Does Terminology Matter?

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Abstract

Following rapid change in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Ireland in the last 20 years, there is considerable diversity in terminology in use. The first part of the paper looks at the different ways in which choice of terms may matter: in setting boundaries, through connotations, as part of wider discourses, and as a political tool. The second part of the paper briefly surveys terms used in Irish and international documents that frame debates around 'early educational alignment'. It looks at terms for the stage of childhood, the field, the settings and the adults in them. The paper concludes that terminology matters and can be political, bound up with debates of wider importance, but that some of the language debates are intractable. The paper closes with questions for further research.

Introduction

Recent years have seen a diverse range of terms in Ireland for early childhood education and care (ECEC) and for those working in it. At times the choice of terms has been the subject of debate, at least within the field. The diversity and the debate reflect the pace of change over the last 20 years, seen in rapid growth in provision (with changes in public funding driving changes in the character of ECEC provision), formalisation (with introduction of regulations, and quality and curriculum frameworks) and professionalisation (with rapid growth in third-level courses and, soon, minimum qualifications). The diversity and debate also reflect widening recognition of ECEC's significance for child development and educational outcomes, which is in turn linked to the expansion of research.

Given the pace of change, it is no surprise that there are diverse views on the nature and purpose of ECEC, including how it relates to the early years of primary school. Debates remain unresolved. 'Childcare' is still a standard term, but does it include the pre-school year? Should we use the word 'childcare' at all and, if not, what term should we use instead? Does 'pre-school year' simply mean 'the year before school', or does it imply preparation for school? Are childcare workers 'teachers'? Faced with diverse and conflicting terminology, we may have a strong urge to fix on a set of words and do away with these awkward questions. Unfortunately the task is fraught with difficulties.

Some of the diversity of terms may be inevitable as ECEC is caught up in political struggles between different institutional interests (UNESCO 2002), in part because it is a sector in flux, in part because early years services are multifaceted (e.g. meeting the needs of children and parents simultaneously). At the same time, debate on terminology may be a distraction, diverting attention from the 'real' issues. The word 'school' has continued in use even as the character of schools has changed over time. So should we worry less about changing our language and more about changing the institutions to which our words refer?

This paper argues that terminology does matter. Part 1 explores how. Part 2 looks at terminology relating to 'early educational alignment'. The paper concludes with questions for further research.

Part 1: How might terminology matter?

Our choice of terms matters for clarity, and to avoid confusion about what we are referring to. But terms also matter because of their wider implications and the philosophical or political approaches embedded in them. Indeed, language is often a political tool.

Setting boundaries

Our choice of terms sets boundaries to the people, things or actions to which we refer, sometimes clearly, sometimes less so. For example, the terms used to describe today's symposium may set boundaries to the invitation list and to the range of topics discussed. Advance information about the symposium described its scope as 'birth-8 years', which is specific and seems broader than 'early childhood', which often refers to 'birth-to-6' and is sometimes used to exclude what happens within schools. On the other hand, the symposium's main title ('early educational alignment') is less specific: it includes *some* of what happens in schools and in centre-based early years services, but it is less clear what, or what else it includes. Does 'early education' include what child-minders do, or what parents do?

Some terms are deliberately chosen for their breadth: to be inclusive, or to broaden a debate. 'Setting' often describes a place where early education and care takes place, and is chosen because it has such wide boundaries. Similarly, 'early learning' seems more inclusive than 'early education': 'learning' can happen anywhere, whereas 'education' may be more restricted.

Sometimes there is no word that quite captures the boundaries of what we want to refer to, and new terms are introduced. The inadequacy of either 'education' or 'care' to describe what happens in early years services led to coining of the term 'educare' (Caldwell 1991), which has gained some currency in the United States (e.g. www.educareschools.org), but little in Ireland. 'Pedagogue' and 'pedagogy' are not new words, but they are less common here than in some central and northern European countries. Proposals have been made to use them more widely to fill a gap in our language.

