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Staff reforms in Ireland

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The German Youth Institute (DJI) is one of the largest social science research institutes in Europe. For over 60 years, it has been researching the living conditions of children, young people, and families, advising the federal government, states, and municipalities, and providing important impetus for professional practice.

It currently employs around 380 people at its two locations in Munich and Halle (Saale), including around 240 researchers. The DJI is primarily funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBFSFJ) and the federal states. It also receives additional funding for specific projects from the European Commission, foundations, and other institutions that promote science.

This report was co-authored by Colette Byrne, doctoral researcher at the Dublin City University (DCU) Early Childhood Research Centre. The DCU Early Childhood Research Centre is an interdisciplinary research centre, led by Professor Mathias Urban, Desmond Chair of Early Childhood Education. The Centre and its research team build on a long tradition of critical inquiry in the field, investigating policies and politics, pedagogies and practices in early childhood locally and internationally from a critical perspective. This is informed by an interest in the transformative potential of collaborative research.

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List of Abbreviations & Acronyms

AIM	Access and Inclusion Model
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DCCC	Dublin City Childcare Committee
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth
DE	Department of Education
DETE	Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECI	Early Childhood Ireland
ELC	Early Learning and Care
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ERO	Employment Regulation Order
FECP	Federation of Early Childhood Providers
FETC	Further Education and Training Centre
IBEC	Irish Business and Employers Confederation
LINC	Leadership for Inclusion
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NFQI	National Framework of Qualifications in Ireland
PACG	Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines
PEMI	Professional Educators and Managers in Ireland
QAB	Qualifications Advisory Board
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SAC	School-Age Childcare
SIPTU	Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union

Project context

This working paper is part of the project ‘Team Concepts and Diversification’ conducted by the International Centre for Early Childhood Education and Care (ICEC) at the German Youth Institute (DJI). The project aims to analyse current debates and developments in relation to staff profiles and team concepts, which are a reaction to the parallel challenges of professionalization, staff shortages, and increasingly needs of children and families in Germany as elsewhere. The study defines ‘teams’ as the entire staff of an ECEC centre who work with children on a regular basis and/or take on management tasks. Finland, Ireland and Slovenia are the countries that have been chosen for this study. The study analyses the experiences of these countries with reforms involving staff diversification and the governance issues and challenges that arise in this context.

The study is divided into two analytical steps: Firstly, a catalogue of questions was drawn up on the basis of a review and in-depth analysis of primary sources and secondary literature. This focused on the legal framework for team composition and current or planned reforms, the underlying professional concepts, the political steering of the implementation steps and accompanying measures. In the three countries, experts were recruited to answer the questions in the form of country analyses, resulting in three distinct country expertise papers.

In the second step of the project, interview visits to the countries ascertained the positions, perspectives and experiences of relevant local stakeholders (professional associations, trade unions, municipalities, ministries and government authorities) to examine the implementation of the reforms and to explore what has worked and what not. The concrete country experiences with diversification and cooperation as well as the organisation of work in heterogeneous and multi-professional ECEC teams can illuminate the question of how ECEC teams can be designed and supported to promote quality.

The present working paper presents the results of the country expertise on Ireland and describes in details Ireland’s experience with multi-professional ECEC¹ centre teams and the latest developments associated with this. In addition, the interviews are used to provide additional background information. We would like to thank all the interviewees for providing such rich background knowledge and sharing with us their expertise on the Irish ECEC system.

Tijana Novicic

Munich, October 2026

¹ In the Irish context, the terms childcare and ECEC are both used to refer to the early childhood sector, sometimes interchangeably.

1 ECEC context in Ireland

According to Esping-Andersen's typology, Ireland is a liberal welfare state, in which the state traditionally plays a limited role in the provision of social services. In addition, a conservative family ideology, shaped by the Catholic Church, influences childcare policy. Historically, childcare was viewed as non-educational and was placed outside of educational governance and funding. Both of these factors contributed to Ireland lagging behind other European countries in terms of public childcare provision (Wolfe/O'Donoghue-Hynes/Hayes 2013).

The split between preschool, which is considered educational, and childcare services is another distinctive feature. Compulsory schooling begins at age six. However, most schools allow for enrolment in so-called “infant-classes” (preschool) from the age of four. Children are effectively in school-based provision for two school years before compulsory schooling, but provision follows the school calendar and is for half-day (Duignan 2024).

Outside of school-based provision there are mainly non-state providers, but increasingly operating with public funding. Whereas in the early 2000s Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres were still virtually non-existent and public funding was limited to services for families in disadvantaged circumstances, there has been conspicuous investment since. The European Union's structural funds in particular have provided considerable start-up support and the years of economic boom accelerated the expansion (Hayes 2016; Hayes/Walsh 2022; Mooney Simmie/Murphy 2023). Despite the shift to public investment, the expansion of places was market driven and nearly exclusively left to commercial providers, which account for approximately 75 percent of ECEC places. Non-profit providers, which make up the other 25 percent of ECEC provision, predominantly serve disadvantaged areas. There is no public provision of ECEC in Ireland (Duignan 2024).

Within this varied providers' context, a significant step towards universal ECEC provision came in 2010 with the introduction of 15 hours of free early childhood care and education (ECCE) for children once they turn three, which was later extended to children aged two years and eight months (Murphy 2015). Children can access this free entitlement in commercial or non-for-profit ECEC centres, and can receive additional provision – more hours per week or outside term time – when paying for it. Effectively, for children attending ECEC centres full-time, the entitlement works as a fee reduction, whereas for children attending only 15 hours per week it makes provision free. From the perspective of ECEC centres, the entitlement created a specific funding stream, covering all children but not fully in terms of hours of attendance. Importantly, the ECCE programme made funding conditional, for the first time, on staff qualification, increasing requirements, and on adherence national curriculum – the ECCE programme (Duignan 2024).

The introduction of the ECCE programme in 2010 also had an impact on the participation rates of four-year-olds in school-based provision (infant classes). Whereas 46.2 % of 4-year-olds attended infant classes in 2002, this number decreased to 16.9 % in 2022. In comparison, uptake of ECCE since its inception garners 96 % each

year for children eligible for the programme. However, participation rates in ECEC for children under three are still moderate. According to Eurostat data the enrolment rate of children in centre-based ECEC settings below age three was 24.4 percent in 2023, and as much as 42 percent for 2-year-olds. The participation rate of 3-year-olds is the highest among the age groups attending ECEC, with a percentage of 90.9 percent in 2023 (Duignan 2024, p. 9).

