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## Chapter

# On the Path to Developing a High-Quality Inclusive Preschool System in the Irish Context: Outcomes from a Systemic Focus on Structural and Process Quality Dimensions

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## Abstract

The contribution of high-quality preschool education to well-being and learning is recognised globally. In Ireland, a universal free preschool programme was introduced in 2010 for children aged between 3-year 2 months and 4-year 7 months and extended to two years' duration in 2018. The programme is now available to all children from the 1st September after the child has turned 2-years and 8 months. While high-quality preschool education benefits all children, it is particularly impactful for children who require targeted prevention and early intervention. Early experiences of the universal preschool system suggested that access remained a challenge for this cohort of children and required a cross-government strategic approach to strengthen policy coherence and secure access for all. Over the past decade, this has led to significant public investment focused on structural and process aspects of provision. This chapter will explore how developments supporting the structural aspects of quality and the resultant impact on process quality, contributing to the creation of high-quality inclusive preschool system. The chapter will conclude by considering how progress can be sustained as we continue on the path to building a preschool system designed to nurture the meaningful inclusion of all children where diversity becomes the norm.

**Keywords:** preschool education, universal provision, high quality, inclusion, diversity

## 1. Introduction

Following decades of exclusion and the ongoing struggle of the inclusion movement to gain traction [1–4], there is a broad acceptance, propelled by an international

rights-based campaign, that an inclusive education system is an imperative for children, families and society [1, 5, 6]. According to Odom and colleagues [7] inclusion involves “belonging, participating, and reaching one’s full potential in a diverse society” (p. 347). Inclusive provision, in the early years, has been found to benefit all children [2]. Furthermore, findings from the UK longitudinal effective pre-school, primary and secondary education project (EPPSE 3-16+) study, suggest that preschool education may have the potential to reduce the risk of special educational needs (SEN) [8]. While we may hold strong aspirations and expectations that all young learners will benefit from high-quality preschool education, in reality numerous barriers to inclusive provision are evident. The research in this area suggests that attitudes, insufficient knowledge and understanding, and poor resourcing, can all hinder the creation of a system where all children are supported to flourish [2, 4].

Following the introduction of universal preschool education in 2010, the ambition was that all eligible children could access and fully participate in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programmes being provided in preschool settings [4]. In the Irish context, building an inclusive model of preschool education is accepted as a principal indicator of a high-quality system and is positioned as a key focus of the quality assurance policy initiatives supporting high-quality preschool education experiences for all children. These initiatives are included in **Table 1** with reference to the macro (national policy level), meso (national programmes) and micro (preschool level) dimensions of policy implementation [9]. Their alignment with structural and process quality outcomes will be interrogated throughout the chapter and the discernible inter-relationship between the three levels of policy implementation considered [10, 11], see **Table 1**.

We will begin by providing an overview of preschool education in the Irish context. We will then review the literature on quality inclusive preschool education before discussing the measures, in place, to promote the structural dimensions of

Macro-level policy implementation national policy level	Meso-level policy implementation national programmes	Micro-level policy implementation preschool level
Better outcomes, brighter futures: The national policy framework for children and young people 2014–2020. Report of inter-departmental working group: Future investment in childcare in Ireland (2015). First five: A whole of government strategy for babies, young children and their families 2019–2028. Partnership for the public good: A new funding model for early learning and care and school-age childcare (2021). Nurturing skills’ the workforce development plan for early learning and care and school-age childcare 2022–2028.	Síolta, The national quality framework for early childhood education (2006). Aistear: The early childhood curriculum framework (2009). Aistear-Síolta practice guide (2016). Diversity, equality and inclusion charter and guidelines for early childhood care and education (2016). Universal design guidelines for early learning and care settings (2019).	Free universal early childhood care and education programme (2010). Better start quality development service (2013). Tusla early years (pre school) inspectorate (2014). Better start access and inclusion model (2015). Better start early years learning and development unit (2015). Department of education early years inspectorate 2015.

**Table 1.**  
*Key policy initiatives supporting high-quality inclusive preschool education.*

quality. The resultant impact on process quality to support high-quality inclusive preschool education will then be considered. To conclude, this chapter will reflect on progress and looking to the future, consider the next steps in sustaining a high-quality inclusive model of preschool education.

