Introduction

There have been significant changes in the field of early childhood education and care in Ireland over recent decades. Responding to the increasing demands for provision there has been unprecedented investment in the expansion of places and the infrastructure to manage such developments. The growth of local childcare support networks and improved coordination across the national voluntary organisations has given an increased visibility to the sector that was missing in the 1990s. The establishment of the Ministry for Children and Youth Affairs provided a policy context for the enhanced cohesion and integration across the variety of policy issues impacting directly on young children's lives including the early childhood education and care system. Alongside policy developments there has been increased investment into a variety of support schemes and initiatives focused on affordability, accessibility, setting regulation and inspection, and mentoring particularly in the context of the two-year universal preschool years. Since 2002, with the publication of the Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector (Dublin, DJELR) and 2010, with the publication of the Workforce Development Plan (DES) there has been policy awareness of the need to review the structure of, and supports for the workforce. While well intentioned these publications did not receive the resources necessary for Irish policy and action to follow other countries towards supporting and developing a graduate-led diverse professional base to enhance the quality of service provision and the experiences of young children.

The publication of First 5 - a strategy for babies, young children and families in 2018 provided an indication of the priorities for the department over the next decade identifying four goals: strong and supportive families; optimum physical and mental health; positive play-based early learning and an effective early childhood system. One of the key objectives of First 5 is to achieve a ‘skilled and sustainable workforce’ and, to this end a new Workforce Development Plan will be published by 2021.

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2 Within First 5 an Early Childhood System is defined thus: a well-functioning early childhood system ensures maximum support for babies and young children across health [from pregnancy], home environment, high-quality early learning experiences, transition to school within a supportive community context [from p.12 First 5]
Internationally a number of developments and trends can be seen as central in directly influencing the daily work of educators in early childhood settings. Hayes and Kernan (2008) identified these developments as including: (i) the professionalising of the early childhood education and care sector with expanded provision of higher level training and the associated development of standards of good practice and ethics; (ii) the growing heterogeneity of societies; (iii) the almost universal ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; (iv) the notion of early childhood education and care settings as sites of democratic practice where children and adults can participate collectively in interpreting experiences and shaping decisions affecting themselves, (Moss, 2007); and (v) the centrality of the principles of social inclusion and respect for diversity in good quality early childhood education.

These developments have been accompanied by a growing recognition of the importance of quality early childhood education experiences for all children in terms of lasting educational, developmental and social benefits in addition to a view of access to quality early childhood education and care as a right for all children.

**Early Childhood Education and Care Pedagogy**

This paper considers how theory and processes inform practice as more young children are now spending increased time in a range of settings outside the home. Evidence shows that the most effective early childhood practice is that which has a sound theoretical base. We know that the adult, and their style of engagement, has a profound impact on the learning experiences of children and sets the scene for their sense of engagement with the world. We also know a great deal about how children develop and learn and recognise that early childhood experiences are important to them in their day-to-day life and in to their future.

Children are the social group most affected by the quality of early childhood services. While this seems like a truism there is a relative complacency about what actually happens children in their everyday experiences and an assumption that by just attending early years settings they will develop and progress positively. In fact the quality of everyday experiences in the early years - wherever children are - has a profound influence on them. They are not merely recipients or consumers of a service but are deeply influenced, individually and collectively, by their early years experiences. The *First 5* strategy notes that ‘Early childhood is a unique phase of life for the realisation of these rights’ (p.24). This statement continues with the qualification that ‘children are particularly vulnerable to the violation of their rights, and to poverty, discrimination, family breakdown and other adversities. Children require special protection to exercise their rights’ (p. 24).

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3 This paper is specifically addressing practice in those early childhood settings providing early childhood education and care (OECD, 2001) for children from birth to six years of age [compulsory school age in Ireland]
This emphasis on ‘special protection’ is in contrast to the more vigorous commitment to the rights of all children seen in the earlier National Children's Strategy (2000) which recognised children as active agents in their development and highlighted the importance of locating policy implementation within a rights-based framework. This was exemplified in their three goals: children will have a voice; children’s lives will be better understood and children will receive quality supports and services. Within this approach children have a right to expect that early childhood settings will challenge and excite them, provide safety and security and enhance their overall development and learning.

