

Aistear

Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige
The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

**Perspectives on the relationship
between education and care in
early childhood: A research paper**

Executive Summary

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By Nóirín Hayes, PhD

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The independent development of the educational and childcare sectors has been identified as one of the key difficulties facing the reform and development of early education in Ireland. This division allows care to be characterised within a framework that de-emphasises the educational nature of the work. This privileges education over care and is manifest in aspects of professional education, pay, conditions of service, and influence. It is the contention of the paper *Perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood* that quality early years provision across all services and ages is best described by the term early education; this synthesising concept requires a rich understanding of the educative nature of care whilst demanding attention to the caring role of education.

The paper addresses the two recurrent, interacting and often, contentious concepts of education and care, which are central to the provision of early childhood education. It does so by considering the context within which early education is currently developing, nationally and internationally. In particular it considers how approaches to understanding the concepts of education and care impact on the lives of children from birth to six years through their influence on policy, curriculum and practice and professional development in early childhood care and education (ECCE).

Education, care and policy development

The term 'early childhood care and education' is gaining a wide currency across the sector in Ireland. Both the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) use slight variations of the term in the title of their influential reports (OECD, 2004; NESF, 2005) and the introduction to *Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (2006) notes that the term *Early Childhood Care and Education* has strong endorsement from the diverse range of stakeholders in the provision of services, as it reinforces the inseparable nature of care and education essential to the provision of quality early experiences (CECDE, 2006, p. 3). However, the OECD cautions that *it is clear that a national policy on the early education and care of young children in Ireland is still in its initial stages*. Care and education are still treated separately (OECD, 2004, p. 6). It seems that simply headlining the two concepts together within the phrase early childhood care and education is insufficient to integrating them conceptually, politically or practically.

The paper contends that the degree to which a state involves itself in early education and the extent to which early education is regarded as either a care/welfare or an educational aspect of policy influences the funding, focus and the status of early education and, in turn, the process and quality of early education itself. It further argues that the 'market' approach to early childhood services, where the care element is removed from the broader context of early education and care, and treated as a commodity to assist parents' work or continue their education predominates in Ireland. This policy approach is criticised as insensitive to the development and learning needs and rights of young children.

Curriculum and practice

There is an international trend towards reconsidering early years curriculum and practice for children from birth to six years to ensure that it takes account of contemporary child development theory, contextual variables and the dynamic interactions that are the essence of quality early education.

In its review of contemporary research the paper illustrates that successful early education facilitates the child in active learning where learning environments are well planned and where staff are well trained, confident and supported in their work. The positive impact of early education is found across all social

groups but is strongest in children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Effective learning in early childhood is exemplified by positive aspirations, task commitment, social skills, responsibility, and feelings of efficacy within the child.

The role of the adult is central to the quality of early education and the paper presents evidence that a dynamic process approach to practice, integrating care and education, offers more for children's positive development and learning than either an academic (education) or a play-based (care) approach alone. The evidence suggests that early education which emphasises the affective dimensions of learning and those cognitive skills associated with the planning and organisation of knowledge positively influences children's later academic development in terms of content knowledge and literacy and numeracy skills.

Such an approach to early education recognises the educative role of care as nurture and both challenges and permits practitioners to give time to planning for the 'soft', affective and difficult to measure aspects of early learning and development such as aspirations, social skills, motivation, organisation, learner identity, and confidence. Furthermore, it challenges adults to encourage playful interaction, exploration, dialogue, and collaborative learning. Such practice supports young children's learning in a rich learning environment and, it is argued, is best exemplified by a 'nurturing pedagogy'.

Professional development

The importance of well-educated practitioners is highlighted in the research into effective, quality early childhood education. It follows that the role of the adult is central to this effectiveness. Well-trained practitioners are confident in their knowledge of the sophisticated nuances of child development; recognise and respond to the normative and dynamic dimensions of development and are familiar with the skills and knowledge appropriate to the children in their setting. Such practices are manifest in a 'nurturing pedagogy' and embody a trust in the educative value of care in early education. The paper concludes that professional education and training for early education practitioners should include a strong element of child development along with subject knowledge and principles of practice.

Conclusion

Despite the many policy references for the need to balance care and education in early education, the evidence indicates that there continues to be a tendency to underestimate the educative role of caring. A significant shift in understanding the role of care in practice requires an explicit acknowledgement of the critical contribution of the interpersonal and relational aspects of early education. To emphasise this it is argued that there is a need to re-conceptualise care as nurture in order that its status as an educative dimension be enhanced. The concept of a 'nurturing pedagogy' recognises the educative role of care as nurture, the importance of relationships and the role of playful interaction, exploration, dialogue, and collaborative learning in supporting young children's learning. Central to the concept is the idea that pedagogy provides a unique integration space for care and education and is, itself, a form of assessment and a guide to an emergent and responsive early years curriculum.

There is a need for a significant investment in early childhood education in Ireland and an ongoing review of the early educational opportunities for children up to six years of age. Reform of early childhood education curriculum and practice with implications for policy, practice and capacity building through training and education is also needed. This will also require a shift to supporting appropriate, effective and quality early education so that Irish children can experience enhancing care and education in learning environments that are empowering and enabling for them in the here and now while guiding them along the path through lifelong learning well equipped with the necessary learning dispositions, knowledge, values, and skills to succeed and to be active citizens in a democratic society. The paper welcomes the current work of the NCCA in developing an early learning curriculum framework from birth to age six across the wide variety of early educational settings. This work affords an exciting opportunity for the reform and development of early education in Ireland.

References

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National Council
for Curriculum and Assessment
24 Merrion Square
Dublin 2, Ireland.

Telephone: +353 1 661 7177
Fax: +353 1 661 7180
E-Mail: info@ncca.ie
Website: www.ncca.ie