

# Early Childhood Care & Education (ECCE) sector in Ireland

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## Abstract

This article is aimed at students or professionals in the field of education who might be interested in learning about educational systems from abroad. It is very important to know about other educational systems in order to learn from them and thus improve our education practice. Hence, this article explains how the children's educational sector in Ireland works from its inception up until the present, where we can know its educational framework and its procedures of organization to provide this service to citizens.

**Keywords:** Educational systems from abroad, Early Childhood Care and Education sector in Ireland, The right of childcare in Ireland, Types of ECCE services in Ireland

**Título:** La Educación Infantil en Irlanda.

## Resumen

Este artículo está dirigido a aquellos estudiantes o profesionales de la educación que pudieran estar interesados en los sistemas educativos extranjeros. Para poder mejorar y enriquecer nuestro labor docente es fundamental conocer que se está haciendo en otros países. Por tanto, en este artículo se muestra cómo es el sector de la Educación Infantil en Irlanda desde sus orígenes hasta la actualidad, donde podremos conocer sus leyes educativas así como los procedimientos de organización con los que cuentan para dar este servicio a la ciudadanía.

**Palabras clave:** Sistemas Educativos Extranjeros, Sector de la Educación Infantil en Irlanda, Los derechos del niño en Irlanda, Centros de Educación Infantil en Irlanda.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is very important to know about other educational systems in order to learn from them and thus improve our school system. Recently, I have had the opportunity of studying "Early Childhood Care & Education" in Ireland, as well as working in an ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) setting as a practitioner. It not only allowed me to learn about another educational system, but also about the procedures of organization.

Hence, the aim of this article is to show how the children's educational sector is in Ireland. It is aimed at students or professionals in the field of education who might be interested in educational systems from abroad.

For that purpose, we will start with the historical development of the ECCE sector in Ireland. Secondly, we will discuss the right of childcare in an ECCE in Ireland. Thirdly, the current range of childcare provisions in Ireland will be explained. Finally, we will speak about qualification requirements in the childcare area in Ireland.



An ECCE setting in Ireland called “Stepping Stones Community Childcare Services”

(Source: Bagenalstown Family Resource Centre)

## **HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ECCE SECTOR IN IRELAND**

In order to understand how Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) emerged and how it is today, we have to go back in time.

The definition of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), has not always been as we know it today. Initially its goal was only to provide assistance. Nowadays, it involves a set of defined educative objectives regulated by the State (An example of this are Siolta and Aistear). The consolidation and educational recognition of this level was not easy, its development was affected by the different social, economic and political factors.

In Ireland, before the 1980s and 1990s pre-school education was not common. The role of the woman was caring for children and doing household chores. Consequently, the state did not promote the incorporation of women into the labor market. A proof of this is the ‘marriage bar’ by which, female working in Civil Service jobs (primary teachers from 1958 were excluded from it) had to resign from their jobs when they got married (It was removed in 1973). Due to all this, Pre-school level was not a priority for the State. Outside the State Primary School system, investment in pre-school provision was targeted to support children in need of specific intervention (educational disadvantage and children with special needs). Young children in Ireland were cared for in their home with little need for a formal education. The low demand ECCE was covered by the private sector. Consequently, the progress in the area of pre-school education in Ireland has come from the private rather than the public sector (Flood & Hardy, E. & C., 2013).

In 1968 a huge step was made, in Rutland Street, Dublin was opened a pre-school. It was possible thanks to the joint work of The Department of Education and the Van Leer Foundation (an organisation that promotes the early education of children living in economically disadvantaged areas). These pre-schools were known as Early Start pre-schools and were opened a total of 40 (Flood & Hardy, E. & C., 2013).

In the 1980s, an increasing number of women chose to remain in their workplace after having children. Consequently, the demand for childcare increased. But it was in during the 90s when this service was boosted and regulated. In this decade, the growing economy required an expanded labour force. Therefore, the labour force could no longer rely on family supports (Moreau, P., 2004,).

The Child Care Act 1991 was a crucial piece of legislation in relation to ECCE, which outlined the context for the regulation of preschool services since until then these services were unregulated. It had limitations since it didn't ask qualified staff (Hayes, N., Bradley, S., 2006)

In the international a consciousness regarding children's rights started to emerge. In 1992, Ireland ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and it committed to support their economic, social and cultural rights.

In 1997, the Partnership 2000 Agreement established an Expert Working Group for evaluating the need of childcare in Ireland. As a consequence of this, in 1999, the Irish Government published two important documents that were key to the development of Early Childhood Care and Education. The first was the so called "Ready to Learn", this is the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, which defined the key objectives and referenced the low base of education provision for children (0-6). It is a document focused exclusively on early childhood education, addressing high teacher to pupil ratios in classrooms, quality indicators and the need for an appropriate curriculum for children under six. The second important document was the National Childcare Strategy which proposed an inter-departmental and inter-agency collaboration to address issues on childcare in Ireland. The document distinguishes between childcare and education and excludes primary school classes (Gallo, M., 2007).

