

Early Childhood Education and Care: Valuing and protecting the common good

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A global / local 'matter of concern'

- Two years of global covid19 pandemic have thrown into sharp relief the crucial role of early childhood education as a common good and public service, essential for the functioning of societies
- Despite significant differences of early childhood systems between countries, similar issues have emerged and ECE has become a 'matter of concern' (Latour) in both the Global South and North
- This raises urgent questions about future directions of policy, practice, and research in the field, and how to overcome its (still dominant) paradigm:
 - **the universal, individual child and its development**
 - **decontextualised knowledge and its creation**
 - **simplistic measurement and comparison**
 - **policies and practices as tools for solving distinct social problems by distinct professions and academic disciplines**



Persistent inequality exposed - social and ecological justice are inseparable

- The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the deep inadequacies in the current system of childcare provision, including uneven access, poor quality, the need for public finance, poor terms of employment for the workforce, and the overall vulnerability of the sector. (Devercelli and Beaton-Day 2020)
- Discontent is rising around the world, reflecting **dysfunctions and injustices** that have emerged **in economic, social and political systems**. It is also a response to the damage humankind is inflicting on the world's natural systems and thus, inevitably, upon itself. The COVID-19 pandemic [...] has exposed these defects to devastating effect. (OECD 2021)



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)



The 'quality' dilemma

Quality is a flawed concept, yet it carries wide currency

Investing in early childhood education and care is a good investment only if the services are of high quality [...]

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)

Towards global policy frameworks: G20 focus on ECEC



Strengthen G20-level commitment to ensuring access to **locally and culturally appropriate early childhood development, education and care** (ECD/ECEC) of high quality for **all children from birth**, and forge international consensus on **government responsibility** for developing, resourcing, and governing a ‘whole-systems’ approach to ECD/ECEC policies (Think 20 2019)

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.

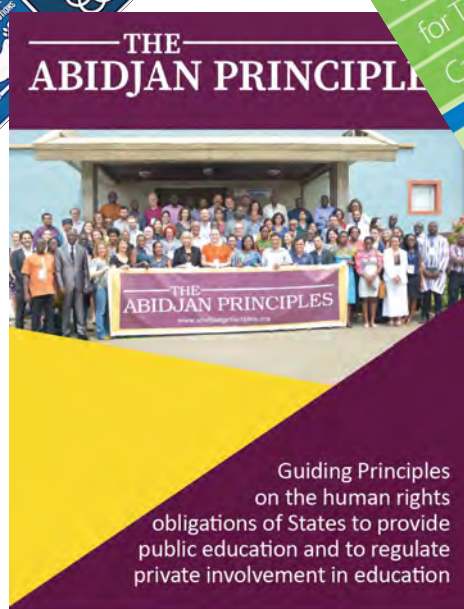
- ***Includes a situation analysis or justification; vision/mission, goals and/or objectives; strategic priorities; activities and services; and a multisectoral organizational framework.***
- ***Is officially adopted by the national government***

(Vargas-Barón et al, 2022)



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

ECEC in 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*



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

Corporatization of ECEC: progress is unravelling before our eyes

- Like 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)

Realising the Child Guarantee in Ireland

Policy commitment needed now:

Systems change towards Early Childhood Education and Care as

- Universal (not limited to 'disadvantaged')
(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
- Rights-based
 - Children's rights
(care for self)
 - Human rights
(care for others, community)
 - More-than-human rights
(care for the Earth)

Thank you!

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Early Childhood Education