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Exploring Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland: Critical Discourse Analysis as a Methodological Tool

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Strand: Diversity in theoretical references and methodologies

Exploring early childhood education and care policy in Ireland: critical discourse analysis as a methodological tool

Introduction

The Irish government have invested considerably in the broad early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector over the last decade. However, a distinction persists between childcare and early education within Irish policy, both structurally and conceptually.

While a shift towards the language of rights in policy documents has been noted; the ambitious language of Irish ECEC policy documents is not always realised in policy implementation, which leads to a tendency toward rhetoric. Using a children's rights lens this paper reports on the preliminary findings of a research study which has sampled these policy documents to analyse the extent to which they consider children and are rights-based from a linguistic perspective. A critical discourse analysis (CDA), which involves thorough analysis of the linguistic structure of documents alongside wider consideration of the socio-political culture in which they were created, allows us to find 'ways into texts' (Pennycook, 2008). Consequently, this paper considers analysis of Irish early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy suggesting a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework as a suitable basis for uncovering the ideology which underlies the formulation of policy. This paper discusses the context of the study, the rationale for the chosen CDA methodology and presents the preliminary findings from a case study of a critical discourse analysis of Ireland's 1999 White Paper on early childhood education "*Ready to Learn*". This paper contends that CDA is a very useful methodology for an intricate analysis of policy and one that is essential to use in attempting to overcome the policy status quo.

Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland

ECEC in Ireland has been contextualised in a general sense as an economically driven childcare concern as a response to women's increased labour force participation, and this has resulted in the prioritisation of 'care spaces' over 'quality provision'. Broadly speaking, the Irish government has been policy active in the development of early childhood care and education; however this activity has tended to concentrate on the 'care' element, alongside some educational provision which is targeted towards special needs groups (mostly in disadvantaged areas). This policy action has included the commissioning of numerous reports and the drafting of policy and practice documents in the areas of early childhood education, and childcare. However, a mixture of funding initiatives for childcare (Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006 (EOCP) and the National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2010 (NCIP)), and targeted programmes for early intervention education services (Delivering Equality of Education in Schools Programme (DEIS) and the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme for Children) have accounted for the provision of ECEC services, focusing on the provision of places, 'with little evidence of sustained policy commitment' (CRA, 2009, p. 10). There has been no integrated national programme or strategy which aims to encompass both early childhood education and care, thus early childhood services remain 'fractured across the welfare (childcare) and educational (early education) domains and ... targeted in nature' (Hayes, 2008, p. 33).

Structural and Conceptual Differences

A structural and conceptual distinction (Hayes, 2007) between early education and childcare persists within Irish policy, which has not gone unnoticed by critics (Bennett, 2006, 2008; CRA, 2009; Hayes, 2002, 2007, 2008; OECD, 2006). The Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA), which itself is a part of the Department of Health and Children, is charged with the coordination of children's policy making in Ireland; however the responsibility for policy relating to early childhood education and care is also co-located within a number of government departments (Hayes, 2002). An example of this is the Early Years Education Policy Unit, which is co-located between the Department of Education and Science and the OMCYA; another example is the Childcare Directorate which was formerly part of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and is now a unit of the Department of Health and Children.

In countries where such split departmental auspices prevail within ECEC, the early education and childcare sectors differ significantly in their funding requirements and allowances, operational procedures, regulatory frameworks, staff-training and qualifications (Bennett, 2008, p. 29). Research by Bennett (2005) has discussed how childcare workers in particular tend to suffer to a greater extent within these divided auspices. In Irish social policy childcare tends to be broadly defined as a general concept which can also comprise early education. Therefore, within the general concept of childcare in Irish policy there are two separate dimensions, childcare and early education.

Early education commonly refers to intervention based pre-school services delivered under the auspices of the Department of Education; these services refer to the 3-6 age bracket (six years of age is the compulsory school starting age for a child in Ireland) and areas of social disadvantage are given priority for such services. Conversely, childcare frequently refers to the broad spectrum of care services for 0-12 year olds, from family based child care through to centre-based provision, including after school care (Hayes & Bradley, 2006; NESF, 2005; OECD, 2004). Adshead and Neylon argue that Ireland's 'split system' can be summed up as one:

where 'education' is more narrowly defined and understood as an activity that largely begins in school and where 'pre-school care' is just as likely to be understood as the activity of 'child-minding' and 'baby-sitting' as it is to be conceived of as education in its broadest (social and developmental) sense. (2008, p. 29)

The disjointed co-location of key early childhood policy units has led to 'a fragmentation of services and a lack of coherence for children and families' (Bennett, 2008, p. 2), within Irish ECEC policy delivery. An example of the effects of such fragmentation was the 'total absence of data' (Ireland, 2007, p. 4) on indicators for ECEC, leading to the OMCYA's inability to report on them for the 2006 State of the Nation's Children report. Consequently, with regard to children's rights in early childhood education and care, the Irish state has failed to prioritise children and 'there is persistent separation of early education as a service for poor children at risk of educational failure from childcare for children of working parents' (Hayes, 2008, p. 19).