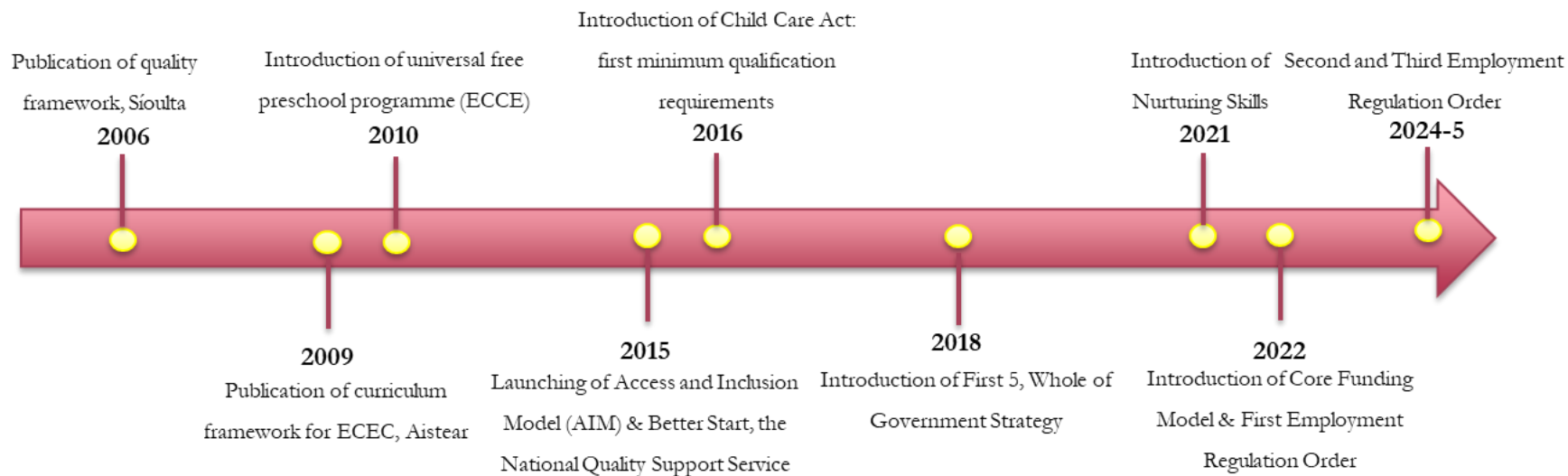
The traditional distinction between early education (preschool in infant classes) and childcare (in for profit and not-for profit ECEC centres) is still maintained today. It is reflected in separate administrative responsibilities. The political responsibility in the area of quality, training and administration of government programmes catering children under 3-year-olds or children in non-school facilities for under 6-year-olds lies with the Ministry for Children, Equality, Disability (DCEDIY). The Ministry of Education (DE) is responsible for school-based provision. However, DE is also responsible for the curriculum linked to the 15 hours entitlement funded through the ECCE programme. It therefore regulates one aspect of provision taking place in ECEC centres, thus outside schools.

In addition, the separation between preschool and facilities for under 3-year-olds is visible in different regulative frameworks and ECEC workforce policies for the two sectors. While a three-year university education at Bachelor level has long been the standard qualification for the (pre)school sector, the state has refrained from regulating and intervening in the training and labour market for ECEC until recently. As late as 2006 qualification requirements for the ECEC sector only demanded that staff should be "suitable and competent adults" (Wolfe/O'Donoghue-Hynes/Hayes 2013; Duignan 2024). Minimum qualifications at level five of the National Framework of Qualifications in Ireland (NQFI) corresponding to level four on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for all ECEC staff were only introduced by law in 2016 (Mooney Simmie/Murphy 2023; DCEDIY 2024; see also Tab. 1). This makes it all the more interesting that in 2023 the percentage of graduates with a Bachelor's degree among ECEC staff in Ireland is comparatively high with 34,4 percent (Duignan 2024, p. 14).

Despite the high qualification level, low pay within the sector remains pervasive and has been linked to high staff turnover (Rodriguez Galvan 2022). Many qualified professionals leave the ECEC field for a career as primary school teachers or assistants, which has a higher professional standing and better pay. While there have been significant efforts to upskill the existing workforce through publicly financed grants and training programmes, the professional field remains, as to 2026, highly fragmented and characterised by a variety of job titles and qualification routes – a stable and coherent professionalization of the sector has yet to emerge. Employment conditions in the ECEC sector are often precarious, and the organisation of professional groups is still in its infancy, which hampers professionalization. While the sector has established a union, current representation is slowly increasing within the workforce.

Recent reform objectives and policy documents, however, set very ambitious goals for the further professionalization of the ECEC field. The remaining chapters examine more closely these policy initiatives and developments.

Fig. 1: ECEC reforms in Ireland over time



Own illustration based on Duignan (2024).

2 Changing staff requirements: From experience to formal qualifications

This chapter takes a closer look at the policy initiatives that have underpinned the increasing professionalisation of the ECEC workforce in Ireland in the last 25 years, with focus on *how* such upskilling was brought about. After describing chronologically the policy milestones (Figure 1), the chapter is organised in three sections. Section 2.2 describes the funding streams that were created and mobilised to incentivise upskilling. Section 2.3 focuses on the efforts to bring order and coherence to the wide range of qualifications related to ECEC which had historically developed in a fairly haphazard way. Section 2.4 moves to occupational roles, as in the Irish system these are not necessarily linked to qualifications and have undergone significant changes.

Policy initiatives in Ireland have invariably seen the professionalization of staff as a route to better ECEC quality and have conceived professionalisation in terms of raising the required formal qualification levels of staff. However, the steps towards professionalising the ECEC workforce were not easy to achieve and professionalization is still in progress. Implementation of the measures had to take into account the highly heterogeneous staff structure and were impeded by low public funding and consistently poor working conditions.

We start by examining the 2002 extensive consultation process which resulted in the publication of "Occupational Job Profiles": a comprehensive framework aimed to describe the competence profiles of ECEC professionals. The framework defined six core areas of competence and knowledge that all professionals were required to have: child development; personal professional development; social environment; health, hygiene, nutrition and safety; education and play; management, administration and communication. For each competence area, five competence levels were defined. The competence levels did not necessarily correspond to formal qualifications, and could be achieved also through professional experience. The five levels were defined as: 1. Basic; 2. intermediate; 3. experienced; 4. advanced; and 5. expert practitioner (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform 2002). The different levels meant to capture the extent to which practitioners could work independently with children and could provide pedagogical leadership within the team. Although the framework did not anchor competence levels to formal qualifications, it noted the goal that 60 percent of staff working directly with children should have at least three years of post-secondary education (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform 2002, p. 27).

In 2010, the Occupational Job Profiles were re-evaluated and mapped onto the Irish National Framework of Qualifications² (NFQI), now linking them to formal qualification levels. Prior and experiential learning were still considered viable route to qualifications, but the mapping provided for the first time a formal recognition of the occupational roles – with their different levels, independency and leadership – that each qualifications afforded. A more specific role was also created with the introduction of “Room Leaders” (equivalent to group leader) within the ECCE programme. The position required a qualification at level 5 of the 10-level NFQI (see Table 1).

A further six years passed before minimum qualifications were introduced for all ECEC personnel. The changed coincided with the revision of the Childcare Act in 2016 which required that all personnel in registered ECEC facilities had at least a NFQI level 5 qualification in early childhood education (see Table 1). Regulations were brought in prohibiting staff without qualification to work unless they fell under what was called a “grandmother clause”. This allowed to continue working for a number of years until retirement without the appropriate qualification level. In addition, staff working as Room Leaders were required to hold an NFQI 6 qualification (a short upper-secondary qualification, equivalent to EQF 5), as were the Manager of the facility. However, these regulations did not apply to school-age care, i.e. those services complementing the half-day preschool provision, contributing to a further fragmentation of the sector.

In 2017, a Review of the Occupational Job Profiles was commissioned to examine existing profiles and roles in ECEC (Urban/Robson/Scacchi 2017). The findings focused on what terminology the workforce preferred as regards profiles and roles, criticized the absence of interdisciplinary training, and recommended that the roles should be based on formal qualifications, as well as experience and continuous professional development. Drawing on previous research from the role profile examinations, comprehensive debates ensued on the vital role that higher qualification levels can bring to the workforce and the value placed on professional experience to support children’s holistic development. Based on this evaluation, in 2021 the government developed a workforce strategy presented in the document “Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC), 2022-2028”. The strategy proposed three role profiles, providing the basis for professional recognition and the development of career paths. These were: Early Years Educator, Lead Educator and Manager (DCEDIY 2021, p. 121; see also chapter 3.2.)

