

The Revised Audit of Research on Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland, 1990-2006

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Introduction

To fulfil many of the objectives within the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn* (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1999), the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was established to develop and enhance early childhood care and education (ECCE) provision in Ireland. More specifically, the CECDE has three core functions, namely:

- To develop a national quality framework for early childhood education;
- To develop targeted interventions on a pilot basis for children who are educationally disadvantaged and children with special needs;
- To advise the Minister for Education and Science on all aspects of early childhood education (CECDE, 2001).

This paper introduces the Revised Audit of Research on ECCE in Ireland, which spans the entire period 1990 to 2006. This project is warranted owing to the efflorescence of research within ECCE in Ireland in recent years, displaying the vibrancy of the developing and evolving early years sector. It is envisaged that the insights gained from the Revised Audit of Research will also inform research developments within the wider ECCE sector to ensure that policy and practice in the Irish context is informed by quality and current indigenous research.

This paper is divided into four substantive sections. First of all, a brief overview of the initial Audit of Research relating to the period 1990 to 2003 is provided. Secondly, the methodology employed in the conducting of the Revised Audit of Research is documented. Thirdly, the findings relating to the Revised Audit of Research from the collection and analysis to date are outlined, drawing comparisons with the initial Audit. Last of all, the next steps in the finalisation of the Revised Audit are detailed.

Initial Audit of Research, 1990-2003

Since the launch of the CECDE in October 2002, a significant programme of research, consultation and development has been undertaken in close collaboration with the DES and a broad range of stakeholders within the ECCE sector. One of the baseline audits

Note:

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conducted by the CECDE in 2003 to guide and inform its work related to the collection and collation of all research relating to ECCE in the Republic of Ireland between 1990 and 2003 (CECDE, 2003). This initial Audit not only identified research priorities into the future but also collected and organised for the CECDE and other stakeholders a vast array of research material that has since been instrumental in informing the work of the Centre and has proven a valuable resource to those with an interest in ECCE research.

As with the Revised Audit, a liberal interpretation of the term 'research' was utilised in 2003. The initial Audit included research on ECCE relating to the Republic of Ireland, including books, chapters, journal articles, conference presentations and papers, unpublished reports, international comparative reports that included Ireland, submissions and postgraduate theses. As the remit of the CECDE spans both formal and informal ECCE provision, the initial Audit focused on research relating to both preschool provision as well as the infant classes of primary schools. In total, this initial Audit collected 1,082 individual pieces of research and categorised them into twelve distinct sections, as outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1 - Themes and Number of References in the Initial Audit of Research, 1990-2003

Theme	Number of References
Childhood and Society	84
Children's Rights	59
Cultural Diversity	119
Curriculum and Methodology	89
Early Childhood Services	345
Educational Disadvantage	128
Irish Language Education	132
Parents and Families	112
Quality	59
Special Needs	123
Staffing, Training and Qualifications	77
The Developing Child	117
Total	1,444*

* The total number of publications is greater than the number of individual pieces of research collected as a number of publications related to two or more of the themes identified.

Each of these themes was further divided into a number of sub-themes to assist the easy identification of research materials. While this range of research was impressive for a sector in its embryonic stages of development, a number of research gaps was identified including research that involved consulting children, research on quality in the Irish context, research on the inclusion of children with special needs within mainstream settings and longitudinal research on all aspects of ECCE.

Revised Audit of Research, 1990-2006

Owing to the large increase in the production and dissemination of research since 2003, the CECDE updated its online database of research on an ongoing basis. In mid-2006, a formal review and update of the initial Audit of Research was initiated in order to collect research produced between 2003 and 2006, and to re-categorise all research completed between 1990 and 2006.