The language of rights in ECEC policy

Ireland ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992 and submitted their 1st periodic report on progress in implementing the Convention in 1996. The *National Children's Strategy* was published in 2000 as a response to recommendations from

the concluding observations on Ireland's first report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The *National Children's Strategy* marked 'the beginning of a shift towards using rights-based language in policy development ... by strongly reflecting the UNCRC' (Hayes, 2002, p. 49). This significant development in Irish policy used the Convention as an informing framework and is evidence of the move within government policy, pertaining to families and children, to adopt the language of rights in official texts (Hayes, 2002; Kilkelly, 2008). However, Ireland's *National Children's Strategy* (2000) does not 'incorporate the principles and provisions of the convention directly' (Hayes, 2002, p. 49), hence it is not a rights based strategy (CRA, 2006).

General comment number seven by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child 'interprets the right to education during early childhood as beginning at birth and closely linked to young children's right to maximum development (Article 6.2)' (Moss, 2008, p. 224). 'High quality childcare that is affordable, accessible and stable has a beneficial social and psychological impact on young children and a direct positive economic impact on society' (Hayes & Bradley, 2006, p. 174) thus it is not unreasonable to anticipate that ECEC provision should be universal and rights-based. Nevertheless, policies within ECEC in Ireland have thus far shaped an approach whereby 'care' is predominantly positioned as a private good to be dealt with within the family and/or paid for in the market, while 'education' is positioned as a public good to be accessed for free in formal school settings only (Adshead & Neylon, 2008; Moss, 2007).

The ambitious language and suggested proposals of Irish ECEC policy documents are not always realised in policy implementation, which leads to a tendency toward rhetoric. Thus, this research project is looking at the extent to which the policy documents themselves consider children and are rights-based from a linguistic perspective. The aim of this research design then, is to find 'ways into texts' (Pennycook, 2008) through a critical discourse analysis, with considerable emphasis on linguistic textual analysis, in order to locate Irish ECEC policy, particularly its approach to 'rights', in terms of language and ideology. Locating policy in terms of language and ideology will aim to reveal the principle philosophy(s) that have been driving policy formulation in this area.

Critical Discourse Analysis Framework

CDA has been positioned by many experts (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 1995, 2001, 2003; Hastings, 1998) as a fruitful way of doing social research, using discourse analysis (in this case CDA) to focus on language combined with engaging with social theoretical issues (Fairclough, 2003). CDA investigates power relations and ideology through ascertaining what the nuances of the society and culture under investigation are, and how these assist in maintaining the status quo. This method is explicitly interested in relations of power and dominance within societies and cultures and how these 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. Thus, using CDA methods in a qualitative research project which accepts this perspective, necessitates answering 'how' questions, in relation to understanding how specific realities have come into being; how they are reproduced through the policy literature and how language figures 'as an element in social processes' (Fairclough, 2001, p. 229).

This study works from the view, that language both shapes and is shaped by societal practices (Fairclough, 1992; Lemke, 1995). Taking policy documents into consideration, it is evident that the reciprocal nature between language and societal practices does truly exist, which is of great significance in terms of both the choice of language describing the policy area and how that filters back into the public domain in terms of the government selling their policies. 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. The diligence attached to this method has paved the way for an intricate analysis of language; how language has been used to express power and how language has been used to pursue a particular ideological trajectory throughout this policy area in the past decade. Consequently, a rigorous analysis of the narrative, grammar and language used can uncover how discourses are replicated in and permeated through policy documents.

For this analysis of Irish ECEC policy documents, Fairclough and Chouliaraki's (1999) critical discourse analysis framework has been used as a base from which to formulate an adapted framework applicable to the study. They see CDA as a form of explanatory critique where there is a problem, for example, an unmet need; obstacles to the problem being tackled; where there is a function of the problem in sustaining existing social arrangements; and potentially some ways of moving beyond or removing these obstacles (1999, p. 60). The specific framework used in this study involves:

1. Identifying and locating a social problem
2. Investigating the social construction of society in which the problem exists to ascertain if it is innate in the culture
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

A critical discourse analysis of policy documents must pay considerable attention to the social, cultural and political climate in which these documents were created, alongside a meticulous textual analysis of the linguistic properties of each text in order to discern what the underlying ideology of the discourse is. This researcher's analysis aims to track any distinctive shifts in policy actions or policy thinking within the language of Irish ECEC policy documents throughout the overall research sample which spans a decade of policy documents from 1999 to present. Consequently, the overall goal of the research is to compare, contrast and critically evaluate any changes or developments within the language of the policy landscape in order to reveal the dominant ideological climate within Irish ECEC policy. On completion of the research analysis work, the information gathered will be used to make recommendations to inform a rights-based ECEC policy model.