² Ireland has a 10-level National Qualifications Framework which provides an overview of the possible routes to achieving state-awarded / recognised qualifications. This includes alternative entry routes and pathways, including recognition of prior and experiential learning (see Table 1).

Tab. 1: Equivalency of NQFI and European Qualification Framework (EQF)

	NQFI Level	NQFI certificates	EQF Level	Examples of approved qualification from DCEDIY Early Years Recognised Qualifications list
General education awards	1	Level 1 certificate (general and further education)	1	-
	2	Level 2 certificate (general and further education)		-
	3	Level 3 certificate (often the first award achieved by young people in Ireland as it represents the award at Junior Cycle)	2	-
	4	Level 4 certificate (e.g. school-leaving certificate at secondary school level)	3	-
	5	Level 5 certificate (e.g. post-leaving certificate courses; transition from general to higher education)	4	School-leaving certificate (upper-secondary); Certificate in Early Learning and Care (two-year vocational course)
Further education and training awards	6	Advanced certificate (e.g. two-year vocational courses)	5	Advanced Certificate in Early Learning and Care (two-year vocational course)
Higher education awards	7	Ordinary Bachelor's degree	6	Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Education and Care;
	8	Honours Bachelor's degree		Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Early Childhood Education and Care
	9	Master's degree	7	Professional Master of Education in Primary Education
	10	Doctoral degree	8	

Source:(National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2022; QQI 2024; DCEDIY 2024).

Table 2 reported the changes in actual qualifications level from 2016 to 2023, thus covering the years from the introduction of a minimum requirement at level 5 to the aftermath of “Nurturing Skills” strategy. In 2023, 93 percent of staff working with children had the minimum qualification NFQI level 5 compared to 71 percent in 2010. Of these, 24 percent had a qualification equivalent to NFQI level 5, 34.4 percent had a qualification at NFQI 6 level and 34.4 percent were qualified to an even higher level; in 2016, the proportion of graduates with at least a bachelor’s degree (NFQI level 8) was significantly lower at 18 percent (Duignan 2024, p. 14; see Tab. 2). In the remaining of the chapter, we examine how these changes were achieved.

Tab. 2: ECEC staff (non-primary) according to qualification levels (in %)

Qualification level	Percentage of staff (2016)	Percentage of staff (2023)
No qualification	7	6.7
NFQI Level 4	29	0.2
NFQI Level 5	43	24.3
NFQI Level 6	6	34.4
NFQI Level 7	6	11.8
NFQI Level 8	13	21.1
NFQI Level 9/10	1	1.5
Total	100	100

Source: Duignan (2024), Walshe (2024).

2.1 Funding the upskilling of the workforce

The introduction of minimum qualifications in 2016 created the need to upskill the existing staff to the new formal qualification requirements. Awards at that time could be obtained as “component awards”, whereby several minor awards could be obtained upon completion of modules, which summed together led to the achievement of a Level 5 qualification. Training for each module could be completed alongside paid work in ECEC centres. Training institutions also were able to exempt students from modules that entailed competences that had already been demonstrated through practical experience in the job. This was a widely used practice and probably supported the process of upskilling.

In addition, a government-funded “Learners Fund” was created in order to subsidise the costs of training for staff already working in the ECEC field. Between its inception in 2014 and 2024, this programme has supported over 5000 ECEC personnel (as a reference, in 2024 ECEC staff account for approximately 40.000 individuals). The Learners Fund has been extended in scope over time and is now also

used for upskilling to levels 7, 8 and 9. At the same time currently, a more restrictive process is underway, whereby the singular component (modular) award system is being replaced by full awards (Pobal 2026a). This creates a higher barrier for progressing to higher qualification levels as it is more difficult to be achieved alongside a job in ECEC (INT_2; INT_5).

It is interesting to note that various complementary incentives have been put in place to achieve the goal of upskilling the workforce. While level 5 qualifications became the legal minimum standard for Educators, upskilling to level 6 was driven by contractual requirements and financial incentives. A level 6 qualification was mandated for Room Leaders (starting with the ECCE programme) in order to be eligible for public funding schemes. Incentivisation was the driver for the employment of staff with higher qualification levels. In order to arrive at a graduate-led workforce, a higher funding capitation rate was set, and as such higher government subsidies based on the number of staff with a relevant level 7 qualification (Bachelor's degree) in a particular ECEC centre (OECD 2021, p. 46). An evaluation found that the higher capitation had been very effective in incentivising higher qualifications, but also noted the difficulty in ensuring that the additional payment was passed on to Educators in the form of higher salaries (DCEDIY 2021, p. 37).

In 2022, a so-called Core Funding scheme was introduced to subsidize operating costs, thus giving greater financial security to ECEC facilities. The higher capitation rates for Room Leaders and Managers with a level 7 or higher qualification have also become an integral part of the new Core Funding Model for ECEC services. In order to improve the quality, affordability, and sustainability of services, the Core Funding was conditional on fee freezes for parents and guardians and on better pay for staff.

Up until the establishment of the Employment Regulation Order (ERO) there was no guarantee that the additional higher funding paid to services for qualification levels would go directly to employees with the degree level qualification highlighting a fundamental weakness within the system. In attempts to tackle the issues of low wages and poor working conditions, the SIPTU trade union campaigned and emphasised the need for mechanisms such as the ERO to support pay rates. In 2021, the labour court recommended that a joint labour committee be set-up between the trade union and employers (Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment 2021).

In 2022 the first pay rates for the ECEC sector were negotiated, between trade unions and employers, which for the first time linked different qualifications and roles within the ECEC sector to hourly rate of pay. Compliance with this ERO is now legally binding for employers in acceptance of public funding. However, income progression across levels of qualifications remains marginal. Indeed, in 2019, salaries were only slightly above the statutory minimum wage, and the difference between the highest and lowest qualification levels was €3.37 per hour (see also chapter 7). With regard to non-monetary rewards, such as granting longer non-contact times or additional days off for continuous professional development (CPD), the achievement of higher qualification levels is not taken into account either (INT_3).

Professional and provider organisations like Early Childhood Ireland, Barnardos, Enable Ireland, EPIC, Children Rights Alliance, ACP as well as the union SIPTU, all welcomed the higher qualification level requirements, understanding that it supports improved quality outcomes for children (DETE 2021; Cummins 2022; Reynolds/Balfe 2022). CPD providers and universities have also welcome the development and responded by offering part-time programmes and blended learning models. Yet the lack of a clear and transparent governance structure to ensure quality of the qualification and training programmes raises concerns in a context with many training providers and disparate agencies and ministries responsible for quality assurance (OECD 2021).

2.2 Streamlining qualifications and training

Alongside initiatives to increase entry qualification requirements, there have also been attempts to reduce the number of qualifications relevant to ECEC, and to regulate qualifications providers. How the landscape of qualifications looked like in the early 2000s is well captured by one interviewee, who put it, “We are working our way through a legacy of non-qualifications. When we started in 2010 with our inspections, we knew that the heterogeneity of qualification profiles was enormous. But even this knowledge did not prepare us for how diverse the qualifications actually were.” (Int_05; Dublin 2025). In addition, many of the training courses were of very poor quality.

Unlike other professions in education or health, in Ireland “Educator” is not yet a regulated profession and there is no official register of Educators in place.³ Regulation and standardisation were mainly sought by mainstreaming qualifications and training. Numerous initiatives were taken to achieve greater standardisation and quality assurance of training and study programmes. A major driver towards greater coherence and standardisation includes the National Framework of quality standards (Síolta) and the National Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Aistear), which are specific to the ECEC sector. The introduction of Síolta in 2006 as well as Aistear in 2009 are considered major turning points for raising standards of quality provision, both in training and practice (French/McKenna 2022).

