

The *Quality beyond Regulations* policy review was initiated to support countries and jurisdictions to understand and enhance quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. This policy review places a particular focus on policies that support the quality of children's daily interactions through their ECEC settings, including with other children, staff/teachers, space and materials, their families and the wider community, known as *process quality*. This note discusses several policy levers that are at the core of children's daily experiences in ECEC, making them important for understanding quality beyond the complex governance and regulatory systems that surround ECEC.

## Ireland

### Key findings

In Ireland, nearly all children aged 3 to 5 (who were not enrolled in primary education) were enrolled in ECEC in 2018, which is above the OECD average, and 27% of children under age 3 were enrolled, close to the OECD average. Despite an increase in public investment over the past decade, average expenditure per child aged 3 to 5 is below the OECD average.

The provision of ECEC involves both centre-based and home-based settings and is almost fully privately managed, though publicly supported. The responsibilities of ECEC are shared between the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and the Department of Education (DE).

A single curriculum framework that applies from birth to 6 years covers all children in ECEC and children of this age group in primary school. The curriculum framework has encompassing goals and specifies children's learning and development goals in terms of principles with a holistic approach to children's development. Play is a central strand of the ECEC curriculum framework and is recognised as fundamental. A priority of the government is to ensure that all ECEC staff implement the curriculum framework.

Most staff working in regulated settings have an International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) Level 4 qualification (post-secondary), and the percentage of staff with an ISCED Level 6 qualification (bachelor's degree) has increased over recent years. The government has made efforts to raise the quality of initial education programmes for ECEC staff, for instance, by requiring the inclusion of a practical component.

Professional development is mainly unregulated, and ECEC staff have no protected time for training. The government provides a number of training programmes, including one to develop knowledge of the quality and curriculum frameworks and one on inclusion, targeting children with disabilities. Most other aspects of working conditions are also unregulated and high ECEC staff turnover seems to be related to poor working conditions.

The monitoring of ECEC settings and programmes is split across several institutions. Most of the interactions involving (or around) children are monitored, and the introduction of education-focused inspections of the publicly funded pre-primary programmes should reinforce the focus put on process quality. While the monitoring of initial education programmes for staff has been strengthened, more can be done on professional development to ensure high quality.

## Governance, standards and funding

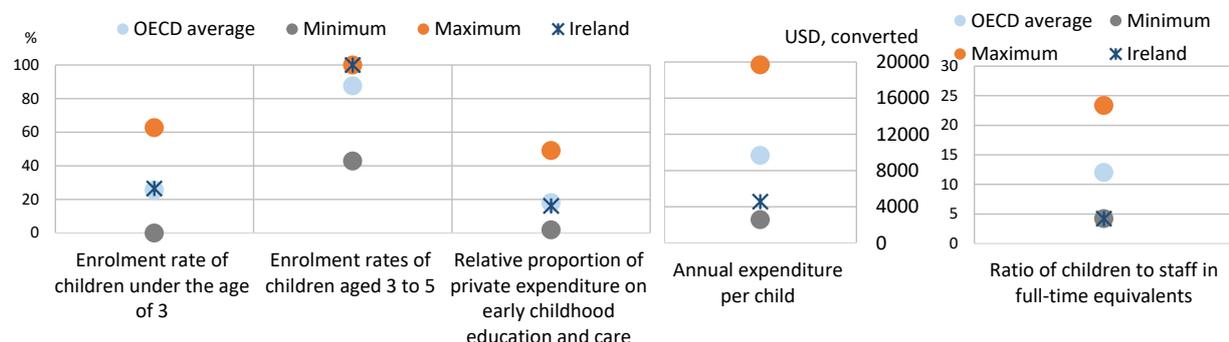
In Ireland, nearly all children aged 3 to 5 (who were not enrolled in primary education) were enrolled in ECEC in 2018, making Ireland one of the leading OECD countries in ECEC enrolment rates for this age group. Some 27% of children under age 3 were also enrolled, which is close to the OECD average (26%). All children were enrolled in private institutions. Despite an increase over the past years, average expenditure per child aged 3 to 5 is well below the OECD average. The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme provides fully-funded ECEC for 15 hours per week over 38 weeks of the year to all children in the two years before starting primary school.

