

# Professionalisation of early childhood education and care practitioners: Working conditions in Ireland

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/cie](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/cie)**Geraldine Mooney Simmie**  and **Dawn Murphy**

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## Abstract

The last decade has revealed a global (re)configuring of the relationships between the state, society and educational settings in the direction of systems of performance management. In this article, the authors conduct a critical feminist inquiry into this changing relationship in relation to the professionalisation of early childhood education and care practitioners in Ireland, with a focus on dilemmatic contradictions between the policy reform ensemble and practitioners' reported working conditions in a doctoral study. The critique draws from the politics of power and education, and gendered and classed subjectivities, and allows the authors to theorise early childhood education and care professionalisation in alternative emancipatory ways for democratic pedagogy rather than a limited performativity. The findings reveal the state (re)configured as a central command centre with an over-reliance on surveillance, alongside deficits of responsibility for public interest values in relation to the working conditions of early childhood education and care workers, who are mostly part-time 'pink-collar' women workers in precarious roles. The study has implications that go beyond Ireland for the professionalisation of early childhood education and care workers and meeting the early developmental needs of young children.

## Keywords

critical feminist inquiry, early childhood education and care, emancipatory possibilities, performativity, professionalisation

## Introduction

The last decade has revealed a global (re)configuring of relationships between the state, society and educational settings in the direction of systems of performance management. In this article, we focus on this changing relationship in early childhood education and care (ECEC) advanced by transnational policy influencers such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

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Development for systems of limited performativity – *Starting Strong* (OECD, 2001, 2018, 2019). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, a policy influencer in 37 countries, stresses the importance, on the one hand, of quality standards and governance of staff–child interactions and, on the other, the working conditions of ECEC practitioners, including pay and conditions, and access to continuing professional development and qualifications. Moreover, its focus is on a quality reform agenda – an edu-business model that aligns with increasing competition between private providers as market-based solutions to the low status of ECEC workers, poor remuneration, low skill sets and qualifications, and poor uptake of professional development opportunities (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019). Hunkin (2021: 205–206) interrogates this rapidly changing policy direction in ECEC reforms in Australia and the political orientation towards a ‘coordinated, global quality reform movement through packages and programmes that systematise, standardise, “improve” and regulate education in early childhood settings’ – a ‘quality’ movement, she argues, that needs challenging on ‘ontological and epistemological grounds’. McGillivray (2008: 244–245) recognises that ‘constructs of children and childhood and those who work with children are woven together from cultural and economic strands within society’. The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted recognition of the crucial importance of the ECEC sector to social and economic well-being, and a new urgency to theorise alternative approaches.

The study reported here focuses on dilemmatic contradictions and tensions between the policy reform ensemble in Ireland and ECEC practitioners’ reported working conditions found in a doctoral study (Murphy, 2018). Our aim was to answer the call for evidence in policymaking in the ECEC sector and to advocate for the working conditions of workers – not as an individual problem of career choice for the primacy of markets but instead as education’s ethical and political responsibility for public interest values (Mooney Simmie and Moles, 2020). Ireland has an emerging rhetoric of ECEC professionalisation, which can be seen in a new 10-year government strategy and increased public subsidisation of the early years (Government of Ireland, 2018). However, ECEC in Ireland is for the most part a private enterprise based on a neo-liberal imaginary of consumer choice and aligned to the global quality reform movement, rather than a holistic, organic, nurturing, agentic notion of relational care and pedagogy (O’Regan et al., 2019). Moreover, Ireland has a cultural historical context where, until relatively recently, all women, and especially poor women and more recently women of colour, were deeply embedded in a patriarchal society where care work was cheapened and (un)seen as ‘women’s work’ (Lynch and Crean, 2019). The *Final report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes*, examining the period 1922–1998, reveals the extent of this patriarchal society up to and including the mid 1970s:

Ireland was a cold harsh environment for many, probably the majority, of its residents during the earlier half of the period under remit. It was especially cold and harsh for women. All women suffered serious discrimination. Women who gave birth outside marriage were subject to particularly harsh treatment . . . It was supported by, contributed to, and condoned by, the institutions of the State and the Churches. (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, 2021: 1)

The doctoral study reported here draws from theoretical frameworks in the politics of power and education – in particular, the gendered and classed subjectivities of ECEC workers (Apple, 2006, 2012; Foucault, 1991, 1994; hooks, 1994). This allowed us to critically scrutinise the dilemmatic contradictions between policy texts and the perspectives of ECEC workers, and to theorise an alternative emancipatory view of ECEC education and care, where complexity and recognition are taken into account in authentic pedagogical encounters of democratic relations with young children, rather than a perfect technology of limited performativity.

