Workforce
3 Editorial
Beatrice Merrick

A view from Wales
Jane Waters

A Northern Ireland Perspective
Glenda Walsh

A view from Scotland
Aline-Wendy Dunlop

Professional knowledge, assessment and accountability: a perspective from England
Elizabeth Wood
This edition of the Journal draws on the discussions at our Annual Seminar in November where we addressed how the four nations of the UK were facing common challenges in relation to early childhood education. Divergent histories and geographies combine with political, socioeconomic and cultural factors to create different responses to those challenges within the limits allowed by devolution.

But there are strong parallels in policy directions too such as towards increasing the availability of early childhood education and care to younger children - ie to (more) 2-year-olds - and for more hours for 3- and 4-year-olds, and seeking to close the gap in achievement between the most disadvantaged children and their peers.

Another common strand is the realisation that more needs to be done to support development and career progression of the workforce. This is the focus which our four speakers from the seminar have chosen for their articles here.

A report from the Economist Intelligence Unit (2012) which benchmarked countries’ early education systems against one another summarised the international consensus on this:

Overall, a well-trained workforce is the most important determinant of quality. “At the end of the day, if you really want to improve the quality, you have to provide the professional development and you have to professionalise the service and provide better conditions for the staff,” says Dr Collette Tayler, an ECE professor at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education. (Ibid:25)

The report notes that in some countries there are still no entry requirements for those wishing to work in ECE while at the other extreme preschool teachers require a minimum of a bachelor’s degree and many have a master’s. The report rates the UK as a single entity, not distinguishing its four different systems, and puts it at the top of the scale, in relation to its criterion for “Presence and scope of preschool teacher qualifications (basic, general certifications versus specialised degree programmes); the effectiveness of enforcement/monitoring and review mechanisms.”

But as this issue of the Journal shows, from within and across the UK there is clear consensus that there is much more to do to develop the skilled and knowledgeable workforce our children deserve.

Jane Waters puts the Welsh government’s current focus on workforce development in the context of an ECE workforce divided between separate requirements for the 0-3 and 3+ age groups. She also underlines the influence of the anti-poverty agenda and the focus on closing the achievement gap. The importance of getting workforce development right is foregrounded by the gap between the intentions of the Foundation Phase curriculum and the reality of delivery in cases where practitioners do not have the knowledge, skills and confidence to deliver it.

Glenda Walsh highlights the inequalities in training and qualifications between the maintained and non-maintained sectors in Northern Ireland, and articulates frustration about the gap between political rhetoric and reality, exacerbated by the stop-start political process.

Aline-Wendy Dunlop identifies the extensive work already done in Scotland on the “children’s workforce” and the common core of skills required, not only for early years practitioners but for the wider workforce working to support children within families and communities. She also highlights recent research on the dwindling numbers of one part of the children’s workforce, namely the nursery teacher, and calls for similar research on the contribution of other parts of the workforce.

Elizabeth Wood focuses on the impact of professional skills and knowledge on the delivery of assessment as an example of how crucial it is for practitioners to have the knowledge base that allows them to take a critical approach to their practice.

At a time when government policy may not always be based on a strong evidence base as to what provides young children with the best opportunities to learn and develop, practitioners need the knowledge that empowers them to exercise their professional judgement in the best interests of young children.

Beatrice Merrick is Chief Executive of Early Education

Reference:
A view from Wales

Jane Waters

Provision for children aged 0-7 years in Wales is divided broadly into the 0-3 years sector and the 3-7 years sector. Workforce development across these sectors has recently been brought together under one ambitious policy directive, Building a brighter future: early years and childcare plan (WG, 2013). What follows is an overview of early years provision in Wales, followed by a description of the current policy aspirations and emerging workforce reform programme.

Provision 0-3
The 0-3 years sector comprises targeted, funded provision in the form of the Flying Start programme and non-maintained, private and voluntary sector provision such as private daycare, childminding and playgroups, including Welsh medium Mudiad Meithrin. The Flying Start programme was launched by the Welsh Government in 2006/07 and operated nationally from 2007/08. It aims to improve outcomes for children in some of the most disadvantaged areas in Wales, identified through the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation. It is acknowledged that Flying Start cannot, and is not designed to, address all of the elements of disadvantage related to child poverty. Instead it focuses on the identification of need and on early interventions to improve children’s language, cognitive and social and emotional development and their physical health (Morris, Wallis and Knibbs, 2014). The main elements of the provision are:

- an enhanced health visiting service
- antenatal to 4 years
- free, high quality, part-time childcare for 2-3 years and 3-4 years olds
- evidence-based parenting support programmes and support for early language development.

Flying Start is variably organised across Wales according to local authority decision making. For example, one local authority might treat its Flying Start provision as a focused intervention in which Flying Start settings are established to cater for the target group. In such circumstances close working relationships are built with feeder schools which may be co-located. Advisory staff then work in a targeted manner with these settings. However in a neighbouring local authority specific children may be funded through Flying Start to take up childcare places within provision that already exists, in private daycare, playgroup or with a childminder for example. Such an approach can be a pragmatic solution to the challenges faced in rural communities with small populations, however achieving consistency across such diverse provision is clearly more challenging. Further, there is a requirement that all staff employed to work within the Flying Start programme must hold at least a Level 3 (L3) qualification. In rural areas therefore, Flying Start-funded practitioners are required to follow the funded child, and may work across a number of settings when the funded children are in attendance. Advisory staff in this scenario are responsible for working across all the various settings that host funded children.

An impact assessment of the Flying Start programme, reporting in 2014, highlighted the need for robust data sharing and tracking mechanisms, as well as thorough qualitative research, in order to reliably assess the impact of the initiative against its stated purposes (Morris et al. 2014). Positive indicators of impact of the first five years of the programme were reported however, such as an increased uptake of immunisation and higher reported breastfeeding rates, and early suggestions that there may be a positive impact on rates of child development in some authorities. The most robust evidence was seen in outcomes for parents, when evidence had been collected using TOPSE (a Tool to measure Parenting Self Efficacy). Areas using this tool measured parenting skills before and after a range of different interventions and all reported at least some measurable and positive changes in parental behaviour as a result of their programmes; the greatest improvements were generally reported in discipline and boundary setting (Morris et al, 2014).

