

Issue No. 5
Summer 2003

Downloadable
Version

Alana

Newsletter of the Centre for Early Childhood Development & Education

EDITORIAL: MORE REPORTS – BUT TIME FOR ACTION

In recent weeks a number of important reports were published which are of relevance to the early childhood care and education sector. These publications are helpful as they contain findings to guide policy and practice. However, they will remain of no consequence unless we act on their recommendations now. I will review some of these recent (and forthcoming) reports to illustrate the point.

In April the NDP/CSF Evaluation Unit (which is independent but operates under the aegis of the Department of Finance) published their "Evaluation of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000 – 2006". In summary the report concludes that the programme has been relevant, of sound rationale, reasonably well managed but "programme performance has been disappointing to date, both in terms of expenditure and output trends." (p. 77)

In its recommendations the report focuses on measures to increase efficiency and effectiveness of the EOCP and issues around policy and coordination. These recommendations don't come as a surprise. The question is: will action be taken now to make the necessary change?

The second publication, "Pre-Schools for Travellers – National Evaluation Report" was also published in April by the Inspectorate in the Department of Education and Science. The report is based on the evaluation of 23 selected pre-schools across the country and confirms many earlier findings. It strongly recommends the integration of pre-schools for travellers with early childhood education in Ireland generally. There are few clear targets or time frames and it remains to be seen whether we will now see the long overdue implementation of the report's recommendations.

Finally, we are awaiting the publication of the OECD review of early childhood care and education in Ireland. The review focussed on coordination, access and quality and work is continuing on a draft document. The full report will most likely be published in September 2003.

There is no lack of reports and recommendations. The question is whether there will be leadership and resources to implement what we know to be right.

Heino Schonfeld
Director

CONTENTS

An Overview of Research in Ireland Pertaining to Early Childhood Education and Care
1990-2003 : 2-3

CECDE and Educational Disadvantage; Context and Understanding : 4-5

The CECDE Research Strategy: A Work in Progress 6

Bits and Pieces 7



AN OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH IN IRELAND PERTAINING TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE 1990-2003

By Thomas Walsh, Development Officer, CECDE

Excerpt from a paper presented at the OMEP Conference, April 5, 2003 in University College Cork

The CECDE was surprised and delighted at the vast amount of research collected in the process of conducting this audit. To date, 1,097 publications and research articles in relation to early childhood education and care in Ireland since 1990 have been gathered. A process of thematic analysis of the collected research indicated that it could be divided into 11 themes. Further thematic analysis produced a series of categories and sub-categories. The categories change in each theme but the sub-categories remain consistent throughout. There is some minor overlap between publications in a number of categories, for example a publication may be relevant to two or three different categories, so that is why the number of publications in Table 1 (1.344) is in excess of the 1,097 individual publications in the audit database to date.

Theme	Number of References*
Children's Rights	62
Cultural Diversity	131
Curriculum	90
Early Childhood Development	362
Educational Disadvantage	133
Irish Language Education	129
Parents and Families	106
Quality	54
Sociological/Historical Perspectives	76
Special Needs	124
Staffing, Training and Qualifications	77
Total	1344

***This number of references is correct as of May 23rd 2003. This is a work in progress and the above numbers are subject to change in the maturation of the project.**

For the purpose of this paper, I will briefly examine 2 of the 11 themes presented in the above Table, the chapter with the most publications (Early Childhood Development) and the chapter with the least publications (Quality), before enumerating various gaps found in the research.

Theme - Early Childhood Development [362]

Early Childhood development is by far the largest in the research audit, containing 304 references. Following thematic analysis, the categories below emerged and the corresponding number of publications for each category is listed:

- ✓ **Child Development [60]**
- ✓ **Child Welfare [33]**
- ✓ **Government Publications [63]**
- ✓ **International Perspectives [20]**
- ✓ **Service Provision [186]**

The voluminous amount of research in this area reflects economic and societal changes in Ireland in the last decade. This has led to increased parental involvement in the labour force, thus increasing demand for early childhood care and education outside the home. Child protection and welfare is also a topical issue in the current climate.

There is also growing recognition of the paramount importance of early childhood education and care on future development. Service provision is a large category within this theme, reflecting a growing societal and state interest and involvement in the area.

