



An Lárionad um Fhorbairt
agus Oideachais na Luath-Óige

Quality Counts

Article written by Jacqueline Fallon, Development Officer, CECDE

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INTRODUCTION

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) is an initiative of the Department of Education and Science and has been in operation since October 2002. It is managed jointly by St. Patrick's College of Education and the Dublin Institute of Technology. The CECDE is the forerunner of the Early Childhood Education Agency, as described in the White Paper on Early Education, *Ready to Learn* (Department of Education and Science, 1999).

While the CECDE has a brief to consider the development and educational needs of all children in Ireland within the ages of 0-6, children at risk of educational disadvantage and children with special needs are a priority concern; "... *the diverse needs of disadvantaged children and children with special needs will form part of the starting point (for the work of the Centre)*" (CECDE, 2001, p. 9).

Further to this '*(t)he Centre will be working towards a co-ordinated strategy for provision for disadvantaged children and children with special needs which has links between the early years sector and schools and between providers, communities and specialist units within government departments and other State agencies.*' (Ibid, p.14). The work of the CECDE will cover both the voluntary/community sector and the infant classes in primary schools, as well as all other settings where young children are cared for and educated. It will, of course, also take account of the special place of the home in each child's life.

In the course of this article, I will look at some issues to do with early intervention in educational disadvantage, at the appropriate context in which intervention should take place, and finally, at the substantial issue of quality provision and how the CECDE is moving forward towards the development of quality standards.

Early Intervention

Education and early intervention structures are important mechanisms in combating poverty and social exclusion.

'While employment is the most effective route out of poverty, education is one of the most important factors in determining employment status, and therefore the education system has a key role in combating poverty.' (Nolan and Whelan, 1999, p. xvii)

However, success in the education system is recognised as dependent on a child's experiences in the earliest years of life.

'Educationalists and psychologists agree that it is within the first six years that the foundations of an individual's linguistic, cognitive, social, creative, physical, moral and spiritual development evolve. Deficits in these areas of development can have long term implications for the child, often affecting his or her ability to respond to the challenges provided later in the educational system.' (INTO, 1998, p.1)

Educational disadvantage has a fundamental impact on a person's life and is itself part of a web of effects experienced by those in situations of social exclusion. If we are to look at the role of education and early years intervention, we need to understand the many and complex issues relating to educational disadvantage in Ireland.

Early intervention, meaning interventions in the early years of a child's life intended to alleviate educational disadvantage, is still underdeveloped in Ireland, and the promotion of debate and consultation is vital to the development of a cohesive, effective system. The trajectory of progress must be clear and all involved must be able to endorse it. This is too important to risk continuing fragmentation and piecemeal development.

Common understandings will be necessary to underpin development and co-ordination. As a starting point for that understanding, and in recognition of the fact that our brief is in pursuance of the objectives of the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, we look to the definition of educational disadvantage therein.

“(T)he impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools.” (Department of Education and Science, 1999, p. 97)

This definition distils the knowledge and understanding which has been developed over time into a concise form which could provide that common understanding for all those who are involved in addressing educational disadvantage. The CECDE's concern is to ensure that each and every child, regardless of circumstance, has the opportunity and support necessary to realise her/his potential.

In expanding the understandings which underpin the White Paper, the CECDE also recognises that disadvantage is ‘... *a complex phenomenon resulting from the interaction of factors that are usually construed as economic, social, cultural and educational*’ (Kellaghan *et al*, 1995, p. 17). In addition, the sheer number of risk factors – poverty, disadvantaged area, family structure, ethnic origin, parental education levels – associated with a family's experience will have an effect on the child's future. ‘*An intriguing ... finding ... is that the mere number of risks ... determines negative developmental outcomes*’ (Leseman, 2002, p. 13). Not only that but ‘*(d)ifferent sources of risk may interact to have very destructive effects on children's prospects...*’ (Blakeslee, 1997, p.2). Research, then, paints a picture of a web of effects which families and children have to negotiate in their daily lives.

It is also fair to say that the voices of parents experiencing disadvantage are not currently heard to any degree and the Centre is committed to redressing this situation.

‘Reaching out to support the involvement of parents and guardians in families experiencing the most extreme forms of disadvantage will also be a priority in the proposals developed by the Centre.’ (CECDE, 2001, p. 13)

To this end we propose conducting research into possible model structures for involving parents of children experiencing disadvantage in consultative processes (CECDE, 2003a). Structures to facilitate all parents being involved are most important given the Centre's stated position that ‘*(c)onsultation with stakeholders will be a crucial part of the process of developing quality standards.*’ (Ibid, p. 10).

Children/Parents/Families

In recent years, research into brain development in young children has confirmed something that early years practitioners have known for a long time – the earliest years of a child's life are the most crucial. The interaction between a child and her/his

environment, even from before birth, provides the foundation on which all future development builds. (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000).

