in parallel with one another, one focusing on the curriculum exclusively and one focusing on all aspects of quality, including the curriculum. These examples of policy development are perhaps symptomatic of the wider lack of coherence and co-ordination within ECE policy development (Neylon, 2014). It is arguable that the arrival of two comprehensive frameworks within a short timeframe caused confusion and in the absence of broad supports for their implementation, their potential impact was not realised. Moreover, Hayes et al. (2013) argue that their rights-based and integrated care and education nature were at odds with the prevailing policy paradigm and this has contributed to their slow and partial adoption. It was this realisation that catalysed the development of the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* for the sector in 2015 that incorporated core elements of both frameworks in a format that was more accessible and adoptable for the sector (NCCA, 2015). While welcome, this new practice guide introduces a new range of terminology and structures which will take some time to become embedded in the parlance of the sector.

The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life*, was published in 2011 with the purpose to improve literacy and numeracy standards among children and young people (DES, 2011). Reassuringly, the importance of ECE is well recognised within the Strategy and a number of actions relate to the ECE sector, including training and qualifications, assessment, curriculum and methodologies in both pre-school settings and in the infant classes of primary schools.

The DES has responsibility for the quality assurance of training programmes for ECE professionals. The Minister for Education and Skills appoints the board of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), which is responsible for, inter alia, maintaining the 10-point National Framework of Qualifications and the validation of education and training programmes (see www.qqi.ie). In 2014, the DES initiated a review of training and education programmes that result in a qualification for the ECE sector. Among other issues being reviewed are the extent to which relevant education and training programmes are being delivered efficiently and by appropriately qualified experts, the quality assurance procedures within institutions, the quality of work placements and the appropriateness of learning outcomes (DES, 2014a). The DES is in the process of analysing the data collected as part of the review and a report is expected in 2016.

In May 2015, the DES launched a consultative process in relation to undertaking

education-focused inspections in settings operating the Free Pre-school Year. This initiative originated in an invite from the DCYA to the DES, as part of the DCYA pre-school quality agenda, to lead and organise an inspection process that focused on the educational aspects of ECE provision. The aim of the education-focused inspections is to complement the existing TUSLA Pre-school Inspectorate inspections which will still focus on compliance with the revised pre-school regulations and standards (DES, 2015b). In summer 2015, a cadre of 10 Early Years Inspectors with expertise and experience in ECE were recruited on a permanent basis to the existing DES Inspectorate to undertake the ECE inspections. Pilot inspections will begin in late 2015 and following the pilot and consultation phases, reports generated on the basis of inspections will be published. A key focus of the inspections is to promote continuous improvement in ECE settings by affirming good practice and making recommendations for improvement. This development marks a milestone for the DES Inspectorate in the direct inspection of pre-school services and provision. It is understood that the co-operation between the DES Inspectorate, the TUSLA Inspectorate and the DCYA is underpinned by a formal Memorandum of Understanding.

In December 2014, the Minister for Education and Skills established an Early Years Advisory Group to provide advice to the Minister and to guide policy development on education issues in the birth to six year old sector. The Group has comprehensive terms of reference which includes the co-ordination of existing education-related activity in the sector, to strengthen the integration of ECE into the overall education continuum and to inform future policy development in relation to ECE issues. It is also tasked to organise an Annual Early Years Education Forum (DES, 2014b). The grouping met twice in 2015.

The split system of care and education is also apparent in the policy provision for children in the birth to six age category with special educational needs (SEN). The *Disability Act 2005*, which has commenced for children under five years of age, provides for an independent assessment of the health and education needs of applicants and a statement of the services which it is proposed to provide (Government of Ireland, 2005). However, there is no statutory guarantee that such services will be provided. Through the *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004* for children of school-going age, all children have an entitlement to services (DES, 2004). For the period birth to six years, these are provided through education services at a pre-school or school level, depending on the nature of the disability. The rollout of services as specified in this Act, at a regional and local level, is co-ordinated by Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOS) of the National Council for Special