'Professionalisation' is defined by Osgood (2006a: 5) as 'a social and political project or mission designed to enhance the interests of an occupational group'. It is this concern for the working conditions of ECEC workers, and, in particular, the gendered and classed positioning of ECEC workers and its inextricable link with emancipatory practices, that interests us in this study. Vincent and Braun argue that conceptualisations differ widely between workers and policymakers:

The label of professionalism and the source of its appeal rest on societal assumptions of the autonomy, discretion, status and self-regulation open to professional occupational groups. However, the state's promise of professionalism to ECEC workers is one rooted in a contemporary context of accountability and performativity and is likely to have little impact on the workforce's low status and low pay. (Vincent and Braun, 2011: 777)

First, we outline a compact of theoretical frameworks for a critical feminist inquiry drawn from the politics of power and education to reveal the gendered and classed subjectivities of a cohort of ECEC workers in Ireland in contemporary times (Apple, 2006, 2012; Foucault, 1991, 1994; hooks, 1994). A critical feminist framework reveals the assumptions inherent in a neo-liberal/elite framing of the problem under scrutiny: 'Feminists' critical policy analyses see through symbolic inaction and are suspicious of policy actors' rhetoric and policies with no enforcement. Symbolic policy can be harmful, like the placebo that gives only the pretence of treatment' (Marshall, 1999: 62). Second, we examine a select literature review showing that researchers internationally are all grappling with low status and poor working conditions in the ECEC sector (Chang-Kredl, 2018; Chang-Kredl et al., 2019; Hunkin, 2021; Moss, 2006, 2007; Osgood, 2006a, 2006b, 2009; Taggart, 2011; Urban, 2008). Third, we outline the research methodology for this inquiry: a critical feminist policy analysis and an empirical study of ECEC workers' perspectives using a purposive sample of 104 workers who completed a national survey and, within this sample, 11 participants who took part in interviews (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Marshall, 1999; Ozga, 2019). Fourth, the findings from the study are discussed (Murphy, 2018). We conclude with implications not only for this occupational sector, in Ireland and elsewhere, but also for ECEC researchers' wider heuristic responsibility for emancipatory possibilities for the educability of every child for a good life in a democratic society and just global world.

## **The politics of power in educational settings**

Education, understood as a normative field, fails to reveal the differential power relations in a hierarchy of knowers who are increasingly hidden within new networks, assemblages, flat structures and social partnerships (Apple, 2006, 2012). This study aims to widen the problem beyond hegemonic understandings which suggest that ECEC takes place on a level playing field of multiple policy actors where ECEC workers are empowered both to comply with and to resist the current regulatory gaze in a data-driven system of management (Fenech and Sumsion, 2007). Instead, the study aims to question who benefits from the current structures, subjectivities and practices, and to theorise alternative emancipatory possibilities for ECEC workers' conditions and development opportunities (Apple, 2006, 2012; Foucault, 1991, 1994; hooks, 1994).

The ideas and concepts drawn from Foucault become a starting place for building a layered theoretical compact. Foucault understood the complexity of power, the presence of discursive spaces to comply with regulatory policies, and the agency not only to refuse and resist but also to go beyond and reconceptualise alternatives. Power is understood as being exercised at every level and in all interactions: 'Power is fluid and multidirectional, local and unstable' (Fenech and Sumsion, 2007: 111). Foucault (1994: 120) recognised the integral place of power in society and

identified the ‘welfare of the population’ as a government priority, where the family was instrumental to this regulatory project. The central positioning of the family and social relations is a timely question given that the COVID-19 pandemic prompts everyone to re-evaluate who they identify as belonging to their familial circle/social bubble. Osgood and Sterling Henward (2020) discuss what this might mean for the ECEC sector. Foucault (1991: 200) draws on Bentham’s panopticon to show how the regulatory gaze induces ‘in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power’ and compliance, despite the possibility of its absence. Foucault (1991) recognised that, in any regulatory system, people must have a felt sense of ownership and find the system enabling and advantageous to well-being rather than its absence.