Provision for 0- to 3-year-olds in Wales that sits outside the Flying Start programme is increasingly represented through a national forum, Cwlwm (Childcare Wales Learning and Working Mutually). Cwlwm sets out to bring together the five leading childcare organisations in Wales to deliver a bilingual integrated service to “ensure the best possible outcomes for children and families across Wales” (PACEY 2016). This forum provides a voice for the 0-3 years non-maintained sector in Wales that accounts for English and Welsh medium provision. Welsh Government will, for example, ask Cwlwm representatives to sit on relevant working parties. Cwlwm partner organisations are:

- Mudiad Meithrin (who are the lead for Cwlwm)
- Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids’ Clubs
- National Day Nurseries Association Cymru
- Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY Cymru)
- Wales Pre-School Providers Association.

Wales is a nation of two languages with governmental ambitions to see the Welsh language thriving in Wales (WG, 2012). There is therefore English and Welsh medium provision across the early years sector. The Welsh-speaking playgroup providers, Mudiad
Meithrin were established in 1971, their website notes that the census figures at this time reported the number of children aged 3-4 years old who could speak Welsh was 11.3% and that this figure has been gradually increasing at each census over the intervening decades; the 2011 Census reported 23.3% of 3- to 4-year-olds being able to speak Welsh. The Meithrin claims a considerable contribution to this outcome (Mudiad Meithrin 2016).

Provision from 3 years

All children in Wales are entitled to 15 hours of early years education provision per week from the day after they turn 3, most usually in school-based nursery classes, with some stand-alone maintained nursery provision and some provision in participating funded, non-maintained settings. Currently this offer is usually spread across a week, however there is some piloting being undertaken of two full day sessions to support working parents. Full time education provision is an entitlement for children for the academic year in which they turn 5. All maintained provision for children from 3 years of age in Wales is subject to the Foundation Phase Framework (WG, 2008; 2015a) which sets out the curriculum and outcomes for 3- to 7-year-olds in Wales.

At the time of its inception the Foundation Phase Framework was seen as a radical overhaul of early years education in Wales signaling a shift away from UK central government education policy and the provision of a single phase of education for children aged 3-7 years in which play and experiential learning are the pedagogical priorities. It was also predicated upon a concern, supported by research literature, about the “detrimental” (NAfW 2001 p.8) effect of an overly formal pedagogy into the 5-7 age range, which children’s interests were clearly visible within the curriculum and for children and adults contributed to the development of a shared understanding of experience.

A central intention was for the Foundation Phase to support a reduction in the gap in attainment between children in receipt of free school meals and those who are not.

The Foundation Phase Framework sets out seven Areas of Learning:

- Personal and Social Development
- Well-Being and Cultural Diversity
- Language, Literacy and Communication Skills
- Mathematical Development
- Welsh Language Development
- Knowledge and Understanding of the World
- Physical Development and
- Creative Development.

Two evaluations of the initiative reported in 2014/15; one, a snapshot “stocktake”, found that where the Foundation Phase was being implemented there were indications of positive outcomes for children but that only a minority of settings were doing it well. A significant variability of quality was reported within and between maintained schools and funded non-maintained settings (Siraj, 2014; 2015). The second evaluation, a three year evaluation study, reported that the Foundation Phase was associated with improved attainment for all pupils, including pupils eligible for free school meals, but no evidence to suggest it had made any observable impact so far on reducing inequalities in attainment at the end of Key Stage 2 (WG 2015b).

Both evaluations recommended significant input into the professional development of those working in the Foundation Phase. Siraj (2015) indicated that a significant shift in workforce culture was required, especially related to the role of the adult in supporting learning and the provision of appropriate playful learning environments to support children’s early literacy and numeracy. We might describe this shift as moving from a pedagogy of facilitation to one of relational intention (see also Waters 2016).

Policy aspirations

The proportion of people living in relative poverty in Wales, 23%, is the highest in the UK outside London. Wales has the highest percentage of children living in poverty, one in three, of any nation in the UK. The cross-party equalities committee recently announced that poverty is not declining in Wales as it is in the north east of England or Scotland (see for example BBC, 2015). Central to Welsh Government policy is the aspiration to tackle the causes and effects of poverty across Wales. Children’s early experiences are recognised across policy work-streams as being central to achieving this aspiration (see also WG, 2012; 2014a).

Building a brighter future: early years and childcare plan (WG, 2013) is the cornerstone Welsh Government policy for the early years. It brings together policies and strategies in Wales for families with children aged 0-7. It is centred around five key themes:

- children’s health and well-being
- supporting families and parents
- high-quality early education and childcare
- effective primary education and
- raising standards.

The plan is actioned and reviewed by a Ministerial Board that steers and monitors progress. The plan is clearly justified by reference to the inequitable outcomes
that exist in Wales for children and young people, and there is a strong mandate for investment in the early years to mitigate for early disadvantage and maximise children’s successful outcomes.

There is explicit recognition of the need for early years (EY) workforce planning in Wales (see also WG, 2014c, the Graham review), and the Welsh Government consulted in 2014 on a 10 year workforce development plan which had a focus on three key themes:

- leadership
- the quality of new entrants to the early years sector and
- the need to raise skills and standards across the existing workforce (WG, 2014b).

Currently, there is “no uniform requirement for the ECEC workforce in Wales in terms of either qualifications, or ratios of staff to children” (WG, 2014c:48). There is an intention to create a career-long professional pathway, or series of pathways, with appropriate and robust programmes of induction and professional development, associated with qualifications, to support aspirational individuals to enter the workforce and develop rigorous skills in both practice and leadership.

Alongside workforce development planning the Welsh Government have committed to the introduction of an Early Years Development and Assessment Framework (EYDAF) to provide a single, overarching assessment framework and a suite of linked assessment tools to chart children’s progress across the early years from birth to the age of 7. Siraj (2014) notes that significant workforce development will be required to support the use of the EYDAF and that this should emphasise teacher/practitioner assessment, will require “training in the use of observation as a way of measuring impact and children’s progress, as well as supporting ongoing and future teaching and learning” (ibid:51) and rigorous moderation across maintained/ school settings and non-maintained settings.

