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A View from Scotland

Early Years Policy in the Four Nations: The Workforce: Common Challenges, Diverse Solutions

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the workforce in Scotland and attempts to offer some solutions to the challenges that surface in any reflection on the early years workforce not only in our four nations but globally. Far from wanting to make any assumptions there are nevertheless some givens: the international collaborations in which I have been fortunate to participate highlight some of these. Writing from University digs here in Australia two fans rotate to help combat today's temperature of 32°: due to rise further during the week to 39° or 40°. We have been up since before 7am this Sunday morning, to catch the cool and hoping for a glimpse of the pelicans, spoonbills and kangaroos we have been fortunate to see on other mornings. Nearby are colleagues from New Zealand, Sweden, Iceland and Australia: for all, issues of access, quality, curriculum, pedagogy and workforce are part of any discussion of early years provision for children up to 8 years old. Such discussions help me to reflect on what may be distinctive about Scotland's Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) context, on the entitlements, opportunities, expectations and aspirations held (Early Transitions and Change, 2015), and on the participation and contributions that will offer solutions.

The features I will highlight later in the week when we present at a high level policy conference in Canberra, will be that in Scotland we have a fully qualified workforce, some two-year olds and every child of three and four has a free entitlement to ELC, and we have a curriculum framework for three to six year olds, underpinned by complementary guidelines for under threes. Each of these policies operate in what remains a tightly coupled system linking Early Learning and Childcare with Primary Education.

The Policy Context

Scotland's policies for early years include the Early Years Framework (Scottish Government, 2008), Early Level Curriculum for Excellence 3-6 (Scottish Executive, 2007), Pre-birth to Three (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010), Pre-School to Primary Transitions Guidelines (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2011) and Getting it Right for Every Child (Scottish Government, 2012). These policies are underpinned by the Education Scotland Act (2000, 2009) and the Children and Young People's Act 2014.

Policy formulation in Scotland at the present time is like an extended conversation: discussion roams around policy aspirations, social justice, poverty and well-being, the range of provision, the composition of the work force, the extended hours offer for 2, 3 and 4 year olds, sustaining quality throughout the journey to expansion, and how

this should all be achieved. Much of the discussion focuses on structural matters, but if we are going to achieve all we aim for, or even some of it, we need to focus on relational matters. On people: children, families practitioners and their communities, and on the tools they have at their disposal.

Frameworks Supporting Practitioners

For the practitioners we have four frameworks in particular that offer elements of pedagogy to bring a policy shape to what they do: Pre-birth to Three (2010), Building the Curriculum 2- Active Learning in the Early Years (2007); Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) (2008 onwards) and Building the Ambition (2014b). To help each practitioner gauge their contribution and that of their own setting, we have the new How Good is Our Early Learning and Childcare (2016) which replaces our previous self-evaluation tool: Child at the Centre. A huge emphasis is placed on the contribution of the workforce, who are understood to be key to all aspirations for children and families: at the heart of all we do is the child.

Working to have children lead their learning through their interests, drive for meaning making, energies and vitalities means they need adults who understand what they need to do. Scotland prides itself on its early childhood education pioneers: initially and early, the philanthropist Robert Owen, who is famed for saying:

“At no age is the desire of knowledge stronger than in childhood”
Robert Owen (1781-1858)

By the early years of the 20th Century Nursery Schools and Child Gardens were opening in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee. The development of provision for children was matched by new courses to educate teachers: infant and nursery teacher specialisms developed as an additional year of teacher education. The primary influence of the family was increasingly understood. Working with families must therefore be a vital component of putting policies into practice.

Currently we are working strongly towards a fully qualified workforce in Scotland. This skilled and upskilled workforce has numbers of tools at its disposal: curriculum and pedagogy are central to this: appreciating and understanding each others' contributions will encourage the relational agency that Anne Edwards (2011) identifies as such a strength.

Scotland Today

Some quick statistics paint the picture of Scotland today – Scotland's population has just tipped 5 million, the independence referendum in 2015 turned any political apathy around in Scotland and people are much more likely to express and defend a view on all matters political than they were 18 months ago. This activation is related to the greater accessibility of politicians with a Scottish Parliament and their civil service. This activation is needed if we are to combat the greatest inequality of all:

income. Take up and indeed provision of food banks has risen exponentially, underlining food poverty as a Scotland wide issue. Education has always been seen as a means to move out of poverty. While families do not lack aspiration for their children, there may be a gulf between what is aspired to and what is expected.