Drawing from a Foucauldian lens widens our understanding of the complexity of power and opens new possibilities of alternative frameworks for the ECEC sector. Nonetheless, it fails to do justice to the often subtle historical and invidious nature of the silencing and suppression involved in the (re)positioning of ECEC workers in current discourses. For this reason, we added Apple’s (2006, 2012) theorisation of education and power. Apple recognises that while every policy actor has agency, education is not a level playing field where everyone has equal status and voice. In addition, Apple’s theorisations draw attention to the gender pay gap that exists between men and women doing the same work. The economic dividend from globalisation is creating a deeply unequal world:

For many women it is often worse. Since so many of them work in ‘pink-collar’ jobs and in the competitive low wage sector . . . they are frequently condemned to relative material impoverishment . . . inadequate health and pension benefits, or non-existent labour unions seem to be the rule. (Apple, 2012: 5)

hooks’ (1994) theorisation of education and politics, class, race, sex and gender adds another vital layer to the writings of Foucault and Apple, and widens our lens on the problem of the emerging professionalisation of ECEC workers. hooks was concerned with sexism, stereotyping and the dominance inherent in the servant-served encounter experienced by poor – mostly black – women, and the historical obstacles to the work of political solidarity between all women and men interested in promoting women in society. hooks (1994) interrogates competitive rivalries – of social standing, gender, sex and race – between different women in patriarchal societies (93–111). Competition between women of different social standing weakens political solidarity:

The degree to which white women are able to turn away from domestic reality, from the responsibility of child care and housework, whether they are turning away for careers or greater leisure, is determined by the extent to which black women, or some other underclass group, are bound to that labour, forced by economic circumstances to pick up the slack, to assume responsibility. (100)

hooks draws from feminist understandings of relational care in educational settings:

Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions, I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions – a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is this movement which makes education the practice of freedom. (12)

This theoretical compact of frameworks from Foucault, Apple and hooks helped us to position the problem of ECEC workers’ conditions as an important educational, political and intersectional question in education’s social responsibility for public interest values. Whose responsibility is it for ECEC workers’ conditions? Is it a private question of choice, a provider question or a wider ethical and political question for the educability of all children and the common good of society?

## Early years literature

Early years research from the turn of the century offers a strong critique of the human capital stance adopted in international policies (Urban, 2008: 138). Grieshaber and Graham (2017: 100) show how pedagogical and political concerns in ECEC become reduced to matters of functionality, where the ECEC worker is someone ‘who is constantly upskilling; performing the work of a qualified teacher but not being remunerated as a teacher, and not being represented equitably in political decision-making space’. This neo-liberal/elite imaginary is in sharp contrast to an emancipatory view of an educator acting as a creative and critical interpreter and translator of policy. Public perceptions of ECEC workers are often connected to stereotypical images, such as the ‘substitute mother’ (Osgood and Sterling Henward, 2020) working within a private orbit. Osgood (2006a, 2006b, 2009) shows how this increased fragmentation considerably weakens the positioning of workers.

There are emerging differences between countries in approaches to improving ECEC workers’ qualifications, regulations and professionalisation, pay and working conditions (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019). Moss (2006) notes that, in the early years of this century, pay parity between primary and pre-primary teachers was agreed in principle in New Zealand. However, by 2020, Neuwelt-Kearns and Ritchie (2020), in their ‘combat poverty’ report, revealed that the problem of the split ECEC workforce – a highly qualified minority of teachers and a lower qualified majority of childcare workers – and the neo-liberal movement to privatisation had dashed such ambitions and absolved the government of responsibility in this regard.

The research landscape in early years reveals the low status and poor working conditions of ECEC workers in most parts of the globe. ECEC workers with low status, remuneration and qualifications continue to languish in precariat environments (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019: 15). There are persistent calls in the early years literature to reclaim the sector in new ways that call up alternative frameworks of ECEC practice and worker subjectivities (Chang-Kredl, 2018; Chang-Kredl et al., 2019; Moss, 2006, 2007; Osgood, 2006a, 2006b, 2009; Urban, 2008). Chang-Kredl et al. (2019) reveal ECEC worker suppression through media portrayals of stereotypical identities and intersectionalities of gender, race and ethnicity. Hunkin asserts that the role of ECEC in a democracy extends far beyond perceived economic dividends and posits that

we must not be content with the limited, economic answers they provide to these rich, complex and personal questions. For edu-quality regimes cannot acknowledge the cultural, moral, ethical and transformational potentials . . . nor critical and diverse viewpoints . . . meaning that without interception they will continue to reshape the sector with devastating impacts. (Hunkin, 2021: 206)

