

Common Good and Public Service

Crisis lessons
for the future of
early childhood
education and care



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2020 has seen the convergence of long-looming crises for early childhood education and care, culminating in large-scale disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. This article takes stock and argues that urgent lessons from the crises should – and can – be learned now. The stay-calm-and-carry-on approach is no longer an option. Instead, the crises have opened up an immediate opportunity to initiate fundamental reform.

The reason life is so strange is that we have simply no idea what is around the next corner, something most of us have learned to forget.

–Colum McCann, Zoli

Unprecedented but not unpredicted

In the competition for a motto for 2020, the insight that life is unpredictable though we tend to pretend otherwise, expressed by the Roma woman Zoli in Colum McCann's novel, is a strong contender. It has been an extraordinary year. Future analysts and historians may well point to 2020 as the turning point that finally ended the certainties of modernity that defined so much of the twentieth century.

Globally unfolding events since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic have been called 'unprecedented'. The term may be overused, but we are clearly entering an era where our blueprints, derived from past experience, no longer offer reliable guidance for humanity on a finite planet. The picture is one of converging existential crises – pandemic, climate, economy, democracy – that reinforce each other, making it difficult if not impossible to identify a credible starting point for developing 'solutions'.

Edgar Morin, in his *Manifesto for a New Millennium*, points to the general messiness of the situation humanity finds itself in:

One is at loss to single out a number one problem to which all others would be subordinated. There is no single vital problem, but many vital problems, and it is this complex intersolidarity of problems, crises, uncontrolled processes, and the general crisis of the planet that constitutes the number one vital problem. (Morin & Kern, 1999, p. 74)

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) in many countries, including Ireland, has been affected by this convergence of crises. Young children and their families are often the most

vulnerable population (Blofield & Filgueira, 2020) and are likely to become the silent long-term sufferers of this crisis (UNICEF, 2020). The pandemic has compounded existing inequalities and created new ones, not least due to unequal access to vital public services.

In 2020 Ireland found out the hard way that early childhood education and care is an essential part of a nation's critical infrastructure. Its disruption has far-reaching consequences, first and foremost for young children and their families, but ultimately for the entire society and economy. As early childhood services had to close due to the pandemic, children were deprived of stimulating learning opportunities, safe spaces outside the home, and in some cases a daily nutritious meal. Families were left without reliable childcare, making it difficult or impossible to work. Key workers, such as those in the health and retail sectors, were prevented from fulfilling their frontline roles.

Early childhood educators, many already in precarious employment, faced losing their livelihoods. As spring progressed it became increasingly doubtful whether early childhood services would be able to reopen, due to a collapse of their business model. Without unprecedented state intervention in the sector, the restart of the economy would have been put in jeopardy. Facing the crisis, countries are engaging in what could be called an 'experiment by nature and design' on a global scale (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Approaching a review of ECEC in Ireland in 2020 solely through the lens of Covid-19, tempting as it might be, would risk losing sight of other critical developments that have shaped the sector. For a fuller picture we must return to 2019 and include other events that coincided with the efforts to sustain early childhood services during lockdown. Despite the intersolidarity of crises and converging uncontrolled processes, the picture is also one of hope and potential.

ECEC is characterised by extraordinary commitment to and engagement with young children and their rights, displayed on a daily basis, individually and collectively. It is important to recognise this, because it is the force that will make necessary reform of the system successful. Any critical interrogation of the systemic failures of the Irish ECEC system has to start by acknowledging the enormous personal and institutional commitment to young children and their right to education and care. Pointing out, as internal and external observers have consistently done, that the system continues to fail children, families, educators, and society is not an exercise in blame. It is, in reference to Bruno Latour (2004), a 'matter of fact' that should urgently become a 'matter of concern' for us all.

Crisis? What crisis?