Current figures suggest 20-22% children live in poverty as do their families. This can be in-work poverty or no-work poverty. What it means is that practitioners working with children and families need to “factor in an understanding of poverty”. (Educational Institute of Scotland, 2014, p.17). A mix of centralisation & fragmentation of policy responsibility can be understood to exacerbate poverty issues. While not the only policy challenge facing child and family policy in Scotland, the ambition to close the gap in outcomes between less well off and children from more affluent families is an absolute priority. There is a need for positive change to childhood experience for many children growing up in Scotland today.

Devolved and Reserved Matters

For a readership furth of Scotland is important to illustrate where control of policy is invested. In particular for the purposes of this paper it should be noted that education and training, health and social services, law and order, local government are among matters devolved to the Scottish Government and critically benefits and social security and employment are not.

| Devolved Matters | Reserved Matters |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • agriculture, forestry and fisheries • <i>education and training</i> • environment • <i>health and social services</i> • housing • <i>law and order</i> (including the licensing of air weapons) • <i>local government</i> • sport and the arts • tourism and economic development • many aspects of transport | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>benefits and social security</i> • immigration • defence • foreign policy • <i>employment</i> • broadcasting • trade and industry • nuclear energy, oil, coal, gas and electricity • consumer rights • data protection • the Constitution |

Table showing devolved and reserved matters, The Scottish Parliament

The separation of these powers between the UK Government in London and the Scottish Parliament does in fact raise a conundrum: in order to fulfill a logical cycle

of change, ideally the same jurisdiction would administer early years policies and policies such as employment, benefit and social security in tandem.

In political terms, Scotland is not short of policy – much of policy related to early childhood is ambitious and sound, but there remains a gap between the aspirations of policy and the reality of achieving those ambitions. The advent of the 32-local authority system in the late 1990s inevitably brought some fragmentation, with Local Authorities designing their own policies or their own versions of national policy for early years. Where central government policy is enacted in law then there is a response, where national policy is delivered through guidance implementation may be variable.

The Children's Workforce in Scotland

Scottish Government social policy can be seen to be about two things – family and economics. In 2011 a team from University of Strathclyde reported on a functional analysis of Scottish Policy as it affected the Children's Workforce at the time. This analysis helped to define what is now understood in Scotland as the "Children's Workforce" and supported the development of Core Competences for the Workforce so defined. In Scotland the Children's Workforce was defined then, and is still considered to be: "All those whose work affects the lives of children, their families and the communities in which they live" (Dunlop et al, 2011, page 6).

The report stated that there is "an aspiration to work collaboratively in the interests of children's wellbeing and in order to tackle the unequal childhoods that lead to unequal lives" (Dunlop et al, 2011, page 6). The Children's Workforce in Scotland can be understood to be multi-layered and multi-skilled. This model of a multi-layered workforce has emerged from the analysis of occupational standards, registration benchmarks and the wide range of existing services. The first layer of this workforce is made up of the practitioners that work all of the time with the same groups of children and families day-to-day and over time. It is this segment of the Workforce that this article focuses upon. There are however three other layers recognised in the Scottish Early Learning and Childcare Workforce and indeed for all children.

The second layer of the workforce includes groups of practitioners whose focus is to work with children and families all of the time, but whose work is with different children and families day-to-day. The third layer of the workforce is made up of all those who work with children and adults in communities, sometimes before they are parents, and includes careers advisors, the world of youth work and community learning and development. These are people whose primary focus is to build capacity within individuals and communities. This wider workforce may work with children but this is not their sole function: we have called this layer the 'enabling workforce'. The fourth layer of the workforce underpins and shapes the work of the three practitioner layers: this group includes strategic leaders and managers. The primary role of this group is to enable the Workforce through strategic direction and capacity

building. People in such positions may come from specialist fields from which typically the management roles are drawn – those in management roles may, but do not necessarily share the same specialist area as those they manage. These layers of practice exist in each branch of services for children and young people and families.

The key workforce competences identified were:

1. Committing to a holistic view of the child
2. Working inclusively with children and families
3. Planning, assessing, reflecting, and implementing strategically
4. Working in partnership with other agencies
5. Sharing information ethically
6. Promoting and supporting children’s learning and development
7. Ensuring children’s physical, emotional and social well-being
8. Identifying risks, preventing injury and weighing benefit
9. Protecting children and young people
10. Building capacity

Subsequently Scottish Government identified a Common Core of Skills, Knowledge & Understanding and Values for the “Children’s Workforce” (Scottish Government, 2012) underpinned by the UNCRC’s guiding principles. The “Common Core” was exemplified through two contexts: Relationships with children, young people and families and relationships between workers.