## Methodology

The research design was justified as a critical feminist inquiry of policy texts and reported working conditions in relation to the key question of the professionalisation of ECEC practitioners in Ireland. A critical feminist research design takes into account power and politics in relation to the classed and gendered status and conditions of ECEC workers. A critical feminist standpoint was used for the analysis of policy texts: ‘through the linked principles of reflexivity and problematisation (in the) sociology of education (in order to) reveal both its construction, and its role in constructing society’ (Ozga, 2019: 11).

The critique draws from a theoretical compact of Apple (2006, 2012), Foucault (1991, 1994) and hooks (1994) as explanatory frameworks revealing the reflexive positioning of the authors and the dilemmatic contradictions and tensions between the rhetoric of reform policies and the reported understandings of a purposive sample of ECEC workers in a doctoral study in Ireland (Mooney Simmie, 2018). The study involved two phases. First there was a critical feminist policy analysis

of ECEC policy in Ireland from 2005 to 2018 against the backdrop of the influence of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Second, an empirical study of ECEC workers' perspectives was undertaken in relation to emerging professional identities, pay and working conditions. A purposive sample of 104 workers in a national survey was used and, within this cohort, 11 participants took part in interviews. The overall study was set within what Creswell and Creswell define as a transformative emancipatory world view:

research inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political change agenda to confront social oppression at whatever level it occurs . . . an action agenda for reform that may change lives of the participants, the institutions in which individuals work or live, and the researcher's life. (Creswell and Creswell, 2018: 9)

Marshall (1999: 60) provides a rationale for critical feminist policy analysis and shows how 'gender research issues seldom connect to policy and how policy researchers collude with this evasion'. She argues that critical feminist policy analysis widens the education policy debate and moves class stratification and gender inequalities away from simplistic methodologies and essentialising labels:

statisticians are fond of sorting by neat demographic categories: by sex, age, socioeconomic status, and so on. Critical feminist analysis insists on recognition of complexity – that the categories are mixed, have many elements that make up whole beings, and are not static but evolve. (Marshall, 1999: 63)

The data analysis was carried out in iterative stages and the findings were generated from extensive readings with and against the grain of the theoretical frameworks and the data set. SPSS was used to create descriptive and inferential statistics for the quantitative data, and NVivo was used to assist with coding the qualitative data. The data sets were continually and iteratively subjected to the researchers' critical and feminist interpretation of the data. Multiple methods of data collection and analysis assured the data's trustworthiness.

## Findings

The findings are now presented, first, from the critique of policy documents and, second, as themes emerging from the analysis of the questionnaires and interviews.

### *ECEC policy reform ensemble in Ireland*

Before the 2000s, Ireland offered a strong cultural resistance to any form of state intervention in the life of the family – a patriarchal concept where women were not expected to work outside the home, which was a right found in the Irish Constitution. This changed with increased education and employment opportunities, especially in the 2000s (the Celtic Tiger years). The education system is unique as a publicly aided system where the trusteeship and patronage of the majority of schools rests with the Irish Catholic bishops (e.g. 92% of primary schools). We identified three timelines in the policy process: first, a period from 1999 to 2007 where Ireland's economy was booming; second, the decade after Ireland's financial collapse from 2008 to 2018 that marked economic austerity; and, third, reforms from 2018 to date, where Ireland's policy strategy is to open ECEC settings and live with the COVID-19 pandemic.



## *ECEC reforms 1999–2007*

Ireland's development of ECEC provision was a slow, reactive and unplanned process, and it only became a feature of society in the late 1990s following pressure from rapidly changing labour markets, especially as more women entered the workforce (Hayes, 2010). In 1999, the Department of Education and Skills published a *White Paper on Early Childhood Education* after a period of consultation with the National Forum for Early Childhood Education (Government of Ireland, 1999). This was the start of the state articulating its vision, values and principles in relation to the ECEC sector.

