

Beginning Is the Hardest Part

A Critically Sympathetic View on the Early Childhood Education and Care Landscape

Beginnings

The year is drawing to its close as I sit down wondering how to begin the 2023 overview of events and developments in the Irish early childhood education and care (ECEC) environment. I feed my procrastination habit with a quick search for quotes about beginnings being the hardest part; 0.35 seconds and 74,200,000 hits later, I am none the wiser. But perhaps 'beginnings' is not the word to look for in this annual stock-taking exercise? We'll come to that.

As is evident in the contributions to the Early Childhood chapter of *Ireland's Yearbook of Education, 2023* was again a year of vibrant activity. It is a strong indication of a rich and fast-developing educational environment that the contributions to this section of the book have doubled over the last six years. ECEC is clearly very much alive in Ireland.

The spread of contributions to the current edition also shows a much-needed shift in thinking, in the collective self-image of those working in and around educational settings for the youngest children. Reaching from engaging parents in shaping our pedagogical practices, ensuring the rights of all young children regardless of their background, and opening the educational institution to art and science, to active engagement between formal (e.g., preschool) and non-formal education and care settings (e.g., childminding, home visiting), the authors and protagonists are examining themselves, their practices, and their understanding of ECEC from an extended *systemic* perspective.

My hopeful reading of this is that a remarkable evolution of the discourse – our collective making sense – of what ECEC is, and should aspire to be, has taken hold, and is here to stay! This systemic turn, as I have called it, is by no means limited to Ireland. It has been a defining feature of



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This article comments on developments in the Irish early childhood education and care landscape in 2023. The many initiatives documented in this *Yearbook* are a sign that early childhood education in Ireland is very much alive. The article traces some of the critical aspects that have shaped the early childhood environment, following up on the author's overview articles in previous editions of the *Yearbook*.

the global development in our field for the past decade, its importance emphasised during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic (Kagan & Tucker, 2018; Urban, 2014, 2022a; Urban et al., 2012, 2018; 2022).

It is more than welcome to see systems thinking firmly embedded in Irish ECEC in 2023. The shift towards an early childhood *system* is reflected in the *Yearbook* articles' frequent reference to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, and in a policy environment that, since the publication of *First 5* (DCYA, 2018), has embraced ECEC as a critical part of an *effective system* of supports for *babies, young children, and their families*.

No such thing

With a nod to the work of Donald Woods Winnicott (1964), one of the important foundational theorists in early childhood development, one could be tempted to say that what we see play out around us is the tacit acknowledgement that *there is no such thing as a preschool*. Winnicott never thought about early childhood education, or preschools more specifically. He was a brilliant and groundbreaking child psychiatrist; he did not take a sociological perspective on educational institutions. His original quote reads: 'There is no such thing as a baby. [. . .] A baby cannot exist alone, but is essentially part of a relationship' (Winnicott, 1964, p. 88).

Like Winnicott's baby, early childhood education and care does not, cannot, exist on its own. Instead, our settings and institutions, and the educational practices within them, are part of a complex societal web of often contradicting aims, purposes, practices, and aspirations. ECEC does not exist in isolation. It is part of 'the sum total of societal reaction to the fact of ontogenetic development' – Siegfried Bernfeld's classic definition of education (Bernfeld, 1973, pp. 31–32).

The first duty

It is this societal, cultural, political, historical, and economic embeddedness that requires us to take a much wider view on the urgent task to transform Irish ECEC into an *effective, competent system* – a system that delivers just and equitable outcomes for *all* children from birth, and their families and communities. Building such a system is an ambitious task; it was expressed, proudly, as one of the *raisons d'être* of the newly independent Irish State a little over a century ago:

It shall be the first duty of the Government of the Republic to make provision for the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of the children, to secure that no child shall suffer hunger or cold from lack of food, clothing, or

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shelter, but that all shall be provided with the means and facilities requisite for their proper education and training as Citizens of a Free and Gaelic Ireland. (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019)

Considering Ireland's performance against a whole range of indicators – beginning with homelessness, child poverty, mental and physical health, and well-being, and extending to access to affordable ECEC for all – I leave it to you to judge how close Ireland has come, in 2023, to fulfilling her 'first duty' to her children. What the Democratic Programme of the first Dáil Éireann on 21 January 1919 should inspire us to do is to reclaim the radical ambition to make ECEC a public concern, a *res publica*, placed at the very core of what it means to be an independent, democratic republic.

