Report on Discussions at RECEC Conference
Long Room Hub Trinity College 20.11.19

Rapporteur: Dr Máire Mhic Mhathúna

Over 100 people attended the RECEC conference held in the Long Room Hub Trinity College on 20.11.19. The theme of the conference was Realising Children's Rights Achieving and Sustaining Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care.

Opening of the conference

Professor Sheila Greene opened the conference by noting that this was the 30th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the first anniversary of First 5, the Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028. She referred to the importance of upholding and monitoring not only quality but also children’s rights. She noted that children’s basic right to safety was still an issue in a minority of facilities as shown in the disclosures on the RTÉ Investigates ‘Behind Closed Doors’ programme, broadcast in July 2019. Beyond the right to safety and bodily integrity, which should go without saying, all children have a right to good education and opportunities for positive development, to have their humanity and individuality recognized and to be treated with respect.

Presentations

Professor Nóirín Hayes, Trinity College, Professor Helen Penn, University College London and Dr Pauline Slot, Utrecht University had provided one paper each in advance of the conference and they are accessible at https://www.tcd.ie/Education/news/recec-conference-2019/. Each speaker made a presentation at the conference and these are appended to this document. There were opportunities for questions and comments immediately after each presentation and a summary of these exchanges is given below, followed by a summary of statements by the members of the panel and the question and answer session that followed.
Question and Answer Session 1: After Professor Nóirín Hayes’s presentation: ‘We need to talk about the children’

**Question:** What are the first steps in implementing the First 5 Strategy?

**Nóirín Hayes:** These will have to come from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). They have an implementation plan but, I would argue, they need a vision for the ECEC sector beyond what is written in the Strategy. There have been many initiatives and pilot programmes but they have not yet fed into preservice training in a coherent way. Currently, for instance, the DCYA recognise over 500 Level 5 or equivalent qualifications for funding purposes, an approach that makes it difficult to monitor and ensure quality. Despite the publication of the Model Framework for Education and Training [childcare] (2002) and the Workforce Development Plan of 2010 the DCYA have formed another Workforce Development Group and aim to ensure quality through a new Workforce Development Plan.

**Question:** People working on the ground in the sector are not consulted. There is a split in the sector between preschool and early years in primary school. It lacks an overarching vision for children.

**Nóirín Hayes:** First 5 appears to consolidate this split with the reconfiguration of the ECEC sector (0-6 years) into the Early Learning and Care (and School age Childcare). This runs counter to existing policy documents for the ECEC sector such a Aistear (0-6 years) and contravenes the philosophy of the NCCA Primary Curriculum Review which is endeavouring to extend Aistear into the early primary school. The split system approach at a conceptual level seems to be driven by existing structural realities rather than by the more contemporary understanding of ECEC as a unique period.

**Question:** This is a very fragmented sector. We need a bottom-up approach and a joined-up approach. I completed the LINC programme but couldn’t implement the full LINC programme as I’m not a manger.

**Nóirín Hayes:** As I mentioned in the presentation the LINC module is a good module and very welcomed by those who take it. However, it stands in isolation from an integrated approach to inclusion - there needs to be strong and visible links with Department of Education so that a module like LINC becomes an integral part of basic training at Level 5 ... all staff members in early childhood education and care settings should be inclusive in their practice.

**Question:** We need to challenge the neo-liberal approach. Why is this not happening?

**Nóirín Hayes:** Some civil servants but mainly academics in economics and social policy are debating the current model and proposing alternatives. Some economists and people working in relational professions such as nurses, teachers are critiquing the effect of the system on society – but
transformative change takes time. The overarching question for Ireland should be ‘what is our vision for children in ECEC’ and how can we achieve quality in a market-led ECEC sector?

**Question and Answer Session 2: After Professor Helen Penn’s presentation: Achieving quality in market led ECEC.**

**Question:** How do we recognise the fact that high quality care is found in private facilities? Ownership is not a problem for parents and children if the quality is good.

**Helen Penn:** I value entrepreneurship and innovation in the private sector. The issue is how to harness the commitment of people outside the State system. Accountability and access are vitally important. Some large companies have their headquarters overseas which can make monitoring and accountability difficult. How can you make representations about changes in the curriculum or other changes in such a setting? It is a top-down system, the opposite for what’s needed for change and innovation. The UK system needs closer regulation both in regard to accessibility and financial accountability. The voice of the ECEC staff needs to be heard. Monitoring of quality ECEC should include details of ownership of nurseries. Regulation and monitoring that is tailored to quality ECEC can make the private sector work better.

**Question:** About 20% of the Irish work-force are in a trade union in Ireland. Most of the sector is private but not-for-profit. Most are small scale, with up to 3 or 4 settings. There are about three large chains with high staff turnover, low pay but premises that look very appealing to parents. How have corporations implemented policy in UK? The Norway model is good, with 50% in private and 50% in public ownership. Do we need to consider the balance?

**Helen Penn:** Big childcare corporations in the UK have significant influence. Research findings from our current study show that a supportive environment is important. While regulations are important, they do not matter too much in terms of children’s learning and development, quality is what matters, quality is most important.