The significant commitment to long term planning for change within the EY workforce may, in due course, show impact. Currently, while some aspects of the draft plan are being taken forward following consultation, the Welsh Government Early Years Expert Panel is due to report on a detailed workforce development plan later this year. It will be essential, given the international evidence about how to best support children’s long term outcomes (eg OECD, 2012), that workforce development is planned in such a way that all those involved in early years provision have access to meaningful professional learning experiences that explore the why of pedagogy and practice as well as the what (see, for example, Waters and Payler, 2015; Oberhuemer, 2015).

Dr Jane Waters is Head of South West Wales Centre of Teacher Education at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David

References


**A Northern Ireland Perspective**

Glenda Walsh

**Background context**

Northern Ireland, comprising six counties in total, is the smallest of the four devolved nations across the United Kingdom with an estimated population of 1,840,400 (NISRA, 2015). Renowned for its troubled past, peace, it seems, was finally restored in 1994 as a result of the paramilitary ceasefires and subsequently the Belfast Agreement of 1998. In turn devolution of regional government to the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont, was restored in 1999, where full legislative power over a number of issues was granted including education and health and social services. In this way Northern Ireland no longer automatically followed policy in England, but started out on a journey of policy developments and aspirations to ensure a more peaceful and profitable future for its children and young people (Palialalogou et al, 2016). It is the intention of this article to unpick this policy context in an effort to unravel the developments and dilemmas encountered with a focus on workforce reform for 3-6 year old children in the context of Northern Ireland.

**Policy developments**

**Pre-school developments (3- to 4-year-old children)**

Provision in Northern Ireland for children prior to starting compulsory schooling had for many years been principally considered a parental concern. Before 1998 funded places for pre-school aged children were only available in a small number of nursery schools or classes, led by a graduate teacher, which were sporadically placed in cities and towns across Northern Ireland resulting in uneven and poorly coordinated services for young children, falling well below the necessary requirements (see Walsh, 2007). Voluntary playgroups, run by mothers in the main, attempted to fill the gap but without the support of any government funding.

The years immediately following the restoration of peace in Northern Ireland witnessed a suite of policy developments relating to young children and their care and education, culminating in the launch of the Pre-school Expansion Programme (PSEEP), entitled Investing in Early Learning (DENI & DHSS, 1998) and the Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland: Children First (DHSS, DENI and T&EA, 1999). These initiatives comprised both an aim to provide more childcare provision across the statutory and voluntary divide and in so doing raise its overarching quality and also to attempt to make childcare more affordable and accessible to all parents (Walsh, 2007). An additional aim of the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme was the replacement of existing reception provision in primary schools with suitable alternative provision. Reception classes were considered not always to provide an appropriate pre-school experience for young children, and as a result the Department has not approved new reception provision since 1998/99 (DENI, 2013).

The Programme for Government (2011-2015) has reiterated its commitment to making available at least one year of pre-school education to every family that wants it. Statistics from the Department of Education showcase that in February 2015 there were almost 24,000 pupils in funded pre-school education which equates to 91% of all 3-year-olds in the Northern Ireland population, the highest figure on record, to date. The overall increase in funded pre-school provision since 1998 is detailed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Pupils in funded pre-school provision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>24,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The First Minister and Deputy First Minister said: "Pre-school is an essential part of every child’s education and we are making significant progress on delivering the Programme for Government commitment" (DHSS, 2015).

Significant developments also took place in primary schools with suitable alternative provision. Reception classes were considered not always to provide an appropriate pre-school experience for young children, and as a result the Department has not approved new reception provision since 1998/99 (DENI, 2013).

In this way, it could be argued that an attempt has been made to bring the early years of schooling in NI into line with contemporary international early childhood research (Hunter and Walsh, 2014).

**School developments (4- to 6-year-old children)**

Significant developments also took place in the school context for children aged 4-6 years. Since the Education Reform Order (Great Britain, 1989) children in Northern Ireland have been obliged to commence formal schooling in the September after their fourth birthday. With the cut off point being 1 July in any given year, some children as young as 4 years and 2 months were required to follow the requirements of a statutory curriculum that was deemed to be subject-driven and assessment-led (Walsh et al, 2006). In light of research evidence and international practice, a review of this more traditional curriculum was undertaken and a play-based intervention, known as the Enriched Curriculum was put in place in a number of Year 1 and Year 2 classes across the province. Positive findings in favour of the more play-based approach in terms of children's learning dispositions, social development and emotional well-being emerged (Walsh et al, 2006 and 2010), resulting in the compulsory implementation of the Foundation Stage curriculum for all 4 to 6-year-old children in Years 1 and 2 of primary school from September 2007 and 2008 respectively (CCEA, 2007). According to the Foundation Stage (FS) curriculum:

- children in the first two years of schooling should “experience much of their learning through well-planned and challenging play” (CCEA, 2007:9)
- and their learning should be supported by teachers who are “committed, sensitive, enthusiastic and interact effectively to challenge children’s thinking and learning” (CCEA, 2007:16).

In this way, the school experience for young children, and as a result the Department has not approved new reception provision since 1998/99 (DENI, 2013).

**Significant challenges**

**Pre-school challenges**

Yet against this backdrop of progress and development, is a picture of early years practice in NI that is challenging and controversial. From the pre-school perspective, inequalities exist across the divide in terms of duration of session, staff-child ratios and most significantly workforce issues. Despite the more favourable ratio of staff to children (1:8 instead of 1:13 in nursery schools and classes), the voluntary sector possess in the main shorter sessions with the children and poorer quality working conditions in general. In contrast to the majority of nursery schools which find themselves in purpose built settings, many playgroups can still be found in church hall settings and mobile accommodation. The amount of funding invested by the Government across the sectors also appears to differ significantly. In the 2012/2013 school year over £40 million was provided to the 97 Department of Education grant-aided nursery schools and 224 nursery units attached to...
primary schools via the Common Funding Formula; while £16.4 million was allocated to the 390 voluntary and private pre-school providers outside of the formula arrangements (DENI, 2013). Differences it appears, still exist in terms of status, salary and skillset, yet those in the voluntary sector are obliged to meet the requirements of the same quality assurance mechanisms as those in the statutory sector as well as implementing the “pre-school curricular guidelines” (CCEA, 2006). Many of those working in the voluntary sector are earning, it seems, little more than the minimum wage, whilst teachers in the statutory sector enjoy an appropriate teacher’s salary.