While the quality of training programmes has increased, a wide variety of training courses exists. In 2019, the Department of Education in collaboration with the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCEDIY) addressed the diversity by

³ Teachers and teaching assistants are, for example, recognised and registered by the Teaching Council of Ireland (The Teaching Council, 2026). Registration is mandatory to exercise the profession and requires to hold relevant qualifications (Teaching Council Act 2001). These mandatory or independent statutory bodies transformed aspirational standards of practice, code of conduct and values into mandatory compulsory obligations for members of the professional bodies. In all cases, the professional workforce is not allowed to practice without registration. As such, there is no body responsible for the regulating the entry into the profession as well as guaranteeing educators are held to specific (qualification) standards other than the list of qualifications DCEDIY provides. Notwithstanding, the inspectorate body, Tusla – the Child and Family Agency, monitors the safety and quality of care within a range for the ECEC sector (Tusla, 2026).

creating Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines (PACG) for professional award degree programmes which were developed in consultation with the sector. A Qualifications Advisory Board (QAB) was established in 2020 to assess degree programmes against these criteria and guidelines. The process started with NFQI level 7 and level 8 (academic) qualifications. This was expected to lead to a more coherent suite of higher awards and the graduating early years professionals taking the sector forward. In a second phase, criteria for awards at NFQI level 4 to 6 followed, on the basis of which new level 5 and 6 programmes were introduced (DCEDIY 2021, p. 36).

In addition to and in combination with these award criteria, the DCEDIY maintains a list of approved qualifications and a process for assessing equivalence of other qualifications (DETE 2022) that meet the requirements to qualify for working in ECEC settings. The list was last updated in June 2024 and includes qualifications in the fields of educational science, early childhood education, primary school education, social and health care or pedagogy based on specific educational concepts (Montessori, Waldorf, etc.) (DCEDIY 2024). To date, it still includes more than 70 programmes.

This approach reflects the fragmented nature of the Irish ECEC system, and highlights a dilemma policy-makers are confronted with: On the one hand, the mainstreaming of qualifications is an ongoing process and the DCEDIY is striving to reduce the number of recognised qualifications. On the other hand, there is considerable pressure to continue recognising a wide range of qualifications available in this field in order to tap into as many resources as possible, as increasing qualification requirements results in high demand for qualified staff.

However, approved areas of expenditure within the Core Funding rules include funding for shared planning sessions (and non-contact time in preparation), as well as (joint) professional development activities, which would ultimately enhance co-operation and team-work irrespective of the large spectrum of qualifications ECEC personnel may have. These practices could achieve a cohesive team environment, leveraging the diverse expertise of team members (DCEDIY 2025a). Yet, although the funding is available, it may not cover all these activities and how money is spent is left to providers' discretion. As such, implementation mostly hinges on the provider's initiative and their motivation towards supporting effective teams (INT_08).

Despite clear recognition of the problems that the patchwork of qualifications and heterogeneity of providers bring, fragmentation of regulations, routes, and profiles of qualification into the ECEC sector is enduring.

2.3 Defining team roles in ECEC

With the introduction of qualification requirements and the upskilling of the workforce, there was also a parallel and continuous attempt to clarify different team roles in ECEC services. Building on earlier documents, the Nurturing Skills Workforce Development Plan (DCEDIY 2021) distinguished the roles of Educator, Lead Educator and Manager and identified a comprehensive list of tasks and responsibilities

for each role profile. The hierarchical nature of these roles was developed to ensure clear lines of responsibility and accountability, which is seen as a requirement for maintaining high standards of care and education. The roles are described as follows (DCEDIY 2021, p. 52):

The role of Manager was defined as “the person in charge of a setting”. Managers are responsible for a wide range of areas including human resources, finance, planning, quality improvement, and collaboration with a wide range of community partners and external agencies, such as regulatory organisations and the local community. There are some support mechanisms in place at the local county childcare committee level to assist Managers in adopting changes as the rules are adjusted within the system. Most people are training as Managers while they are working in the position. All Managers and Lead Educators are required to complete a level 7 degree, in order to hold the position. However, many of the managerial components are not covered with the degree programme, therefore causing a discourse on how best to fulfil the role of Manager.

For a given group of children⁴, a distinction was drawn between a ‘Lead Educator’ and ‘Educator’. The term of ‘Lead Educator’ is used to reflect the important role that these professionals assume within the group of children and in relation to other Early Years Educators. A Lead Educator has responsibility for the learning and care of a group of children, leading the practice with that group. The description of the role of the Educator includes “responsibility for their own actions under direction” by the Lead Educator and “some responsibility for the quality of the service within established guidelines” (ibid.) (see Tab. 3).

The similarities within these two role profiles in working with a group of children are plenty. Both have responsibilities in observation and documentation, planning and organisation of activities as well as creating stimulating learning environments for children. The main distinction is that Lead Educators develop quality improvement strategies, lead pedagogical practice and liaise with outside agencies. As such, Lead Educators have somewhat more responsibility for the group as well as leading other Educators (see Tab. 3). In addition, similarly to Managers, they are expected to interact with external agencies.

⁴ There are no specifications with regard to group size. The Educator-child ratio is set at 1:3 for children below one, 1:5 for children between one and two years, 1:6 for children between two and three years and 1:8 for older children. While for children older than three there is a maximum group size of 22 children, there are no specifications for younger children (Duignan 2024: 12).

Tab. 3 Key tasks and responsibilities of Lead Educators and Educators in comparison

Key Tasks and Responsibilities	Lead Educators	Educators
Joint tasks and responsibilities		
Create high quality stimulating learning environments indoors and outdoors, ensuring child safety and security while promoting child-centred learning and offering engaging and enriching experiences	✓	✓
Support children's transitions into, out of and within the setting	✓	✓
Maintenance of a comprehensive records management system	✓ (Responsibility for)	✓ (Contribute)
Continuous compliance with statutory regulations, legislation, contractual obligations and practice frameworks relevant to ELC setting operation	✓ (Ensure)	✓ (Contribute)
Highly reciprocal, responsive and respectful relationships & interactions with babies, toddlers and young children and foster the development of their peer relationships	✓ (Build, maintain & advocate)	✓ (Maintain)
Working in partnership with parents, families and guardians in the care and learning of their children	✓	✓

Effective working relationships with colleagues and actively participate in and contribute to team activities	✓ (Develop, establish and maintain)	✓ (Maintain)
Continuous compliance with statutory regulations, legislation, contractual obligations and practice frameworks relevant to ELC setting operation	✓ (Ensure)	✓ (Contribute)
Anti-bias policies, procedures and practices that adhere to equality legalisation	✓ (Contribute to)	✓ (Be aware)
Play as a life enhancing experience for children	✓ (Promote)	✓ (Value)
Child centred approach to early learning and care in partnership with children promoting children's agency and participation at their early learning and care environments	✓ (Promote)	✓ (Engage)
Tasks and responsibilities of Lead Educator		
Support the development of quality improvement strategies within a setting to enhance quality of experience for all children and staff	✓	
Lead, develop and evaluate curriculum in line with national guidelines	✓	

Develop, implement & evaluate specific strategies to support children with a range of communication needs	✓	
Liaise with outside agencies e.g. County Committees, Regulatory Organisations, National Government Organisations and the local community & liaise with other professionals and institutions to inform quality practice	✓	
Engage in regular evaluations of children's environments	✓	
Develop and implement purposeful strategies that foster children's sense of identity and belonging	✓	
Lead pedagogical practice in a learning room & take responsibility for leading pedagogical practice through coaching, mentoring and evaluating	✓	
Contribute to the formulation, implementation and evaluation of policies and procedures to support quality practice	✓	
Lead and advocate for inclusive and democratic practice in the context of national guidelines and models	✓	
Lead planning and assessment practices to provide quality early education experiences to and for children	✓	
Engage in CPD opportunities to review and improve knowledge and skills at a personal and professional level including activities such as self-reflection and evaluation	✓	

Maintain awareness of quality Early Learning and Care (ELC) provision and practice in the wider local, national and international context	✓	
Tasks and responsibilities of Educator		
Contribute to the development of short-term and long-term plans to meet the diverse needs of children both at group and individual level based on observations, experience working with the child and reflection		✓
Use a range of appropriate observation strategies to identify babies' and young children's needs		✓
Engage in learning opportunities to improve knowledge and skills at a personal and professional level		✓

Source: For Lead Educators see Source: DCEDIY 2021, Annex 3: 128; For Educators, see DCEDIY 2021, Annex 3: 128.

