



Sligo School Project Symposium

Concepts of Child-Centredness revisited: **Images - Institutions - Impacts**

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at Sligo School Project
Abbeyquarter
Sligo

Organised by the Patron Body of Sligo School Project

Platform for Discussion

Child-centredness is one of those concepts that is easily put on a pedestal and in doing so it is no longer questionable. Such is the potential effect of, e.g. putting it into a list of "ethical principles" as in the Educate Together Charter, and also in the Memorandum of Sligo School Project CLG.

That child-centredness was listed as one of the guiding ethical principles for the evolving multi-denominational schools in Ireland has to be seen in a historical (space-time) context. It was a line of demarcation against approaches in education that did not consider children as fully valid persons. Rather they might have been seen as empty and yet-to-be-filled containers, or as creatures born in sin and in need to be straightened up to become truly human. For reasons of simplification, let us call these views "old fashioned", or "traditional approaches."

No doubt, there are still people "out there" who would uphold such views. But the reality in Ireland 2023 is also that in teacher education, in early childcare, and in the wider social debate about education, child-centredness is a well established guiding principle. You will hardly find a teacher, SNA, principal, social worker, early childcare practitioner who would openly argue against child-centredness.¹ In this regard, referring to the "old fashioned, traditional approaches" means hunting shadows that we in the first instance put up for exactly this reason: a convenient self-affirmation in our commitment to child-centredness.

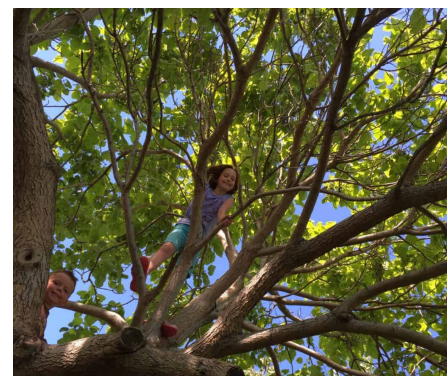
On the other hand, when it comes to practices in families, early childcare, schools, youth clubs, sports clubs, summer camps we observe remarkable differences. That makes the picture quite puzzling. If everyone, or at least the vast majority of people in the education sector, subscribes to the principle of child-centredness - and yet the practices differ remarkably ... how come? Is there something wrong with the concept of child-centredness? Is it probably just a void that can be filled with whatever you like?

¹ Not to 'be child-centred' in fact stands in direct contrast to the perspective that dominates current childcare policies, see e.g. https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Context_of_Early_Childhood_Education_and_Care_in_Ireland.pdf

At our Symposium last year we heard about the concept of child-led learning (as opposed to child-centred). Also the term child-friendly came up in relation to the creation of a desirable environment in families or schools, and the term child-driven in relation to learning efforts. We often use these terms, and rarely think about their exact meaning. They are all compound words: "child dash something." If we try to examine them for their actual content, meaning, and the effects of their use, there is an element of disturbance, we easily find ourselves in quicksand territory.

We may catch ourselves in employing images of children/childhood that are overly naive, or unconsciously gendered, or biased by assumptions about class or race, assumptions that we may be fast to dismiss if we critically reflect about it. But at the same time these pictures are in our heads/minds. They pour into our talking about children, education, schools.

Take for example some typical pictures that could be used in a presentation on contemporary concepts of child-centredness, here depicting children minding a camp fire, climbing trees, hitting nails into a stub of a tree; all pictures taken in a forestry or nature environment. These children are visibly young, early primary school years²:



In our discussion at last year's Symposium there was a near unanimous agreement that children in pictures like these are not working class children. Why do we perceive it that way? And why can exactly these pictures be used to try and ignite discussion about concepts of childhood, and clearly in favour of a concept of the agentic child?

Such "children in nature" are quickly bring up in us a great sense of approval. And in our self-affirming conversation we easily come to an agreement of what the "real child" is like, or should be like. And, clearly, this "real child" is not a 16 years old punk in plateau-shoes or high heels with a fag in their mouth hanging out in front of a large complex of flats in Belfast, London, Dublin or Tubbercurry³ - although the UN-convention of childrens' rights defines child as any person under 18. It is neither the 55 years old son or daughter visiting their parents who are in their 80s and are taken care of in a nursing home - although the parents greet them with a happy: "Hello, dear child!"