This was followed by a much more ambitious programme, the €449 million Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP 2000–2006). This programme aimed to provide response to the development of quality childcare supports and services. It also included the promotion of equality of opportunity in the workplace and the removal of barriers to female participation in the labour market (Gallo, M., 2007) Over the period 2000-2010 over 65,000 places were created in early childhood centers (State Investment in Early Childhood Care & Education Programmes).

Besides, two high impact external reports on early childhood care and education published, one from the OECD (2004) and the other from the National Economic and Social Forum (2005). (Hayes, N., Bradley, S., 2006)

At a national level, in 2002 the Minister for Education and Science established the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education. Among other things, CECDE produced Ireland's first quality framework, entitled *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (2006). The organisation was disbanded in 2008, because the "Ready to Learn aims" were already covered. Therefore, Child Care (Pre-School) Regulations (2006) were produced by the Department of Health and Children. This document set out regulations that must be covered by organisations or individuals providing ECCE services (first aid, behaviour management, fire safety measures, heating, ventilation, etc.) (Flood & Hardy, E. & C., 2013).

*Síolta* (2006) is the national quality framework for early childhood care and education in Ireland. It established 16 quality standards that guide the way to provide and develop early childhood care and education services, ranging from the Rights of the Child to Legislation and Regulation (*Síolta: National quality framework for early childhood care and education in Ireland*).

Another major step for ECCE in Ireland was in 2009 when the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) developed the National Curriculum Framework for Early Childhood Education named as *Aistear*. It can be used in a variety of settings including children's homes, childminding settings, infant classes in primary school as well as in sessional services and in full and part-time day care services. The Framework is underpinned by 12 principles of early learning and development many of which are shared with *Síolta* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2013, *Aistear in Action*).

In January 2010, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) ensured that all children could avail of one year of free pre-school before they entered primary school. In the budget of 2016 this was extended and since then children can start pre-school from the age of 3 years and continue until they enter primary school (less than than 5 ½ years) (Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme)

This initiative promote that all children benefit from quality pre-school education. This programme is provided to both, community and private crèches. About 4,500 settings participated (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, n.d).

In Ireland, seven national non-governmental agencies are dedicated to the promotion of ECCE. These organizations have been working since 1999 under the name of "The National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative" (NVCC). They receive state funds. According to Flood & Hardy, E. & C., (2013), the seven organisations involved in the NVCC are:

- Irish Pre-School Play Association

- Forbairt Naíonraí Teoranta
- Childminding Ireland
- St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland
- Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association
- Children in Hospital Ireland
- Barnardos.

Throughout this report, we can see the development of ECCE sector in the last 50 years. Now, this sector is in good conditions. Nevertheless, it must continue working to improve the quality of early years services and supports in achieving positive outcomes for children and their families as well as for society as a whole. The document “Children 2020: Planning Now, for the Future” sets out the key principles that Ireland must take in the next years to advancing high quality care and education for all young children (Irish Youth Foundation and The Atlantic Philanthropies, 2010, Children’s Early Care and Education in Ireland, Children 2020).

### THE RIGHT OF CHILDCARE IN AN ECCE IN IRELAND

When we talk about the rights of the child we must look at "Rights of the Child Convention", adopted in 1989. It has been ratified by all States except the United States of America, Somalia and South Sudan. This is the first international legally binding instrument for the protection of the Rights of the Child. All the rights of the children are included in this international treaty and it obliges the governments to fulfill them.

It is composed of 54 articles dealing with the civil, political, socioeconomical and cultural rights of children. It describes the obligations and responsibilities of all agents involved such as parents, teachers, health professionals, researchers and the children themselves (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948).

With regard to education, States Parties recognize the educational rights of children. This ensures their access to education, making primary education compulsory and available free of charge to every child. Besides, it allows the access to higher education to everybody on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means.

Furthermore it facilitates the access to scientific/technical knowledge and modern teaching methods for the development of child's personality, talents, mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948).

Ireland was committed to promote children's rights when it ratified to the United Nations the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992. According to data published in September 2012 by Humanium, an international child sponsorship NGO dedicated to stopping violations of children's rights throughout the world. Nowadays, Ireland has a Child Rights Compliance rate of 9,05 / 10 (Garnier, A., 2012).

This is very good appraisal, but it also results from others laws implemented in Ireland in the last decades. One of them is "The Childcare Act (1991)" in which the welfare of children is promoted ensuring the adequate care and protection up to the age of 18 years. This Act covers aspects such as child protection, social work, family support services, voluntary care among others. It also provides childcare protection of in case of emergencies. State also gives children access to a solicitor free of charge and to a guardian. Furthermore, pre-school services are supervised. This aspects will be treated in more depth in the "Pre-school services Regulations and Safety 1996/1997/2006" and “Health and Welfare at Work Act (2005)” (Electronic Irish Statute Book (eISB), n.d.).

Another important law was “Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children” that was published in July 2011. This guidance is a roadmap to help different society agents like parents, professionals, organisations and the general public to identify and report child abuse and welfare concerns. Other document which took on this question was "Our Duty to Care: Principles of Good Practice for the Protection of Children and Young People (2002)". It offers guidance on the promotion of child welfare and the development of safe practices in work with children.

