“Who Would Bother Getting a Degree When You Would Be on the Exact Same Pay and Conditions . . .?” Professionalism and the Problem With Qualifications in Early Childhood Education and Care: An Irish Perspective

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Abstract
Although the literature is replete with research that indicates the importance of qualified and highly skilled practitioners in the provision of quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), challenges to the retention of highly skilled graduates and the establishment of a professional ECEC workforce persist. This study investigates the barriers that hinder practitioners from obtaining higher level ECEC qualifications. It presents findings from the perspectives of practitioners (n = 18) participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme using semi-structured interviews. This article is part of a doctoral study with practitioners and parents on quality in ECEC and the impact of technology on quality practice. Importantly, this article presents findings from the practitioner interviews as they relate to the barriers faced by practitioners in obtaining higher level qualifications. Findings indicate that practitioners value the role of qualifications in the provision of quality practice. Despite this, findings suggest that the likelihood of obtaining an ECEC degree is largely dependent on the practitioner’s financial situation. For example, in the absence of appropriate pay scales and occupational profiles, practitioners are forced to avail of social welfare services.

Keywords
family involvement, preschool, early childhood education, teacher qualifications

Introduction
This article contributes to the debate on the role of qualifications and the barriers that hinder practitioners from professional advancement within the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) field. Findings from this study were informed by a doctoral study that investigated quality in ECEC, from the perspectives of 18 Irish practitioners and 15 parents participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme (Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA], 2010). This scheme “provides children [aged 2.8 to 5.6 years] with their first formal experience of early learning prior to commencing primary school” (Government of Ireland, 2019). This article focuses on the findings from the semi-structured interviews with practitioners.

Quality in ECEC is contested, and there are inconsistencies within the literature as to what it comprises and how it should be monitored (Hanno et al., 2020). However, multiple studies (De Schipper et al., 2009; Foong et al., 2018; Gomez et al., 2015; Munton et al., 2002) focus on structural aspects in ECEC such as adult–child ratios and staff qualifications. Although structural aspects of ECEC may influence quality provision, it has been theorized that they are not themselves sufficient to determine quality in an ECEC service (Bonetti & Brown, 2018). In addition, Bonetti and Brown (2018) conclude that research “is still trying to answer questions, such as what are the optimal teacher qualifications [and] what is the ‘minimum level’ that guarantees good provision?” (Bonetti & Brown, 2018, p. 14). Other studies claim that pre-service and in-service training directly influence quality of

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practice (Bromer & Korfmacher, 2017; Sylva et al., 2004). Research regarding the impact of qualifications on quality practice in ECEC is conflicting.

This study investigates qualifications, one component of the iron triangle, through the lived experience of practitioners. The next section presents some of the arguments from pertinent international research on the role of ECEC qualifications in quality practice.

**Qualifications in ECEC: The International Landscape**

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD, 2012), the effect of practitioners’ qualifications on quality instruction has been the subject of intense international debate. Kelley and Camilli (2007) explain that this may be due to mixed findings and differences in methodology. However, there seems to be a strong correlation between quality provision, continuity of care, and practitioners’ qualifications (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010) coupled with an integrated approach to care and education (Sylva et al., 2004). Conversely, Hughes (2010) proposes that, at the expense of teacher training, quality ECEC originates in adult–child relationships together with what the practitioner does. Kelley and Camilli (2007) state that it is not apparent whether increased training and education increase classroom quality. Even in the context of these debates, the literature seems to consistently convey the benefits of qualified practitioners in children’s development and in providing developmentally appropriate learning experiences (Manning et al., 2017; OECD, 2012, 2015; Penn, 2011).

In countries such as Ireland, however, a different approach has been adopted, and approximately 519 courses that range from applied social care to nursing have been deemed sufficient to work in Irish ECEC settings (DCYA, 2017). This may mean that the professionals that are deemed suitable to work in ECEC services are not experts in child development and developmentally appropriate practice. In addition, even when a practitioner does have an ECEC degree, many of these courses can differ in content and quality, making it difficult to ascertain which characteristics are integral to the preparation of students for the ECEC workplace (Whitebook et al., 2014). Peetrs et al. (2016), however, claim that the key issue is not in identifying qualifications as a crucial factor in the delivery of quality provision but that limited opportunities exist for practitioners to enroll in a professional ECEC program that considers prior learning and the background of the practitioner.