The provision of ECEC involves both centre-based and home-based settings, with a multiplicity of types of centre-based settings, including some specific ones in disadvantaged regions, targeting disadvantaged children (e.g. Early Start programme). Home-based ECEC is largely unregulated. Around 40% of children at age 4 and a majority of children at age 5 attend primary schools. ECEC is under the responsibility of both the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Department of Education.

With a relatively complex and almost fully private provision of ECEC, ensuring high-quality ECEC to all children is a key challenge and has been the objective of recent policies. A review of the funding system to improve quality, affordability and accessibility is ongoing in 2021. Focus is also put on building a high-quality workforce with a workforce development plan covering both initial and continuing professional development underway in 2021. The government also plans to revise the inspection system and strengthen quality assurance.

Figure 1. Enrolment rates, funding and standards: Ireland

2018



Note: Minimum and maximum values are across OECD countries. In a majority of countries, including Ireland, enrolment rates of children under the age of 3 in ECEC only consider settings meeting ISCED Level 0 criteria.

The reference year is 2017 for relative proportion of private expenditure on early childhood education and care and annual expenditure per child.

Source: OECD (2020<sup>[1]</sup>), *Education at a Glance 2020: OECD Indicators*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/69096873-en>.

## Curriculum and pedagogy

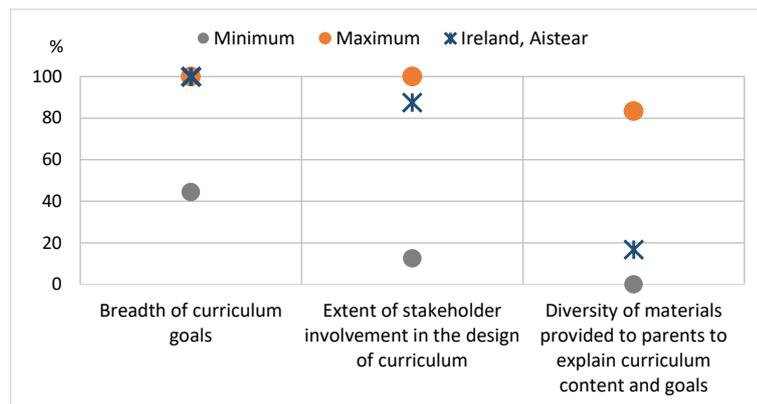
In Ireland, while settings may use curricula related to their affiliation (e.g. Montessori, Steiner), there is a single ECEC curriculum framework, called *Aistear*, which covers all children from birth to 6 years. The goals for children’s development are expressed in terms of principles such as a child’s uniqueness, children’s connections with others, and children’s holistic development and learning. The ECEC curriculum framework is recommended for all settings, but ensuring that all ECEC staff gain strong knowledge of the curriculum framework and use it in their practices with children remains a challenge, for instance, among the mainly unregulated home-based settings. Some children aged 4 and most children aged 5 and 6 who are enrolled in primary education are mainly covered by the primary education curriculum, although pedagogical approaches set out in the ECEC curriculum framework continue for this age group at the primary level.

The ECEC curriculum framework has very broad goals, including the holistic development of children. It also facilitates education continuity and transitions, providing guidance on material to be used with children and co-operation with families. It aims to support the quality of children’s interactions with ECEC staff and other children as well as support high-quality interactions between staff and parents through guidelines for supporting learning at home. Process quality is, therefore, at the core of the curriculum framework. A broad range of stakeholders was involved in its design. This is one of the rare curriculum frameworks included in the survey that involved children in its design.