These existing roles were formalised through the first ERO for the sector, effective from September 15, 2022 followed by the second revision on September 24, 2024 and third on October 25, 2025 (Workplace Relations Commission 2025). The EROs set different minimum pay rates for these roles, with higher rates for graduates in Lead Educator and Manager positions. This structure aims to establish a clear career progression and leadership roles within the sector (DCEDIY 2021). However, several interviewed persons reported that these roles are rarely implemented and often not even known in ECEC practice (INT_01; INT_03).

3 A vision for the sector and its further professionalization: The Nurturing Skills Workforce Plan (2022-2028)

In 2019, the government published “First 5”, a comprehensive ten-year strategy for children in their first five years of life. It developed a cross departmental approach to improve access, affordability and quality in ECEC and committed to involving the relevant stakeholders to achieve these goals (Duignan 2024). This led to the previously-mentioned ambitious strategy to further professionalise the sector, titled ‘Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC), 2022-2028’. The strategy built on existing measures in many areas, expanding and consolidating them into five central pillars.

The five pillars are:

- (1) the creation of a career framework;
- (2) the further raising of qualification levels;
- (3) the establishment of a national quality-assured CPD system;
- (4) the promotion of staff recruitment, retention and diversity; and
- (5) the further regulation of the profession (DCEDIY 2021).

The rest of the chapter examines the concrete steps that have been taken to realise each of them, and the tensions that still remain.

Creation of a career framework

To raise the attractiveness of the jobs and offer career opportunities, the Nurturing Skills Workforce Plan is committed to developing a career framework with clear career progression. In this context, additional roles to the abovementioned roles of Educator and Lead Educator (see Chapter 2 and Tab. 3) with specific responsibilities have been identified, with the aim of enabling career pathways and developing a 'distributed leadership' model in ECEC settings (Northside Partnership 2025). The model suggests differentiated leadership roles for pedagogy; diversity and inclusion; educational partnerships and placement guidance. In many cases measures for implementation have been gestures of goodwill from ECEC providers as opposed to universal evaluation of how distributed leadership is realised within the entire ECEC workforce (see chapter 3.1 & 4).

Raising qualification levels

A key objective of "Nurturing Skills" is a graduate-led workforce, meaning that at least 50 percent of early education staff in the facilities should have a university degree (at least EQF 6) by 2028. A university degree should be mandatory management so that Managers can act effectively as change agents in view of the urgent need for quality improvements and a heterogeneous staff structure. In order to achieve these goals, it is estimated that as of today around 4,600 professionals in the field will need to gain further qualifications and require support to do so (Nurturing

Skills: 62). Study programmes (e.g. part-time study programmes and blended learning models) have been created and scholarships established for this purpose. However, current working conditions place a major barrier to achieving this goal. While the intake of students is high, turnover is a massive problem. Many of the most qualified professionals leave the sector for other jobs, or progress to what is perceived as a higher awarded and better paid early childhood educational role within the preschool sector (see chapter 4).

Establishment of a national quality-assured CPD system

The development of a national training system for the sector is another pillar that has been supported through the development of the Core Funding Model and aims at strengthening the professionalisation strategy. This includes the development of structures for the coordination and quality assurance of CPD provision as well as the establishment of a national "gateway" to enhance transparency and facilitate access to quality-assured CPD measures. On the side of the individual professionals and CPD users this infrastructure shall be complemented by the development of an online portal system that enables the recording and documentation of CPD activities at individual level (in the form of portfolios) and at the level of ECEC institutions.

Promotion of staff recruitment, retention and diversity

Includes a pragmatic approach to dealing with ECEC personnel shortages by opening up new opportunities to different categories within society, promoting the diversity of staff. For example, previously underrepresented groups - specifically men and ethnic minorities - are to be addressed through tailored qualification offers. It is seen as an advantage that offers children diverse role models and strengthens the links between daycare centres and the various families and communities. A corresponding commitment includes examining the development of different entry routes into early childhood education, including apprenticeships and other forms of work-based learning, as well as facilitating access to further and higher education.

Further regulation of the profession

Regulating the profession remains a matter of utmost importance. Currently, the ECEC Educator profession is still not regulated and there is no official register of this profession. While the adherence to minimum qualification requirements is monitored through regulation of services, combined with maintenance by DCEDIY of a list of approved qualifications (see Nurturing Skills: 36), representation and association of Educators in the ECEC is still in its infancy (INT_07). However, government initiatives to regularise the profession have commenced. In 2019, the Department of Education in collaboration with DCEDIY published new Criteria and Guidelines for professional award degree programmes (PACG) and a Qualifications Advisory Board was established in 2020 to assess degree programmes against these Criteria and Guidelines. In parallel, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) published Professional Award Type Descriptors for awards at Levels 5-6 in 2019 (DCEDIY 2021, p. 36). In addition, minimum entry requirements into the profession are in place and monitored by Tusla – the Child and Family Agency (the

statutory regulator). These minimum requirements include police background vetting and specific minimum qualifications for filling certain positions. However, an English-language proficiency requirement is not in place – Nurturing Skills envisions introducing a minimum requirement for language proficiency “over an appropriate timescale” for non-native speakers (ibid.: p. 85).

In addition to the five pillars, Nurturing Skills mentions that the State is not responsible for the creation of a professional association. However, the plan does acknowledge that such an organisation would enable professionalisation and enhance other Nurturing Skills objectives. The paper clearly states that the engagement of the profession with the workforce plan is essential for its success. As such, the government laid down in Nurturing Skills that it would aim to involve such an association, “provided it has reached sufficient organisational scale to carry out the core functions expected of a professional association”, should it emerge from the sector. While there have been some attempts to create such an organisation, to date the sector has not been able to form such a representative body (INT_01; INT_07). As the slow and rather late representation through unionisation has shown, providers and employers at times have intentionally slowed down this process (see Chapter 5; INT_07).

Overall, while the government paper outlines a long-term vision of the professionalisation of the sector, it was criticised, on the one hand, for acknowledging that poor working conditions exist but failing to offer any solutions for improving them (and not seeing itself as responsible for doing so). On the other hand, Nurturing Skills would remain very vague about the steps needed and timeframe to achieve the desired progress – thus failing to provide a clear roadmap. Some scholars and stakeholders have questioned whether “Nurturing Skills” can be described as a strategy or it is more of a long-term vision for the sector (Reilly/Pierce/Norris/Foley 2024; Cummins 2025; INT_03). Stakeholders in the sector as well as administrative leaders in the Ministries agree that there is still a long journey ahead to implement the workforce plan.