**Research Context**

This research takes place within an Irish context. Irish ECEC services are regulated by three primary agencies, namely, TUSLA, Pobal, and the Department of Education and Skills (DES). Each of these agencies has specific roles regarding the regulatory landscape. For example, TUSLA focuses on safeguarding children with regard to safety, health, and welfare (TUSLA, 2018b), The DES inspects ECEC services based on process quality components, such as the type of learning opportunities and resources available to children (DES, 2016), while Pobal focuses on compliance with governmental funding schemes (Pobal, 2016). Irish ECEC services cater for children aged from birth to 6 (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009); however, children in Ireland typically begin primary school at age 5 (Government of Ireland, 2018).

The Irish ECEC model has traditionally operated under a split care and educational system with limited state funding (Urban et al., 2011b). There are, however, various governmental ECEC schemes and initiatives that aim to alleviate the burden of high ECEC costs for parents and increase access to ECEC for children (Pobal, 2018b). One of the most popular state-funded initiatives is the “ECCE Scheme,” which enables 3 hr, per day, of free ECEC for children 2 years before they begin primary school education and is offered by 93% of all Irish ECEC services (Pobal, 2018b). In addition, the majority of Irish practitioners (57%) work in community ECEC services.

**Qualifications in ECEC: The Irish Context**

In November 2018, the Irish Government unveiled the long awaited “First 5” which was Ireland’s first ever cross-departmental strategy to support babies, young children, and their families (Government of Ireland, 2018) for a 10-year period. This document recognized the need to professionalize the early childhood profession (which it considers to be children from birth to 5 years old) through three main strategic actions:

1. identify and address staff requirements;  
2. improve initial training and in-service training for all early childhood staff; and  
3. professionalize Early Learning and Care (ELC); support employers to attract and retain high-quality workforce (Government of Ireland, 2018).

Indeed, it seems that “there is currently no single agreed professional title and a myriad of occupational titles that such a graduate may aspire to” (EYEPU Working Group, 2017, p. 7), which results in disunity and adds to weak professional practitioner-identities (EYEPU Working Group, 2017). To remedy this, First 5 proposes a new term for the early childhood sector—ELC. Seemingly, this is in direct opposition to the terms used in Irish policy, guidelines, and frameworks. For example, the term used by TUSLA (2016, 2018b) is “early years services,” while in the Irish National Early Childhood Frameworks (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2006; NCCA, 2009), the preferred term is “early childhood education.” In
addition, terms such as “child care” are also used to describe ECEC. In 2019, “the first ever statutory entitlement to financial support for parents in availing of ECEC was introduced” and titled “The National Childcare Scheme” (National Childcare Scheme, 2020).

However, before the introduction of new terms to support the professionalization of ECEC, the level of investment in the workforce must be highlighted. Ireland only invests 0.2% of its gross domestic product on ECEC, in comparison to other countries such as Denmark, where investment is significantly higher at a rate of 2.0% (Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, 2016). A direct comparison, however, cannot be made between Denmark and Ireland as they are inherently socially and economically different. Ireland operates under a split ECEC model “in which childcare for the youngest children (under three or four years old) and the kindergarten for older children (up to compulsory school age) are separate” (Urban et al., 2011b, p. 22).

Conversely, Denmark’s ECEC model utilizes a “unitary system where provision for the youngest children is integrated” (Urban et al., 2011b, p. 22). It can also be argued that increased investment in the ECEC workforce would reduce the high-turnover rates that have stemmed from poor working conditions, training opportunities, and pay (Moloney, 2018; Pobal, 2018b; Urban et al., 2017). For quality ECEC to become a reality, a graduate-led workforce must be a priority (Urban et al., 2017; Whitebook et al., 2018) with opportunities to access evidence-based preservice and in-service training (Burns, 2018). In Ireland, there are more than 25,000 practitioners; yet, more than 1,000 practitioners do not hold any qualifications in “Childcare” (Pobal, 2018b), while almost 4,000 are still in the process of obtaining a 1-year certificate in ECEC. Even when qualifications are obtained, the content of some ECEC training courses can vary considerably (Greene & Hayes, 2014; Whitebook et al., 2014). This can result in a lack of consistency and capricious standards (Whitebook et al., 2016).