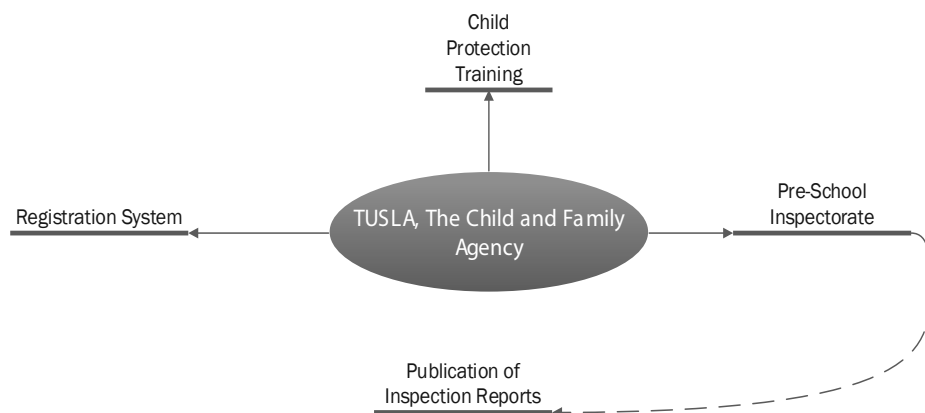
Education (NCSE). This involves identifying the needs of children and deciding on the level of resources schools require to provide them with an appropriate education service. SENOs also provide a service to parents and children through the co-ordination of the delivery of services between the health sector and schools (Walsh, 2010). It should be noted that not all the provisions of the EPSEN Act are operational at present. The interface between the Disability Act and the EPSEN Act is not always immediately evident or easily navigable for services, schools or parents catering for children with SEN. Entitlements vary between both Acts for children of the same age depending on the setting that they attend. The DCYA is currently leading, in conjunction with the DES and DoH, the development of a logic model on the process for developing SEN service provision (DCYA, 2015c:54).

Moreover, an interdepartmental working group chaired by the DCYA, *Supporting Access to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme for Children with Disability*, reported in September 2015 on accessibility issues to the Free Preschool Year programme for children with a disability (Interdepartmental Working Group, 2015). It outlined the provision of seven levels of support across a continuum to enable children with disabilities to fully participate in the Free Preschool Year. A Cross-Sectoral Implementation Group has been established to oversee the implementation of the provisions of the report which is financed by a €17 budget in 2016.

TUSLA – The Child and Family Agency

TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency, is a dedicated State agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children. Since 2014, TUSLA has assumed responsibility from the HSE for inspecting pre-schools, play groups, nurserys, crèches, day-care and similar services which cater for children aged 0-6, under the *Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006* (DHC, 2006) (see Figure 4 below). These inspections are undertaken by the Pre-school Inspectorate. Since 2013, Standard Operating Procedures have been introduced to harmonise inspection approaches.

Figure 4: TUSLA – The Child and Family Agency



As part of a programme of reforms, structures for a National Early Years Inspectorate have been established in 2015 under Tusla’s Quality Assurance Directorate. At present, the pre-school regulations are under review (see section on DCYA) and pre-school inspectors are using a focused inspection tool in the interim which primarily focuses on issues of Governance, Welfare and Safety. The Advisory Service previously offered by the Inspection Teams has been suspended by TUSLA to allow for a focus on the core task of inspection. Since July 2013, all inspection reports prepared by the Pre-school Inspectorate are published on the Pobal website.

A system of registration for ECE services is planned to follow the publication of the revised pre-school regulations and revised national standards. At present, services notify rather than register with TUSLA and they are not subject to any inspection prior to commencing operation. Once the registration system is operational, services will be unable to operate until they have undergone an inspection and they will then be subjected to ongoing inspection in order to determine their ongoing registration status (DCYA, 2014c).

