

New Beginnings? Overview of Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland

Real potential for change

Another year has drawn to a close, presenting me with the annual task to provide an overview of the state of affairs in Irish early childhood education and care (ECEC), to appraise collective achievements, and to outline challenges and possibilities for the year ahead. As always, the difficulty is where to start. It has been another active year for a vibrant and fast-developing part of the Irish education system, for sure!

One way of establishing the vibrancy of the field is to look at the breadth of contributions to the early childhood section of this *Yearbook*. It shows that early childhood has, as I suggested in an earlier edition, firmly established itself as a profession that *speaks and thinks for itself*.

However, my task is not to introduce or summarise the articles in this section. Rather, it is to identify key aspects that characterise how we, and others, speak and think about the sector, its current state, and its future. The present analysis adds to a picture that has emerged over many years; I have written about it in this *Yearbook* since I started providing my annual overview in 2018. What's new, then?, I imagine you asking. A lot, and not so much, from my point of view.

2024 has brought us to a critical juncture for the future of ECEC in Ireland. Decisions taken now will determine whether we can future-proof the early childhood education system and meet our shared responsibilities to *all* children, their families, and society as a whole. It has long been clear that the early childhood system is in serious crisis. There is now, too, real potential for change. Two fundamental stages are required, I suggest, to realising the necessary systems change. Both are on the table now.



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In this overview article I trace the shift from denial (of an issue) to acknowledgement (of a problem), to a programme for action in the 2024 general election manifestos of the two parties that have presided over the Irish early childhood system for years and their commitments to reform it over the new term of government. I find both ambition and lack thereof, and map out what we should really be talking about in 2025.

1. From denial to acknowledgement

The early childhood sector has long been in crisis; this has been documented at every level for years by internal and external observers, including the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Eurofound, and of course everyone trying to access early childhood services or to pursue a career as a professional early childhood educator in Ireland. The main systemic challenges have long been identified:

- » fragmentation
- » governance
- » accessibility
- » affordability
- » quality
- » working conditions.

What has changed, profoundly, is that there is now a broad consensus by all actors, and across the entire political spectrum, that (a) we have problems and (b) we can address them. In retrospect, we might record 2024 as the year of *We can't continue as we are!*

2. From acknowledgement to action

If there is one indication of political commitment, it might be found in the change of discourse across the political spectrum. Unthinkable only a few years ago, all parties now argue for much stronger, *hands-on*, State involvement in ECEC. The arguments extend to calls for *public* early childhood provision complementing – or even, in the long term, replacing – the current fragmented picture, with its over-reliance on private for-profit provision.

At the Early Childhood Research Centre in Dublin City University, we have long argued for necessary systems change towards a universal, rights-based, public ECEC system. Together with others, we have laid out the arguments and evidence for such a shift, and provided the road map for transition. Observing the changed political discourse in the run-up to the 2024 general election, it would be tempting to say we have won the argument. But have we?

Let me take a look at the two parties that are, at the time of writing, about to form the new government. What have they promised in their election manifestos, and what might we expect to see enshrined in the programme for government?

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What are they saying?

Both parties give prominent space to early childhood in their manifestos – so far, so good. There are, however, some fundamental differences that have the potential to create tensions in a programme for government, and there are critical issues not addressed by either party. (I limit my analysis to the manifestos of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, as they are likely to be the largest partners in government. I am aware that other parties have explicit positions on ECEC.)

Fianna Fáil

The Fianna Fáil (FF) manifesto *Moving Forward. Together* (Fianna Fáil, 2024) places early childhood at the centre of the party's commitment to 'ensuring that Ireland is a good place to raise a family, and that all children are afforded an equal start in life and equal opportunities throughout their lives' (p.71). The document then refers to past achievements, including a doubling of investment in 'childcare' by the last government, thus taking credit for the successful advocacy of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), headed by outgoing Green Party minister Roderic O'Gorman.

The manifesto promise is to keep course and 'continue to grow State involvement and investment in the sector'. Stated main objectives are to achieve 'access, affordability and quality'. The manifesto is clear about the party's priorities:

- » They refer to the sector as 'childcare', thus obscuring the fundamental educational function of early childhood education and care.
- » Private provision 'plays a very significant role' in FF's plans; 'there can be no overnight abandonment'. However, there will be a 'ramping up' of 'state-led provision, particularly in areas where there is insufficient supply'. What I find remarkable here is the apparent inability to distinguish between the different types of 'private' provision: small services and community-based providers are clearly part of the solution. Large, corporate, for-profit providers are very much part of the problem. Remarkable, too, is the implicit acknowledgement that the existing system of largely private provision is failing children, families, and entire communities, as it is incapable of ensuring 'sufficient supply'. It is hard not to read this as the familiar call for the State to pick up the pieces where the private sector fails.
- » There is recognition of the critical role of early childhood educators, though they are framed as 'childcare workers', and of their unsustainable 'pay and conditions'. It is concerning that the FF strategy to address this is to rely further on Employment Regulation Orders (EROs), which keep early childhood educators in a low-skill, low-wage bracket indefinitely, and to channel future increased funds through 'childcare providers'

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instead of direct State payment of wages and aiming for pay parity with equally highly qualified graduate professionals.