Connotations and implications

In addition to the boundaries it sets, the choice of term may affect (and reflect) the way we think or feel about an issue, because of its connotations. 'Childcare' and 'childminding', while standard terms, seem to imply little more than a protective function, with no implication of an educational role. For that reason we may prefer terms such as Early Childhood Care and Edcuation (ECCE) or ECEC that reflect the inseparability of 'care' and 'education' in early childhood. Conversely, there is some opposition to the Irish Government's use of the term 'ECCE' to describe the free pre-school year, as it risks misrepresenting ECCE as being defined by that one scheme (Wolfe, O'Donoghue-Hynes and Hayes 2013).

The choice of term may also impact on the way those working in the area think about themselves. The UK and New Zealand, for example, use 'teacher' in early years services, with implications of responsibility, qualifications and status that go with being part of a profession. However, adoption of school-related language may encourage parents or educators to think of pre-school's main purpose as preparation for school.

Wider discourses

Our choice of words – and what we mean by those words – reflects not just the boundaries and connotations of words but also a wider 'discourse', which in turn reflects the structures or philosophy that underlie how we think about early childhood and early years services.

Moss (2014) critiques two current 'dominant discourses'. One is the discourse of the 'market' and childcare as a 'business'. Penn (2013) similarly critiques the market discourse in ECEC, which assumes a minimal role for the State in relation to 'childcare', in contrast to common understandings of 'education' as a public good that merits public investment and control. The

second discourse critiqued by Moss is one of 'investment', 'high returns' and 'quality', which imply that early childhood education is a means to some other end rather than valuable in itself, and which fail to recognise how political and value-laden it is.

Others challenge the neuroscience discourse (MacNaughton 2004), in which terms such as 'prevention and early intervention' are embedded. While this discourse has had a persuasive impact on some politicians (e.g. Allen and Duncan Smith 2008), it risks presenting ECEC as a medical intervention, which in turn may push ECEC away from a view of the child as a 'competent learner' and 'active agent in her/his own development' (CECDE 2006).

A political tool

As a result of all the above factors, terminology is frequently a political tool. Bown et al (2009) discuss the use by politicians of specific discourses to focus debate on some issues and close off others, e.g. through discussing ECEC within a discourse of working parents rather than a discourse of children's rights. In contrast, the language of 'education' may be used to generate a stronger case for public funding for ECEC (Hayes 2007, UNESCO 2002). Similarly, those advocating greater public funding often talk of 'investment' rather than expenditure, because of its link to economic arguments about the long-term returns to early education (e.g. Heckman 2002).

In his critique of the US movement for alignment of early childhood education with school, Halpern notes the strategic intent of a term such as 'prek-3rd' that explicitly points to the 3-8 age-range: 'demarcating a specific age range organizes the attention of stakeholders', creating a 'recognizable identity' for this alignment, helping to persuade administrators and parents and thus bring about policy change (Halpern 2013, p.14).

Use of a term with strategic intent is, however, no guarantee of success. As Hayes notes, efforts in Ireland to encourage use of 'ECEC' or 'ECCE', and to end the separation of 'childcare' and 'early education', have – in spite of some success in official documents – been 'insufficient to integrate them conceptually, politically or practically', with different Government Departments still responsible for different aspects of the one field (Hayes 2010, p.69).

The desire to use language as a tool to lead change in attitudes to ECEC must also be balanced with the need to make ourselves understood. If our terminology diverges too far from standard usage, we risk failing to communicate. With 'childcare' a prominent theme in the media and public discourse, we face a dilemma in deciding how far to go along with standard usage when seeking policy change.

Part 2: The terminology of early educational alignment

Having explored some of the ways in which terminology matters, Part 2 briefly surveys terminology in Irish and international documents that frame debates around 'early educational alignment'. It looks at terms for the stage of childhood, the field, the settings and the adults in them.

Stage of childhood

'Young children', 'early childhood' and the 'early years' clearly describe an early stage of life. However, the boundaries of these terms are not clear, and the boundaries matter when we are discussing 'early education'. Is the upper boundary of 'early' 4, 5, 6 or – as in this symposium – 8 years old? And does 'early' start at birth or at 1, 2, 3 or 4? The term 'pre-school' is also ambiguous, sometimes just referring to the period between 3 years old and school entry, sometimes to the period from birth to school entry, with both uses seen in Government of Ireland (2015).