## **2. Inclusive preschool education: the Irish context**

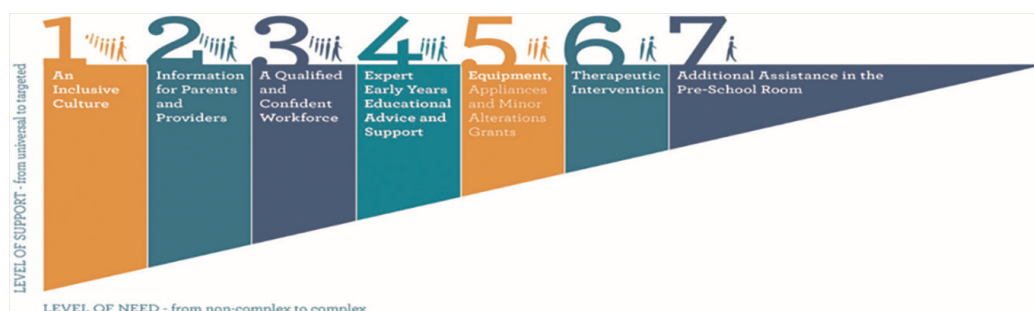
Preschool provision in Ireland has developed in an *ad hoc* fashion and due to a myriad of political, social and economic reasons, state involvement in preschool education has, historically, been minimal [2]. In terms of the education of young children, investment from the foundation of the Irish state in 1922 until relatively recently was almost exclusively concerned with primary schooling [1]. Consequently, there is significant diversity with regard to the provision of preschool education which includes a combination of private and community run services and a number of targeted intervention schemes for children considered at risk of educational disadvantage [12]. Changes in the social and economic climate in Ireland have led to a steady growth in the demand for early childhood services, resulting in a raft of policy, regulatory and curricular developments over the past 20 years. These developments culminated in 2010, with the advent of the first universal ECCE programme for children aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months, applied to children from their third birthday in 2016 and extended to 2 years' duration in 2018 [1]. The ECCE programme is now available from the 1st September after the child has turned 2 years and 8 months, allowing all children to attend state-supported preschool provision up the age of 5-years and 6 months.

This programme provides a scheme of payments to early-years settings providing free preschool education. It runs across 38 weeks from September to June and entails 3 hours provision across a 5 day a week [4]. In the main, early years and school-aged childcare services are operated privately with the most recent figures indicating that only 26% of services are run by non-profit community organisations [13]. Participation rates in the ECCE programme remain high with an uptake of over 95% and parents have been largely positive regarding the impact of the programme [4, 14]. Although the formal school starting age in Ireland is 6 years, for historical reasons related to custom, practice and the neglect of preschool provision during the early years of the foundation of the state, children may enrol in primary school from the age of four. This practice was leading to concerns in terms of a dissonance between children's developmental trajectory and the expectations of the primary school curriculum [3]. The ECCE programme has contributed positively to disrupting this pattern and since its introduction, the proportion of 4-year-olds in the entry school grades continues to decline (from 46% in 2002, to 17% in 2022) [15].

Early experiences of universal preschool provision, however, indicated that access remained a challenge for children requiring targeted prevention and early intervention measures [2]. The vision articulated in the *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014: 2020* related to children's rights and equality was not being realised [16]. Supports available to children and preschools across the country were reported as being inequitable and the quality of how children and families were experiencing inclusion consequently varied. It was reported that a cohort of children were being excluded from preschool settings [4, 17]. Overall, it seems that an interplay of factors such as poor investment over a long period, deficient infrastructure, a lack of resources, and limited knowledge and

understanding were cumulatively creating a barrier to some children accessing and participating meaningfully in preschool education [4]. Given that, in Ireland, unlike primary education, there is currently no legislative basis for, or constitutional right to, preschool education, a government response was required to rectify what were increasingly concerning circumstances for children, families and preschool educators. Based on an evolving cross-government strategic approach in relation to children, the *Inter-Departmental (IDG) Report on Supporting Access to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme for Children with a Disability* was launched in 2015. The IDG Report [17] provided a pivot for the Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (AIM). The AIM was described as an evidence-based “child (and parent) centered model” (p. 5) informed by a consultation process with parents, representative groups, early years educators, academics and policy makers. Eschewing a diagnostic approach in favour of maintaining a focus on a child’s developmental level, functional ability and need, as detailed in **Figure 1**, the AIM adopted seven levels of graduated support from universal (Levels 1–3) to targeted supports (Levels 4–7) [1].