In an effort to support the acquisition of ECEC qualifications, the Learner Fund was introduced by the DCYA in 2014. The Learner Fund provides recent graduates of ECEC certificates and degrees a bursary to assist in the cost of obtaining a qualification in ECEC (Pobal, 2018a). However, a bursary of €750 does not seem suitable to alleviate the costs of obtaining an ECEC degree which can cost over €3,000 in annual student fees (UCC, 2018). Even upon graduating with an ECEC qualification, practitioners earn an average of €12.17 per hour, while assistants earn an average of €11.20 per hour (Pobal, 2018b). This may also explain why the staff retention rate in ECEC services is 25% (Pobal, 2018b).

Drawing from this, removing disincentives for newly qualified ECEC graduates and empowering existing practitioners to upskill may aid in the development of a qualified ECEC Irish workforce (DES, 2010). The establishment of occupational profiles that are linked to appropriate pay scales may be a crucial factor in the development of a graduate-led Irish ECEC workforce (Duncan & Rhys, 2018; Fillis, 2018). It is also important to note that it was only in December 2016 that all ECEC practitioners were mandated to have a minimum of a certificate (Quality and Qualifications Ireland—Level 5) in “Childcare” (TUSLA, 2016). As a result, there are many practitioners who have significant experience in ECEC but do not have relevant qualifications in ECEC. There may be a need for recognition of prior learning to facilitate these types of practitioners (Fillis, 2018).

Method

We aimed to explore quality in ECEC from the perspectives of practitioners and parents availing of the ECCE Scheme (DCYA, 2010). In particular, we addressed the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What defines quality in the provision of ECCE from the perspectives of practitioners?

Research Question 2: What defines quality in the provision of ECCE from the perspectives of parents?

Research Question 3: What are the challenges in providing quality ECCE from the perspectives of practitioners and parents?

Research Question 4: What supports, technological or otherwise, are needed to enhance quality in ECCE from the perspectives of practitioners and parents?

However, this article focused on the challenges in providing quality ECEC from the perspectives of practitioners who consistently highlighted the challenges in obtaining higher level ECEC qualifications, staff retention, and the need for occupational pay scales.

Design

This research aimed to add to the discourse on quality by exploring how parents and practitioners define this value-laden concept (Merrill et al., 2020) through the meanings they attach to it. In other words, it intended to explore participants’ personal views on quality in ECEC. Qualitative methods were employed because, in general, qualitative research is premised on the assumption that multiple forms of reality exist (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013; Merriam, 2009). This allowed the researcher to effectively capture the diverse beliefs held by parents and practitioners, on the challenges that hinder quality ECEC provision and make recommendations.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen because quality ECEC is a value-laden concept and semi-structured interviews were chosen as they are better suited than group and structured interviews when gathering individualized subjective experiences (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013) on value-laden phenomena. In addition, they are flexible, and when participants deviate from the interview schedule, the
semi-structured researcher is encouraged to follow their lead in “exploring new topics that are relevant to the interviewee” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). As a result, the semi-structured approach encouraged participants to challenge preformulated interview questions (Patton, 2015). Semi-structured interviews utilize open-ended questions, and the responses derived from these responses provide the basis to move toward “theoretically driven variables of interest” (Galletta, 2013, p. 24).

**Recruitment**

TUSLA is one of the main inspectorate bodies for early childhood services in Ireland and ensures that these services are in compliance with the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 (TUSLA, 2018b). “All persons proposing to operate an early years service in Ireland are legally required to register that service with TUSLA—Child and Family Agency” (TUSLA, 2020). A list of registered services, that is, early childhood services that have been inspected by TUSLA and approved to open as early childhood services are publicly available via an online directory.

This study purposefully sampled practitioners using the TUSLA (2018a) directory of preschools in Ireland. A core sample group of practitioners \( n = 3 \) were randomly selected from the early years directory (TUSLA, 2018a). Based on this initial cohort, the snowballing method was applied to gain access to other practitioners who were participating in the ECCE Scheme (Bryman, 2016; DCYA, 2010).

