

# Lessons in early education from New Zealand <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** Wayman, Sheila

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## EXCERPTS:

CHILDCARE IS still seen by many people in Ireland as a way to keep children safe and entertained while their parents are at work. If they learn some letters and numbers in preparation for "big school", all the better.

Equally, the word "childcare" rarely appears in the media without being preceded by "the high cost of". It is an expensive phase that parents have to go through to hold onto jobs. For others, it is an insurmountable obstacle to working outside the home, at least until children are old enough to start school.

The free pre-school year, which was introduced in January 2010, was welcomed as a bridge between childcare and primary school but the first day of junior infants is still generally regarded as the day a child joins the education system.

The State only got serious about trying to increase childcare places from the mid-1990s when it was in our economic interest to keep more women in the workplace. The needs of the labour force seemed uppermost in policy-makers' minds.

But care and education are inextricably linked - a baby is learning from day one and at a much greater pace in the first three years than at any other stage of life. At policy level, Ireland has been slow to recognise just how crucial a child's experiences in the early years are for lifelong learning, health and wellbeing.

Internationally, early childhood care and education became an all-encompassing policy theme long before it was addressed here. With families recognised as children's first educators, it has been shown that children over the age of two benefit most from the combination of a positive home learning environment and high quality pre-school education.

As the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Frances Fitzgerald, has acknowledged, in the past, the focus of childcare was solely on supporting parents, whereas it should be on quality support for the development of the child.

Her announcement in January that a National Early Years Strategy is to be developed is a significant step towards greater investment in a sector which, international research has shown, pays off economically, never mind socially.

In the US it is estimated that for every dollar spent on early childhood interventions, the return is \$16 (€12.43), while research for the National Economic and Social Forum suggested it would be €7 for every €1 invested here.

The benefits not only include avoiding future State expenditure on these children in adulthood but also increased income in terms of taxes as they go on to better jobs with a higher earning capacity. The transformation of a toddler into a chief executive starts among the toy boxes, sand pits and painting easels of a dynamic playschool run by well-trained staff.

When it comes to early childhood care and education, Ireland is, in ways, where New Zealand was in the 1980s, according to Prof Linda Mitchell of the University of Waikato in Hamilton. She was in Dublin recently to explain what a 10-year strategic plan, which was started in New Zealand in 2002, meant to children under the age of six and their families.

"We've moved on - at least it shows you can move," she says, sitting in the basement offices on Merrion Street of Start Strong, an alliance of organisations and individuals advocating improved early care and education in Ireland.

With New Zealand and Ireland sharing certain similarities, such as population size, climate, landscape and importance of agriculture, its work in developing services for children aged zero to six is seen as offering valuable lessons.

During her visit, which was organised by Start Strong, Mitchell met the expert advisory group appointed to help draw up the National Early Years Strategy. She also briefed members of the Oireachtas, although, ironically, publication of the wording for the children's rights referendum that same morning affected the numbers attending her presentation.

Back in 1986, New Zealand became only the second country in the world, after Iceland, to integrate early childhood education services into its ministry of education.

"This changed a divided system, where childcare was seen as social welfare for the needy, to an education service," she explains. It took another 10 years to introduce a fully integrated, bicultural curriculum, bringing children through the education system from birth to 18.

The national strategy, "Pathways to the Future" (2002-2012) followed, and the broad consultation involved in its preparation was "critical", says Mitchell, who helped to draw it up.

"What is interesting about the plan is it is broader than outcomes for children. It saw very much the importance of the relationship with parents and families, as well as good transitions to schools and good links between the health and social service sector and the education sector."

SO, WHAT significant steps in early childhood care and education has New Zealand taken and how does Ireland compare?

#### Free pre-school

Since 2007, two free years of pre-school have been offered to every three-year-old child in New Zealand, before starting school at age five. It involves 20 hours a week for 48 weeks of the year - compared with one year in Ireland of 15 hours a week for 38 weeks.

It proved to be a "real lever" for getting children into early education, says Mitchell, and boosted participation rates nationally.

In the follow-up evaluation of the strategy, 17 per cent of parents said the fact it was free was the main reason they had decided to enrol their child for early education.

#### Drive for quality

Access to early childhood centres is only beneficial if they are of high quality, so there was a huge focus on making sure people working in early childhood education were qualified. By 2006, 50 per cent of staff at childcare centres had to have a three-year university degree or technical institute qualification equivalent to a degree, specialising in early childhood.

The strategy aimed to have all staff with teaching qualifications by 2012 but this target was reduced to 80 per cent by a new government. Last year, the rate of registered teachers in the early childhood sector stood at 69 per cent.

In Ireland, the only mandatory qualification is for Feta level five for the leader of groups in the free pre-school scheme. However, centres where pre-school leaders have a degree in early childhood education receive higher State funding of €73 per child per week, as opposed to the standard €62.50.