ECEC in Ireland was not in a good state before Covid-19. 2019 was a remarkable year. Following the launch of *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families* (DCYA, 2018) in November 2018, 2019 was the first year that saw ECEC embedded in a wide-ranging and ambitious ten-year strategy. *First 5* in itself is an important achievement, as it opens the possibility of creating a coherent vision for

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the ECEC system and consequently a roadmap for realising it. With *First 5*, Ireland now has a chance to catch up with a globally emerging ‘systemic turn’ (Urban et al., 2018) that has led countries and international organisations increasingly to adopt integrated policy frameworks for addressing early childhood development, education, and care. This shift is manifest in the EU Quality Framework for ECEC (Council of the European Union, 2019) and in recommendations adopted by the leaders of the Group of 20 (G20) that refer to policy briefs developed by the Early Childhood Research Centre at DCU, in collaboration with a global network of early childhood research and policy centres:

Strengthen G20 commitment to advancing access to locally and culturally appropriate quality Early Childhood Development (ECD)/ Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for all children from birth, and build international consensus on government responsibility for a ‘whole systems’ approach to ECD/ECEC policies. (Think20, 2019, p. 4)

Welcome and necessary as it is in its ambition, *First 5* also shines a light on the state of the early childhood profession in Ireland. As I pointed out in Ireland’s *Yearbook of Education 2019–2020* (Urban, 2019), the renaming of the field as *Early Learning and Care* (ELC) without any meaningful consultation sets Ireland at odds with the hard-won international consensus on a shared understanding of *Early Childhood Education and Care*.¹

“ **The profession’s inability to agree on a shared collective identity, and the absence of an autonomous professional body, exacerbate the weakness of the field.** ”

That it could be introduced top-down, at a crucial moment for the Irish early childhood system, without much resistance, reflects the profession’s inability to agree on a shared collective identity, and the absence of an autonomous professional body, which exacerbates the weakness of the field. As I wrote in 2019: ‘ECEC in Ireland has yet to become “a profession thinking and speaking for itself” (Urban and Dalli, 2012). Unlike other established professions, we are still spoken to, and critical decisions are made for us, not with us’ (Urban, 2019, p. 96).

Other critical incidents for Irish ECEC have cast their shadows over the year to date:

- the scandal of child maltreatment and professional malpractice, exacerbated by insufficient response by the inspectorate, that once again had to be revealed by investigative journalism
- the existential threat to early childhood services caused by an unsustainable insurance model and the absence of state-supported indemnity
- the continued scandal of precarious employment for the majority of early childhood educators, leading to unsustainable staff turnover rates and endangering the well-being of children.

These are some examples of how convergent crises that, once they enter the public consciousness, open the possibility for change. Arguably, ECEC entered public consciousness – or at least the news cycle – on 5 February 2020, when several thousand early childhood educators and parents from across Ireland joined a large protest march in Dublin. Organised by a

coalition of early childhood organisations (Together for Early Years²), the march was a powerful show of hands for better working conditions and appropriate public funding.³

However, public attention soon turned to a very specific crisis when, on 12 March, then-Taoiseach Leo Varadkar announced the immediate closure of all 'childcare facilities', amidst a general closure of schools, third-level education, and a range of public facilities and institutions. It then became apparent, literally overnight, that ECEC is indeed a vital public service, whose absence had wide-ranging implications for the entire country.

What have we learned (if anything)?

As the Covid-19 crisis unfolded in spring 2020, much effort had to be put into ensuring the survival of the early childhood system during the immediate lockdown, and to enable its safe reopening. Once again, the unsustainable model of relying on a largely private sector to provide an essential public service, common good, and children's right had been exposed. Unprecedented state intervention was demanded and provided.

In a parallel development, the three political parties that would eventually form a new coalition government – Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, The Greens – negotiated and agreed a Programme for Government (PfG) that had to meet two competing challenges: responding to the immediate crisis while setting out a viable plan for 'Our Shared Future'.⁴ Early childhood occupies a prominent place in the PfG, although mostly in relation to 'childcare' (mentioned thirty-one times) and its affordability for parents. 'Early education' is mentioned only twice (it also appears in the heading 'Early years education and affordable childcare'). First, the Programme states:

For providers, we recognise the value of Early Education and Childcare for children and we will introduce a long-term sustainable funding model that promotes quality, better outcomes for children and makes a career in childcare more attractive. (PfG, p. 80)

This seems a strange prioritisation to me, placing the value to providers before children's rights. It adds to the impression that the PfG understands values first and foremost in the monetary sense.