Rather than being presented as a separate entity to be grafted onto existing provision, the model was situated within the existing regulatory, curriculum and quality assurance frameworks that were in place for preschool settings and the expectation that inclusive practice was already a requirement was clearly articulated. Since the AIM was launched, over 24,000 children have received 53,000 supports in over 4000 settings nationally [1]. In line with international evidence, AIM adopts a child-centred, whole-setting approach to supporting inclusion rather than targeting individual children, per se. Moreover, a formal diagnosis is not required to benefit from AIM supports [4]. Latest data indicate that in the preschool year 2020–2021, 4244 children attending 2045 preschool services received support from AIM [13]. Cross-government commitment to supporting inclusive preschool experiences for all children is evident in *First Five Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028* [18], a core objective of which is to build a sustainable model of high-quality preschool education that promotes diversity, inclusion and equitable participation, underpinned by research, evaluation and other relevant developments. The realisation of this commitment is apparent in the publication of *An End of Year One Review of the Access and Inclusion Model* in 2019 and the commissioning of an end of year three evaluation of the AIM, which is forthcoming [4, 19]. At the fulcrum of the regulatory, quality and curriculum frameworks within which the AIM model is located is a concern to ensure that all children’s preschool experiences are supporting them to realise their potential through the provision of quality preschool education.



**Figure 1.**  
The better start access and inclusion Model ([16], p. 27).



### 3. Quality preschool education

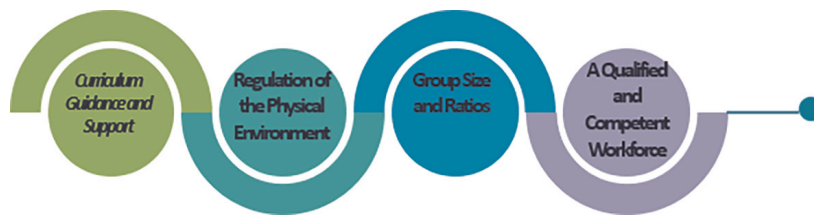
Quality involves the degree to which preschool education results in positive child outcomes [19]. Supporting positive child outcomes consequently has benefits for children, families, communities and society more broadly. Raising the quality of preschool education is also recognised as a powerful tool in eliminating poverty and equalising opportunity and outcomes [20–23]. While quality is influenced by local, national and international dimensions particular to each societal context, generally speaking the theoretical models in the literature propose that quality preschool education involves both structural and process dimensions [22, 24, 25]. Structural dimensions of quality include: teacher initial qualifications and continuing professional learning; the curriculum; the physical environment; teacher-child ratios and group sizes. Process quality encapsulates the experienced curriculum or programme of activities, and interactions [21, 22, 24]. Essentially, structural dimensions of quality collectively should support high process quality [24, 25]. Lower child-teacher ratios, smaller group sizes and teacher education for example, have been found to predict better teacher-child interactions [25]. The relationship between the structural and process dimensions of quality is recognised as complicated, however. Even when the structural dimensions of quality are well regulated, the quality of processes can fluctuate [24] and a robust quality assurance process is therefore essential. Moreover, isolating the effect of preschool education on outcomes is challenging as it is but one element of the child's bioecological system contributing to the child's overall development [2, 21]. In particular, research in this area underscores the central position of the home learning environment in a child's bioecological system and its indisputable influence on wellbeing and learning success [26].

While expanding access to preschool education is important in meeting all children's right to the best start in life, the quality of this education is essential to optimising wellbeing and learning. Improving quality requires significant public investment and recently Ireland has actively sought to re-balance its under-investment in preschool education. The budget allocation has consistently increased with state investment in early years and school-aged childcare reaching over €1 billion in 2023. In 2023, €308.2 million was budgeted for the ECCE programme (to benefit 108, 000 children) and AIM (benefiting 5000 children) [27]. This increase in investment, in turn, has been accompanied by measures focused at developing both the structural and process quality of preschool education.

#### 3.1 Structural quality

The structural dimensions of quality tend to be those which are more measurable and which consequently, are highly regulated. **Figure 2** provides an overview of the foremost measures adopted by the government in relation to structural quality, which will be further explored in this section.

In Ireland, the Child and Family Agency, Tusla, has overall responsibility for regulating early years settings. All settings offering an ECCE service are required to comply with the *Childcare Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations, 2016*; *Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) (Amendment) Regulations 2016*; and the *Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) (Amendment) Regulations 2022* [28–30]. The Early Years Inspectorate at Tusla has responsibilities for registration, inspection, and enforcement



**Figure 2.**  
*Measures supporting structural quality.*

of these regulations [14]. The inspection process is guided by the Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF) published in 2018 [11]. Under the regulations, dimensions of structural quality such as minimum qualifications, group sizes, teacher-child ratios; and elements of the physical environment (for example, access to outdoor learning space), are tightly regulated.

