

Strategies for Change.

Diversity as a Challenge for the Early Years' Profession.

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Abstract

Early childhood education and care has moved up national and European policy agendas, driven by common concerns about employment, competitiveness and gender equality and, to a lesser extent, about children's rights, equity and social inclusion. There is a consensus on the need for more and higher quality services, increasing integration of 'childcare' and 'early education', and enhanced training and status for the workforce whose members are seen as essential to quality provision. But this consensus does not extend to how to achieve these goals: national policies for change vary.

Internationally, an emerging discourse on professionalism in early childhood emphasizes the importance of critical reflectiveness, autonomy and professional habitus over the mere acquirement of skills and techniques.

But there is a parallel and increasingly influential discourse on outcomes, quality, curriculum, management and other means of regulation that leaves early childhood workers with a dilemma: They are expected to achieve predetermined and ambitious outcomes in a working context that is increasingly diverse and less predictable. The paper examines the tension that arises for early childhood workers and explores possible strategies for change.

Introduction

Speaking from the background of international comparative research on processes of change in early childhood education and care systems, we have to be careful not to be falling into the trap of comparing one system to the other from a simplistic perspective. In a European context, the question is not, which approaches to developing adequate services for young children and their families might be better than others. What we can do, though, is identify common strands and core issues that make change for children more likely to happen and more likely to be sustainable.

Today, a wind of change has shattered many of the certainties about the supremacy of one early childhood system over the other – and this is especially true for my country. In 2003, the OECD carried out a review of the early childhood education and care policy in Germany and concludes – among others – that '*... it seems inappropriate that the volume and quality of early services should be substantially uneven across the country, and that families in different Länder cannot expect roughly equal support and socioeducational opportunities for their children.*' (OECD 2004b:44)

Only recently, in February 2006, the Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights has concluded a mission to Germany to consider how the country endeavours to implement the right to education. The preliminary report critically notes that '*... the education system should, to the extent possible, offer a conducive environment to help breaking the cycles of poverty and social disadvantages, thus promoting equal chances for all. This is particularly true within the context of the demographic changes in the country and the paradigm shift on migration. Education should thus be the vector of a full inclusion of disadvantaged groups ...*'.



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Pride goes before a fall and it is high time all of us who are committed to children's rights join forces and contribute to a climate of sharing experiences and learning with each other – nationally and internationally.

In the light of these introductory remarks I want to share a few thoughts and questions with you as colleagues and fellow professionals. They appear to me as crucial for the further development of any support system for young children and their families – and they are closely linked to how we understand roles of early childhood practitioners.

Early Childhood Education and Care has moved up national and European policy agendas – and there is a consensus on overall goals

Early childhood care and education has moved up the policy agenda. In recent years, it has become a policy priority, both among EU member states and at Community level. One reason is its role in achieving economic goals, in particular employment growth. The Council of Ministers in 1992 agreed a Recommendation on Childcare, setting down broad principles and objectives, and 10 years later, in Barcelona, further agreed targets for childcare provision:

'Member States should remove disincentives to female labour force participation and strive, taking into account the demand for childcare facilities and in line with national patterns of provision, to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age.'

(Plantenga and Siegel 2004).

But expansion of early childhood services has other rationales, too: it is seen as a condition for gender equality, educational attainment, lifelong learning and social inclusion. At the same time, the policy context includes a new international and national attention to children's rights and participation framed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and recognised explicitly in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Article 24).

Widespread policy commitment to more early childhood provision is also combined with a recognition that provision has to be of good quality. There have been important European and national discussions on what quality entails, including the publication in 1996 of Quality Targets in Services for Young Children by a European Commission expert network.

It is further generally acknowledged that more and better early years' services require substantial investment.

Where there is not consensus, however, is how to bring about change – in what ways services should develop and how to bring about this development. Throughout the Union, a multitude of strategies and actions can be identified, expressed in an increasing number of national policy documents and initiatives for achieving the common policy goals of more services of better quality.

While the development of the early years' profession is seen as crucial for quality, many countries are facing major workforce challenges

It is generally recognised and supported by research that the workforce is central for achieving the policy goals of increasing both quantity and quality of provision (Oberhuemer and Ulich 1997; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva et al. 2002; Dalli 2003; Dalli 2005; MacNaughton 2005). But most countries face major workforce challenges – and this is particularly true for Ireland.

Like in many countries, the workforce is split between early childhood teachers and childcare workers, reflecting a deep institutional split between early childhood education and childcare that is increasingly questioned by researchers and policy makers. Childcare workers are typically poorly



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educated and badly paid, raising questions about the quality of this part of the workforce and recruitment and retention.

