# The Temptations of Block Play

## Approaches to reconceptualising and reforming the Irish early childhood education and care system

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**This review of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Ireland in 2021 takes a systems perspective to ask what crisis lessons, if any, have been learned from the pandemic, what progress has been made, and what new perils have arisen. As the sector edges towards professionalisation, are we any nearer to a universal, rights-based, public ECEC system?**

Where to start? To attempt a critical review of the events and developments shaping the Irish early childhood education landscape in any given year is a risky undertaking, and 2021 was no different. A lot has happened since I concluded my article in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2020* with a note of hope and cautious optimism grounded in 'Ireland's remarkable capability for social transformation' (Urban, 2021, p. 31). Written one year into a global pandemic that, among other things, put a spotlight on the precariousness of social infrastructure in Ireland and globally, the article was subtitled 'Crisis lessons for the future of early childhood education and care'.

Picking up the threads as we look back on another year, maybe a way into the 2021 review could be to ask what, if any, of the crisis lessons have been learned, what progress has been made, and what new perils have arisen in the process. Are we any nearer to a universal, rights-based, public early childhood education and care (ECEC) system in this country?

### A systems perspective (managing messes)

I approach my analysis from a systems perspective for several reasons. First, an effective early childhood system is what *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families* aspires to achieve by 2028 (Department for Children and Youth Affairs, 2018). We should take this aspiration seriously, enquire how it can best be achieved, and never cease to ask ourselves how things are going.

Second, early childhood systems are what I care about and have written about for many years: How can we better understand how actors and agents in a complex environment come together in ways that result in better, more just and equitable outcomes for *all* children, their families and communities, for local and global society? The early childhood system I am referring to consists of *people* – educators, children, mothers

and fathers, administrators, policymakers, researchers, teacher educators, and others. It also includes institutions, legal frameworks and regulations, and so on – elements with the power to significantly shape the experiences and outcomes for everyone involved. They all bring a lot to the table: their aspirations, hopes, and dreams, their values and traditions, their politics, policies, and interests, their professional practices and operational models, their institutional logic; the list goes on.

Third, because a systems perspective enables us to shift the focus from the individual to the whole, and to questions of how the elements of the system – be they human or non-human – can come together in something that is more *competent*, *equitable*, and *sustainable* than what we have now, and delivers better outcomes for *all*. Such a shift of perspective, too, allows me to preface my analysis with a huge shout-out to the commitment and resilience of all those who did their utmost to keep early childhood education and care services open under extremely difficult conditions: early childhood educators first and foremost, but also everyone who supported them in their task. Recognising their commitment, the necessary analysis focuses on the shortcomings of the system we are operating in (and how to address them), a system that continues to fail children, families, educators, and society.

Which brings me to a first level of analysis of the situation in which the early childhood system finds itself at the end of 2021: it's a mess! Let me explain:

One of the remarkable developments of the past year was the emergence of a broad consensus that the Irish early childhood education and care system is not fit for purpose. Obviously, this is not news for those involved in the system (e.g., educators) or affected by it (e.g., parents). What has changed is that the consensus now extends into public discourse – reflected in the media, for instance – and across the political spectrum. There is public recognition that we have a problem, which in itself is an important acknowledgement, a first step towards dealing with the issues.

But no one simple and straightforward solution has presented itself. Rather, as the American philosopher William James might say, we are still experiencing an *unstructured state of confusion* from which strings of problems continue to be extracted: affordability, accessibility, quality, working conditions, resilience to disruption, and so on. Russell L. Ackoff, a pioneer of systems thinking, refers to what decision makers have to deal with under such conditions as *messes*. 'A mess', he writes, 'is a system of external conditions that produces dissatisfaction' (Ackoff, 1974, p. 5).

The fundamental implication of adopting a systems perspective is that problems do not exist in isolation, nor do their solutions. As we identify individual problems, each one 'affects the state of the messes of which they are part' (ibid.). As a consequence, it is impossible to get out of the mess by 'independently solving its component problems' (ibid.). Or, in the words of Casaubon, the protagonist of Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum:* 'As the man said, for every complex problem there's a simple solution, and it's wrong.'

There is another, more hopeful way of interpreting the 'messiness' of the Irish ECEC environment: It is precisely the sector's complexity that calls

for, and opens, the possibility for fundamental reform of the way we – all of Irish society – relate to services for young children and their families. What emerges are the contours of an essentially democratic, political, and ethical project that will take years to complete – but should be brought under way with urgency now.

## The temptations of block play

At the time of writing, there still appears to be a lack of ambition at policy level to lead the ethical and political project to create a universal, rights-based, public ECEC system for all young children and their families in Ireland. The prominence of 'childcare' as the defining term in policy debates and public discourse – and in the Programme for Government, as I have argued (Urban, 2021) – has echoes of the debate that entered the EU policy space about 30 years ago.