While the regulations do not refer to *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* [31] or *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* [32], *Regulation 19 Health, Welfare and Development of the Child* [11] aligns with the frameworks in requiring that settings facilitate a programme which fosters each child's wellbeing, learning needs and interests. Under Regulation 19, the extent to which services provide for play, and support diversity and inclusion, are also inspected.

### 3.1.1 Curriculum guidance and support

Curriculum involves the content or 'what' of learning and many modern curricular frameworks also provide guidance on the processes or 'how' of learning [31, 33]. In Ireland, preschool education lacked a national curriculum until the early childhood curriculum framework, *Aistear* (translates as 'Journey' from the Irish language) was published in 2009 [31]. *Aistear's* status as a framework, rather than a curriculum, per se, provides flexibility in how settings align the framework with their selected curricular approach. This flexibility allows settings to provide responsive curriculum experiences infused with, and scaffolded by, the national curriculum framework. The framework includes children between the ages of birth to six-years and endorses play and relationships as contexts which support children to develop as confident and competent learners. *Aistear*, identifies the knowledge and understanding, skills, dispositions, attitudes and values children learn and develop across the early years. Learning aims and goals are presented through the four integrated themes of wellbeing, identity and belonging, communicating and exploring and thinking [32]. It is a holistic and integrated curriculum framework which sees children learning and developing many things all at once and places equal emphasis all aspects of development. As a flexible and emergent framework, it lends itself to the type of individualised approach which is a marker of effective inclusive education [7]. The *Guidelines for Good Practice*, accompanying the framework support early childhood teachers developing pedagogical strategies which foster the belonging and meaningful inclusion of children requiring targeted prevention and early intervention measures.

*Síolta* (translates as 'Seeds' from the Irish language) [32], is a quality and self-evaluation framework designed to be used in conjunction with *Aistear* to improve the overall quality of service provision. While *Aistear* is concerned with curriculum and the quality of the learning experience, *Síolta* is concerned with broader aspects of service quality. As working with both frameworks can be challenging, the NCCA

has developed the *Aistear-Síolta* Practice Guide, an on-line tool designed to support teachers using both *Aistear* and *Síolta*, together, in a practical way, to develop high-quality practice [34].

The specific reference to *Aistear* by the IDG in 2015 consolidated the expectation that the four interconnected themes of wellbeing, identity and belonging, communicating and exploring and thinking applied equally to all children. Given that *Aistear* will shortly be 15 years published, the NCCA has undertaken a review of the framework. Consultations with a range of stakeholders, including children, are ongoing and the updated framework will reflect recent societal and economic changes, workforce development, current policy directions, and the up-to-date evidence on young children's development and learning [35]. Moreover, the updated framework will align with the recently published Primary Curriculum Framework for Primary and Special Schools [36]. Initial findings from the consultations [37] indicate that the national curriculum framework is working well in supporting services to provide high quality education and care. Data from the consultations suggests a need to reflect on how inclusive the framework is, in its current form, and that there is scope for it to align more with recent policy developments in mitigating against exclusion and marginalisation, and in promoting the meaningful access and participation, of all children.

### 3.1.2 *The physical environment*

Research highlights that the early learning environment impacts on child outcomes [22]. In Ireland, the *Childcare Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations, 2016* [29, 30]; *Aistear* [31] and *Síolta* [32], all endorse the importance of the early learning environment. The physical environment, in preschools, is highly regulated and settings must be appropriate and safe for both children and staff. The statutory regulations [28, 29] set out requirements in relation to the structure of the premises, storage, lighting, heating, ventilation, cleaning and hygiene; maintenance and repair; waste disposal; and sanitary facilities. They also set out minimum space requirements—a minimum space/area requirement of 1.818 m<sup>2</sup> per child currently applies [11]. Under these regulations [29, 30], preschools are required to provide safe and appropriate facilities for children to rest and play. Play opportunities need to be available indoors and outdoors and necessary adaptations must be made to ensure children with diverse needs can fully access the outdoor learning environment [11]. According to the latest figures from Pobal, 97% of early years settings reported having an outdoor space. Moreover, 81% of services reported that their premises was accessible to wheelchair users [13]. Under the regulations it is expected that all children will have adequate, accessible, safe and stimulating resources to play and learn with and that their identities will be reflected in the resources available. Where children use individualised adaptive equipment (i.e. augmentative communication devices), preschools are required to use these appropriately to support wellbeing, learning and development [11].

