

The first duty

The role of universal, free, and public early childhood education and care
in ending child poverty

End Child Poverty Week | Day 5 | 15 September 2023

mathias.urban@dcu.ie



Ollscoil Chathair
Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University



End child poverty!

ECEC has a crucial role – it is NOT a panacea

Early childhood education and care provision needs to be part of an **integrated child-rights based package of policy measures** to improve outcomes for children and break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage

(Council of the European Union 2019)

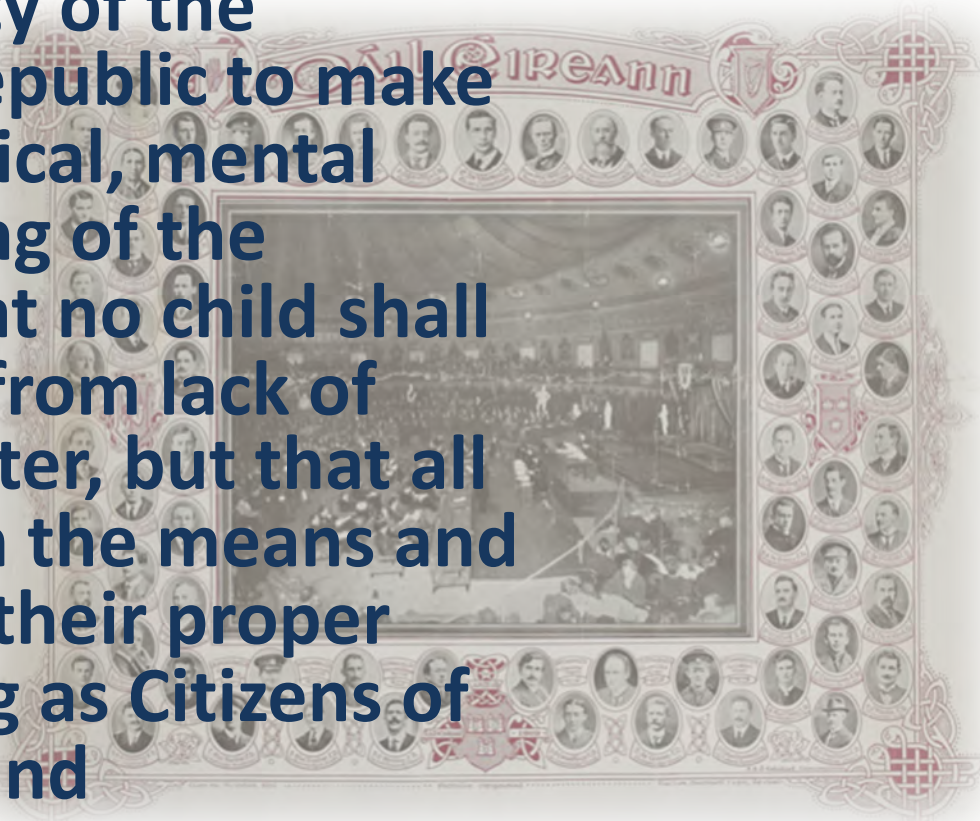


Early Childhood Education

Outline

1. How did we get here?	The current crisis—undeniable dysfunctionality—of the Irish early childhood education and care system has deep roots in how we think about children and families, the role of the state, and its relationship to the common good. As we struggle to move on, it is important to understand how we got to where we are today
2. What is going on elsewhere?	Irish ECEC policy affecting young children and families develops in a fast changing international early childhood policy context that we choose to ignore at our peril (and, more importantly, at the peril of children)
3. Where to from here?	Going forward, in order to overcome child poverty, starting with early childhood, we must—and can—overcome our poverty of ambition first

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 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



Persistent challenges

- *Fragmentation (governance, resourcing, data, accountability, service provision)*
- *Chronic underfunding*
- *Vested interests*
- *Reactive, not pro-active, policy making*
- *Lack of political will to initiate necessary systems change*



Root causes: a post-colonial lens

Remnants of unresolved colonialism

- Persistent colonial structures and institutions of governance
- Highly centralised decision making / weak local government
- Distrust in community capabilities and local decision making
- A colonial/colonised mindset?

