# Pedagogical approaches for ‘quality’ early childhood care and education: What works / what matters?



Emma Pearson, Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education,
Maynooth University, Ireland
Emma.Pearson@mu.ie

# ‘Quality ECCE’: The educator *matters*

https://milestones.com.au/about-us/national-quality-framework/



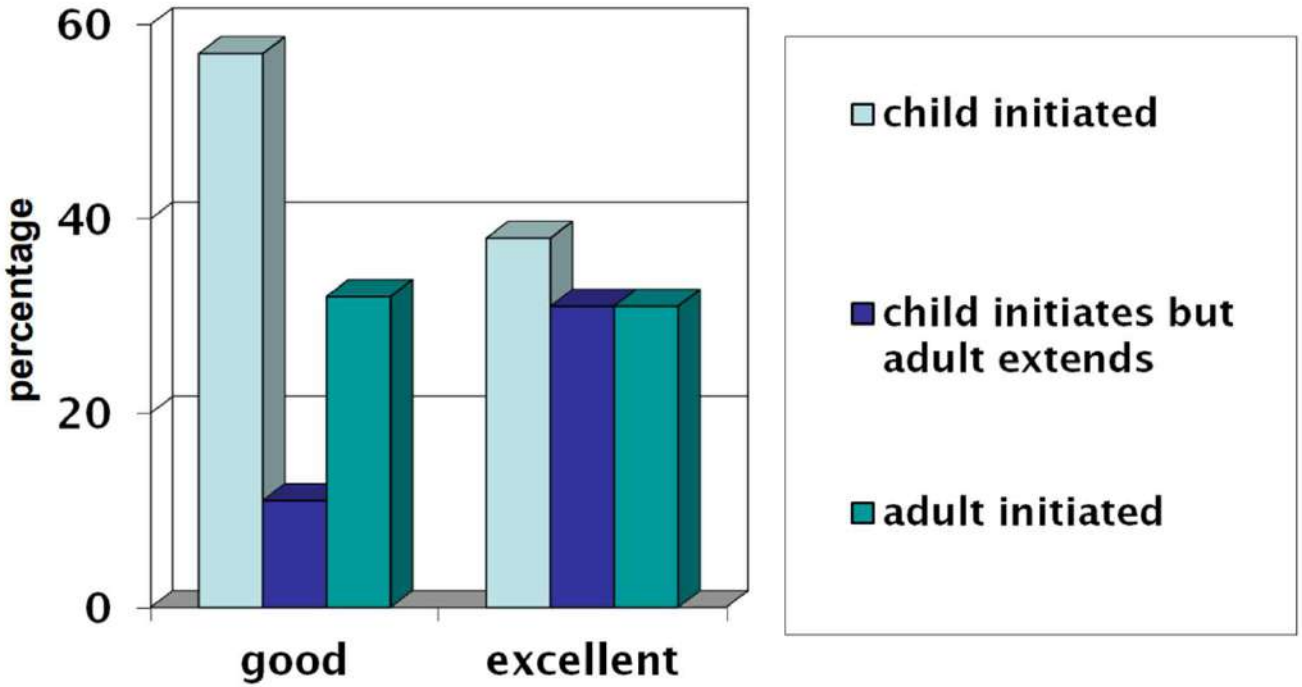

(Rankin et al., 2024)

*‘Be as invested in the families **and professionals** as they are in our children. We cannot make a lasting impact on children by skipping over the adults in the middle’*

(Li, 2025)

Consistent evidence that relationships shape child outcomes (Bethel et al., 2017)

# Skilled educators & ECCE quality




Source: Siraj, I. (2024). *Intentional and relational pedagogy: The role of the adult in the classroom*. https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2024/11/Int_Rel_Ped_2025_IramSiraj.pdf

# Pedagogical choices & ambiguity




- ‘Quality’ of implementation depends on educator understanding/skill/ training (Sivertsen & Bjorgen, 2026)
- Educator skill depends on quality / *nature of* training (Kingston & Siraj, 2017)

# What is ‘pedagogy’?

- Technical delivery of a curriculum and /or educating with values and purpose through rich relationships? (Pearson & Degotardi, 2016)

- Educator as instrument or instrumental?