Under Level 5 of the AIM, at **Figure 1**, preschools can apply for funding towards minor alterations to, and for access to, specialist equipment [13]. Pobal data indicates that in 2020/2021, 223 children availed of AIM support at this level. In June 2019, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Centre for Universal Design (CEUD) at the National Disability Authority launched the *Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning and Care Settings* [38]. Universal Design involves the creation of environments which allow for the full participation and engagement of all children



and adults. The guidelines provide guidance on the refurbishment, renovation and building of early years services in Ireland. They include a self-audit tool which early years services can use to evaluate the accessibility of their learning environments. Overall, the guidelines help to ensure that the early learning environment responds to individual physical, psychological and emotional needs.

### *3.1.3 Group size and ratios*

Low child-teacher ratios and smaller group sizes have been shown to enhance the quantity and quality of teachers' interactions with children, in the early years [25]. Similar to the physical environment, preschool group size and ratios are also highly regulated in Ireland. The current teacher-child ratios for the ECCE programme are 1:11 while the maximum number of children that can be catered for in one room is 22 [11]. Under AIM Level 7 support, preschools can apply for additional assistance in a preschool room to support the inclusion of a child identified as requiring more targeted support measures. Reflecting a whole-setting approach, additional assistance, rather than being for an individual child, is provided to reduce the overall teacher-child ratio in the preschool room [4]. 2855 or 2.7% of children enrolled in the ECCE programme accessed AIM Level 7 support in the year 2020–2021 [13].

### *3.1.4 A qualified and competent workforce*

Central to a high quality inclusive preschool system is a qualified and competent workforce [3]. In Ireland, those working in the preschool sector reflect considerable diversity in terms of their experience and qualifications. While historically the sector lacked any minimum qualification requirement, since 2016 all preschool teachers must hold a minimum Level 5 major award in ECCE (on the National Framework for Qualifications (NFQ). Under the contractual requirements of the ECCE programme, preschool lead teachers must hold a minimum Level 6 major award in ECCE and preschools can also apply for higher capitation where lead teachers have a major award at Level 7, or higher [3].

In Ireland teacher preparation programmes in ECCE are offered across a range of further and higher education institutions. Standardising programme content, across different providers, was identified as a significant step in the development of the workforce. The *Professional Awards Criteria and Guidelines (PACG) for Initial Professional Education (Levels 7 and 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Sector in Ireland* and the *Professional Award-type Descriptors (PATD) (Level 5 to 8) Annotated for QQI ELC Awards*, now function to reduce the variability of experience across different programmes [39, 40].

To establish the qualified and competent workforce needed to deliver high-quality inclusive preschool education, the Government funded the Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme (a special purpose award located at Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), Quality and Qualifications Ireland 2023). The LINC Programme was developed and first delivered by the LINC Consortium (Mary Immaculate College, Early Childhood Ireland (ECI), and Maynooth University (MU)—Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education) in 2016. Through this AIM Level 1 universal support, early childhood teachers are empowered to develop innovative solutions to promote the wellbeing of learners requiring targeted prevention and early intervention measures and to ensure that they are enabled to achieve their full potential. To date over 5000 early childhood teachers have completed the programme

and have qualified to become inclusion coordinators (INCOs). The interim and end-of-year-four LINC programme evaluations indicate exceptionally high overall satisfaction levels with the programme, suggesting that this innovative model is impacting positively on the quality of inclusive culture, practice, and pedagogy in preschools [3, 41, 42]. Building on the LINC programme and graduates' requests for further professional learning opportunities, a complementary free professional learning programme, LINC+ launched in 2021, for LINC graduates working as INCOs. In line with national and international literature on quality preschool education, the LINC+ programme has a strong focus on developing teacher communities of practice. Overall LINC and the LINC+ programmes provide an evidence-based and cost-effective approach to the continuing professional learning of early childhood teachers with the net effect of improving the preschool experience for *all* children [3, 41, 42].

Under AIM Level 1 universal supports, early childhood teachers can also avail of a programme of professional learning in Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. This free programme supports teachers embedding the *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education* [43], in practice. Under AIM Level 3, the Early Years Learning and Development Unit of *Better Start, The National Early Years Quality Development Service* established initially in 2013 by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (now the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)), offers a suite of continuing professional learning opportunities for early childhood teachers to develop their competence in creating inclusive early childhood experiences for all children. These include the Hanen 'Teacher Talk' programme, the 'Lámh' (translates as 'hand' from the Irish) sign language system used to support communication for those with speech language and communication needs (SLCN), and SPEL-Sensory Processing E-Learning programme [44]. Better Start also provides a Quality Development Service (QDS) to provide coaching and mentoring for preschool settings in the implementation of *Síolta* and *Aistear*.