The curriculum framework is accompanied by guidelines that aim to support ECEC centres and parents in its implementation. ECEC staff can flexibly implement the curriculum framework, which has, however, a strong focus on the use of play for children’s learning and development. Inspections of registered ECEC services suggest that ECEC staff effectively implement guidelines around the observation of children and the understanding of their interests and needs, but less so when it comes to implementing those on learning and development. In particular, ECEC staff are not consistently using play-based pedagogy to support children’s learning and development.

**Figure 2. Features of curriculum frameworks and pedagogy: Ireland**

2019



Mandatory external monitoring of curriculum in Ireland (Aistear)	<b>No</b>
Percentage of curricula with mandatory external monitoring	<b>50%</b>

Notes: *Breadth of curriculum goals* corresponds to the percentage of goals included in the policy questionnaire (nine goals in total) stated in the curriculum. Goals include, for instance, “to provide guidance on the holistic development, learning and well-being goals for children”, “to provide guidance that facilitates educational continuity and transitions” and “to highlight the importance of co-operation with families to support the goals for children”.

*Extent of stakeholder involvement in the design of curriculum* corresponds to the percentage of actors (e.g. ECEC staff, parents, children, researchers – eight categories in total) involved in developing the most recent version of the curriculum framework.

*Diversity of materials provided to parents to explain curriculum content and goals* corresponds to the percentage of types of material provided to parents to explain the content and goals of the curriculum (e.g. website, social media, meetings at the ECEC setting – six categories in total). Maximum, minimum and percentage values are taken over the 56 curriculum frameworks included in the survey.

Source: *Quality beyond Regulations* database.

## Workforce development

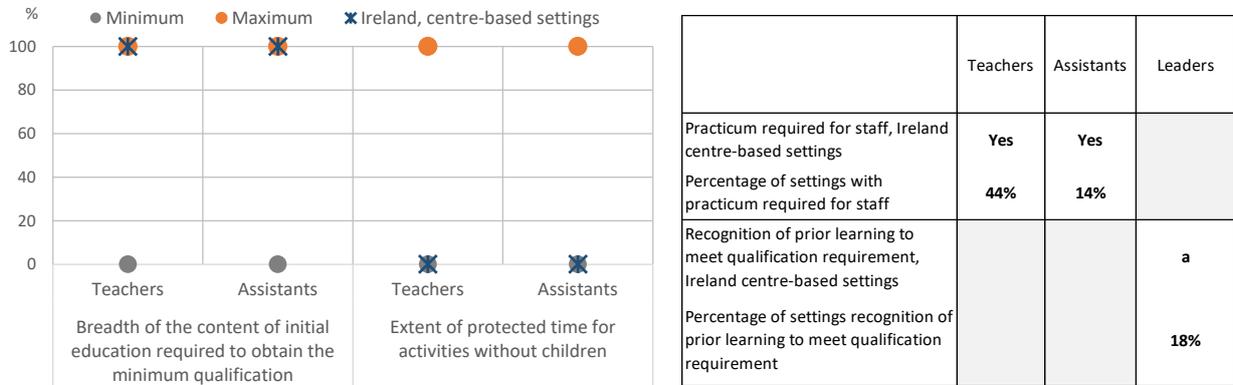
Most staff working in regulated ECEC settings have an ISCED Level 4 qualification, which is now a requirement. Teachers (i.e. room leaders) in the publicly funded pre-primary programmes (ECCE) need to have an ISCED 5 qualification, with additional funding available to centres with teachers with an ISCED Level 6 qualification. Initial training programmes for staff have to cover a broad range of areas, including playful learning, transitions, diversity and family engagement. A practicum as part of initial education programmes is also required for all staff working in centre-based settings. Efforts have been made to improve the quality of initial professional education programmes, particularly by ensuring that the curriculum framework is integrated, and requiring professional practice placements.

Participation in continuing professional development is mainly unregulated, and ECEC staff do not have protected time for participation in training. Financial incentives are available for teachers and assistants who participate in formal training so as to increase their qualifications. In addition, some specific programmes are available with financial support. These include a programme (Aistear and Play) that aims to develop knowledge of the curriculum framework, and a number of training programmes that form part of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), which aims to ensure that children with disabilities can access the ECCE programme. The lack of protected time for training and available funding create barriers to participation in professional development. The landscape of professional development is complex, both in terms of institutions involved and the variety of programmes, which makes it difficult for ECEC staff to get a good picture of available programmes and support, and for the government to monitor participation and quality.