Qualifications of course differ significantly between the two sectors. All teachers in the statutory sector possess a degree level qualification with qualified teacher status. In the voluntary sector only half of the staff are required to possess a relevant childcare qualification which in turn can translate into a poor skillset with regard to competence in Literacy and Numeracy. In terms of qualifications, the majority of staff in the voluntary/private sector are required to hold a minimum qualification at level 2 in early years or play work. (DHSSPS, 2012). Such qualifications tend to be diploma focused and competence-based, lacking the critique and reflection required at degree level. For such qualifications, a GSCE in English and Literacy and Numeracy. In terms of status, salary and skillset, yet those in the voluntary sector are obliged to hold a minimum qualification at level 2 in early years or play work. (DHSSPS, 2012). Such qualifications tend to be diploma focused and competence-based, lacking the critique and reflection required at degree level.

As part of the PSEEP, a new role known as an “Early Years Specialist” (EYS) was devised, to support practitioners in the voluntary sector. Qualified teachers, those holding a qualification in Early Childhood Studies at diploma, foundation degree and degree levels and those with an NVQ level 4 were deemed appropriately qualified to carry out this role (ETI, 2014a). The key aim of such a role was to “support quality improvement and the raising of standards within the pre-school setting” (ETI, 2014a:1). A recent evaluation carried out by ETI in 2014 reveals that all is not well with this role in current practice, where the EYS support provided no longer conforms, it seems, to the original guidance issued by DE. There appears to be an increasing trend to combine groups of staff from different settings for training and the sharing of practice, rather than providing monthly on-site visits to provide appropriate support to individual settings (ETI, 2014a).

Although recommendations to progress this role in practice have been clearly stipulated, the need to upgrade the level of qualifications required of all those working in the pre-school sector in general has not gone unrecognised (ETI, 2014a).

Despite the challenges articulated above, the recent Chief Inspector’s Report for 2012–2014 (ETI, 2014b) indicated that the overall effectiveness of 83% of the pre-school settings inspected was evaluated as good or better (an improvement of seven percentage points in comparison with the settings inspected during the last reporting period).

Recognition must be given to the hard work and goodwill of the staff across the statutory and voluntary sector in achieving such a result. Yet despite this favourable outcome fewer settings in general were evaluated as very good or outstanding, indicating that there is still some work to be done to ensure high quality provision across the province. In addition the Chief Inspector’s report (ETI, 2014b) has also recognised the disparity that presently exists in the private/voluntary sector regarding the quantity and quality of support available to promote improvement.

It would seem therefore that the above challenges are all pointing towards the need for a graduate-led workforce in pre-school practice, the necessity of which has clearly been articulated within local and international research (see McMillian and McConnell, 2015). The burning question that remains is whether the Government in Northern Ireland would be willing to invest in such a development?

School challenges

As for the early years in schooling, in spite of the progress made in terms of curriculum development, evidence would suggest that efforts to translate such policy effectively into practice remains highly problematic (Hunter and Walsh, 2014). Although play has been endorsed politically within the content of the NI FS curriculum, the findings from recent research evidence articulates the need for an up-skilling of the early years teaching profession in Northern Ireland to ensure the implementation of high quality challenging play in practice. The study raises questions as to the type of initial teacher education and subsequent professional development that is required to guarantee the highest levels of teaching and learning in our early years classrooms and in turn to resolve the contested interface of play as policy in practice (Hunter and Walsh, 2014). Findings from the Chief Inspector’s Report (ETI, 2014b:43) confirm such thinking, emphasising that teachers in Years 1 and 2 of primary schooling “need to build upon children’s pre-school learning, set higher expectations for all children to write independently and to develop their thinking skills through numeracy, literacy and play-based activities”.

In this way it would appear that curriculum statements are insufficient without appropriate policy strategies and financial investment to ensure the initial teacher education and continuing professional development that Foundation Stage teachers so urgently require. Perhaps the answers to such challenges will lie in the long-awaited Northern Ireland early years framework: Learning to Learn?
In October 2013 the early years framework (0-6 years), entitled Learning to Learn, was finally published by the Department of Education (DE, 2013) after a lengthy consultation process. This framework was anticipated by the early years community as the holy grail, setting out the political vision for early years education and learning in Northern Ireland for the next number of years, something that has been long awaited in the NI context. Its key aim is to ensure that “all children have equal opportunities to achieve their potential through high quality early years education and learning experiences” (DE, 2013:17).

The Learning to Learn Framework appears to recognise, it could be argued, some of the unresolved dilemmas that exist in Northern Ireland regarding the early years workforce and in an effort to move forward the need to maximise “the use of teaching expertise” (DENI, 2013:27) has been emphasised by DE, to support practice in early years settings and in turn, raise standards. McMillan and McConnell (2015:8) who undertook a critique of the Learning to Learn framework, argue that such a reference conveys the framework’s tacit acknowledgement for a graduate-led workforce but with an unfortunate “deafening silence” around the issue of raising workforce qualifications to graduate status. The framework does articulate its intention to liaise with DHSSP&GS around current qualifications with specific reference to literacy and numeracy and indicates the need to raise the number of professional development days for the voluntary sector, however the specifics about how a graduate-led workforce might be achieved in practice goes unmentioned, once again contradicting the findings embedded within local and international research (McMillan and McConnell, 2015).