In *First Five Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028* [18], the transition to a graduate-led early years workforce, a national model of continuing professional learning, and clearly defined career pathways, are identified as powerful enablers of high-quality early childhood education [13, 45]. This aligns with the view that teacher education is a reliable indicator of quality [19, 22]. The government launched two reports in December 2021—'*Partnership for the Public Good—a New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-age Childcare*' and '*Nurturing Skills' The Workforce Development Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-age Childcare 2022–2028*' [46, 47]. Following the establishment of a Joint Labour Committee (JLC) to address pay and conditions in the early years sector, in 2022, two new *Employment Regulation Order (EROs)* set out minimum pay rates and terms and conditions of employment for early childhood teachers [48]. Despite the introduction of the EROs and a new funding model, teacher wellbeing, status, and remuneration, remain significant challenges for those working in the sector [49]. Invariably, this perpetuates ongoing recruitment issues and undermines efforts to sustain the quality of the preschool system.

### 3.2 Process quality

To raise the quality of preschool education, investment in, and regulation of, structural quality clearly needs to translate into tangible enhanced process quality, namely high-quality interactions and learning experiences. A large corpus of international research has shown that positive interactions and an appropriate

programme of learning experiences impact positively on children’s overall wellbeing and development [8, 21, 22, 24].

While in Ireland the Tusla inspection process ensures compliance with the minimum standards required to protect children’s health, safety and well-being, the Inspectorate of the Department of Education has assumed responsibility for evaluating the quality of education processes in services participating in the ECCE programme [10, 50]. In 2022, the inspection remit of the Department of Education Inspectorate was extended and now includes babies, toddlers and young children. In addition to evaluating the quality of processes to support children’s learning and development, the Quality Framework for Education-focused Inspections (EYEI) also evaluates: the quality of context to support children’s learning and development; the quality of management and leadership for learning; and the quality of children’s learning experiences and achievements [10]. Within each of these prime areas, there are a number of specific outcomes, each of which are accompanied by more specific signposts for practice. Both the Tusla and Department of Education inspection processes maintain a “focus on process quality, self-evaluation and inspection for improvement” ([14], p. 217).

Recent policy developments recognise that a high-quality preschool system must go beyond inspection and evaluation and include support for settings to improve the standard of provision. In this context *Better Start, the National Early Years Quality Development Service* works with early years services supporting children from birth to 6-years to improve the quality of inclusive provision. In line with the research which suggests that on-site continuing professional learning is particularly powerful in raising quality [22], *Better Start* provides mentoring and coaching for individual settings which is facilitated by its early years specialists (EYS). Better Start EYS work closely with *Síolta*, *Aistear* and the *Tusla Quality and Regulatory Framework* to develop high quality practice in early years settings. Data from the 2020/2021 Pobal Annual Early Years Sector Profile reports that AIM Level 4 support and mentoring was accessed by 1671 early years services [13]. The foci of the inspection frameworks in Ireland together with Better Start’s Quality Development Service, Early Years Learning and Development and Access and Inclusion Model emerge as facilitators of process quality through their foci on interactions; children’s programme of activities, self-evaluation and reflection, and the promotion of the concept of the agentic child (see **Figure 3**).

### 3.2.1 Interactions

Interactions include those between teachers and children; between children themselves; between teachers and parents-carers; and between the setting and the community. High quality interactions between teachers and children involve the provision of emotional warmth and security, in addition to suitable levels of cognitive challenge.



**Figure 3.**  
*Measures supporting process quality.*



Findings from the UK Effective Provision of Preschool Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) project, for example, indicate that high-quality preschool settings were characterised by interactions that also supported sustained shared thinking (SST), which involves two or more people working together to solve a problem or expand upon an idea [8]. Moreover, the CARE research project, conducted across a number of European countries, found that dyadic teacher-child interactions could be complimented with more of a focus on the group of children themselves, as a community of learners [51]. This aligns with findings from a number of studies, the authors have been involved in, which underscore the importance of interactions with peers for children receiving targeted prevention and early intervention measures [41, 42, 52–54]. Using multimodal means of representation, young children consistently articulated that opportunities to learn and play with their friends is one of the most important things about their preschool experience.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Child Development conceptualises the child at the centre of an intricate and interconnected system and considers the quality of the interactions between the child's family, educational setting and community as decisive for development [2, 55]. Collaboration with families is deeply embedded in *Aistear* [31]. Parents-carers are recognised as the child's primary educators and congruent with the international research, the significance of the home learning environment, and of continuity across home and preschool, is acknowledged [56, 57]. Children are happier, more motivated and engaged in their learning when parents-carers support their learning across home and preschool. Moreover the regulations set out the requirement that information is shared with parents in relation to their children's wellbeing and learning [13]. *The Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines* [43] further endorse the need for preschools to work closely with families to meet the learning needs and interests of their children.