It is useful to review current understandings of how early childhood practices impact on children. Such a review can act as a stimulus for educators to reflect on their practice and the quality of provision for young children so that the experience of early childhood settings will be a positive and affirming one for all those involved. Children develop in the midst of many different and interacting systems (Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny, 2017). Whilst the family is recognised as the central space for early development, an increasing number of families share the early care and education of their children with various types of services. These services grow and are supported as part of the wider society and have, to a greater or lesser degree, contacts with other educational, social and cultural settings in the wider community. As such they provide an important bridge for children and parents alike, particularly useful where services are provided for minority or marginalised parents and their children. While acknowledging the primary role of the educators as the education and care of children attending settings it is also important to recognise the important potential of early childhood settings in creating these links across various populations and systems.

**Interacting children, adults and environments**

The interactions between individual children, the adults in their life and the various early years environments are critical spaces for learning. In Ireland early childhood education and care, in line with international understandings (OECD, 2001; EC, 2019) refers to the development and learning of young children from birth through to age six years [compulsory school age]. This period of life has been defined internationally as the first stage in education. The contemporary view of children as active agents in their learning is an important one. It requires educators in all types of early childhood settings to recognise and respond to the reality that even the very youngest children contribute to the context and content of their own development. This is not to underestimate the dependence of the child or the very powerful,

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4 The *First 5* strategy reconfigures this understanding somewhat by introducing the term Early Learning and Care (ELC) which it defines as 'centre-based ELC and regulated home-based ELC but excludes grandparental care and the early years of primary school'. In excluding the non-compulsory early years of the primary school the definition differs significantly from the more widely understood definition of Early Childhood Education and Care.
protective role of the adult. It does however, challenge adults to reconsider practice and to take account of the rich and diverse nature of each child when planning early care and education, designing learning environments and providing learning opportunities.

Viewing children as participants in the early childhood process allows adults to work with children as well as provide for them. It offers a context within which children can be seen as collaborators in learning and be valued in the here and now. While it is important to consider the future, and educators are contributing to the foundations of future learning, it is the immediate, day-to-day experiences that are of immediate relevance, these are the experiences that matter. Children learn from the world around them; the ordinary has the potential to be extra-ordinary. The adult can contribute in making the experience of the ordinary a rich learning experience through expanding children's language, thinking and understandings.

Children trust adults and look to them for protection and guidance. Children are motivated to learn, to seek meaning in their world and they expect that the adults they meet will assist them in this endeavour. They bring to the learning situation their own capabilities and will develop, through their experiences, the dispositions for learning that contribute to their overall success among their peers and in new social environments. It is at this stage in their development that children come to understand their world. Their curiosity and desire for knowledge is evident in their play, their exploration, their questions and their behaviour. The adult has a valuable contribution to make in this regard. To make the most of the early years children need adults to trust and adults who trust them, are excited, inspired and challenged by them. The child becomes the centre of practice and the curriculum in action should reflect this. Good practice requires that adults actively include children in the experiences of the early learning environment, engaging with children and learning from them as well as enhancing the learning opportunities for them. This pedagogical approach is informed by a belief in the active nature of child development and includes the child as a partner in development.

The extent to which practice is responsive to learning opportunities of even the most mundane activity such as nappy changing, transition from one space to the next or tidy-up time, depends on the quality of the educators and will influence the quality of the experience for the child. Settings which recognise that learning is an ongoing process will engage children in the day-to-day activities, will include them in planning and will expect them to contribute. The challenges of this approach to practice are recognised. It is not sufficient to make a plan for the day and follow it; the dynamic and interactive nature of development requires that educators are flexible, responsive and reflective throughout their engagement with children. The design, organisation and resourcing of the early years setting is central to the early learning process. Settings, both indoor and outdoor should be safe whilst also providing rich and varied opportunities for exploration, play and risk-taking. Children
thrive where they feel part of the learning environment, feel that they belong and adults need to consider how best to make settings welcoming and familiar for all children irrespective of their background. The quality of planning necessary for such provision is pedagogical planning; it requires the creation of learning opportunities in risk-rich, content-rich and language-rich environments. Practice is most effective when it is relational and responsive to the child. This refocusing of practice requires a significant shift in approach away from some more traditional styles where a daily routine can become a fixed routine and planning rests exclusively with the adult. It also has significant implications for the quality and content of even the most basic training at initial and continuing professional education and development.