A key issue is whether terms encompass the initial years of school. With the majority of children in Ireland starting school at 4, 'early childhood' is often understood to mean 0-4. However, Síolta and Aistear both define early childhood as birth to 6, including the infant classes of primary schools. The European Commission has defined the period covered by 'ECEC' as the period from birth to compulsory school age (EC 2014, p.69), which is 6 in Ireland. Similarly, the Irish Government asked the Expert Advisory Group on the 'Early Years' Strategy to examine the period from birth to 6 (DCYA 2013). However, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has proposed that Governments define early childhood as birth to 8, specifically to ensure the transition to school is covered by the definition in all countries, including those where the transition is at 7 (UNCRC 2006).

The first two years of primary school in Ireland, which currently cater for 4-6 year olds, continue to be called 'infant' classes. The usage is in some ways strange, as in many contexts

'infant' means a child in the first year or so after birth. Applied to school, the term may suggest that the infant classes are when education *begins*. If so, broader understandings of 'early education' may mean it is time to reconsider this use of 'infant'. However, the term has a long history, dating back at least to the Model Infant Schools in the 1820s, and infant classes were open to 2 year olds when Ireland's national system of education was established in 1831 (O'Connor 2010).

The field

Many terms describe the field: 'childcare', 'early education', 'ECEC', 'ECCE', 'pre-school', 'early childhood development and education' and other variants. The terms are often interchangeable. In some contexts, however, 'early education' is used to distinguish certain types of provision from 'childcare', particularly in 'split systems' such as Ireland (OECD 2004).

The 1999 DES White Paper *Ready to Learn*, for example, acknowledged the inseparability of care and education and noted that 'children learn from the earliest moment', but proceeded to focus on 3-6 year olds, arguing that 'care is the dominant requirement of children aged less than 3 years' while 'education is a more significant need of older children' (DES 1999). The parallel report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group (Government of Ireland 1999) was titled the 'National *Childcare* Strategy', reflecting its origin in concern for women's labour market participation, even though it defined childcare as 'services providing care and education' (p. xxii).

The choice of term frequently reflects institutional interests. The OECD *Starting Strong* reports, prepared by the OECD Directorate for Education, use 'ECEC', and use this term even to cover out-of-school provision for children up to 12 (OECD 2006, p.229). In contrast, OECD documents written from a labour market perspective distinguish 'childcare and pre-primary education' (OECD 2007). Similarly, the education directorate of the European Commission has adopted 'ECEC' for all non-parental provision from birth to compulsory school age (EC 2011), whereas other parts of the Commission continue to use 'childcare' (EC 2015), reflecting a labour market orientation.

UNESCO's International Standard Classification of Education framework (ISCED) – which defines education levels for international comparisons – broadened its definition of 'ISCED

0' in 2011, but continues to exclude care. Prior to 2011, ISCED 0 referred to 'pre-primary education' for children aged 3 and up, 'designed primarily to introduce very young children to a school-type environment' (UNESCO 2006, p.20). The 2011 revision renamed ISCED 0 'early childhood education' and included 0-2 year olds. However, ISCED 0 now has two sub-categories, which perpetuate an age-distinction between 0-2 and 3-5 year olds, and the ISCED definition of 'early childhood education' includes only programmes with 'an intentional education component' and excludes 'programmes providing only childcare' (UNESCO 2012, pp.26-27).

Some argue the word 'care' should be dropped altogether and the whole field termed 'early childhood education' as a means of raising its status and moving from a labour market focus to a child development focus. Here education is understood as 'education-in-its-broadest-sense' (Moss 2014), not with the aim of 'schoolification' of pre-school settings but rather so that 'education' can be 'reclaimed as a holistic, liberating and democratic practice' (Urban 2009, p.16)

Even when 'care' is retained, to stress the integration of care and education, some put more stress on 'education' by putting the word first, as in 'ECEC'. The OECD *Starting Strong* reports explicitly argue in favour of putting 'education' first in the acronym, 'the child's right to development and education being considered a priority in all services organised for young children' (OECD 2006 p.22).