The second time 'early education' features in the text is in a pledge to implement the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) to 'help children with additional needs to access early education and care settings' (p. 81). This is clearly not a programme that prioritises children's universal right to early childhood education! It is left to the reader to work their way to item three in a list of twelve bullet points under the heading 'Early years education and affordable childcare'. Only here do we find what should have been spelled out as the overall and urgent task for the new government:

Reform the childcare system to create one that brings together the best of community and private childcare provision, is focused on children's

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rights and quality outcomes, reduces inequalities, supports staff retention, and substantially reduces costs to parents. (PfG, p. 80)

A commitment to overdue reform is welcome. The terminology, however, is concerning. While across Europe and more widely, countries and international organisations recognise the importance of an integrated ECEC system,⁵ with education as a universal right of young children, and a value of its own, the Irish government seems to be embarking on a largely utilitarian route. Framing the purpose of the early childhood system largely as childcare, Ireland appears to be disassociating itself from the global consensus. Moreover, prioritising childcare over education risks deepening the conceptual split between them and exacerbating its damaging effect on the Irish early childhood system.

The PfG contains twelve specific commitments covering a range of issues, including the establishment of a single government agency, Childcare Ireland, tasked with developing and assuring ‘quality’ over further investment to ‘reduce costs for parents’ through ‘universal and targeted subsidies’, and measures to improve ‘terms and conditions of employment’.

It is a highly aspirational programme that links with Goal D of First 5, to establish ‘an Effective Early Childhood System’ (DCYA, 2018, pp. 104–115).

“ Essential elements of a Competent System include at the very least an autonomous professional body, and an integrated, whole-system monitoring, evaluation, and research structure.

Potential stepping-stones to this effective system are the announcement of Childcare Ireland as a one-stop-shop for developing and assuring quality, and government support for the establishment of a Joint Labour Committee in the childcare sector. Both are potentially important elements of what could eventually become a Competent System (Urban & Guevara, 2019; Urban et al., 2012) of ECEC in Ireland.

‘Potentially’, because other essential elements of a Competent System are still missing. They include at the very least an autonomous professional body for early childhood education and care (whose absence is at least noted in First 5) and an integrated, whole-system monitoring, evaluation, and research structure (First 5 aspires to establish a research observatory, which could become a central element of such a structure).

While it is welcome to see children’s rights mentioned as one element of the new government’s commitment to early childhood provision, the overall impression is one of lack of political will to address the underlying challenges of ECEC in Ireland that have consistently been pointed out by Irish and international observers over three decades:

- governance
- fragmentation
- resources
- marketisation.⁶

Unfortunately, as far as ECEC is concerned, the PfG is a missed opportunity. It is a programme for system repair, at risk of perpetuating the piecemeal approach to early childhood policy, not a much-needed programme for system change.

There are other indicators that make me question the political will to embark on a fundamental change of approach. Announced in the context of *First 5*, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in 2018 established two working groups: the Workforce Development Plan (WDP) Steering Group and the Funding Model Expert Group. Their terms of reference predate the pandemic. Neither group was given a remit to address the systemic challenges; their work to date has stayed firmly within the limitations of the existing early childhood provision.

Even before Covid-19 it was questionable, at best, to insist on the separation of the two groups and their agendas and work plans. As a member of the WDP Steering Group, I requested a joint meeting and an alignment of work plans from the outset, a request repeatedly rejected by the Department. Only recently was it indicated that direct communication between the two groups might be arranged, when they resumed their work after the disruption. The pandemic did not cause the dysfunction of the Irish ECEC system; it has brought it into focus. It should now be a priority to revise the working groups' terms of reference and explicitly include *system change* in their remits.

Looking forward: A necessary and possible transition

There can be no return to normal because 'normal' was the problem in the first place⁷

When the contours of the new government began to emerge earlier this year, INFORM, a group of senior independent experts, of which I am a member, produced an analysis of the early childhood system and laid out arguments for fundamental reform supported by a roadmap and concrete steps.⁸ Our vision for the Irish ECEC system is one that is *universal, public, and free at the point of delivery* – in line with the EU's Child Guarantee.⁹

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Most importantly, it is based on children's rights to education from birth as spelled out in General Comment No. 7 of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2006). Our arguments and proposals focus on what we believe should have been at the core of the PFG: a bold initiative and political leadership aimed at transitioning the Irish ECEC system to one that is effective and competent, as envisaged in *First 5*.

In our contribution we lay out three commitments that we believe should have been at the core of the PFG:

1. a commitment to a universal, public, rights-based ECEC system
2. a commitment to introducing the core constituting elements of such a system over the lifetime of the new government
3. a commitment to immediate measures to begin and sustain the transition.

