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An Investigation into the Impact of the Universal 'Free' Pre-School Programme on Early Childhood Practice in County Carlow (2015)

The Universal 'Free' Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (ECCE) was introduced in January 2010 in Ireland, with 94% of children taking part in the scheme in the year that it was introduced (DCYA, 2010). The aim of this research was to identify and analyse the impact of the ECCE scheme on early childhood practice in County Carlow. It further explored the following questions:

1. What was the real cost to County Carlow ECCE practitioners of the introduction of ECCE scheme?
2. How did County Carlow ECCE Scheme providers fulfil quality obligations to Síolta under the current ECCE model?
3. What was the impact of the ECCE Scheme on partnership with parents and early year's services in County Carlow?
4. What effect did the ECCE Scheme have on pre-school education for the children of County Carlow?

The project addressed the dearth of research on the impact of such a scheme and is timely with the current focus on reform of the ECCE sector and plans for a second ECCE year to be introduced. The research found that several anomalies exist within the ECCE scheme, in relation to its funding, quality, administration and children. Findings also identify possible supports that could enhance the scheme's roll-out and the need for a national evaluation of the current model of the ECCE scheme.