The Analysis Process

The analysis process itself involved several readings of the document in order to familiarise the researcher with the writing style of the document and the main themes and issues of the policy text. The researcher then noted the main themes and sub themes within the text and using NVivo qualitative software organised these into coding categories. The coding categories (NODES) fall into two types, free nodes and tree nodes. Free node coding was undertaken relating the nodes to the key themes/objectives of the White paper as iterated by

the authors of the document. The tree nodes were constructed from the researcher's interpretation of the most important and recurrent topics of interest for critical research within the document. Each tree node was used as a coding category with more detailed and specific sub-categories within, the tree nodes the researcher selected were:

- Age concepts
- Benefits of early education
- Concepts of education and/or care
- Government Provision
- Key target groups
- Quality
- Roles in Early Childhood Education
- Standardisation

Following on from the coding process the researcher conducted further textual analysis of the document paying close attention to the coded text which ultimately illustrates the basis of the argument.

An example of this process in action follows:

1. The **Constitution** recognises that the primary and natural educator of the child is the **family**.
2. 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.
3. Other parents **choose** to provide their children's pre-school care inside the family home.

This excerpt refers to the constitutional protection and position of the family in relation to the education of children. Looking at **sentence 1** with a critical discourse analysis lens can see the text being construed as setting out education and care as the business of the family rather than the state. The **2nd sentence** through collocation of the words **development & education** alongside **normal** experiences in the home implies this type of parental pre-school care as the norm.

Conversely the second part of the sentence then uses the word **choose** to infer that it is a choice of parents to have their children cared for outside the home but not the norm. This sentence also separates out the concepts of education and care, collocating education with developmental progress at home facilitated by parents and collocating care, which is not home based and by a family member, with an activity that exists outside the family and the home which is not the norm.

Findings

A CDA of Ireland's White Paper was undertaken, this involved analysis of the socio-cultural nuances of Irish society in relation to policy making. Once the social problem, in this case the White Paper document, was located contextually, then a more specific analysis of the language in the text and analysis of the construction of the text were employed. These are the findings from this case study.

The social problem in this case, is that ECEC policy in Ireland is not formulated from a right's basis. Places in ECEC programmes are not issued as a right and policy documents in this domain tend to only acknowledge the notion of rights and the Convention rather than adhere to them; these documents do not have a rights context per se nor do they propose to issue services from a rights-basis.

*Early childhood education **should** be child-centred, providing children with the opportunity to enhance all aspects of their development. In this regard, the White Paper seeks to **take account** of Article 29 1(a) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Article notes that “the education of the child shall be directed to: (a) The development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.”*

It is important to note that the White paper expressly speaks of increasing the supply of childcare places and **only** commits to direct provision of early education services for key target groups.

Ireland is significant in its socio-cultural composition for the way that social policy has been greatly shaped by the dominant influence of the Catholic Church, the legacy of which still remains today through the principle of subsidiarity, where the state do not intervene in the private domain of the family except as a last resort, and still very much enshrined in and reproduced through the principles of the 1937 constitution Bunreacht na hÉireann, today.

The White Paper consists of a Minister’s Foreword and eleven chapters which set out to look at: the context, existing provision, areas of focus: quality; disadvantaged children; special needs children, the role of parents in ECEC and finally structures for inspection, standardisation and implementation.

The traditional process of policy making often involves the government publishing a Green Paper, which is a discussion based document on a policy area. A Green paper is usually followed by a White paper which sets out the government’s proposed policy action. There was no Green paper preceding this White paper; a consultative process took place which resulted in the Report on the National Forum for Early Childhood Education. Nevertheless, this White Paper appears as more of a discussion document, with longwinded descriptions and explanations of the issues affecting policy formulation within ECEC and a lot less actual clearly outlined policy than the length of the document would imply. Special areas of interest for the researcher included the interesting chapter on, and consistent referral throughout the document to the strong role parents must play in ECEC; which is underpinned by a lack of any strong policy proposals or assurances for this area. There is also much confusion in the White Paper particularly around the areas of age concepts within early childhood and most importantly between the concepts of education and care.