Theme - Quality [54]

It is surprising to note that the subject of quality, which has received so much attention in the Irish context, is relatively unsupported by published research. The 53 research items have been categorised as follows:

- ✓ **Government Publications [20]**
- ✓ **International Perspectives [5]**
- ✓ **Quality Indicators [12]**

✓ Quality of Service Provision [17]

Quality is a complex and subjective term that is difficult to define in simple statements or checklists. As quality is a dynamic and context-specific term, the importation of models and research from other jurisdictions must be mediated for the unique Irish context and complemented by our own research.

The absence of Irish material in relation to quality makes discussion difficult to ground and much research needs to be conducted in this area to ensure a comprehensive and informed discussion of the topic. The CECDE will play an integral role in the progression of this debate in the development of the Quality Framework.

Gaps in the Research

This immense number of publications is a credit to the early years sector in Ireland, which has remained under-funded and underdeveloped for many years. On primary analysis of the information to date, a number of research gaps are prominent. These may alter or increase as further analysis of the data takes place.

Children's Rights/Voices: While there have been a lot of publications in relation to the rights and voices of children in the teenage years in preparation for citizenship, the question of consultation with and empowerment of children in the early years is largely underdeveloped.

Transitions: While there is a wealth of research available in relation to early childhood education and care, there is a general absence of publications regarding the transition from early years education and care to the formal education system.

Quality: As already noted, there has been little research in the area of Quality in the Irish context, both in relation to quality indicators or the evaluation of the more intangible and dynamic elements of quality.

Parents and Families: Recent years have witnessed a welcome focus on supporting the wider family in relation to parenthood. However, there appears to be no direct government policy in relation to parental involvement, although many government policies, such as the Report of the Commission on the Family, make indirect reference to this.

Educational Disadvantage: Much research has been completed in the area of disadvantage, yet there is a dearth of publications that focus on the importance of an integrated approach to tackling educational disadvantage.

Special Needs: There is need for further examination of effective interventions for children with special needs. In particular, there is a need for critical examination of the process of inclusion and integration of children with special needs in mainstream settings.

Staffing, Training and Qualifications: There is little research in the Irish context relating to the impact of training and qualifications on the quality of services provided in settings.

Cultural Diversity: The question of the education of foreign national minority groups is relatively new in the Irish context. A considerable amount of research has been conducted in a relatively short period of time. However, there is little research available in relation to the language needs of minority groups in the Irish context.

International Perspectives: While international perspectives featured as a category in all of the chapters, there is a dearth in research that compares Ireland with other jurisdictions.

Longitudinal Research: The vast majority of the research is one-off, short-term evaluations of initiatives. This does not take into account long-term effects of projects, which is of vital importance.

Policy: All sections are quite weak on policy that does not emanate from government. There are a few organisations such as the Combat Poverty Agency, Irish National Teachers Organisation, Pavee Point, Irish Travellers Movement and Barnardos, as well as certain individuals, that produce policy papers, but the majority of the research is categorised as descriptive/analysis. Research needs to be undertaken to inform new policy development and to generate debate and discussion on policy issues.

Conclusion:

It is hoped that the research audit will be of great benefit as a resource that draws together in excess of a decade of hard work and dedication within the early childhood education and care sector. The audit is in fact a salutation of your work and could only be produced with your support and co-operation. While certain limitations were enforced on the scope of the audit, it still covers all publications in the Republic of Ireland over a 13-year span. It is hoped to publish the research audit in the summer and it will be available as a searchable on-line database when the CECDE's website becomes operational. This on-line database will be updated regularly to take account of emerging research and there will be updates of the hard copy publication. This will be a valuable centralised resource for the whole of the early childhood care and education sector.

*For a full copy of this paper, please email Peadar.Cassidy@spd.dcu.ie;
to contact the author, please email Thomas.Walsh@spd.dcu.ie.*

CECDE AND EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE; CONTEXT AND UNDERSTANDING

By Jacqueline Fallon, Development Officer, CECDE

Excerpt from a paper presented at the OMEP Conference, April 5, 2003 in University College Cork

While the Centre's brief is to develop and co-ordinate early childhood education for all children in Ireland, we do have a particular brief to consider the needs of children at risk of or experiencing disadvantage, and children with special needs. This paper will consider some aspects of the context in which the Centre will progress towards fulfilling that brief in relation to disadvantage.

Definition

We understand educational disadvantage as it is defined in Section 32 of the Education Act, [1998] "[T]he impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools."

Our concern is to ensure that each child, regardless of circumstance, has the opportunity and support necessary to reach her/his potential.