Methodology

At the outset, the initial Audit of Research acted as a foundation document to inform the development of the Revised Audit. To this was added any research that had come to our attention in the interim relating to the period 1990 to 2003. A diverse range of strategies was then employed to elicit relevant research publications and reports for inclusion in the Revised Audit to ensure it was as representative as possible of the range of research conducted in Ireland since 2003. First of all, the extensive databases of contacts developed by the CECDE since 2002 were used to alert the ECCE research community to the Revised Audit. Individuals and organisations were requested to submit any research they had undertaken, or were aware of, between 2003 and 2006 relating to the care and education of young children aged birth to six years. The scope of this request within the sector was wide and included relevant government departments, most notably the DES, the Department of Health and Children, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and the newly formed Office of the Minister for Children (OMC).

In addition, a large number of non-government organisations, voluntary childcare organisations, City and County Childcare Committees, Area-based Partnerships, and academics and researchers within third level institutions were also contacted and requested to submit titles or references for pertinent research they had conducted. As copies of research reports and publications submitted were incorporated into the CECDE resource library, bibliographies within these were reviewed to identify further relevant research for the Revised Audit. National and international journals with a remit for ECCE were examined and relevant articles were recorded for inclusion within the Revised Audit. Online databases of research such as the Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI) Register of Theses were also examined, as were the library catalogues of third level colleges for relevant postgraduate theses. General internet searches were also conducted using pertinent keywords and search parameters, which also resulted in the unearthing of a large number of research material and sources. The participation of CECDE staff at a number of national and international seminars and conferences also proved valuable in the identification of conference papers presented by individuals and organisations.

Research Findings

Although there was a level of awareness that the capacity and productivity of the ECCE research sector had developed significantly in recent years, the CECDE was pleasantly

surprised at the range and extent of research publications and materials collected. At present, the collection phase of the Revised Audit has been completed but the analysis of findings is ongoing. Therefore the following findings are provisional in nature and are subject to certain change as further analysis and examination continues.

At this stage in the collection and analysis of research, 1,806 individual pieces of research have been identified for the period 1990 to 2006. This represents an additional 724² pieces of research relating to the period 2003 to 2006, in addition to the 1,082 publications identified in the initial Audit for the period 1990 to 2003. The categorisation process for the Revised Audit has been informed by the development of *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006). This is a quality assurance programme that contains sixteen national standards relating to the achievement of quality practice in ECCE settings. In order to support and inform the development and implementation of *Síolta*, the research collected has been categorised under these sixteen standards, as well as seven additional over-arching categories. The scope of this research is displayed in Table 2 below. The first sixteen themes correspond to the national standards within *Síolta* and the seven remaining categories relate to themes within the initial Audit and those that emerged in the collection process.

Table 2 - Themes and Number of References in the Revised Audit of Research, 1990-2006

Theme	Number of References
<i>Síolta</i> Themes	
Rights of the Child	58
Environments	18
Parents and Families	185
Consultation	40
Interactions	8
Play	43
Curriculum	197
Planning and Evaluation	25
Health and Welfare	80
Organisation	54
Professional Practice	142
Communication	1
Transitions	7
Identity and Belonging	316
Legislation and Regulation	62
Community Involvement	22
Additional Themes	
Child Development	106
Childhood and Society	103
Disadvantage	172
Early Childhood Services	393
Quality	118
Research	52
Special Needs	173
Total	2,375*

* Once again, the total number of pieces of research is greater than the number of individual pieces collected, as a number of publications necessitated inclusion in two or more categories.

Note:

- 2 A small number of these relate to pieces of research from the period 1990 to 2003 that were inadvertently omitted from the initial Audit.

