

The Challenges of Becoming a Profession

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Introduction

On 29th November 2006, the Cork branch of the Association of Childcare Professionals in Ireland came into being. The council of this association has the task of developing their newly formed body in such a way as to facilitate the rising professionalism of those working within the childcare sector in Ireland. The founding of this association was a momentous event, and reflects the growing value and importance of this area of work.

This paper will argue that the support provided by a strong professional association will facilitate and guarantee the implementation of high quality within childcare services. It will show that childcare has moved strongly towards becoming a recognised profession and has taken the preliminary steps towards establishing its own professional association at national level. The paper will examine the challenges facing the association, drawing on research and experience from other professions. It will suggest key ways in which the new association can provide support to the childcare profession and the ways in which the childcare sector can maximise these developments in order to become a fully fledged profession delivering services of the highest quality to children and families.

Professions and Professional Associations

'Professional' is a term widely used in modern society. It has been defined by Cruess *et al.* (2004) as:

"An occupation whose core element is work based upon the mastery of a complex body of knowledge and skills. It is a vocation in which knowledge of some department of science or learning or the practice of an art founded upon it is used in the service of others."

Terms such as para-professional can denote the type of client relationship that exists - such as dealing with groups rather than the more traditional form of a one-to-one that typifies a professional person such as a lawyer. Childcare workers, dealing as they do with groups in a similar manner to teachers, have often been seen as less than a full professional.

The professions are part of the societal system of classifying people according to their occupation. This ancient system of classification has been commonplace for centuries, as can be seen, for example, in the surnames, dictated by occupation, adopted in the old rolls or registers of the early guilds. Several writers have identified the typical attributes of professionals. Moore (1970) describes the characteristics of professionals as a 'cluster

of attributes', among which are:

- having a full-time occupation in their professional field
- having a commitment to a calling
- belonging to a formalised organisation
- having undergone specialist training or education
- having a service orientation
- practising autonomy in their role as professionals

These, and other similar descriptions, contribute to what has been termed by Runté (2003) as a 'professional ideology'. Each profession, as it develops, seeks to measure itself against these attributes to support the idea that it has attained professional status. Moore (1970) states that to have one's occupational conduct judged as professional is highly regarded in all post-industrial societies and in at least the modernising sectors of others.

The roots of professional associations in Europe and the British Isles lie in the early Middle Ages. Initially, all trades, crafts and vocations were grouped in similar types of guilds. The gradual cleavage of the trades from the professions began when some of the earliest professions developed associations with the universities. As the end of the twentieth century drew near, the explosion in the number of professionals was reflected in the corresponding rise in the number of their associations. The more familiar form of modern professional association emerged, with the strong individual identity that each profession embodies. Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1933) observed that

"A number of men, though they perform similar functions, do not make a profession if they remain in isolation. A profession can only be said to exist when there are bonds between the practitioners, and these bonds can take but one shape - that of formal association."

It has been shown that there has been a dramatic growth in the professions in modern times (Watkins *et al.*, 1992). However, despite this growth, a number of writers argue that the power and influence exercised by the professions is diminishing due to a number of factors, such as segmentation; technological advances; political factors; economic factors; and in Ireland, a lack of collective action (Krause, 1998).

However, while the power exercised by the associations may be weakening, newly emergent professions such as Childcare have a clear role to play in modern society both on behalf of their client groups and their own fellow professionals.

Emergence of Childcare as a Profession

The division of labour in Irish society led to the bulk of childcare being undertaken by women. Family support has traditionally been the main way in which both parents found

it possible to work outside the home. Neighbours and close friends also provided, and still provide, a large portion of care for children. In July 2002 the Central Statistics Office showed that 67,500 families of primary school children availed of non-parental childcare for their children (Central Statistics Office, 2002). This requirement was met through a range of formal and informal options, with unpaid relatives accounting for approximately 46%, paid carers accounting for 32%, unpaid relatives accounting for 14%, creches accounting for 6% and other facilities accounting for 3% of care for children in the school age bracket.

The rise of the pre-school playgroups movement in the mid 1960s was an early factor in changing the landscape of childcare in Ireland. The economic growth from the late 1980s onwards heralded another change and the government in the 1990s began to pay heed to the demand for more childcare places as the economic imperative for more people to participate in the workforce took hold. A range of policy documents were published relating to Early Childhood Development and Education, such as the *Study of the Economics of Childcare in Ireland* (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform [DJELR], 1998) and the *National Childcare Strategy, Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group* (DJELR, 1999). This led to an increasing recognition of the role that childcare workers played, and to the development of expanded roles for them.

This recognition has been acknowledged by Coolahan (1998) and the DJELR (2002) who have said that personnel working with children in the early years are of paramount importance in ensuring the provision of quality education and care services. This helped to foster self-belief among childcare workers and contributed to the development of a clear professional identity. The funding invested in the sector in recent years through the National Development Plan (Department of Finance, 2000), and in particular through the establishment of the Equal Opportunities in Childcare Programme (DJELR, 2000) and the National Childcare Investment Programme (2006 to 2010) (Office of the Minister for Children [OMC], 2006) albeit with an economic rationale behind it, has been of great value in helping the self recognition of this grouping as professionals.