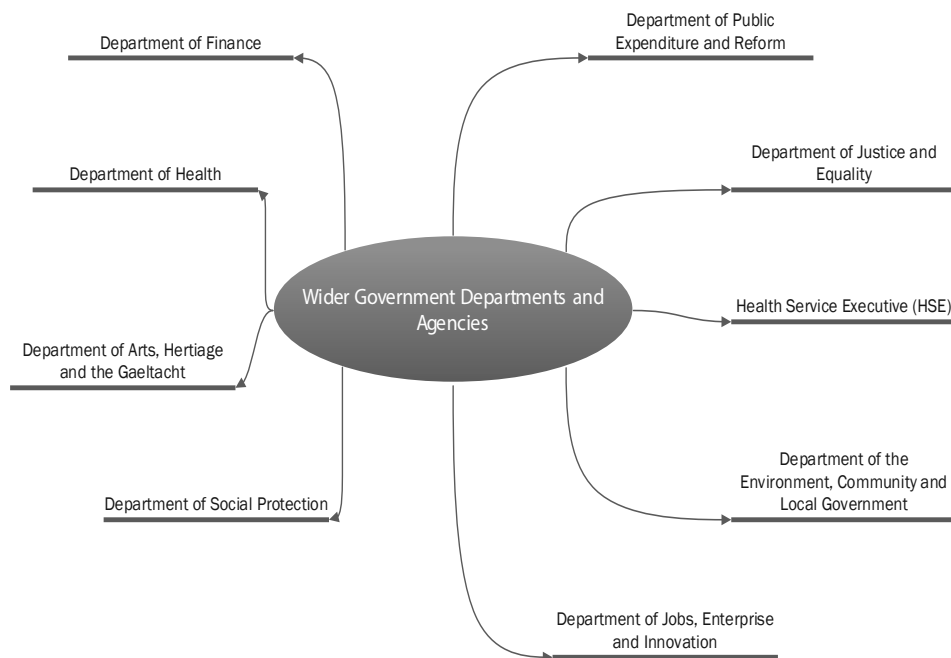
TUSLA is also responsible for providing Child Protection Training based on *Children First, National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (DCYA, 2011). *Children First* provides national guidance for the protection and welfare of children in Ireland. This training is delivered to voluntary and community organisations through their Children First Information and Advice Officers (DCYA, 2015d).

Wider Government Departments and Agencies

A range of other government departments and agencies also has an impact on

or peripheral responsibility for aspects of ECE provision in Ireland (see Figure 5 below).

Figure 5: Wider Government Departments and Agencies



In summary, the role of these departments and agencies includes:

- The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) has ultimate responsibility for the reform and improvement of public services, including public expenditure, public service pay and public service modernisation (<http://www.per.gov.ie/>).
- The Department of Finance is responsible for the administration of public finances in Ireland (<http://www.finance.gov.ie/>).
- The Department of Justice and Equality has responsibility around child and family law and for Garda Vetting by An Garda Síochána (<http://www.justice.ie/>).
- The Department of Health has responsibility for the roll out of free GP care to all children under the age of six as part of the Government Health Reform Programme (<http://health.gov.ie/>).
- The Health Service Executive (HSE) delivers services to children and their

parents/ families who may have special educational needs or be affected by educational disadvantage. It also promotes and delivers parenting programmes (<http://www.hse.ie/eng/>).

- The Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht is responsible for the implementation of the *20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030* (Government of Ireland, 2010) (<http://www.ahg.gov.ie/en/>).
- The Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government has responsibility for the planning and building regulations for ECE services and for public spaces for children and young people (<http://www.environ.ie/en/>).
- The Department of Social Protection is responsible for the provision of a number of payments relating to children and families, including Child Benefit, the Family Income Supplement, the Single Person Child Carer Credit, the After School Child Care Scheme and the One-parent Family Payment. Approximately €2.3 billion is allocated annually in child and family related supports (<https://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/home.aspx>).
- The Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation encourages the creation of high quality and sustainable full employment and is responsible for the National Employment Rights Authority. At present, close to 25,000 early childhood professionals are employed in the ECE sector (<http://www.enterprise.gov.ie/en/>).

As children's and family's lives permeate all aspects of society, it is inevitable that a large number of departments have a role in ECE. What is necessary is the development of a core vision and policy framework to guide and inform decisions made by these wider departments and agencies in relation to children.