At present, further analysis of each of these themes is ongoing in order to produce sub-themes and to facilitate the identification of research gaps to be addressed by the CECDE Research Strategy and other researcher organisations and individuals within the sector. Indeed, such analysis may warrant the creation of additional themes in categories such as Early Childhood Services and Identity and Belonging, considering the voluminous nature of the research categorised under each. Undoubtedly, the identification of research gaps in the initial Audit in 2003 focused researchers on previously under-researched themes and it is envisaged that recommendations from this Revised Audit will have a similarly positive effect. Even in this embryonic stage of analysis, a number of trends are evident within the Revised Audit:

- There has been a huge upsurge in the undertaking and publication of research pertaining to ECCE between 2003 and 2006. This is proven by the fact that while the thirteen-year period from 1990 to 2003 yielded 1,082 pieces of research, the three-year period 2003 to 2006 witnessed the production of 724. Statistically, this corresponds to an average of 83 research publications per annum between 1990 and 2003 compared with 241 per annum between 2003 and 2006, a three-fold increase in the latter years.
- One of the main gaps in the research identified in 2003 related to the theme of quality in the Irish context. Great strides to address this deficiency have been made in the interim with 118 publications relating specifically to this theme. Moreover, *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education has been developed and published (CECDE, 2006) and has the potential to inform policy and practice relating to quality at a national level.
- Many of the categories that are immediately comparable between the initial Audit (1990-2003) and the Revised Audit (1990-2006) show a huge upsurge in the number of publications in the past three years, as illustrated in Table 3. It is also important to keep in mind that many individual publications in the initial Audit may have been assigned new, more appropriate categories, in the extended range of themes used for classification in 2006.

Table 3 - Comparison of Themes from the Initial Audit of Research (CECDE, 2003) and the Revised Audit of Research (CECDE, 2006)

Theme	1990-2003	1990-2006
Cultural Diversity*	119	316
Curriculum	89	197
Disadvantage	128	172
Early Childhood Services	345	393
Parents and Families	112	185
Quality	59	118
Special Needs	123	173
Staffing, Training and Qualifications**	77	142

* This has been renamed Identity and Belonging, and now includes publications relating to Irish Language Education.

** This has now been renamed Professional Practice.

- A number of themes within the Revised Audit contain a surprisingly low number of publications, including Interactions, Planning and Evaluation, Communication and Transitions. It is probable that many of the research publications relate to these themes in some way, without being the principal focus of their work. However, it is necessary to prioritise such themes in future research strategies and plans within the sector considering their critical importance in the achievement of quality practice in ECCE settings.
- As identified in 2003, there is a distinct absence of a critical mass of longitudinal research relating to ECCE in Ireland. The commencement of the Growing Up in Ireland study (OMC, forthcoming) is a welcome development in this regard and this must be complemented by additional longitudinal research focusing on specific aspects of ECCE provision in Ireland

Next Steps

A number of steps remain in the completion of the Revised Audit of Research, which will be published in Spring 2007. Work is already underway in relation to producing sub-themes or sub-categories under each of the twenty-three themes listed in Table 2. As already outlined, this analysis may result in the creation of additional themes or indeed the merging of existing themes, as appropriate. Following on from this, further analysis and comparison will identify research gaps in the Irish context relating to ECCE that will inform both the research work of the CECDE and the wider ECCE community. Subsequent to the publication of the Revised Audit, each entry will be included on the online database accompanied by a range of appropriate key words to ensure the references and the research are accessible to as wide a range of stakeholders as possible.

Conclusion

It is evident from the preliminary analysis of research conducted in Ireland between 1990 and 2006 that the ECCE research community has much to feel proud about, considering the context of a fledgling sector that has been traditionally under-funded and under-resourced. The impact of increased investment in ECCE services in Ireland is mirrored in the quality and quantity of research that has been produced in recent years, most notably since 2003. However, there is no room for complacency as many research gaps still exist in the Irish context and there is a continuous need for ongoing current research to inform policy and practice. Furthermore, the dissemination and sharing of research is of critical importance so that by affecting practice, it can ultimately impact positively on the lives of our youngest children.

It is envisaged that the Revised Audit of Research will be published in Spring 2007. Hard copies can be obtained from the CECDE upon request, it will be available for download from the CECDE website (www.cecde.ie) and the searchable online database will be

updated. The CECDE resource library now contains the majority of publications featured in the Revised Audit, as well as a host of other valuable resources.

References

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