We Need To Talk About The Children

Trinity College Dublin Conference
November 20th 2019
CELEBRATING CHILDREN
UN International Children’s Day!

International Year of the Child 1979 [40 years]
UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 [30 years]
National Childcare Strategy 1999 [20 years]
White Paper on Early Education 1999 [20 years]
First 5 Strategy 2018 [1 year]

‘There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children.’

Nelson Mandela
Why this focus on children?

The inherent power and dominance of the adult

The overwhelming impact of structures

A paradox:

a neo-liberal model of economics - which highlights value for money and depends on the market - *coupled with* a child welfare/protection discourse leading to excessive regulation of the new and unfamiliar system that is ECEC
CONTEXTS
This presentation has three sections

A reflection on rights as a basis for policy and practice for children attending early childhood education and care

A review of the First 5 strategy document from the specific perspective of children’s rights and early childhood education and care

Considering a vision of children in early childhood education and care in Ireland
International – Starting Strong 1 and 11

Starting Strong II (OECD, 2006) ended with a set of proposals posed as ‘policy areas for consideration by governments’:

1. To attend to the social context of early childhood development.
2. To place well-being, early development and learning at the core of ECEC work, while respecting the child’s agency and natural learning strategies.
3. To create the governance structures necessary for system accountability and quality assurance.
4. To develop with the stakeholders broad guidelines and curricular standards for all ECEC services.
5. To base public funding estimates for ECEC on achieving quality pedagogical goals.

6. To reduce child poverty and exclusion through upstream fiscal, social and labour policies, and to increase resources within universal programmes for children with diverse learning rights.

7. To encourage family and community involvement in early childhood services.

8. To improve the working conditions and professional education of ECEC staff.

9. To provide freedom, funding and support to early childhood services.

10. To aspire to ECEC systems that support broad learning, participation and democracy (OECD, 2006:4)
National – current strategic focus

First 5 – A whole of Government Strategy for babies, young children and their families

Vision: All babies’ and young children’s *early years* will be valued as a critical and distinct period which should be enjoyed. Families will be assisted and enabled to nurture babies and young children and support their development, with additional support for those who need it. Those providing services for babies, young children and their families will be equipped to contribute to their learning, development, health and wellbeing. Community contexts will help babies and young children make the most of their early years and fulfil their potential.

Some figures:

63,897 babies born in 2016

185,580 children attending universal free preschool [Pobal, 2018]
National – an example ‘Breaking Point’

Reflecting a policy shift from ‘a community supportive service working with children and families in the local areas of disadvantage to a sector driven by the goals of a competitive market system’ [Brockelsby, 2017]

“The findings highlight a community early year’s sector at the end of its limits of creativity and commitment. ... It has exhausted all mechanisms to maintain services on minimal investment with ongoing and increasing expectations and demands. It is struggling to respond to family support needs presented and to provide an affordable accessible service to low income families. It is a sector which is already financially unsustainable with the alarming prospect of closure facing many services in the next 1-2 years. It is a service at breaking point.” [Brockelsby, 2017]
RIGHTS, YOUNG CHILDREN AND QUALITY ECEC
Children’s Rights

A complicated space:

… rights of children as articulated in the UNCRC have gained hegemonic status in policy-making and influenced a wide range of political and social practices as well as knowledge production on children and childhood.

… at the same time, children’s rights have become an explicit instrument, not only to protect and emancipate children from oppression, but also to govern, regulate, and control children and childhoods

(Holzscheiter et al, 2019:272)
Children’s Rights

“So long as rights are grounded in free, equal, or autonomous individuality, children will be pressed to the outer edges of the social circle. ... For it is children who, on the one hand, are most likely to be marginalized and unheard, and it is children again who, on the other hand, need the greatest social response. A human rights regime based on responsibility to otherness would find in children its clearest reason for being, its greatest opportunity for humanity”.

(Wall, 2008: 541)
Legal discourse v social justice discourse

“There is a wider meaning to rights, a meaning beyond law - in which rights discourse is about justice, ethical fit, consonance with the rules of law, what law is and what law should be, where law speaks and where it is silent …

the argument that children should have no rights, or only some rights, is incoherent…

it reifies childhood and ignores the legal reality.

it mis-states the symbology and nature of rights.

it casts rights as the antithesis rather than the essence of relationship and responsibility…”

McGillvray, 1994
Children’s Rights

“… although ‘incompletely theorized’ (Sunstein, 1995), a level of moral agreement underlies the CRC as reflected in the deliberative process, which leads to the recognition of particular interests for children as human rights… the interests that ground and justify children’s rights can never be considered inherent or capable of determination by reference to a single test or moral theory… Hence, the idea of a social interest theory of rights to capture the social and deliberative process by which rights are created and recognised”.

(Tobin, 2013:409)
Children’s Rights

“The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is an organisational framework which foregrounds children’s issues and highlights the unique nature of children’s needs and rights. The Convention can act as a mirror against which the duties and obligations of adults and of the State – and their response to these obligations – can be reflected …

the case [is made] for a re-evaluation of the place of children in Irish policy making and recommends a move from the reactive welfare model of child policy to a proactive rights-based model”.