**Theory to practice**

Within research the role of the early childhood education and care setting in modern societies is under review. It is no longer seen as simply a safe place to have children minded while parents work. Rather, it is recognised as an influential institution for children, one where their rights and needs can be met in a way that recognises and respects them. Within such settings children have the opportunity to develop a sense of belonging beyond the immediate family group, a sense of contribution to a new social system. The quality of these opportunities can influence their sense of identity, the view they form of themselves. This reality places an obligation on adults to consider their vision for children, to be alert to the immediate environment whilst at the same time remaining sensitive to the background experiences of children and the valuable contribution of such experiences, even for very young children.

Research continues to illustrate that successful early education facilitates the child in active learning in environments that are well planned, where staff are well trained, confident and supported in their work. Quality models of early education are characterised by underpinning principles which present a view of the child as an active partner in the integrated and ongoing process of learning reflecting a strong commitment to developing the social and affective dimensions of learning as well as the more traditional emphasis on cognitive development. This reflects the views expressed by many (Bruner, 1996; Hayes, 2008; OECD, 2004; Sylva et al., 2004) that the most important learning in early education has to do with the affective, dynamic and difficult to measure aspects of development such as aspirations, social skills, motivation, organisation, learner identity and confidence.

Research suggests that for high-quality, effective early childhood education and care it is necessary to have well-trained staff, familiar with child development and subject material, who recognise and respond to the dynamic and individual nature of development in the early years and who can work with an emerging curriculum, such as *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009), a curriculum framework which is driven by the interests and experiences of the children and the opportunities afforded by the environment (OECD, 2006). Cultivating positive learning dispositions and feelings in young
children leads to positive outcomes in social, linguistic and cognitive development and the skills necessary for later school success. It is a holistic, adaptive and, ultimately, more effective approach to early education.

One of the difficulties in translating research findings into practice however, is that practice happens in the real world and learning is a far more dynamic and messy process than any text can capture. Contemporary research and literature confirms the importance of attending to this dynamic and messy process and informing such attention by reference to our increased knowledge about and understandings of the components of the process and their interdependence. Early education models of practice have been guided by principles derived from the study of development and pedagogy, by societal values and by the aims that policymakers have for education.

The role of the adult in early childhood education is crucial and multi-faceted and has been characterised as a combination of listener, questioner, advisor, demonstrator, actor, sympathiser, negotiator, assessor and guide (Athey, 1990). I would go further and contend that the adult in early childhood settings must also recognise their role as a ‘co-learner’, a reflective observer of children who learns from observation and uses this as the basis for pedagogical practice (Hayes, 2008). To have a positive impact in the lives of young children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, requires understanding and respect for the fact that children are participants in their development bringing with them, to each opportunity and challenge, their own personal histories and experiences. Recognising the child’s active contribution to the process of learning reflects the rise in attention to children’s participation in education emerging from psychological, sociological and rights research and calls for a new pedagogical approach. Such pedagogy presumes that we all hold certain ideas and beliefs, which through discussion and interaction, can be moved towards some shared frame of reference and is child-sensitive, less patronising and more respectful of children’s own role in their development. In the early years understanding the day-to-day dynamic development of individual children is critical as it presents insight into the varied levels of cognitive, affective and social development more typical than in later years; normative development affords a valuable benchmark against which to check the dynamic development of individual children, should such checks be necessary.

**A nurturing pedagogy**

If adults are to nurture children’s learning as part of a caring educative process they must develop skills of observation and reflection to allow for the non-intrusive planning and the provision of learning environment that support and extend children’s own learning and quality interactive opportunities. To nurture requires an engaged, bidirectional level of interaction and confers on the early childhood educator an enhanced, educational role. Despite many recommendations on the value of balancing the care and education elements of early education there is a tendency to
underestimate the educative role of caring (Hayes, 2007). A significant shift in understanding the role of care in practice requires an explicit acknowledgement of the critical contribution of the interpersonal aspect of early education; the realisation in practice that the close interactions, the proximal process, are the engines of development [Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Hayes et al, 2017]. To emphasise this it has been argued that there is a value to reconceptualising care in early childhood education and care settings as nurture in order that the status of care as an educative dimension is enhanced (Hayes, 2006, 2008). The idea of considering care as nurture confers on it an active connotation with a responsibility on the adult to provide nurturance and foster learning rather than to simply protect and keep children safe. Such a shift in emphasis would raise the expectations many have of early childhood care and education.