In 1992, the driving factor of the EU's emerging interest in services for young children was to urge member states to increase 'childcare' provision in order to promote gender equality and facilitate women's participation in the labour market (Council of the European Communities, 1992; Urban, 2012). It took almost two decades for EU policies to fully transition to a recognition that 'participation in high-quality early childhood education and care' is beneficial for all children, reaching far beyond its role as a service for working parents (Council of the European Union, 2011). It took almost another decade for the EU to embrace and promote systemic approaches to ECEC (Council of the European Union, 2019).

With the EU Child Guarantee (European Commission, 2021), Europe is only now beginning to catch up with global recognition that early childhood development, education, and care are an essential part of any society's critical infrastructure that requires integrated and multi-sectoral policy approaches (Kagan et al., 2019; Urban et al., 2020a, 2020b, 2021). There is no doubt that early childhood educators, the sector in general, and specific Irish policies regarding young children and their education have embraced and incorporated many of these developments. I do wonder, however, about the public and policy discourse, *the way we talk about services for young children and their purpose*. With some notable exceptions, perceptions in Irish society of what – and who – early childhood education and care are for seem stuck in a time warp!

Nonetheless, there has been no shortage of activity in the early childhood policy space. Welcome efforts have been made to put in place some of the building blocks that are essential for an effective and competent ECEC system (Urban et al., 2012). Some of the processes that were brought under way in 2019, following the launch of *First 5* in 2018, are nearing completion. Others have been added to the mix. Below are some highlights:

- A Workforce Development Plan that will bring much-needed clarity to the professional roles, role profiles, and possible career trajectories for early childhood educators. The plan was prepared by a steering group in 2019–20 and finalised in a consultative process with stakeholders and subject experts in 2021. The final document, titled 'Nurturing Skills', has been published by DCEDIY (2021a).

- The work of an expert group to develop a 'new funding model' for ECEC, tasked with 'examining the current model of funding, its effectiveness in delivering quality, affordable, sustainable and inclusive services and how additional resourcing can be delivered for the sector to achieve these objectives drawing on international practice in this area'. This work, too, has been completed. The report of the expert group, titled 'Partnership for the Public Good', has been published (https://first5fundingmodel.gov.ie/); both the new funding model and the Workforce Development Plan were launched by Minister O'Gorman on 7 December 2021.
- A review of the 'operating and oversight model' used by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to 'support the delivery of accessible, affordable and high-quality early learning care and school age childcare services'.
- The establishment of a Joint Labour Committee (JLC) with the aim of establishing an Employment Regulation Order that addresses pay and working conditions in ECEC services.
- The launch of a consultation on reform of the existing inspection regime.
- The launch of 'Principles for a High Quality and Accessible Public Childcare Model' by the Community Platform (Community Platform, 2021).
- The publication of the final report of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality, demanding the transition to a 'publicly funded, accessible and regulated model of quality, affordable early years and out of hours childcare', underpinned by an increase of public funding to the internationally recognised benchmark of 1% of GDP (Citizens' Assembly, 2021).
- The launch of a research report on the establishment of an independent professional body for the early childhood profession, conducted by CRANN and Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (Moloney & Davern, 2021).
- The launch of an online consultation process on the implantation of the EU Child Guarantee in Ireland (DCEDIY, 2021b).
- The publication of a review of Irish ECEC policies, undertaken by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021).

This is by no means an exhaustive list. Each initiative is a valuable and necessary piece of work. Each one addresses a key challenge that has been present in the Irish ECEC environment for years: unsustainable funding, uncertainty about professional roles and careers, untenable working conditions, and inefficient governance. We are finally moving, it seems, out of William James's *unstructured state of confusion* into a phase where problems are identified, acknowledged, and addressed.

However, the question remains whether and how the solutions offered by the various initiatives can come together to manoeuvre us out of Ackoff's *mess* that we are undeniably in. It is worrying, for instance, that the initiatives addressing the governance of the system – funding model, workforce development, operating model – saw no change to their terms of reference despite significant changes of the context they are operating in. As I have argued before, including in this publication (Urban, 2021), the

critical element missing from the outset is an explicit remit to work towards system change, not system repair.

The new funding model, in its title at least, finally recognises early childhood education and care as a *public good*. It recognises, too, that realising this aspiration will require taking much more *public responsibility* (Urban, 2021) for providing education and care for all children in this country. The 'Partnership for the Public Good' certainly deserves appreciation and careful analysis. At first reading (at the time of writing, on the day of publication), it appears that the proposal moves closer to supply-side funding of services (a 'core funding'), which is overdue and welcome. Welcome, too, is to see that the core funding is supposed to be conditional to a fee freeze for providers – although this announcement is already triggering 'market' resistance.