(Hayes, 2002)
Children’s Rights and the family

“… the CRC offers what could be termed a collaborative or cooperative conception of the relationship between state and family as regards children’s upbringing. This sits somewhere between the liberal individualist conception of the family, in which the state must not interfere with a family unless a child is at risk, and the collectivist conception, in which child-rearing is under direct control of the community…”

(Archard, 2004)
Children’s Rights and ECEC

... any suggestion that children’s rights under the CRC threaten the integrity or effective family functioning is without foundation. Instead of pitting the rights of parents against those of children, the CRC actually offers a relational rather than individualistic conception of rights. [Tobin, 2013]

Article 18(2) provides that states ‘shall render appropriate assistance to parents ... in the performance of their child rearing responsibilities’

Article 27(3) requires states to take appropriate measures, in accordance with national conditions and within their means, to assist parents and others who are responsible for a child’s development
“Now that government has conceded to a right to access ECEC for children of a given age, the need to consider children’s rights within ECEC setting becomes all the more pressing…”

(Hayes and Bradley, 2009)
HOW DO WE STAND?
A shift in vision?

*Our Children-Their Lives* National Children’s Strategy - 2000

Vision

An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own, where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential.

**DCYA Strategic Statement - 2011-2014**

Our Mission: To lead the effort to improve the outcomes for children and young people in Ireland.

… Be child- and youth-centred, with children, young people and families at the heart of its work. Childhood and youth will be respected and valued as important life stages ...
A shift in vision?

Better Outcomes-Brighter Futures - 2014

Our vision is for Ireland to be one of the best small countries in the world in which to grow up and raise a family, and where the rights of all children and young people are respected, protected and fulfilled; where their voices are heard and where they are supported to realise their maximum potential now and in the future.

DCYA Strategic Statement - 2019

Our Vision is for Ireland to be one of the best small countries in the world in which to grow up and raise a family where the rights of all children and young people are respected, protected and fulfilled; where their voices are heard; and where they are supported to realise their maximum potential now and in the future.
Considering *First 5*

First 5 Big Steps:

- Access to a broader range of options for parents to balance working and caring
- A new model of parenting support
- New developments in child health
- Reform of the Early Learning and Care (ELC) system
- A package of measures to tackle early childhood poverty
Considering *First 5*

*It is confusing* and ambiguous in its use of language:

The term Early Learning and Care [ELC] has been selected by the *First 5* strategy authors to refer, in the main, to those services for young children attending various 'childcare' settings outside the home and those working in such services but excludes the non-compulsory junior and senior infant classes.

The explicit omission, in the strategy document, of any reference to the internationally accepted term Early Childhood Education and Care [ECEC], which names and identifies one of the three significant micro-systems of contemporary early childhoods [alongside the family and the primary school] is problematic and significant.

(Hayes, 2019)
Considering *First 5*

To further confuse *First 5* defines an **Early Childhood System** thus:

… a well-functioning *early childhood system* ensures maximum support for babies and young children across health [from pregnancy], home environment, high-quality early learning experiences, transition to school within a supportive community context [DCYA, 2018:12]

This is not a strategy for Early Childhood Education and Care – a microsystem where upwards of 250,000 children spend increasingly long hours from an increasingly early age
Considering *First 5*, children and ECEC

A particular view:

“Given the importance of parental care in the first year and the evidence that shows prolonged periods in centre-based ELC can have a negative impact on children’s cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes, particularly for younger children, paid parental leave and wider supports for parents to balance caring and work have been prioritised in this Strategy.

*With those notable caveats*, ELC benefits all children, with the largest gains experienced by children from vulnerable groups, including low-income or immigrant households and those with less educated parents. These gains are most likely in settings when there is a diverse mix of young children”. (Emphasis added)

(DCY, 2018:87)
Despite acknowledging the State’s role in ‘vindicating the rights of the child’ (DCYA, 2018:14) the Strategy goes on to note that:

The **benefits of high-quality** ELC extend widely:

ELC allows parents to participate in training and employment in the knowledge that their children are safe, happy and well cared for and provided with opportunities for play and peer interaction.

*Labour force participation* in turn increases family income and reduces the risk of poverty.

Ensuring high-quality ELC (and school-age childcare) is affordable and accessible to all children and, in particular, children from vulnerable backgrounds, is therefore central to this Strategy

(DCYA, 2018:87)
Considering children and quality ECEC

First 5 acknowledges the importance of a high quality Early Childhood System in their overarching principles:

Principle 3: Services and supports to children and their families should be of a high quality, affordable and accessible to all, while recognising that some children and families will need additional support.

Principle 4: The provision of quality services requires everyone working with children and families to communicate and cooperate with one another and with children and families in an atmosphere of mutual respect and common purpose/partnership.