ECEC settings include the home, voluntary/community centres and private provision. The White Paper described an expansive remit of 'facilitating quality early education for all' (Government of Ireland, 1999: 68). However, it revealed a market-led discourse, suggesting ECEC as an investment for individuals' prospects of finishing school and gaining employment, and an investment for society that would yield higher economic growth and productivity (15). State responsibilities were tightly confined to a national qualifications framework and a quality assurance service. It was to 'consider providing limited funding for the upgrading of facilities and materials to enable provision of quality early childhood education' (60).

After consultation with the National Co-ordinating Childcare Committee and others, a model framework was introduced for the education, training and development of ECEC workers (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2002). A detailed curriculum for ECEC practitioners was provided and five types of practitioner were identified depending on experience and qualifications: basic, intermediate, experienced, advanced and expert practitioners. A priority issue at the time was securing a system of recognised qualifications.

The report recognised the low status of ECEC workers, and this was expressed as a private issue of career choice rather than an issue of public priority: 'salaries are extremely low in both sessional and full-day care, reflecting its very low status as a career' (ibid: 9). State-funded investment in the ECEC sector began with support from European structural funds and was directed towards the provision of places rather than the working conditions and development of workers. The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme, with a budget of €499 million in 2000 (Hayes and Bradley, 2006: 168), provided 34,000 additional ECEC places.

## *ECEC reforms 2008–2018*

In the decade after the global recession of 2008, coinciding with a financial crash in Ireland (2011–2013), an economic policy of austerity was introduced in all public services, including ECEC. At the peak of this storm, the Early Childhood Care and Education reform programme was introduced. This provided free preschool for children of eligible age for 3 hours a day, 5 days a week for 38 weeks of the year (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2019), initially for one year and later upgraded to two. Payments from the state were made directly to ECEC service providers, of which 74% were private providers (Hayes, 2010).

Mistrust of authority figures in Irish society grew exponentially in the years that followed, with revelations, from the mid to late 1990s onwards, of church abuse scandals by authority figures in what were publicly trusted educational institutions for babies and young children. By 2016, the political stage was set for the introduction of new low-trust modes of regulation in the ECEC sector, heralding the large-scale introduction of a new politics of systems of performance management. A new national system of quality inspections, aptly named the Early Years Education Inspection, was introduced (Department of Education and Skills, 2018).

## ECEC reforms 2018–2020

By 2011, 50% of three-year-olds were in home settings in parental or guardian care; only 10% were in ECEC care centres; more than 14% were in a relative's care; and another 12% were in a child-minder's or nanny's care. ECEC workers were required to hold a minimum of Level 5 on the National Qualifications Authority framework. By 2017, 26.8% of workers held this standard, with a higher number holding Level 6 (41.8%) or above (Pobal, 2019: 118).

The Irish government introduced a 10-year policy strategy in 2018 to address ECEC: the *First 5* policy document (Government of Ireland, 2018). The policy presents an ambitious wish list for a 'graduate-led professional ELC [early learning and childcare] workforce' by 2028; the 'introduction of a new funding model for ELC'; and a 'strengthened governance structure at national and local level' in order to 'improve affordability, accessibility and quality' (Government of Ireland, 2018: 11). And it notes the current high costs of early learning and childcare borne by parents and guardians in Ireland: €177.92 per week in 2017–2018.

Despite policy priorities for higher credentials in the early years, there was no official increase in recognition, status or financial remuneration for such attainment. ECEC workers were paid close to the minimum wage, with a derisory difference of €3.37 in the hourly rate found in 2019 between those with the lowest and highest qualifications: Level 4 (€12.25), Level 5 (€11.42), Level 6 (€12.63), Level 7 (€13.93), Level 8 (€13.45) and Level 9/10 (€15.18; Pobal, 2019: 138). While state funding for the sector increased yearly – around €640 million per year with an additional €75 million in 2020 to support reopening after the COVID-19 lockdown – it remained deeply unfavourable in European terms (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2020).

In summary, in terms of the professionalisation of ECEC workers, the policy ambitions for the early years in Ireland were to be enacted by subsidies to private providers to hire the most qualified; a new system of continuing professional development for pre-primary teachers to be aligned with the current primary teacher system; and a top-down regime of regulation and inspection. However, there was no recognition afforded to, or responsibility accepted for, crucial questions of the problem of the precariat employment of ECEC practitioners.

