BACKGROUND CONTEXT

• Northern Ireland has the youngest starting school age in Europe;
  • children are obliged to start school in their 5th year (and can be as young as 4 years 2 months);
• Divisive school and pre-school systems;
  • School - religious segregation
  • Pre-school – statutory and voluntary divide
• Troubled past
COMMON CHALLENGES

• Pre-school challenges:
  • Workforce
  • Range and quality of provision

• School challenges:
  • Pedagogy and Practice
  • Conflicting policy aspirations

• Poverty challenges
  • Early intervention
  • Accessing and Educating parents
PRE-SCHOOL CHALLENGES

• WORKFORCE
  • Graduate versus no qualifications (practitioner);
  • Difference in status, salary, skillset;
  • Inconsistencies in professional development;
  • The Early Years Specialist;
  • Expectations, if DE funded, similar in terms of outcomes.
PRE-SCHOOL CHALLENGES

• RANGE AND QUALITY OF PROVISION
  • Childminders, daycare, playgroup, nursery, reception
  • Differences in ratio (1:8 – 1:13), number of hours (2.5 hrs -4.5 hrs), premises and funding
  • Minimum standards versus pre-school curricular guidelines
  • Lack of co-ordination at departmental level (DHSS&PS versus DE)
SCHOOL CHALLENGES

• PEDAGOGY AND PRACTICE
  • The FS curriculum compulsory for all Year 1 classes since September 2007 and Year 2, September 2008;
  • Children in first two years of schooling should “experience much of their learning through well-planned and challenging play” (CCEA, 2007:9); 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).

• Issues arising from FS in practice (Hunter and Walsh, 2014; Walsh et al, 2010):
  • Problematising play as learning:
  • High levels of extension and challenge not always in evidence – a tokenistic response
  • Complex and high level play as a medium to develop children’s powers of thinking and creativity not fully understood
  • Raises the question whether a play-based curriculum can deliver the ‘educational outcomes’ as identified by the political agenda critiquing play as pedagogy:
  • Need to move beyond the confines of a prescriptive pedagogy to a pedagogy based on responsiveness, skilful interactions and playful experiences – grasp ‘learning /teaching moments’.
SCHOOL CHALLENGES

• CONFLICTING POLICY ASPIRATIONS
  • Every School a Good School: a policy for school improvement (DENI, 2009) – emphasis on raising levels of achievement, especially in literacy and numeracy;

  • Count, Read, Succeed: a strategy to improve outcomes in literacy and numeracy (DENI, 2011)

• Foundation Stage: non statutory assessment guidance (CCEA, 2012):
  • assess pupil progress in each cross-curricular skill
  • assess pupil progress in each of the other skills
  • assess pupil progress in each area of learning
POVERTY CHALLENGES

• EARLY INTERVENTION:
  • Inspection findings highlight under developed social, emotional and language skills on part of young children
  • Quality 0-3 provision is presently area-based and under-developed;
  • Early intervention can be delayed;
  • persistent under-achievement in Protestant working class boys (Equality Commission, 2015).

• ACCESSING AND EDUCATING PARENTS
  • Lack of support for new parents;
  • Hard to reach parents – changing mind-sets;
RESOLUTIONS OR AT LEAST ATTEMPTS??

• New Learning to Learn Framework 0-6 years (DE, 2013) – political vision for early years education and learning in Northern Ireland over the next number of years;

• Key aim: all children have equal opportunities to achieve their potential through high quality early years education and learning experiences (DE, 2013:17).

• How and what do they aim to achieve?
PRE-SCHOOL RESOLUTIONS

**WORKFORCE:**
- The Department anticipates ‘creating a number of pilot early years education support clusters to raise standards by making greater use of the teaching expertise in nursery schools and units, special schools, expertise across other relevant providers and early years specialists’ (DENI, 2013: 27) – hint towards a graduate workforce?
- Liaising with DHSS&PS around current qualifications with specific reference to literacy and numeracy;
- Raising the number of professional days for the voluntary sector.

**RANGE AND QUALITY OF PROVISION:**
- A move away form reception classes in primary schools;
- Pre-school to be considered as part of the Foundation Stage and revision of curriculum documentation in light of this;
- The policy document ‘Every School a Good School’ to apply to all DE EY provision;
- Ratios across provision to be re-aligned in favour of voluntary sector ;8;
- Improved liaison between DE and DHSS&PS – towards more joined up thinking.
• Hunter and Walsh (2014: 15) call for an upskilling on the part of practitioners in Northern Ireland to ensure that ‘they have a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the meaning of play as pedagogy in EY classes, necessitating a high level of expertise on the part of the professionals’;

• DE (2013) acknowledges this need and 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; and

• DE (2013) recommends an overall closer alignment between Pre-School and FS.
POVERTY RESOLUTIONS

• More monies to be invested for identifying and addressing under-development across the pre-school sector;

• A review of Surestart to be conducted to evaluate if investment is helping to improve well-being and development outcomes in the most disadvantaged areas; and develop potential plans for the expansion of the programme and all settings will be subjected to an ETI inspection;

• Early monitoring and assessment of children at risk of exclusion; and

• Increased emphasis on family support.
STUMBLING BLOCKS

• A seriously constrained economic climate;
• A very unstable power-sharing arrangement.

Looks like Early Years Education is heading for the back burner again!!!