Families

A child does not experience disadvantage on her/his own, but in the family context. 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. Therefore to support children means to support their parents. The National Children's Strategy states that '... external intervention should be to support and empower families within the community' [National Children's Strategy, 2000, p. 5], a position closely mirrored by the Centre's work programme which refers to the '... empowerment of parents as educators of their own children;...' [CECDE, 2001, p. 9]. Parents 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.

Intergenerational transmission of disadvantage

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 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 parents and grandparents in their lives as children.

That support and intervention should begin at birth, if not before. 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' [in Reynolds et al, 1997, p.48] - a fact of which practitioners are very well aware.

Early Intervention and Integrated Models

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, 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 there are some concerns 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.

The area of Early Intervention is one in which we can learn much from the experience of those working with children who have special needs. A very interesting model has been developed in the state of Ohio, and which is in fact enshrined in legislation. Early Intervention takes place in the context of the Individual Family Services Plan [IFSP]. As the title indicates the model recognises the unique circumstances of each family's needs, allows the family at the centre to determine its own goals and then offers the supports needed to achieve those goals. It also, and this articulates well with our own National Children's Strategy, recognises the place of the family in the community. One of the instruments used as part of the process of building relationships between the family and the service providers is the family mapping template. This helps prevent seeing families solely as defined by need, but instead realigns families as active participants within the extended family and community. [Espe-Sherwindt, M. Constructing a Kaleidoscope: The IFSP in Ohio. Bureau of Early Intervention Services, Ohio Dept. of Health. Columbus, OH. 1997]

Closer to home is the Sure Start initiative, established by the British Government to provide early intervention supports for disadvantaged families in an integrated way. CECDE has established links with the programme in the North, and will be looking closely as it develops. Sure Start is interesting in that it sets out to add value to existing services by concentrating on integration rather than instigating completely new services. Building on the expertise and knowledge already there is more appropriate than constant new beginnings. The experiences of Sure Start teams in implementing the integration model will be very useful as the Centre sets out on its brief to co-ordinate early childhood education. We recognise the wealth of expertise in the sector and believe that the way forward is to capitalise on that.

In a nutshell, 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 Centre that developments will be evidence based and sustainable, and to that end we will be looking closely at evidence of what works in effective interventions.

Identification of needs

But before we consider the efficacy of interventions, we must be concerned that we can successfully identify the children and families who need support. 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 belief 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.

To further our ability to identify the needs of children and their families, the Centre will commission research into effective models which will add to the experience and expertise of those already working in the area. The research project will examine the most effective ways to identify children at risk of disadvantage, in particular rural or dispersed disadvantage. The Centre's research programme will also address the issue of parental involvement and representation among parents experiencing disadvantage, with the intention of establishing structures to ensure those parents who do not have a voice at present will be active partners in the development of early childhood education.

***For a full transcript of this paper, please email Peadar.Cassidy@spd.dcu.ie;
to contact the author, please email Jacqueline.Fallon@spd.dcu.ie.***

***Anyone interested in research and joining OMEP Ireland
can contact Ann Fanning at 021-4342703 or email at bpfanning@eircom.net***

THE CECDE RESEARCH STRATEGY: A WORK IN PROGRESS

By Dr Gemma Kiernan, CECDE Assistant Director

The CECDE Research Strategy has been designed to facilitate the accomplishment of our extensive brief of co-ordinating and enhancing early childhood development and education in Ireland, paying particular attention to disadvantaged and special needs groups. It is a three year strategy, derived largely from our Programme of Work (CECDE, 2002), but also from the research gaps highlighted in our audit of Irish research in the area of early childhood care and education from 1990 to date (see CECDE, 2003). It is currently a 'work in progress' because we are in the process of consulting with the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector to develop it further.

The Research Strategy involves examining existing national and international research in the area of early childhood care and education, as well as undertaking new research. It is comprised of a number of strands:

- | Overarching research which centres primarily around our preparation of a conceptual framework of how young children develop and learn in the Irish context. We will also be undertaking a national and international overview of good practices, policies and research in early childhood education and care;
- | Quality related research whereby we will examine the meaning of quality in the Irish context, the key characteristics of a quality curriculum for the early years and the values underpinning the existing primary school curriculum. We will also investigate good practices in teaching methodologies especially with regard to the levels and types of adult-child interactions and the role of the adult in learning for children of different ages. We will be looking at practitioner perceptions of how to assess children and at the relationship between practitioner qualifications and quality;
- | Thematic based research in which we will focus on aspects of educational disadvantage, particularly the need for targeted responses for children in the 0-3 years age group and the sort of model structures that need to be developed and implemented to involved parents of children who are marginalised in consultative processes. We will also be addressing the area of special needs where we will develop a framework to document existing provision and to consider optimal interventions. Other topics we are concentrating on include promoting the smooth transition of children from pre-school to formal schooling, children's experiences of second language acquisition and practitioners perspectives about play and learning in the Irish context.

