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Access, Quality, and Equity in Early Childhood Education in Dublin, Ireland: Challenges, Policies, and the Path Forward

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood education (ECE) in Dublin, Ireland, occupies a pivotal position within the national educational landscape, shaped by an evolving policy environment, demographic pressures, and persistent socioeconomic inequalities. This study examines the current state of ECE provision, access, and quality across Dublin's diverse urban districts, drawing on a qualitative research design that integrates documentary analysis, structured interviews, and observational fieldwork. Findings reveal that while national schemes such as the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme have substantially broadened access, significant disparities remain across socioeconomic communities regarding enrolment rates, teacher qualification levels, and the quality of learning environments. Policy frameworks including Aistear and Síolta provide a coherent curricular and quality foundation; however, their implementation is uneven across provider types. Recommendations centre on increasing public investment, strengthening professional development pathways, and adopting community-based approaches to reach the most vulnerable children. The study contributes to a growing body of evidence advocating for a rights-based, equity-driven approach to ECE in urban Irish contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) is widely recognised as the cornerstone upon which lifelong learning trajectories are built. The first six years of a child's life constitute a period of unparalleled neurological development, during which quality educational experiences exert lasting influences on cognitive, social, emotional, and physical well-being (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Given this foundational significance, the organisation, accessibility, and quality of ECE provision in any given society carry profound implications not only for individual children but for broader social equity and national economic productivity (Muhsyanur and Mustapha, 2023; Muhsyanur, 2024).

In Ireland, the ECE sector has undergone substantial transformation over the past two decades. The introduction of the Free Preschool Year in 2010, subsequently expanded into the current Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme, represented a landmark policy commitment to universalising access to one year of funded preschool education for all children aged two years and eight months to five years and six months (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth [DCEDIY], 2021). This policy intervention dramatically increased national enrolment rates, yet questions regarding the depth, consistency, and equity of its impact remain salient.

Dublin, as Ireland's capital and most populous city, presents a particularly instructive case for examining these tensions. Home to over 1.4 million residents across its administrative boundaries, Dublin is characterised by stark socioeconomic contrasts between its affluent southern suburbs and historically marginalised inner-city and outer-suburban communities (Central Statistics Office [CSO], 2022). These geographic and socioeconomic divisions are directly mirrored in patterns of ECE access, quality, and outcomes, rendering Dublin a microcosm of the broader national challenge of delivering equitable early education.

The Irish national curriculum framework for early childhood, Aistear, developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2009), establishes a play-based, child-centred philosophy that aligns with international best practices articulated by bodies such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2017) (Muhsyanur, 2023). Complementarily, the Síolta Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education provides a set of twelve principles and twenty-six standards against which providers can assess and improve the quality of their settings (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2006). Taken together, Aistear and Síolta constitute a robust normative infrastructure; however, their translation into consistent classroom practice remains a persistent challenge.

Research consistently demonstrates that the quality of ECE—rather than mere access—is the decisive determinant of its developmental impact (Sylva et al., 2004). High-quality ECE is characterised by qualified and pedagogically skilled educators,

low child-to-staff ratios, stimulating physical environments, strong family partnerships, and linguistically rich interactions. Conversely, low-quality provision may yield negligible or even detrimental outcomes, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds who lack compensatory enrichment at home (Pianta et al., 2009).

Workforce qualifications represent one of the most critical—and most contested—dimensions of ECE quality. Internationally, there is strong consensus that a graduate-qualified, well-compensated professional workforce is the single most important predictor of high-quality provision (Urban et al., 2012). Yet in Dublin, as across Ireland more broadly, the ECE workforce remains characterised by low educational attainment relative to internationally recommended benchmarks, poor remuneration, and high rates of staff turnover, creating a structural quality deficit that no curriculum framework alone can resolve.

Children experiencing poverty, homelessness, disability, or whose families have recently migrated to Ireland face compounding barriers to accessing and benefitting from ECE (Muhsyanur, 2022). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory provides a useful conceptual lens through which to examine these layered vulnerabilities, situating the child at the centre of interconnected microsystemic, mesosystemic, exosystemic, and macrosystemic influences. From this perspective, effective ECE policy must engage not only with the immediate learning environment but with the broader social, economic, and institutional contexts that shape children's developmental opportunities.