Market mentality

- Uncritical belief in the ability (or intention) of the capitalist 'market' to address social problems from an equity and justice perspective
 - (Early childhood, care for the elderly, housing, health having developed into their dysfunctional state following similar patterns)
 - Government seeing its role as market enabler rather than provider of public service
- Leading to the entirely predictable (and predicted!) situation where the entire ECEC sector is under threat from corporate takeover (following the pattern seen in other countries before)



[...] decolonisation involves attempts at dismantling the colonial institutional structures

(Oppong, 2023 p. 70)



The 'childcare market' is the problem, not the solution

Corporatization of ECEC: progress is unravelling before our eyes

- Like in other countries before (UK, NZ, AUS, US), large-scale corporate takeover of early childhood education and care is taking place in Ireland
- Happening with government inaction?, indifference?, or explicit encouragement?
- Already threatening
 - Quality standards
 - Qualification requirements
 - Working conditions
 - Children's rights

- ***\$13.7million: net profit 2022, Affinity Education Group, Australia***
- ***\$2.3 billion: annual public funding to for-profit providers, NZ: '...and ultimately passed on to investors'***
- ***UK: "The childcare market benefits from having acquirers who already have secured their funding and are underway with their expansion strategies."***
(RDK Childcare Market Report 2023)

1. How did we get here?

The current crisis—undeniable dysfunctionality—of the Irish early childhood education and care system has deep roots in how we think about children and families, the role of the state, and its relationship to the common good. As we struggle to move on, it is important to understand how we got to where we are today

2. What is going on elsewhere?

Irish ECEC policy affecting young children and families develops in a fast changing international early childhood policy context that we choose to ignore at our peril (and, more importantly, at the peril of children)

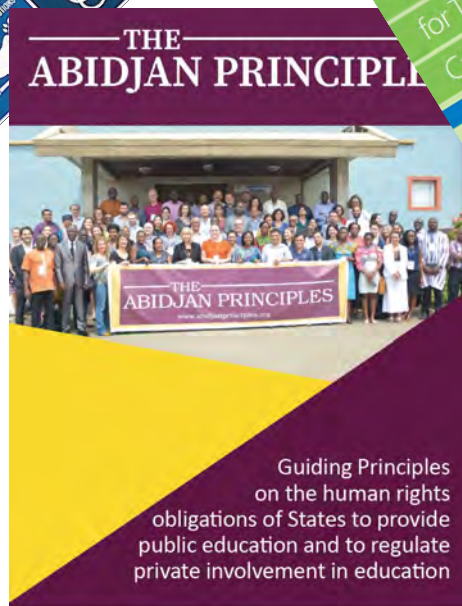
3. Where to from here?

Going forward, in order to overcome child poverty, starting with early childhood, we must—and can—overcome our poverty of ambition first



Just and equitable systems for early childhood development, education, and care:

- Central to achieving the entire SDG framework
- In Ireland and globally



Prioritising public over private education



- Right to education and care from birth
- Whole-of-government, multi-sectoral and integrated policy development, provision and coordination
- ECEC finance: 10% of education budget

Effective early childhood systems require multi-sectoral policies

- 76 countries have adopted multi-sectoral early childhood policy frameworks or strategies, most of them in low and middle-income countries (LMIC) in the global south
- Most upper middle-income and high-income countries in Europe, Central Asia and North America continue to use sectoral policies; however, some multisectoral ECD policies do exist in Europe (recent emerging example: EU Child Guarantee)

Multisectoral coordination includes the health, nutrition, education, and protection sectors.