Looking to the Future

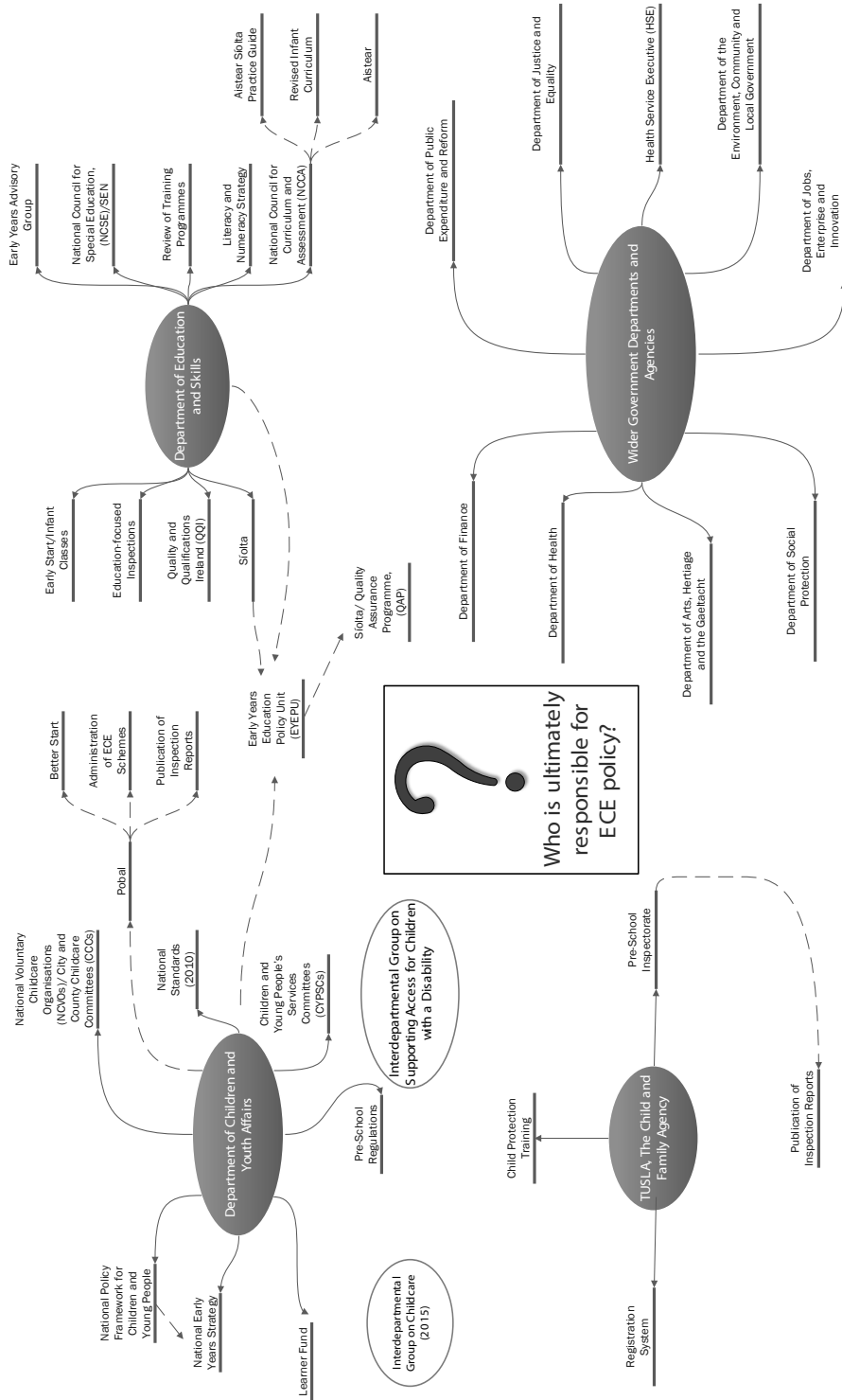
This brief outline of the policy responsibility of the main department and agencies with a remit for ECE presents a bewildering and complex array of relationships and interconnections between and among the various stakeholders. In some instances, the absence of effective co-ordination between these departments and agencies accentuates the problem. It is important to remember that there are many other partners that are involved in the policy and practice domain of ECE at an international, national and local level that also impact on policy development and enactment. Figure 6 below maps the key policy responsibilities of the main government departments and agencies and highlights the overcrowded space that is the ECE policy development arena. This paper argues that what is

missing from this figure is a clear vision or dominant department at the core that orients policy and practice in relation to ECE in Ireland. In its absence, individual departments and agencies are continuing, despite efforts at collaboration, to work largely in isolation and insulation from one another. A consequence of this approach is the development of multiple overlapping layers of policy for the sector that is complex to understand or enact.

