

Strategies, systems and services: a Northern Ireland early years policy perspective

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Following a lengthy consultation process across Northern Ireland (NI), 2013 saw the publication of *Learning to Learn: A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning* [DE (Department of Education). 2013. “Learning to Learn: A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning.” Accessed July 15, 2014. http://www.deni.gov.uk/english_a_framework_for_ey_education_and_learning_oct_13_tagged.pdf]. This document has major implications for change in regard to children's services in the province. For this paper we have employed a critical discourse analysis (CDA) methodology (Ozga, J. [2000]. *Policy Research in Educational Settings*. Buckingham: Open University Press) in order to explore the relationships between language and power in the shaping of the policy discourse illustrated by *Learning to Learn*. Comparisons and contrasts are drawn between the language and assumptions made in the document, particularly in relation to the issues of quality and workforce qualifications. Attention is drawn to the message of the framework document that early years professionals must provide consistently high quality services to children and families through a process involving effective collaboration. However, the persistent ‘split system’ of statutory and voluntary sectors within the field of early childhood provision in NI plays a key role in the creation and legitimization of dominant discourses and accepted norms. Through this CDA process we demonstrate the ‘emancipatory potential’ of CDA for analysis of early years policy by both academics and practitioners.

Keywords: Critical discourse analysis; quality; workforce development; early years policy

Introduction

Context

The island of Ireland is divided into two parts: the six counties in the north east make up Northern Ireland (NI) and are part of the UK, whilst the 26 remaining counties make up an independent state known as the Republic of Ireland. Since devolution of regional government to the NI Assembly at Stormont in 1999 (with a period of suspension from 2002 to 2007), policy in the fields of education and care in NI – as in Wales and Scotland – has not automatically followed policy in England. There are, as Walsh (2007, 56) points out, a number of ‘distinctive features’ in regard to early years services in NI, most notably the early school starting age and the divisive

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nature of the school and preschool systems. Children in NI start compulsory primary school in the September following their fourth birthday and must follow the requirements of the NI Curriculum (CCEA 2007). Almost all children in NI attend preschool year provision (children aged 3–4 years). The DE (2006a) stated that places were available for approximately 92% of eligible children and this provision is often inclusive in terms of religion and ethnicity; however, despite the growth in recent years of integrated schools, most children move from inclusive preschool environments to religiously segregated primary schools. This, as Walsh (2007) explains, can result in the segregation of neighbouring children as young as four years of age. Although preschool provision tends to be religiously and ethnically inclusive, it remains largely a two-tier, ‘split system’ of voluntary/private ‘child care’ provision – staffed by vocationally trained day care and playgroup leaders – and statutory ‘education’ provision (nursery schools) – staffed by graduate level teachers. In addition to the ‘split’ in regard to qualifications, the current two-tier system supports unequal access to quality provision, with differing staff ratios, duration of provision, inspection arrangements, resources and funding in evidence (for further detail on preschool provision in NI, see McMillan and Walsh 2011).

Policy background

The most significant policy developments relating to early years provision in NI date from the election of the Labour government to Westminster in 1997, with the almost immediate launch of an ambitious preschool expansion programme (DENI and DHSS 1998). The intention was initially to provide an extra 6000–7000 preschool places and ultimately one year of preschool education for all children whose parents wanted it. Both targets were fully met and, indeed, exceeded (DE 2006a). The *Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy* (DHSS, DENI, and T&EA 1999) was consistent with the aims and objectives of the *National Childcare Strategy* (DfEE 1998) produced in England and restated the government’s long-term goal ‘to integrate early education and care within a wider supportive framework of services for children and parents’ (DHSS, DENI and T&EA 1999, 10). Within the statutory preschool sector (nursery schools and classes) teachers were mainly graduates and were required to have qualified teacher status. However, it was clear that the majority of the workforce within the voluntary/private sector (playgroups and day care facilities) did not hold higher education or teaching qualifications, and so a new role – the Early Years Specialist (EYS) – was introduced to support preschool settings in this rapidly expanding sector (DENI and DHSS 1998). Each preschool leader would be required to be qualified to NVQ Level 3 (or equivalent) and the setting would also be obliged to employ the services of a more highly qualified EYS, shared between several settings, in order to assure quality and work towards achieving qualification parity with the statutory sector. The EYS must be either a qualified teacher or hold specified Level 4, 5 or 6 qualifications such as NVQ Level 4 or a diploma or honours degree in Early Childhood Studies (DE 2003). This role was, and continues to be, unique to NI and its success has been variable, as outlined in a recent evaluation study (ETI 2014b), which will be further explored later in this paper.

The holistic policy of the re-elected Labour government in England, as proposed in the *Every Child Matters Ten Year Strategy* (HM Treasury 2004), was reflected in two policy documents published in NI in 2006: *Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge* (OFMDFM 2006) and *Children and Young People Funding Package* (DE

2006b). The first document comprised a ten year strategy for children's services in NI and focused particularly on issues of health and well-being; the second announced a pilot programme of 'extended schools' to be focused, initially, on schools (including nursery schools) in disadvantaged areas, thus mirroring the holistic 'Every Child Matters agenda' of England. The Department of Education consulted on the future of preschool education in NI (DE 2004) as part of its review of preschool arrangements and published *Outcomes from the Review* almost two years later (DE 2006a). One outcome of the Review, in the pursuit of an integrated approach, was the transfer in November 2006 of responsibility for all early years services to DE, thus creating a 'lead department'. This happened during a period of NI Assembly suspension when NI was again under direct rule from the Labour government in London. However, in April 2011 (DE 2012) there was a realignment of the policy functions and childcare and child minding policy matters were returned to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). In 2010 the election of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government had led to many changes in UK early years policy; however, in NI all education policy had been returned to the reconstituted NI Assembly and so the effects of the coalition policies were less apparent. The Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister continues to lead on day care and child poverty and DE retains policy responsibility for Sure Start, the Early Years Fund and the two-year old programme. More than a decade after the previous Childcare Strategy document (DHSS, DENI, and T&EA 1999) the long-awaited draft *Early Years (0–6) Strategy* (DE 2010a) appeared. However, this Strategy did not survive beyond the consultation stage and, after a further three years, a key document emerged: *Learning to Learn: A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning* (DE 2013). This policy document has major implications for the future shape of young children's (0–6 years) services in NI, especially in the areas of quality provision and qualifications.

This brief background to early years policy in NI reveals a devolved government's stated commitment to the principles of integrated provision, unmatched by a commitment to adequately finance such a system. This has been demonstrated by the intentional expansion of voluntary/private sector provision rather than adopting the much more costly option of either building more nursery schools to expand the statutory sector or creating a new preschool sector. The co-existence of two competing preschool sectors in NI – with divergent funding, ratio, inspection, qualification and staffing arrangements – perpetuates inter-sectoral divisions, despite the lip service paid in policy documents to integrated policy and practice.

Methodology

Our search for an appropriate methodological tool with which to critique recent early years policy in NI – specifically the recently published *Learning to Learn framework* (DE 2013) – led us to explore Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), or, as Taylor (1997) prefers to call it, Critical Policy Analysis. This area of study has developed within the social science field of 'policy sociology' (Ozga 1987), whereby qualitative techniques are applied to aspects of policy in order to enhance understanding of that policy. There are, according to Fairclough (2003), two main types of CDA: one where the linguistic micro-structure of a text is examined in order to explore the connections between language and meaning; the other where historical and social contexts of the text are the central focus. Liasidou (2008, 488), carrying out an analysis of

inclusive education policy in Cyprus, argues that, for her task, the first type of CDA is ‘meaningless unless it is placed within the discursively constituted social context’ – a contention we share in relation to analysing early years policy in NI and for which reason we deemed it essential to include the introductory, contextualising sections of this paper. Central to any analysis of policy documentation, therefore, is the recognition that there is no ‘single reading of policy texts’ (Taylor 1997, 26); instead there are multiple understandings and interpretations, depending on the social, political, economic and other perspectives of its readers. This approach focuses on the ‘*linkages between discourse, ideology and power*’ (Fairclough 1993, 135) and thus involves both contextualisation and close analysis of the policy text concerned. Furthermore, it is widely recognised (Fairclough 2000; Liasidou 2008; Ozga 2000; Taylor 2004) that it is vital to pay close attention to the ‘linguistic absences or silences of the text’ (Liasidou 2008, 492), since these often play a key role in the ‘agentic marshalling of discourse’ (Bacchi 2000, 52) within the policy-making agenda. A clear recognition of the key roles played by subjectivity and interpretation within this post-modern approach prompts Taylor (1997, 33) to propose a stronger focus on the effects of policy rather than its intentions, and leads to the development of her tri-partite conceptual framework of ‘contexts, texts and consequences’.

This framework of ‘contexts, texts and consequences’ employed by Taylor (1997, 33) is closely related to the structure of Ozga’s (2000, 100) Text Analysis, whereby policy texts are analysed in terms of the messages they communicate regarding the ‘source, scope and pattern’ of the policy. Ozga (2000) suggests that text analysis requires a framework of questions, which she terms ‘text analysis protocol’ (99). For the analysis of the *Learning to Learn* (DE 2013) document, this tri-partite structure has been adopted: the analysis is structured under Ozga’s three headings and the probing text analysis protocol has been applied. Building on the historical and policy context of the *Learning to Learn* (DE 2013) document and having identified the most appropriate text analysis framework to be employed (Ozga 2000), we proceed to explore issues of language and power in the shaping of the policy discourse through carrying out a CDA of *Learning to Learn* (DE 2013), with reference to key-related policy documents.

The source of the policy

Ozga’s (2000) text analysis protocol requires that we interrogate the source of education policy in terms of whose interests it serves. In order to do this, she argues that we must examine the ‘particular narratives’ (95) carried by the policy text – the story of how it came to be. The 40 page document *Learning to Learn* was introduced in 2013 by the Minister for Education, John O’Dowd. In the Foreword he explains that the previous Education Minister’s draft *Early Years (0–6) Strategy* (DE 2010a) had ‘generated a wide and interesting debate on the range of issues facing children and their families’ (DE 2013, 1). In fact, almost 2000 consultation responses were received from voluntary sector organisations and charities, schools, academics and other interested individuals. (By comparison, the draft *Childminding and Day Care for Children under Age 12: Minimum Standards* (DHSSPS 2012) received 63 responses.) The consultation responses (DE 2012) demonstrated overwhelming lack of support for the 0–6 draft Strategy. John O’Dowd in the Foreword to *Learning to Learn* (DE 2013) admits that the proposals in his predecessor’s draft Strategy were ‘not well received by the majority of respondents’ (12).

However, on closer analysis of the responses, DE (2012) insists that the larger organisational responses tended to agree in principle with the vision and aims of the strategy, although they raised a number of fundamental issues and sought clarification about the implementation details. Several organisational responses, such as those of Barnado's (Kelly 2012); Children in Northern Ireland (CINI 2012) and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC 2013), highlighted the lack of focus on the research evidence that learning starts before birth. They noted an absence of emphasis on pregnancy and on the important roles played by other professionals such as midwives and health visitors. Responses overall pointed to the lack of cognisance and utilisation by the Minister of the evidence-based paper which had been drawn up by DE (2010b) in order to inform the draft Strategy (DE 2010a). The summary of responses document (DE 2012) noted that the draft Strategy had focused mainly on education interventions and therefore tended to concentrate on current DE provision rather than on holistic services. It is important to note that the draft Strategy (DE 2010a) was written with the premise that all young children's services were overseen by DE. However, following the realignment in 2011 (DE 2012), which effectively split the system again, it was deemed possible to atomise the child into education and care components. The *Learning to Learn* document (DE 2013) paints only the education side of the picture. The 'key' themes identified by DE from the consultation responses (DE 2012) provided a legitimate rationale for narrowing the focus of the *Learning to Learn* framework (DE 2013) to 3–6-year-olds – whereas the draft Strategy (DE 2010a) had focused on 0–6-year-olds – and to the sector that was now under the sole responsibility of DE. This resulted in a policy document entitled *Learning to Learn: A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning* (DE 2013) to replace the draft *Early Years 0–6 Strategy* (DE 2010a) – a much more manageable task for the Minister but a loss to the early years sector who still await an interdepartmental early years Strategy.

Applying Ozga's (2000) text analysis protocol to the policy document, we finally consider its relationship to global, national and local imperatives. The Minister lists several global and national imperatives such as the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN 2008) which he says have *been* 'taken into consideration when developing these proposals' (18). It is unclear from the document how or why this was done; however it is noteworthy that the stakeholder group that was formed to advise the Department in reshaping early years policy (DE 2010a, 2013) had representation from many of the local children's charities working in this field. This stakeholder group played a role in the precise wording of aspects of the new policy (DE 2013) and a rights-based, inclusive language was adopted throughout the document, with words such as *for all*; *equitable access*; *equality of opportunity* and *inclusion* appearing frequently (e.g. 16–18). Although this implies equal access for all children, no matter what their ethnic group or disability, it is interesting to note the specific mention of Irish Medium provision (20). This small sector of the NI education system comprises 803 out of 23,440 preschool children and delivers the curriculum in the Irish language. The privileging of a specific group within a policy document adds substantial value to this group and may denote the focus of the political party and the Education Minister's values and beliefs.

At local level, the Minister links the *Learning to Learn* document to 'a substantial suite of wider education policies that impact on the delivery of early years or to which early years could contribute ...' (10). These include Every School a Good School (DE

2009a); Community Relations Equality and Diversity (DE 2011) and the Review of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion (DE 2009b). The delivery of this education policy therefore sits within the wider NI Executive policy context and awareness of policies such as Delivering Social Change (OFMDFM 2014) may well impact on the outworking of the Learning to Learn framework. It is disappointing, however, that both the draft Strategy (DE 2010a) and the Learning to Learn framework (DE 2013) have ignored the global and holistic perspectives presented within their own commissioned evidence-based paper (DE 2010b). For example, international models of quality provision and the clearly established links between qualifications and quality which are documented in the paper have been largely disregarded.

The scope of the policy

Having examined the history and source of the policy, our focus turns to the scope of the document – ‘what it is assumed it is able to do’ (Ozga 2000, 95). On the first page of the Foreword the Minister clearly states that his department’s core objectives are ‘to raise standards in education’ and ‘to reduce educational underachievement’ (i). The *Learning to Learn* framework – as a successor to the draft *Early Years 0–6 Strategy* (DE 2010a) – was intentionally refocused to share these departmental objectives. This positions the policy directly within the remit and control of DE, providing a clear and strong message that the department is working within its own jurisdiction in implementing the framework policy. Thus the policy sits within a learning and education context and, unsurprisingly, the school readiness agenda is central throughout; indeed on page 15 the aims of preschool education are stated as ‘to help children learn and develop and to prepare them for primary school’. On the one hand the framework argues that ‘early childhood is a significant and distinct time in life and as such it should be nurtured, respected, valued and supported in its own right’ (19) and yet, in the same sentence, the stress reverts to the ‘significant foundation it provides for future and lifelong learning’. Even though the consultation responses (DE 2012) criticised the focus on ‘school readiness’ and the international models considered in the evidence-based paper (DE 2010b) warn against this approach, the *Learning to Learn* framework continues to stress readiness to learn for all children. The language of the document stops short of advocating the readiness for school agenda, with some acknowledgement of ‘the importance of the home learning environment’ (18) and, indeed, a key theme is supporting parents to support their children’s learning (18). However the scope is clearly about education and the ‘care’ side of early years has been removed. This contextual split perhaps reflects the departmental and policy split, but such significant ‘linguistic absences or silences of the text’ (Liasidou 2008, 492) are uncomfortable for many professionals who believe that education and care cannot be separated and that an ‘educare’ approach (McMillan 2008) is essential to quality early years provision. In fact the only reference in the framework to ‘care’ is the stated aim to *provide* ‘a positive and nurturing early learning experience’ (18), but here the notion of care is obscured by the dominant notion of education, rather than taking its place as an inseparable partner.

Two of the five overarching aims of the policy: ‘Raising standards for all’ and ‘Closing the performance gap’ do not resonate with the overarching aims of early years practitioners. It is easier to identify with the other three aims: to ‘Improve the child’s learning environment’ in order to provide quality provision; to ‘Transform the governance and management of education and to Develop the educational

workforce' (16–17) as mechanisms for accountability of quality services, but it is problematic to imply the practitioner's responsibility to measure standards of performance of young children in order to ensure that children leave school with good GCSE scores. However, the Minister does go on to tell us that he is 'confident that it will deliver improved outcomes for children and families' (2). This is a rather sweeping statement and, although it is clear the Minister has specific educational outcomes in mind for children (improved grades), it is not clear in what terms the improved outcomes for families are envisaged. Osgood's deconstruction of policy texts relating to the early years workforce in England (Osgood 2009, 735) similarly reveals that policy-makers in England tend to portray the early years workforce, unrealistically, as 'the saviour of the economy, of children and of working mothers'. Such constructions reveal the need for increased clarity as to the perceived relationship between the overarching aims and the implementation of the policy.

The Education Minister defends his almost exclusive focus on education and learning by referring to a strategic 'two strand approach' (16), the first being the 'focus on early years education and learning' (what DE can do) and the second being the need to work at an interdepartmental level to engage ministerial support to deal with wider family issues. One of the crucial issues he highlights – which crosses both strands – is the need to support parents to support their child's education. The 'importance of the home learning environment' (18) in young children's learning and development is clearly acknowledged and this directly reflects the findings of research studies such as Effective Preschool Provision in NI – a longitudinal study of the effects of preschool education in NI (Melhuish et al., 2006). *Learning to Learn* (DE 2013, 25), in its Action Plan section, states that DE will collaborate with DHSSPS, via the Family Support structures, as part of this 'two strand' approach. Work has begun on this collaboration with a roll out of community based family support signature programmes (for example, *Incredible Years* programme and Nurture Units) via the DHSSPS and the Public Health Agency (OFMDFM 2014). However, there is a marked and intentional shift from the language of the previous NI Childcare Strategy 'to integrate early education and care within a wider supportive framework of services for children and parents' (DHSS, DENI, and T&EA 1999, 10) to the current *Learning to Learn* framework's more pragmatic language of 'collaboration' (16); 'co-ordination' (16); 'information sharing' (26); 'multi-agency working' (26) and 'liaising' (27).

The task of providing high quality early years education requires a highly trained and appropriately qualified professional (Nutbrown 2012). The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO 2013) expressed the view that standards will only be raised by employing a qualified teacher workforce throughout the early years sector. However, Early Years (the organisation which represents mainly the voluntary early years sector in NI) has called for a review of teacher training courses in order to ensure competence in working with 0–6-year-olds (implying a current lack of competence) and favours a new profession of 'education and care pedagogues' for this task (Early Years 2013). The link between a graduate workforce and quality has been made consistently (Eraut 1994; OECD 2006; McMillan 2008; Nutbrown 2012) and research studies have identified this relationship (Melhuish et al., 2006). The language within the *Learning to Learn* framework supports such a view by urging settings in the voluntary/private sector to: 'maximise the expertise and experience of qualified teachers' (26) and to begin 'making greater use of the teaching expertise in nursery schools and units ...' (27). This conveys the message that the statutory sector, where a graduate must be employed, is an indicator of better quality provision. Therefore it was

surprising to see that the strategy did not address the issue of raising workforce qualifications – another ‘deafening silence’ of the text – except by referring readers to the DHSSPS *Childminding and Day Care for Children under Age 12: Minimum Standards* (DHSSPS 2012) document in regard to the required qualification levels for those in the voluntary/private child care sector (DE 2013, 26). Thus the policy document tacitly acknowledges the argument for graduate leadership but fails to make any move towards achieving it. The reason for this is assumed to be the overall ‘current difficult economic climate’ leading to ‘unprecedented financial challenges’ (DE 2013, 14); however, this financial constraint is not explicitly applied within the framework document to the issue of qualifications and no aspiration towards graduate leadership is expressed. Within the statutory sector workforce, the vexed question of whether the graduate should be an early years professional, with an Early Childhood Studies degree, or a qualified teacher remains unanswered yet again (McMillan and Walsh 2011).

Whilst the *Learning to Learn* framework fails to address the issue of appropriate workforce qualifications, it does address the issue of ‘continuous professional development’ (26) by acknowledging the need to provide ‘appropriate support mechanisms to achieve the highest standards of preschool provision through collaboration and dissemination of best practice ...’ (27). Capacity building and training within the early years workforce are regarded as important; however, the language of the policy, in advising voluntary/private sector settings to utilise the expertise of the statutory sector staff (27), maintains the sectoral split and reinforces the dominant discourse that statutory is best (McMillan 2008). This is consistent with Osgood’s (2009, 739) analysis, in which she contends that early years policy constructs ‘deficit discourses: the workforce as lacking’ leading to the imposition of top-down policy in order to remediate the deficit. The top-down policy proposed here is the establishment of Early Years Education area support clusters, with financial reward from an *Excellence in Early Education Fund* (27) for ‘outstanding’ settings who will lead regional cluster training. In theory, this distinctive model of professional development allows for the financial and status reward within the voluntary sector of those settings who have achieved an outstanding inspection, as they may become the lead setting in the cluster; however, in practice this seems rather unlikely, since the majority of ‘outstanding’ settings are located in the statutory sector (ETI 2012, 2014a). Kennedy (2005) outlines nine models of professional development and regards the ‘deficit’ model as problematic, in light of its implication of ‘blame for perceived underperformance’ (239). A recent evaluation of the role of the EYS in NI supports Kennedy’s view by highlighting the challenges of cluster training based on an implicitly deficit model: ‘While cluster training may be beneficial for some settings who have developed and improved sufficiently in their practice, there is clearly a need for staff with lower qualifications and less experience to retain a higher level of on-site support’ (ETI 2014b, 2). What ETI is recommending here is, in Kennedy’s (2005) terms, a sensitive ‘coaching/mentoring’ model of support which may lead in time to a mutually supportive ‘community of practice’ model. Without a clear conceptual basis for its formation and conduct, it remains to be seen how effective this proposed continuous professional development cluster approach will be in terms of raising quality and empowering the workforce.

Finally, with reference to Ozga’s (2000) text analysis protocol, we asked: What are the policy relationships embedded within *Learning to Learn*? We have already discussed in the previous section how the document was devised in sympathy with

other local policies; here we consider a specific example relating to qualifications and training. There is an overt link made (26) with the ETI Chief Inspector's Report (ETI 2012), which notes the need to improve the quality of leadership and management in 30% of the preschool settings inspected. *Learning to Learn* cites this finding and undertakes to develop a programme of continuing professional development for staff and management committees with a focus on leadership and management to be in place for the 2014–15 academic year (DE 2013). This is a practical example of effective policy relationships within the early years sector. A second example concerns the role of the EYS in supporting leaders of preschool settings in the voluntary/private sector. *Learning to Learn* cites the Chief Inspector's Report (ETI 2012) which states that 'The quality of the external support provided by the early years specialists to voluntary and private settings remains varied and a more detailed evaluation of this work is required' (ETI 2012 [cited in DE 2013, 45]). This reinforces an acceptance of the need for EYS improvement, which is also noted in the *Evaluation of the Role of the Early Years Specialist* (ETI 2014b), and demonstrates a co-ordinated approach to early years policy in this aspect of its implementation, albeit largely within one government department.

The pattern of the policy

In addressing the third strand of Ozga's (2000) model – a consideration of changes required by the policy – we return first to the issue of qualifications and training. The *Learning to Learn* framework document (DE 2013) proposes that DE will 'establish appropriate support mechanisms to drive up standards in preschool provision and disseminate best practice' (27). We have argued that this requires a graduate leadership approach and it is both disappointing and inconsistent that this option was not even discussed in the document. The *Childminding and Day Care for Children under Age 12: Minimum Standards* (DHSSPS 2012) document reveals that qualification levels of leaders in the voluntary sector will be raised only to Level 5 (diploma but not degree level). This indicates that the pattern of the *Learning to Learn* policy will lead to changes that are not outlined within it and also betrays a lack of communication between policy-makers and training providers, since there is a reservoir of locally trained graduates in Early Childhood Studies available to fill such posts.

An overview of the changes required by *Learning to Learn* must also focus on the need for collaboration and partnership. The need for enhanced collaboration across a range of early childhood education, health and care systems is clearly required. The language of the policy, as considered in the previous section, communicates openness to enhanced collaboration and co-ordination; however, this also provides a convenient loophole where there is failure to deliver. The policy acknowledges, for example, the close liaison needed between DE, DHSSPS, Education and Library Boards and the proposed new body, the Education and Skills Authority (ESA). This single body was to be 'a modern, efficient and professional education body' (DE 2013, 15) to support all aspects of education and youth work in NI and its establishment was scheduled for 2013. The policy relies heavily upon the role that ESA will play in ensuring implementation by 2015/2016. However, the establishment of ESA has since been serially delayed and therefore it is unclear how the implementation can progress within the stated time frame. Several of the policy document's Key Actions are timed to begin 'immediately following the establishment of ESA' (e.g. 34). DE, in dialogue with the stakeholders, is working on 'lead-in' times (35) to introduce some of the

changes. However, it is clear that a more realistic timeframe is now required. There are also, according to the policy, some changes required to primary legislation and therefore agreement between all political parties is required for implementation. This, in the context of political life in NI, may take considerably longer than the document's proposed time scales.

Conclusion

In attempting to draw conclusions from this CDA, we concur with Osgood's (2009, 746) conviction that 'policy discourses are cultivated and carefully crafted to have certain effects'. Just as there is no 'single reading of policy texts' (Taylor 1997, 26), so, we argue, there is no single writing. Ozga (2000) reinforces this view by stating that education policy always emanates from a combination of three factors: the state apparatus, the economy and the institutions of civil society. All three influences have been considered within the context of NI in the course of this CDA, and the overarching conclusion drawn is that, despite its collaborative, inclusive, rights-based discourse (DE 2013, 19), *Learning to Learn* represents a retreat from integration and perpetuates the 'split system' of early years provision in NI. The major shift in policy focus from the Childcare Strategy (DHSS, DENI, and T&EA 1999) to the *Learning to Learn* framework (DE 2013) appears to have been influenced by two main contributory factors: economic and political considerations.

The worldwide recession of the past few years and its impact on the provision of state-funded services clearly constrains the Education Minister in the support and possible expansion of early years provision in NI. It is not by chance that the framework policy begins by highlighting how expensive the early years sector is (3) and clearly a graduate profession (with appropriate remuneration for graduate leaders) would be beyond the current education budget, since staff costs account for around 80% of the total cost of early years services in most countries (OECD 2006). The Minister, therefore, has opted for the lesser financial output of focusing preschool expansion mainly on the voluntary/private sector, where the unit cost per child is significantly less and capital funding is largely avoided. The recent evaluation of the role of the EYS (ETI 2014b) reported that only 73% of EYS support to leaders in voluntary/private preschool settings was deemed to be 'good or better', indicating that more than a quarter of EYS activity was rated as satisfactory, inadequate or unsatisfactory. Despite this and many other concerns raised by the evaluation, the absence of graduate leadership renders it imperative to continue with this under-developed method of quality assurance and support. The economic context in which *Learning to Learn* is being implemented, therefore, tends towards perpetuation of the split system and away from integration of services. Many early years professionals in NI continue to seek an interdepartmental Strategy that will continue the road towards integration of services begun by the previous Childcare Strategy (DHSS, DENI, and T&EA 1999), but the current economic climate is not conducive to such a development.

The second contributory factor to the direction of early years policy in NI is the political context. We noted earlier in the discussion that *Learning to Learn* was conceived alongside, and in collaboration with, a wider suite of policies within NI and yet failed to take account of a range of international and global perspectives on early years education outlined in the earlier evidence-based paper (DE 2010b). This rather insular approach may reflect the problems of a society emerging from conflict,

in which segregated education is the norm (Walsh 2007). The changes in legislation required for some aspects of the framework implementation will require agreement across political parties and this is often problematic in a devolved system which is based on power sharing. However, in Arnott and Ozga's (2010, 335) CDA of education policy in Scotland, they identify the opportunity for 'small, social democratic states' to 'craft the narrative' of their education policy in a way no longer dictated by a dominant external agenda. NI, like Scotland, has such an opportunity in relation to early years policy. For example, the unique role of the EYS within NI has undoubtedly improved the quality of provision within the voluntary/private early years sector (ETI 2014a, 2014b). This role could be strengthened and revised in order to build capacity of leadership within the voluntary/private sector as a stepping stone towards the future creation of a unified quality preschool sector.

Osgood (2009) speaks of the silencing and invisibility of the early years workforce often brought about through government policy; it is the intention of this paper that early years practitioners should be encouraged and empowered to engage actively with policy analysis at both initial and in-service stages of training in order to become more 'policy literate' (Simpson and Connor 2011, 2). However, it is important to note that 'policy literacy' (Simpson and Connor 2011, 2) in the context of CDA involves more than merely possessing an enhanced understanding of aspects of policy; rather it assumes a will to act upon that enhanced understanding. Thus Liasidou (2008, 486) speaks of the 'emancipatory knowledge interest' of CDA, but also of its aim to 'promote progressive social change'. In examining the linkages between policy language and power relations, from a Foucauldian perspective, regimes of truth (Foucault 1980) may be intentionally and gradually challenged and unmasked in the interests of social justice and appropriate provision for our youngest citizens. To this end, both Taylor (1997) and Liasidou (2008) highlight the 'emancipatory' potential of CDA as 'a practice-based and action-orientated subject' (Liasidou, 2008, 496) not to be confined to an academic discipline. We therefore propose that early years professionals should regard active engagement with policy issues as integral to their professional role, providing them with a voice and rendering them more visible advocates for children.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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