This takes me back to my initial question as I consider the state and development of ECEC over the past 12 months: Besides vibrant activity, the extraordinary commitment of all involved, inspiring practices, and numerous welcome initiatives, have we seen real beginnings of change, of radical transformation towards a universal, rights-based, free, and public ECEC system?

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Let me recap where we were at the end of 2022. This was year one of the Employment Regulation Order (ERO), put in place to establish 'minimum rates of pay and conditions of employment for workers' in the 'business sector' of Early Learning and Childcare, or, as the Department of Enterprise, Trade, and Employment also refers to it, the Early Years Services sector (DETE, 2022).

One year on, the ERO has indeed delivered modest wage increases for professional educators. However, my concern at the time, expressed in my roundup in *Ireland's Education Yearbook 2022*, was that the process carried two fundamental risks:

1. It firmly frames ECEC as a low-skill 'service', in line with only two other sectors of the Irish economy: contract cleaning and security industry. This is hugely counterproductive and undermines the unfinished task to recognise ECEC as a highly qualified profession whose members are on par with equally qualified education professionals at all levels of education.
2. While it establishes much-needed 'industrial' relations and a legal forum for wage negotiations, it also gives significant leverage to large corporate employers and their representatives. In a context of rising corporate activity and for-profit provision, I predicted that this would lead to increased pressure on pay, regulations, and working conditions (Urban, 2022b).

Arguably, both developments came to pass in 2023. This was entirely predictable (and predicted!); it follows the neoliberal playbook of similar devastating developments in countries with an overreliance on a supposed 'market' and policies that rely on vital public services to be delivered for private

profit: UK, New Zealand, and Australia, to name a few. As governments are committed to increase public spending on ECEC, as is the case in Ireland, well-organised internationally operating corporations find their profits underwritten by public funds. It is extremely worrying to see the apparent inability – or lack of political will? – to learn from these well-documented examples and to devise clear political counter-strategies for Ireland.

As I argued in 2022, there is a specifically Irish aspect to the problem of private provision of ECEC: *private*, in the Irish context, is a rather complex mix of models that includes small, community-embedded services and large international corporations. While the former find it increasingly difficult to operate in an environment of tougher regulation and bureaucratic demands, the latter can operate in an economy of scale and return sizeable profits that are extracted from the system and channelled to shareholders. There can be no ethical or fiscal justification for such a model.

It does not help that the early childhood profession in Ireland is still fragmented and lacks a strong unified voice, that is, an active professional association that would enable the profession to ‘think and speak for itself’ (Urban & Dalli, 2012), and to complement the much-needed and welcome representation of workers’ rights by trade unions.

All for public?

As regular readers of *Ireland's Education Yearbook* will be aware, I have long advocated for the principle of universal, free, and public education to be extended to the youngest children. Considering the ongoing systemic challenges and perma-crisis of ECEC in Ireland, not only is it the only sustainable solution, it is an ethical and political obligation for a democratic society to take collective responsibility for all children.

Taking this responsibility seriously begins with acknowledging that the ‘market’ does not deliver children’s and families’ rights. Therefore, it is one of the most promising developments over the past 12 months that the term *public* has firmly entered the debate. Across the political spectrum there is now broad recognition of the need for much stronger public involvement in providing services for ‘babies, young children, and their families’ as we seek to address the right to education and care for all children from birth. Whether you reluctantly accept or enthusiastically embrace the conclusion might depend on where you position yourself on the political spectrum. The reality is that the debate about a public system of ECEC is here to stay and has found its way onto political and electoral agendas.