In relation to the criminal justice system the “Children Act 2001” is the main legislation covered children. In this Act is revealed the preventing criminal behaviour, diversion from the criminal justice system and rehabilitation.

In terms of rights equality, the "Equal Status Act (2000-2004)", prohibits discrimination in terms of: gender, sex orientation, religion, disability, race, family status, etc. "The Education for Persons with Special Education Needs Act (EPSEN, 2004)" stated that all children with special educational needs should be educated, wherever possible, in an inclusive environment with children who do not have special educational needs (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2013, Aistear in Action).

Other important laws on childhood education from birth to 6 year olds were "Sólta" and "Aistear". The National Quality Framework, known as Sólta (2006), is a set of national standards for early childhood education. It focuses on improving the quality of all aspects of the ECCE setting including administration procedures, adherence to legislation and HR and governance. On the other hand, Aistear (2009) is the National Curriculum Framework. It can be used as a guide in planning learning experiences in childhood education (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2013, Aistear in Action ).

In short, all laws deal with children care proceedings, education and protection covered by the State.

### CURRENT RANGE OF CHILDCARE PROVISION IN IRELAND

According to Flood & Hardy, E. & C (2013), the types of ECCE services currently available in Ireland can be organised under these headings:

**Sessional services**, which provide ECCE services at a defined period of time during the day (e.g. 9am–1pm). Generally, they take care children between two and six:

- **Playgroups:** They open for approximately three hours per day. Playgroups usually attend kids until they go to primary school. Community playgroups are primarily funded by government and are run by community members.
- **Montessori Schools:** Montessori pre-schools teach according to the principles and educational methods of Maria Montessori and also follow the Aistear framework. They are privately owned and provide service for three hours per day. Some offer morning or afternoon sessions.
- **Naíonraí:** Usually for children aged 3 years to 5 years of age. In this kind of preschool the language of learning is in Irish and follow the Aistear curriculum framework. Naíonraí attend children between three and five years old for three hours approximately. They are supported by the organisation Forbairt Naíonraí Teoranta.
- **Early Start:** is a one-year preventative intervention offered in selected pre-schools in designated disadvantaged areas. Early Start follows the Aistear curriculum framework and the is oriented towards children who are at risk of not reaching their potential within the school system. It is managed and funded by the Department of Education and Skills and there are 40 schools in Ireland.
- **Pre-schools for Traveller Children:** since the ECCE scheme was introduced in 2010, all children can avail of a year's free pre-school so the Department no longer funds separate provision for Traveller children.
- **Pre-schools for Children with Special Needs:** This kind of preschool provide services for young children with severe or profound disabilities. It run by a specialised staff. There are special pre-school class units for children with autistic spectrum disorders attached to primary schools as well as a number of ABA schools for children with autism. Department of Education and Skills also provides a service to young children with visual and/or hearing impairment from the age of two years.
- **Parent and Toddler Groups:** Parent and toddler groups who meet to play and to provide socialisation opportunities for children. The settings are community centres or parents' homes. This initiative is supported by Early Childhood Ireland.
- **Drop in centres:** This service usually is provided by shopping centres, leisure centres or other establishments as part of customer/client service. It is a place where parents can leave their children over a period of not more than two hours.

**Full-time services**, which provide ECCE services throughout the day. Generally, they take care children between three months to six years:

- **Crèches, Day Care Centres and Nurseries:** This Service are usually provided for children aged 6 months to school-going age. But many settings don't accept children under the age of 12 months. Furthermore, these centers to help the families also offer after school care, homework clubs, summer camps, for primary school children. These

services usually operate a long day (8am–6pm). Most of them are privately owned and only a small number are community crèches

- Family Day Care/Childminders: This is the most common form of CEEC service in Ireland. It offers a structured day care service for pre-school children for more than 5 hours per day. It has various rooms eg baby room, wobbler room, toddler room, playschool etc.

**Part-time services**, which provide ECCE services for a total of more than 3.5 hours and less than 5 hours a day. It may include a sessional pre-school service for pre-school children not attending the part-time day care service.

(Flood & Hardy, E. & C., 2013)

## **QUALIFICATIONS AND EXPERIENCE NEEDED TO WORK IN THE ECCE SECTOR**

From 31 December 2016, as stated in the Child Care Act (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016, all staff working directly with children must hold a minimum of FETAC Level 5 (or equivalent) in childcare/ early childhood care and education.

On the other hand, the law also says that ECCE room leader must hold a minimum QQI Level 6 Major Award in Early Childhood Care and Education (or equivalent) from December 2016. Further more, Room Leaders/Assistants are required to have completed a minimum of a 3 hour food safety awareness course (National quality framework for early childhood care and education in Ireland).

The law also includes other qualifications such as higher capitation. A higher capitation fee is payable to playschool sessional service providers where all the Pre-school Leaders in the sessional service room hold a bachelor degree in childhood/early education (minimum of Level 7 on the NFQ or equivalent) and have 3 years experience working in the sector, and where all the Pre-school (National quality framework for early childhood care and education in Ireland).

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