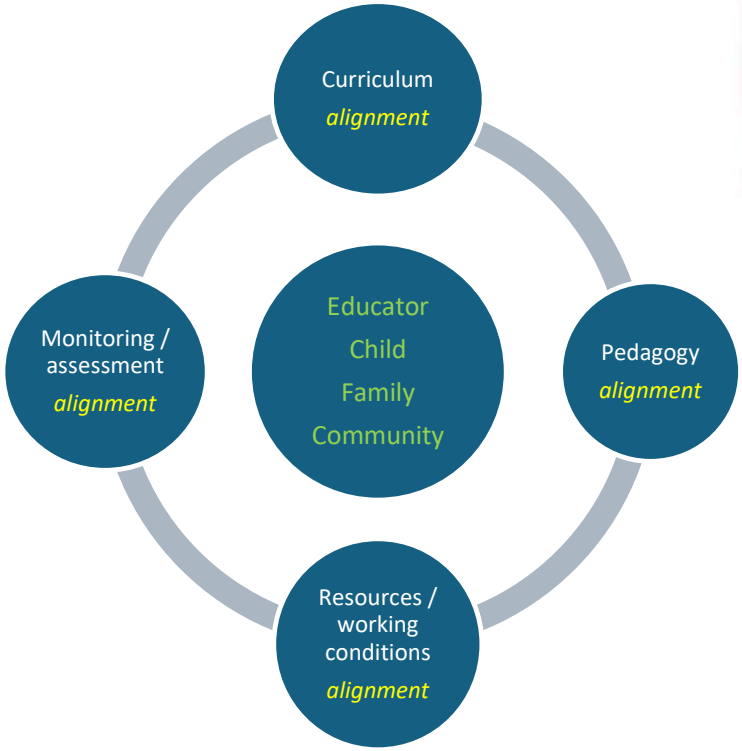






# Pedagogy and **intentionality / purpose**

**‘Intentional’ ECCE:**
**What <u>we</u> want for <u>our</u> children**










**Intentional educators**

*Know and understand* children (broadly & in context)

*Know and understand* curriculum / learning objectives; available / appropriate resources & materials

*Know and understand* themselves

**Build on this knowledge to <u>plan for learning</u> (through a variety of approaches to suit needs)**

(Siraj et al., 2017)

# Intentional educators (Bassett, 2023)

*“intentional teaching is where teachers truly know their children and use their understanding to join in and guide when the opportunities arise”.*

*“I will teach maths in it (play) asking how much water how many spoons of sugar, how much milk”.*

*“Observations throughout the day can allow us as practitioners to scaffold learning for children and offer challenges to their interests”.*

*“Child was playing with an activity planned by me to help them explore the idea of floating and sinking. I observed for a while and later asked him what he had noticed. He did not fully understand the vocabulary of floating and sinking. We explored together where I introduced the words and demonstrated what they mean. The next day, I placed new items to explore and encouraged him to do so. He did so and was very excited to be able to use the words 'float' and 'sink' in context” ”*







**Intentional pedagogy focuses on understanding and responding to:**

- *My children – their needs / capabilities*
- *The materials & resources available to me*
- *My goals for the children and for myself (connected to curriculum, drawing on a range of approaches)*







Play, literacy, numeracy, social connections, identity and
**the intentional pedagogue**



# Implications for workforce development

- Systems acknowledge and support **the critical role of educators** in making decisions around what is most appropriate for their children (equity, materials, context, curriculum)

- Training emphasises **processes for understanding, interpreting, responding** and applying

  - Pre-service training: **active engagement** in / application of theories and models to educators' own contexts (play-based approaches). What do I already know / value? How does this align with training content? How might I apply this in my own context? What might be the challenges / opportunities?

  - In-service training: **Tailored (on-going with implementation and feedback from centres built in)** focus on skills for intentional teaching: observation; assessment and planning; working with families and communities; leadership

- Strong, **aligned, intentional systems**: curriculum, pedagogy, monitoring / on-going supports, measures of quality, working conditions

# Final thought

*Pedagogy is not simply the 'act of teaching' but instead is the act of teaching informed by the ideas, values and beliefs which sustain and motivate it. Pedagogy is praxical – in that it aims to produce skills, knowledge structures or ways of thinking which will enable children to participate in and transform their current and future lives*

*(Pearson & Degotardi, 2016)*



Thank you!

# References


Bassett, A. (2023). *Intentional Teaching is a Taonga: An exploratory study of teachers' perspectives, beliefs, and use of intentional teaching in Aotearoa New Zealand and England.* Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MEd (Early Years), Massey University.

Bethell, C., Jones, J., Gombojav, N., Linkenbach, J., & Sege, R. (2019). Positive childhood experiences and adult mental and relational health in a statewide sample: Associations across adverse childhood experiences levels. *JAMA pediatrics*, *173*(11), e193007-e193007.

Kingston, D. & Siraj, I (2017). Supporting the Implementation of the Foundation Phase through Effective Professional Development. *Wales Journal of Education*.

Li, J. (June 4th, 2025). *Building positive early childhood experiences through simple, ordinary human interactions.* Keynote speech, HOPE Summit, Tufts University Medical Centre. Junlei Li, PhD on the importance of simple, relational interactions | 2025 HOPE Summit | Tufts Hope

Pearson, E. & Degotardi, S. (2016). *Innovative pedagogical approaches in Early Childhood Care and Education in the Asia-Pacific region: A resource pack*. UNESCO / ARNEC. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246050

Rankin, P., Staton, S., Jones, A., Potia, A. H., Houen, S., Healey, B., & Thorpe, K. (2024). *Linking Quality and Child Development in Early Childhood Education and Care. Technical Report.* Australian Education Research Organisation Limited.

Siraj, I., Kingston, D., Neilsen-Hewett, C., Howard, S., Melhuish, E., & De Rosnay, M. (2017). Fostering Effective Early Learning: A review of the current international evidence considering quality in early childhood education and care programmes-in delivery, pedagogy and child outcomes. *Fostering Effective Early Learning Study*. NSW Department of Education.

Sivertsen, A. & Bjørgen, K. (2026) Pedagogical practices used by early childhood education and care (ECEC) teachers to promote participation, *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 70:1, 236-247, DOI: 10.1080/00313831.2025.2468181