The work itself is also recognised to be changing and increasingly demanding, because of increasing diversity among children and families and the complexity of the work in the institutions set up to serve them (Woodhead 1996; OECD 2001; Dalli 2003).

Early childhood workers have to address not only the need to provide care, but also broader requirements – educational, social and cultural – collaborating with parents from diverse backgrounds and with diverse local communities (OECD 2001).

The issue of who the future worker should be becomes increasingly important, as well as how the workforce should be structured. Recent research on understandings of professionalism carried out in one European country (Scotland) identifies as many as eleven job titles for working with young children (Adams 2005). This reflects how conceptualizations of the workforce differ to a great extent. As Oberhuemer (1997) has pointed out, there is no consensus on the role of people working with young children in institutional settings in Europe.

Differences and uncertainties about conceptions and self-conceptions of the early childhood profession reflect wider differences and uncertainties about the services in which they work: social constructions of the worker are linked to social constructions of the settings in which they work. Understandings of early childhood institutions are ‘... deeply influenced by underlying assumptions about childhood and education’ (OECD 2001:63). Early childhood institutions may, for example, be understood as services (for working parents) or means of social intervention (e.g. delivering targeted programmes for disadvantaged areas); as pursuing educational tasks (preparing children for compulsory school) or serving the local community as ‘forums in a civil society’ (Dahlberg, Moss et al. 1999:7).

These different social constructions of services and their workforces are a potential influence in strategies of change. But they are produced and influenced by broader social, political, cultural, economic and historical contexts and welfare regimes, which also shape directions and strategies of change. For example, differing welfare regimes lead to different roles being given to the state (and to different levels of government), markets and families, and to public or private providers; while the existence of a pedagogical or an educational tradition in the early childhood system may influence whether political strategies are based on an integrated or split early years’ sector.

So, overall, there seems to be a consensus on the need for more and higher quality services, increasing integration of ‘childcare’ and ‘early education’ and – more recently – enhanced training and status of the workforce, whose members are seen essential to quality provision. But this consensus does not extend to how to achieve these goals.

We need to explain and make explicit what we mean by the concepts we are frequently using: quality – outcomes – profession. Practitioners increasingly need to be able to explore and critically question what they mean for their day-to-day practice with children and families in their particular social, economic or cultural context.

While the field is becoming increasingly diverse, there is also an increasing urge to achieve predetermined outcomes

In 2001, the OECD comparative report on early childhood education and care (OECD 2001) states that:

“the populations of OECD countries also are becoming increasingly heterogeneous as a result of immigration, the arrival of refugees and asylum seekers, and economic migrants seeking work in countries with labour shortage.”

(OECD 2001:24)



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And, as a consequence, *'the need for early childhood staff and provision to value and respond to the needs of ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse families remains a challenge in many countries.'* (ibid).

This general description is reflected in an increasing number of national documents (white papers, strategic plans ...) that are being produced to set the policy strategies to further develop the early years' systems.

The theme of this conference is the *'Respect for Diversity – Working with Professionals in Early Childhood Education'*. It is obvious that any practice that values diversity requires adults' awareness for children's realities and experiences. What needs to be acknowledged is the value of an awareness of practitioner's realities and experiences. Developing a shared understanding of what it means to act professionally in diverse, open and uncertain contexts is a powerful tool for the development of the early years' systems across Europe, and therefore offers an opportunity to develop a shared European perspective on early childhood education and care.

And since the changes in policy result in high expectations that have to be met by practitioners, we need to ask how practitioners' realities can be reflected and their needs be met by the support systems of training, evaluation and research.

But writing about individual practitioners' realities in general and for a European conference in particular is almost a "mission impossible" – to say the least.

How could the author, being an academic, being German, being male, even dare to give practical advice?

We are, I suppose, in a very similar situation to many early childhood practitioners who face the daily pressure of having to know what is right for children. They encounter girls and boys of all ages, infants, toddlers, 3, 4, 5 year olds, each one of them with a personal history and from a family with a particular social, cultural and economic background. The one thing they have in common is that they are different. Almost certainly, they are neither like us, nor like any picture of a universal child that could be addressed in a universal approach.

In early childhood care and education, we have begun to acknowledge that children are expert learners and communicators and that child centred practice requires listening carefully and sharing questions rather than hastily providing answers.

So, to alter a quote from Donald W. Winnicott, the famous child psychiatrist, I want to suggest that all of us who bear responsibilities on different parts of the early years' systems start listening and sharing questions – *instead of telling each other what to do.*

Although explicitly addressed at non-professionals – he writes about the young mother's experience of giving birth to a child – the famous introduction to D.W. Winnicott's classic *The child, the family and the outside world* (1987) covers the whole dilemma of adults who are working with young children – in the social, cultural and economic context of a modern society that puts increasing pressure on them to produce predetermined outcomes.