- » The final commitment is to parents' 'flexibility and choice' in choosing their 'childcare arrangements' – again rejecting the responsibility of the State to ensure children's rights to early childhood education. Reference to 'education' is made only once when, under 'affordability', the manifesto promises (without specific details) to 'put the ECCE scheme on legislative footing'.

Fine Gael

Fine Gael (FG), in their general election manifesto *Securing your future* (Fine Gael, 2024), make some interesting choices. First, the manifesto refers to *Early Childhood Education and Care*, setting the tone for a government taking responsibility for ensuring the right to education for all its children, from birth. The confusion quickly returns, however, as other parts of the text refer to services as 'childcare' and to educators as 'childcare educators'. Second, the manifesto boldly places children at the very beginning of their election promises. *Giving our children the best start in life* is the opening section of the entire manifesto (p.7), with *Better early childhood education and care* the first election priority.

FG's approach appears to be based on a number of important positions:

- » Policies outlined in the manifesto seem centred on children first, not on 'childcare arrangements' only.
- » FG also acknowledge that the task at hand is holistic, as 'the first five years are critical, shaping future health, education, and well-being. A happy, nurturing environment during these formative years can set a child up for lifelong success (p.7). The statement seems to connect, without specifically naming it, to the priorities of the existing *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children, and Their Families*.
- » Like FF, the manifesto then introduces a triple focus on *accessibility, affordability, and high quality*. The overall aim, here, is stated as *empowering parents, grandparents and carers* – which implicitly recognises the complex and unsustainable current realities of Irish 'childcare arrangements'.

Building on these opening statements, the FG manifesto lists 13 concrete actions the party promises to take in a new government. These include a commitment to 'capping costs' at €200 per child per month, creating 30,000 public 'early learning places', extending the 'free' ECCE scheme by one hour, and making ECCE a legal entitlement.

Two of the announced policies stand out, from my point of view, as they allude to necessary systemic changes:

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- » 'Fair, progressive wages' will be established for 'childcare workers in public services'.
- » The Childcare Facilities Guidelines for Planning Authorities, dating back to 2001, will be reviewed 'to ensure childcare spaces are provided and put into use'.

A preliminary verdict, and what to expect

At first glance, there is a lot of overlap between the two manifestos; this is probably not a surprise. There is broad agreement that early childhood will require significant attention and investment from the yet-to-be-formed government. This increases the likelihood of a prominent place in the programme for government. There also appears to be a more explicit recognition of the complexity of the task, requiring a whole-systems approach to reforming ECEC. As advocates, scholars, and professionals arguing for systems change, we might indeed have won the argument!

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There are also significant differences between the two party positions – none of which are insurmountable. While both parties argue for more hands-on State involvement, including State provision of early childhood services, FF seem inclined not to challenge the reliance on the private sector. FG, if only tentatively, refer to ECEC as public service.

As for the persistent crises of the workforce – recruitment, retention, pay and conditions, professional recognition – FF rely on the existing ERO process. While the ERO has secured some minimal increase in hourly rates, it has locked early childhood educators in a low-wage bracket, with no pathway towards full recognition as a qualified, graduate profession. I predicted as much; it has now come to pass. FG, in contrast, seem committed to reviewing (and therefore potentially changing) the ERO process, and to creating facts on the ground by paying educators as public servants.

The messages coming from the two parties may appear like a quantum leap compared to previous years, and could even signal a period of new beginnings for ECEC. Yet they should be read with a note of caution. While recognising that *something* has to be done, and even offering some concrete action, the proposals' lack of ambition is worrying, considering the scale and urgency of the task.

First, neither party acknowledges its role in presiding over a failed system for years – decades – that does not result in an *equal* (FF) or *best* (FG) *start in life* for children. Second, the commitments stop short of full-scale systems reform: a roadmap to a rights-based, universal, public ECEC system is nowhere to be seen. Third, the elephant in the room: neither party seems aware of, or concerned about, the damage to service provision caused by corporatisation, financialisation, and speculation. Following a deeply worrying international

pattern, Ireland is at acute risk of sleepwalking into a collapse of the corporate, for-profit 'childcare' similar to that of Australia in 2008.

Going forward, what should we be arguing for?

1. A programme for government that is serious about the need for – and the possibility of – fundamental change to a rights-based, universal, public ECEC system, enshrined as a legal entitlement in national legislation.
2. A clear political statement spelling out the direction of travel.
3. A road map with measurable milestones, fully funded over the full term of government.

What else should we be talking about, in 2025?

All of the above are crucial to turn around the early childhood education and care system. Yet the much-needed systemic policy change does not replace an equally needed and much more fundamental discussion. We are now at the beginning of the second quarter of the 21st century. Many of the underlying assumptions of what ECEC is about are firmly rooted in the 20th century. But the world has changed profoundly, requiring us to re-evaluate and re-imagine the purpose of education in general, and of early childhood education more specifically.

The world that young children are born into is one with a perfect storm of mutually reinforcing existential crises for humanity, most if not all of them self-inflicted: climate catastrophe, loss of biodiversity, forced displacement and mass migration, war, violence, and genocide, dysfunctional global capitalism, threats to democracy, and breakdown of international institutions and rules. The *polycrisis* (a term coined by Edgar Morin) severely impacts the lives of young children, present and future. It is now urgent that we initiate and engage in open democratic debate about how we, as a society, relate to all young children, and reclaim the purpose of early childhood education as a common good.

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