

Title:

**Early childhood in troubled times: Competent systems and new global conversations**

Abstract:

Early childhood has gained an important place on international and national policy agendas. Investing in early childhood development, education and care services is seen, by governments and international organisations, as a powerful tool for addressing a wide range of societal challenges. There is a broad consensus that individual and collective well-being, social cohesion, social justice, and even macro-economic prosperity cannot be achieved without substantial investment in services for young children and their families. However, most countries today are faced with a fundamental dilemma: while early childhood services and practices are inevitably local (they take place somewhere!), approaches to developing, governing, evaluating and researching these practices are becoming increasingly homogenised. On a global scale, there is a stark imbalance between narrow ‘western’ understandings of what effective or ‘best’ early childhood education looks like, and culturally and locally embedded practices of diverse communities. This has led, for instance, to an overemphasis on standardised testing of children and streamlined policy solutions.

In my presentation I argue that reframing and reconceptualising the relationship between the ‘global’ and the ‘local’ in early childhood is urgent, considering the state of the world we live in. Competent systems are needed on a global scale. They require new conversations and equal partnership between early childhood actors and initiatives in the ‘global south’ and ‘global north’.

The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals present a challenges – and possibilities - for this global conversation. One of the challenges is to strengthen the systemic turn, the emerging consensus that only whole-systems approaches can effect sustainable change and more just and equitable outcomes for all children. This will require new coalitions of practitioners, policy makers, academics and activists in the global south and north to counter the surge of privatisation in the field, reclaim early childhood as a public and public responsibility, and to decolonise early childhood development, education and care from the corporate and philanthro-capitalist takeover.

It will be crucial to maintain the momentum that has led to much increased access to ECD/ECEC programmes in recent years. Equally important, the 2030 SDGs are an opportunity and obligation to re-define the purpose, values, and goals of early childhood development, education and care programmes in the face of existential crises on a global scale.

Early childhood in troubled times:  
Competent systems and new global conversations

Realities and Challenges of the Education for the Next Generation for Sustainable Development  
with Focus on Early Childhood

16<sup>th</sup> Japan Education Forum for Sustainable Development Goals, Tokyo, 22 February 2019

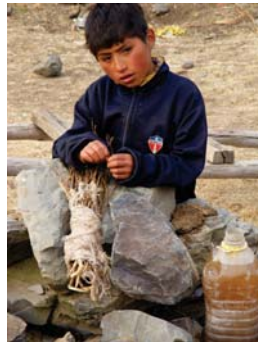
Mathias Urban, Dublin City University  
Early Childhood Research Centre



Mathias Urban – Early Childhood Research Centre



DCU  
Early Childhood Research Centre



DCU  
Early Childhood Research Centre



DCU  
Early Childhood Research Centre



DCU  
Early Childhood Research Centre

Early Childhood: cultural practices

*ECEC policy and the quality of services are deeply influenced by underlying assumptions about childhood and education: what does childhood mean in this society? How should young children be reared and educated? What are the purposes of education and care, of early childhood institutions? What are the functions of early childhood staff?*

(John Bennett, OECD, 2001, p. 63)



DCU  
Early Childhood Research Centre

Early Childhood: local practices

Early childhood education is inevitably local. It takes place somewhere (*Eu-topos*) and sometime

It is a political practice that has a historical concreteness and immediateness associated with Paulo Freire's notion of *hope*, *directivity*, and *transformation*:

*'The revelatory, gnosiological practice of education does not of itself effect the transformation of the world: but it implies it'*

(Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of Hope)



DCU  
Early Childhood Research Centre

Early Childhood: global practices

While inevitably *local*, early childhood education, at the same time, unfolds in a global non-space (*U-topos*), with contested ideas, borrowed practices, vested (commercial!) interests, and transnational agents



DCU  
Early Childhood Research Centre

## Early Childhood Education: global practices

### Concepts:

Quality, assessment, development, education ...

### Agents:

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), World Bank, UNICEF ...

### Content and practices:

Montessori, Reggio Emilia, HighScope ...

### Commercial and philanthro-capitalist interests:

KiddieCorp, Bright Horizons, Clinton Global Initiative, Education Outcome Fund, Pearson ...



Our children can't be clean and tidy when they go to school; where can I bathe my child... there's a flood in my house. How? What if my child gets pneumonia? I didn't have children for them to get sick  
(a father)

...if there are no conditions at home for doing homework, if seven of them live in a small space. Everything is done there – the cooking, baking, smoking, changing babies, sleeping... all seven of them! How can a child learn and be at peace? What else do I have to say? Which factors have an impact on their development? I have mentioned enough -- poverty, malnutrition, [and] hunger...  
(a school principal)



## What if it doesn't work?

theguardian

Unicef report finds that one in three British children are in 'multi-dimensional poverty' and says gaps between rich and poor are widening around the world



INDEPENDENT

### Thousands of children start school hungry, MPs warn

More than one in five children at some primary schools in England start their first and final years of primary school undernourished, figures show



## Third world problems?

- Growing up under conditions of poverty and exclusion is a reality for an increasing number of children in Europe
- Being 'marginalised' is an experience no longer confined to the margins (neither geographically nor socially)
- Experiences of poverty and exclusion have become a new normality across Europe, including the most affluent countries