3.1 Creation of career pathways and further differentiation of roles in ECEC

Pillar 1 of Nurturing Skills includes the creation of career pathways to increase the attractiveness of the sector and create a career framework with clear progression. The document envisions staff to receive both the possibility to achieve the status of Lead Educator through supported qualification upskilling and progress to roles with additional responsibilities through continuing professional development.

The career pathway discussed widely as a “best practice” is that of the Inclusion Coordinator⁵ (LINC 2026a). The role was established through a consortium of organisations using evidence-based research and practice to bridge the gap between knowledge and application, creating the Leadership for Inclusion (LINC) training programme. This programme was conceptualised in conjunction with the introduction of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM⁶) in 2016. The primary goal of AIM is to support the inclusion of children with disabilities and special needs into the ECEC system. While the LINC programme is the training element, AIM is the funding application of the programme to support inclusion.

The programme is a professional development programme at level 6 of the NQFI. It was created to be a blended learning experience for Educators, while working closely with university mentors. Once graduated, it allowed Educators to become “Inclusion Coordinators” in their setting. It is designed to support Educators in leading inclusive practice within their settings. ECEC Managers may nominate their staff members (including Managers and Educators) for the LINC programme, if the setting has a preschool room contracted under the ECCE programme. To be eligible to apply for the LINC Programme, applicants must have the minimum qualifications in accordance with the DCEDIY’s Early Years Recognised Qualification Listing (see chapter 2.2.). However, as spots in the programme are limited, the Educators from settings that do not currently have an Inclusion Coordinator are prioritised first (LINC 2026a; INT_08).

Upon completion of the programme, Educators return to their ECEC setting as Inclusion Coordinators. This role is quite broad on paper. An Inclusion Coordinator's key responsibilities include providing leadership on diversity, equality, and inclusion within their setting, guided by national guidelines. They support staff in implementing inclusive practices and assist parents of children with additional needs. They also contribute to curriculum planning and assessment, ensuring all children can participate in activities, using frameworks like Aistear and Síolta. They collaborate with other professionals to ensure necessary support is in place and to aid children's transition to primary school. Furthermore, they help develop and review the setting's inclusion policy and assist with applications for AIM support (LINC 2026b). While many Educators have trained up to be Inclusion Coordinators, funding is only available for a single Inclusion Coordinator role per ECEC service. Today, around 52 percent of ECEC centres employ an Inclusion Coordinator (Pobal 2026b). Nevertheless, funding for Inclusion Coordinator positions through AIM is tied to a specific child with special needs attending the ECEC centre. As such, Inclusion Coordinator positions are often made redundant, when this child transitions to other services and schools. As a result, staff trained as Inclusion Coordinators may fall back on Educator or Lead Educator positions or leave the centre for a

⁵ This role is often referred to as the Leadership for Inclusion (LINC)Coordinator or Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) Coordinator.

⁶ AIM is a child-centred model, involving seven levels of support, moving from universal to targeted, based on the needs of the child and the ECEC service. It offers tailored, practical support based on need and does not require a formal diagnosis of disability (DCEDIY, 2025b).

position as Inclusion Coordinator elsewhere, introducing operative disruption and discontinuity of care (see Chapter 4).

Nurturing Skills also considered and encouraged new additional other roles, designed to meet the needs of specific groups of families and children while extending the range of career paths to Educators and complementing the Inclusion Coordinator role (DCEDIYY 2021, p. 55). This kind of development corresponds with what Urban et al. (2017) identified as “distributed leadership model”, whereby different staff members hold specific leadership roles. In the Irish case, Nurturing Skills specifically proposed the following roles:

- **Pedagogy Leadership:** Lead Educators could be responsible for pedagogical leadership, which includes implementing the curriculum in line with Aistear, mentoring colleagues, and developing effective approaches to support children’s learning.
- **Diversity and Inclusion:** Building on the Inclusion Coordinator role, leadership on diversity and inclusion is conceptualised as a broader umbrella term, also encompassing ethnic and cultural diversity.
- **Family and Community Partnership:** Leaders will support engagement between families and the setting, with strengthened support in line with First 5 commitments, in disadvantaged contexts. This exists within many community hubs already.
- **Student Placement and Induction:** Supporting quality learning experiences for students on professional practice placements, engaging with educational institutions, and mentoring Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners during the induction process.

Building on this discussion, the national support initiative “Better Start”, which focuses on developing quality ECEC, currently including mentoring, coaching, and implementation of the Siolta and Aistear Frameworks, AIM administration and training of LINC as well as coordinating and delivering a number of CPD programmes, is now assessing what roles can best support children in disadvantaged areas. Such new roles are envisioned to provide assistance in better linking ECEC settings with the families and communities surrounding them and aiding children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds as well as ethnic and cultural minorities (Better Start 2026; INT_06).

Nurturing Skills acknowledges that children and families are more diverse, requiring a wider range of specific and targeted support. To foster this, the document emphasizes the need for team-based CPD activities and learning, time for reflection and non-contact time. Accordingly, DCEDIY funds through Better Start, a range of support mechanisms, including mentoring, training, advice and support mechanisms that enable ECEC centres to facilitate and engage in such team-based activities, (DCEDIY 2021, p. 38).

To reiterate, the differentiation of roles within Nurturing Skills feeds into discussion on distributed leadership. The document states that leadership must not be concentrated in managerial roles within the setting, but rather, distributing leadership and responsibilities amongst staff may be pivotal to quality improvement. This fosters a

shared sense of quality, better team-work making staff relationships stronger and improving process quality. Moreover, the document notes that the distribution of leadership responsibilities may support career development and establishment of a career pathway for Educators, thus raising the attractiveness of the sector for Educators (DCEDIY 2021, p. 49).

3.2 Discussions on Leadership

Nurturing Skills envisions the introduction and development of distributed leadership in Irish ECEC centres. Distributed leadership within this context looks at developing the framework of roles Manager, Lead Educator and Educator and further enhancing leadership skills through training and CPD. In addition, next to this hierarchical distribution of roles and responsibilities within settings, additional roles, such as the Inclusion Coordinator described above, are proposed to take up specific pedagogical leadership responsibilities within the setting. This would create career pathways for Educators making the ECEC sector more attractive for graduates while additionally supporting settings in improving pedagogical practice and process quality (DCEDIY 2021, p. 49)

However, research indicates that the introduction of mandatory leadership roles in Irish ECEC services has been met with mixed reactions. Some ECEC staff feel that leadership roles were imposed without sufficient discussion, research, or training, leading to confusion and a lack of confidence in articulating the purpose of leadership within the sector (Nolan 2023). Thus far, two studies have examined distributed leadership in Ireland. In the first study by Simic, McCulloch and Wagner, (2025) interdisciplinary distributed leadership is examined within five community not-for-profit ECEC centres in North Dublin. The second study by Nolan (2023) is based on interviews with 50 Irish ECEC staff holding roles exploring the development and impact of mandatory leadership roles in the Irish ECEC sector.

Both studies acknowledge that many beneficial outcomes of distributed leadership exist if implemented well, such as trusting relationships, promotion of practice that can sustain change, enhancing a collegial culture of support and collaboration that focus on improving childrens' outcomes. Nolan's (2023) research also indicates that while there is a recognition of the potential benefits of distributed leadership, its actual implementation is limited and inconsistent across the ECEC sector in Ireland. Both studies identify that the mandatory role system has developed a top-down approach, with, prioritisation of compliance, governance, business model strategy over nurturing relationships, connections and support for ECE personnel. This has led to a fragmented understanding and practice of leadership where collaborative approaches are not fully realised or supported. Simic et al.'s (2025) research considered that imposed leadership roles can at times disregard the vital years of experience of Educators without a higher qualification. This can leave the Educators feeling undervalued and unrecognised for their expertise. The study goes on to discuss that taking all factors into account such as top-down pressures, low pay, and limited professional recognition is leading to burn out and many Educators eventually leaving the sector.

