



2010-01-01

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Rachel Kiersey

Dublin Institute of Technology, rkiersey@dit.ie

Nóirín Hayes

Dublin Institute of Technology, Noirin.Hayes@dit.ie

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Recommended Citation

Kiersey, R., Hayes, N.: The discursive construction of 'children' and 'rights' in Irish Early Childhood Policy. Paper presented at the 20th EECERA Conference, Knowledge and voice in early childhood, Birmingham, UK, September 6th, 2010.

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The discursive construction of 'children' and 'rights' in Irish Early Childhood Policy

By Rachel A Kiersey, *Dublin Institute of Technology*
rkiersey@dit.ie

This research forms part of a wider thematic research project exploring Irish early childhood policy design from a number of angles; this strand of the research is concerned with “revealing meaning” from Irish Early Childhood Education and Care policy texts through a critical discourse analysis study. The study examines how language has been used in these policy texts to construct knowledge about the policy area and if this language has or has not sustained a particular ideological trajectory throughout this policy area in the period studied.

Introduction

The Research Sample for this study consists of the following policy documents:

- **Ready to Learn - White Paper on Early Childhood Education (1999)**
- **National Childcare Strategy (1999)**
- **National Children’s Strategy (2000)**
- **Strengthening Families for Life, report of the Commission on the Family (1998)**
- **Social Partnership Agreement – Towards 2016 (2006)**

This study uses a critical discourse analysis methodology to investigate the language use of and knowledge constructions within these ECEC policy texts. The critical discourse analysis (CDA) methodology used in this study follows the general rules proposed in the CDA framework devised by Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999); alongside Foucault’s notion that language, power and knowledge are fundamentally interconnected at the level of discourses (1977). The Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis is concerned with investigating where meaning comes from and what kind of knowledge it then constructs. The theoretical goal of this critical discourse analysis study is to understand how specific realities have come into being in the policy area; how they are reproduced through policy literature, how language use is an integral facet of social processes, and how this shapes meaning about ECEC in wider society.

Theoretical and conceptual framework of research

Critical Discourse Analysis Methodology

Glenda MacNaughton interprets Foucault’s view of knowledge and truth as positioning knowledge as “‘culturally prejudiced’ and ... thus partial, situated and local” (2005, p. 23). CDA is used to investigate what Foucault refers to as ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault, 1984), which construct and reinforce knowledge about a policy area making it difficult to see past such truths. This knowledge construction takes place within policy texts. Such texts then rely on the establishment of “cultural categories” (Luke, 1995, p. 14), hierarchical meanings of “normality”, which are taught, learned and reproduced through the consumption of policy texts (Luke, 1995; MacNaughton, 2005)

A concentrated detailed examination of the linguistic properties of policy documents can aid in the understanding of how knowledge constructions are reproduced and perpetuated within discourses and how these discourses are then replicated throughout policy texts with the knowledge constructions thus becoming a kind of “truth”. To quote Annette Hastings:

if discourse analysis can identify what kind of knowledge is promoted through policy and how it is promoted through language use, then it provides the opportunity for discourses to be both scrutinised and challenged (1998, p. 209).

This method is explicitly interested in how texts construct representations of the world. CDA is used to explore the relationship between policy texts and their historical, social, political and cultural contexts. It examines how these representations are embedded in and reproduced through the use of language and other semiotic incidences. The aim of this research is to find out the underlying ideology permeating ECEC policy in Ireland, if there are means to move beyond the current situation, and, to make recommendations which propose to improve services for children through the development of a rights-based policy framework. When CDA is applied to an official document, it can expose the political agenda, the hegemony behind the text, the inclusion of particular voices versus the exclusion of others, and the way(s) in which values are expressed and realised. Consequently, a rigorous analysis of the narrative, grammar and language used can reveal how discourses are replicated in and permeated through policy documents.

A thorough discourse analysis situated in a clear framework for use which combines analysis of the language used in policy text discourses with analysis of the social context in which they exist can help to locate how discourses are created in and perpetuated through policy documents. The CDA framework was applied to policy texts using a thorough linguistic textual analysis, while also considering the wider dominant political and social context at the time of publication and dissemination.