Each child's growth and development is dependent on the nature and quality of her/his interactions with the environment into which s/he is born. For the newborn and very young child, that environment is mediated by her/his parents; '*... infancy is a unique time of helplessness when nearly all of children's experience is mediated by adults in one-to-one interaction permeated with affect*' (Hart and Risely, 1995, p. 193). To support children means to support their parents. '*The family generally affords the best environment for raising children and external intervention should be to support and empower families within the community*' (National Children's Strategy, 2000, p.5).

Given the impossible-to-overstate importance of the family context, intergenerational transmission of disadvantage assumes significant importance. Our concern, understandably, is with the child of the moment, rather than with the child of twenty years ago who is now the parent. Evidence suggests though, that in order for intervention to be lasting and effective, it will have to be in place over two to three generations.

'...(I)t is clear that by the time of a woman's first pregnancy important risk factors have already been established, some of which may not be amenable to intervention in a single generation' (Chapman and Scott, 2001, p. 318).

Nor are inter-generational risk factors associated only with mothers' histories; Corcoran (2000) has observed that '*... fathers' economic status accounts for about 25 percent of the economic status of sons in their mid-20s, but about 50 percent of the status of sons in their late 30s. Fathers' income appears to have an equally strong link to the economic status of their adult daughters*' [p. 18].

Parents are the key people in a child's life, and it is entirely reasonable to recognise that a parent's life experience will have effects on her or his child's experience. Recognising this effect is not to apportion blame, is not to stigmatise nor to create inequality between children and their parents. Rather, it is to support the proposition that intervention must be family centred, and that interventions in educational disadvantage with young children must take place in that context.

It is hardly necessary to reiterate the importance and efficacy of early childhood intervention, except to restate the position of the White Paper on Early Childhood Education; '*... (T)he benefits of early childhood education are more significant for children who are disadvantaged*' (Department of Education & Science, 1999, p. 11) and to suggest that intervention in educational disadvantage needs to identify and engage with children and families in a continuous and holistic way. We need to identify each child's needs at birth through local and individual knowledge, provide services to families and children on the basis of the child's right to support, and continue that support for as long as the child needs it.

Quality

Perhaps the biggest issue for the development of early years education for children experiencing disadvantage is that of quality which the CECDE will consider at length and in depth in the course of its work. The *Audit of Research on Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland, 1990-2003* recently published by the CECDE, has shown the dearth of research in the Irish context on this most fundamental of issues.

It is now widely accepted that *'... while disadvantaged children may benefit disproportionately from high quality care, they also appear to suffer disproportionately from exposure to low quality care'* (Currie, 2000, p. 26). Provision is not enough. At the moment, though, much of the funding available in Ireland relates primarily to the provision of places. However, if we refer back to the White Paper (Department of Education & Science, 1999), it is quite unequivocal on this issue;

'... the provision of places is not sufficient, in itself, to achieve developmental/educational goals, which are basic to the alleviation of disadvantage: the State must be concerned with the developmental experiences of the children who fill these places and must ensure that the provision is actually helping in the achievement of the developmental/educational goal' (Department of Education & Science, 1999, p. 65).

Quality provision is the basic minimum requirement for intervention. The development of the Quality Standards Framework for the entire early years sector, and *'... support(ing) providers in relation to compliance with quality standards ...'* (CECDE, 2001, p. 11) will be a core activity for the CECDE. The *CECDE Programme of Work* (2001, p. 3) specified the first action in pursuit of the Quality Standards Framework to be the development of a *'...conceptual framework describing how children (from 0 to 6 years) develop and learn.'* Work on the conceptual framework is ongoing, and will be completed by the end of this year. *'The (conceptual) framework will be used as the basis for developing guidelines and standards in the areas identified in the White Paper (curriculum and methodology, equipment and materials, staff and qualifications) and in relation to parental involvement'* (CECDE, 2001, p. 3).

Consultation with stakeholders in early childhood care and education (ECCE) will be central to the development of the quality standards framework. Consultative seminars have already taken place in six locations nationwide. These provided an opportunity for all stakeholders in the early childhood care and education sector to contribute to the debate on quality. The seminars have provided the CECDE with invaluable information in our work devising quality standards, and the results of the consultation will be available in the near future on the CECDE website, www.cecde.ie.

Quality can be used as something of a catchall concept. It can be reduced to check lists of cleaning activities which are easier to monitor than the *'... more dynamic, intangible aspects of quality such as interaction between adults and children and the developmental appropriateness of activities and expectations'* (Hayes in Department of Education & Science, 1999, p. 53).

While it is important to provide safe and clean environments for children, the point at which the child experiences the intervention being made is at the point of contact with the adult in whatever setting educational provision is made. *'... (T)he most important aspect of childcare quality is the nature of the interaction between the teacher and the child. Small group sizes, better teacher training ... make positive interactions more likely'* (Sawhill, in preface to Currie, 2000). While it is very important to invest in appropriate materials and equipment, the most important type of investment is in the training and development of the personnel delivering the intervention. In the Irish context, the issue which seems to incite the most interest in this regard is that of qualifications and training.