² Thanks to Leah for the images.

³ O.k., there may be no flat complexes in Tubbercurry, but there may still be 16 year old punks.

Don't get this wrong. Sure, we do like forests and nature. That is not the point. What is questionable is the image of "child" that is engrained in our thinking and that is automatically connected to judgements and evaluations. And this image may in fact be not only one image. There may be a number of them, probably even contradictory or mutually exclusive ones. But as thought material we activate them in discussions about practice. Consequently they influence our decisions to *practically act in exactly this* (and not another) manner. And clearly in any one situation we can only act in one way, even if this acting is based on a rotten compromise or a complete mix-up of contradictory pictures.

Then, as compound words they all rely on two parts: child-centred, child-led, child-friendly, child-driven. They share the first part, the child. They differ in the second one. Taken as nouns (child-centredness, child-ledness, child-friendliness, child-drivenness⁴) they can pass as ethical principles. Thus they can be used by educational institutions to define their ethos. However, they are much more common as adjectives depicting a characteristic feature of something, like above: child-centred *approach*, child-led *learning*, child-friendly *environment*, child-driven *curriculum* etc. This makes the task of critically engaging with concepts like child-centredness and our understanding of it even more interesting. Such an engagement entails questioning both parts of the compound terms.

For the first part, the "child", e.g.: What are the elements contained in our own respective construction of "child"? What is their historical embeddedness? What are the images that are shaped in our heads? What is the connection and interplay between ideas of "child" and social factors like class, gender, race, ethnicity?⁵

It also entails questioning the alternatives for this first part, and looking at the rationale behind them. Take for example subject-centred instead of child-centred approach, peer-led instead of child-led learning, work-friendly instead of child-friendly environment, profit-driven instead of child-driven curriculum. Here the "child" is deliberately replaced by terms that are not taking the bait of contrasting "child" to "adult." Albeit that "child" and "adult" are categories worth contrasting, particularly as they depend on each other, and in their prevalence in our minds they are powerful constructs, hence worth questioning. But relying on the obvious replacement only re-affirms the construction of "child" as the other to "adult" and by doing so it freezes our thinking into a constant loop from which it is difficult to escape.

As for the second part of the compound terms, if we take the idea of child-centredness, which was our starting point, another direction for questioning is the spatial analogy that is contained in the word. If there is something that takes a central position it necessarily presupposes something else that surrounds it as a periphery. As an adjective "child-centred" on its own makes no sense. To become meaningful it requires a point of reference, a something that is labelled to be child-centred. But here, there are different issues at stake. A "child-centred curriculum" is not the same as a "child-centred approach to education", or "child-centred practice", or a "child-centred school", or "child-centred pedagogy."

In the case of the Educate Together Charter, the reference point is the "child-centred approach to education." As we are talking in the last instance about daily practices, namely the real life happening on the ground in a given school, we have to look at the institutionalised framework in which education is transferred into practice. And straight away there is another trap looming.

4 Some of them may sound strange; we don't normally use them, but grammatically they are built correctly.

5 These are the ones most prevalent in contemporary discussions, there are other factors like space, nationality or language, science, moral.

Summarising all that happens in schools under the all-embracing term of "education" blurs more than it clarifies. Schools themselves, and their virulent spread across the globe over the last 150 years, are both an element in the practical construction of childhood as well as a consequence of the spread of ideas about childhood and their relation to society as a whole. In 2023 Western Europe, schools have acquired⁶ a number of functions:

- Qualification (i.e. acquisition of certain skills, knowledge)
- Socialisation (i.e. for children/youths to learn how to be part of group/s, society, incl. appropriating certain roles/identities)
- Allocation (i.e. creating a workforce differentiated on the basis of school certificates, grading)
- Legitimation (i.e. advocating the legitimacy of the political order and power structures of the respective societal organisation, mainly the state; in Ireland also the church)
- Enculturation (i.e. training children and youths in certain cultural traditions, customs, habits)
- Custodial services (i.e. looking after children to free parents, e.g. for the labour market)⁷

Obviously all of these functions could also be exerted in other formations, institutions, organisational entities and models than school. The historical development that led to schools being assigned these functions in and for society did not follow a blueprint or a master-plan designed by some genius or a think-tank in the late 19th century. It followed a societal dynamic that is influenced by an interplay between economic, technological and political developments, and changes in patterns of family and community life.