Critical Discourse Analysis Framework

The specific CDA framework developed for use in this study involves 4 stages:

1. Identifying and locating a social problem, in its semiotic aspect
The social problem in its semiotic aspect, in this case, is the construction of knowledge within Irish ECEC policy discourses as it is presented at the level of texts/official documents in ECEC policy.
2. Investigating the social construction of society in which the problem exists to ascertain if it is innate in the culture
Is it the ideological construction of the social order or the social order itself which needs to be changed?
3. Undertaking the actual linguistic textual analysis of the document paying close attention to narrative, grammar, sentence structure, semantics, and the meaning of, location and collocation of words
4. Revealing the main findings & ascertaining any possible ways to overcome and strive for change
Identifying ways in which the social problem can be addressed within the social order, looking for “gaps and contradictions that exist” in order to seek out “unrealised potential for change”.

The “problem” within ECEC Policy

This paper is concerned with the exploration of the construction of knowledge about ‘children’, ‘rights’ and ‘ECEC’ in Irish early childhood policy discourses.

The concept of ECEC which I use for this study and the wider project is derived from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) understanding of ECEC, as a concept where:

“care” and “education” are inseparable concepts and quality services for children necessarily provide both ... The use of the term ECEC supports an integrated and coherent approach to policy and provision which is inclusive of all children and all parents regardless of their employment status or socioeconomic status. This approach recognizes that such arrangements may fulfill a wide range of objectives including care, learning and social support (OECD, 2001, p. 14).

The OECD defines the early childhood period as birth to 8 years old but for their Starting Strong thematic review reports they stuck to the age range of birth to below compulsory school age, under 6. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child also define the early childhood period to be below eight years of age. They view early childhood programmes as of crucial importance for the sound development of children, the Committee calls on States parties to ensure that **all** children are guaranteed access to these programmes, especially the most vulnerable. This is in terms of ensuring that all young children receive education in the broadest sense, which acknowledges a key role for parents, wider family and community, as well as the contribution of organized programmes of early childhood education provided by the State, the community or civil society institutions.

Ireland

In Irish policy there is a persistent structural and conceptual distinction (Hayes, 2007) between early education and childcare, which has been widely criticised both nationally and internationally (Bennett, 2006, 2008; CRA, 2009; Hayes, 2002, 2007, 2008; OECD, 2006). Within this distinction, early education frequently refers to intervention based pre-school services, while conversely, childcare frequently refers to the broad spectrum of care services catering for birth to twelve year olds, from family based child care through to centre-based provision (Hayes & Bradley, 2006; NESF, 2005; OECD, 2004).

Government departmental responsibility for policy concerning children and childhood thus has traditionally been located across and within a number of separate government departments in Ireland (Hayes, 2002). For example, the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) was established as a coordinating office for children’s policy but is itself still a part of the *Department of Health and Children*. Also, within the OMCYA, the *Early Years Education Policy Unit* is co-located between the *Department of Education and Science* and the OMCYA, while the *Childcare Directorate* which was formerly part of the *Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform* is now a unit of the *Department of Health and Children*. This disjointed location and co-location of key early childhood policy units has led to a fragmentation within ECEC policy delivery. An example of the effects of this fragmentation arose when the OMCYA were drafting the *State of the Nations Children Report - 2006* when they were unable to report on indicators for the early childhood education and care area “due to a total absence of data” (Ireland, 2007, p. 4). Subsequently, the Irish state has failed to prioritise young children and “there is persistent separation of early education as a service for poor children at risk of educational failure” (Hayes, 2008, p. 19) from the notion of the provision of “childcare for children of working parents” (ibid.).

Discourses of knowledge about Irish ECEC policy have subsequently been constructed twofold; on one hand as policy responding to a ‘childcare crisis’, and, on the other hand as policy targeting educational disadvantage; both of which fall short of conceptualising services and supports as rights-based.