In addition the Learning to Learn Framework (DE, 2013) has committed to creating a programme of continuous professional development for early childhood practitioners, teachers, principals and staff with a focus on the pedagogy of play in practice encouraging an overall closer alignment between Pre-School and FS. In this way, it would seem, that finally recognition has been given to the need to enhance the expertise of Foundation Stage teachers to “ensure the highest and sophisticated levels of teaching and learning in our EY classrooms” (Hunter and Walsh, 2014: 15). However once again the specifics have been ignored about how this development might be achieved in practice.

In conclusion

To this end it is suggested that the role out of the Learning to Learn framework, as many aforementioned policy documents in Northern Ireland, is another case of the Emperor’s New Clothes, where the early years community have once again been lulled into a false sense of security that progress is being made. Despite the good intentions that belie its content, its level of innovation, it could be argued, has been over-emphasised as the supporting structures to facilitate this change in practice have been left unchanged. Top-down pressures from an over-selective and assessment-led education system, a professional development structure which has been hugely rationalised, a model of teacher education where play-based pedagogy is only seen as an accessory, a budget that has been squeezed significantly and a power-sharing agreement that is becoming ever more shaky are some of the reasons why progress in the field of early childhood education in Northern Ireland remains some way off.

The picture of progress presently looks bleak and extremely depressing. The time therefore must be ripe to finally invest in what really matters to NI society, namely our young children. They definitely deserve it!

Glenda Walsh is Head of Early Years Education and Principal Lecturer in Education (Early Years) at Stranmillis University College.

References:


CCEA, DENI, DHSSPS (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety) (2006), Curricular Guidance for Pre-school Education. Belfast: CCEA.


Introduction
This paper focuses on the workforce in Scotland and attempts to offer some solutions to the challenges that surface in any reflection on the early years workforce not only in our four nations but globally. Far from wanting to make any assumptions there are nevertheless some givens: the international collaborations in which I have been fortunate to participate highlight some of these. Writing from university digs here in Australia, nearby are colleagues from New Zealand, Sweden, Iceland and Australia: for all, issues of access, quality, curriculum, pedagogy and workforce are part of any discussion of early years provision for children up to 8 years old. Such discussions help me to reflect on what may be distinctive about Scotland’s Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) context, on the entitlements, opportunities, expectations and aspirations held (Early Transitions and Change, 2011), and on the participation and contributions that will offer solutions. The features I will highlight later in the week when we present at a high level policy conference in Canberra, will be that in Scotland we have a fully qualified workforce, some 2-year-olds and every child of 3 and 4 has a free entitlement to ELC, and we have a curriculum framework for 3- to 6-year-olds, underpinned by complementary guidelines for under 3s. Each of these policies operate in what remains a tightly coupled system linking Early Learning and Childcare with Primary Education.

The policy context
Scotland’s policies for early years include the Early Years Framework (Scottish Government, 2008), Early Level Curriculum for Excellence 3-6 (Scottish Executive, 2007), Pre-birth to Three (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010), Pre-School to Primary Transitions Guidelines (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2011) and Getting it Right for Every Child (Scottish Government, 2012). These policies are underpinned by the Education Scotland Act (2000, 2009) and the Children and Young People’s Act 2014.

Policy formulation in Scotland at the present time is like an extended conversation: discussion roams around policy aspirations, social justice, poverty and wellbeing, the range of provision, the composition of the workforce, the extended hours offer for 2-, 3- and 4-year-olds, sustaining quality throughout the journey to expansion, and how this should all be achieved. Much of the discussion focuses on structural matters, but if we are going to achieve all we aim for, or even some of it, we need to focus on relational matters. On people: children, families practitioners and their communities, and on the tools they have at their disposal.

Frameworks supporting practitioners
For the practitioners we have four frameworks in particular that offer elements of pedagogy to bring a policy shape to what they do: Pre-birth to Three (2010), Building the Curriculum 2: Active Learning in the Early Years (2007); Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) (2008 onwards) and Building the Ambition (2014b). To help each practitioner gauge their contribution and that of their own setting, we have the new How Good is Our Early Learning and Childcare (2016) which replaces our previous self-evaluation tool, Child at the Centre. A huge emphasis is placed on the contribution of the workforce, who are understood to be key to all aspirations for children and families: at the heart of all we do is the child.

Working to have children lead their learning through their interests, drive for meaning making, energies and vitalities means they need adults who understand what they need to do. Scotland prides itself on its early childhood education pioneers: initially and early, the philanthropist Robert Owen, who is famed for saying:

At no age is the desire of knowledge stronger than in childhood
Robert Owen (1781-1858)

By the early years of the twentieth century nursery schools and child gardens were opening in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee. The development of provision for children was matched by new courses to educate teachers: infant and nursery teacher specialisms developed as an additional year in particular that offer elements of pedagogy for children was matched by new courses to educate teachers: infant and nursery teacher specialisms developed as an additional year.
an understanding of poverty”. (Educational Institute of Scotland, 2014:17). A mix of centralisation and fragmentation of policy responsibility can be understood to exacerbate poverty issues. While not the only policy challenge facing child and family policy in Scotland, the ambition to close the gap in outcomes between the less well off and children from more affluent families is an absolute priority. There is a need for positive change to childhood experience for many children growing up in Scotland today.

Devolved and reserved matters

For a readership furth of Scotland it is important to illustrate where control of policy is invested. In particular for the purposes of this paper it should be noted that education and training, health and social services, law and order and local government are among matters devolved to the Scottish Government and critically benefits and social security and employment are not.

The separation of these powers between the UK Government in London and the Scottish Parliament does in fact raise a conundrum: in order to fulfil a logical cycle of change, ideally the same jurisdiction would administer early years policies and policies such as employment, benefit and social security in tandem.

In political terms, Scotland is not short of policy. Much policy related to early childhood is ambitious and sound, but there remains a gap between the aspirations of policy and the reality of achieving those ambitions. The advent of the 32-local authority system in the late 1990s inevitably brought some fragmentation, with local authorities designing their own policies or their own versions of national policy for early years. Where central government policy is enacted in law then there is a response, where national policy is delivered through guidance implementation may be variable.

