



An Lárionad um Fhorbairt  
agus Oideachais na Luath-Óige

**Submission to the Office for Social Inclusion,  
Department of Social and Family Affairs, May 2003**



## INTRODUCTION

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE] is an initiative of the Department of Education and Science and has been established 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. [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.

Education and early intervention 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]

Educational disadvantage has fundamental effects in 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. This submission considers just three aspects;

- ✚ Early identification and support.
- ✚ Investment in personnel.
- ✚ Promotion of common cause across the entire early years sector.

Early intervention<sup>1</sup> is still at a very early stage 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.

## **EARLY IDENTIFICATION AND SUPPORT**

### **Disadvantage**

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]. The sheer number of risk factors associated with a family's experience will have an effect on the child's future. Not only that but '*[d]ifferent sources of risk may interact to have very destructive effects on children's prospects...*' [Blakeslee, 1997, p. 2].

### **Early Years**

In recent years research into brain development in young children has confirmed something that early years practitioners have known for a long time – that 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

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<sup>1</sup> In the context of this submission, early intervention means interventions in the early years of a child's life intended to alleviate educational disadvantage.

development builds. [See, for example 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].

Parents, especially those experiencing a range of stress factors, need consistent support and outreach. Every child born should, as a right, have the support and care s/he needs to ensure s/he is nurtured, loved and kept safe. These earliest experiences are – just as the opposite is the case – the foundation for secure, healthy children.

Stressed family settings, as Leseman has described [Leseman, 2002. See also Waldfogel, 2000.], will not provide young children with the type of experiences which will be of optimum benefit, citing '*... abundant evidence for a strong causal relationship between stressed family environments in early childhood and poor mental and physical health of the offspring later in life*' [Leseman, 2002, p. 13]. This being the case, the earlier children at risk are identified, the better.

### **Timing of intervention**

For the most part we think of early intervention in educational disadvantage as beginning around age three with pre-school services. But '*Zigler, talking about Head Start, has succinctly expressed the problem: 'We simply cannot inoculate children in one year against the ravages of a life of deprivation*' [Reynolds et al, 1997, p.16] – a fact of which practitioners are very well aware.

In fact supports and intervention should begin at birth, if not before. There is evidence to support the efficacy of intervention that begins even before birth. A study of the Elmira home visitation experiment found that '*... the investment in the family, from the perspective of government spending alone, was recovered for families of low socio-*

*economic status before the children were four years old* [Olds et al, 1997, p.48]. The Memphis home visitation program which set out to replicate the Elmira project found that *[t]he effects of home visits were greater for children born to women who had been identified as having few psychological resources – an assessment based upon measures of intelligence, mental health, and ... self-efficacy ... the ability to cope effectively with a wide range of challenges and stresses ...* [Ibid. p. 49].

While there is further evidence also from Europe [Hanrahan-Cahuzak, 2002], Ireland has its own model of a home visiting programme, the Community Mothers Programme [CMP]. The CMP has been evaluated [Molloy, 2002], and while concerns have been expressed about the reliability and validity of the evaluation [Hanrahan-Cahuzak, p. 49], the results are promising. For example, while the scheme supports families on the birth of the first child, the beneficial effects have been shown to persist to the advantage of subsequent children [Molloy, 2002, p.44]

If we needed further justification for offering supports even before birth, it is to be found in the evidence for the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. It is suggested that, in order for intervention to be lasting and effective, it will have to be in place over two to three generations to, literally, break the cycle. “... [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. See also Corcoran, 2000]. To alleviate disadvantage in the next generation of children, we have to support their parents and grandparents in their lives as children. “In order to fully address the issue of childhood disadvantage, a broadening of the time frame of intervention to include women’s health status prior to conceptions is needed” [Chapman and Scott, 2001, p.305].




One of the great strengths of early home visitation is that it supports the family, in particular the mother, in developing the skills and environment which will best provide the child with the kind of interactions we know will stimulate optimum development. The Community Mothers, for example, are, by definition, part of the same communities as the families and children with whom they work. With the support of the Public Health and Family Development Nurses they are in an excellent position to assess need through non-intrusive observation.

## **Early Identification**

In order to be able to intervene early and effectively, identification is the crucial issue. Support cannot be offered unless the need is identified, and we cannot be satisfied at the moment that our ability to identify children at risk of educational disadvantage is effective. Kellaghan has outlined the difficulties which arose with the Breaking the Cycle rural scheme. Based on the assumption that the children for whom the intervention was intended ‘... *attended small schools ...*’ [Kellaghan, 2002, p. 25] the scheme was limited to small schools. It was discovered in the course of the evaluation that the intended targets of the intervention were, in fact, attending larger schools in small towns.