In a similar way, Nolan (2023) highlights the needs for a more inclusive and participatory approach to leadership that values the contribution of all ECEC practitioners. Nolan, (2023) notes in her research that introducing inclusive leadership can be challenging in Ireland, particularly in settings where traditional hierarchical structures are deeply entrenched. It may in some cases require significant cultural and organisational change. It's important to consider the perspectives of ECE personnel and provide transparency, culture of accountability, adequate support and training to foster effective collective leadership in teams.

4 Current challenges: Staff recruitment and retention and working conditions

The main challenges to implementation of the goals and initiatives outlined in First 5 and Nurturing Skills have been staff recruitment, retention and working conditions of ECEC personnel. Indeed, these aspects feed into each other in various ways, amplifying the problem. Staff retention in ECEC in Ireland is a significant challenge due to low wages, limited career advancement, short-term contracts and insufficient state funding. The staff crisis is leading to operational difficulty, reduced accessibility, availability, longer waiting list, and increasing stress amongst the staff that still remain in the sector. The job demands of Educators have continually created more paperwork, regulations and CPD. Often the time allocated does not allow for the amount of work that needs to be done. A significant number of Educators report experiencing work related stress that exacerbated their concerns of rising inflation and that the salary for many does not match the living wages (Murphy 2020; Childhood Services Ireland 2024; SIPTU 2024a; SIPTU 2024b; SIPTU 2026). Many Educators have indicated that their job has adversely affected their mental health, with issues such as anxiety and depression being widespread. In turn, this is affecting the quality of care provided to children in ECEC services. There are now many reports of standards slipping within some services struggling to maintain safety and quality (Walsh 2025). Problems of recruitment show particularly at Lead Educator and Educator level.

While Core Funding was pivotal in developing the financial sustainability of ECEC services, it does not necessarily directly lead to increased wages for employees. Nonetheless, the ERO introducing a minimum wage for role profiles was a starting point for better working conditions for staff (see DETE 2022). However, many feel that this was not the correct route to take a professional career, as the ERO is used for jobs such as hairdressing and security, but not for academic professions. Moreover, the ECEC sector pay remains only slightly higher than the minimum wage in Ireland. In July 2024, the early years sector pay for an Educator was raised to €13.65 per hour (Workplace Relation Commission 2025). However, in January 2025 the minimum wage within Ireland was raised to €13.50 (DETE 2024), therefore creating a 15c difference between a qualified ECEC professional and a person without any qualification. Despite upskilling to attain Level 8 or level 9 qualifications, many ECEC staff find that making ends meet still remains a challenge, even with the highest graduate wages.

There is a €17,000 yearly difference between the entry level salary of a Level 8 graduate as an Educator and Level 8 primary school teacher. This financial strain leads many to seek opportunities abroad, where foreign recruiters offer more attractive packages. These often include higher salaries, paid flights, and minimal tax deductions. As a result, a significant number of ECEC staff are drawn to places like the UAE or Dubai, where they are compensated on par with primary school teachers (Portobello Institute 2024).

An additional strain on ECEC personnel that affects staff recruitment and retention is based on the frequency of short-term contracts for some roles, the most prominent example being Inclusion Coordinator roles under AIM. To elaborate further on this, we must first examine contractual rules of the Inclusion Coordinator roles under AIM. The role was created to support children in the ECCE scheme for the three hours of preschool attendance (see Chapter 3.1). In 2024, an evaluation of the AIM program acknowledged its success and the report advocated for widespread support for expansion of the role and these included (Nagle 2024):

1. The expansion of AIM for children beyond the preschool hours to either Preschool term: *38-weeks* of services: 6 hours per day or *41-weeks* of service: 6.5 hours per day during non-term time if required.
2. Extending AIM to children who are younger than the qualifying ECCE age.
3. Expanding AIM to children of school age care (SAC).

These were to be phased in over time enhancing contractual rules (DCEDIY 2025b) to provide greater support for children for inclusion. While a very welcomed initiative for children, it impacts staff turnover. Educators who take up AIM roles are often only temporarily employed as Inclusion Coordinators in their settings, as when the child attached to AIM funding leaves the ECEC service the position is made redundant. Lastly, an undergraduate degree Educator in an AIM position can never get the graduate payment as it simply is not available, leaving them on the lowest contractual arrangement within the ECEC sector.

As a result, AIM positions often go unfilled for the full year as they are temporary contracts from one year to the next. Many ECEC personnel working within these arrangements have to apply to social welfare to get funding or payment over the summer as they are not employed at the ECEC centre during this time. These factors are leading many professionals, whether minimum NQFI level 5 or level 8, to leave the sector for a more financially stable career, contributing to persistent staff shortage, which undermines the quality and accessibility of care and education for young children in Ireland (Rodriguez Galvan 2022).

Government strategies to counter the shortage of skilled ECEC professionals include, among others, education programmes for back to work schemes, career changers and people on unemployment schemes. In 2024, NQFI level 5 and level 6 programmes (ATHY FETC 2024; DCCC 2024) were either fully or almost fully funded in most public local regional colleges. Applicants must be aged 21 and be in receipt of a qualifying social welfare payment for a minimum of six months. Qualifying social welfare payments include, e.g. people receiving jobseekers benefit and allowance or single parents. Many students complete their initial education and then directly enter the workforce, only a small number continue on directly to a Level 6 programme (CSO 2021; 2024).

5 Reactions by trade unions and professional groups

Irish ECEC staff often feel like marginalised voices in policies. As a result a number of representative groups have formed: The Union – SIPTU (comprised of mostly Educators and a small few community and private providers), Professional Educators and Managers in Ireland (PEMI) (set-up by academics and private providers), Early Childhood Ireland (private owners/providers), The Federation of Early Childhood Providers (private owners/providers), Association of Childhood Providers (private owners/providers, some Educators) and Childhood Services Ireland – IBEC (Private business owners/provider). While the DCEDIY does consult with the sector in accordance with the rules of policy, it is questionable whether any of the feedback is actually actioned or taken on board. Even when DCEDIY may agree with the feedback, they are frequently restrained due to lack of funding (Nagle 2025a). In addition, most representative bodies in the ECEC sector represent the interests of (private) providers. While the Union – SIPTU – represents Educators in pay deals, it is the only body solely representing the interests and perspectives of Educators as of now. Overall, the sector is fairly new to unionization, as their representation by SIPTU only commenced a decade ago. While the number of Educators in the union has substantially risen, some employers employ “union busting” tactics and won’t allow their staff to participate in the union. As of 2025, the union has around 5000 members with the sector in Ireland comprising approximately 37 000 professionals (INT_07).

The relationship between advocacy groups and the government is often one of negotiation and collaboration, where advocacy groups campaign for additional funding and professionalisation of the workforce. The government normally considers these requests within the broader context of policy, budget constraints, and other factors. It’s a dynamic process that involves compromise and adjustment from both sides. The introduction of Core Funding and the development of the First 5 and Nurturing Skills initiatives indicate the government commitment to the ECEC sector but the goal of attracting and retaining staff is likely to fail without regular substantial wage increases to bring salaries and benefits in line with the education sector (Reilly/Pierce/Norris/Foley 2024; Nagle 2025b; Molinuevo/Consolini/Magnano; Anzillotti 2025).