The children’s workforce in Scotland

Scottish Government social policy can be seen to be about two things – family and economics. In 2011 a team from University of Strathclyde reported on a functional analysis of Scottish Policy as it affected the children’s workforce at the time. This analysis helped to define what is now understood in Scotland as the “children’s workforce” and supported the development of core competences for the workforce so defined. In Scotland the children’s workforce was defined then, and is still considered to be: “All those whose work affects the lives of children, their families and the communities in which they live” (Dunlop et al, 2011:6).

The report stated that there is “an aspiration to work collaboratively in the interests of children’s wellbeing and in order to tackle the unequal childhoods that lead to unequal lives” (Dunlop et al, 2011:6). The children’s workforce in Scotland can be understood to be multi-layered and multi-skilled. This model of a multi-layered workforce has emerged from the analysis of occupational standards, registration benchmarks and the wide range of existing services. The first layer of this workforce is made up of the practitioners that work all of the time with the same groups of children and families day-to-day and over time. It is this segment of the workforce that this article focuses upon. There are however three other layers recognised in the Scottish early learning and childcare workforce and indeed for all children.

The second layer of the workforce includes groups of practitioners whose focus is to work with children and families all of the time, but whose work is with different children and families day-to-day. The third layer of the workforce is made up of all those who work with children and adults in communities, sometimes before they are parents, and includes careers advisors, the world of youth work and community learning and development. These are people whose primary focus is to build capacity within individuals and communities. This wider workforce may work with children but this is not their sole function: we have called this layer the “enabling workforce”. The fourth layer of the workforce underpins and shapes the work of the three practitioner layers: this group includes strategic leaders and managers. The primary role of this group is to enable the workforce through strategic direction and capacity building. People in such positions may come from specialist fields from which typically the management roles are drawn – those in management roles may, but do not necessarily share the same specialist area as those they manage. These layers of practice exist in each branch of services for children and young people and families.

The key workforce competences identified were:
1. committing to a holistic view of the child
2. working inclusively with children and families
3. planning, assessing, reflecting, and implementing strategically
4. working in partnership with other agencies
5. sharing information ethically
6. promoting and supporting children’s learning and development
7. ensuring children’s physical, emotional and social wellbeing
8. identifying risks, preventing injury and weighing benefit
9. protecting children and young people
10. building capacity.

Subsequently Scottish Government identified a Common Core of Skills, Knowledge & Understanding and Values for the “Children’s Workforce” (Scottish Government, 2012) underpinned by the UNCRC’s guiding principles. The Common Core was exemplified through two contexts: relationships with children, young people and families and relationships between workers.

Alongside legislative issues is the drive to create change for families. Naomi Eisenstadt’s Report Shifting the Curve (2016) explores three main issues – in-work poverty, housing affordability, and young people’s life chances – and provides a series of recommendations about each. The main recommendation concerning young children is:

Ensure childcare commitments focus on quality to improve outcomes, and consider providing a limited number of free hours of childcare for primary school aged children (Recommendation 3, Eisenstadt, 2016:28)

Eisenstadt highlights the importance of high quality Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) settings, and referring to Siraj and Kingston’s (2015) recent independent review of the workforce in Scotland, emphasises the role of qualifications for that workforce, saying:

Nursery managers in Scotland are required to have a childcare degree, and the Scottish Government has committed that, by 2018, every nursery in the most deprived areas will have an additional qualified teacher or childcare graduate.

However, while steps are already in hand to put higher qualified staff in poorer areas, more needs to be done to ensure early years practitioners are trained to the same standard as teachers of children in school, and pay and conditions differentials are ironed out. (Ibid:11)

The implied connection between qualification levels and child outcomes is still poorly evidenced in Scotland. There is some evidence from course data and inspection that the practices change and learning experiences offered improve under the leadership of more highly qualified staff, but there remains a need for evidence of what it is that more highly qualified practitioners do and how this may link to child outcomes in the longer term (Dunlop, 2015).

Teachers in the Workforce
A recently published study (Dunlop et al, 2016) reports on the contribution of the GTCS-registered teacher to the early learning and childcare workforce in Scotland, and at its heart is about equity for young children and the hopes and ambitions Scotland has for them. Scottish Government policy aspires to make Scotland the best place in the world to grow up. As discussed, part of this ambition is to tackle child poverty in Scotland and narrow the gap that disadvantage brings to educational outcomes. At the same time as increasing the free entitlement to ELC with the aim of this rising to 1,140 hours per year by 2020, there has been, over the last 10 years in Scotland, a 29% reduction in the numbers of GTCS-registered teachers employed in such services, but only a 4% drop in child numbers, which gives a ratio of one teacher to 84 children at this important stage. The most recent Scottish Government statistics result in a new figure of 39% reduction over a ten year period.

Evidence was gathered by:
1. Accessing publicly held current data on early years provision and staffing in Scotland
2. Mapping the perceptions held by early years GTCS-registered teachers of the roles they play and contributions they make in ELC through an audit questionnaire;
3. Focusing a literature review on key concepts such as relational agency, professional beliefs and practices; children’s experiences and the wider role of teachers with families, community and fellow professionals;
4. Holding a series of regional focus groups with GTCS-registered teachers to understand the part they play in early learning and childcare prior to school and into primary 1, and to identify the support and barriers they encounter in fulfilling their role.

The survey drew 1440 respondents who represented teachers working both in ELC and in or supporting the early stages of primary schooling. The Focus Groups held highlighted teacher contributions through seven themes of importance and significance to them:

- knowledge and delivery of the curriculum and understanding its intentions and pedagogy
- leadership and vision
- specialist training and qualifications and whose benefit these are for
- working with parents and in the community with a particular emphasis on deprivation
- progressing learning through skills in the cycle of Observation, Assessment, Planning, Recording and Reporting
- supporting transitions, into nursery and out of it in to primary school
- the nursery teacher as a mentor and trainer of others.

A similar depth of information is needed in relation to others in the workforce, in order to fully understand what the most favourable composition of the workforce may be to achieve the ambitions Scotland has for its children.