Selection criteria to participate in this study focused on practitioners who were working within the ECCE Scheme with children aged 2.8- to 5.6-year old. The qualifications of practitioners who participated in this study ranged from a diploma to a master's in ECE. Pseudonyms were allocated to the participants (T1, T2, T3, etc.). This study adhered to the ethical code of conduct of the researcher’s educational institution; ethical approval was sought and granted from the institutions’ Research Ethics Board.

**Data Analysis**

Grounded Theory Methodology was used to interpret the findings from the semi-structured interviews. Findings were analyzed using an inductive approach to ensure any conclusions drawn were “grounded in the data” (Sengstock, 2008, p. 133). The 40- to 60-min interviews were documented by the researcher using a digital voice recorder and transcribed word for word.

This approach was founded by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and “is a useful research method for researchers aiming to generate novel theory because it emerges from data gathered and analysed” (Howard-Payne, 2016, p. 50). A disadvantage of using Grounded Theory is the potential for prejudice when collecting and analysing the data. This was reduced by adhering to an inductive and comparative approach in the analysis of participant-generated data on quality in ECCE (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). That is, the theory was derived directly from the data collected (Birks & Mills, 2015). During the data analysis, the coding of data from the semi-structured interviews and online surveys was conducted over a period of time using three specific techniques (i.e., open coding, axial coding, and selective coding).

**Open Coding**

The semi-structured interviews were analyzed “line by line” (Strauss, 1987, p. 28) to inductively generate concepts on quality ECCE from the interview transcripts (Charmaz, 2014). Open coding was utilized to generate “a list of codes and categories attached to” (Flick, 2009, p. 310) practitioners and parental descriptions of quality ECCE.

**Axial Coding**

Axial coding consists of the clarification, illustration, and revision of the initial codes over an extended period (Strauss, 1987). After their refinements, the initial codes were redefined as categories (Strauss, 1987). Gibbs (2010) recommends that researchers can look for “intervening conditions” during axial coding (Gibbs, 2010). These conditions relate to factors that may affect practitioners and parental experiences or their ability to provide quality ECCE (Figure 1). As a result, the following questions relating to the constructive or destructive influences on parents and practitioners’ experiences of quality ECCE were an important part of the analysis process:

1. What resources (e.g., qualifications) or support (e.g., investment) do practitioners and parents need to develop or access quality ECCE?
2. What strategies and/or actions (e.g., accountability) do practitioners take to develop and sustain quality practices?
3. What challenges and strategies are faced by practitioners and parents?

Axial coding was repeated numerous times before core categories were identified (Glasser, 1992). It was at this stage that selective coding began (Strauss, 1987).

**Selective Coding**

“The goal of selective coding is to integrate the different categories that have been developed, elaborated, and mutually related during axial coding into one cohesive theory” (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019, p. 89). Selective coding enabled the researcher to focus on three core categories (i.e., accountability, relationships, and professionalism) and associate
“other categories to it” (Mertens, 2005, p. 424) to assess and refine categories and their relationships with one another (Table 1). This article focuses on the theme of professionalism. In addition, any “striking observations [from the interviews] and thoughts that were relevant to the development of theory” (Flick, 2009, p. 310) were recorded in a qualitative research journal. These thoughts and ideas were justified by linking them to research on quality in ECEC. This research journal informed the development of a theory that was grounded in the primary and secondary research data.

**Ethical Considerations**

I provided an information sheet and consent form to all participants via email before the scheduled interview. The objectives and criteria required to participate were detailed
in a one-page information sheet using language free of jargon. I explained in the consent form that the information provided by participants would be kept confidential, participation was voluntary, and there was no personal (i.e., financial) gain from partaking in this study. On the day of the interview, I gave the information sheet and consent form to participants who were given time to read both forms and signed the consent form; a copy was retained by the participants. I kept the signed consent forms in a locked cabinet, and these have been scheduled to be destroyed 3 years after the completion of my Doctoral of Philosophy degree in June 2022.

**Reliability and the Insider-Researcher**

The researcher obtained a degree in “Early Years Education” from *** Institute of Technology and had experience working in ECEC services prior to the commencement of this study which was undertaken as part of a Doctor of Philosophy. The researcher could have been described as an “insider-researcher” (Griffith, 1998, p. 361).