Reconceptualising care as nurture strengthens the attention to the educative nature and value of care and allows for a more appropriate ‘nurturing pedagogy’ to emerge in early learning environments (Hayes, 2006; 2008; Hayes and Kernan, 2008). Linking the term nurture with pedagogy is intended to focus attention on the implications for practice. Although well known in educational theory through the work of authors such as Freire (1998/1970) and Bruner (1996) the term pedagogy is relatively new one in Irish early educational discourse. Pedagogy is a word that captures the multi-layered and dynamic practices necessary to support children's holistic development. The term ‘pedagogy’ is used to capture the integrated processes of caring, educating and learning alongside the principles, theory, values and approaches which underpin daily work with young children in the range of early childhood settings. Pedagogy encompasses the processes of children learning and adults creating learning opportunities and environments that engage, challenge and interest young children. It also focuses attention on the everyday learning that adults themselves engage in, as they observe, reflect on and critically analyse the content and approach to their work with young children, alone and with other adults.

Central to a nurturing pedagogy is a rights-based focus on children, a focus that foregrounds and celebrates the importance of relationships and interactions: between children, between adults and young children, between adults and their colleagues and parents of the children they work with, and between learners and the environments where learning takes place. A nurturing pedagogy is a style of practice that is explicit in engaging children, respecting them, understanding their rights while meeting their needs and integrating the learning opportunities provided across the care and education dimensions. It builds on the individual capabilities and dispositions of the child within their socio-cultural contexts and derives from the belief that it is the close interactions, the proximal processes, between children, adults and the environment that drive development and learning. Examples include feeding and comforting babies, playing with young children, facilitating child-to-child interactions, comforting those in distress, making plans, word play and storytelling, acquiring new knowledge and know-how. Responding to our understanding of early childhood
development requires that we prioritise relationships and interactions over direct instruction and teaching as the cornerstone, the unique feature of early educational practice.

Combining the word pedagogy with the term nurture is intended to strengthen the early childhood education and care professional space. The word nurture has quite a different tone to it than the word care. In comparing the meaning of the two words, ‘nurture’ is more engaging and active than ‘care’. The verb ‘to care’ is almost custodial in tone and requires a minimum of interaction; the adult merely provides for and looks after the child. To nurture, on the other hand conveys a far more engaged level of interaction and requires the adult to actively nourish, rear, foster, train, and educate the child through his/her practice. Skills of observation and reflection are central to a nurturing pedagogy. They enhance practice and planning and are manifest in well-managed and yet responsive and flexible practice through the provision of a learning environment that includes children and supports and extends their learning. This allows for increased attention to positive interactions between both child and adult and child and child. It also allows for planning by the adult for future opportunities that might extend the child’s own learning giving a key role to the adult which takes the child, rather than the content, as central. It encourages the movement away from the more traditional, organisational/management role of the educator and strengthens the focus on the pedagogical role. A nurturing pedagogy fosters the processes of interaction, dialogue and planning leading to the shared construction of knowledge, between children and adults, within the contexts of an enabling learning environment and an emerging curriculum responsive to the child in the immediate now. This pedagogy highlights the importance of initial and continuing professional development for the adult.

In settings where the adult is observing and listening to young children and reflecting on these observations, the curriculum plan is based on an assessment of children’s interests and developmental level as well as their rights and needs and the aims of education. A nurturing pedagogy encourages reflective practice where the educator creates rich, interactive learning environments. In addition it facilitates the early identification of difficulties in individual development and early action to address them either in the context of the setting or through outside interventions and supports. Implicit in the concept of a nurturing pedagogy is the idea that pedagogy is a guide to an emergent and responsive curriculum and is in itself, a form of assessment. Finally, a nurturing pedagogy extends the underlying idea of respect for the child as an active, participating partner in the learning process while at the same time recognising and articulating a mechanism for respecting the dual nature of early education as care and education in practice.
REFERENCES:


