

76 - Community of Practice and Professional ECE

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Purpose: The purpose of the transcripts is to provide readers and listeners with a written version of each episode of the UAGC Center for Early Childhood Education's Early Childhood Chatter Podcast so they can follow along with the audio content. www.uagc.edu/ece-center/chatter-podcast

Audience: Current Active & Enrolled Students

Episode Transcript

Host Dr. Shipley: Hello everyone and welcome to Early Childhood Chatter with Dr. Shipley and Dr. Heald. We will upload a new episode every other week on Wednesdays.

Host Dr. Heald: Twice a month, we come to you with a 10-minute professional development that you can quickly listen to for new ideas to use today. Don't forget to subscribe to this podcast to get notifications about future episodes.

Today we are so excited to have Paula Walsh with us. Paula is an ECE trainer and a placement assessor in the further education and training sector, a freelance writer, and a PhD candidate researching STEAM in ECE.

She currently holds a BA with honors in early childhood education, a master's degree in leadership in early childhood education, that she received in 2022. Paula has extensive ECE experience in both the pedagogical side, as well as the management side. She's co-founded a Twitter community, and a practice page, and a podcast that I'm sure she's going to share with us.

These focus on sharing ideas and knowledge of all things quality in ECE pedagogy and professional practice in Ireland. So, we are so honored to have Paula as our honored guest today. Welcome Paula.

Paula Walsh: Hi, I'm really pleased to be here. How are you?

Dr. Stephanie Heald: We're so good. We're excited to have you and just grateful that you have joined us today.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Yes, Paula, thank you so much for agreeing to be here. I know the time difference is a lot, so thank you for everything. And we're so excited to hear about your professional ideas.

And I know our audience is going to benefit so much from this. So, tell us what you're here to talk about today and why it's a passion of yours.

Paula Walsh: Sure: , well, I suppose there's a few things that I'm passionate about.

I mean, obviously, I'm doing my PhD to do at STEAM in early years, but that's something I've just started. But prior to this in the last number of years, as well as that topic, I've also been really passionate about professional practice, and professionalization of the early childhood sector in general. I don't know too much about what your sector is like, but I know globally there generally is sort of a view, that the early childhood sector perhaps is struggling to be recognized as a professional sector.

That's certainly the case here in Ireland, and with requirements sort of increasing for early childhood educators to have higher levels of qualification, you know, even right up to degree level qualification. I think it's really important that that journey for professional status also needs to come along hand in hand with that. You know, so I know there are issues here in Ireland, about maybe society sort of having this perception of early childhood educators as, you know, child binders.

You know, they're there in that parents obviously need childcare, for workforce activation and to be able to engage in the workforce, but nevertheless, the sector does provide care and education. So, there can be a bit of a conflict there, I think, in how we're perceived. Are we perceived as educators, or are we perceived as somebody who cares for children? Really, we should be perceived as both because I think they go hand in hand.

But I certainly think in my experience, and in relation to the Irish sector, that there is a bit of a struggle in, you know, recognizing the early childhood education sector, as a professional sector, you know, along the lines of, you know, the other more formal educational and schooling sectors.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: I think you bring up such a great area for us to reflect on as educators, and as just a society where our most valuable resources are our kids, right? So, we want to make sure we're putting those who are experienced and prepared in front of them. What do you recommend new educators do, to kind of increase their knowledge and increase their community of practice and profession in ECE? And on the very other end of the pendulum, what do you recommend veteran teachers do to do the same?

Paula Walsh: Yeah, well, I suppose here in Ireland, I know I can only really speak, you know, with a lot of knowledge about our sector, and I'm hoping that your educators who listen to this podcast, will also be able to align themselves and recognize certain things and take something from it.

But just to paint you a bit of a picture, I suppose, up until 2016, to work in the early childhood sector in Ireland, you didn't need to have any kind of a professional qualification of any kind. So, anybody could decide to open up an early childhood education setting and take in children and not have a qualification. So that was changed, and it's now embedded in our regulation.

We have a piece of regulation called the Child Care Act, and that states now that you must have a minimum level of qualification. So, it's not a university degree. It would be, say, two stages sort of lower than that, but it's still a professional qualification.

It's called a level five. It would take maybe a year to attain. So that's the minimum that you can have to work in the sector.

And then we have the next stage of educational level, which, again, is just, say, equivalent maybe to the first year of a university degree. And that's called a level six here, and that would qualify you to be like a room leader or a supervisor, a person in charge of developing the curriculum, within a room in an early childhood environment. And then that's also embedded in the legislation.

But after that, you know, there is nothing legislated for in relation to having a degree as such. But we're changing here at the moment, and, you know, we are the current government strategy here in Ireland, is looking to have a 50 percent degree qualified workforce by 2028. So, we would assume that naturally what will follow on from that will be that, you know, those minimum qualification requirements will also increase to reflect that.

So, we can have people who are newly qualified in the sector here at various levels, right up to university degree, master's degree, and so on. But I think what's really important that, you know, what we need for new people entering the sector, who might have a degree qualification, but no experience, and they might be going into the workforce then and engaging with somebody who has a qualification maybe that's slightly lower on the scale, than theirs, but lots and lots of experience. So, I think we really need to that's where I think the community of practicing can come in and can really, sort of help to knit the workforce together in that way.

So, you know, perhaps thinking of mentorship, for example, if you have somebody new coming into the sector with their degree, that another person who's maybe been in the sector longer can mentor them and can impart some of that really valuable experience and knowledge that they have, from engaging hands on in the sector. And likewise, the graduates who's newly coming into the sector will have some important information and knowledge academically that they could maybe impart. So, I think the important thing is that, you know, that we engage with each other, collaborate as

practitioners and educators, and that we acknowledge that we all have something really important to bring to the table, whether we have a degree qualification or not.

Or if we have lots of experience. So, you know, communities of practice, I think, are a really important part of that. So to try and build upon that and put a bit of structure, I suppose, around that, myself and a colleague of mine, Celine Govern, we started a community of practice on Twitter last year, which we called ECE Quality Ireland, and we sort of try and encourage discussion every week.

We put up a different discussion topic on a different element of practice. It could be to do a curriculum. It could be to do it legislation.

It could be just to do with some kind of ethical dilemma, or whatever it might be, or something that's relevant and topical that week. And we encourage practitioners to engage with each other, and to share their ideas, and to exchange their knowledge. And then we also have our own podcast where we try and bring other people from different parts of the sector or sector abroad, and sort of trash out some topical issues to try and help further reinforce that sense of a professional community of practice.

And I think that that's really a valuable thing to try and work on, because to be able to identify, as a professional who's part of a professional sector, if you look at definitions of what a professional is or what a profession is, it's a group of people who are all brought together, and identify as part of a particular sector as a result of the qualification or the fields that they've studied. So, as we formalize the requirements around qualifications in the early childhood sector, we need to then try and support everybody within the sector to identify themselves as professionals. And that's what we're trying to do with our community of practice, to try and bridge a bit of a gap between the academic knowledge, and what happens in practice, you know, so that people can see where their theory links to their everyday practice or perhaps, you know, other people's academic knowledge, and take ideas of where that can link into their practice.

Because it's important that if we want to be identified as a professional sector, that we identify ourselves as professionals, and each other within our community of practice as professionals. So that's sort of where our community of practice has tried to sort of fill that gap a little bit or address that issue here.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Paula, I can see over here, some of the things that you're saying, you know, the pay and not being recognized always as a professional, but as, you know, a babysitter or a caregiver.

But where I'm from, we had pre-K, which was government funded, and every child was able to go. And so, I think a lot of states are taking that on. So over here, early childhood, quality early childhood education is at the forefront, I think, of a lot of people's minds, as it should be.

So why do you think that we struggle to be recognized as professionals or having a professional sector? Why do you think that is?

Paula Walsh: Yeah, and, you know, to be honest here, we also have a government funding for early childhood education, and children in Ireland get two years of free preschool. Now, it's only three hours a day. So, if you're a parent who's working full-time, you get three hours free.

But then the other five or six hours that your child is there in daycare or in creche and you have to pay for. So, there is a focus on the value and the importance of early childhood education, in those years, certainly between sort of two and a half and five when children move into what we would call primary education, the more like the formal start their education. Yeah, I think historically, you know, from the perspective in the Irish sector, there's definitely been that just ongoing dichotomy, and that sort of between care and education.

You know, prior to prior to, I suppose, us in Ireland joining the European Union, or what would have been then called the European Economic Community back in 1970. Oh, God, I'll probably get this wrong. It was the late 1970s, let's say, you know.

Women didn't really work. So, you know, even back in the 1950s and 60s, you know, once a woman got married, she had to leave her job. You couldn't work.

You know, so women stayed at home, and they were the primary caregiver. And I think we're still struggling with hangover from that because we know that the sector is predominantly filled with female educators. A part of that as well here is because, the sector sort of works to the school calendar.

So, a lot of early childhood settings might close down over the summer holidays and practitioners aren't getting paid. So that's not then attracting more males into the workforce, to sort of try and change and make that shift where from not being just primarily seen as sort of a female dominated area. But I suppose once we once Ireland joined Europe, you know, women then were further enabled.

There were more, you know, Ireland starts to become more prosperous, and women were able to, you know, there were more jobs and then there was more of a need for childcare. And well, it would have been just really seen, I suppose, more as childcare then, which, it's evolved slowly into early childhood education and care. But I think there's just there's several different forces at play, including that sort of being seen as a female dominated sector, being seen as maybe a role that's not necessarily full time, if you work in a workplace that has to close down for the school holidays.

And so, you know, that the role is always perhaps if you take an example of a family where there's a man and a woman and they're both working, you know, that if the female is working in the early childhood sector, it's more seen as a part-time sort of role because it's not sustainable as a job that could sustain the whole family if that makes sense. So I think all those things are connected with that. Also, the very low pay and that is something we're trying to address here at the moment.

Our government has just brought in a large funding package, to try to increase the wages for people working in the sector. But up until very recently, it was minimum wage. You know, so if people coming out of college then with degrees, who are being paid very little, whereas if you look at other formalized professions such as primary school teachers, or nurses, for example, just to try and pick something that's sort of slightly maybe equivalent, you know, those people, when they get their qualification, they go into a job where they start maybe on the bottom of a very decent looking salary scale.

And, you know, throughout their career, their salary goes up every year and they have a pension plan and this, that and the other. Whereas in early childhood education, it's like an hourly paid rate, no pension. You mightn't get paid during the summer, you know, so there's the job security is not there.

So I think until we need to really find our place, and until we're properly funded by government and recognize, I think, at that level as aligned more formally to the formal education sector, then I think society in general is going to struggle in their perception of us and they're going to struggle to move beyond that, you know, glorified babysitter a bit. Now, we have come a long way. So I do want to acknowledge that, you know, in Ireland, we have come a very long way, really, if you consider that back in 2016 was when minimum qualification requirements were first introduced and now we're on our way to a 50 percent degree led workforce by 2028.

Government have just, as I said, injected a large amount of funding, that was that's to go towards increasing practitioner and educator salaries. But it's still just not reaching that par with other sectors, you know, sort of that equivalent sectors such as primary school teaching, maybe or nursing. But I do think we can get there here in Ireland.

You know, the nursing sector would have gone through a similar sort of move from been seen as maybe more of a vocational sector, a vocational job that you're in it for the love of us, as opposed to a professional role. You know, and I think, you know, we can still be in a professional role and be in it for the love of it too. You know, I think anyone working in early childhood education, you know, you do need to have a love of us, you know, because it isn't an easy job.

