

# Considering the Publicness of Early Childhood Education and Care

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With some notable exceptions, Ireland has not yet teased out deeper questions of what is meant by 'publicness' in early childhood education and care (ECEC). This article discusses that topic by offering an overview of themes explored in a recent symposium in Trinity College Dublin, which aimed to draw ECEC into the wider conceptualisation of public education.

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## Introduction

Ireland has seen substantial recent investment in early childhood education and care (ECEC). But in 2024, debate on public ECEC became mired in disputes about how money was allocated and spent. With some notable exceptions, such as Urban (2023), we have not yet teased out deeper, arguably more important, questions of what is or could be meant by 'publicness' in ECEC, or asked whether 'public' and 'publicly funded' mean the same thing.

There is rich scholarship on publicness from other educational levels that has not been widely applied to ECEC. Those conceptualising 'publicness' in education tend not to consider ECEC, and those conceptualising ECEC tend not to draw on the literature on publicness, leading to missed opportunities for understanding public ECEC.

This article gives an overview of themes explored in 'A New Publicness for Early Childhood Education and Care', a symposium that took place on 30 May 2024 in Trinity College Dublin, aiming to draw ECEC into the wider conceptualisation of public education.



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## More than a question of funding

Beyond practical issues of funding, the symposium explored what is at stake when addressing public ECEC. In his presentation, Carl Anders Säfström identified issues concerning *borders* (who is included/excluded), *identity* (who are they who are included/excluded), *history* (how is the story of Ireland told so that some children are included and others excluded?), *power* (who are elevated to decide over others, and how?), and *ethics* (based on what values?), and whether those values marry with democracy and equality. The value that society places on education as a public good can determine its visibility, perception, and place in society.

Discussions from the authors and attendees questioned whether ECEC is as visible and valued as other educational levels in Irish society. Primary and secondary school (in the most part) are mandatory. Third level is optional but valued as a pathway to a career. ECEC is not mandatory and is often viewed as a commodity that parents may or may not be able to afford.

O'Toole and colleagues (2023) highlighted that much of the narrative in recent policy documents centres on affordability of childcare for working parents in the context of the need for early childhood educators to be paid a living wage. Policymakers' arbitrary introduction of a new term, 'early learning and care' (ELC), removing the word 'education', and the invisibility of pedagogy and even of children in many policy documents are telling.

Hayes argued that 'early childhood education and care' is a 'controlled vocabulary' accepted internationally. It provides a common terminology to emphasise that care and education are inseparable concepts in practice (Neuman, 2019). Consolidation of the identity of various services under this title has led to growth in research into the value of ECEC, while raising the status of this unique period of education (OECD, 2018). 'Care' remains undervalued, with priority investment in services directed to the 'educational' dimension for older 'preschool' children. Combining education and care, ECEC has a distinctive theoretical and pedagogical character which is served by educators with distinct qualifications.

Nevertheless, ECEC is also integral to the wider continuum of lifelong learning. If education is a human right, why should that right begin at five years of age? Children's brains develop rapidly in their first five years through positive interactions, relationships, and learning experiences (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2020). Why is their education and care seen instead as a *commodity*?

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## A new publicness for ECEC

Public education is more than funding: it is an understanding of the relationship between education and society (Biesta, 2012). Contextualising each child within the bioecological model of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) emphasises that each child is an individual embedded in a socio-cultural context: a family and a society. This provides a means of examining how different levels of society impact on the design, quality, and experience of early childhood services, with consequences – some perhaps unintended – for children, educators, and families.

Using Biesta's framework, O'Toole et al. (2023) argued that *considerations* of ECEC should be guided by equity, plurality, and communal ownership and commitment. At the symposium, the authors developed these ideas. Focusing on principled rather than pragmatic notions of ECEC, they proposed that to establish a meaningful 'publicness' of ECEC, it is necessary to fundamentally change how it is viewed and shaped by society, parents, and those directly involved.

Despite consultations on ECEC in Ireland over the years, it has never been deeply considered through the lens of publicness – only in terms of market demands and private interest. A new publicness might 'consider' ECEC through four lenses: child, parent, educators, and community. This would include considering children as full citizens with insights and agency; educators and educational settings with expertise, insights, and agency; the genuine financial pressure experienced by families; and the community of ECEC as a 'public good' working towards a fairer society.

ECEC is a public good that affects everyone in society. It also gives hope that things can be positively different for the individual, the collective, and society. Education is defined by pointing out that culture and the making of society are not given by blood, by position, or by developing 'inner natural abilities' and are not inherited but *taught* in principle to anyone in every new generation. That means there can be no public education if the public good is excluded (Säfström, 2023).

Defining what is in the interests of the public good is difficult, because people perceive the purpose of ECEC differently. This can create tensions and challenges for developing a coherent, sustainable system. But if public education is essential for the materialisation of values and educating in a democratic society, this makes public ECEC contested by its nature, since a democracy must allow for many voices to be heard.

We envisioned the symposium as an opportunity to provoke debate on unpacking Ireland's tensions – politically, culturally, pedagogically – to help us

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understand the ownership and public visibility of ECEC. We invite readers to continue the conversation.

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