## ECEC workers' understandings

The purposive sample of ECEC workers in this study held the minimum Level 5 qualification and 97.1% were female, which corresponds well with national statistics (98.2%; Pobal, 2019: 124). Nine of the eleven interviewees were female. Similar to the national profile, 72% of the practitioners were under 45 years old (Pobal, 2019: 124). The findings revealed that this cohort consisted mostly of female part-time precariat workers – what Apple (2012: 5) calls 'pink-collar workers' – a superordinate theme that is further elaborated across each of the following subthemes: responsibilities, recognition, remuneration, regulation and representation.

**Responsibilities.** The ECEC workers were anxious to share how much they enjoyed early years work with young children and described their responsibilities as varied, with a multiplicity of job titles. Their work extended beyond the education and care of babies and young children and included many domestic, cleaning and other manual tasks. A typical day appeared as a series of routines undertaken with the children. It became quickly apparent how much was expected of the workers:

Half 10 is lunch, 15, 20 minutes. The big guys have to get the lunch, get their own lunches, put them away, tidy up and then, when we've done that, then work-wise, then, for the smaller ones, there's worksheets, then, you know it's all phonics and sounds, handwriting. They've all books. We've another up in the press that's all completed. It's art and story and dance every day. (Nicola) (pseudonyms are used for all participants)



I do the downstairs bathroom for one of the girls and I just give it, like, a quick mop. And then, yeah, so the kids, then, would have their tea or that, and we'd collect the dishes and that, and do you know, like, they're like, and we'd either put them into the dishwasher or we'd be washing by hand. (Amy)

Acknowledging the increased levels of record-keeping required to satisfy the Early Years Education Inspection, the participants showed that there was no in-built provision of non-contact time for this work:

When they're having their free play, obviously because there'd be two (childcare workers) still in the room, and then you'd get your time to do it. But even at that, you just sit by the round tables, and when the children are doing their own thing you can always do this work during that time. (Emma)

We sit down once a month and do our observations. We're a team for the observations. It's not just [Nicola] does them. We both do them and, like, we alternate the children as well, so, like, she does one month with one group and I do the other, and we swap over then, so we can see each other's different attitudes. It's all in our own time. Yeah, all in our time. (Elaine)

**Recognition.** The participants' job titles and responsibilities showed neither clarity nor coherence and relayed the public perception of their role as childminding, adding ambiguity to recognition of their role:

The majority of people see it as babysitting that, even family and stuff. They see it as, 'Oh, what are you going and doing a degree for?' And I think a lot of it has to do with the government and the pay, and the fact that previously you didn't need qualifications to work with children, and it's only in the last few years you've needed them, and like you wouldn't let your child go to primary school with someone who wasn't qualified or had enough qualifications, but yet they see you and they don't care really. They just drop them off and they actually don't know what your qualifications are. (Kate)

When the parents are dropping them in, it's like, 'Oh, you get to play with them all day while I'm going to work'. Hello, like, what am I doing? It's like they do their thing all day. It's like you're their babysitter. They've no understanding. (Emma)

Childminding – that's what they think it is. They don't see that we are preschool educators. That's what we are: we are preschool educators. (Elaine)

I think that's the way that childcare has been viewed in Ireland and probably a good part of the western world since whenever, you know. So, I'm not criticising parents but I think there is a lack of information, of knowledge, of what exactly childcare is and what goes into it. Well, hopefully that changes now when people realise that now you do need to have at least a Level 5 to be in there, so that might filter down to parents at some stage – that, you know, these people are trained, these people are educated. (Joe)

Lynch et al. (2012: 178) identify the existence of a care ceiling whereby, culturally, women are posited as 'default carers'. This is a concept that resonates with the following comments:

I think that because it's mostly women, you know, people think, oh, you know, that's what you're meant to be doing anyway. I think that, you know, people think, 'Oh sure, you're minding two of your own anyway, what's 20 more'. (Kate)

Despite expressing positive dispositions towards further education and development, the findings revealed a multitude of constraints for this cohort of ECEC workers (see Table 1). Given the precariat nature of the work, any quest for credentials was offset by potential loss of earnings that

**Table 1.** Challenges for ECEC workers wishing to engage with further education.

Challenge	p (degree of significance)
Conflicting course and work days	.059 (not significant)
Loss of earnings	.027 (significant)
Little availability of weekend/evening courses	.017 (significant)
Time commitment	.010 (significant)
Few job opportunities	.081 (not significant)
No increase in wages	< .050 (significant)
Cost of courses	< .050 (significant)

workers might need to forego in order to engage with coursework outside the working day, the prohibitive cost of courses and the lack of remuneration for any credentials received (Pobal, 2019).