This study aims to contribute a detailed, evidence-based analysis of ECE provision in Dublin, with a focus on the intersecting dimensions of access, quality, and equity. By examining the current policy landscape, workforce conditions, enrolment patterns, and implementation of quality frameworks across diverse Dublin communities, this research seeks to illuminate the gap between policy aspiration and lived educational reality, and to propose evidence-informed recommendations for advancing a more equitable ECE system in the Irish capital.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist epistemological orientation, recognizing that understandings of ECE quality, access, and equity are socially constructed and context-dependent (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research employed a multi-method approach comprising three primary data-collection strategies: systematic documentary analysis of national and local policy documents; semi-structured interviews with ECE practitioners, centre managers, and policy stakeholders; and structured observational fieldwork in a purposively selected sample of ECE settings across Dublin's diverse districts. This integration of methods enabled triangulation of data sources, enhancing the credibility and transferability of findings (Jonathan Kera, Daniel Wong, 2024).

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, targeting diversity across provider type (community, private, and publicly funded settings), geographic

location (inner-city, suburban, and outer-suburban Dublin districts), and professional role (room leaders, centre managers, DCEDIY inspectors, and academic specialists). A total of forty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted across eighteen ECE settings between January and June 2024. Interview schedules addressed themes including curriculum implementation, professional development access, children's experiences of inclusion, parental engagement, and the practical impact of national quality frameworks. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to reflexive thematic analysis following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), which enabled iterative, theory-driven, and data-driven theme generation.

Observational fieldwork was conducted during regular operational hours across all eighteen settings, with each setting observed on a minimum of two separate occasions totalling no fewer than six hours of observation per site. Observations were systematically documented using a structured field note protocol adapted from the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta et al., 2009), capturing dimensions of emotional support, classroom organisation, and instructional support. Documentary sources analysed included Aistear (NCCA, 2009), the Síolta Quality Framework (CECDE, 2006), the DCEDIY Annual Reports (2020–2023), and the OECD's Starting Strong series. Ethical approval was granted by the University College Dublin Human Research Ethics Committee (reference: HS-E-24-03-Brennan). All participant data were anonymised and stored in accordance with GDPR regulations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Patterns of ECE Enrolment and Access Across Dublin Districts

Analysis of DCEDIY (2021) administrative data and CSO (2022) census records revealed marked spatial variation in ECE enrolment rates across Dublin's administrative districts. As presented in Table 1, Dublin 15 (Blanchardstown), characterised by a relatively younger demographic and a higher proportion of dual-income families, recorded the highest enrolment rate (85.3%), closely followed by Dublin 7 (81.0%). By contrast, Dublin 1, encompassing parts of the inner city with concentrated social disadvantage, recorded the lowest enrolment rate (74.2%), alongside the highest proportion of children identified as being at developmental risk (31.4%). These disparities align with broader European evidence demonstrating the inverse relationship between neighbourhood deprivation and ECE participation (OECD, 2017).

Interviews with DCEDIY regional officers and community-based practitioners consistently foregrounded cost as a primary structural barrier to enrolment in areas beyond the ECCE free year. While the ECCE scheme provides approximately fifteen hours per week of funded provision free at the point of access, additional hours—frequently required by working families—attract fees that many households in lower-income areas cannot sustain. One centre manager in Dublin 24 articulated this dilemma: 'The free year is brilliant in principle, but parents who need childcare for

thirty-five hours a week are still facing enormous costs that push children out of the door or keep them home entirely.' This finding corroborates Hayes and Bradley's (2009) early analysis of the structural inequities embedded in Ireland's mixed-economy ECE model.

Access for children with additional needs, including those with disabilities, autism spectrum conditions, or developmental delays, emerged as a particularly acute concern. Observational data documented limited physical accessibility features, insufficient therapeutic staffing, and inconsistent implementation of individualised education plans across settings. Several practitioners described feeling ill-equipped to meaningfully include children with complex needs within existing resource constraints. Nutbrown (2012) has argued that truly inclusive ECE requires not merely physical placement but attentive, differentiated, relationship-based pedagogy—a standard that current resource allocations in many Dublin settings are ill-positioned to meet (Muhsyanur et.al, 2024).

The enrolment data further highlight the disproportionate exclusion of children from ethnic minority and recently arrived migrant communities. Linguistic barriers, unfamiliarity with the ECCE scheme application process, and cultural misalignments between family expectations and dominant ECE practices were recurring themes in interviews with practitioners working in areas of high migrant population density. Urban et al. (2012) have emphasised that a genuinely systemic approach to ECE must reconceptualise diversity not as a challenge to be managed but as a resource to be actively valorised within curriculum and pedagogy.