Framework for coding

The Framework for coding was developed to demonstrate clearly how the critical discourse analysis would be conducted. Rather than look for prescribed themes/discourses within the policy documents, I let the themes emerge from the texts for coding. Thus the framework for coding follows these steps:

1. Two initial read-throughs of documents
 - To familiarise with style & genres
2. Additional thorough read through of documents
 - To generate key themes and discourses
 - To look for variation in the text
 - To pay attention to silences in the text
3. Coding by themes and discourses
 - Using NVivo qualitative software as a data management tool
4. Analysis and selection of key areas for discussion from coded themes/discourses
5. Breaking down paragraphs, sentences in the selected areas using linguistic textual analysis to understand how the linguistic properties construct ‘knowledge’ about the social reality

Cross document meta-analysis was then undertaken in order to discern the specific knowledge constructions that had been revealed as the most important issues across all the documents from the first level of analysis; thus the issues of how knowledge is constructed about Needs; Rights; concepts of the child or children and Age concepts within Early Childhood were revealed to be among the most important discourses shaping early childhood education and care policy at textual level.

The Analysis Process at work:

The **Constitution** recognises that the primary and natural educator of the child is the **family**. Much of a child’s development and education in the earliest years takes place through normal experiences in the home, although many parents now **choose** to have their children cared for, from a very early age, outside of the home. Other parents **choose** to provide their children’s pre-school care inside the family home

1. The first sentence highlights the importance afforded to the **Constitutional family** in Irish family policy; this can be seen to imply that the education & care of young children is the business of the family not the State
2. The use of the word **choose** in the second sentence where parents now choose to have their children cared for outside the home seems to signify that while parental pre-school care in the home is traditionally seen as the usual order of things; nowadays there are parents who choose the less usual activity of having their children cared for outside the home.
3. The use of the word **choose** in the third sentence reiterates the idea that parents choosing care in the home is more traditional and perhaps more usual.

Main findings

The findings I will present now look at the construction of knowledge of children and rights in Irish early childhood policy discourses.

Knowledge constructed about the child and children within Irish Early childhood policy

Age

The dissonance concerning the age of early childhood is the most prevalent issue within the policy documents. There is general confusion over whether to adhere to a general 3-6 years

age composition or whether to be more specific and target the general (as it is in Ireland) pre-school age of 3-4 years.

The *Commission on the Family* positions the age of early childhood in 2 categories; from 0-3 years of age in terms of supporting parents financially to choose their own care/educational arrangements privately; then it sees from 3 years to age 4 or 5 years (in other words, general school going age) as the age cohort in need of state supported provision of childcare/education.

The *National Childcare Strategy* is concerned with the care of children from birth to the age of 12. However it also makes reference to an Economic & Social Research Institute survey which grouped the children into two age categories 0-4 years and 5-9 years. The Strategy also refers to the Childcare Act 1991 which provides pre-school regulations covering services that cater for 0-6 year olds.

Ready to Learn, the white paper on early childhood education initially locates the age of early childhood in relation to the development of policy as 0-6 years but further into the document it begins to construct the age which it will be providing services for as 3-6 years of age, within this targeting the 3-4 year old age group specifically for actual policy interventions/actions; positioning 0-3 years of age as in receipt of parent-led early education in the home, not as the responsibility of state service provision.

The most recent social partnership agreement *Towards 2016* locates the age of early childhood in tandem with the Barcelona targets which aimed to make childcare available to 90% of children aged between 3 and the mandatory school age by 2010.

The *National Children's Strategy* does not specify age when it sets out its targets in relation to early childhood education policy; the objectives are directed towards pre-school children with no age cohort identified as such. It also references both the *National Childcare Strategy* and the *White Paper on Early Childhood Education* in terms of the development of policy initiatives.

This lack of consensus throughout the policy documents in the Early Childhood area has gone some way to bolster the incoherence of service provision up until the recent introduction of the free pre-school year, which specifically targets the 3-4 year age group. Despite the mandatory school age being 6 years, children in Ireland generally start school from the age of 4.