In other words, the researcher’s previous underpinning knowledge and previously held assumptions of quality in ECEC informed the research process (Teusner, 2016). There are significant advantages to any study which is led by an insider-researcher (Coughlan & Shani, 2015). The researcher was familiar with the phenomenon under investigation as well as the participants (practitioners and parents). This facilitated an open dialogue and mutual understanding (between the researcher, practitioners, and parents), which added to greater interpretation and apprehension of quality ECEC. However, there are also disadvantages and ethical considerations for the insider-researcher, such as bias and the role of subjectivity on the interpretation of primary data. To mitigate the potential for bias, specific strategies were employed. For example, in the current study, any hypothesis or conclusions made were based on participant-generated data (primary research).

Importantly, many viewpoints, theories, and perspectives within the literature on quality ECEC were identified, discussed, and presented in this study. This made it possible to present a balanced discussion on the quality in ECEC. These considerations informed and guided the formulation of theories and conclusions on quality in ECEC. During the data collection stage, clarification was sought from practitioners and parents. This process increased the reliability of the data regarding the researcher’s analysis of participants’ responses (Unluer, 2012). A research journal was used to acknowledge and identify the researcher’s beliefs, values, and experiences throughout the research process. This enabled the research to engage in reflexivity, transparency, and honesty to maximize the integrity of the research (Macfarlane, 2009). Different modes of inquiry aided in the triangulation of data (Dhattiwala, 2017). Flick (2015) argues that the triangulation method “produce[s] knowledge at different levels, which means going beyond the knowledge made possible by one approach” (p. 219).

**Discussion and Findings**

This section presents the findings and analysis of practitioners’ perspectives on the barriers to obtaining ECEC qualifications and briefly discusses the benefits of professional advancement for quality practice.

**The Problem With Qualifications**

To investigate practitioners’ perspectives on qualifications and quality practice, the current study examined what type of qualifications, if any, inform quality ECEC learning experiences. There seems to be a link between the importance of qualifications and the quality of instruction (Fillis, 2018; Wall et al., 2015). Despite this, findings from the current study indicate that in reality, the likelihood of obtaining an ECEC degree is largely dependent on the practitioner’s financial situation,

I would love to do masters. Financially I cannot do a masters, we need to be incentivised, courses that take into account that some of us have to work and have families. (T9)

The argument presented by T9 is substantiated by the literature which indicates that “the average hourly wage of staff working in the early years sector is €12.17” (Pobal, 2018b, p. 11). In parallel, the Workforce Development Plan (DES, 2010) indicated that “the non-availability of grant aid for part-time degree courses” (p. 45) was a challenge in the delivery of ECEC courses. It appears that it is not feasible for practitioners to access ECEC degree training programs’ opportunities, even on a part-time basis, as they would be spending more than half of their yearly wage in this endeavor. As highlighted by T15, the ECCE Scheme (DCYA, 2010), for instance, required ECEC leaders to have a QQI Level 6 (diploma) in “Childcare.” However, funding directly related to increasing staff wages for those who obtained higher level qualifications was not evident (DCYA, 2018),

think about it this way. They are screaming for higher qualifications. . .[for practitioners] but did it not cross anyone’s minds that we actually need to be helped to get these qualifications or at least, like every other profession, pay us depending on our years of experience and level of qualification. (T15)

Whitebook et al. (2014) argue that “it is time to confront the low premium that is placed on educational attainment within the early childhood teaching workforce” (p. 82). Research also suggests that retention rates for ECEC degree holders are truncated as many of these graduates leave the profession to pursue higher paid professional opportunities (Moloney, 2010). For example, “more than half (57%) [of
The importance of qualifications regarding the quality of instruction, child outcomes, and enhancing the status of ECCE has been reflected in the literature (Fillis, 2018; Gambaro et al., 2015; Manning et al., 2015). Despite this, findings from the current study indicate that in reality, the likelihood of obtaining an ECEC degree is largely dependent on the practitioner’s financial situation. Professional advancement also seems to correlate with good working terms and conditions in ECCE,

I need an opportunity to go back to college, I need that opportunity... I would love to do masters. Financially I cannot do a masters, we need to be incentivised, courses that take into account that some of us have to work and have families. (T9)