**Question:** Speaking as a private sector manager, registration and regulation are too stringent and bureaucratic, with no support. Chains may be able to manage this but small companies or single settings cannot do this level of administration without missing out on contact time with children. Where is the child in this? It’s a complex issue and it’s getting worse.

**Helen Penn:** What do you suggest?

**Questioner:** You need to start by recognising the issue.
Nóirín Hayes: The changes in the ECEC [nursery] sector in the UK are significant and happened at speed. We used to look to England and Northern Ireland for good practice because you had an established base in nursery education on which to build.

Helen Penn: We had an established part-time system that was too part-time for working parents. It was also expensive for local authorities to run. Services were gradually sold off or privatized.

Nóirín Hayes: New Zealand mobilised the ‘women’s voice’ to call for quality ECEC services that met the needs of parents and children.

Helen Penn: Yes, but this has gradually petered out. Things change unless they are well embedded. Settings are run by financial managers, it’s now a business first model. In France they have done better. Ecole maternelles are run by the State for over 3s but services for the under 3s, which were part of the Department of Health are increasingly run by private companies.

Question and Answer Session 3: After Dr Pauline Slot presentation: *A European perspective on ECEC quality*

During the discussion period Pauline expanded and clarified some of the methodological and statistical issues introduced in her presentation.

Panel Discussion

The following people gave a short reflection on the presentations:

- Professor Sheila Greene (Chair)
- Dr Geraldine French, Dublin City University
- Dr Sheila Garrity, NUI Galway
- Saoirse Brady, Children’s Rights Alliance
- Toby Wolfe, DCYA.

Dr Geraldine French: There have been many small demonstration programmes developed but they are not developed into mainstream education in Ireland. For instance, the Early Start programme was established in 1994 and is still a pilot programme. This raises the question of how we can embed the learning into mainstream education. Programme and policy developers need to talk to people on the ground and adopt a bottom-up approach. At the same time people say they have been over-consulted. How can we realistically access the voice of the sector? The threatened demise of the community sector is a cause for concern.
Nóirín Hayes: Helen’s presentation was profoundly depressing and we have to find ways of preventing that happening here. How can we maintain small scale settings which are in the best position to promote meaningful experiences and relationships for staff and children and ensure equity and fairness?

Pauline Slot: We should emphasise the importance of process quality. The status of babies is a cause for concern. Neurological research shows the greatest acceleration in young children’s development takes place between birth and 2.5 years. There are disparities in the quality of provision for that age group and poor care can have profound effects. Nevertheless, the gap remains between high advantaged children and low advantage and we need to help the latter catch up.

Dr Sheila Garrity: The three speakers touched on aspects of Children’s Rights and the celebration of the UNCRC. Helen spoke about the importance of nature and the Wild Child movement. She stressed the importance of relevant, meaningful and purposeful activities and of relationships between all stakeholders, including children, parents, staff. This brings us back to the fundamental nature of Children’s Rights. This is similar to the Ethics of Care, and the importance of good connections to all. Nóirín offered a critical analysis of policy changes over time and showed how children have disappeared from the vision. The model of corporate care in the UK discussed by Helen is focused on the service and not the child. The aim is profit, not child development. Social stratification is being promoted and equality is being eroded by employing staff with low qualifications, particularly in less advantaged areas. The apprenticeship model adopted by some chains trains staff to serve the corporation or service but not the child. Pauline’s research centred on both the setting and the child, with her illustration of the child at the centre of ECE. The EU CARE project [https://ecec-care.org] discussed the different levels of quality and the importance of professional development to achieving and maintaining quality. We need to ask if we are going down the corporate road. How is our system developing when over 70% of provision is in the private sector? Issues within the system include the fact that registration is too onerous for small providers and that the insistence on monitoring children’s hours of attendance ignores the reality of children’s lives.

Saoirse Brady: The Children’s Rights Alliance have focused on the early years since 2016. People may be familiar with our Report Card which has a specific section addressing government action on Early Childhood Education and Care. We recognise how key quality is and the opportunities needed to get it right. We welcome First 5, the national strategy and the opportunities it provides. Other opportunities will arise from the work of the Workforce Development Group. Current issues include registration, regulation, affordability, parental choice and the voice of the child. The voice of the very young child can be accessed as was evident in the Start Strong book If I had a Magic Wand, showing how children’s views can be accessed through appropriate methodologies. CRA have communication
with political parties and parents, mainly mothers. The division in the Irish context is between children under 3 and over 3, but the *First 5* strategy talks of transitions and tries to bridge that gap.