#### Pay parity

The securing of equal pay for kindergarten teachers with school teachers in 2002 was an important victory in changing attitudes to early childhood education, says Mitchell, who was involved in a long union campaign on the issue.

Low pay among childcare staff here is seen as a deterrent to young people making a career in the sector.

#### Parental involvement

Another key feature of the strategy was involving parents more in planning and assessing children's learning.

Early childhood teachers are expected to have in-depth discussions with parents, to get their views on a child's strengths and interests and how they want their child to develop. This feeds into the development of an individualised programme for that child.

Mitchell's evaluation of the impact of the strategy showed a significant shift in parental involvement. In 2004, some 36 per cent of parents said they had taken part in assessment and planning for their child; by 2009 this had risen to 60 per cent.

#### Inspections

A government agency that is independent of New Zealand's ministry of education is responsible for inspecting every licensed early childhood centre at least once every three years. The main focus is checking that centres are meeting the requirements of the curriculum.

Every inspection is reported in detail on the agency's website and a summary for parents must be displayed in a public place within the centre.

Here, the HSE is responsible for inspections, which are infrequent due to lack of staff. Although the HSE has said for some time that it intends to publish reports online, it has not happened.

#### Childminders

All home-based carers, the equivalent of childminders in Ireland, are part of the regulated early childhood services in New Zealand.

They too must follow the curriculum and are expected to do assessments of each child, in the way the centres do.

Local co-ordinators, who must be qualified teachers, support these carers with resources, ideas and weekly activities.

In Ireland, childminding is the most used and least regulated form of childcare. Only childminders who care for four children or more from different families are required to register.

#### Quality evaluation

A substantial improvement in overall quality of the early childhood education was recorded throughout New Zealand during the strategy.

"The way we measured quality," Mitchell explains, "was the interactions between the adults and children were more responsive, more cognitively challenging, more directed to children's learning and development.

"And the environments were better resourced - the equipment and the spaces for children were better and relationships with parents became much stronger."

However, it was noticeable, she adds, that centres where management did not allow staff to take up training opportunities offered by the strategy did not improve in their quality ratings.

#### Linking in health and social services

A vision of early childhood centres serving as hubs for health and social services was the one thing on which the strategy failed to deliver.

Mitchell envisaged professionals such as public health nurses, speech therapists, psychologists, etc coming to early childhood centres instead of parents having to take their children to them.

But it didn't happen; mainly, she believes, because there were no policy actions set in place.

"What we saw with health and social services was an aspirational statement and then it was just left to the services to do it. Nothing changed."

#### PLANS FOR PRE-SCHOOL

A second free pre-school year for all children would certainly be on the wish list of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Frances Fitzgerald. But her department was not willing to be any more specific when contacted by The Irish Times.

Proposals for an extension of the scheme are likely to be included in the first National Early Years Strategy, which the department is currently preparing.

However, a spokeswoman said, "Noting the current financial constraints, any such extension at this time is not likely."

A second free pre-school year is being called for by Start Strong, an alliance of organisations that advocates higher quality care and education for young children in Ireland.

"It is not about children spending necessarily long hours in a service but having daily access to a service. And that is crucially important - particularly from the age of two onwards," says the director of Start Strong, Ciairín de Buis.

The introduction of the free pre-school year in January 2010 was a big step forward and it is a huge success, as reflected in the fact that parents are voting with their feet on this one, she says.

"It will have an enormous impact - anecdotally it already is, you have teachers talking about the difference it is already making."

About 65,000 children - approximately 95 per cent of children in the year before school - are availing of the free pre-school hours, the Minister told the Dáil in July.

Last year the scheme cost approximately €166 million and that is expected to rise to €175 million in 2012, due to increased numbers of children in the relevant age group.

According to the review of expenditure published by her department before the last budget, a second free pre-school year for all children would cost in the region of €60 million in the first full year, although, it adds, that could vary depending on how the proposal was implemented.

#### HIGHER QUALIFIED STAFF ARE NEEDED IN THE PRE-SCHOOL YEAR

There is concern that children under the age of three are being overlooked as the focus of developing early childhood education has been on the free pre-school year.

The minimum qualification requirements that were introduced in 2010 apply only to leaders of groups operating under the free pre-school year scheme, which also offers increased funding for higher qualified staff.

"Unfortunately, a knock-on effect of that is the higher qualified staff can be pulled into the pre-school year, so those working with the under-threes can tend to have lower, if any, qualifications," says the director of Start Strong, Ciairín de Buis. "What we are pushing for is that there needs to be minimal qualifications for all staff."

Meanwhile, the cost of childcare in Ireland for the under-threes remains a huge issue. Unlike in many other European countries, there is no subsidised, high-quality childcare available after paid maternity leave is over. Parents receive no State assistance for the care and education of their child (other than child benefit and with the exception of those who qualify to use subsidised community creches) until the free pre-school year kicks in - and that is only for 15 hours a week, 38 weeks a year.

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