- ***Includes a situation analysis or justification; vision/mission, goals and/or objectives; strategic priorities; activities and services; and a multisectoral organizational framework.***
- ***Is officially adopted by the national government***

(Vargas-Barón et al, 2022)

Now is the time to fundamentally (re-)think systems change

- 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)
- ***[this] can only happen with the active participation of citizens in new forms of collective action at the local, national and international level*** (OECD, 2021)



1. How did we get here?

The current crisis—undeniable dysfunctionality—of the Irish early childhood education and care system has deep roots in how we think about children and families, the role of the state, and its relationship to the common good. As we struggle to move on, it is important to understand how we got to where we are today

2. What is going on elsewhere?

Irish ECEC policy affecting young children and families develops in a fast changing international early childhood policy context that we choose to ignore at our peril (and, more importantly, at the peril of children)

3. Where to from here?

Going forward, in order to overcome child poverty, starting with early childhood, we must—and can—overcome our poverty of ambition first

Towards a public early childhood education and care system: some points for consideration (1)

Increased funding, while needed, will not on its own lead to systems change.
The transition is a political and ethical project

- A 'public' ECEC system is more than 'publicly funded'. It is
 - rights-based: children's (enforceable) rights to education and care from birth, oriented towards equity and justice
 - progressively universal: accessible to all children, families, and communities, with specific resources allocated to those who need most to achieve equity and justice
 - free 'at the point of delivery'
- Increased funding will be counterproductive if state policies continue to enable and encourage private profits to be funnelled out of the system



Towards a public early childhood education and care system: some points for consideration (2)

- It is necessary to reconcile a child's right to care and education, from birth, with families' right to accessible and affordable childcare.
- 'Care' and 'education' depend on each other and should always be referred to in one term: *Early Childhood Education and Care*
- Transition to a public model of ECEC requires more than increased funding. We are facing radical change with implications at all systems levels
- Such change requires political leadership, a clear sense of direction, and the preparedness to take on the many vested interests in the sector



Towards a public early childhood education and care system:
some points for consideration (3)

- Resources should be allocated (in budget 2024 and following) to **de-privatise** ECEC and phase out for-profit provision over a defined (5-year) period
- Subsidising fees, while probably popular, is not sustainable: Like similar policies in the housing sector it will lead to higher costs for the public and increased profits (with no positive effect on the quality of provision, accessibility, working conditions...)



A tentative roadmap

Policy commitment needed now:

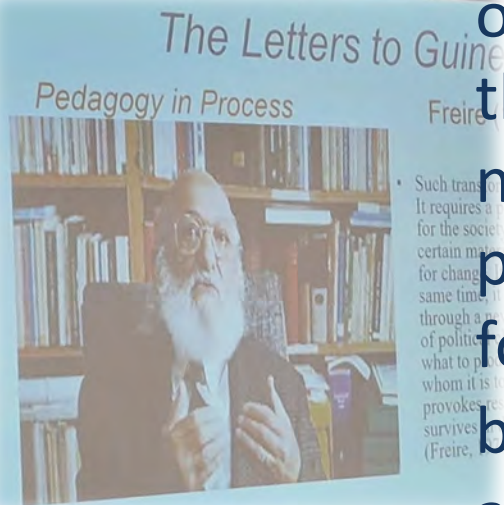
Systems change towards Early Childhood Education and Care as

- **Progressively universal**
(for ALL children and families, with additional resources for those who require it most)
- **Public and community-based**
(Phase out 'for-profit' provision by 2028)
- **Integrated and multi-sectoral:**
education, care, health and well-being, urban planning, ...
- **Rights-based**
 - Children's rights
(care for self)
 - Human rights
(care for others, community)
 - More-than-human rights
(care for the Earth)



All of this requires a radical transformation of the educational system inherited from the colonizers. Such transformation can never be done mechanically. It requires a political decision coherent with the plan for the society to be created, and must be based on certain material conditions that also offer incentives for change

(Paulo Freire, 1978, Letters to Guinea-Bissau)



Thank you!

mathias.urban@dcu.ie