



**Submission to the
Educational Disadvantage Committee
on the
Traveller Education Strategy
January, 2004**



The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was established in 2002 by the Department of Education and Science (DES) under the joint management of St. Patrick's College and the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). The CECDE is the forerunner of the Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA), and is charged with preparing the groundwork for the ECEA. The production of a Quality Standards Framework for early childhood education in Ireland will be the key output of that work. In all aspects of the work of the CECDE, the issues of equality and inequality are core concerns (CECDE, 2001). It is with these considerations in mind – quality, equality and inequality – that the CECDE makes this submission towards the development of the Traveller Education Strategy from the perspective of the fundamental importance of early years education.

Educational disadvantage has been described as '*... a complex phenomenon resulting from the interaction of factors that are usually construed as economic, social, cultural and educational.*' (Kellaghan et al, 1995:17) This conceptualisation is particularly appropriate in the case of Traveller children. The sheer number of stress factors emanating from socio-economic, cultural and educational conditions, and the interaction of those stress factors can have detrimental effects on a child's prospects (Leseman, 2002; Blakeslee, 1997). For the first few years of a child's life, her/his experience is mediated, for the most part, by her/his parents (Hart and Risely, 1995). 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 or 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. This approach is entirely consistent with the National Children's Strategy (Department of Health and Children, 2000) and with the principles underpinning, for example, the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL).

Given the history of provision of education for Traveller children, it would not be at all surprising to find a legacy of negative attitudes towards education among the Traveller community today. Between the 1960s and the 1980s '*(e)ducation was viewed as a tool of settlement or to put it starkly – as a way of taking the Traveller out of the Traveller child. However, partly because of hostility from parents and teachers from the majority population, provision tended to be characterised by segregation.*' (Pavee Point, n.d.) Consequently, parents in the Traveller community who may have come through this system may well have poor memories from that time. In that context it is heartening to see that in the school year 1999 – 2000, five hundred and thirty pupils were in attendance at Traveller Pre-schools, indicating a level of continued support for education among the Traveller community. Both the Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community (DELR, 1995) and the National Evaluation Report on the

Pre-Schools for Travellers (DES, 2003) note the important and beneficial role of the Pre-schools among the Traveller community.

What must be stressed is the crucial role of interventions in the earliest years of a child's life to contend with conditions of disadvantage. The interaction between a child and her/his environment, even from before birth, provides the foundation on which all future development builds (Shonkoff & Philips, 2000). However '(w)e recognize now that by the time children are 4 years old, intervention programs come too late and can provide too little experience to make up for the past ...' (Hart and Risely, 1995:2). It is also most important to note, given the reference in the Traveller Education Strategy Scope and Terms of Reference document to the importance of ensuring the cost-effectiveness of the educational service to Travellers, that the most cost-effective interventions are those with pre-school children. (Barnett, 2000; Reynolds et al., 2002; Cleveland, G & Krashinsky, M.)

'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)

It is, therefore, a cause of dismay that the list of priorities suggested by the Advisory Committee on Traveller Education (ACTE) in point 10 of the Proposed Approach and Terms of Reference does not include any specific reference to early childhood education. Nor is there any mention of the transition from pre-school provision – be it home or out-of-home setting – to the Primary school. Leseman (2002) has pointed to the disruptive effects of poor transitions at this early stage in a child's development, and it could be argued that this transition is of more fundamental importance than transfers at a later stage, such as that from Primary to Post-primary. The CECDE, having been charged with the co-ordination and development of early childhood education in Ireland by the DES, believes that provision for Traveller children prior to their entry to the Primary school system must be included for priority consideration. Not to do so will constitute a major disadvantage for Traveller children.

In terms of curricular change, the CECDE advocates the introduction of an anti-bias curriculum. An anti-bias curriculum transcends the capacity of an intercultural curriculum to incorporate cultural issues and broadens the remit to the areas of class, language, religion, gender, disability, etc. (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Corson, 1998). The underlying intent of an anti-bias approach is to foster the development of children and adults to become critical thinkers and be active in building a more caring, just and diverse community and society for all. This is focused at both the majority and minority communities. For the majority, it involves the acquisition of skills to live in a multicultural society and to respect

diversity. The aim for minority groups is to assist integration, while in tandem, promoting and advancing their ethnic identity and cultural values. To implement such a curriculum requires an investment from practitioners to adapt their current approaches and allow diversity to permeate all facets of the curriculum. It also requires investment in the practitioners.

A strategy for the implementation of an anti-bias curriculum in the Irish context has been proposed by Murray and O'Doherty (2001) and this can be adapted to meet the needs of individual contexts and institutions. They divide the implementation process in two, with one area focused on the Training Institutions and Organisations while the second considers the context for Early Years Settings, Organisation and Services. For further detail, please refer to Murray and O'Doherty (2001)

Central to the implementation of any curricular change is the capacity of the staff working with the children. Training and support will be necessary. In that context, the CECDE has begun the process of establishing a research project based on the recommendations of the National Evaluation of the Traveller Pre-schools (DES, 2003) which found a significant need for in-service training among both the teachers and members of the management committees. In direct response to these recommendations, the purpose of this project is to develop and implement an in-career development programme for the teachers and members of the management committees of Traveller Pre-Schools. One of the proposed outputs of the research project is an accredited training package tailored to meet the needs of staff working with children who are disadvantaged in the early years. One of the objectives of the project is to develop practice (e.g. curriculum and pedagogy) in Traveller pre-schools, and consideration of the needs of anti-bias practice will be part of that development.

The Task force on the Travelling Community (DELR, 1995) recommended that the DES should take over the responsibility for comprehensive Pre-school provision for Traveller children. Since that recommendation was made, the DES has developed the Early Start model, and there is now a structure in which provision could be made by the DES for Traveller children. The Traveller Education Strategy must consider this option in mapping '*... out the way forward in relation to Traveller education, taking account of the complexity of the issues involved, the history of provision and existing measures.*' (Traveller Education Strategy, Scope and Terms of Reference, 17/10/03)

In conclusion, the Traveller Education Strategy must give close consideration to the needs of Traveller children in the birth to six years age group, and not just those in that age range who are in Primary school, if it is to truly concern itself with life-long learning. The Strategy must propose ways in which those needs can be met, including the need for smooth transitions into school and follow-through intervention to capitalise on any early gains. Curricular change must be on the basis of an anti-bias curriculum which is focused on all children and not just at Traveller children. The Centre for Early Childhood Development and

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Education, as a relevant agency (See point 9, Terms of Reference) must be involved in the consultation process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **In developing the Traveller Education Strategy, priority consideration must be given to provision for Traveller children prior to their entry to the Primary school system to fully reflect the principles of lifelong learning.**
- **The crucial role of interventions in the earliest years of a child's life to contend with conditions of disadvantage must be incorporated in the Traveller Education Strategy.**
- **Early interventions must take place in the context of the family and be family-centred.**
- **The Traveller Education Strategy must consider the importance of smooth transition from pre-school (home or out-of-home settings) into Primary school.**
- **Follow-through supports must be available to Traveller children in the Junior classes in Primary school to capitalise on gains from early intervention.**
- **Curricular change must be on the basis of an anti-bias curriculum which is focused on all children and not just Traveller children.**
- **The training needs of those involved in the education of Traveller children, particularly those involved in early years education, must be met.**
- **The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, as the relevant agency for the early years sector, must be involved in the consultation process.**

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