As the provision of ECEC is almost fully privately managed in Ireland, ECEC staff's working conditions are not covered by specific regulations, and the government has few direct policy levers to influence them. There is no protected time for activities to be performed without children. ECEC staff turnover is high and around half of the settings reported difficulties recruiting staff in 2018-19. This is partly driven by relatively poor working conditions. Improving ECEC staff's working conditions is one of the objectives of the new funding model and government workforce development plan in development in 2021.

Figure 3. Features of ECEC workforce development: Ireland

2019



Notes: *Breadth of the content of initial education required to obtain the minimum qualification* corresponds to the percentage of content areas required to obtain the minimum qualification among the 20 considered areas that can be grouped into the following categories: child development; child health; curriculum and pedagogy; playful learning; classroom management; diversity; transitions; and family and community engagement.

*Extent of protected time* corresponds to the percentage of tasks for which there is protected time among the seven following tasks, namely: individual planning or preparing play and/or learning activities; collaborating and speaking with colleagues and parents or guardians within this ECEC setting; documenting children's development, well-being and learning; participating in the ECEC setting management, staff meetings and general administrative work (including communication, paperwork and other clerical duties); attending professional development activities; reflecting on work; laundry, tidying-up, cleaning, shopping or cooking.

Maximum, minimum and percentage values are taken over 108 settings included in the survey.

Grey cell: information not asked for this category of staff.

"a" = not applicable.

Source: OECD *Quality beyond Regulations* database.

### Monitoring and data

Given the various types of ECEC settings and programmes, monitoring is crucial to ensure high quality for the whole sector. Three organisations are in charge of monitoring and inspections: 1) Tusla, a government agency, assesses regulatory compliance across a range of areas for all registered providers and performs registration; 2) the Department of Education Inspectorate conducts education-focused inspections of the publicly funded pre-primary programme; 3) Pobal, another government-funded agency, monitors administrative and financial information. External monitoring takes place less than once a year. Monitoring in this way requires strong co-operation between institutions to ensure that the monitoring burden put on ECEC settings is not too high and that monitoring outcomes are clearly defined and communicated. The government is planning to expand monitoring of the home-based sector.

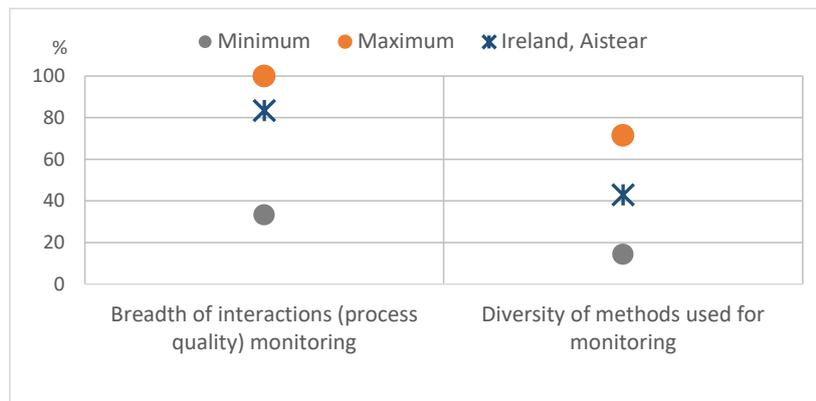
The Department of Education inspection monitors whether the provision of the ECCE programme is informed by the curriculum framework, which involves, for instance, monitoring that ECEC staff have a good understanding of the curriculum framework; a holistic approach to learning is taken with children; and planning takes into account children's interests. In addition, the inspection monitors the degree to which play is central to support children's learning and development, and evaluates how emergent language, literacy and numeracy skills are fostered. Interactions between ECEC staff and children, children and the environment/materials and ECEC staff and parents are monitored. There is a plan to extend the Department of Education inspections to settings for children aged 0 to 3. Tusla monitors all centre-based settings. This includes oversight of process quality as one of the areas to monitor, among many others.