Issues relating to qualifications and training are sometimes thought to be more relevant to personnel working in the community and voluntary sector, but these are live issues across

the entire range of provision for young children. For example, while qualification standards for teachers in the primary sector are well established and standardised nationally, currently, due to a shortage of trained teachers, many persons working in the system are unqualified.

The primary school system is where the State has so far concentrated its investment in interventions in educational disadvantage, (CECDE, forthcoming) and evaluations of these initiatives will provide evidence for developing interventions throughout the sector. Indeed, the Department of Education & Science commitment to the evaluation of programmes is of long standing, going back to the evaluation of the Rutland St. Pre-school Project (Kellaghan, 1977). But we must not continue the pattern of interventions which do not address the need to support changes in methodologies and teacher behaviours.

‘This neglect of concern for the role of teaching is evident in the ways in which we continue to provide intervention programmes which look to schools and teachers to address children’s problems of low achievement and early school leaving but do not acknowledge that changes of emphases in relation to curriculum content, and changes in teaching approaches and methodologies, may be necessary qualities of the intervention’ (McGough, 2002, p. 73).

The CECDE is committed to the use of research evidence in its policy development work as well as its work in relation to provision and practice (CECDE, forthcoming). In the matter of training and qualification there is a growing body of research evidence which indicates that child outcomes are better when caregivers and staff are highly trained (Lowe-Vandell & Wolfe, 2000).

Issues of qualification and training are relevant to all sectors where early interventions happen. All personnel working with young children at risk of educational disadvantage should have access to ongoing training, to opportunities for acquiring appropriate qualifications and to recognition for expertise gained in the field through experience and specialisation.

The general perception of where the early childhood sector ends and begins, which type of provision belongs where, and how different groups identify themselves is at an early stage of development. To date there has been no encouragement of a strong identity for those working with children in the 0-6 age range. For example, junior and senior infant classes belong, in the general perception, to the formal school sector. However, as infant teachers already know, and as the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, 1999 recognises, infant classes are different from older classes. Infant classes provide a transition into formal schooling, but while *‘... children come to school with a variety of educational experience, both from the home and from pre-school education ... (t)here is a need for a continuing process whereby the child’s experience in the infant classes interacts with the developmental experience of home and family’* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1999, p. 10) and, by implication, with pre-school provision.

The lack of communication between school-based providers and, in particular, community providers means that many children in disadvantaged areas or other situations of disadvantage are making the transition into school from community or other playgroups with no communication between the school and the provider.

‘At the level of ECEC-systems design coherence and continuity between simultaneous and successive contexts of development should also be

strengthened. This concerns in particular the transitions between home and ECEC-provisions, the transitions between different successive ECEC-provisions, and the transition of ECEC-provisions to primary school. Discrepancies between the most important contexts of development and learning, and early frequent interruptions may render the developmental and learning process less effective' (Leseman, 2002, p. 40).

Given the lessons outlined by Leseman (2002) we can assume that these discontinuities are not conducive to effective interventions. Happily, there are indications that practitioners, schools and other stakeholders are already moving forward with very practical co-operative measures to improve the conditions of transition for children (CECDE, forthcoming).

If the personnel working with the children in the delivery of educational interventions are the most crucial element of a quality service, then mutual respect among all groups, a recognition of commitment, interest and effort among practitioners in all sectors will be prerequisite in the development of flexible, cohesive and nurturing responses to our most vulnerable children.

CONCLUSION

To recap briefly then, children experience disadvantage in the context of the family. The greater the number of stress factors, the more acute the experience of disadvantage, which is further embedded by intergenerational transmission. Early intervention must take place in partnership with families, in their communities in a consistent, integrated and continuing way. It is the intention of the CECDE that developments will be evidence based and sustainable, and to that end we will be looking closely at what works in effective interventions.

However, outside of the Department of Education and Science provision, we don't know with certainty how targeted provision is meeting the needs of children experiencing or at risk of educational disadvantage. The CECDE is currently completing an audit of provision of services targeting disadvantage and special needs, (CECDE, forthcoming) and this will go some way towards building a picture. Given the importance of research evidence in the development of best practice, the *Audit of Research* (2003b) has shown gaps in our knowledge of what is happening here in Ireland. Evaluations of targeted initiatives certainly comprise one of those gaps. *'The challenge for practitioners here is to document and evaluate this work, and to disseminate indigenous best practice within the professional community here. This is another aspect of co-ordination of services to which the Centre will be paying attention'* (Fallon, 2003).

Education is a powerful mechanism for combating poverty and social exclusion. Education and intervention in the early years is particularly important and effective, especially for children who are marginalised and at risk of educational failure. Quality early education is a prerequisite for achieving equality of outcomes, and we must achieve it. Our children have only one childhood.

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