The net effect for a school today is that it faces the above mentioned requirements. They are not necessarily all voiced by the same people at the same time. Quite the opposite, there are contradictions even between the possible interpretations of the various functions and their relative importance in the whole mix. Hence in any given environment some gain a more central, others a more peripheral status.

The Sudbury model for example pushes the idea of allocation (grading) to the periphery. Grading does not feature in their practice, at least for the entire period of the school attendance; albeit that students in Sudbury schools (or other Free Schools, Democratic Schools) are supported at the end of their school career if they want to sit a leaving cert or equivalent. Equally, there are differences in attitudes towards grading between mainstream schools in Ireland and for example France or England. And there are also remarkable differences between the primary and the secondary school sector in Ireland itself. Plus, in each individual school the balances of central and peripheral aspects can be shifted in quite different directions. In some schools the focus lies almost entirely on skills development and knowledge conveyance (qualification), while aspects of socialisation are not considered essential. In some the ideas of conveying traditions, habits, namely the aspect of enculturation becomes more central, while in others this is given little attention at all. And so on ...

Should we thus define the relative proportions between these functions and their mix in a prescribed way to determine what it means to follow a "child-centred approach"? Mind you, this is after we have clarified, what we mean by "child", and which of the various pictures, or blend of pictures we

6 This formulation is a simplification. The process is not only acquisition, it also includes assigning such functions to schools, even by times against the declared will of teachers, principals or local management.

7 Taking into account different standpoints or perspectives to look at the practice of schooling can lead to even more differentiated descriptions of the functions of school.

accept as "ours". And if we were to do that, would it be enough to determine a solid conceptual basis for our practice?

It is important to remember that all our scrutinising at the end of the day has a *material* purpose and needs to be anchored in reference the actual *doing* of school, the everyday *practice* in the lived reality of those who meet in these peculiar spaces. But this "doing" is not done by a "school" as an abstract entity; it is done by real flesh, people who move around, speak, gesticulate, look at each other, listen, lift things, carry them around, run away, shout, write on a board, point to things, switch PCs on or off, open and close doors, sit on toilets, eat, drink, hit each other, read books or not, kick footballs, jump over fences etc. All these "doings" in their entire interactive character are the real stuff that we eventually want to judge along lines of a supposed "child-centred approach to education."

But schools are neither founded, nor maintained by children. In all cases they are founded by adults, and their organisational permanency depends on adults. And in the concrete practice/s that are enacted in the schools, adults are central figures. Regardless of conceptual statements, the real life situation in the institutionalised context affords the teacher a central position in everyday institutional life.

Hence, to speak of a "child-centred approach" could be read as somehow paradox, because it puts the teachers in the position of being responsible for the implementation and practical realisation of a child-centred approach and thus only affirms *their* central role in the school - regardless of whatever the ethical principles may proclaim.

If all this seems to be a far stretch away from the initial questioning of the concept of child-centredness: It is not! The practice in schools can only be understood against the background of historical embeddedness, institutional constraints, political demands, ethical proclamations and pedagogical ideologies - all of which have impacts on policy documents, statements of colleagues, parents, school inspectors, and most of all the actions of the different parties involved in everyday life in schools. In social science this whole chatter is often called "discourse" and it even includes the 9 o'clock news headlines about the latest case of bullying in a North Tipperary secondary school, or the latest PISA-tables published in the national newspapers. A concept like child-centredness needs continuous re-interpretation against this background.

From the perspective of Sligo School Project, most obviously we are the school that has found the philosopher's stone when it comes to child-centredness (irony intended). No, in fact, we are quite happy to keep all channels open for further discussion of the conceptual ideas and particularly potential blind spots when it comes to child-centredness.

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