It appears, however, that the proposal avoids addressing the fundamental structural flaws of the 'childcare market', and the underlying democratic and political dimensions of the public good in relation to the right to education and care for every young child from birth. If the 'Partnership for the Public Good' is supposed to be a turning point, a decisive step towards a universal, rights-based, public ECEC system for Ireland, it deserves all our support. But it would have been good to see this expressed unambiguously as a policy ambition and direction of travel.

The second major building block of what will eventually form the 'effective' early childhood system that *First 5* aspires to is the Workforce Development Plan, published (on the day of writing this article) as 'Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022–2028'. I have commented before on the imposition of the *ELC* acronym and its implications for a profession that is educational at its core (unacceptable, inaccurate, and setting Ireland outside of international consensus) (Urban, 2019). Without repeating the argument *for* my continued use of ECEC, it is worth pointing out that the document, despite a thorough consultation, risks coming across as a plan *for*, not *with*, the profession. This, in turn, points to the continued absence of a collective ECEC profession that 'speaks and thinks for itself' (Urban & Dalli, 2012).

The Workforce Development Plan prominently mentions the absence of a professional association as something that will have to be addressed. This is a much-needed step forward, as it recognises that an autonomous professional association is indeed an indispensable part of our 'effective' ECEC system – not a welcome add-on. To be clear: I welcome the Workforce Development Plan because it will bring much-needed clarity and direction to the sector. However, as a member of the steering group of the process I was surprised to learn that:

- Despite aiming at professionalising the ECEC workforce, the term *profession* is absent from the title. Terms like *skills* (who defines these?) and *nurturing* (who is being nurtured, and who does the nurturing?) come with connotations that do not necessarily evoke images of a confident, autonomous profession.
- Key recommendations made by invited subject experts and stakeholders were not included in the document, e.g., in relation to diversity and equality and to State support for a professional

association (although the recommendations are available on the DCEDIY website).
- The published version of the document, according to DCEDIY, is 'very similar' (personal communication) to the one agreed by the steering group – so obviously it is not identical.

I observe with interest, too, the establishment of a Joint Labour Committee, comprising representatives of employers and employees (trade unions). It promises to address another fundamental failure of the existing Irish ECEC system: to provide recognition and appropriate and sustainable remuneration and working conditions for its workforce. This is a potentially important move, as it prepares the ground for establishing proper industrial relations between organised employer and employee bodies. Will it be able – or willing – to challenge its own founding paradigm, that there is an 'industry' to educate and care for young children? Can it become a voice that articulates the need to transition from a business model to a public service model? Or will the JLC become a tool to improve, but maintain, the status quo? We should watch developments with critical appreciation as we continue to make the case for a universal, rights-based, public system of early childhood education and care.

On 26 September 2021, Roderic O'Gorman, Minister for Children, Equality, Diversity, Integration and Youth, spoke on public radio about a range of issues related to his department's brief but focusing on responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. During the interview, he touched briefly upon the more general problems facing the early childhood sector. Remarkably, he identified marketisation as the central problem (Newstalk, 2021). His was a welcome (if rare and not repeated) acknowledgement of what is at stake if we are serious about building a universal, rights-based, and public early childhood system in Ireland.

*Cui bono*? Who benefits from the way we organise 'childcare' in Ireland? One issue absent from the debate is the apparent inability to distinguish between different forms of private, for-profit provision, the central element of our marketised system. A unique feature of the Irish ECEC landscape is the prevalence of small businesses, often owned, managed, and run by one person. They are close to the communities and families they serve and are a valuable part of how ECEC can and should be provided. Many operate as businesses because it is the only frame of reference available. We should not conflate them with the fast-growing corporate sector, often multinational chains, that have entered the Irish 'childcare market' precisely because it is so profitable.

International experiences (e.g., New Zealand, The Netherlands, UK, Australia) show that corporate childcare providers, some of them the same multinationals now operating in the Irish 'market', exert pressure on governments to lower regulatory, quality, and qualification standards. This poses a real risk to the declared aim of improving the quality of ECEC. In Ireland, highly profitable companies (e.g., Giraffe group: €2 million pre-tax profits in 2018; see also O'Brien, 2021; Coyle, 2021) are already lobbying the regulator for weaker standards, such as regarding sleep arrangements for toddlers, which risks putting pressure on adult–child ratios (Flynn, 2021).

## Developing ECEC as public good requires democratic debate

Arising from this situation is a question that reaches well beyond the early childhood sector. It will have to be addressed in open public and democratic debate: Do we agree that it is desirable and acceptable that vital public service, including essential infrastructure, education, and collective care, should be delivered by providers whose main motive is profit, and whose main responsibility is to their shareholders?