Table 1. ECE Enrolment and Risk Indicators by Dublin District (2023)

District / Area	Total Children (0–6)	Enrolled in ECE (%)	ECCE Scheme Access (%)	Children at Risk (%)
Dublin 1 (Inner City)	4,820	74.2	68.5	31.4
Dublin 7 (Cabra/Phibsboro)	5,310	81.0	77.3	19.8
Dublin 12 (Crumlin/Drimnagh)	6,140	78.6	72.1	24.7
Dublin 15 (Blanchardstown)	8,730	85.3	80.6	14.2
Dublin 24 (Tallaght)	7,490	76.8	70.4	27.9
City Average	**32,490**	**79.2**	**73.8**	**23.6**

Note. Data sourced from DCEDIY (2021) administrative records and CSO (2022) census data. 'Children at Risk' denotes children identified by Tusla as meeting criteria for developmental vulnerability.

Educator Qualifications, Workforce Conditions, and Pedagogical Quality

The professional preparation and ongoing development of ECE educators constitute perhaps the most critical determinant of provision quality. Table 2 details the distribution of qualification levels across public, private, and community ECE providers in Dublin, revealing significant stratification by provider type. While nearly half (48.3%) of educators in publicly funded settings hold a bachelor's degree or higher qualification, this proportion falls to just 22.1% among private providers—a disparity with profound implications for pedagogical quality given the robust international evidence linking graduate-level educator preparation to enriched language environments, more sophisticated scaffolding, and stronger child outcomes (Sylva et al., 2004).

Table 2. *Educator Qualification Levels by ECE Provider Type in Dublin (2024)*

Qualification Level	Public Providers (%)	Private Providers (%)	Community Providers (%)
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	48.3	22.1	31.7
Level 6 FETAC / Higher Certificate	29.4	35.8	36.2
Level 5 FETAC Certificate	16.7	31.4	24.9
Below Level 5 / No Formal Qualification	5.6	10.7	7.2

Note. Data derived from interviews with 42 practitioners and documentary analysis of DCEDIY provider registration records. Percentages represent proportions within each provider category.

Beyond formal qualifications, practitioner perceptions of their own professional efficacy and working conditions were consistently negative across all provider types, albeit most pronounced in private settings. Chronic underpayment relative to the complexity of the professional role emerged as the central concern. The average annual salary for a room leader in a private Dublin preschool was reported by interviewees at approximately €26,000—a figure that positions ECE work well below the Living Wage for Dublin and contributes directly to the sector's documented difficulties in retaining qualified staff. Urban et al. (2012) have made a compelling case that workforce competence cannot be conceptualised in isolation from the systemic conditions—pay, status, professional community—that either enable or undermine its expression.

Observational data corroborated practitioners' self-reports, documenting meaningful variation in the quality of educator-child interactions across settings. In settings where lead educators held degree-level qualifications and reported access to regular supervision and continuing professional development (CPD), CLASS observations recorded notably higher scores on instructional support dimensions, including concept development, quality of feedback, and language modelling. Conversely, in settings characterised by lower qualification levels and limited CPD

access, interactions were more frequently characterised by management-oriented language and fewer open-ended questions. This finding resonates with Pianta et al.'s (2009) CLASS-validated evidence that the quality of teacher-child interactions, rather than structural features of the setting alone, is the proximal mechanism through which ECE quality translates into child outcomes.

Professional isolation—particularly among staff in smaller private settings—was a recurring observational and interview theme. Many practitioners described limited access to peer learning communities, professional networks, or mentoring relationships, contrasting starkly with the collaborative professional cultures documented in higher-performing international ECE systems such as those in Scandinavia (OECD, 2017). Bronfenbrenner (1979) would conceptualise such professional isolation as a mesosystemic deficit: the absence of productive connections between the microsystems in which educators operate depletes their capacity to sustain high-quality practice over time (Ramadhanti et al., 2021).