In Ireland, there has been some resistance to the downgrading of 'care', with the terms typically reversed as 'ECCE', possibly reflecting fear of schoolification. The concern is not exclusive to Ireland, however. Gibbons (2007) warns of what may be lost when the educational aspect is stressed, including 'an economy of "expert" knowledge in which care is increasingly subject to an educational regulatory gaze', marginalising historical understandings of care (p.123).

Gallo (2007) argues that since the 1999 White Paper there has been an 'emerging common language' in Ireland in favour of 'ECCE', seen for example in Síolta, Aistear and in NESF (2005), though the clarity of the term has been muddied through its appropriation by the so-called 'ECCE programme' as the public title for the free pre-school year (DCYA n.d.).

Given the growing interest in situating the field within a children's rights discourse, rather than as a labour market support, one might have thought that the word 'childcare' would have been banished by now. But the word remains embedded in many institutions (e.g. City and County Childcare Committees) and funding programmes (e.g. Community Childcare Subvention) and remains a common term in public discourse.

Sixteen years on from the White Paper, the recent report of the Inter-Departmental Working Group was titled 'Future Investment in *Childcare* in Ireland' (Government of Ireland 2015). While the choice of term partly reflects inclusion of both pre-school and after-school provision, it looks like a step back in time. Compounding the sense that our language has gone full circle, the Department of Education and Skills has – through its recent decision to limit the new 'education-focused inspections' to the free pre-school year – implied again that 'early education' is limited to 3+ year olds (DES 2015). The scope of recent National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) research reports encompassing the age-range 3-8 also sits uneasily with the Aistear definition of early childhood as birth to 6.

The settings

The diversity of terms used to describe early years settings is if anything greater than the range of terms for the field. While schools, whatever their individual character, are immediately recognised as 'schools', pre-school settings may be called crèches, nurseries, pre-schools, day-care centres, playschools, etc., with little clarity on the differences between the terms, and even potentially precise terms such as 'Montessori' in practice used broadly.

In an effort to be inclusive of the diversity of practice, 'service' or 'provision' is often simply attached to one's favoured term for the field, e.g. 'ECCE services' or 'early years provision'. The European network that developed the 40 Quality Targets twenty years ago deliberately advocated a broad approach, recommending the term 'services for young children', arguing that 'attempting to distinguish between "childcare services" and "education services" for children below compulsory school age is neither conceptually valid nor useful in practice' (EC Network 1996).

Dahlberg *et al.* (1999, p.11) criticise 'service' as 'the language of provider and purchaser, giver and taker, producer and consumer', and instead talk of 'early childhood institutions' to capture the notion of 'public forums, plazas or arenas'. Moss (2014) talks of 'early childhood

centres', to help us think of them as places that may bring together a range of different professions and purposes.

However, both 'centre' and 'institution' exclude homes (Dahlberg *et al.* 1999). In contrast, Aistear uses 'setting' to show that the framework applies both in non-parental settings – including schools –and in homes (NCCA 2009). The value of 'setting' lies in its breadth, which matters given the large impact of the 'home learning environment' on early education outcomes (Melhuish 2010) and – in Ireland at least – the prevalence of child-minders' homes as a setting for ECEC.

Those working in the field
In spite of extensive work on occupational profiles in the Model Framework (DJELR 2002), the *Workforce Development Plan* did not fix on a term for those working in the field, referring loosely to 'the ECCE workforce', perhaps reflecting the exclusion of issues around status and the terms and conditions of employment from the scope of the plan (DES 2010, p.2).

Moloney's interviews with ECCE staff in Ireland found 20 different terms in use, indicating the level of 'uncertainty, ambiguity and change that permeates the sector', with interviewees agreeing on one thing: that those working in ECCE 'are definitely not teachers' (Moloney 2010, p.176).