We cannot afford to let children down in this way. We each have only one childhood. The National Children’s Strategy Engine for Change proposes a model ‘... *to empower people at local level who are directly involved with the delivery of services to children.*

*The key elements in the framework are:*

-  *Managing the change through new national level structures*
-  *Delivering the change through improved local structures*
-  *Promoting the development of human resources’*

[National Children’s Strategy, 2000, p. 26]

We now have plenty of new national level structures, and many models of local level structures. [For e.g. see Cullen, 2000a, 2000b, 1997. Integrated Services Initiative, 1997. Molloy, 2002.] Surely the time is now right for the type of ‘... *integrated needs analysis ...*’ [National Children’s Strategy, 2000, p. 5] the National Children’s Strategy cites in one of its operational principles?

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*’. [Government of Ireland, 1999, p. 11] and to suggest that intervention in educational disadvantage needs to identify and engage with children and families from birth. We need to identify 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**

### **Components of quality provision**

However it is also true to say 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 relates primarily to the provision of places;

*'... 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.'* [Government of Ireland, 1999, p, 65].

Quality provision is the basic minimum requirement for intervention. The development of quality standards 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.

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 Government of Ireland, 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.

### **Qualification and Training**

Issues relating to qualification 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 initiatives within the Primary Sector are technically staffed by teachers with appropriate qualifications, currently many persons working in the system are untrained.

Further, in the In-service provided to facilitate the introduction of the Revised Curriculum, there was no dedicated provision for Junior Classes. The White Paper states ‘...[T]he skills required for teaching infants are not the same as general teaching skills in all respects’ [Government of Ireland, 1999, p. 30]. However, current in-service provision does not address the particular needs of teachers working with the Junior Classes. Neither is there any dedicated in-service to address the needs of teachers working with children experiencing educational disadvantage. In-service for Early Start personnel is infrequent and sporadic. ‘[Early Start] in-career support has continued on a piecemeal basis and in my view has been inadequate to the needs of the programme’ [McGough, 2002, p. 80].

The Primary school system is where the State has so far concentrated its investment in interventions in educational disadvantage, and the approaches taken through these interventions will possibly be the models for developing interventions throughout the sector. 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’ [Ibid, p. 73].*

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 experience gained in the field through experience and specialisation.

## **Diversity and consistency**

The early years sector in Ireland has developed in the absence of a national vision of what provision for our youngest children should resemble. In particular, provision for children experiencing or at risk of educational disadvantage prior to entering Primary school, has been very poor. The State's involvement was limited to the Rutland Street Project, until the inception of the Early Start Pre-school Project, which is still in pilot phase. Funding is also now available for childcare places for disadvantaged children under the EOCP.

Because there has been no unifying principle guiding the development of the early years sector we now have a wide range of types of provision, but, perhaps paradoxically, this is one of our great strengths. The diversity of our provision has come about in response to the needs of various sectors, and is to be encouraged.

Diversity needs to be supported by common high standards and quality, and it is in this context that the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education will provide a Quality Framework, at the same time as the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA] is developing its Framework for Early Childhood Learning.

Providers in the private, community and school based sectors have shown their commitment over the years to providing the best for the children in their care, and will undoubtedly continue to do so within the curricular and quality frameworks.

## **Further steps**

However our commitment to cohesion must go further than this, in particular in terms of early and continuing interventions in educational disadvantage. There are two points to be made here.

✚ Firstly, services must be made available to children in need in a cohesive and continuous fashion based on early identification of needs as discussed in Section 1.

✚ Secondly, communication and mutual respect and understanding must be fostered and achieved among the many different providers in the myriad of settings in which early education takes place. This includes, of course, in the home with parents.

So all those involved in the provision of services, in particular early educational interventions, should have a sense of common cause as part of seamless provision to meet a child's needs.

*“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 processes less effective” [Leseman, 2002, p.40].*

Currently there are many issues that inhibit the development of a cohesive approach to the provision of early educational interventions.

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. Given the lessons outlined

by Leseman [2002] we can assume that these discontinuities are not conducive to effective interventions.

Interventions occur in many settings outside the school system in terms of pre-school provision. Early Start caters for a small number of children in a relatively small number of disadvantaged areas. There is no school based pre-school provision for the majority of children at risk of educational disadvantage, and community playgroups are local responses to the needs of the community's children. Any measures to support early intervention must take account of this fact, and supports must be offered not only to school-based interventions but also to all those who provide services to meet the needs of children.

This will include supporting the training and qualification needs of the sector. It will also include the provision of resources to support developments under the quality and curriculum frameworks.

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.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The CECDE recommends the following.

- ✚ Further research into early identification and intervention for all children in need in Ireland, from birth.
- ✚ The National Action Plan should give dedicated attention to early childhood development and education.
- ✚ The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education is responsible for coordinating educational intervention to address the needs of disadvantaged children from birth to 6 years. The CECDE is very well placed to offer support and insight to those charged with addressing issues of social inclusion as it affects children. We

recommend that the Office for Social Inclusion consult with the CECDE as it moves forward with the National Action Plan.

## **CONCLUSION**

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 marginalized and at risk of educational failure. Early education is a prerequisite for achieving equality of outcomes. It is vital to consider the role of early years educational interventions in the National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion, and to plan for targeted resources and investment. Children have only one childhood.

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