This concurs with findings, which suggest that a full-time ECEC assistant in Ireland earns €20,000 per year. (O’Brien, 2016). In parallel, “the non-availability of grant aid for part-time degree courses” (DES, 2010, p. 45) was a challenge in “the successful delivery of and participation in ECCE courses” (DES, 2010, p. 44). It appears that it is not feasible for practitioners to access ECEC degree training programs opportunities, even on a part-time basis, as they would be spending more than half of their yearly wage in this endeavor. As highlighted by T15, the ECCE Scheme (DCYA, 2010), for instance, required ECCE leaders to have a QQI Level 6 qualification in “Childcare.” However, funding related directly toward increasing staff wages for those who obtained higher level qualifications was not evident (DCYA, 2018),

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why would anyone bother getting a degree when with a QQI Level 5 and 6 you would be on the exactly same pay and conditions as the person who started with you with a masters a level 8 or level 7. . . you work with kids. A masters is there for people that want to become lecturers. Even the degree in childcare, from my experience, doing a degree was a stepping stone for people, so they didn’t have to work in childcare. They could go on to be primary school teacher or something else. (T9)

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explains how she was discouraged from doing a masters because she was only working with children, whereas a masters was for those who wanted to “become lecturers” (T9) while doing a degree in early childhood education was used as a “stepping stone for people, so they didn’t have to work in childcare. They could go on to be primary school” (T9).

There also seems to be a generational gap between those in managerial positions “who have been in childcare for years and even though they have upskilled just to stay in their positions don’t understand what they are learning and are only doing it to put it on paper” (T9). Some practitioners also agreed that recognition of prior learning was important to celebrate the decades of experience that many practitioners without degrees possessed.

I am at this from the beginning and I know so many childcare workers that have fallen by the waste side because they were not able for the qualifications. When, in fact, they should have been giving the lectures because they were so experienced. They should be applauded for what they have done before, it should count for something. If they are going back to college, it’s like they are starting from day one. (T16)

I am not going to be at it much longer. I have been working at it for the last twenty years and have done a lot of training over the years. I feel very aggrieved that we are not recognised for all the training we’ve done well. I do have a [QQI] Level 7 in Science. I am a third level graduate and over the years have done lots of training such as High Scope . . . We have students coming in from third level education to our places and we are mentoring them we are getting no recognition for it. (T1)

Indeed, experiential learning was valued by practitioners, and there seemed to be arguments against an overreliance on ECCE theory in the absence of practical applications because when “you go into the workplace it’s all about if you’re good with children” (T11).

**Occupational Profiles and Pay Scales**

A central theme relating to ECEC qualifications and professionalism that emerged was the absence of pay scales in ECEC,

Some practitioners believed that a degree should be required because “if we want it to be treated like any other profession then we need to be qualified like every other profession” (T9). Indeed, many ECEC services participating in the ECCE Scheme (DCYA, 2010) operate using the primary school calendar, yet full-time primary school teachers are paid for 9 weeks of the summer holidays (Holden, 2013) while practitioners are not,

you have 183 days the same as primary schools but we have to sign on [social welfare] during the summer, we sign on for Easter and Christmas and the owners can’t because we are employers. We need more money and funds in the sector, that’s why so many people are leaving, it doesn’t matter how much you love it, you can’t live on fresh air. (T8)

It was also noted that payment for staff holidays are a statutory requirement (Organisation of Working Time Act, 1997) and so practitioners were surprised that the ECCE Scheme (DCYA, 2010) did not cover holidays,

I do think we should be paid [as part of the ECCE Scheme] for 42 [weeks] because I have to pay my staff for 42 weeks. That’s just a statutory holiday requirement. I do think every service should be paid enough to cover holidays for staff. Like, if you work 52 weeks in the year, for example, you’re entitled to 4 weeks holidays in the year paid. Its 16 1/2 days if you’re working 38 weeks. Those 16 1/2 days should be covered as part of the ECCE Scheme. (T18)