Constructing “the child” in Irish Early Childhood policy documents

The National Children's Strategy and *Towards 2016* construct the child as an active contributor in and agent of their own lives; while also needing to be supported by family and wider society. Conversely the remaining policy documents position the child as one that is in need of care due mostly to having working parents. All the documents bar the National Childcare Strategy separate the early years of early childhood 0-3 from pre-school early childhood 3-6 as different stages requiring different interventions where children's needs for care, particularly in the 0-3 category, are the more pressing needs to be met rather than bestowing them with rights to education. In the case of 0-3 year olds needs they are prioritised as needs for care, usually provided by a family member or privately accessed by a family member.

All the documents locate themselves in the realm of aiming for delivery of supports and services that will enhance the child's optimal experience of childhood encouraging them to reach their full developmental and educational potential. This ties-in with the general construction of the child as an “adult in waiting” who requires education and care to socialise them into being “ready for school” in order to ultimately become a rounded active citizen and responsible adult.

All the documents construct a usual child for whom they generally devise the policy strategies for, however additional strategies are devised for those children who are constructed as particularly in need of early education; children from disadvantaged communities and/or children who have special needs. The most recent of the documents reviewed, **Towards 2016**, positions the first of its high level outcomes to be achieved within the ten-year framework as to:

Enhance early education provision for children from disadvantaged communities and for those with special needs

Most of the policy documents generally construct the child as one that has a right to access high quality early education and childcare, however there is a polarity between the National Childcare Strategy which sees a need for policy for both childcare and early education to be formulated from a rights basis,

“The Expert Working Group, while acknowledging that children, parents and community all have needs and rights in relation to childcare, believes that the primary consideration in a National Childcare Strategy is the rights and needs of children” (Ireland, 1999, p. 44)

and the White Paper – Ready to Learn whose principle objective is

“to support the development and educational achievement of children through high quality early education, with particular focus on the target groups of the disadvantaged and those with special needs” (Ireland., 1999).

Most of the documents cause confusion by separating the concepts of care and education whilst simultaneously integrating them. The National Childcare Strategy and the social partnership agreements construct early childhood education as part and parcel of the quality childcare they are concerned with developing.

The term ‘childcare’ ... as used by the Expert Working Group means services providing care and education which are viewed ... as being complementary and inseparable.

As with the age constructs there is a recurring construction of ECEC as childcare, particularly from birth to aged 3, in terms of “Minding Babies” for working parents.

Take this quote from Ready to Learn, which suggests that the traditional perception of early childhood services is as care services for “minding the babies” of working parents.

All early childhood services must encompass, not only childcare, but also education.

Put simply, care without education cannot succeed in promoting educational objectives.

And further:

There is little point in using childcare as a mechanism for tackling disadvantage if it does not address the educational and developmental needs of children.

The Policy texts have predominantly been situated in response to a childcare crisis. Following this policy texts have prioritised the development of early education policy in the order of:

1. Targeting provision for “othered” children
2. Supporting the need for parental choice over the education and care of their young children
3. Supporting the need for parents of young children to be supported financially,

None of the documents have prioritised the offering of early education to “all” children as a right.

Analysis of parliamentary debates related to both the National Childcare Strategy and the Early Education White paper highlighted the issue of Local politics on the National stage – childcare and/or pre-school as debated in the Irish parliament is often situated in terms of ministers arguing for local provision in their constituencies. Debates about childcare and early education are predominantly concerned with provision of places as opposed to a greater conceptual debate.

The most recent policy development in his area is the introduction of a Free Pre-School Year. Preliminary analysis of this recent policy change demonstrates that the government are keeping their approach to this policy area within the same ideological context; provision is accessed through existing providers as opposed to the strategic development of new standardised provision, which indicates that there has been no overwhelming change in the ideological position of policy provision, more just a rational economic decision with a new name and a funding change. The introduction of the free pre-school year does imply that an ideological shift could be forthcoming but it is currently operating in the context of a redirection of economic policy in this area.