However, recently a number of reports issued by the Pre-School Inspectorate (Health Services Executive, 2007) have found standards lacking in some instances. In the past, there had been no clear voice to speak out on behalf of the workers in such cases. So it is timely that the professional association has come into being now.

As a new group, childcare professionals need to use their association wisely to move the profession forward and establish and maintain ever-higher standards. As a profession speaking with a clear voice, they will be able to have input into decision-making regarding developments in their field. The association will be able to develop ethical

standards of practice; to foster the continuing professional development of their members; and to provide support, advice and encouragement for those entering the profession.

The Development of the Association of Childcare Professionals

The new representative body for childcare workers and practitioners, the Association of Childcare Professionals, is currently operating at a regional level as the Cork Branch. There are indications that other counties will follow shortly and ultimately it is hoped that it will become a national association. The association has elected a council of twenty experienced people. They are setting up a legal structure, and establishing a number of sub-groups to work on various aspects of the association's development.

One of the key initial goals of the regional branch will be to offer a strong network to create a sense of community among people who can often be quite isolated, especially if they are working in a small service or as a childminder. The association is currently establishing a baseline for entry to full membership of the association. This baseline will set a standard for people without qualifications to aim for if they want to become part of this community, and will encourage people to take up training and education in the field. Later on, different categories of membership at a higher level will reward further development and provide a strong contribution to the profession.

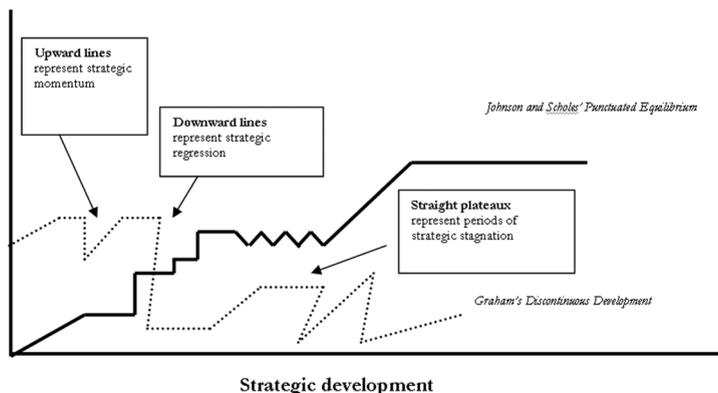
The establishment and rigorous enforcement of codes of practice and ethical guidelines will allow for the development of a strong and positive public image, thus enhancing the status of childcare workers. In turn it is hoped that this will be recognised through realistic rates of pay within the sector.

As the association develops and its reputation grows, it will be possible to develop policies on relevant items and to begin to influence policy. Continuing professional development will also be assisted through the development of programmes that allow members to build their own personal development portfolios with current knowledge and expert skills. This will ensure that children are really benefiting from being cared for by professionals of high standing.

A hazard that can befall associations that do not build well on knowledge developed over time is that of discontinuous development. Research conducted by Graham (2006) has shown that this can occur in professional associations where planning is not followed up by definitive targets for implementation, both short and long-term, and where sound systems and structures are not put in place to ensure that there is continuity of leadership which retains and builds upon the knowledge and experience gained by previous members. It differs from what Johnson and Scholes (2002) call 'Punctuated Equilibrium' whereby development is consistent, but perhaps at an uneven pace. When discontinuous

development occurs, the association progresses for a period of time, however momentum and knowledge are lost and subsequent councils and leaders will have to try to repeat the earlier progress in order to develop further. This is illustrated in figure 1:

Figure 1: Discontinuous Development vs Punctuated Equilibrium



The association needs to ensure that it remains aware of the wider environment and that it does not focus exclusively on internal development. To do this can lead to what Johnson and Scholes (2002) call 'strategic drift'. Organisations that suffer from this can lose members as they do not provide up-to-date support and members become frustrated and leave. Chandler (1962) has shown that strategic drift may not be noticed by organisations until they are considerably out of step, and that organisations can take a very long time to re-align themselves. Many of course will weaken irreversibly.

Good financial systems need to be put in place at an early stage. Adequate financial planning will ensure that other systems can be provided, such as good administrative support, to make sure that members' needs are met promptly. Community-building can be supported through the early establishment of a journal or newsletter. This could be on-line to reduce costs. In time, this can become a strong focus for members, especially if the content is interesting, informative and relevant.

Other services that can be planned for the future are regular seminars and conferences; the development of resources that can be shared among members; links with other associations and groups both nationwide and internationally. Some associations also seek to gain group benefits, in areas like insurance and pensions.

In Summary

Through the new Association of Childcare Professionals in Ireland, Cork Branch, childcare workers are establishing a distinct voice within the wider community and have exhibited the attributes of a professional ideology. The new regional professional association can look forward to a period of prolonged growth and development. During this time, it is hoped that it will become a national body, providing representation and support to many within the childcare sector, and giving them a strong voice in the Ireland of the future.

The association faces many challenges internally and externally. Internally they need to manage growth and to develop wisely, and externally to face the challenges of an inconsistent environment. Wise strategic decisions will need to be taken, and ultimately the desire to keep the needs of children to the fore will provide childcare professionals with the motivation to grow and develop.

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