In many countries today, strategies to further develop services for young children and families are closely linked to concepts of 'quality' and 'profession' – or the development of the workforce in general. In the UK, for instance, the Government has introduced a 'Children's Workforce Strategy' which is seen as being crucial to achieving the five outcomes of 'Every Child Matters'. This document clearly links the two concepts (quality and workforce development) as it states:

'... the strategy envisages radical reform of the early years' (and broader childcare) workforce, recognising the crucial role it plays in determining the quality of provision. And we know from the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project (EPPE) that the better the quality of childcare and early education, the better it is for the child's development.'

(Department for Education and Skills 2005:25)



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It is indeed a convincing correlation: a highly qualified, professionalized workforce leads to better quality of provision, which in consequence leads to better child development and to children who achieve the outcomes of being healthy, safe, successful and economically independent.

From a critical perspective, though, it can be argued that the concepts of “quality” and “profession” in early childhood are not necessarily complements. There might, in contrary, be an enormous tension between the two concepts and practitioners may find themselves torn between the contradictions as long as they are taken for granted and are not reflected upon.

Donald W. Winnicott talks about the young mother’s relief of not being told what to do. Even though she may prefer to ‘*avoid thinking things out*’ (1987:17), as long as there is love, the baby will probably get a good start. Early childhood practitioners sometimes cannot feel this relief. They are facing the every day challenge of not only giving children a ‘good start’ but leading them to achieve predetermined and highly ambitious outcomes.

In the Irish context, for instance, an influential policy report of the *National Economic and Social Forum* (2005) expects the following from high quality early childhood services:

Children ...

- *being better prepared to make the transition to school;*
- *being less likely to drop out or repeat grades;*
- *showing greater sociability;*
- *having improved physical health.*

Mothers (whose children participate in quality EC programmes) ...

- *display lower levels of criminal behaviour;*
- *less behavioural impairment due to alcohol and drugs.*

Lifetime effects:

- *EC contributes to economic performance;*
- *to reduced commission of crime in adulthood.*

Socio-economic effects:

- *§17 return on each dollar invested in EC*
(National Economic and Social Forum 2005:16)

Expectations are high, indeed, and there is, of course, an immanent risk of failure. Sometimes it may even look like early childhood services are expected to save the world – or, at least, to solve a whole palette of social problems that adults have not been able to tackle in an appropriate way so far. All this adds to the pressure on early childhood practitioners

We are making connections between highly qualified, motivated practitioners (who value children and who – in return – are valued by the broader society for their important contribution on the one hand, and the quality of services and the outcomes for children and the society on the other hand. This is convincing and I appreciate the recognition of the crucial role of practitioners for the quality of the early years’ system on the whole. But this should not be taken for granted. It requires indeed a new deal for children and a major shift in the underlying assumptions about ‘quality’ and ‘outcomes’.

Early childhood workers are left with an unsolvable dilemma – unless we start re-thinking the concept of professional development



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There is a mainstream discourse in early childhood education and care that, in recent years has widely been criticized. Many taken for granted concepts – programmes, intervention and outcomes – are linked to the concept of the child as an incomplete being, as a future adult. The basic assumption of *curriculum*, for instance, is a child that is a reproducer of predefined knowledge and values. How much does our concept of care relate to the image of the child as a dependent, only future autonomous subject?

These understandings have consequences for the way early childhood services are understood and shaped. They become *future factories* (Urban and Murray 2005), with the term factory being a metaphor for sites to produce predetermined outcomes by applying rational technologies.

From this perspective, early childhood workers are understood as technicians, applying technologies to achieve outcomes (Moss). It is, in general, a discourse of certainty, knowledge and power that has been predominant in the western, Anglo-American sphere for decades.

We insist, that there is no way to develop high quality early childhood education and care that is not closely linked to the social and cultural context of growing up. But then new questions arise about the presuppositions for our pedagogical theory and practice: How can we organize the relationship between children and adults, which we refer to as education, under conditions of constant change and uncertainty? Looking at the changes in our own life, do we really know today, what to teach children, so they will be able to cope with future challenges? We certainly don't. What we do know is that our experiences and our knowledge as adults can no longer be projected in a linear way or serve as a blueprint for our children's future. Margaret Mead, the American ethnologist, has first introduced the concept of a '*prefigurative culture*' where it will be the child – not the parent or grandparent – that represents what is to come (Mead 1978:83).

What is the future going to be like? We may, on the one hand, complain about the complete loss of certainty and that we are no longer capable of drawing a detailed map for the future developments. But we may, on the other hand, also acknowledge the openness for new possibilities. If we chose to widen our perspective, it soon becomes obvious, that there has always been a plenitude of representations of the world.