In order to ensure that this Research Strategy becomes a reality, we are in the process of recruiting for 2 post-doctoral fellowships and 4 doctoral studentships. These positions will be supervised by the CECDE and designated staff in the Dublin Institute of Technology and St Patrick's College, Drumcondra. Staff in the CECDE will also undertake some of the research themselves and we have the capacity to commission specific pieces. At a broader level, we will encourage other agencies to undertake relevant research and provide support to them where possible. All of our research will be conducted in an ethically responsible manner and will be approved by the Ethics Committees in the aforementioned institutes/colleges.

The realisation of this Research Strategy will ensure that the CECDE's work is substantiated, for example, that the national quality standards we develop for all aspects of early childhood care and education and the framework we propose for their implementation are evidence based. It will also build the research capacity of the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector. We will be disseminating the research findings to the Sector, including the academic community, through a variety of book and journal publications and conference presentations. We intend to use the findings to promote and facilitate commentary and debate on issues within the Sector and to further our knowledge and understanding of what is best for children in all their diversity in early years settings in Ireland today.

If you would like a full copy of the CECDE Research Strategy, please contact me at:
Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE)
The Gate Lodge
St Patrick's College,
Drumcondra,
Dublin 9

Tel. 01 8842112
Fax: 01 8842111
E-Mail: gemma.kiernan@spd.dcu.ie

BITS AND PIECES

CECDE On the Road....

Members of the team are currently engaged in a series of study visits around the country. The aim of the visits is to further our knowledge of the many initiatives addressing the needs of children experiencing disadvantage and children with special needs. Jacqueline Fallon spent an absorbing two days in Cork, where she met with the personnel involved with the Greenmount Early Learning Initiative, the Togher Family Centre and the Brothers of Charity Centre in Ballincollig.

The Greenmount Early Learning Initiative is an initiative of Cork City Partnership in conjunction with Scoil Mhuire na nGrás National School, Greenmount and the Greenmount Community Playgroup. The initiative supports the staff of the playgroup and the infant classes to develop a thematic approach to language development linked to an outdoor learning area. The Togher Family Centre has a long, well established history of working with children in close, supportive partnership with parents, and demonstrates commitment to its principle of partnership in its management structure. The Togher Family Centre recently received a 'Centre of Excellence' award at the NCNA conference. The Brothers of Charity Centre in Ballincollig is a community based early intervention service whose aim is to maximise the child's full potential, to work within the family and the community, empowering and supporting parents, care givers and family members. The team operates a multi-disciplinary approach in the Centre's work, with members from several professional disciplines co-operating in the decision making process.

It was an excellent visit to Cork, and the hospitality and openness of all was remarkable. Many, many thanks for your generosity with your time, and in being so forthcoming about your work.

Further study visits are planned around the country in the coming weeks. Maresa Duignan will head North to Donegal. She will be visiting the Lifestart foundation in Derry and one of their projects in Lifford, meeting with a group of Paediatric Occupational Therapists who have formed a national forum group and also meeting some of the coordinators of the Breaking the Cycle (Rural) programme. Following on from this, team members will be arranging to visit a variety of services and initiatives in the South East, West and in Dublin. We will keep you up to date with feedback in next quarterly issue.

CECDE goes Stateside!

Creative Inc, designers of the CECDE Logo, were asked some time ago to submit work for the European design annual of a well known and respected American design magazine called 'Print'. Of the submissions they entered the 'Jack in the Box' CECDE logo was selected for inclusion! This stylish logo was the work of Katie Quinn, Senior Designer with Creative Inc. Congratulations, Katie!

CECDE website – Launch date set for 18th August

Work is underway on the website for the CECDE. ICAN, a well-respected and award-winning Internet advertising company, are working with us on this project and we expect the website to be operational by August. The website will host information on ourselves and our work, and will in time support consultation with all interested parties by way of interactive elements. The date for the launch of the website is the 18th of August so check us out then at www.cecde.ie.