Reference is made to the importance of early education across policy documents however, from a linguistic perspective; it is persistently contextualised as subordinate to childcare. This is evident from a screenshot of the OMCYA website where tellingly the information for the free pre-school year is to be found in the side-bar menu of the childcare section of the website not in the side-bar menu of the early years education section.

This lack of an overwhelming shift in the ideological position of policy provision is exemplified through the OMCYA's adherence to the use of the conception Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as opposed to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) thus locating Care as the dominant concern over Education.

Needs not Rights?

The concept of Needs is positioned as a more urgent, necessary and greater concept than Rights.

A quick word frequency search using the query tool in NVivo across four of the policy documents highlights this polarity in the use of the term rights versus the use of the term needs.

| Policy Document | Rights | Needs |
|------------------------------|--------|-------|
| National Childcare Strategy | 58 | 119 |
| <i>“Ready to Learn”</i> | 5 | 125 |
| National Children’s Strategy | 50 | 125 |
| Commission on the Family | 120 | 160 |

The Report of the Commission on the Family speaks widely of children’s rights, and rights to access quality services; and the National Childcare Strategy almost position services as a right when it states that *“a right of access for every child to quality childcare in a safe and secure environment where he/she is respected and accepted, should be guaranteed regardless of the status of the child or of his/her parents”*.

However the **white paper** only positions services as a response to needs.

More tellingly the attention to needs is positioned generally across the policy texts as attending to the early education needs of children across the spectrum, but then subordinated

to those general needs are the needs of “other” children such as rural children, disadvantaged children; traveller children and children with special needs. The White Paper however states that it addresses “*the needs of children with special education needs and the educationally disadvantaged*” as a priority. In fact all of the policy documents position addressing disadvantage and special needs as a priority in some capacity.

The National Children’s Strategy sums up this needs greater than rights approach in its Objective A *Children’s early education and developmental needs will be met through quality childcare services and family-friendly employment measures*, when it states that: *A key challenge in this period of expansion will be to ensure that the needs of children are the primary consideration in the development of new quality places.*

Not one of the policy texts positions children’s rights to early education as a primary objective.

Implications, practice or policy

To summarise, the predominant knowledge constructions about children and rights that are constructed across these Irish ECEC policy document discourses are:

- 3-4 years old is the average age for Early Childhood Education Policy objectives
- Children are still seen in the context of the family, as opposed to being seen individually, particularly with regard to the importance attached to parental choice.
- Children are the subjects of needs rather than rights.
- Policy is concerned with
 - developing active citizens – future responsible adults, and
 - particularly developing readiness for school.
- Services are prioritised to the most “needy” children.
- “Childcare” and “Early Childhood Care and Education” are the predominant terms used.
- Distinct lack of policy constructed from a rights basis.

These knowledge constructions hinder the development of rights-based policy. Parents are still seen as the primary educators for the early years of early childhood. Policy continues to be centred on the notion of readiness for school, as exemplified by the latest note on eligibility for the free pre-school year (July, 2010). The eligibility terms for the free pre-school year state that it is not available to children under the age of 3 years and 3 months old, while also stating the expectation that formal schooling will have begun by the age of 5 years 6 months, the age at which eligibility to participate ceases. This excerpt from the guide for parents about the free pre-school year illustrates the ideological construction of the policy:

What is the free Pre-School Year in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)?
The ECCE is a new scheme designed to give children access to a free Pre-School Year of appropriate programme-based activities in the year before they start primary school. Participation in a pre-school programme provides children with their first formal experience of early learning, the starting-point of their educational and social development outside the home. Children who avail of pre-school are more likely to be ready for school and a formal learning and social environment. (OMCYA, 2009)

While this policy change in provision is welcome, it only serves to highlight the issue that prior to its introduction there were no rights for children to early childhood education services. There are no indications that the ideological perspective driving previous policy documents has changed. Changing times and economic restrictions have forced the government to make the policy changes for the time-being; it is still nonetheless a redirection

of funds. It will be interesting to monitor the success and effectiveness of the free pre-school year policy over time to see what happens.

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