While there has been a flurry of policy development and activity across a range of departments and agencies in recent years, Hayes et al. (2013) assert that little has changed in terms of the State's fundamental philosophy relating to ECE, with a distinction still evident between childcare and early education despite the rhetoric of an integrated system. They characterise the period 1995-2012 as one "...of rapid policy change without transformation" (Hayes et al., 2013:4). In its submission on the development of a National Early Years Strategy, Start Strong called for a re-examination of the split in relation to policy development and delivery of services responsibility for 'childcare' and 'early education' and recommended that a single government department be assigned responsibility for ECE considering the integrated nature of care and education (Start Strong, 2013). *Right from the Start*, the Report of the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy recommended bringing "...together in a single Government department all policy responsibility for early care and education services, including their funding, quality assurance, curriculum development, training and workforce development" (DCYA, 2013:26). Policy documents and policymakers continue to iterate the inseparable nature of care and education but policy implementation continues along divided lines. As Hayes (2010:69) states, "... simply headlining the two concepts together within the phrase early childhood care and education is insufficient to integrate them conceptually, politically or practically."

In 2010, UNESCO research asserted the overall policy benefits of integrating policy responsibility for childcare and ECE within Departments of Education rather than attempting policy co-ordination across departments (Kaga, Bennett and Moss, 2010). The most positive benefits accrued to systems that achieved deep policy integration where all levels are committed to the change process. This is the policy norm in countries such as England, Scotland, Sweden, Norway, Slovenia, Spain and New Zealand and in many countries that have high quality ECE provision. Similarly, the Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care (CoRe) report (European Commission, 2011) focuses on the importance of all aspects of the ECE system being fit for purpose to achieve a competent system, including the inter-institutional and governance levels.

Figure 6: Who is ultimately responsible for ECE policy in Ireland?



Implications and Recommendations

It is evident that policy responsibility for ECE is fragmented among a bewildering array of government departments, agencies and organisations. Recent years have witnessed the proliferation of a vast range of policy and legislative initiatives in the sector and the creation of new structures for their implementation. The current energy and interest in the sector must be harnessed with a view to bringing greater coherence and shared approaches. While departments and agencies are cognisant of wider policy developments, it is arguable that many policies are developed in isolation from one another and with insufficient cognisance of their impact on the service providers in the sector. This has led to a situation and context that is becoming increasingly complex and untenable for the sector.

In conclusion, a number of considerations and recommendations are posited for the future development of ECE policy. Some of these re-echo the recommendations of earlier policy documents but have not been enacted or implemented to date:

- One essential key strategic policy game changer must be the centralisation of key ECE policy development within a single government department. It is evident that interdepartmental co-ordination and co-operation has failed to provide a cohesive and integrated policy vision or practice delivery model for the sector. As well as developing and providing for the implementation of key ECE policy, this central department should also be instrumental in co-ordinating ECE policy across all other government departments that have a remit for ECE for children aged birth to six years. This department must become the key centre point of all ECE policy development with a strong understanding of the totality of impact of policy development on the sector. This development is central to the creation of a 'competent system' as advocated by the CoRe report (European Commission, 2011).
- To guide the work of the centralised department with responsibility for ECE, a clear shared vision or strategy for the sector is required. The National Early Years Strategy, currently being developed, has the potential to provide this shared cohesive vision spanning all aspects that affect the lives of young children. A strategic consultative process is required as part of its development to ensure participation in its development and an ownership of its contents. Consultation must be focussed, transparent and underpinned by a commitment to act on outcomes, a process that has not always been characteristic of consultation in the ECE sector to date.