More specifically, in the current early-childhood policy landscape, there are questions we should be asking about possible unintended (or not-so-unintended?) consequences of the recently established JLC. How do we ensure it does not hand more leverage to large corporate providers? And that it does not maintain or even increase pressure on wages, conditions, standards, and regulation? There may well be advantages of scale as we move towards larger entities in ECEC services, for example concerning regulation and forward planning. The political and democratic question is whether we want those advantages to arise in planned and democratically accountable ways in a public ECEC system. The alternative, I am concerned, is to be stuck with policies indefinitely reacting to market pressures.

## Better workforce management does not equate to professionalisation

While it is overdue to address pay, conditions, and profile of the early childhood workforce (i.e., through JLC and Workforce Development Plan), we should be careful not to confuse these necessary initiatives with the general task of *professionalising* ECEC. As I and others have argued consistently, this is not primarily a technical task. On the contrary: It is first and foremost an ethical and political project, one that centres on the collective identity of professionals concerned with the education and care of young children.

Without doubt, there are organisational tasks that must be addressed, and structures to be established in order to make it work. But the main questions to be asked, debated, and communicated by the project of professionalisation are questions of identity: *Who are we, the early childhood education and care profession? Who am I, as a member of that profession?* This is the core task of an autonomous professional association, and it is welcome to see growing support for such a body to be established. The need for a professional association has been acknowledged, for instance, in the process of creating the Workforce Development Plan from the outset.

There is a broad consensus that the establishment of a professional association can succeed only if it comes from within the profession. Negotiating the many voices, interests, and aims in that space is in itself a contribution to professionalisation. As such, it cannot be imposed; it can only be owned and run by the profession. However, the overall responsibility for the effective early childhood system towards which we are working lies with government, and it manifests in the government's role in *creating the conditions* for the 'effective system' to flourish. An autonomous professional association for ECEC is an indispensable part of the system. What we need to see is government assuming a role that is much more proactive than what is now included in the Workforce Development Plan, not in setting up or running a professional association, but in *enabling it coming into existence.*

There is a temptation to tackle the challenges of the ECEC system one by one, and at distinct construction sites. Some will say, not without reason, that it is the pragmatic approach to resolving critical issues. However, none of the building blocks we are handling makes sense unless we share an idea of the edifice we are constructing.

## Care for the self, the other, the planet: Early childhood education and care as an ethical and existential project

*May you live in interesting times*. This apocryphal wish, often falsely purported to be a Chinese curse, seems an appropriate description of the state we are in. If anything, the ongoing and currently resurging Covid-19 pandemic gives cause to urgent reconsideration of what our efforts to build an 'effective' early childhood system are really for. Especially if we look at them in the wider context of the convergence of existential global crises that will be real lived experience for young children as they grow up: the high likelihood of more pandemics, catastrophic climate change, loss of biodiversity, and a widening crisis of democracy, economy, and peace. All this should alert us to a necessary democratic debate about the *purpose* of ECEC, both in the here and now, and with our eyes firmly on the increasingly uncertain future.

Some obvious answers are beginning to emerge from global experiences. Young children are most affected by the pandemic disruptions; UNICEF (2020) alerts us to a global children's rights crisis. While there is widespread disruption of education – 150 countries closed their schools throughout 2020 (UNESCO, 2021) – hard data on the youngest children is still hard to come by (Gromada et al., 2020). The emerging picture is one of widespread disruption of early childhood services in all countries affected by the pandemic (Kenny & Yang, 2021). Emerging, too, is the recognition that countries with more integrated early childhood systems appear to be coping better with the disruption: multi-sectoral policies are an indicator of systems resilience.

As we reconfigure our services for young children, seeking to make them fit for purpose for the coming decades, the questions we should ask ourselves are no longer merely organisational. Humanity, due to its own actions and inactions, faces an existential crisis; collective survival is no longer a philosophical question. Considering this stark reality, how do we, as early childhood educators, contribute to young children's education and care *for the self, the other, and the planet*? This, I suggest, is the question of purpose that legitimises our efforts to reconceptualise the system.

In a recent outlook on the state of social systems, the OECD observes:

> *As countries plan their recovery from the multiple crises triggered by the pandemic, they have an opportunity to make these systems more inclusive, more sustainable, more resilient and more responsive.* (OECD, 2021, *p.* 9)

But this, the authors conclude, can only happen

> *with the active participation of citizens in new forms of collective action at the local, national and international level. (ibid.)*

Could this be what we should be educating young children for?

Young children, babies, or toddlers who enter an early childhood service for the first time today will be about 10 years old by the time we will most likely have missed the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. They will be 30 by the time we will have missed, as it stands today, the 2050 zero-carbon-emission target now widely acknowledged as the last chance to avoid catastrophic and irreversible overheating of Earth by the end of the 21st century. At that time, they may well be the parents of young children themselves. What do we, early childhood educators, advocates, and scholars, at the beginning of the second decade of the century, want these children to experience as they grow up?

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