Similar findings were reported by a 2017 report commissioned by the House of the Oireachtas on ECEC working conditions. It consolidated the findings of the current study by stating that “this creates precarious working conditions and part-time contracts resulting in most practitioners being forced to sign onto the Live Register for the summer months [avail of social welfare services]” (p. 12). Another interesting argument highlighted by practitioners in the current study was that business owners cannot avail themselves of social welfare services because they are self-employed. The House of the Oireachtas (2017) states that “this legality increases already existing financial pressures for those providers who are struggling” (p. 12). To remedy this, the House of the Oireachtas (2017) suggests that a 52-week ECCE Scheme (DCYA, 2010) contract should be implemented, and providers should be allowed to avail of social welfare services in the interim. However, some practitioners argued that the only way to remedy the pay disparity in ECEC was to set one standard for the workforce at the expense of vocational courses,

when we all have degrees, then we can turn around and tell the government that we have this massive qualified workforce and we want longer hours for preschool or want to be paid over the summer. So, instead of 15 hours per week we want 25 hours; an extra 2 hours per day is all we’re looking for. We’re looking for
5 hours, in total, per day to match up with the schools. . . but we can’t do that with just FETAC [QQI Level 5 Certificate in “Childcare”]. (T9)

However, in Ireland, even if the minimum qualification to work in ECEC was raised to a degree, this may not alleviate the issue of remuneration. Findings indicate that there may be a need to set occupational profiles (Urban et al., 2017) and pay scales for practitioners based on their experience and qualification levels. Although higher governmental grants are paid to ECEC services that employ practitioners who have obtained a Level 7 (or higher), the current study offers suggestive evidence that this may not be reflected in higher wages for practitioners. Minister Katherine Zappone, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, stated that she “hopes” that the capitation would be reflected in an increase for staff working at the coalface (Oireachtas, 2017b). However, it is at the discretion of the service owners whether they agree to this process or whether they opt to put the capitation rate toward other expenses.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Based on this study, implications for theory and practice emerge. It seems that ECEC course content and experiential learning opportunities for prospective ECEC practitioners should be based on occupational profiles (Fillis, 2018) to increase consistency in program outcomes for those who participate in these courses (Fillis, 2018). To support the professionalization of ECEC, it is recommended that

1. All ECEC leaders should be required to obtain a degree in ECEC and be supported by assistants with certificates in ECEC. This will facilitate the creation of a graduate-led workforce, thereby increasing the quality of provision and the professionalization of the ECEC sector (Oireachtas, 2017; Sylva et al., 2004).

2. Governmental grants should be implemented to encourage existing practitioners to upskill. In Ireland, for example, it is recommended that the Learner Fund (DCYA, 2014) grant should be increased to subsidize at least 50% of the costs required to obtain full- and part-time ECEC degrees in approved and accredited higher education institutions.

3. Findings indicate that practitioners who have worked in ECEC for more than 5 years should be recognized for prior learning (RPL), and this experience should also be considered in the structure and duration of ECEC programs (Foong et al., 2018; Oireachtas, 2017). It is also important to consider practitioners who may wish to enroll in part-time courses while they continue to work in ECEC services.

4. To stabilize and increase retention of quality practitioners in the ECEC workforce, it is recommended that ample student places are allocated to part-time courses to encourage in-service practitioners to upskill (Oireachtas, 2017).

Conclusion: The Development of a Professional Irish Early Childhood Workforce

Seemingly, the role of the practitioner is greatly misunderstood, and there appear to be hierarchical structures festering within the ECEC workforce. This study suggests that even with financial incentives to obtain ECEC degrees, views from practitioners may perpetuate the idea that qualifications are not needed to work in ECEC.

In addition, the majority of practitioners understood the importance of degrees and in-service training on the provision of quality learning opportunities for young children. However, inadequate funding, a dearth of part-time courses to facilitate practitioners in full-time employment, and discouragement from peers and management were identified as barriers to professional advancement. A brief examination of the Scandinavian countries supported the view that law has an expressive function in the formulation of social norms. The available evidence seems to suggest that the adoption of a systematic approach to the development of comprehensive ECEC legislation by policy makers and investment in ECEC are vital components of professionalization. Governmental interest, together with investment and consultation with key stakeholders, can radically transform the preconceived notions of the early childhood practitioner. This article advocates that the value of ECEC in any society is derived from the importance attributed to it in law and budgetary decisions made by policymakers.

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