The workers considered that the reforms mostly benefit the providers, given that capitation grants per child increase on a sliding scale for the provider based on the qualifications of the workers but the sliding scale for the remuneration of the workers remains tightly confined:

Of course, most people are looking for Level 6 because of the free preschool [payment]. (Cian)

I'm doing Level 6 now. But its Level 7, Level 8 nearly is what they definitely want now and anything above that, even though you'd still be still on the same minimum wage. (Emma)

It can be a bit depressing. I mean, you ask yourself why you're doing this. I mean, in my class, there's only 11 and then the people doing the social care, I think there's about 40, because the wages are higher. And, you know, you're in the class and it is a lot of work and a lot of stress, and you think why, why are you doing this to yourself? But you hope that, when you're finished, things might have changed. (Kate)

I know it happened in one place that the lady encouraged or forced staff to go and get more qualifications so that she'd get (the government grant) but, you know, she wasn't supporting them in any way. She wasn't giving them any more money. She wasn't giving them any money towards doing their course and it just created such bad feeling. (Claire)

**Remuneration.** Remuneration is a significant issue in the professionalisation of members of an occupation. It is not only concerned with wages and employment contracts, but also connected to societal status, study leave, sick pay, bonus payments, development opportunities, pension rights, and so on. The 'pink-collar workers' in this study earned, on average, €10.10 per hour, which is less than what is understood as a living wage (€12.30 per hour). The turnover rate for the sector is high:

Me and my partner are renting at the moment and we want to buy but we can't get a mortgage with my wages. So, you're after getting your qualification and you want to stay in childcare, but you need to be able to pay your mortgage as well. (Kate)

Poor rates of pay present multiple challenges, financial difficulties, and a societal lack of respect and value for the work undertaken. The participants made comparisons between working in the ECEC sector and alternative types of employment, including working in a well-known supermarket chain (Aldi) or the hospitality sector:

I heard last week that people in Aldi are getting €11 an hour, and there are SNAs [Special Needs Assistants] that don't even have Level 5 and they're getting €22 an hour, and you're getting €8 maybe €9 something an hour. (Kate)

I think, like, they don't get the recognition that they need, like, they should be getting and that, and then, like, it's really bad, the pay is really bad, like, you're on minimum wage, like, I would get the same working as, like, a waiter. (Amy)

We get paid for doing 38 weeks of the year. There's 52 weeks in the year. I'm self-employed. I can't sign on the dole and the other childcare worker is the same. She can't sign on either. So, what are we to do for money? Every parent, I guarantee you, every parent thinks that we get paid for 52 weeks of the year, not 38. (Nicola)

Lynch et al. (2012: 14) recognise how the altered emphasis of education from care to performativity diminishes practitioner autonomy whilst also effectively casualising labour. Similarly, in conversation about their working conditions, Nicola and Elaine described the demanding nature of a job that has no formal rest or well-being breaks:

They don't realise we've no lunch break. (Nicola)

We don't take a lunch break. (Elaine)

Yeah, we've no coffee break, you know. If you take in the hours, we get a quarter of an hour in the morning, a quarter of an hour in the afternoon, and that takes us up to half past 4, (the end of the day). (Nicola)

The intense pace of the work was echoed by Claire, who recognised the psychological and emotional impact of the poor working conditions in addition to the physical ramifications:

How can you have confidence in yourself and how can you have pride in yourself if you're being paid the minimum wage? And you feel that every ounce of work, you know, that you feel you're being made to work, I mean. And I saw that you barely get enough time to have a break. You barely get enough time to go to the bathroom, and you're being offered barely enough money to cover your petrol. (Claire)

**Regulation.** The participants' reactions to the Early Years Education Inspection were mixed. Some of the participants expressed a desire for unannounced inspections and others reported feeling disconnected from a tick-box approach:

For the first five years I was there, nobody came out, so I couldn't understand. Why was that? So, it needed to be done, definitely more inspections. I don't know about letting schools know about when they are going to come. They should come on the hop . . . It's like nursing homes or anything like that, hospitals, they should be just on the spot. If they came not in a big fancy-pants car, cause they'll all be waiting for the big fancy-pants car – if they have a bike, go on the bike, just get in there on the hop and see what's really going on. (Emma)