## Chickens coming home to roost?

- In 2015, more than one million refugees and migrants entered Europe through perilous routes, fleeing war, violence and persecution in countries like Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq (the top three countries of origin)
- Many choose to seek asylum in EU Members States
- Despite highly questionable actions taken by the EU to prevent refugees from entering, and to keep them in confinement in Turkey or the country of first arrival (Greece), more than 331,000 people have reached Europe in 2016; 107,192 in 2018, 2,133 have drowned in 2018 alone according to UNHCR data.
- *One in four refugees is a child (28%)*



## Third World Problems?

- Ensuring the right to inclusive, culturally and locally appropriate early childhood education, care and development for all children is no longer a question that is only relevant to so-called 'developing' countries
- Boundaries between centre and periphery have become blurred (Braidotti)
- Europe (and the US) need to learn with and from Kenya and Colombia (to give just two examples) – and vice versa



## Inequality: the crisis within

Present day Europe is struggling with multiculturalism at a time of increasing racism and xenophobia. The paradoxes, power dissymmetries and fragmentations of the present historical context rather require **that we shift the political debate from the issue of differences between cultures to differences within the same culture.** In other words, one of the features of our present historical condition is the shifting grounds on which periphery and centre confront each other, with a new level of complexity which defies dualistic or oppositional thinking.



## Fundamental policy choices

Early childhood services as *investment* in children:  
Return on investment, human capital, management, assessment, technocratic accountability...

Early Childhood services as *commodities* for parents:  
Private-for-profit providers, cost (affordability vs sustainability)...

Or

Early childhood as a public good and a public responsibility:  
*La primera infancia, compromiso y responsabilidad de todos* (Uruguay):  
Children's rights / human rights as basic orientation,  
Trust

in the 'capacity of human beings for intelligent judgement and action if proper conditions are furnished' (Dewey, 1939), and to develop trust in 'the constructive powers of ordinary men and women' (Unger, 2005)

Democratic accountability and participatory evaluation, respect for diversity, equality, and social justice



There are alternatives!

A sustainable long-term public policy for early childhood; providing comprehensive and integrated ECD/ECEC Promoting integrated governance that recognises knowledge(s), practices and developments in the diverse territories



Critical questions to frame the conversation

- What does it mean to be a child, to live and to grow up in our society?
- What is the purpose of early childhood services?
- What is our understanding of the relationship between the private (family) and the public (society)?
- What do we mean by education? School readiness – or **Educação**, a political, emancipatory practice of liberation?



Critical questions to frame the conversation

- Who takes part in the process of defining quality?
- Whose knowledge and expertise is seen as relevant?
- Whose values, traditions, hopes and aspirations are informing the process?
- What do we see as success and good practice?
- Who is excluded and silenced in the process?
- What other ways are there to ensure more just and equitable outcomes for all children and families?



The 'systemic turn' and the case for Competent Systems

- Countries in both the global north and south are increasingly adopting policy frameworks that address early childhood from a holistic perspective (Cardini & Guevara, in press)
- Examples include the *European Union Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care* (2014) and the *Comprehensive Care Strategy De Cero a Siempre* in Colombia (2013)
- These policies urgently require new and effective approaches to governance, resourcing, professional preparation and evaluation at all levels of the early childhood system
- They also point to the need – and possibility – for shared learning from, with, and between policy and practice initiatives in the global south and north.



The 'systemic turn' presents new challenges

- Education, primary healthcare, nutrition, children's rights, social cohesion, equality and other aspects that contribute to the ECD/ECEC system are often grounded in different, and not necessarily matching, conceptualisations, understandings, terminologies and accepted practices
- The need to coordinate not only within one professional system (early education) but across several professional and disciplinary systems in ECD adds to the complexity of the task
- A *Competent System* (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2012) ensures that practices, knowledge and orienting values are shared between actors with a wide range of professional and disciplinary backgrounds, and across all levels of the system
- This requires coordinated approaches to governance, resourcing, professional preparation, and evaluation that embrace complexity



T20/G20: policy recommendations

G20 governments can and should take decisive action, taking a three-pronged approach: supporting the systemic turn in early childhood development, education and care:

- I. Initiate and support measures that make systemic approaches sustainable
- II. Initiate and support joint learning from and with forward-looking ECD/ECEC initiatives across G20 countries
- III. Embrace and support systemic approaches to ECD/ECEC governance, policy implementation, and evaluation

Adopted at global summit, Buenos Aires, 17-18 September 2018



A roadmap to integrated Early Childhood Development, Education and Care for Sustainable Development

- Build on and support whole-systems approaches to ECD/ECEC (Competent Systems)
- (Re)claim ECD/ECEC as public good and public responsibility – counter privatisation, corporatisation, and phase out for-profit programmes
- Extend the ECD/ECEC agenda from SDG4 to all 17 SDGs
- Initiate programme and policy review with a focus on content, values and ethics rather than access and enrolment only:
  - what should we be *developing*?
  - what should we be *educating for* to achieve sustainability on a finite planet?



The future isn't something hidden in a corner. The future is something we build in the present.  
Paulo Freire

Thank you!

