

# IRELAND

Early Childhood Education and Care  
**ECEC Workforce Profile**

*Country report author*

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## Glossary

### **EQF** – *European Qualifications Framework*

Outcomes based (knowledge, skills, competences), eight-level reference tool to enable qualification comparisons between countries.

<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/european-qualifications-framework-efq>

### **ECTS** – *European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System*

A system for enhancing student mobility through the Europe-wide recognition of credit transfers and credit accumulation in higher education

[https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system-ects\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system-ects_en)

### **ISCED** – *International Standard Classification of Education*

An instrument for comparing levels and fields of education across countries, developed by UNESCO in the 1970s and revised in 1997 and 2011.

<http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/international-standard-classification-of-education-isced-2011-en.pdf>

## About the author

**Maresa Duignan** is Assistant Chief Inspector in the Ministry for Education in Ireland with particular responsibility for the evaluation of education provision in state funded early education and care settings for children aged from birth to six years. She has worked on the development of key national policy for the ECEC sector and has a particular interest in the professionalisation of the ECEC workforce, including the role of internal and external evaluation processes and their impact on professionalism in practice.

## 1. ECEC governance in Ireland

In Ireland, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services have a long tradition of multi-sectoral governance. This is primarily related to the source of state funding. ECEC provision is funded, in the main, by two government departments. The Department of Education (DE) provides for early education and primary education for children aged 3–6 years located in and under the governance of schools. ECEC for children under 3 years and for children aged 3–6 years in settings other than primary schools is funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY). There is some small level of provision for children with disabilities or at risk funded by the Department of Health; however, these are small scale interventions and usually subject to regulation and policy generated by either of the two lead departments.

Children aged 0–6 are enrolled in centre-based ECEC settings on the basis of their parents' choice. There is low level of participation by 0 to 3 year-olds in centre-based settings, with the majority of parents providing care themselves or making informal childcare arrangements (Doorley et al. 2021; McGinnity et al. 2013). A further complexity to the pattern of ECEC enrolment in Ireland is the traditional early enrolment in formal education. Despite the fact that the compulsory school starting age is 6 years, some 4 year-olds and almost all 5 year-olds attend primary school (DE 2022a)

Governance and funding of ECEC is centralised, however there is a national support system at county level which assists ECEC services with funding application and improving the quality of provision. In November 2018, a landmark policy document was published which has the potential to transform the delivery of early childhood supports and services across multiple domains. *First Five: A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families* presents a comprehensive cross-ministry strategy to deliver:

- A broader range of options for parents to balance working and caring
- A new model of parenting support
- New developments in child health, including a dedicated child health workforce
- Reform of the Early Learning and Care (ELC) system, including a new funding model
- A package of measures to tackle early childhood poverty.

Despite the interruption to the implementation plan for this strategy as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic, a range of actions have already been delivered. The title for the Early Years sector, historically used to refer to the diverse range of ECEC (non-primary) settings and staff was replaced with the term Early Learning and Care (ELC) and this term is now used in all national policy pertaining to ECEC in non-school based settings in Ireland. The commitment to reform the ELC sector has multiple elements with the most significant for this report being the commitment to developing “an appropriately skilled and sustainable professional workforce that is supported and valued and reflects the diversity of babies, young children and their families” (DCEDIY 2018, 103). This translates into a series of actions including:

- *Identifying and putting in place the staff requirements to deliver early childhood supports and services*
- *Improving access to high-quality initial training and CPD opportunities to ensure the staff involved in delivering early childhood supports and services are fully prepared for the demands of their professional roles*

- *Developing mechanisms to raise the professional status of the ELC (and school-age childcare) workforce and support employers to offer more favourable working conditions to attract and retain staff increasing the qualification profile of the workforce (ibid, 112).*

It is also of note that the systems and structures that comprise the operating model for ECEC funded by DCEDIY were subject to review in 2020/21 as a result of a Programme for Government commitment to establish a national agency to support the development of “high quality child-care” (Government of Ireland 2020, 80). The report arising from this review was published in December 2021 (Indecon 2021) and is one of a number of significant research and policy publications that were published in 2021 and which will impact on the future development of the ECEC sector and workforce in the years ahead. These policy developments will be further detailed in *Chapter 6*.

## 2. Who belongs to the early years workforce?

### 2.1 Regular contact staff in ECEC provision

The complex nature of provision of ECEC services and patterns of enrolment of children aged 0–6 years in a variety of state funded care and education provision makes the definition and description of the ECEC workforce in Ireland quite challenging. The following definition, taken from Irish national policy, clearly excludes the staff in primary schools from the ECEC workforce as it characterises ECEC provision to be:

*“...daycare facilities and services for pre-school children and school-going children out of school hours. It includes services offering care, education and socialisation opportunities for children to the benefit of children, parents, employers and the wider community. Thus, services such as pre-schools, naíonraí [Irish language: pre-schools], daycare services, crèches, play groups, childminding and after-school groups are included, but schools (primary, secondary and special) and residential centres for children are excluded” (DJELR 1999).*

However, for the purposes of this report, staff in primary schools working with children aged 3–6 years will be included in order to provide a full picture of workforce in Ireland engaged in the care and education of children aged 0–6 years.

#### **Staff working directly with children in ECEC settings 0–5 (non-Primary)**

The data in this paper draw from a Pobal<sup>1</sup> survey of ECEC settings which have an active contract with the state to deliver non-primary ECEC services for children. This survey is administered annually via an integrated IT system which manages the state ECEC funding programmes. While completion of the survey data was not a requirement for funding prior to 2022, it was integrated on the funding application system and completion of this ‘survey profile’ data was strongly encouraged by both Pobal and DCEDIY. The most recent survey results were published in December 2023 with a strong response rate (88.6%) that reflects the commitment of the Early Years sector to engagement with this survey. The Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report 2022/2023 (Pobal 2023) estimates that almost 33,000 staff worked in the Early Years sector in 2022/2023, with 83% working directly with children. This represented a 2% increase in the workforce since the pre-pandemic survey results for 2019/2020. This stability in the workforce across the years

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<sup>1</sup> Pobal is a not-for-profit company with charitable status. Pobal manages programmes on behalf of Government departments, other national agencies and the EU.



of the pandemic may be attributed to the Government decision to establish an employee wage subsidy scheme which effectively supported the continued employment of staff in ECEC services throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Traditionally there has been a diverse range of titles for staff working in direct contact with children in ECEC settings (0 to 5 year-olds) in Ireland, with no consensus on terminology. This issue was again identified by the DCEDIY in *Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Development Plan for the Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare sector 2022-2028*. This report, the culmination of two years of research and consultation with all stakeholders identified that “... final decisions on terminology for the profession should be a matter for future decision by a professional body for the sector” (DCEDIY 2021b, 19). It determined that in the interim, the following titles would be adopted as working titles:

- **Early Years Educator** – staff working directly with children in centre based ECEC settings, irrespective of grade or qualification.
- **Lead Educator** – staff who lead practice with a group of children /other early years educators
- **Manager** – used to refer to the person in charge of the day-to-day operation of a setting

Prior to 2022, the Annual Early Years Sector Profile report maintained the naming conventions for staff used in previous reports (the *Nurturing Skills* titles will be used in all future surveys) and this can be observed in *Table 1* below which provides a breakdown of staff working directly with children (including managers) as follows:

*Table 1*  
Ireland: Staff in ECEC settings (non-Primary) – percentage according to job titles, 2023

| Job Title                   | Proportion of staff in % |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Centre Manager              | 10                       |
| Deputy Centre Manager       | 3                        |
| Lead Educator               | 30                       |
| Educator                    | 50                       |
| AIM <sup>2</sup> Level 7    | 6                        |
| Student placement/volunteer | 1                        |
| <b>Grand Total</b>          | <b>100</b>               |

Source: Pobal 2023

Data are also available on ancillary or support staff not working directly with children (including managers) in ECEC settings as follows:

*Table 2*  
Ireland: Ancillary Staff in ECEC settings (non-primary) – percentage according to job titles<sup>3</sup>, 2023

| Job Title                          | Proportion of staff in % |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Kitchen Staff                      | 29                       |
| Cleaner                            | 19                       |
| Administrator                      | 18                       |
| Caretaker / Maintenance / Gardener | 11                       |

<sup>2</sup> Access and Inclusion Model  
<sup>3</sup> Based on 3,440 staff, excluding 487 staff that did not have a job title.



| Job Title                    | Proportion of staff in % |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Other                        | 9                        |
| Driver                       | 4                        |
| Salaried Director            | 3                        |
| Owner-Operator / Sole-Trader | 2                        |
| Non-salaried Director        | 2                        |
| Deputy Manager               | 2                        |
| Security                     | 1                        |
| <b>Grand Total</b>           | <b>100</b>               |

Source: Pobal 2023

### Staff working directly with children in primary schools

In the primary education sector, staff working directly with children include qualified Primary School Teachers and Special Needs or Classroom Assistants. All Primary Teachers are required to have an honours Bachelor's degree in primary teaching and be registered with the Teaching Council of Ireland (The Teaching Council 2016). Special Needs Assistants (SNA) are required to have achieved a NFQI (*National Framework of Qualifications Ireland*, QQI 2021) Level 3 (ISCED Level 2) major award or equivalent, but no specialist subject is specified (DES 2011). Anecdotal evidence would suggest that many SNAs have achieved a specialist qualification. However, as this is not a requirement for employment, no data are available on the extent of such qualifications.

In 2022/2023, a total of 38,976 Primary Teachers were on the Department of Education payroll; however, these data are not disaggregated by the age of the children and so it is not possible to isolate those working directly with children aged 4 and 5 years old. Similarly, there were 16,827 full-time equivalent SNA posts sanctioned for employment in primary schools in 2022/2023, but there are no data available for the number allocated to work with 4 and 5 year-olds.

Table 3 shows ECEC staff in centre-based settings (non-primary) and the main staff in primary classrooms and also categorises the core pedagogues (i.e. staff with group or centre responsibility) according to one of five ECEC professional profiles adapted from the original SEEPRO-study (see Box 1 at end of this chapter). The titles from Nurturing Skills have been adopted in this table.

Table 3

#### Ireland: ECEC staff in centre-based settings (0–5 non-primary and 4–5 primary)

| Job title  | Main ECEC work-place settings and age range | Main roles and positions | Main age-range focus of initial professional education | Minimum qualification requirement<br>ECTS credits<br>EQF level<br>ISCED level |
|--|---|--------------------------|--|---|
| <b>ECEC sector 0–5<sup>4</sup> (non-primary)</b> |   |                          |  |   |
| <b>Centre Manager</b>                            | <b>Full- and part-time day care</b>         | Centre head              | 0 to 5 years   | Post-secondary vocational qualification in                                    |

<sup>4</sup> **Editors' note:** International data sources use varying ways of presenting the age range of children enrolled in ECEC settings. We have chosen the following age-inclusive format for the SEEPRO-3 reports for countries with a school starting age at 6: **0–2** years for children **up to** 3 years of age and **3–5** years for 3, 4 and 5 year-olds. The relevant formats for Ireland are **0–5** and **4–5** years.



| Job title   | Main ECEC workplace settings and age range  | Main roles and positions                 | Main age-range focus of initial professional education | Minimum qualification requirement<br>ECTS credits<br>EQF level<br>ISCED level  |
|---|---|--|--|--|
| (qualification only required if working directly with children)<br><br><i>Profile:</i><br>Early Childhood Pedagogy Professional | <b>Sessional pre-school</b><br><b>After school services</b><br><b>Drop-in services</b><br>0–5 years<br><br>If after school provision is offered, the age range may extend to 14 years   |  |  | early childhood care and education<br><br>ECTS credits: n/a <sup>5</sup><br>NFQI: level 5<br>EQF: level 4 or 5<br>ISCED 2011: 4                            |
| <b>Lead Educator (ECCE)</b><br><br><i>Profile:</i><br>Early Childhood Pedagogy Professional                                     | <b>Full- and part-time day care</b><br><b>Sessional pre-school</b><br><b>After school services</b> <sup>6</sup><br><b>Drop-in services</b><br>0–5 years<br><br>If after school provision is offered, the age range may extend to 14 years | Core pedagogue with group responsibility | 0 to 5 years   | Post-secondary vocational qualification in early childhood care and education<br><br>ECTS credits: n/a<br>NFQI: level 6<br>EQF: level 5<br>ISCED 2011: 4/5 |
| <b>Lead Educator (non-ECCE)</b><br><br><i>Profile:</i><br>Early Childhood Pedagogy Professional                                 | <b>Full- and part-time day care</b><br><b>Sessional pre-school</b><br><b>After school services</b><br><b>Drop-in services</b><br>0–5 years<br><br>If after school provision is offered, the age range may extend to 14 years              | Core pedagogue with group responsibility | 0 to 5 years   | Post-secondary vocational qualification in early childhood care and education<br><br>ECTS credits: n/a<br>NFQI: level 5<br>EQF: level 4<br>ISCED 2011: 4   |
| <b>Early Years Educator</b><br><br><i>Profile:</i><br>Early Childhood   | <b>Full- and part-time day care</b><br><b>Sessional pre-school</b><br><b>After school services</b>  | Qualified co-worker                      | 0 to 5 years   | Post-secondary vocational qualification in early childhood care and education<br><br>ECTS credits: n/a   |

<sup>5</sup> n/a = not applicable

<sup>6</sup> For both Lead Educator and Educator roles, whilst individuals may also provide after-school services, their *roles* in after-school service provision have different titles (as set out in *Nurturing Skills*). In particular, in after-school provision, the equivalent of Early Years Educator is “School-Age Childcare Practitioner”.





| Job title   | Main ECEC workplace settings and age range   | Main roles and positions                 | Main age-range focus of initial professional education | Minimum qualification requirement<br>ECTS credits<br>EQF level<br>ISCED level   |
|---|--|--|--|---|
| Pedagogy Professional   | <b>Drop-in services</b><br>0–5 years<br><br>If after school provision is offered, the age range may extend to 14 years |  |  | NFQI: level 5<br>EQF: level 4<br>ISCED 2011: 4  |
| <b>Primary education sector (4–5)</b>   |  |  |  |   |
| <b>Primary Teacher</b><br><br><i>Profile:</i><br>Pre-primary and Primary Education Professional | <b>Classes in primary schools</b><br>4 and 5 year-olds<br><br><b>Primary schools</b><br>4–11 years                     | Core pedagogue with group responsibility | 4–11 years   | Bachelor’s degree (honours)<br>4 years university<br><br>ECTS credits: 180<br>NFQI: level 8<br>EQF: level 6<br>ISCED 2011: 6                      |
| <b>Special Needs Assistant / Classroom Assistant</b>  | <b>Classes in primary schools</b><br>4–5 years<br><br><b>Primary schools</b><br>4–11 years                             | Co-worker without formal qualification   | n/a  | Junior certificate – Lower secondary or QQI Level 3 award <sup>7</sup><br><br>ECTS credits: n/a<br>NFQI: level 3<br>EQF: level 2<br>ISCED 2011: 2 |

*Box 1*

**SEEPRO profile categories for ECEC core professionals** (adapted from Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman 2010)

- **Early Childhood Pedagogy Professional** (specialist focus, 0–6/7 years)
- **Pre-primary Education Professional** (exclusive pre-primary focus 3/4–6 years)
- **Pre-primary and Primary Education Professional** (focus on pre-primary *and* primary education 3/4–10/11 years)
- **Social and Childhood Pedagogy Professional** (mainly broad focus, including ECEC, usually 0–12 years, but sometimes including adults)
- **Social Care/Health Care Professional** (sometimes early childhood focus, sometimes broad focus, including adults)

<sup>7</sup> Ireland has a 10 level national qualification framework (NFQI) through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way. The many different types and sizes of qualifications included in the NFQI are organised based on their level of knowledge, skill and competence. Level 5 and 6 awards broadly equate to ISCED level 4 (ISCED 2011). For further information, see QQI – Quality and Qualifications Ireland 2017 and 2021.



## 2.2. Centre leader

### ECEC Manager (non-primary)

The predominance of private for-profit provision in Ireland and the lack of regulation to practice until 2016 has mitigated against the availability of definitive role profiles for any staff in centre based ECEC (non-primary) settings. In the 2021 Workforce Development Plan, three “basic career grades are identified: Early Years Educator, Lead Educator (building on the current room leader role), and Manager” (DCEDIY 2021b, 51). The Manager role is described as “... the person in charge of a setting” (*ibid*). There is currently no qualification requirement for this role beyond the regulated qualification (NFQ Level 5 award) required of all staff working directly with children. However, the Workforce Plan makes the following commitment:

*Over the lifetime of this Workforce Plan, minimum Qualification requirements will be introduced for Managers, at Level 6 in ELC ... In line with First 5, it will be a target that by 2028 all Managers of ELC services should have a qualification at Level 7 or higher (ibid, 53).*

The tasks of the Manager are briefly described as including:

*...human resources, finance, planning, quality improvement, and collaboration with a wide range of community partners and external agencies (ibid).*

However, perhaps reflecting the early stage of this development, the Workforce Plan also acknowledges that, “other leadership responsibilities may be distributed across a service in different ways”. These leadership responsibilities have been identified as including pedagogy, diversity and inclusion, family and community partnership and student placement and induction. Data on centre-based managerial staff collated in the Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report 2022/2023 (Pobal 2023) indicates the following:

- 40% are owner managers, 60% are employees of the service.
- On average 70% of the total cohort work directly with children.
- 71% hold a qualification at NFQ Level 7 (ordinary Bachelor’s degree) or higher (this may not be in a field of study related to ECEC).
- The average hourly wage for a centre manager is €17.26.

It is worth noting that since September 2022 a legal minimum wage has been established through Employment Regulation Order of €16.50 for non-graduates and €17.25 for graduates.

### Principal (primary)

The Principal is responsible for the day to day management of the school, is the leader both of learning and the school community, is a member of the Board of Management and an employee of the Board. The Principal can be secretary to the Board of Management but cannot be Chairperson or Treasurer. The Principal’s Role is set out in Circular 16/’73 (Department of Education, Primary Branch 1973) and in Section 22 and Section 23 (eISB 1998a, b) of the Education Act 1998 as amended. The former document dates from 1973 when primary schools in Ireland were referred to as National Schools. In larger schools, the Principal may be appointed in a non-teaching capacity and may be assisted by a Deputy Principal. The Department of Education pays the salaries of Principals in recognised primary schools according to established and agreed pay scales. The Principal’s salary is a combination of the teacher salary plus a post of responsibility allowance (incremental scales).

## 2.3 Centre-based posts of responsibility

### ECEC sector 0–5 (non-primary)

Once again, the historical absence of standardised role profiles or nationally agreed terms and conditions of employment in the ECEC (non-primary) sector has resulted in a variety of arrangements for deployment of staff to special assignments. The introduction of the Lead Educator post in the Workforce Plan, building on a previous role of Room Leader in the free preschool programme, is the closest articulation of a post of responsibility in this sector. This role is described as follows:

“A Lead Educator will have responsibility for the learning and care for a group of children, leading the practice with that group” (*ibid*:52).

Further role profiles are set out in *Nurturing Skills* (*ibid*: 121-136). The different roles now have legal force through being the basis for the different pay rates specified in the Employment Regulation Orders in September 2022. *Nurturing Skills* commits to further development of roles of special responsibility, building on the INCO model, with the objective of developing a model of distributed leadership across ELC and SAC settings.

The role of Inclusion Coordinator (INCO) is regarded as a post of responsibility in ELC settings as it is usually a post allocated to an existing staff member, who is required to undertake a specialised qualification to occupy the post in the setting. This qualification and the operation of this post in the ELC setting is funded through the Access and Inclusion Model of supports for the inclusion of children with a disability in the ECCE programme of free preschool (see LINC 2022 for full details of the role profile of the INCO and the specialised course required for these staff).

### ECE 4–5 years (primary)

There is a very well-established structure for the organisation and allocation of posts of responsibility in the primary school system (DES 2019).

They are part of a school's leadership and management structure. They are promotion posts and are referred to as Principal, Deputy Principal, Assistant Principal I and Assistant Principal II.

## 2.4 Pedagogical co-ordinators and supervisory staff

### ECEC sector 0–5 (non-primary)

This category of staff in Ireland represents a very small percentage of the overall workforce, and traditionally has been employed either in national voluntary organisations, private large-scale ECEC services (e.g. chains) or private consultancy firms. There are no data available on the number, qualification requirements or terms and conditions of staff in these organisations. In 2015, the Better Start, National Quality Development Service was established to provide a range of supports for the improvement of the quality of provision in the ECEC (non-primary) sector. The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) was launched in June 2016 to enable the full inclusion and meaningful participation of children with disabilities in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme. Early Years Specialists recruited to staff these new programmes had to be higher education graduates with a minimum of three years of relevant practice experience in ECEC (Pobal 2020). There are currently 147 Early Years Specialists employed by Better Start *National Quality Development Service* with a salary scale ranging between €41,528 and €56,968 per annum (Pobal employee management system/Pobal salary scale, information provided by personal email communication, January 2024).

Two distinct inspectorates monitor and evaluate the quality of the ECEC sector in Ireland. These are the TUSLA Early Years Inspectorate (TUSLA 2016) and the Department of Education Inspec-

torate (DE 2022b). Inspectors in each organisation must be higher education graduates. The Department of Education Inspectorate requires applicants for Early Years Inspector positions to hold a recognised qualification in ECEC and have a minimum of five years of practical experience in the ECEC sector preferably in a leadership role in a centre based ECEC setting providing for children aged 0–5 years. The TUSLA Early Years Inspectorate recruits from a wider range of qualifications with a significant number qualified as Public Health Nurses (TUSLA 2018).

## 2.5 Specialist support staff

### ECEC sector 0–5 (non-primary)

Once again, due to the private sector nature of the significant majority of ELC settings, local arrangements are more generally the rule for the deployment of specialist support staff. Through the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) a pilot programme has been established to allow for nursing support staff to be employed to support children with complex healthcare needs in mainstream ELC settings. Another pilot programme, The In-School and Early Years Therapy Demonstration Project, is a joint initiative by the two main government departments to provide specialised therapist support in school or preschool settings to children with disabilities (NCSE 2020).

### ECE 4–5 years (primary)

The provision of therapeutic or other non-teaching supports for children in primary school (apart from SNAs) is generally managed by external agencies such as the Health Service Executive (HSE 2019), National Council for Special Education (NCSE 2022a) and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) (DE 2022c).

## 3. Structural composition of ECEC workforce: qualifications, gender, ethnicity

### ECEC sector 0–5 (non-primary)

The Irish ECEC workforce is strongly female with less than 2% being male. Since the introduction of the universal free preschool education programme by the Irish Government in 2010, the qualification profile of the workforce has steadily improved due to the unprecedented introduction in 2010 of a contractual requirement for Preschool Leaders to have achieved minimum qualification levels to practise. The contractual qualification requirement for Preschool lead staff was raised to a minimum of a Level 6 major award in Early Childhood Education and Care in 2016, and a minimum of a Level 5 major award in ECEC became the regulated qualification to practise for all staff working directly with children in ECEC settings under the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016. The current qualification profile of staff in settings on contract to deliver state funded ECEC is represented in *Table 4* below.



Table 4

**Ireland: ISCED levels of education, main programmes in Irish education/training, typical awards and National Framework of Qualifications Ireland (NFQI) levels**

| ISCED 2011 Level                  | Corresponds to:   | Typical award                           | EQF Level | Award NFQI Level |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|-----------|------------------|
| 0 Pre-primary education           | Early Start and other pre-primary provision   | QQI Certificate                         |           | Level 1/2        |
| 1 Primary education               | Primary education   |   | 1         |                  |
| 2 Lower secondary                 | 2nd level education – Junior Cycle  | Junior Certificate                      | 2         | Level 3          |
| 3 Upper secondary                 | 2nd level education – Senior Cycle  | Leaving Certificate                     | 3         | Level 4          |
|                                   |   |   | 4         |                  |
| 4 Post-secondary non-tertiary     | Apprenticeship, Post Leaving Cert (PLC) courses, other Further Education and Training courses | QQI Level 5 Certificate                 | 4         | Level 5          |
|                                   |   | QQI Advanced Certificate                | 5         |                  |
| 5 Short-cycle tertiary education  | Third level: Higher certificate<br>HEI diploma  | Higher Certificate                      | 5         | Level 6          |
| 6 Bachelor's degree or equivalent | Third level: Ordinary (three-year) or honours (four-year) Bachelor's degree<br>Higher diploma | Ordinary Bachelor's Degree              | 6         | Level 7          |
|                                   |   | Honours Bachelor Degree                 | 6         | Level 8          |
|                                   |   | Higher Diploma                          | 6         | Level 8          |
| 7 Master's degree or equivalent   | Third level – master's degree and postgraduate certs/diplomas                                 | Postgraduate Diploma<br>Master's degree | 7         | Level 9          |
| 8 Doctoral degree or equivalent   | PhD   | PhD                                     | 8         | Level 10         |

Source: Adapted from ISCED 2011 (UNESCO 2012)

Table 5

**Ireland: ECEC staff (non-primary) – percentage according to qualification levels, 2023**

| Qualification Level | Percentage |
|---------------------|------------|
| No Qualification    | 6.7        |
| NFQI Level 4        | 0.2        |
| NFQI Level 5        | 24.3       |
| NFQI Level 6        | 34.4       |
| NFQI Level 7        | 11.8       |
| NFQI Level 8        | 21.1       |
| NFQI Level 9/10     | 1.5        |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>100</b> |

Source: Pobal 2023

The figure of 6.7% for unqualified staff in ECEC settings includes staff who worked only in school-age childcare (both those in SAC-only services and those staff employed in combined ELC/SAC services but who worked only with school-age children), as well as students on practice placements and volunteers. There are no specified qualification requirements for SAC staff.

There is also a small legacy from the 2013 policy decision to allow for a 'grandfathering' rule to apply to staff who are approaching retirement from their employment in the ECEC sector and who do not wish to undertake courses leading to the required regulated qualification. In such

cases staff can sign a declaration of their intention to retire from the sector and are then exempted from the minimum qualification requirement. This exemption was due to expire September 2021 but was extended for a further two years to September 2023.

The predominance of vocational qualifications at a lower level than a Bachelor’s degree reflects the traditional absence of regulation for the ECEC workforce. Even with the introduction of regulation to practise in the ECEC sector, the required qualification will be set at a minimum level of 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQI). This is equivalent to ISCED 4 internationally (see *Table 4* above). However, despite the limited availability of funding to support the workforce to achieve higher level qualifications (a Learner Fund was set up in 2017 to support early years educators who complete degree programmes at level 7 or higher), there has been a steady increase since 2010 in the number of staff with a Bachelor’s degree or higher working in the sector. In 2016, the percentage stood at 18% and was 34.4% in 2023 (Pobal 2023).

This has certainly been influenced by a range of incentives available to employers to recruit higher education graduates. Higher Capitation payments were established in the ECCE programme since 2011 and have recently been replaced by graduate premium payments for Lead Educators and Managers in the Core Funding Model in 2022. Since September 2022 there has been a higher minimum wage for Lead Educators and Managers who have a DCEDIY-approved qualification at level 7 or higher. These factors are likely to have been significant contributors to the rising proportion of graduates. It should also be noted here that *First 5* commits to a graduate-led workforce by 2028, and Nurturing Skills commits to introduce a new funding mechanism to support the upskilling of early years educators.

There are no data available regarding the ethnic breakdown of the ECEC workforce. However, processing of applications for contracts to deliver the Free Preschool in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme funding has led to the establishment of a qualification database which details qualifications currently accepted as fulfilling the contractual requirements for the DCYA funded free preschool education programme. This shows that there is a growing diversity in the qualification profile of the ECEC workforce albeit starting from a very homogeneous Irish national base.

*Table 6*  
Ireland: Structural composition of ECEC staff (non-primary), 2023

| Staff categories  | Proportion of workforce in %  |
|---|---|
| Staff with specialist higher education degree                   | 34.4  |
| Staff with specialist vocational qualification (post-secondary) | 58.9  |
| Staff with non-specialist qualification                         | n/a   |
| Unqualified staff   | 6.7   |
| Specialist support staff (e.g. Speech Therapists)               | n/a   |
| Male staff  | 3.2   |
| Staff with a background of migration                            | No comprehensive national data available; however, 13.9% of staff with qualifications achieved their initial qualification outside Ireland. |

Source: Pobal 2023; 2022a, 105

**ECE 4–5 years (primary)**

The total number of Primary Teachers working with children aged 4 to 12 years on the payroll of the DE in 2022/23 was 38,976. There are no disaggregated figures for those working with 4 to under 6 year-olds in primary schools. Special Needs Assistants’ (SNAs) employment is broken down into full time and part time as follows:



Table 7

**Ireland: Special Needs Assistants according to gender and employment, 2022/23**

|              | Full time     | Part time    | Full-time equivalent |
|--------------|---------------|--------------|----------------------|
| Males        | 946           | 223          | 1,093                |
| Females      | 12,603        | 4,792        | 15,734               |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>13,549</b> | <b>5,015</b> | <b>16,827</b>        |

Source: DE 2022e

The combined workforce amounts to a total of 57,540 persons.

Table 8

**Ireland: Structural composition of primary sector** (no disaggregated data for pre-primary section), **2022/23**

| Staff categories  | Proportion of workforce in %<br>n = 57,540 |
|---|--|
| Staff with specialist higher education degree                   | 68   |
| Staff with specialist vocational qualification (post-secondary) | n/a  |
| Staff with non-specialist qualification (SNA)                   | 32   |
| Unqualified staff   | n/a  |
| Specialist support staff (e.g. speech therapists)               | n/a  |
| Male staff  | Primary Teachers: 15<br>SNAs: 6            |
| Staff with a background of migration                            | No national data available                 |

Source: DE 2022a

## 4. Initial professional education (IPE)

### 4.1 Initial qualifying routes (higher education and vocational)

Regulation of qualification to practise in the ECEC sector was introduced in 2016. The Childcare Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 require that

*“... all staff members working directly with children in pre-school services must hold at least a major award in early childhood care and education at level 5 on the National Qualifications Framework, or a qualification deemed by the Minister to be equivalent”* (Government of Ireland 2016).

The historical absence of regulation of staff qualification has resulted in a very diverse workforce whose members have undertaken a variety of initial professional studies (or in some cases none at all) before commencing work in ECEC settings. Into the future the likely range of IPE will comprise the following:

1. Completion of school leaving certificate (completed by the majority of pupils at the end of secondary education) as point of entry into a higher education programme in early childhood studies at Levels 6, 7 or 8 on the Irish national framework of qualifications (NFQI).
2. Completion of a further education programme in early childhood studies at Levels 4, 5 or 6 on the NFQI – this may also facilitate progression to awards in higher education as above.



For many in the ECEC sector in Ireland (outside of staff in primary schools), the latter route has been the most common. This is primarily due to the relatively recent introduction of minimum qualification requirements into the statutory regulations governing the registration and operation of ECEC services (specified as a vocational qualification QQI Level 5/ISCED Level 3); but is also a result of the low status with which work in this sector has traditionally been regarded (Duignan 2012; DES 2016a; DCEDIY 2021b).

Tables 9 to 11 give a brief overview of the main qualifying routes for core pedagogues and other key contact staff (e.g. Early Years Educators) in the 0–5 non primary ECEC sector. As all staff must now comply with regulatory requirements for a minimum qualification of a nationally accredited major award in Early Childhood Care and Education (or equivalent as detailed by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth list of recognised qualifications) (Government of Ireland 2023), the qualification route to achieving this award is common for all staff.

Table 9  
Ireland: Centre Manager, ECEC 0–5 sector (non-primary)

|  |
|--|
| <p><b>Job title in English:</b> <i>Centre Manager</i></p> <p><b>Profile:</b> Early Childhood Pedagogy Professional</p>   |
| <p><b>Entry requirements:</b> School leaving certificate (secondary education) and/or completion of further education programme in early childhood studies. <i>Minimum requirement</i> = Level 5 (NFQI) major award in Early Childhood Care and Education or equivalent (only required for staff working directly with children)</p> <p><b>Professional studies:</b> The duration, place of study and whether full or part time varies according to individual choice of educator.</p> <p><b>Award:</b> Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Level 5 Certificate in Early Learning and Care</p> <p><b>ECTS credits:</b> n/a</p> <p><b>EQF level:</b> 4</p> <p><b>ISCED 2011:</b> 4</p> <p><b>Main ECEC workplace:</b> The full range of ECCE settings for children 0–5 (non-primary)</p> |

Table 10  
Ireland: Lead Educator, ECEC 0–5 sector (non-primary)

|  |
|--|
| <p><b>Job title in English:</b> <i>Lead Educator</i></p> <p><b>Profile:</b> Early Childhood Pedagogy Professional</p>  |
| <p><b>Entry requirements:</b> School leaving certificate (secondary education) and/or completion of further education programme in early childhood studies. <i>Minimum requirement</i> = Level 5 (NFQI) major award in Early Childhood Care and Education (or equivalent).</p> <p><b>Professional studies:</b> The duration, place of study and whether full- or part-time varies according to individual choice of educator.</p> <p><b>Award:</b> Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Level 5 Certificate in Early Learning and Care</p> <p><b>ECTS credits:</b> n/a</p> <p><b>EQF level:</b> 4</p> <p><b>ISCED 2011:</b> 4</p> <p><b>Main ECEC workplaces:</b> The full range of ECCE settings for children 0-5 (non-primary)</p> |





Table 11

**Ireland: Early Years, ECEC 0–5 sector (non-primary)**

|   |
|---|
| <p><b>Job title in English:</b> <i>Early Years Educator</i><br/> <b>Profile:</b> Early Childhood Pedagogy Professional</p>  |
| <p><b>Entry requirements:</b> School leaving certificate (secondary education) and/or completion of further education programme in early childhood studies. <i>Minimum requirement</i> = Level 5 (NFQI) major award in Early Childhood Care and Education (or equivalent).</p> <p><b>Professional studies:</b> The duration, place of study and whether full or part time varies according to individual choice of educator.</p> <p><b>Award:</b> Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Level 5 Certificate in Early Learning and Care</p> <p><b>ECTS credits:</b> n/a</p> <p><b>EQF level:</b> 4</p> <p><b>ISCED 2011:</b> 4</p> <p><b>Main ECEC workplace:</b> The full range of ECCE settings for children 0–5 (non-primary sector)</p> |

Table 12 summarises the IPE characteristics for Primary Teachers.

Table 12

**Ireland: Primary Teacher**

|  |
|--|
| <p><b>Job title in English:</b> <i>Primary Teacher</i><br/> <b>Profile:</b> (Pre-primary and) Primary Education Professional</p>   |
| <p><b>Entry requirements:</b> National Leaving Certificate; minimum points requirement. Restricted entry<sup>8</sup></p> <p><b>Professional studies:</b> 4 years at university</p> <p><b>Award:</b> Bachelor’s degree (honours) in Education – Primary</p> <p><b>ECTS credits:</b> 180</p> <p><b>EQF level:</b> 6</p> <p><b>ISCED 2011:</b> 6</p> <p><b>Main ECEC workplace:</b> Primary schools, classes in primary schools attended by 4–5 year-olds</p> |

## 4.2 Competences, curricula and pedagogic-didactic approaches in IPE programmes

### Vocational/Further Education Awards (ECEC sector 0–5, non-primary)

In 2018, Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI), the body responsible for the quality of further and higher education programmes in Ireland, also instituted a review of the Common Award System (CAS) (QQI 2011) which included standards for further education awards in Early Childhood Care and Education (QQI 2018). The CAS included a range of mandatory and elective component awards that could be selected by education and training providers who wish to deliver nationally accredited programmes of education and training for the early years sector in Ireland. The review was conducted by a Standards Review Group comprising representatives of the Early Learning and Care community of practice. This work took place concurrently with a similar review of higher education awards (see *Chapter 4.3* below) and ultimately resulted in the publication of *Professional Award-type Descriptors at NFQ Levels 5 to 8: Annotated for QQI Early Learning and Care (ELC) Awards* in November 2019 (QQI 2019). These specially annotated Professional

<sup>8</sup> The number of places on initial primary teaching courses in Ireland is restricted annually by the Government. Each third level institution offering this programme has an allocation of places and sets the minimum points requirement for entry each year based upon demand. The average points requirement in 2016/7 was 465 (out of a possible 625). Alternative entry routes are available for mature students (The Teaching Council 2015b).



Award Type Descriptors (PATD) were then used as the basis for the development of new programmes of IPS at levels 5 and 6 on the NFQI. The introduction to the PATD explains the way in which they operate:

*The Awards Standards herein set out, in broad terms, the standards of knowledge, skill and competence that must be achieved before a major award can be made in Early Learning and Care (ELC) at National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) Levels 5, 6, 7 or 8. The awards standards are presented in the form of annotations to the NFQ Professional Award-type Descriptors (PATDs). The annotations explain how to interpret the PATD indicators when designing programmes leading to ELC awards (ibid, 1)*

The development of programmes leading to awards in ELC by educational institutions is governed by QQI validation processes (QQI 2017). The Awards Standards comprise a generic element, applicable to any professional award type and an ELC annotation. The annotation explains how the standards should be interpreted for ELC. The PATD for ELC also include a set of specific validation criteria as follows:

### **1. Programme development**

- 1.1 The programme will show evidence of the involvement of a broad range of expertise and experience in its development, including, Early Learning and Care professionals, curriculum development experts, programme providers, regulators, employers, higher education representatives.
- 1.2 Programmes leading to a major award at NFQ Level 5 are expected to be at least one (full-time equivalent) academic year. Add on programmes leading to an ELC major award at NFQ Level 6 for those with an ELC major at Level 5 (or an equivalent award) are also expected to be at least one (full-time equivalent) academic year.

### **2. Teaching staff**

- 2.1 Teaching staff for programmes leading to ELC awards will hold a relevant Major Award at NFQ Level 7 or higher and either a teaching qualification or five or more years of teaching experience on programmes designed to prepare learners for practice in the ELC sector.
- 2.2 The teaching team will include some with ELC qualifications, or equivalent, and previous experience working in the ELC sector.
- 2.3 New staff members will be provided with an induction programme and all staff will have access to ongoing professional learning opportunities.

### **3. Professional Practice placements**

- 3.1 Professional Practice placements will be integral to the programme. Programme providers will maintain an appropriate code of practice for providers of Professional ELC Practice placement and associated procedures and criteria. Code of practice will apply to all aspects of the professional placements.
- 3.2 Providers must specify (in writing as part of the application for validation) the intended learning outcomes for the practice placement and the strategy for the assessment of the achievement of those outcomes by learners.
- 3.3 The programme will ensure that each (full-time) learner completes 150 hours of Professional Practice placement (per annum) in a minimum of two ELC settings: (1) working directly with children aged between 0 and 20 months and (2) working with children between 20 months and 6 years; with an appropriate balance between settings.



- 3.4 All Professional Practice placement settings must be with entities currently registered as service providers with TUSLA<sup>99</sup> and must meet the programme provider's criteria for placements selection.
- 3.5 During Professional Practice placements learners will have the opportunity to:
  - a) Observe experienced practitioners and reflect on these observations
  - b) Integrate theory and practice
  - c) Apply knowledge and practice
  - d) Acquire and demonstrate the required competence, values and work practices with babies, toddlers and young children in the context of their setting, family and community under the supervision of more experienced practitioners
  - e) Engage in self-reflection and self-evaluation of their own practice and engage in conversations with more experienced practitioners around their practice.
- 3.6 Learners must be Garda Vetted before going on Professional Practice placement and have completed the current *Children First* (DCEDIY 2021a) E-learning programme.
- 3.7 Providers will have policies and procedures covering elements such as: selection of placements to ensure a quality learning experience; an effective system to ensure the ongoing quality of the practice placements; procedures for effective communication with the practice placements; assessment of learners while on practice placement.
- 3.8 There will be a formal written agreement between the provider and the practice placement setting out respective roles and responsibilities and a code of practice for supervision of learners.
- 3.9 Professional Practice placement supervisors will be suitably qualified at NFQ level above that of the learner being supervised or will have appropriate experience/alternative qualifications.
- 3.10 Professional Practice placement monitors will be suitably qualified and experienced in ELC, be Garda Vetted and have experience in the assessment of learners.
- 3.11 Learners, Professional Practice placement supervisors and professional practice placement monitors will be informed about practice placement assessments, their link to programme learning outcomes and the marking criteria used.
- 3.12 While on Professional Practice placement, appropriate support, guidance and supervision arrangements will be maintained for the learner by the education programme team and supports will be in place for learners who are experiencing difficulties during the professional practice placement.
- 3.13 Learners must pass the Professional Practice placement element of the programme before an award can be made.

#### 4. Learner language competence

- 4.1 Minimum English language and literacy competence at entry to the programme for speakers of English as a second language would be B2 in writing, reading, listening and speaking.

The emphasis on professional practicum and professional formation processes is the significant difference between these professional award type descriptors (PATD) for ELC and the preceding Common Award Standards (CAS). Their development in parallel with the professional award criteria and guidelines (PACG) for higher education programmes has also allowed for the develop-

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<sup>99</sup> TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency through its Early Years Inspectorate is the statutory regulator of ELC/SAC services in Ireland.



ment of a suite of awards across the further and higher education systems that facilitate professional progression pathways for learners and removes traditional barriers between further and higher education awards by promoting continuity and coherence across the continuum of professional awards from QQI level 5–8. The PATD also promotes the possibility of cooperation across education and training providers in the development and validation of programmes leading to these awards thus providing greater consistency in the content and quality of initial professional education. (For further detail of the ELC related content in these award descriptors, see QQI 2019.)

**Higher Education Awards**

**ECEC sector 0–5 (non-primary)**

The Government commitment in *First 5* to support the development of a graduate-led workforce by 2028 in ECEC settings coincided with an initiative led by the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to develop a suite of professional awards from Level 5 to Level 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications for the Early Learning and Care sector. The first stage of this work resulted in the publication of *Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines (PACG) for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Sector in Ireland (2019)*. The purpose of these criteria and guidelines is to support the development by higher education institutions of professional awards for early childhood educators, at Level 7 and Level 8 on the Irish national framework of qualifications. The aim is to guarantee consistency of approach and quality in provision of education, ensuring graduates are fully prepared to take on the complex challenges of practice in this field. In 2020, the Minister for Education and the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth jointly instituted a Qualifications Advisory Board on a non-statutory basis to review Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Sector against the PACG. By June 2022, a total of 27 higher education institutions had successfully submitted their Level 7 and Level 8 programmes for review and it is anticipated that the first graduates of these programmes will be available for employment in ECEC settings in 2024.

Details of the content of the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines (PACG) for *Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Sector in Ireland* may be viewed online (see DE 2022d).

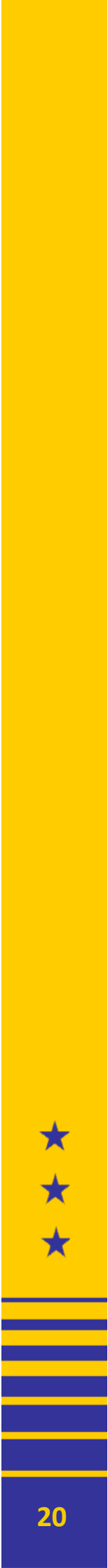
**ECE 4–5 years (primary)**

Staff working in primary schools with children aged 4 and 5 years comprise qualified and registered Primary School Teachers and Special Needs or general classroom Assistants. Primary Teachers are required to have a higher education Bachelor’s degree that meets the requirements of registration with the Teaching Council of Ireland and must meet the required Irish language proficiency requirements.

Table 13

**Ireland: Mandatory Elements of Programmes of Initial Teacher Education (ITE)**

|  |
|--|
| <p>The following are mandatory elements of all ITE programmes as stipulated by The Teaching Council of Ireland (2011).</p> <p><b>Early Childhood Education (Primary)/Adolescent Learning (Post-primary)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Inclusive Education (Special Education, Multiculturalism, Disadvantage, etc.)</li> <li>– Numeracy</li> <li>– Literacy</li> <li>– Gaeilge (Irish) (Primary)</li> </ul> |
|--|



- The Teacher as Professional/Reflective Practitioner/Researcher
- Developing a Professional Portfolio
- Parents in Education – Co-operation and Collaboration
- The School as a Learning Community
- Preparation for School Placement
- Teaching, Learning and Assessment including School and Classroom Planning
- Differentiation
- Behaviour Management
- ICT in Teaching and Learning
- Legislation Relevant to School and Classroom
- The Teacher and External Agencies.

In all areas of study there should be provision for:

- The promotion of the love of learning, reflective practice and critical thinking
- The development of student teachers' understanding of schools as organisations
- The development of student teachers as researchers and lifelong learners
- Students' personal and social development, having regard to teachers' pastoral role
- Student teachers' literacy and numeracy and their competence in promoting and assessing literacy and numeracy as appropriate to their curricular/subject area.

The lack of specialised qualification requirements for the **Special Needs Assistants / Classroom Assistants** means that there are no specific competency or curricular requirements available for this role.

### 4.3 Alternative entry and qualification routes, system permeability

#### ECEC 0–5 sector (non-primary)

The National Framework for Qualifications in Ireland (NFQI) describes a 10 level awards framework that provides clarity for learners regarding the potential pathways towards achieving qualifications awarded/recognized by the State (QQI 2021). This includes the options for linear progression through the Irish education system and for alternative entry routes and pathways including recognition of prior and experiential learning. The establishment of a suite of professional awards in ECEC (non-primary) since 2019 should provide greater opportunities for access transfer and progression for early years professionals into the future. The facilitation of career pathways that encourage continuing professional education is a core element of Nurturing Skills. It also includes a strong commitment to examining the development of a range of entry routes into the sector (including apprenticeships or other work-based learning, and access programmes in further and higher education) (DCEDIY 2021b, 55).

#### ECE 4–5 years (primary)

Entry into the teaching profession in Ireland is regulated by the Teaching Council of Ireland. There are also post-graduate routes into teaching (The Teaching Council 2015c).

## 5. Guided workplace experience (practicum) in the initial professional education of core professionals

### ECEC 0–5 sector (non-primary)

A practicum in an ECEC setting is a requirement of all nationally accredited major awards in ECEC in Ireland. It is a core criterion for the recognition of international awards to be deemed equivalent to Irish awards in ECEC. Since the publication of the PACG in 2019, detailed specifications regarding the nature of this practicum element of IPE have been available to higher education institutions and this has been mirrored in the professional award type descriptors (annotated for Early Learning and Care published by QQI). This was a much welcomed development in Ireland as it streamlined this aspect of professional education across all national awards and addressed previously expressed dissatisfaction by graduates of ECEC award programmes at all levels (DES 2016a). See *chapter 4.2* above for further details of guidelines for professional practice in initial professional education for ELC staff.

### ECE 4–5 years (primary)

In the primary sector, supervised practicum for Primary Teachers is standardised and specified by the Teaching Council of Ireland. In general, it is required that 40% of initial professional education should comprise a supervised practicum. Further, it is a requirement of registration as a Primary Teacher that each student passes this element of the programme (The Teaching Council of Ireland 2011).

## 6. Continuing professional development (CPD) of ECEC staff

### ECEC 0–5 sector (non-primary)

Once again, the traditionally unregulated nature of practice in ECEC in Ireland prior to 2016 has predicated against a coherent system for CPD. However, a number of significant developments have impacted on this situation including the establishment in 2014 of Better Start, National Early Years Quality Development Service (2022) and the National Síolta Aistear Initiative (NSAI) (Aistear Síolta 2016). Both of these initiatives have developed national programmes for CPD on a range of practice-oriented topics as well as online resources and materials to encourage engagement in internal/self-evaluation as a professional activity. Furthermore, the Access and Inclusion Model has had a significant impact through the delivery of the Leadership for Inclusion qualification and a range of other short courses to support the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream preschool settings (e.g. Hanen, Lámh, SPEL). A national initiative to provide training for ECEC (non-primary) staff in child safeguarding/child protection has also been established.

Other CPD opportunities are delivered through organisations and agencies at regional or local level, which are either funded by the state or membership fees to support quality improvement in ECEC. The courses offered through these organisations are varied and rarely adhere to a standardised format. ECEC staff traditionally have attended such CPD in their own time and at their own expense, however the Core Funding model established in 2022 includes funding to services to support early years educators to participate in CPD. In some instances, employers



may subsidise this activity for their staff but there are no national data available to establish the extent of this support. One of the five “pillars” of Nurturing Skills (DCEDIY 2021b, 70) is the development of a national CPD system for the ELC/SAC sector. This pillar includes commitments to:

- Adopt a “whole system” approach to CPD, with CPD to be coordinated by a single agency
- Develop a single national “gateway” to facilitate access to quality-assured CPD resources and supports
- Develop an online system to enable the recording, tracking and viewing of CPD engagement at individual and service levels
- Develop a single, national self-evaluation framework, supported by a suite of resources and training programmes
- Develop structures and processes for the quality assurance of CPD resources, activities and supports.

### **ECE 4–5 years (primary)**

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of Primary School Teachers falls under the remit of the Teaching Council of Ireland (for details see: The Teaching Council 2015a). Under the terms of rule 58 of the Rules for National Schools, Primary Teachers are incentivised, through the availability of extra personal vacation days (EPV), to avail of a wide range of CPD courses during the summer months when schools are closed (DES 2017). Some of these courses are particularly relevant to teachers of children in the infant classes of primary schools (4 and 5 year-olds); however, they are not mandatory and are offered by a wide range of private education providers.

In the instance of the introduction of new curricula/practice in primary education, teachers will be offered specific CPD by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). The PDST was established in September 2010 as a generic, integrated and cross-sectoral support service for schools (PDST 2017). The PDST offers professional learning opportunities to teachers and school leaders in a range of pedagogical, curricular and educational areas.

## **7. Working conditions and current workforce issues**

### **7.1 Remuneration**

#### **ECEC 0–5 sector (non-primary)**

The annual Early Years sector profile report for 2022/2023, published in December 2023, highlights the continuing challenge of poor terms and conditions of employment that has existed across the ECEC workforce (non-primary) for decades. It reported that the average hourly wages of staff working directly with children was €14.34. When this data is disaggregated by role within the ECEC setting, it reveals that staff working directly with children in non-leadership roles earned an average of €13.93 (Pobal 2023).

It is important to note that a Joint Labour Committee for Early Years Services was established in 2021, and resulted in the Employment Regulation Orders that came into force in 2022. The legally binding minimum wage in the sector is now €13 per hour, and higher minimum wages are specified for those in Lead Educator and Manager roles and those in such roles who have relevant graduate qualifications.





### ECE 4–5 years (primary)

Primary teachers' terms and conditions of employment are established centrally by the Department of Education in consultation with national representative bodies. Salaries are paid directly to teachers by the DE, however they are employed by the Board of Management of the school in which they work. Circular 0056/2021 provides full details of salaries and is available to view online (DE 2021).

A teacher's gross salary is comprised of various elements as follows – although these allowances may not be applicable to all teachers:

- The appropriate incremental point of the common basic scale
- An additional allowance for academic qualifications
- An additional allowance for a promoted post (i.e. principal, deputy principal, assistant principal, special duties teacher)
- Other special allowances
- Teachers' Children's Allowance in certain cases.

### Special Needs Assistants (SNA)

Salaries of SNA's were revised in 2022 and full details can be found in circular 009/2022 and below. All SNA commence employment at point 1 on the salary scale (DE 2022e).

## 7.2 Full-time and part-time employment in ECEC provision

A further disincentive to work in the ECEC sector may be the prevalence of part-time contracts for staff which translate into staff becoming unemployed for a number of weeks in each year. *Table 14* below shows the prevalence of this across the workforce.

*Table 14*

**Ireland: ECEC staff working part time and full time<sup>10</sup>**

| Weeks paid per year | Number of staff | % of staff |
|---------------------|-----------------|------------|
| Under 38 weeks      | 1,462           | 6          |
| 38–42 weeks         | 5,426           | 21         |
| 43–49 weeks         | 1,937           | 8          |
| 50–52 weeks         | 16,423          | 65         |

Source: Pobal:2023

## 7.3 Support measures in the workplace for newly qualified and newly appointed staff

In the ECEC (non-primary) sector, this is another aspect of Professional Practice that has not been developed in a standardised manner. However, the deficit has been noted in *Nurturing Skills* with a commitment to developing an induction programme for new graduates entering the ELC sector.

In the primary sector the induction and support processes for newly qualified teachers are detailed in the National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT 2022).

<sup>10</sup> This data does not include managers working directly with children in ECEC settings





## 7.4 Non-contact time

There is very little information available at national level regarding the terms and conditions of employment of the ECEC 0–5 sector (non-primary) workforce due to the predominance of privately operated ECEC services. However, data on the number of non-contact hours worked per week by staff working directly with children was gathered in 2020/21 and showed that 60% worked at least one non-contact hour. The number of hours was higher for managerial staff in community (not-for-profit) ECEC settings. It is positive that recognition is being given by employers to the importance of paid non-contact time as a support for the professional activities of staff in ELC settings including for example, planning and internal review. However, the fact that 40% of staff still do not benefit from paid non-contact time is indicative of the need for continued promotion of the professional nature of this field of work. The Core Funding Model, which includes funding to services to support non-contact time for early years educators and managers, may serve to address this.

The terms and conditions of employment for Primary Teachers are standardised and subject to national pay agreements. This includes agreements regarding working hours and contact and non-contact time. The details of these arrangements are contained in Circular 11/95 (Department of Education and Science, Primary Branch 1995). The working time of SNAs is based upon the allocation of special education teaching resources to the school. However, in general there is minimal allocation (10–15 minutes before and after) of paid time for non-contact with children (NCSE 2022b).

## 7.5 Current staffing issues

Data collected on the length of time working in the ECEC (non-primary) sector identified that there was considerable mobility across the workforce in 2021/22 and in fact the annual staff turnover rate had increased 5% on the previous year to an average of 25% (Pobal 2022a, 119). When ECEC providers were surveyed regarding the retention of staff it became apparent that large, privately operated ECEC settings in urban areas had the greatest challenge in retaining staff and those with higher qualifications were the most likely to leave their employment. The survey data also revealed that only 29% of staff had moved to another ECEC setting, with 40% leaving the sector for employment elsewhere (a variety of other reasons accounted for the balance). It is also of note that 60% of ECEC settings with staff vacancies reported that they were experiencing difficulties with recruitment (*ibid*: 123).

The traditionally more stable workforce in the ECEC (primary) sector has also been experiencing challenges in the recruitment and retention of qualified Primary School Teachers. In both sectors the sustained rise in the cost and availability of housing is a strong factor influencing this situation.

## 8. Recent policy reforms and initiatives relating to staffing and professionalisation issues

A series of policy reforms are underway in Ireland that will directly or indirectly impact on the situation of ECEC (non-primary) staff. These include changes to the way in which the sector is funded; the systems and structures that support the organisation and governance of the sector,



including regulation; the structure and delivery of initial and continuing professional development of the workforce and initiatives to begin to improve the terms and conditions of employment of staff. The following publications provide detail on each aspect of the reform agenda:

- *First Five: A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families* (Government of Ireland 2018)
- *Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, the Report of the Expert Group* (DCEDIY 2021c)
- *Review of Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) Operating Model in Ireland*. Report Submitted to Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Prepared by Indecon International Consultants (Indecon 2021)
- *Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland, the Report of the OECD's Country Policy Review* (OECD 2021)
- *Nurturing Skills – The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, 2022-2028* (DCEDIY 2021b).

In 2022 and 2023, some of the actions and commitments contained in these publications have commenced implementation. Of note is the establishment of the Core Funding Model (First 5 2022) which is designed to promote the following objectives.

- Improved affordability for parents by ensuring that fees do not increase
- Improved quality through, among other things, better pay and conditions for the workforce
- Supporting the establishment of an Employment Regulation Order through the Joint Labour Committee (Early Years' Joint Labour Committee 2022)<sup>11</sup>
- Supporting the employment of graduate staff
- Improved sustainability and stability for services.

*Nurturing Skills* contains a comprehensive vision for the future of the ECEC (non-primary) workforce and identifies actions under five distinct but inter-related pillars.

- Establishing a career framework
- Raising qualification levels
- Developing a national Continuing Professional Development system
- Supporting recruitment, retention and diversity
- Moving towards regulation of the workforce.

Successful delivery of commitments under the five pillars will be supported by three "key enablers" that are identified in *Nurturing Skills* as:

- Improvement in pay and conditions of employment
- Coordination of the quality support infrastructure
- Ongoing engagement with the profession.

Another key reform agenda that has potential to impact upon the practice of ECEC in both non-primary and primary ECEC settings is that being undertaken by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA]. The NCCA has initiated an extensive consultation and research programme to review both *Aistear*, the early childhood curriculum framework (NCCA 2021) and the 1999 (NCCA 2020) primary school curriculum. The first ever Primary Curriculum Framework

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<sup>11</sup> This initiative resulted in the establishment of a legally binding minimum hourly remuneration for staff in ELC/SAC settings. Two Employment Regulation Orders were established, one for early years educators and one for lead educators and managers.



was published in March 2023 (NCCA 2023) and marks the beginning of a period of sustained development of both curriculum content specification and continuing professional development for the ECEC (primary) workforce.

### **Impact of national initiatives to improve the quality of ECEC on the early years workforce**

Since the establishment of the universal free early childhood care and education (ECCE) Programme in 2010 there has been a sustained national government commitment to capacity building of the ECEC (non-primary) workforce. Initially this took the form of a ‘Learner Fund’ which was established in 2014 to support early years educators to achieve a qualification in ECEC studies equivalent to a major award at NFQI level 5 or level 6. This was a very successful intervention and resulted in over 5,000 staff employed in ECEC settings achieving these awards (Pobal 2022b). The establishment of a higher capitation grant in 2011 and its successor, the graduate premium payments in Core Funding, acted to incentivise the employment of higher education graduates in ECEC (non-primary) settings. It has also proven to be influential in encouraging the development of the capacity of that workforce to engage with increased expectations regarding pedagogy and quality improvement.

Regulation has played a major role in the evolution of the ECEC (non-primary) sector. The commencement of the Childcare Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 (DCEDIY 2019) which transformed the workforce in ECEC (non-primary) into a regulated profession, sustained the demand for support for initial professional education and in more recent years the Learner Fund also offered bursaries to staff wishing to achieve NFQI Level 7 and Level 8 qualifications.

Another major initiative to build the capacity of the ECEC workforce was established in 2016 in the format of the Leadership for INclusion (LINC) in the Early Years programme. LINC, is a NFQI Level 6 Special Purpose Award (Higher Education), that is designed to support the inclusion of all children in the universal ECCE programme of free preschool. The course is offered for free to people working within Early Learning and Care and is fully funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Once qualified, graduates perform the role of Inclusion Coordinator within their Early Learning and Care Setting. This role was developed as part of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), a national Government strategy to support the inclusion of all children in the ECCE programme (AIM 2016). The LINC programme contains online and classroom based sessions in order to ensure a flexible and quality learning experience, enabling pre-school staff in full-time employment to participate in the programme. Over 4,000 staff have graduated from the programme in the period 2016–2021 and it will continue to operate until 2023 (LINC 2022).

The transformation of the qualification profile of staff in ECEC settings, as evidenced in *Table 5*, is strong testimony to the effectiveness of these initiatives. However, with the publication of *First Five* and *Nurturing Skills* and the commitment to a graduate-led workforce by 2028, there is a need for further investment of resources into IPE at higher education level. Plans for such investment are contained in *Nurturing Skills – The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022–2028* (DCEDIY 2021b) as previously discussed and have the potential to raise the profile, status and attractiveness of professional roles in the ECEC (non-primary) sector in the future.



## 9. Recent country-specific research focusing on ECEC staff

Each of the policy documents listed in *chapter 6* above were based on programmes of research and consultation. Most specific to the professionalisation of the ECEC workforce is the Workforce Development Plan for the Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare Sector in Ireland. This publication includes a vision for a graduate-led workforce in centre-based ELC settings and the introduction of registration and qualification requirements for home-based workers. The Plan includes commitments to “... raise qualification levels, to create professional development pathways and to promote careers in the sector” (*ibid*, 7). The background research studies that informed the Workforce Development Plan are published online (DCEDIY 2021b) and are available for review. The implementation of the plan is to be realised through a complex, but inter-related set of actions over the period 2022–2028.

The fact that the significant majority of ECEC settings are in receipt of funding from the State to deliver their services has allowed for the collection and collation of profile data through an annual beneficiary survey. Participation in this survey is obligatory since 2022, and it will be a very valuable source of profile data on the growth and development of the ECEC (non-primary) workforce into the future.

## 10. Workforce challenges – country expert assessment

The two years of the global COVID-19 pandemic, 2020–2022 served to highlight a wide range of challenges for the ECEC workforce in Ireland, both for those working with children in ECEC (non-primary) and in primary schools. The challenge of the largely private sector nature of ECEC (non-primary) was evident in the struggle many services experienced in retaining staff during periods of closure or limited operation due to public health restrictions. This struggle was significantly mitigated by the introduction of an employment wage subsidy scheme (Irish Tax and Customs 2022) which effectively stabilised the workforce and allowed this strongly private sector provision to continue to offer services during the pandemic. This scheme supported the idea of ECEC (non-primary) as a *public good* that should be substantially supported by the State in the same way as ECEC (primary), wider education provision and health services. This was reinforced in *Partnership for the Public Good* (DCEDIY 2021c) which was followed by the announcement of the Core Funding Model (DCEDIY 2021c) in December 2021. This included a commitment to improve the terms and conditions of employment of the ECEC workforce. How this translates into practice in a continued private for-profit ECEC sector will present a significant challenge in the coming years.

The pandemic also highlighted challenges for the practice of ECEC across all settings. These included working in partnership with parents and families, promoting the well-being of children, using ICT, supporting children with special educational needs and managing effective transitions across the early childhood continuum. The key challenge now is to ensure that the learning from these experiences is translated in professional education and support programmes.

A significant challenge for the ECEC workforce in Ireland is the continuing disparity between staff working in primary schools and those working in the non-primary sector. Whilst the past decade

has seen significant progress towards creating the context in which such parity could be established – through the establishment of a universal free preschool programme, increased State investment in ECEC provision, publication of professional awards for IPE and regulation of qualification to practice – there remains much work to be done. The scope and nature of this work has been identified in relation to the non-primary ECEC workforce (DCEDIY 2021b) and a complex series of implementation strategies is underway to deliver on the vision they articulate of a graduate-led sector fully equipped with the appropriate skills, knowledge and values to deliver high quality ECEC for babies, young children and their families in Ireland.

However, in addition to addressing challenges particular to the ECEC (non-primary) workforce there is the wider issue of addressing the disconnect between the two cohorts of the ECEC workforce, primary and non-primary. This is important because of the impact this disconnect has on the early learning and care experiences of children aged 0–5 years, particularly in relation to transitions across the continuum of settings funded by the State for children in this age range.

In recent years a number of national policy decisions have begun to erode the divide between these two workforces including in particular the establishment of universal free pre-primary education for all children for up to two years before enrolment in primary school. From a very low level of participation pre 2010, almost every child now attends some form of pre-primary education before entering primary school. The commission from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to the Department of Education Inspectorate to extend inspection to include early learning and care provision in 2016 was also a significant development and established parity of terms and conditions of employment for education inspectors in early years, primary and post-primary education contexts. More recently the establishment of a suite of professional award standards for qualifications for ECEC (non-primary) staff has identified the common aspects of initial professional education with ECEC staff in primary contexts and there is evidence that the higher education institutions delivering IPE for both cohorts of undergraduates have identified aspects of the content of IPE programmes that can be held jointly.

In summary, there is much reason to be optimistic regarding the potential for future ECEC workforce development in Ireland. A key challenge will be the retention of the current experienced workforce in the ECEC (non-primary) sector until these reforms are realised in practice.

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