

Policy Brief: 'Childcare' - business or profession? ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

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Speaking in the Dáil (Parliament) on 29 May 2013, the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) said: "Child care is a profession...I do not like to see this referred to as a business, a sector or an industry. Unfortunately for some, that is what it has turned into."

Variable quality

When it is high quality, early care and education brings benefits all round. It benefits children through giving them a great start in their learning and development. It benefits parents through helping them seek employment, helping families get out of poverty. And it benefits the economy, with cost-benefit analysis showing high rates of return to investment. When it is low quality, however, many of those benefits disappear - and children can suffer.

The quality of early years services in Ireland is very variable, a fact highlighted in the Prime Time investigation, A Breach of Trust, in 2013. The key determinant of quality is the staff, with the quality of adult-child interactions closely linked to staff training. Qualification levels in Ireland are low by international standards, which is no surprise as many staff earn little more than the minimum wage.

Research, commissioned by Start Strong and published in November 2014, by Professor Penn and Professor Lloyd of the University of East London, shows that 'variable quality and inequitable access' are typical of countries - such as Ireland - in which early years services are run on a 'market' model. In Ireland, as elsewhere, the 'market' model means low public investment, with quality relying largely on providers' goodwill and on parents' income and ability to 'shop around'.

From a 'market' to a profession

There is an alternative approach, which recognises that early care and education is a public good. As the foundation of children's education, early years services should be seen as a public service. Like other public services, if we want to ensure that early years services are of high quality, they need public investment, with a professionalised workforce and a robust inspection system.

Other stages of our education system are recognised as a public service. Schools, for example, are staffed by professionals who earn professional wages. The same should be true of early years services. The Taoiseach was right to say that 'childcare' should be a profession, not a business.

Public investment - not tax credits

Public investment in Ireland's pre-school services amounts to less than 0.2% GDP. The average investment in OECD countries has recently increased to 0.8% GDP. Because of the lack of public investment in Ireland, staff wages are low, and parents have to pay the full cost of provision. Outside the Free Pre-School Year, only a small proportion of families have access to subsidised places.

The solution is direct investment in services - subsidising the cost of 'childcare' places for families while raising quality standards and supporting professionalisation. Tax credits, which reflect a market view of 'childcare', are not the solution as they will do nothing to improve quality.

A new Irish model

There is much to be proud of in Ireland's early years provision, with many high quality services, a committed workforce, and excellent national frameworks in *Síolta* and *Aistear*.

But there is also much that needs reform, including variability in the quality of services - with some services failing to meet minimum standards; low pay and poor working conditions for staff; inequity in access to quality services; and the invisibility of most childminders.

We need a new Irish model of early years provision - one that builds on our legacy of private and community provision and childminding, but significantly enhances public investment and public involvement - to ensure quality for all children.

Learning from schools

Just as our national school system is privately owned but is in effect publicly provided, so too we need to move to a position where our early years services, while they may be owned by a mix of private and community providers, are nonetheless delivering a public service.

That is not to say that early years services should feel like schools to children. Early years services should be distinctive in their strong

emphasis on play, child-led activity, an informal atmosphere, small group size, and low adult-child ratios.

The building blocks of reform

In a number of ways, the Free Pre-School Year has already laid the groundwork for this new Irish model, and these opportunities can be built on further:

- Many early years services only offer the Free Pre-School Year, and are therefore already fully or largely State-funded.
- The State is from September 2015, for the first time, introducing minimum qualifications for early years educators, albeit at a low level.
- The Higher Capitation Grant (paid to services delivering the Free Pre-School Year with a graduate leader) is a mechanism by which the State is already incentivising professionalisation.

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