Initial education programmes for ECEC staff at all levels are subject to internal or external quality assurance processes. In recent years, new quality standards have been developed for initial education

programmes for ECEC staff, and all programmes at ISCED Level 6 and above will be reviewed as part of a revalidation process by 2021, which should lead to greater integration of curriculum and pedagogy into initial training programmes and the development of practicum. Several institutions are involved in the monitoring of professional development programmes. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth monitors and evaluates the professional training programmes that it funds, including programmes delivered by Better Start and through AIM. Responsibility for monitoring and evaluating other training lies with the organisations that carried out or commissioned the training. There is room to ensure better monitoring of the quality of professional development programmes.

**Figure 4. Features of the monitoring system: Ireland**

2019



Notes: *Breadth of interactions (process quality) monitoring* corresponds to the percentage of types of interactions monitored among the seven considered types of interactions: between ECEC staff and children, among children, between children and the materials in ECEC settings, between ECEC staff and parents, between children and their communities, and between parents and children.

*Diversity of methods used for monitoring* corresponds to the percentage of methods used for monitoring among the six following methods: inspection; staff self-assessment/evaluation; portfolios; surveys; peer reviews; and child assessments.

Maximum, minimum and percentage values are taken over 108 settings included in the survey.

Source: OECD *Quality beyond Regulations* database.

### What is the *Quality beyond Regulations* project and how does it apply in Ireland?

The *Quality beyond Regulations* policy review was initiated to support countries and jurisdictions to better understand the different dimensions of quality in early childhood education and care, focusing on process quality in particular. The first phase of the project culminated in a literature review and meta-analysis of the links between different dimensions of quality and children's learning, development and well-being, published under the title *Engaging Young Children* (OECD, 2018<sup>[2]</sup>).

The second phase of the project builds on this research base to address the overarching question: How can policies enhance process quality and child development and what are good examples of these policies? To address this question, countries in the OECD's Early Childhood Education and Care Network were invited to share information on relevant policies by completing a questionnaire. Twenty-six countries responded to this invitation, resulting in a rich database of information on ECEC systems around the world and their efforts to promote high-quality ECEC as of the year 2019.

In addition, six countries (Australia, Canada, Ireland, Japan, Luxembourg and Switzerland) participated in the *Quality beyond Regulations* project by completing in-depth country background reports. These reports were undertaken by national governments, as well as provincial governments in Canada. The reports were based on a common framework developed by the OECD to facilitate comparative analysis and maximise

the opportunities for countries and jurisdictions to learn from each other. The country background reports are complementary to the information collected in the policy questionnaire, and together, these two sources provide the data for the main analyses presented in this publication.

This note builds on information provided by Ireland through the policy questionnaire and its country background report as well as other international databases (i.e. the OECD Education at a Glance database). In the policy questionnaire, Ireland reported information on one curriculum framework (*Aistear*) and one type of ECEC setting (centre-based settings).

In the *Quality beyond Regulations* project, the term “teachers” refers to the individuals with the most responsibility for a group of children at the class- or playroom-level. They may also be called pedagogues, educators, childcare practitioners or pedagogical staff. The term “assistants” refers to ECEC staff whose role is to provide support to the teachers or lead staff member with a group of children. The term “leader” refers to the person who has the most responsibility for administrative, managerial and/or pedagogical leadership at the ECEC centres. In Ireland, the “teacher” category corresponds to “room leaders”, and other staff are included in the “assistant” category.

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**Note regarding data from Israel:** The statistical data for Israel are supplied by and under the responsibility of the relevant Israeli authorities. The use of such data by the OECD is without prejudice to the status of the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the West Bank under the terms of international law.

## References

- OECD (2020), *Education at a Glance 2020: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, [1]  
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