I'm here 20-something years and some years I had two inspections a year in here but I haven't had anybody in three years telling me what they want. Only now the guys that come in from Dublin with the laptops, that there could be 40 kids here, they actually don't care. As long as my register matches their laptop, and my role book. Pobal is the only one we've had from Dublin, but they couldn't care less about them little lads there. (Nicola)

Lynch et al. (2012: 199) recognise the growth of new managerialism in education, and the participants' experiences of working in ECEC appeared to bear testament to this:

There was one lady came from Tusla I think it was. She just came in with an iPad and just checked the number of children. I think it was in relation to the grant, that was what she was inspecting – just that this lady had the number of children she had applied for. I think she asked where the fire exit was and then she left. (Claire)

**Representation.** Another significant aspect of ECEC professionalisation is the social and political project of (public) representation. While the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) seeks a collective-bargaining voice for ECEC workers, such as making pre-budget submissions to government in relation to worker pay and conditions, this work is only in its infancy and is not without challenges. To date, there has been no state/societal ambition declared in relation to public intervention in working conditions (sick leave, study leave, holiday pay, etc.) for ECEC workers. The participants regarded trade union membership as an essential element of their professionalisation:

I know I keep going back to the idea of the union but I think it's a very important part for the profession. There's strength in numbers. Like, I've been talking to a few people, like, you know, who are in the work placement now, that I was and they were, like, if they had a union, it would be great because there probably would be more funding towards keeping childcare places open, especially good ones. (Cian)

I never really thought about unions but I think, yeah, like, everybody knows if the teachers are on strike, or so it would maybe be a way of bringing childcare workers together. (Kate)

I was never a member of a union, but maybe, maybe it could work. But I suppose if you need a voice, it's very hard to have a voice in this country and sometimes you just become exhausted. (Claire)

## Concluding comments

In this study, we problematised the professionalisation of ECEC practitioners in Ireland within a globalised policy reform context that (re)configures ECEC as a system of performance management (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001, 2018, 2019). We used a critical feminist inquiry as an explanatory framework to widen the problem and glimpse the reported lived reality of a cohort of ECEC practitioners in Ireland (Apple, 2006, 2012; Foucault, 1991, 1994; hooks, 1994). In a post-theocracy Ireland, there was evidence of an emerging professional identity for ECEC workers (O'Regan et al., 2019). SIPTU, the trade union for the early childhood education sector, with over 6000 members, organised a massive public protest in the spring of 2020 in an Early Years Alliance with a number of non-governmental organisations, including workers, parents/guardians and providers (Ní Aodha, 2020). The protest called for (re)configuring ECEC as a public rather than private service and demanded radical reform of the sector and a decent wage and entitlements for workers – points that were later made by SIPTU in a pre-budget submission in 2021 (Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union, 2021).

The early years research literature shows that ECEC workers are (re)configured as docile functionaries in a preoccupation with standardised applications that meet objective modes of accountability measures for attaining optimal developmental outcomes for very young children (Fenech et al., 2010). The review shows how Foucauldian technologies of governmentality are embedded in ECEC systems and how they generate a new normal of regulatory gazes in what is clearly a field of differential power relations (Chang-Kredl, 2018; Moss, 2006, 2007; Osgood, 2006a, 2006b, 2009; Urban, 2008).

In Ireland, the findings revealed that ECEC practitioners were subjected to new modes of performative-led inspections and persistent demands for increased credentialism while presenting as ‘pink-collar workers’ (Apple, 2012: 5) – a mostly vulnerable group of precariat women workers with low status, poor remuneration, weak qualifications, few opportunities for further education and development, and no collective-bargaining rights. The practitioners had domestic cleaning duties beyond childcare and no well-being breaks in their schedules. The findings revealed the depth of the problem for low-skilled women workers, who are exploited as a precariat ECEC workforce by institutions of the state that favour competition, choice, soft coercive power and surveillance over public interest values and ECEC workers’ rights.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of the ECEC sector but this study dares to ask: For what purpose? While the closure of services during the pandemic has emphasised the sector’s importance, the rhetoric of reform for career choice and efficiency appears as a race to the bottom when compared with the lived reality of ECEC practitioners’ conditions and opportunities for further education and development. The findings revealed an intellectual poverty and social cost for the low status of poorly paid ECEC practitioners, which has implications well beyond Ireland for others grappling with similar issues.

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