We have to be aware that our image of the world will not necessarily represent the realities and representations of our fellow human beings – especially when they are young children. We are no longer leading children into a future that is by and large already known by adults. In a very practical way, not metaphorical at all, adults and children today are '*equally immigrants into the new era*' (Mead 1978:70). As a consequence, we are facing radical changes in pedagogical relations. Accompanying children on their expedition is not an easy task at all. We all must learn to read new maps that we might not be used to. What may add to the complexity of the task is that some of them are deliberately designed to getting lost.

If we chose to acknowledge the child as a being instead of a becoming, as a fellow citizen with rights and a recognized place in the society, we will not only have to develop a new 'ethic of care'. We will also need to re-invent the role of the professional.

Early childhood workers may then be seen as

- fellow learners and co-constructors of knowledge;
- researchers (of practice and of learning processes);
- critical thinkers and border crossers;
- dialogic and reflective practitioners in a continuous process of professional development.



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If early childhood practice is understood as a process of co-construction with other children and adults, as a space for *'sustained shared thinking'* (Siraj-Blatchford 2003), we will also have to alter the focus of adults activities. Carla Rinaldi from Reggio Emilia writes about a pedagogy of listening:

'If we believe that children possess their own theories, interpretations and questions, and are protagonists in the knowledge-building processes, then the most important verbs in educational practice are no longer 'to talk', 'to explain' or 'to transmit' ... but 'to listen'.

(Rinaldi 2005)

In want to conclude with a few remarks on the value of asking questions and a few thoughts on how to achieve coherence between practice, professional development and research. The point I want to make is that child centred practice and a rights based approach to care and education can only be achieved if we focus on and invest in adults. Margaret Mead, who gave us the concept of the pre-figurative culture, was very decided about that.

'Now, with our greater understanding of the process, we must cultivate the most flexible and complex part of the system – the behaviour of adults. We must, in fact, teach ourselves how to alter adult behaviour so that we can give up postfigurative upbringing, with its tolerated cofigurative components, and discover prefigurative ways of teaching and learning that will keep the future open. We must create new models for adults who can teach their children not what to learn, but how to learn, not what they should be committed to but the value of commitment.'

(Mead 1978:87)

Adults who are supposed to be listening to children need to be listened to themselves. And early childhood practitioners as co-constructors of knowledge and values need a professional environment that facilitates the co-construction of *'actionable knowledge'* – as Chris Argyris (1997) calls it – and critical reflection.

In a participatory curriculum development project in Germany we aimed at involving practitioners as researchers in their own concern. At a workshop, we asked them to explain, what had been *'easy'* respectively *'difficult'* about their involvement. Unanimously, the practitioners stated that finding the question is the hardest thing to do in any process of research or collaborative learning.

Strategies for change – anywhere in Europe – highlight the crucial role of the early years' workforce and the importance of attitudinal change towards children and their development and learning in complex real life situations. This requires preparing, fostering and appreciating a culture of self-determined change, and creating a work climate where the practitioners' questions or research interests can be expressed and verbalized, thus to serve as starting points for the collaborative process.

But, being part of a culture that values knowledge over uncertainty, most of us are quick with the answers but totally untrained to ask questions. Practitioners in early childhood settings are usually not confronted with the idea that the questions they might have about their every day practice could really matter in a research project, an assessment or an evaluation.

On first sight, questions that emerge in the context of an explicit set of outcomes are likely to focus on facts and figures: do we achieve the outcomes we are aiming at?

Questions like these will most likely produce simple answers.

But we may also choose to ask more complex and perhaps critical questions and we may chose to stop taking everything for granted.

Reflecting on our daily routines and practices with children and families, for instance, systematic training and collaborative research could encourage practitioners to ask questions such as:



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- *How have I come to do things this way?*
 - *How have I come to understand things this way?*
 - *Who benefits from how I do and understand this?*
 - *Who is silenced in how I do and understand this?*
 - *How many other ways are there to do and understand this?*
 - *Which of those ways might lead to more equitable and fair ways of doing things?*
- (Mac Naughton 2003:3)

The aim is to systematically question the taken for granted truths – the ‘big ideas’ as some post-modern theorists like to call them.

The fascinating thing about reflective and open approaches is that they can be applied to any level of the system. They are a powerful tool for establishing links between practice, training / professional development, research and evaluation.

Considering predominant approaches to practitioner education and training in many countries, we might ask another critical question: Do we really believe that adult behaviour can be altered by traditional ways of teaching?

For any complex problem there is a simple solution.

And it is wrong

Umberto Eco, Foucault’s Pendulum



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