Discourses

Discourses in the White Paper which centre on the role of the family in ECEC give a great insight into the socio-cultural mind-set of Irish policy making, bolstered by the principle of subsidiarity, and enshrined in Article 42.1 of the Irish constitution which provides parents with rights, which give them the duty, “to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children” (Ireland, 1937). As a consequence of this constitutional protection of the family in Ireland the state is positioned to intervene within the domain of the family only in “exceptional cases, where the parents for physical or moral reasons fail in their duty towards their children” (Article 42.5, Ireland, 1937). This view is also reflected by the Commission on the Family, and referenced in the White Paper.

“The vital role of parents in their children’s education is recognised and as a fundamental principle, the State seeks to support and strengthen, but not to supplant this role”

The Report on the National Forum for Early Childhood Education which convened as the consultation process in advance of the White Paper also highlighted that *“the involvement of*

parents in early childhood education ... is a matter of central importance to the well-being of society”.

It is rather pertinent that while the White Paper devotes a large amount of space to a discussion on the importance of parents involvement there is no proposal to develop an equitable system of support for parents to provide this early education service to their children.

In relation to discourses of age concepts in the White Paper, it seems that the authors of the document could not make a decision as to what age group the policy document was targeting, 0-6 years or 3-6 years; this uncertainty is demonstrated through the use of many contradictory statements. In some cases the document refers to the fact that the age group that early education policy is concerned with is from birth to six years old: *“In line with national and international thinking, therefore, early childhood will be taken to mean children who have not yet reached their sixth birthday”* but as the paper develops there is much indecision and inconsistency regarding the age concepts within early childhood. There are instances where the importance of early childhood education from birth is recognised: *Without adequate levels of care and support, without exposure to everyday experiences and stimulation, a child’s development may be damaged: “once the critical period (0-4 years) is past, that system of the brain will never be able to develop or function normally”.*

Whereas elsewhere in the document the age concept begins to distance itself from 0-6 years in favour of 3-6 years instead: *“Appropriate early childhood education programmes can be expensive to provide. Extending education provision generally to children aged less than 4 would have significant resource implications for other educational sectors”.*

As illustrated in the earlier section discussing the analysis process; the White Paper’s location of early childhood education and care appears to encompass an even greater amount of conceptual indecision. There is much discussion of the necessity to keep education and care integrated which is recurrently contradicted by discussing the provision of separate services for both education and care, separate inspection procedures for education and care, separate standardisation for education and care, and so on. A couple of examples of this uncertainty/inconsistency:

The developmental age level of the child across the spectrum can be important in regard to whether the focus is principally on care or education. It can never be exclusively on one or the other. This, in turn, may determine whether the provision made is indirect, through advice on stimulation and education to parents and carers, or direct, in terms of teaching the child. At times, it may be both.

All early childhood services must encompass, not only childcare, but also education. Put simply, care without education cannot succeed in promoting educational objectives.

Discussion

This recurrent ambiguity behind key concepts in ECEC weakens the policy proposals, causes confusion and distorts the meaning of the text. On a brief read through of the document perhaps these problem areas would not be so apparent, but a sustained and intricate discourse analysis of the White Paper reveals a distinct lack of focus and direction in many rather important areas which only serves to then highlight the overall weakness of the White Paper as an outline of policy proposals.

The use of language here is also telling, rather than any explicit statements of intent the government “aim to support” the development of a high quality system of ECEC. There is no clear policy line taken on important issues such as the age factor, targeting versus universalism, locations for ECEC provision and so on; there is a tendency to imply that ECEC in centre based provision is a parental choice rather than a necessity or a right. Instead of outlining what the government will be doing in relation to ECEC policy the document tends to discuss or highlight what they may or may not do.

In sum the document sits rather uncomfortably, somewhere in-between a more discursive consultative document, and a White Paper outlining policies rather than coming across as a clear statement of intent in relation to the development of ECEC policy.

Conclusion

As with much of Irish social policy, the core ideology behind this policy document is a laissez faire one, which is reinforced through use of the principle of subsidiarity.

A thorough analysis of the document shows how the language is positioned in a way so as to cause confusion by deviating from the point of the document (which is to set out a policy plan for the development of Early Childhood Education) while also evading the assertion of any solid policy commitments.

The use of this CDA methodology gives the researcher a closer insight into the text, combining analysis of the social, cultural, political and economic context of the social problem with an in-depth analysis of the language. This CDA method serves to paint a clearer picture of what the text really means and where it is ideologically located as opposed to the use of a less involved documentary analysis method. Only through the use of such a detailed method of analysis of existing policy can we advance to both comprehend and ‘weaken the dominant ideologies that hide powers support for the interests of those who oppress and discriminate’ (MacNaughton, 2005). This is why a critical discourse analysis is a significant tool to investigate the ethos behind ECEC policymaking in Ireland and to assist in the development of a rights-based framework for the future.

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