**Toby Wolfe:** Today’s seminar raises big questions and DCYA welcomes discourse on these issues which put children at the centre. DCYA has consulted widely with young children in the *First 5* process. I would dispute the statement that *First 5* is about services, not children. Based on UNCRC General Comment 7, those involved in developing national strategies should place children at the heart of policy and should devise rights-based strategies. The Policy Unit, founded just over a year ago, is committed to quality. Obviously process quality is very important but the focus of the Department is on structural quality, in collaboration with colleagues in the Department of Education and Skills. The offices of senior managers from DCYA and DES are located in close proximity, which helps communication. Quality goes beyond regulation and policy levers have an impact on process quality. Today gave us a welcome focus on systemic questions and in particular on the role of the private sector in ECEC. It is not a simple dichotomy of public equals good versus private equals bad and the Irish system is different from that in the UK. We have few large chains, one or two only, some other companies have three or four settings in a local area but most are small scale.

Registration is problematic at present but we will find solutions to the current difficulties. We are not trying to drive out the small providers. Controls and regulations are necessary. The details of the new funding model are being worked on and indicate a new relationship between the State and preschools. We are working on the legal issues. Quality, affordability and inclusion are important. *First 5* is trying to move from a split system and is trying to move on from a system where higher capitation grants were payable only in relation to children over 3. Regarding language and the use of the term *Early Learning and Care*, it was presented in a move away from the term childcare and is inclusive and intended to move the focus to what children do at this stage. The term to be used for the staff who work in the sector is not decided as yet and will be included in public consultations next year. I take issue with some of the comments made about *First 5* and urge you to look at the content and commitments and to look at the direction of travel. Childminding will be included, with regulation and grants available. A DEIS-like model will be developed. This is a Whole-of-Government strategy, with relevant departments working together. There are many areas of cooperation and programme development. This is new and is exemplified in the National Síolta Aistear programme, the AIM approach and proposed developments in relation to transitions. A CPD structure will be developed to support pedagogical leadership and there will be public consultation.

The session was then opened to the floor and questions included the following:

**Question:** Many people are having great difficulty with the TUSLA registration system. Staff are close to burn-out, with great stress on their emotional capacity. They have low pay, no pension, no
security of employment. When are the authorities going to speak to staff? Is this going to remain in academic and political discourse only?

**Saoirse Brady:** The Alliance is aware of the burden of regulation on staff. It needs dedicated staff to manage this administrative task. There could perhaps be an administrative hub for smaller services. It is also needed for childminders. Childcare staff want to work with children, not carry out admin. Processes are needed but we need to get it right. We are coming together from different perspectives.

**Toby Wolfe:** We have great sympathy for people who are experiencing difficulties. This reflects the scale and speed of policy change, which is good but takes its toll. How should we manage policy change? More may be coming but working conditions need to improve. The Department provides some additional payments for administration. The Minister is committed to improving wages through Sectoral Employment Orders but this needs a strong trade union membership. Research is ongoing for the Workforce Development Plan.

**Nóirín Hayes:** Many people speak about emotional drain and organisational strain. Perhaps more cooperation could take place between TUSLA and the Department of Education and Skills in regard to setting inspections. The two approaches could be combined into one coherent inspection system supporting ECEC services.

**Question:** TUSLA take three months to review submissions and then give only three weeks to rectify the issues. Is this fair?

**Maresa Duignan, Department of Education and Skills:** The subject of this conference is important. It is also important that we take a positive approach. The sector has been through fire. Teams have been established at the invitation of DCYA to work collaboratively. In the past three years the 17 DES early years inspectors have conducted over 2,000 inspections. This is making practice visible in a challenging environment. Settings have welcomed DES inspections as they can showcase good practice and engage in educational discourse. Staff and children can make their stories visible in the reports and use them to talk to parents. It will take time for the initiatives in First 5 to be implemented.

**Sheila Garrity:** We know that there are lots of good things happening but also recognise challenges such as registration. There is amazing commitment in the sector and a cause for celebration. Great progress has been made in the past 20 years. Policy makers and academics are seeking what is best for children. We should, however, try to avoid the unintended consequences and address the connection between practice and the policy table.

**Question:** Providers are worried about the consequences of not completing the TUSLA registration process in time.
Toby Wolfe: TUSLA does not seem to be represented here today, and there are communication difficulties. DCYA is engaging with them to try to resolve some of the issues. This must not drive out small providers. We consult with the sector a lot and have been criticised for over-consultation. There is a stakeholder group in the Workforce Development Group and there will be a consultation process in the spring.

Concluding Remarks

Sheila Greene: Today’s discussion shows that there are pressing issues and longer term concerns relating to children’s right to quality ECEC. Communication is key and we recognise that working in children’s best interests is what is important. I encourage all here to disseminate the presentations and discussions, and discuss them with your colleagues to broaden the conversation. Sincere thanks are due to all involved in today’s seminar: RECEC, Nóirín Hayes for her trojan work, Valerie Kelly from the School of Education for administrative assistance, the postgraduate students for their assistance, Emily from the Long Room Hub which is a wonderful venue for seminars like this, our guest speakers for their stimulating presentations and the panel for their reflective comments and to everyone in such an engaged audience. Particular thanks are due to Dr Máire Mhic Mhathúna who stepped in at short notice to take the notes of the days proceedings which have fed into this short report.

Thank you all for attending today and for your continued interest and enthusiasm in the Researching Early Childhood Education Collaborative.