It's a hard job. But, you know, and people who are in this, you know, they are they're in it because they love it, and they stay in it, because they love it, you know, so, you know, you really have to. You know, it's not an easy role.

You know, you'd often hear sort of anecdotes of people, practitioners saying, oh, you know, a parent dropped their child into me, and they were on their way to work. And, you know, they were saying, oh, God, I wish I could stay here and play with the children all day. And you say, well, actually, there's a lot more to it than that, you know, so.

So, yeah, I think we've a lot more to do, but we have certainly come a long way, you know.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: Paula, I hear the optimism in your voice and that just gives me excitement, because more than ever, we want our profession to be one that is recognized and and really acknowledged for what they do, because we all know in the trenches, new teachers, veteran teachers work very, very hard to build our population. Can you give us three quick takeaways for our listeners as we wrap up?

Paula Walsh: Yeah, sure.

Well, I think firstly, you know, I think as a sector, as an educator or a practitioner, we need to be the change that we want to see. So, I think, you know, we need to exude that. Yes, we are professionals, you know, and be proud of it and, you know, tell everybody about it, you know.

So, I think it's important. I don't know about in the States, but I know even here in Ireland, for example, there isn't a set, even a title for the role of educator, in an early childhood setting. You know, it changes from childcare worker, which is something we definitely want to move away from because it doesn't give any impression of being a professional role to educator, practitioner, preschool teacher.

So, I think we need to, first of all, decide ourselves. We are professionals and this is who we are. If we have any, if we want to have any hope of others accepting us as professional as well, we need to, you know, move forward together as professionals.

Engaging in the community of practice, with others who are in a similar, in the same sector and sharing knowledge is really, really important and mentoring others, I think, you know, is also, you know, we lift each other up and, and, and mentor each other. You know, if you have lots of experience and somebody comes into your setting, how's newly qualified, you know, you can, as I said earlier, you have knowledge, you can share with each other. So, you know, just being cohesive, working together, engaging together, lifting each other up, and moving ourselves as a profession forward as the professional sector we want everyone else to recognize us as.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: I love that. And you, like Dr. Heald said you speak so passionately about this topic. So, I know that you're trying to make change and that's amazing for our profession.

So, what is one challenge you want to leave our listeners with as we wrap up?

Paula Walsh: One challenge. Oh God. Um, I think just to, you know, continue to not lose faith in what we are here to do.

It can be very difficult when there are struggles to do with, you know, pay, professional recognition, maybe society's perception of, you know, that whole care or education or professional or childhood or whatever. Um, so just to, you know, be stoic and keep, you know, a sense of who you are as a professional. Know that you know your area, know that you know your role and that you are good at what you do and, you know, be the professional that you want everybody else to accept you as.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: That's awesome. Okay. Thank you so much.

And I know that you've shared a bunch of resources with me. Do you want to talk about those for just a second, like a podcast?

Paula Walsh: Oh yeah. So, I do, I have a website, um, www.thedigitalearlychildhoodeducator.ie. So, I have a blog that I write about current topics to do with quality and professionalism and early childhood education up there.

I'm also sharing some of my journey as a PhD student up there. And I'm on Twitter, at Digital Early Ed. And as I mentioned earlier, along with a colleague of mine, the ECE Quality Ireland on Twitter is our community of practice.

It's not limited to being an Irish practitioner. So, we would absolutely love to see people from anywhere, um, across the globe engaging in our community of practice and sharing knowledge. Um, cause I think that's really important too, you know, because I know for my own research in various countries across the globe, um, there are the same struggles for professional recognition in Australia, Canada, you know, there's lots of countries in the UK.

So, we're all sort of fighting the good fight together. So, I think, you know, anybody is welcome to come and, and share their, their thoughts and their knowledge with us on at ECE Quality Ireland on Twitter. We'd love to have you.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Perfect. Thank you so much, Paula. It was so nice to have you on and we hope to see you again soon.

Paula Walsh: Thank you so much. I really enjoyed it. Take care.