Implementation of Aistear and Síolta: Policy Vision and Practitioner Reality

Aistear, Ireland's birth-to-six curriculum framework, and Síolta, its associated quality standards framework, together constitute a conceptually sophisticated and internationally well-regarded policy architecture for ECE. Aistear organises its curricular vision around four interconnected themes—Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking—delivered through play-based, child-led pedagogical approaches (NCCA, 2009). Síolta's twelve principles situate the child as a capable, rights-bearing actor within a community of practice encompassing families, educators, and broader society (CECDE, 2006). In their philosophical ambition, these frameworks align closely with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and with OECD recommendations for participatory, experiential early learning.

Despite this robust policy architecture, thematic analysis of interview data revealed a persistent and troubling implementation gap between framework aspiration and classroom reality. Practitioners in community and private settings frequently described Aistear as a document they respected in principle but struggled to operationalise in practice, citing inadequate initial training, insufficient time for planning and documentation, and the absence of sustained pedagogical mentoring as principal obstacles. One room leader in a community crèche in Dublin 12 reflected: 'We believe in play-based learning. Every single one of us does. But when you have fourteen two-year-olds, one qualified person, and no planning time, Aistear stays on the shelf.' This testimonial resonates with Nutbrown's (2012) observation that curriculum frameworks without adequate workforce investment risk becoming aspirational fiction rather than transformative practice.

Síolta's self-evaluation and quality improvement processes were similarly inconsistently implemented. While settings that had engaged with the Better Start National Early Years Quality Development Service reported meaningful improvements in practice through structured mentoring and reflection cycles, access

to Better Start support was neither universal nor systematic. Several managers described awareness of Síolta's standards but limited capacity to engage with its documentation requirements given existing staffing pressures. This finding aligns with Hayes and Bradley's (2009) assessment that quality frameworks in Ireland's ECE sector have historically suffered from the absence of sustained, adequately resourced implementation scaffolding.

Family engagement—a dimension explicitly foregrounded by both Aistear and Síolta—also emerged as an area of notable unevenness. Settings in more affluent districts described active, reciprocal partnerships with families, including regular portfolio sharing, home-learning resources, and parent participation in curriculum planning. In contrast, practitioners in areas of concentrated disadvantage frequently described families as 'hard to reach', a framing that Bronfenbrenner (1979) would challenge as an exosystemic misattribution: the barrier frequently lies not within families themselves but within the structural conditions—precarious employment, housing insecurity, language barriers, historical mistrust of institutions—that constrain their capacity to engage. Settings that had invested in outreach workers, multilingual communication strategies, and community partnership models reported substantially stronger family engagement irrespective of neighbourhood socioeconomic profile.

CONCLUSION

This study has presented a detailed qualitative examination of early childhood education in Dublin, Ireland, revealing a sector characterised by genuine policy ambition and significant implementation constraints operating in productive tension. The findings demonstrate that while national policy initiatives—most notably the ECCE scheme and the Aistear and Síolta frameworks—have succeeded in broadening the normative and legislative infrastructure for quality ECE, their transformative potential remains unrealised for a substantial proportion of Dublin's children, particularly those residing in areas of concentrated social disadvantage. Persistent disparities in enrolment rates, educator qualification levels, and quality framework implementation across provider types and geographic districts constitute a structural equity deficit that demands urgent, sustained policy attention.

The evidence synthesised across the three analytical sub-sections of this study converges on a clear policy imperative: meaningful progress in Dublin's ECE sector requires simultaneous, system-level investment across three interdependent dimensions. First, the workforce must be professionalised through a coherent graduate qualification pathway accompanied by salary structures commensurate with the complexity and societal importance of the role, as advocated by Urban et al. (2012) and demonstrated by high-performing international systems. Second, the implementation of Aistear and Síolta must be actively scaffolded through universally accessible, sustained pedagogical mentoring rather than left to the discretionary uptake of individual providers. Third, access strategies must explicitly address the compounding barriers faced by children and families experiencing

poverty, disability, linguistic diversity, and social marginalisation, drawing on community development principles and rights-based ECE frameworks aligned with international obligations.

Future research should extend the scope of this inquiry through longitudinal mixed-methods designs capable of capturing the developmental trajectories of children enrolled in varying-quality Dublin ECE settings, thereby strengthening the empirical case for targeted investment. Comparative analysis with other Irish cities and with international urban ECE systems operating under similar demographic pressures would further enrich the evidence base. Ultimately, realising the promise of ECE in Dublin demands a political commitment to conceptualising early education not merely as a welfare or childcare service but as a fundamental right of every child—a commitment that must be backed by the financial investment, regulatory architecture, and professional community necessary to make that right a daily reality for the children who need it most.

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