The recognition of public responsibility for the education and care of the youngest children brings Ireland broadly in line with global developments.

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International actors, including UNESCO, are affirming education as a universal right beginning from birth – requiring well-educated, well-recognised, and well-paid educators and sustainable public funding. Three pillars – the right to early childhood education, the workforce, and finance – are inseparable parts.

This is made explicit in the Tashkent Declaration and Commitments to Action for Transforming Early Childhood Care and Education (UNESCO, 2022). On public funding, the Declaration recommends that countries assign ‘at least 10 per cent of education expenditures to pre-primary education, and prioritize and reorient public expenditures for ECCE to focus on the poorest and most disadvantaged’ (ibid.). One year after Tashkent, the global debate on early childhood focuses on regional implementation and on the declaration of a *decade for early childhood* by the United Nations.

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While it is most welcome to see at least some of the international discourse reflected in Ireland, I think we should be much more ambitious. We should not be behind the curve, constantly catching up with developments. We should aim at joining other countries in leading the debate and model the transition to a universal, rights-based, free, and public system of early childhood education and care.

It is necessary, though, to be clearer in the internal debate about what exactly *public* might mean in the Irish context. While it is increasingly embraced, there remains a lot of confusion in the debate. Let me offer some pointers.

Public – not just publicly funded

1. There is a fundamental difference between a *publicly funded* and a *public* system.

- » All governments are obliged to provide adequate public resources for education. Whether they meet that obligation is another question (albeit an important one).
- » A truly *public* system requires active government involvement in all aspects of the system, including service delivery, planning, regulation, monitoring, and evaluation. It includes the State taking responsibility as employer of educators.
- » While children, families, and educators are entitled to sustainable funding, there can be no place for profit in a public system (i.e., public funds extracted from the system for personal, corporate, or shareholder gain).

2. A public system requires strengthening of local democracy and decision-making powers.

- » Ireland has one of the weakest systems of local government, with many decision-making powers centralised in national government departments (Council of Europe, 2023).
- » This is a colonial legacy that Ireland shares with other former British colonies. Colonial rule depends on strong central and weak local power. It rests on distrust of the locals, on the dismissal of their expertise and capability to govern themselves, to be governed instead by centrally appointed magistrates.
- » None of this is specific to early childhood. However, a transition to a public *system* of ECEC requires building structures that enable local governance of early childhood provision, including planning, resourcing, administering, and evaluating. The task at hand is to envisage, build, resource, and qualify the entire system.
- » Is that an overambitious exercise in catching up with unfinished decolonisation? Maybe. But why not let early childhood pave the way?

3. A public system addresses more than provision of education and care to children and families in your local setting.

- » The key characteristic of early childhood provision in Ireland is that services are often small and close to the community they serve. Individually managed, it leaves services overburdened with administrative tasks. A public system can turn this into an advantage and introduce local-level bundled administration, reporting, management, and so on.
- » Caveat: the same goes for large-scale corporate providers. They, too, can operate at an economy of scale, putting them at an unfair advantage over independent services. Left uncontrolled, they create 'childcare deserts': entire communities left without access to services that are deemed unprofitable (for an example from Fingal, see Dalton, 2021).

4. A public system requires expression of political will, political leadership, a roadmap, milestones, and accountability. This includes (not an exhaustive list):

- » Commitment to a transition to a universal, rights-based, free, and public early childhood education and care system in the next programme for government.
- » The establishment of a Minister for ECEC, complemented by significantly strengthened local ECEC governance.
- » The phase-out of any for-profit provision (see definition of 'profit' above) over a five-year period, complemented by significantly increased funding.
- » A fully funded programme to prevent buyout of independent services by corporate or chain providers. Any service considering closing must be

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offered the chance to transition into public ownership. This will be a complex task, requiring that investment and property issues be sorted out.

Does such a programme stand a chance of realisation? I am convinced it does, not only because it is necessary but because it will enable us to show who we are, and aspire to be, as a society that takes shared responsibility for all children. As Howard Zinn wrote:

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. [. . .] If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.

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