We cannot pretend that, on any scale, we can return to carrying on as if nothing has changed. The past year has made that abundantly clear. The

status quo ante is gone. Besides, as the graffiti sprayer in Hong Kong reminds us, it was the problem in the first place. Differently put, by Pope Francis in his recent papal encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*: 'Anyone who thinks that the only lesson to be learned was the need to improve what we were already doing, or refine existing systems and regulations, is denying reality' (Francis I, 2020).

In 2020, ECEC in Ireland has finally arrived a crossroads. The policy choices made today will determine if we, as a country, will have to continue with a patched-up, dysfunctional system, or instead seize the opportunity to realise something better, more equitable and sustainable, and fundamentally different.

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I use the phrase 'seize the opportunity' because that is precisely what the crisis gives us: an opportunity to stop, take stock, re-evaluate, and redesign how we provide early childhood education and care in this country. There are obvious structural elements that need to be looked at: some existing ones will have to be scrapped, new ones put in place. All have been emphasised by experts for years. They include:

- public policy and resourcing, under the auspices of one government department, which draws directly on the expertise of professionals across all ECEC setting types
- support structures at local level, to lead and enable joint planning, accessible professional development, and opportunities for sharing learning
- provision to be based on local community needs, defined through mandatory participatory short-, medium-, and long-term planning
- an active, cohesive monitoring, evaluation, and research system that sets standards and systematically documents and investigates perspectives of all stakeholders, including children, families, and educators, and replaces the current differentiated inspection regimes
- an autonomous, inclusive professional body to regulate and represent the ECEC workforce, responsible for professional conduct and ethics, overseeing training, qualifications, and continuous professional development, in collaboration with relevant local and national organisations.

System change is possible – beginning now

While these and other elements are indispensable, system change is not a solely structural task. To suggest so would reduce to a technical and managerial task what is fundamentally a political, ethical, and democratic project. Before we can meaningfully address structural questions about service provision and governance, we have to engage with a more far-reaching question: What do we, as a society in the twenty-first century, aspire to for *all* children?

This is a question of values, ethical stances, and most of all vision. A central point of critique of the Irish early childhood system has been the absence of a shared vision amidst the multitude of fragmented views and vested interests within and around ECEC. Ireland has shown remarkable capability

for social transformation in recent years, unimaginable not too long ago, in areas such as women's reproductive rights and marriage equality. These changes were achieved through broad and informed democratic debate and political leadership. It is about time we applied these capabilities to the education and care of the youngest children.

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ENDNOTES

1. The OECD (2001) provides this internationally adopted definition: 'Early childhood education and care refers to any regulated arrangement that provides education and care for children from birth to compulsory primary school age, which may vary across the EU. It includes centre and family day-care, privately and publicly funded provision, pre-school and pre-primary provision.'
2. Association of Childhood Professionals, the Federation of Early Childhood Providers, the National Community Childcare Forum, the National Childhood Network, Seas Suas, and SIPTU.
3. www.rte.ie/news/ireland/2020/0205/1113244-childcare-funding/.
4. <https://static.rasset.ie/documents/news/2020/06/programmeforgovernment-june2020-final.pdf>.
5. As we have documented elsewhere, there is a significant trend to integrate systems even further and to move towards integrated early childhood development, education, and care (Urban & Guevara, 2019).
6. European Commission, 2015; OECD, 2004; for more detailed discussion see Urban et al., 2017.
7. Graffiti in Hong Kong. *The Guardian*. www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/11/coronavirus-who-will-be-winners-and-losers-in-new-world-order.
8. INFORM is an independent, non-partisan group of senior academics and professionals who advocate for and assist in bringing about change in the early childhood system. Papers by INFORM and information about the group can be downloaded here: www.dropbox.com/sh/p5hg3de17drckuf/AAAF77jfhvAOtTvqloDgbsdla?dl=0.
9. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1428&langId=en>.

Progress Report for First 5, the Whole-of-Government Strategy for babies, young children and their families



In November 2020, Roderic O'Gorman, Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, published the Government's First 5 Annual Implementation Report 2019.

First 5, the ten-year Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (2019-2028), focuses on early childhood from the antenatal period to age five, and takes a joined-up, cross-government approach to supporting babies, young children and their families during these critical early years.

The First 5 Annual Implementation Report 2019 summarises the progress in implementing the strategy, with over 90% of all 2019 commitments met at this point.