- A single, cohesive regulatory system for the sector is required. While welcome, the education-focused inspections must integrate cohesively with the existing pre-school inspections so that a single unified inspection system that focuses on all aspects of quality in ECE provision, and that complements settings' self-evaluation practices, can be developed.
- A policy audit needs to be undertaken to enumerate and evaluate the totality of policy documentation for the ECE sector that has been developed in recent times. This should identify the policy gaps, the policy duplications and the obsolete policy currently in existence. An implementation plan should then be developed for the range of worthwhile existing policy initiatives in the sector to translate their vision into reality. The centralised department with policy responsibility for ECE must support the sector with a cohesive suite of ECE policy that will remove the need for individuals and settings to navigate the complex and multiple requirements of a myriad of departments and agencies currently being imposed.
- At a government level, a strategic investment plan for the sector spanning the next five years should be discussed and delivered to raise expenditure on ECE from 0.5% at present (DCYA, 2015c:32) to the OECD average of 0.8% of GDP. A longer term investment target should be to raise this investment to the 1% UNICEF benchmark by 2025. Development and improvement will not occur unless there is an immediate, significant and consistent increase in State investment in the sector.
- Much of the administrative complexity of the ECE system could be reduced or eliminated by adopting a policy of progressive universalism, i.e., providing a universal provision of basic supports and services for all with extra supports for those who need them.
- Much of the investment to date in the ECE sector has been targeted at the physical infrastructure. It is now time to invest in the professionals who work in the ECE sector from whom so much is expected, the people who deliver the service and who are fundamental to the quality of experiences and outcomes experienced by the child. This investment should be targeted at supporting improved training and qualifications for early childhood educators, provision for ongoing CPD, ensuring payment for non-contact hours for professional purposes and the introduction of appropriate salary structures and scales.

Bibliography

- Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2006). *Síolta – The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.
- Children’s Rights Alliance (2008). *Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs – Information Note*. Dublin: Children’s Rights Alliance.
- Coolahan, J. (Ed.) (1998). *Report on the National Forum for Early Childhood Education*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2011). *Children First, National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children*. Dublin: DCYA.
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2012). *Minister Frances Fitzgerald announces preparation of Ireland’s first National Early Years Strategy*. Accessible at: <http://www.dcy.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?DocID=1751>
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2013). *Right from the Start: Report of the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy*. Dublin: DCYA.
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2014a). *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014 – 2020*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2014b). *Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme General Conditions of Grant Funding Agreement*. Dublin: DCYA
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2014c). *General Information on the New Early Years Registration System*. Accessible at: <http://www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services/registration-system-new>.
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2015a). *Welcome to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs*. Accessible at: <http://www.dcy.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?DocID=120>.
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2015b). *Training and Employment Childcare (TEC) Programmes*. Accessible at: <http://www.dcy.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?fn=%2Fdocuments%2Fchildcare%2FCETSMainPage.htm&mn=chiv&nID=4>.
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2015c). *Report of Inter-Departmental Working Group: Future Investment in Childcare in Ireland*. Dublin: DCYA.
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2015d). *Children First Training*. Accessible at: <http://www.tusla.ie/children-first/roles-and-responsibilities/organisations/children-first-training>.
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2015e). *Budget 2016: Expansion of Free Pre-School*. Accessible at: <http://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/ecce-scheme/20160107FAQonBudgetUpdated.pdf>
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2015f). *DCYA Early Years Recognised Qualifications: List of Early Years qualifications recognised for the purposes of meeting the requirements of the Regulations and DCYA Childcare Programmes Contracts*. Dublin: DCYA. Accessible at: <http://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/ecce-scheme/20150928FinalPublishListQualifications.pdf>.
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2016). *Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme 2013-2017*. Accessible at: http://www.dcy.gov.ie/docs/Area_Based_Childhood_%28ABC%29_Programme/1938.htm.
- Department of Education and Science (1999). *Ready to Learn - A White Paper on Early Childhood Education*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Department of Education and Science (2004). *The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act*. Dublin: The Stationery Office. Accessible at www.ncse.ie.
- Department of Education and Skills (2010). *A Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector in Ireland*. Dublin: DES.
- Department of Education and Skills (2011). *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life – The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020*. Dublin: DES.