The word 'teacher' often provides a clear demarcation between schools and pre-school settings (Woodrow 2008). It is also often linked to specific qualifications, with the term applied in Ireland to qualified teachers in Early Start settings even though they are providing for children of pre-school age (DES 2014), while the term is not applied to graduates in other pre-school settings that happen to be on school premises, nor to Special Needs Assistants in schools. In contrast with 'teacher', 'childcare worker' and 'crèche worker' suggest a limited role and low status. Such terms reflect social expectations of those working in the field, but do not reflect their aspirations.

Given the link between 'teaching' and workers' pay and conditions (Macfarlane and Lewis 2004), some pre-school educators have sought to apply the word 'teacher' to themselves as a political tool to raise their status. In New Zealand, 'kindergarten teachers' succeeded in their

campaign for pay parity with school teachers (Dalli and Te One, 2003). In England too, the term 'teacher' is now officially available to some early years workers, though only those with qualifications comparable to school teachers (Department for Education 2013), thus retaining a hierarchy of terms.

Several terms reflect the desire for recognition as a profession. In Ireland, the ACP has adopted the term 'childhood professional', which can encompass a wide range of settings and ages. However, Moss (2006) critiques the concept of the 'professional' as a 'technician' and at odds with a conception of the early childhood worker as a 'researcher'.

The term 'practitioner' is frequently used, perhaps because it too suggests professionalism while being open to all those working in pre-school settings, not just graduates. The term was used in the 2002 Model Framework, which sets out occupational profiles from 'basic practitioner' through to 'expert practitioner' (DJELR 2002). Similarly, Aistear defines practitioner as 'all those working in a specialised manner with children in all early childhood settings' [except parents] (NCCA 2009, p.6). Internationally, the Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education (CoRe) report uses the term 'practitioner', with the same broad scope (Urban *et al.* 2011, p.26). In some ways, however, it is an odd choice of term as it is not generally used in education or care contexts, and is more associated with medicine.

Others have called for language that is clearly educational (Adams 2008), such as 'educator', which suggests common ground with schools without the expectations that 'teacher' creates. In Australia, 'educator' is now the standard term in early childhood services (Commonwealth of Australia 2009). However, Ortlipp *et al.* (2011) caution against an educational discourse, arguing that while it may help raise workers' status, it risks 'deprofessionalising' them by bringing with it pre-defined learning outcomes, indicators and 'components'.

In Ireland, 'educator' may have a broader resonance as the Constitution puts parents too in the role of 'educators': 'The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family' (Article 42.1). So the term opens up the prospect of 'early educational alignment' between not just schools and pre-school settings but also families. However, sometimes we need a term to distinguish workers in non-family settings. And parents are not only educators; they are sometimes the object of education, as in two-generation approaches such as family literacy projects.

A criticism of both 'teacher' and 'educator' is their limited scope – they may not capture the integration of care and education. Petrie (2005) calls for the central and northern European term 'pedagogue' to be a unifying term that draws together all childhood professionals. However, the OECD (2006) argues that 'pedagogy' is generally understood differently in English, where it may be understood to mean 'teaching method', as distinct from Petrie's holistic understanding.

Conclusion

Terminology matters, both for clarity and because of connotations and discourses in which terms are embedded. Terminology can be political, bound up with debates of wider importance. However, getting the words right is no guarantee of policy success, and debate on language risks distracting us from the 'real' issues at stake. Furthermore, some of the language debates are intractable, with institutional interests embedded in different terms. Nevertheless, choice of terms may be especially important when discussing 'early educational alignment', as we are questioning the boundaries we sometimes take for granted between children, fields, settings and groups of workers.

Questions for discussion:

- Does it really matter? What has been the actual impact – at a policy level and in perceptions among educators and parents – of different terms used in Ireland that relate to early education? How might we measure or assess the impact?

- Are things different here? Why has terminology in Ireland diverged from terminology in other countries, and what (if any) have been the consequences?

- Are we all speaking the same language? How far is there convergence and divergence in the use of terms (and the meaning of terms) between those on either side of the school/pre-school divide?

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