However, there is no commitment to the Quality Audit of the universal free preschool promised previously.
Considering children and quality ECEC

Despite Principle 2: “Relationships and interactions … play a central role in the quality of children’s experiences in early childhood” *First 5* identifies ELC quality indicators in terms of Structural Quality with no reference to Process or Pedagogical Quality.

“… quality indicators may include: **minimum qualification** for Room Leaders and/or Assistants for children at all ages; **minimum service offer** (operating hours); **maximum fee** levels for parents; managers with minimum levels of qualifications and/or experience; **role of manager** (excluded from staff:child ratios); **supportive working conditions** such as minimum number of hours per week paid time for team planning/reflection for each staff member; **participation** in national quality development activities; provision of **parent support** services; acting as a **hub for support** and training networks for local childminders.”
CAN WE TRANSFORM ECEC FOR CHILDREN?
Valuing ECEC and its impact on children

The conservative and incremental approach of *First 5* needs to be challenged.

The traditional approach of working within existing structures and investing in schemes/programmes without an overarching integrated vision for young children in a contemporary context needs to be reformed/transformed.

The challenge not unique to Ireland.

Recognising the power of structures and drawing on the work of Kagan in the US the following 8 slides offer food for thought within an Irish policy context (Kagan, 2016).
Conventional Think: Direct Programs and Services

The Problem with Thinking Programmatically

Focuses only on specific program/services

– Concerned with particular service instead of how services relate/ if they are being duplicated
– Not concerned with how difficult it is for families to put programs pieces together

Model or demonstration programs are often not scalable and don’t serve all children

– Children who live in certain area with certain parents may get services, but not all
– Leads to inequities that get perpetuated over the years

Doesn’t build capacity in system

Can be inefficient

Often doesn’t have the supports to achieve intended goals  

(Kagan, 2016)
Changing Our Thinking (Kagan, 2016)

FROM: Thinking Programmatically

TO: Thinking Systemically
What is Systemic Thinking? (Kagan, 2016)
Systemic Thinking Says (Kagan, 2016)

\[ \text{PROGRAMS} + \text{INFRASTRUCTURE} = \text{QUALITY SYSTEM} \]
Systemic Thinking Says

\[ 8 - 1 = 0 \]

(Kagan, 2016)
Systems Science:

Focuses on the interdependence between groups of individuals, structures, and processes that enable quality and progress

Contends that if you separate the parts from the whole, you are reducing the ability to implement quality services

Recognises professional development, data, and financing as part of quality

However, in most countries ECE is NOT a coherent system - instead, we see many several funding streams, hundreds of small programs, and many regulations

Parents find ECE hard to understand and navigate, so we have much to learn from systems science

(Kagan, 2016)
CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS
Transforming society for young children

Infrastructural integration is not enough.

A vision for early childhood education and care services that does not include children and their lived reality front and centre needs to be reformed – even transformed.

First 5 needs to be augmented to become more child and rights focused – particularly in view of the realities of contemporary Irish childhood. **We need an ambitious strategy for ECEC**

The current and proposed new funding model for ECEC is flawed – it does not factor in the lived experiences or rights of the child-in-family.

The power of the neo-liberal model and its focus on the individual rather than individual-in-society negatively effects marginalised groups and has particularly negative effects on children as social group.
Leadership and change

We need to rethink the national economic approach – a tall order but one that is being debated nationally and internationally.

A shift from the neo-liberal thinking of Friedman and Hayek towards a new socio-ecological economic paradigm is espoused by a growing number of economists (Ian Gough, Kate Raworth and Esther Duflo ...) and a central element of the Sustainable Development Goals.

... The eco-social policies that underpin such an economic paradigm can ‘simultaneously pursue both equity/social justice and sustainable/sufficiency goals within an activist, innovative state ...’ (President Michel.D. Higgins November 12th 2019)
Leadership for children in ECEC

Central to this is a rethinking of what counts as valuable ...

Informed by feminist thinking this factors in the valuing of caring roles in society [within which Early Childhood Educators are often aligned]

This new economic paradigm calls for a new form of capitalism – one that highlights rights, wellbeing and sustainability and focuses on State responsibility for public services.

A shift in this direction requires vision and leadership coupled with careful planning and innovation.

Could this thinking inform a rights-based approach to ECEC which values the child and those working directly with children??
Towards a vision for children in ECEC

Develop a top-down and a bottom up approach to establishing an *ambitious and relevant vision* for children in ECEC in contemporary Ireland.

Within this vision – and recognising the importance of training at pre-service and CPD – *review of the basic training programmes* at Levels 5 and 6 feeding in to the revised requirements for degree level ECEC programmes.

*Value early childhood educators* through supporting a strong professional identity which will, in turn enhance the status of ECEC.

Place *the child at the centre* of any vision and – from there – at the centre of policy and practice in Early Childhood Education and Care.
AND ANOTHER CELEBRATION?
It shall be the first duty of the Government of the Republic 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…

Declaration of 1st Dáil, January 1919

... a possible starting point …
Or - are young children a luxury we can no longer afford ... a mere commodity?
THANK YOU😊