Moving towards 'connective professionalism' has been identified by the Centre for Education Research and Innovation (CERI), at the OECD, as crucial to the future of teaching [58]. Realising this 'connective professionalism' in the early years can be particularly powerful for children's wellbeing and development. Such collaboration can ensure that children receive timely intervention in addition to supporting information sharing and capacity building. Preschool teachers have a wealth of knowledge on individual children's learning journeys which can inform specialised interventions, when needed. Given that public access to speech and language therapy and occupational therapy services remains 'problematic, in September 2019 the Departments of Education and Skills, Children and Youth Affairs and Health, launched the *In Preschool and In-School Therapy Demonstration Project* which was managed by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). 150 preschools, primary schools, post-primary schools and special schools were involved in the pilot project. The project focused on developing a tiered model of therapeutic intervention, delivered to children in their educational settings. Findings from an evaluation of this project [54] suggest that it was successful in providing therapeutic support in early childhood settings. The evaluation reports: an increase in staff confidence and ability in the early identification of children requiring additional support; increased competence in modifying classroom environments and teaching approaches to provide for all learners; and an understanding of each other's (educators and therapists) roles in terms of supporting all children in early childhood education [54]. Unfortunately, while the In-school Therapy Project is continuing in 75 schools, it has been paused in preschool settings notwithstanding its promising outcomes.



The transition from preschool onto primary school can be a challenge for some children [59]. In a national study exploring teachers, parents and children's perspectives on school readiness, children through both their narratives and drawings indicated that primary school was perceived in terms of: "the size of the buildings"; the limited availability for play; the centrality of homework and the importance of making friends" [59, 60]. Effective transition practices involve planning and communication between all stakeholders. In collaboration with teachers in preschools and primary schools, the NCCA recently developed *Mo Scéal: Moving from Preschool to Primary* [61]. This online resource bank includes a range of information and resources which can be used during the child's transition, namely the *Mo Scéal* or 'my story' templates which tell the child's learning journey so far. There is no requirement to use *Mo Scéal* but use of the tool clearly supports quality development through building communication and collaboration with schools and families, to nurture a positive transition experience for all.

The Reggio Emilia preschool programme in Northern Italy, underscores the significance of the environment through referring to it as the child's "Third Teacher" [62]. The environment shapes children's learning experiences and can promote, more or less, feelings of belonging, interactions, autonomy, individual interests, and a range of thinking and learning behaviours [22].

### *3.2.2 Programme of activities*

The content of children's preschool education has received much attention and reaching consensus around what children should learn during the preschool years remains challenging. The research in this area affirms the potential of playful emergent inquiry-based approaches which align with young children's learning needs and interests [23, 63, 64]. Moreover, longitudinal data such as that from the HighScope preschool curriculum comparison study, illustrate positive effects for a child-centred playful preschool curriculum through to adulthood [63]. Child-centred approaches have been found to propel the development of the whole child to an extent that those focusing on a narrower suite of academic skills, fail to do [23, 63, 64]. Taken together the research suggests that the quality of the programme of activities, or experienced curriculum, is supported when: it is guided by an evidenced-based national curriculum; affords teachers flexibility and autonomy to adapt to local needs and interests; focuses on developing the whole child; fosters integrated learning; is responsive to learner needs and interests; learning experiences oscillate between those which are child- and adult-led [21–23, 33].

Daily routines such as eating, resting and transitioning are core components of children's daily preschool experience and it is important that they are incorporated with, rather than being seen as separate to, the curriculum. Responsive daily routines are vital for wellbeing and development and provide valuable occasions for children to interact and learn with, their teachers and peers [22, 65].

### *3.2.3 Self-evaluation and reflection*

Where high-quality preschool provision exists self-evaluation and reflection are firmly rooted in whole-setting and individual planning processes. Reflection has been described as "remembering with analysis" [66]. The emergence of self-evaluation as a concept can be traced to the school improvement movement in 80s, where schools examined their policies and practice with reference to the education of all learners [67].




The 'self' in 'self' evaluation is associated with the teacher, learner or whole-school community. Both concepts are reflected in the principle of 'the teacher as researcher' as articulated in the philosophy of the Reggio-Emilia preschool programme [68]. Research has a particular meaning in this context related to intentional planning, observation in action of what has been planned, actively listening too children, reflecting on children's responses and using the reflections to make pedagogical decisions [69].