The Future
Presently a new focus on raising attainment for all through the Scottish Attainment Challenge (an incentive programme to improve school outcomes), the expansion of ELC hours, international PISA results and implementation of the 3-6 Early Level of the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence, combine to place a major focus on the workforce being “fit for purpose” (Early Years Framework, 2008). Scottish Government has now considered and decided which of Siraj and Kingston’s recommendation to take forward and part of that process will be to review staff qualifications and conditions of employment, the composition of the workforce and recruitment.

Such common challenges as described here exist across our four nations. Solutions will of necessity be diverse as they determine to take account of local context, different systems, policy shifts and new aspirations. What we do hold in common is what I see as the right of children to responsive and knowledgeable adults who can support children to develop their learning disposition, emotional wellbeing and funds of knowledge as they begin their journeys through our early and school learning systems. Scotland’s ambition for the expansion of the Early Learning and Childcare hours offer is likely to explore blended models (Scottish Government, 2016). The solution to our common challenges may be what could be called “a blended workforce”.

Aline-Wendy Dunlop is Emeritus Professor, University of Strathclyde

See page 15 for references
Elizabeth Wood

There are well-established links between high quality provision for young children, and their subsequent outcomes in educational achievement, wellbeing and social capabilities. We know that “high quality” is associated with a range of different factors to do with the structure of provision (environment, facilities, staffing) and the processes (curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, assessment practices and adult-child relationships). Structural and process characteristics are all reliant on the professional knowledge of practitioners, which means that workforce reform is central to achieving the standards all reliant on the professional knowledge of practitioners are developing or improving their workforce systems.

Training and qualifications
Policy aspirations in the UK (England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales) share this commitment to high quality provision in all four ECE frameworks. However, there are varying levels of qualifications across the sector, including those who have leadership roles in ECE settings and organisations. These variations play out in different ways. First, practitioners draw on similar knowledge bases in their training, but there may be different interpretations and emphases. A key example here is the dominance of child development theories in training programmes, and the different ways in which these may be interpreted. ECE practitioners may understand child development as a natural/biological process, but may not understand the implications for planning curricula, interacting with children in their play, or making accurate assessments of their learning.

Second, these different levels of qualifications may limit the extent to which ECE staff can discuss and address critical issues, and develop innovative practices. Without such engagement, there is a danger that conformity to the Early Years Foundation Stage (or indeed to ECE policy frameworks in any country) becomes the dominant way of organising provision and practice. Such conformity is a problem in societies that are “super-diverse”, where children and families belong to multilingual, multicultural, and multifaith communities. From this perspective, there are different “learners”, who may have different developmental pathways according to their diverse family and community backgrounds. However, assessing children’s outcomes against developmental indicators and learning goals demands attention to “regularities” and not to unique or idiosyncratic characteristics.

Taking these complex issues into account, I will explore assessment in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in England. First, I will look at the structures for assessment in the EYFS, and then at the processes. I intend to provoke some critical reflection on assessment, and to consider the extent to which practitioners are able to exercise their professional knowledge in making assessments about children’s learning and development how practitioners may draw on different forms of knowledge to make those assessments, and the implications this has for “reliability”.

Assessment in the EYFS
The EYFS in England includes children from birth to five. Most children aged 4 to 5 are full-time in a Reception (or Foundation 2) class in a primary school, because there is usually one entry point in September. The assessment structure for the EYFS includes:
- developmental check at age 24-36 months
- assessment against seventeen Early Learning Goals at age 4-5

Currently we are moving from EYFS Profile (revised version introduced in 2013) to the new Baseline Assessment format (introduced in 2015). The revised EYFS Profile requires practitioners to assess children against a set of 17 learning goals (ELGs). Practitioners should use their judgement to decide whether children have met each ELG or whether their level of attainment is above or below that described in the ELGs. This will result in a judgement of “expected”, “emerging” or “exceeding” for each child. (STA, 2013:5)

Three baseline assessment schemes have been approved from Early Excellence, National Foundation for Educational Research, and the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring (University of Durham). Each scheme has a different approach, so whatever “score” a child achieves will be influenced by the scheme, the setting in which the scheme is used, the knowledge and judgements of the practitioners, and how each scheme is interpreted. A further problem is the confusion between learning and development in the EYFS.

Practitioners must indicate whether children are meeting expected levels of development, or if they are exceeding expected levels, or not yet reaching expected levels (“emerging”). This is the EYFS Profile. (DIE, 2012:11)

I have highlighted the words learning goals, attainment, and development because practitioners are being expected to make assessments of different processes. Think about putting on a pair of glasses – what you see depends upon the lens you are looking through. The EYFS presents us with many lenses. Practitioners are expected to agree upon what is a “good” level of development, and to make a judgement about whether children are “emerging”, “expected” or “exceeding” the learning goals. The child’s
“score” is also an indicator of attainment and of their readiness for school. Taken together, these scores also act as indicators of the quality of the setting, and the effectiveness of practitioners in enabling children to achieve those outcomes.

So, what we have in the EYFS is a process of assessment that “measures” child outcomes and their school readiness, and the practitioners’ performance, regardless of the differences in their levels of qualifications and experience, or the settings in which they work. Government “standards” work in mysterious ways – the EYFS outcomes are being used as indicators of quite different things in order to create accountability to Ofsted, to parents and to society. And when we add into this mysterious process the varied levels of staff qualifications, then the reliability of those measures must be called into question.

Let’s think about these problems through a practical example. When you read this description of an episode of play, think about your own setting, your personal beliefs and values, and what opportunities for assessment are presented.

Free play on the climbing frame – different lenses, different views

A group of children (all boys) are playing together outdoors. There is a large climbing frame with ropes tied to a hoist on the top railing. The boys bring five scooters to the climbing frame and develop a plan for hoisting them to the top. They co-operate in tying on the scooters, with two boys at the bottom and two at the top to do the hoisting and untying. More boys gather as the activity develops. Five minutes later, five scooters are on the platform, and five boys are riding them around in a small space, sometimes dodging, and sometimes deliberately crashing into each other. This is a noisy, lively and exciting activity – freely chosen and organised by the boys. One boy, Majed, is newly arrived at the school, with a few words of English. Korby shows Majed how to tie the scooter on the rope and physically helps him onto the platform. Majed chooses not to ride a scooter but laughs, claps and jumps excitedly at the edge of the platform. A practitioner stops the activity on the grounds of safety and helps the children to bring down and untie the scooters.