Indeed, low wages for ECEC workers are at the forefront of the public discourse in Ireland. Despite the ERO leading to an increase in wages in 2022 and 2024, reactions to this were mixed as the increase in wages was not met with an increase in government funding. The Federation of Early Childhood Providers (FECF) has lobbied the DCEDIY during stakeholder consultations, rejecting the pay agreement for the ERO. They argued that the wage increases stipulated by the ERO were not matched by corresponding funding from the state, which would threaten the sustainability of many services. The FECF reported that 1000 services have closed since 2017, while only 579 services have opened (Kenny 2026). In addition, the increase in pay is rather marginal, as entry level pay is only slightly above the Irish minimum wage (see Chapter 4).

Consequently, there is not one unified voice that represents Educators in ECEC in Ireland, which therefore creates a fragmented approach to achieving professionalisation. Moreover, there is no professional body that unifies the sector around a collective identity (Urban 2021; 2023). This ultimately makes it harder to implement staff reforms, for example the implementation of the roles Manager, Lead Educator and Educator (INT_01). In comparisons to professional groups such as teachers, Ireland's ECEC Educators operate without the legislated or regulated professional body to uphold professional conduct or examine fitness to practice, if complaints are made. This is creating fragmented accountability, conflicting handling of professional misconduct, weak enforcement of regulations and a voluntary nature of implementation of the code of ethics within the profession (Maloney /Quinn/Murphy/Daly 2020). As a result, this is impacting the professional identity and status of Educators.

The political parties in power committed to a number of different actions towards a public model of ECEC (ECI 2024). Both the Fianna Fail and Fine Gael manifesto promised to increase capacity of state-led or state-owned facilities alongside the private ECEC sector, while also reducing fees for parents to €200 a month. The initial roll out of state-led ECEC infrastructure has begun in 2026 with the support of the Local County Councils, The Land Development Agency and the Department of Housing. It has been steered by the DCEDIY to firstly purchase, refurbish and fit-out existing ECEC centres. The initiative involves the use of vacant state-owned buildings and the acquisition of additional premises in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. While the State will retain ownership of these buildings, service provision will be outsourced through a tendering process to not-for-profit providers, while private providers may also apply, if they intend to operate on a not-for-profit basis. The goal is to develop thousands of new places for children throughout the country (HOR 2026), as DCEDIY data shows that over 65,500 children are on waiting lists. Newer estimates also show that there will be a shortage of 14,000 places by 2030 (Nagle 2025b). However, expanding the (public) ECEC system will be limited in achievement, if pay and conditions are not addressed at the same time.

6 Outlook

Various policy initiatives in Ireland since the beginning of the Millenium have focused on upskilling the workforce in order to increase the quality of ECEC services provided to families. Particularly important for this goal, are the ideas laid down in “Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC), 2022-2028”, introduced in 2021. Indeed, the mainstreaming of qualification pathways into the sector has come a long way. Historically, the quality of qualification pathways was very diverse, meaning that staff would have varying degrees of understanding of pedagogical practice and thus, made team work difficult as staff could not gain a shared understanding of practice. The list of qualifications by the DCEDIY as well as the orientation towards the Siolta (2006) and Aistear (2009) frameworks have, however, improved the quality of qualifications of staff and led to a more coherent understanding of quality practice in the Irish ECEC sector. Indeed, orientation towards the curriculum in daily practice has had an impact on the formation of a shared understanding amongst ECEC staff, leading to some consolidation of a shared professional identity and professionalism.

Furthermore, the introduction of the Core Funding Model in 2022 has helped to raise the financial stability of services by directly granting operating costs, linking these to fee freezes and better pay for staff. As Core Funding further links higher funding to the qualification levels of ECEC personnel, this incentivises settings to employ highly qualified personnel. This has been instrumental in achieving the goal of a graduate led ECEC workforce. The high rate of academically qualified personnel that was achieved in relatively short time stands out as rather remarkable and would be worth a closer look. In particular, further investigation would be worthwhile into the role played by the financial incentives given by the introduction of the Core Funding system. However, low wages and high staff turnover persists which is endangering the sustainability of building professional (as well as collective) identity within the settings and amongst ECEC personnel themselves. In particular, the lack of organisation within professional bodies and associations is impeding on progress in Educator representation in government consultations and policy making.

Within the Core Funding rules a certain amount of funding is also provided for regular team meetings, shared planning sessions, and joint professional development activities. These practices help in building a cohesive team environment and leveraging the diverse expertise of team members. While state funding is given, it may not cover all these activities and how the funding is used by the providers is discretionary. As such, implementation mostly hinges on the provider’s initiative and their view on how important these activities are in building effective teams.

While campaigns organised for union membership within SIPTU have been ongoing, progress is quite slow due to many opposing organisations, such as (associations of) private providers, employing union busting tactics. This has led to slow infrequent incremental raises in wages, which are negotiated within the ERO for the sector. Low wages and unfavourable working conditions in the sector have also led

to high turnover and staff shortages. As such, mainstreaming qualification pathways and reducing the list of qualifications of the DCEDIY is considered risky as it may exacerbate staff shortages. In order to make the sector more attractive, Nurturing Skills has set forth ideas on the diversification of role profiles through the creation of the functional roles of Educator, Lead Educator and Manager. The plan also identifies a comprehensive list of tasks and responsibilities for each role profile. The hierarchical nature of these roles was developed to ensure that there is a clear line of responsibility and accountability, which is seen as a requirement for maintaining high standards of care and education and raising the profile of the profession. Nevertheless, highly qualified professionals frequently either move abroad in pursuit of higher salaries or leave the field altogether to work in primary education.

Even so, the ongoing policy reforms and proposed initiatives outlined above are expected to contribute to further diversification within ECEC teams and roles. In this context, the possibility of creating additional role profiles with specific responsibilities – similar to the Inclusion Coordinator model – have been identified, with the aim of enabling career pathways and developing a 'distributed leadership' model in ECEC settings. Ideas of distributed leadership have become prominent in this context and are clearly enshrined in Nurturing Skills. It remains to be seen how different leadership concepts are implemented in practice between a more top down and a distributed approach. Currently, the national initiative “Better Start” is considering the development of a similar role to that of Inclusion Coordinator for the support of children in disadvantaged areas. This new role is envisioned to provide assistance in better linking ECEC settings with the families, communities and additional services surrounding them.

The precise effects of these developments on job attractiveness and satisfaction, however, remain uncertain. The state separation of education roles created a functional fragmentation between undergraduate primary and post-primary school teachers on the one hand and under graduate-level Educators on the other hand, considered a less meaningful position due to lack of recognition. Given the persistent challenges of poor working conditions and low pay, alongside the fragmented and often inadequate representation of ECE personnel through unions or professional associations, the successful implementation of these distributed leadership concepts and role profiles is likely to face significant obstacles. Current developments seem to be moving in an area of tension between the challenges of still very diverse qualification backgrounds on the one hand and a considerable number of academically trained ECE personnel, who are looking for a career path on the other hand.

The last decade has seen positive and accelerated changes within the ECEC system for families without much transformational change in professional recognition, or employment terms and conditions for the ECEC workforce (Wolfe/O'Donoghue-Hynes/Hayes 2013). The ECEC sector is characterised by low pay and fixed-term contracts for the majority of roles. In turn, the rather low job security staff in the ECEC sector face, hinders staff retention, in turn limiting career progression and sector development. This directly links to high turnover, which impacts the wellbeing and strain within the current ECEC workforce. Counteracting these issues will

require a shift in thinking about the current positionality of the sector and embedding a state culture of public interest in the ECEC profession to ensure accountability to children, families and society (Nagle 2025a).

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