While there is a formal process for school-self-evaluation (SSE) in the Irish context, at preschool level, reflection and self-evaluation are encouraged as internal evaluation processes, which can be discussed during external inspections [10]. There is an explicit intention that the feedback from evaluation during inspection fosters professional reflection and internal evaluation, with the net effect of improving learning experiences and outcomes [10]. Research conducted by Daly and colleagues on educational provision for autistic children highlighted the progress in school self-evaluation processes at individual and school level with scope for further development at learner self-evaluation level [52]. Area 4. of the EYEI framework [10], which is focused on the Quality of Management and Leadership for Learning explicitly articulates an expectation that preschool settings, in line with *Aistear* and *Síolta*, engage in ongoing review, self-evaluation and reflection. These practices, in turn support the type of professional learning which impacts positively on the quality of practice.

#### 3.2.4 *The agentic child*

High-quality preschool education promotes children's agency, viewing them as co-constructors rather than receivers of the curriculum. Chiming with the extensive research on child agency, Ireland has proactively pursued a children's rights agenda ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992 and the UN Convention on the Rights Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2018 [6, 70]. The ratification of these conventions and their prominence across macro-meso- micro-policy levels related to creating an inclusive preschool system signals a government commitment to recognising and actioning the rights to which all children are entitled. Article 12 of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) explicitly articulates the right of the child to have their opinions taken into account and their perspectives respected in decision-making which impacts upon them, while in Ireland, children's right to have their voices heard and allocated due weight is further acknowledged in the Irish Constitution [6, 71, 72]. Article 7 of the CRPD mirrors the provisions of Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) [6], and extends the obligation to preserving the right of the child, with disabilities, to express their views freely on matters which impact upon them and ensuring that they receive appropriate support to realise this right.

Recent research conducted in the context of the evaluation of Phase One of the LINC programme explored children's encounters across three preschool settings in Ireland to develop an understanding of how children experience and perceive inclusion in their preschool environment [42]. The research employed an approach specifically to facilitate young children's participation developed by the authors – Exploring and Telling, which utilised video and a talking maths methodology [42]. **Table 2** provides a glimpse of children's activities with reference to Inclusive Culture; Inclusive Practice and Inclusive Pedagogy, suggesting that a focus on agency as a feature of provision is contributing to process quality.

Inclusive culture	Inclusive practice	Inclusive pedagogy
		
<p>Obstacle course designed in a both a universal and targeted manner to accommodate the child's needs and those of all children in the setting.</p>	<p>Child supported in taking a break from activities and select his own favourite book to read.</p>	<p>The INclusion CO-ordinator uses a 'First and Then' card with the child to support the child's agency in engaging in activities.</p>

**Table 2.**  
*Child agency across inclusive culture, inclusive practice, inclusive pedagogy.*

#### 4. Discussion and conclusion

High-quality inclusive pre-school education impacts positively on children, families and society, more broadly. High-quality programmes can have immediate and often longer-term benefits and can be most impactful for children considered at risk due to socio-economic disadvantage and/or children requiring targeted prevention and early intervention [21, 22, 73]. In a relatively short time, through a commitment to investment that focuses on structural and process aspects of quality across macro-meso-micro policy levels, Ireland has made significant progress on the path to developing a high-quality inclusive preschool system and in effect creating a preschool system where diversity becomes the norm [3]. The ongoing concern to reduce policy fragmentation through adopting cross-government approaches and the commitment in *First Five: A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies Young Children and their Families* [74] to considering how AIM can be enhanced or expanded to include, for example, all early learning and care services, school-aged childcare services, and children with additional needs other than those with a disability, based on relevant developments and evaluation findings is indicative of a proactive dynamic government response.

However, challenges remain with recent research suggesting that re-calibrating the focus of how inclusion is conceptualised to reflect the diversity of early childhood settings is timely in view of our developing understandings of difference and the move from a medically driven-deficit to a strengths-based approach that frames inclusion as a rights issue [43]. There is potential to extend the current AIM to provide for the equal participation of all children based on the principles of progressive universalism thereby ensuring the availability of high-quality inclusive preschool education with targeted prevention and intervention measures in place for the cohort of children for whom this is required. Acknowledging that ultimately, the quality of teaching remains the pre-eminent influence on a child's outcome [75], the provision of multi-professional/agency support to facilitate transdisciplinary/transagency working, equity in professional learning opportunities, pay and conditions and funding mechanisms will ultimately be the determinants of how far the Irish system progresses on its path towards creating a high-quality inclusive preschool system.

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