Alongside legislative issues is the drive to create change for families. Naomi Eisenstadt’s Report ‘Shifting the Curve (2016) explores three main issues – in-work poverty, housing affordability, and young people’s life chances – and provides a series of recommendations about each. The main recommendation concerning young children is:

“Ensure childcare commitments focus on quality to improve outcomes, and consider providing a limited number of free hours of childcare for primary school aged children”
(Recommendation 3, page 28)

Eisenstadt highlights the importance of high quality Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) settings, and referring to the Siraj and Kingston’s (2015) recent independent review of the workforce in Scotland, emphasises the role of qualifications for that workforce, saying

“Nursery managers in Scotland are required to have a childcare degree, and the Scottish Government has committed that, by 2018, every nursery in the most deprived areas will have an additional qualified teacher or childcare graduate.

However, while steps are already in hand to put higher qualified staff in poorer areas, more needs to be done to ensure early years practitioners are trained to the same

standard as teachers of children in school, and pay and conditions differentials are ironed out.” (page 11, *ibid*)

The implied connection between qualification levels and child outcomes is still poorly evidenced in Scotland. There is some evidence from course data and inspection that the practices change and learning experiences offered improve under the leadership of more highly qualified staff, but there remains a need for evidence of what it is that more highly qualified practitioners do and how this may link to child outcomes in the longer term (Dunlop, 2015).

Teachers in the Workforce

A recently published study (Dunlop et al, 2016) reports on the contribution of the GTCS-registered teacher to the early learning and Childcare workforce in Scotland, and at its heart is about equity for young children and the hopes and ambitions Scotland has for them. Scottish Government policy aspires to make Scotland the best place in the world to grow up. As discussed part of this ambition is to tackle child poverty in Scotland and narrow the gap that disadvantage brings to educational outcomes. At the same time as increasing the free entitlement to early learning and childcare (ELC) with the aim of this rising to 1,140 hours per year by 2020, there has been, over the last 10 years in Scotland, a 29% reduction in the numbers of GTCS-registered teachers employed in such services, but only a 4% drop in child numbers, which gives a ratio of 1 teacher to 84 children at this important stage. The most recent Scottish Government statistics result in a new figure of 39% reduction over a ten year period.

Evidence was gathered by:

1. Accessing publicly held current data on early years provision and staffing in Scotland
2. Mapping the perceptions held by early years GTCS-registered teachers of the roles they play and contributions they make in ELC through an audit questionnaire;
3. Focusing a literature review on key concepts such as relational agency, professional beliefs and practices; children's experiences and the wider role of teachers with families, community and fellow professionals;
4. Holding a series of regional focus groups with GTCS-registered teachers to understand the part they play in early learning and childcare prior to school and into primary 1, and to identify the support and barriers they encounter in fulfilling their role.

The survey drew 1440 respondents who represented teachers working both in ELC and in or supporting the early stages of primary schooling. The Focus Groups held highlighted teacher contributions through seven themes of importance and significance to them:

- Knowledge and delivery of the curriculum and understanding its intentions and pedagogy.
- Leadership and vision.
- Specialist training and qualifications and whose benefit these are for.
- Working with parents and in the community with a particular emphasis on deprivation.
- Progressing learning through skills in the cycle of Observation, Assessment, Planning, Recording and Reporting.
- Supporting transitions, into nursery and out of it in to primary school.
- The nursery teacher as a mentor and trainer of others

A similar depth of information is needed in relation to others in the Workforce, in order to fully understand what the most favourable composition of the workforce may be to achieve the ambitions Scotland has for its children.

The Future

Presently a new focus on raising attainment for all through the Scottish Attainment Challenge, an incentive programme to improve school outcomes; the expansion of ELC hours, international PISA results and implementation of the 3-6 Early Level of the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence, combine to place a major focus on the workforce being “fit for purpose” (Early Years Framework, 2008). Scottish Government has now considered and decided which of Siraj & Kingston’s recommendation to take forward and part of that process will be to review staff qualifications and conditions of employment, the composition of the workforce and recruitment.

Such common challenges as described here exist across our four nations, solutions will of necessity be diverse as they determine to take account of local context, different systems, policy shifts and new aspirations. What we do hold in common is what I see as the right of children to responsive and knowledgeable adults who can support children to develop their learning disposition, emotional wellbeing and funds of knowledge as they begin their journeys through our early and school learning systems. Scotland’s ambition for the expansion of the Early Learning and Childcare hours offer is likely to explore blended models (Scottish Government, 2016). The solution to our common challenges may be what could be called “a blended workforce”

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