- Department of Education and Skills (2014a). *Minister O'Sullivan Announces the First Major Review of Education and Training Programmes for Early Years Sector*. Accessible at: <http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2014-Press-Releases/PR14-09-04.html>.
- Department of Education and Skills (2014b). *Minister O'Sullivan Announces New Early Years Education Advisory Group*. Accessible at: <http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2014-Press-Releases/PR2014-12-03.html>.
- Department of Education and Skills (2015a). *Annual Statistical Report 2014-15*. Dublin: DES. Accessible at: <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Statistical-Reports/>
- Department of Education and Skills (2015b). *Early Years Education-focused Inspections in Early Years Settings Participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme: Briefing Paper*. Dublin: DES.
- Department of Health and Children (2006). *Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations 2006*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Department of Health and Children (2010). *National Standards for Pre-School Services*. Dublin: DHC.
- Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (1999). *National Childcare Strategy – Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Duignan, M. and Walsh, T. (2004). *Insights on Quality – A National Review of Policy, Practice and Research relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland 1990-2004*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.
- European Commission (2011). *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care – A Study for the European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture: Final Report*. Brussels: European Commission.
- French, G. (2013). *A Journey without a Roadmap*. Dublin: Dublin Institute of Technology. <http://arrow.dit.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1023&context=aaschssrep>
- Government of Ireland (1998). *Education Act*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Government of Ireland (2005). *Disability Act 2005*. Dublin: The Stationery Office
- Government of Ireland (2010). *20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Hayes, N. (2010). *Childcare? Early Childhood Education and care? Towards an Integrated Early Years Policy for Young Children in Ireland*. *Early Years*, 30, (1), 67-78.
- Hayes, N., O'Donoghue Hynes, B. And Wolfe, T. (2013). *Rapid Change without Transformation: The Dominance of a National Policy Paradigm over International Influences on ECEC Development in Ireland 1995-2012*. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 45 (2), 1-19.
- Hayes, N., O'Flaherty, J. with Kernan, M. (1997). *A Window on Early Education in Ireland. The First National Report of the IEA Pre-Primary Project*. Dublin: Dublin Institute of Technology.
- Interdepartmental Working Group (2015). *Supporting Access to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme for Children with a Disability*. Accessible at: http://www.hea.ie/sites/default/files/idg_report_-_supporting_access_to_ecce_for_children_with_a_disability_final.pdf
- Irish Times (2015a). *"Concern about 'inadequate' pre-school inspections"*, 8th April 2015. Accessed at: <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/concern-about-inadequate-pre-school-inspections-1.2167861>.
- Kaga, Y., Bennett, J. and Moss, P. (2010). *Caring and Learning Together: A Cross-national Study of Integration of Early Childhood Care and Education within Education*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Kiernan, G. and Walsh, T (2004). *The Changing Nature of Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland*. *Irish Educational Studies*, 23, 2, 1-18.
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2009). *Aistear, The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: NCCA.

- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2015). *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide*. Dublin: NCCA. <http://www.ncca.ie/en/Practice-Guide>
- National Economic and Social Forum (2005). *Early Childhood Care and Education – NESF Report No. 31*. Dublin: National Economic and Social Forum.
- Neylon, G. (2014). An Analysis of Irish Pre-school Practice and Pedagogy using the Early Childhood Environmental Four Curricular Subscales. *Irish Educational Studies*, 33, 1, pp. 99-116.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004). *OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Pobal (2014). *Pobal Annual Early Years Sector Survey 2013*. Dublin: Pobal.
- Start Strong (2013). Shaping the Future*. Dublin: Start Strong.
- Walsh, T. (2010). *Early Childhood Intervention Project - Country Report: Ireland*. Accessible at: <http://www.european-agency.org/agency-projects/early-childhood-intervention>.
- Walsh, T. and Cassidy, P. (2007). *An Audit of Research on Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland 1990-2006 (Second Edition)*. Dublin: CECDE.

List of acronyms

- ABC** - Area Based Childhood Programme
- ASCC** - After-school Child Care Programme
- CCCs** - City and County Childcare Committees
- CCS** - Community Childcare Subvention Programme
- CEC** - Community Employment Childcare Programme
- CECDE** - Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
- CETS** - Childcare Education and Training Support Programme
- CYPSCs** - Children and Young People's Services Committees
- DCYA** - Department of Children and Youth Affairs
- DES** - Department of Education and Skills
- DHC** - Department of Health and Children
- DJELR** - Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
- DPER** - Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
- ECE** - Early Childhood Education
- EPSEN** - Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs
- EYEPU** - Early Years Education Policy Unit
- HSE** - Health Service Executive
- NCCA** - National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
- NCIP** - National Childcare Investment Programme
- NCO** - National Childcare Organisation

NCSE - National Council for Special Education

NEYS - National Early Years Strategy

OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OMCYA - Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs

PIP - Programme Implementation Platform

QAP - Quality Assurance Programme

QQI - Quality and Qualifications Ireland

SEN - Special Educational Needs

SENO - Special Educational Needs Organiser

TEC - Training and Employment Childcare