How you look and what you see

Let’s come back to this idea of the “assessment” lens - what you see depends upon the lens you are looking through. As a researcher, I saw this activity as presenting some interesting evidence of children’s learning, notably: their social and co-operative capabilities (by including Majed, Korby showed empathy and relationship skills), collaborative problem-setting (how to get the scooters up to the platform) and problem-solving (tying and hoisting). The children showed initiative, creativity and inventiveness in their game and there was much emotional excitement, engagement and attention to the activity. There was sustained communication - through words, gestures and facial expressions. The practitioners had perhaps not anticipated that the hoist would be used for items other than buckets with handles, but children often take an activity in their own directions, with or without the approval of adults. It is through such choices that children enact free play based on their personal and collective agendas.

At the end of the day, I discussed this observation with the practitioners, whose qualifications ranged from a teacher with a degree and QTS, a Nursery Nurse with NNEB qualifications, a Learning Support Assistant with Level 3 qualifications; to an unqualified Teaching Assistant who supported children with learning English. Each practitioner interpreted this episode in different ways, as shown in some of their comments:

“... The boys were being naughty, this is not allowed.”

“Well, yes but it was quite creative wasn't it? I mean, well, we give them some choice, so it's hard when they choose things and then we say no, you can't do that.”

“I'm just thinking about this now...you noticed that Korby helped Majed, and I have seen Korby doing this before. He is kind, helpful. But you won’t find him sitting at any table-top activities, he always likes to be outside.”

“But we do have to do the health and safety thing – it was all chaos at the top of the climbing frame, no room, and I could see an accident coming.”

“Was it all chaos? I think there were some rules – Harry said “five, only five scooters”, and they were very co-operative with the tying and lifting them on to the top of the climbing frame.”

“Yes, they were really developing their co-operation, and Majed, well you could see that he was involved and really enjoying that.”

The discussion developed into more general issues about assessment, and all the practitioners agreed that it was much easier to make assessments about children’s learning in adult-directed activities, with a specific focus that reflected the EYFS learning goals. Assessing children’s learning and development through play presented problems which they recognised as stemming from their values and beliefs, the structures and rules of the setting, and the unpredictable flow within free play activities.

We can now go back to the two issues raised earlier.

► The extent to which practitioners are able to exercise their professional knowledge in making assessments about children’s learning and development.

► How practitioners may draw on different forms of knowledge to make those assessments, and the implications this has for “reliability”.

In relation to the first point, the practitioners were all making judgements and assessments about this activity, based on their knowledge as well as personal beliefs and values. The reflections show the overlap between personal judgement and interpretation and a more objective assessment (with the latter being required for the EYFS Profile). This is clearly not a straightforward process. The practitioners have some understanding of what is expected, what children can already do, and what is emerging (for example Majed’s confidence to get involved). It is often the case that practitioners focus on interesting or overlapping skills (such as Korby’s empathy and sensitivity to including Majed) rather than the kinds of discrete or isolated skills that are identified in the EYFS Learning Outcomes.

What is interesting about this episode (and this applies to many activities in EYFS settings) is that children often act more competently when they are in a collective activity, rather than in an individual activity. This has implications for reliability and consistency of assessments that are made.

In relation to the second point, we can see that the practitioners are drawing on different forms of knowledge to make those assessments, but it is not clear whether they are identifying children’s learning, or their development. When thinking about the reliability of assessments, Early Education has some practical advice, taken from Development Matters:

Children develop at their own rates, and in their own ways. The development statements and their order should not be taken as necessary steps for individual children.
They should not be used as checklists. The age/stage bands overlap because these are not fixed age boundaries but suggest a typical range of development. (Early Education, 2012)

Here we have a clear statement that helps practitioners to think about some complex issues – namely the apparent regularity of children’s development, as presented in the EYFS, and the ways in which development may vary over time (and not just with age). The episode of play also shows how children’s learning and development can be influenced by context, especially where they are co-operating and supporting each other.

This takes us back to the idea of assessments being valid and reliable (as Ofsted tells us they should be). Assessing children’s learning and development is not an exact science, not least because these processes are themselves complex. There are many variables that influence how assessments are made: what we see depends on the lens we are looking through, and this in turn influences our interpretations. Different levels of training, qualifications and professional knowledge bring additional variations into the assessment processes. This is not an argument for more standardisation in the EYFS and in training. It is an argument for more time and space for reflective dialogue between practitioners, for looking closely at children’s learning and development, for considering how we talk about children’s progress and achievements. Reliability does not only come through using the Learning Goals and Baseline Profiles, but how these are understood and used by practitioners in their provision and practice.

Read more about these issues
If you are interested in reading more about the challenges of assessment in the EYFS, these two articles provide some food for thought and discussion.

References


Summer term training courses


15 Apr
“Come into the Garden” - Raising achievement outdoors by developing opportunities for discovery and wonder
Location: London, Trainer: Kathryn Solly

20 Apr
Early physical and sensory development of the child
Location: London, Trainer: Jasmine Pasch

22 Apr
British values and diversity in the early years
Location: Tyne & Wear, Trainer: Vicky Hutchin

26 Apr
Positive relationships:
engaging other adults, conflict resolution and problem solving
Location: London Trainer: Fiona Kemp

27 Apr
Becoming an early writer: drawing and mark-making
Location: London, Trainer: Anni McTavish

17 May
Growing the Child: nurturing the ‘super skills and attitudes’ of learning
Location: London, Trainer: Marion Dowling

19 May
Ready, Set, Read! Inspiring reading in the early years foundation stage
Location: London, Trainer: Anne Harding

24 May
EYPP and closing the gap
Location: Tyne & Wear, Trainer: Caroline Eaton

08 Jun
The keys to unlocking outstanding practice in the EYFS
Location: London, Trainer: Kym Scott

13 Jun
Special Educational Needs & Disability (SEND)
Location: London, Trainer: Julie Revels