



An Lárionad um Fhorbairt
agus Oideachais na Luath-Óige

CECDE and Educational Disadvantage; Context and understanding

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OMEP Conference, April 5, 2003 in University College Cork*



The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE] was established by the Department of Education and Science in 2002 under the joint management of St. Patrick's College of Education and the Dublin Institute of Technology. The Centre is the forerunner of the Early Childhood Education Agency as envisaged in the White Paper on Early Education, Ready to Learn. [Department of Education and Science, 1999]

While the Centre's brief is to develop and co-ordinate early childhood education for all children in Ireland, in pursuance of the objectives of the white paper we 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 AND IMPACT

Common understandings will be necessary to underpin development and co-ordination, and the CECDE welcomes this opportunity to consider some of the multiplicity of issues which constitute our understanding of the experience of disadvantage. 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.” [White Paper, 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*’ as Kellaghan [1995, p. 17] has pointed out in his analysis of educational disadvantage in the Irish context. The sheer number of risk factors 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 together in their daily lives.

Families

A child does not experience disadvantage on her/his own, but in the family context. Stressed family settings cannot provide young children with the type of experiences which will be of optimum benefit. Leseman, [2002, p. 13] for example, cites *'... 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.'* Waldfogel [2000, p, 61] has also observed that *'[c]hildren who grow up in poverty fare worse than other children on a number of outcomes, for example educational attainment and health.'* 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, *'... 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] and, therefore, the inescapable conclusion is that to support children means to support their parents.

Implicit, though, in any efforts to support parents must be the principle of partnership, the centrality of the family and the place of the family in the community, a position supported by the National Children's Strategy [2000] and central to the CECDE's values. 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]

It is, however, 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.' [Ibid. p. 13]

To this end we propose conducting research into possible model structures for involving parents of children experiencing disadvantage in consultative processes. 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] While the Centre's brief is to develop quality standards for all settings, again the *'... diverse needs of disadvantaged children and children with special needs will form part of the starting point.'* [Ibid. p. 9]

INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF DISADVANTAGE

While none of the research evidence cited above on the impact of disadvantage comes as news to anyone working with disadvantaged children, what we have perhaps not paid as much attention to in the past is the 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.

'...[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.'* [Op. cit. 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 or 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 possible to change children's lives within a generation, ...' [Hart and Risely. 1995. P. 208] but at what cost? Hart and Risely [1995] describe the Milwaukee Project [op. cit. pp. 206-208] as an example of the type of intervention which would be necessary to effect change in one generation. Very briefly, babies whose mother recorded IQ's of less than 75 were taken into full time out-of-home day care at between six and eight weeks. The carer who would be the baby's primary caregiver spent between three and five hours per day for three days a week in the child's home prior to that time. The mother also entered a programme at the same time as the baby went into full day care. An intervention based on removing very young babies from their home and requiring mothers to become involved in a programme outside their home away from their babies at a very early stage in the developing relationship is not consistent with family centred policy. While this may have been justified in the context of the original Milwaukee Project, it would be difficult to justify this type of project in other circumstances, and it is not compatible with family empowerment values, although *'[t]he children in the Milwaukee Project, unlike children from comparable families not enrolled in the project and unlike children in other less time-consuming intervention programs, were equal to the national average in accomplishments at age 8.'* [Ibid. p. 206]

Hart and Risely [1995] go on to state that *'[i]ntergenerational transmission of enriched experience takes years,'* [Ibid. P. 209] Their assessment of the alternative time scale is undoubtedly reasonable, and may well be less attractive than the dramatic promise of change in a single generation, but with consistency and commitment, and constant attention to the quality of services, family focused interventions can be cumulatively effective.

Hart and Risely [1995] rightly question whether current models of intervention are up to the challenge, *'... and whether this process will keep pace with the increasing demands of a technological society and the growing numbers of families raising children in poverty remains uncertain.'* [Ibid. p. 209] and we must constantly evaluate our responses. Difficulty, thankfully, does not preclude success, and there is evidence of success, most recently from the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education [EPPE] Project. *'... the effect of attending pre-school [versus not] on developmental progress is greater than the effect of measure of social disadvantage.'* [Sylva et al. 2003. P. 4]

In an earlier overview of the evidence, Sylva [2000] examined a broad spectrum of research literature and a wide range of evaluations of pre-school programmes, and demonstrates the positive effects which accrue to ‘... *excellent, cognitively oriented pre-school programmes...*’ [Sylva. 2000. p. 123] She argues for, and produces convincing evidence to support, play based programmes as opposed to more formal systems of pedagogy to afford the most long lasting positive effects;

‘This rigorous longitudinal study with random assignment support the claim that early childhood curricula in which children initiate their own learning are superior to programmes of didactic instruction.’ [Ibid. p. 127]

To alleviate disadvantage in the next generation of children, then, we have to support parents and grandparents in their lives as children. Parents experiencing a range of stress factors need consistent support and outreach, and, as is outlined in the next section, the literature contains many examples and models of how this could be achieved. Every child born should, as a right, have the support and care s/he needs to ensure that s/he is nurtured, loved and kept safe. These earliest positive experiences are the foundation for secure, healthy children. ‘Dropping into’ a child’s life for a year is not the answer to the complex situation which many families experience; ‘... [Slavin] found that the more successful programmes were interventions that combined several ‘strands’ of intervention, involved intensive participation by children and families and lasted for a substantial number of years.’ [Ibid. p. 124]

INTERVENTION

When to provide intervention and support, then, is a pertinent question. For the most part we think of early intervention in educational disadvantage as beginning around age three with pre-school services. There is substantial support in the literature for considering this to be inadequate for many of the children who need it. As a practitioner myself in Early Start, I was only too aware that while the experience of the year was appropriate for many of the children, for too many more it was inadequate. Every year I met children who had needed, for example, support for language development at eighteen months or so. By the time they came to Early Start, their difficulties were compounded. ‘... 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. Kellaghan and Greaney [1993] made much the same observation in their follow up study of the Rutland Street Project;

'While some of the findings of this study point to the important role an early childhood education programme can play in the lives of children living in a disadvantaged environment, they also serve to underline the limited value of a single intervention for children growing up in an environment which is beset by a great variety of problems.' [Op. cit. p. 22]

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the implications of this finding, a brief consideration of some forms of intervention that could form part of a long term, integrated model will illustrate the possibilities for the future development of intervention strategies.

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, 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]

The Elmira home visitation experiment, in brief, was established in 1978 and involved a two pronged programme delivered by a nurse in the home, beginning while the participating mothers were still pregnant with their first child. On the one hand the programme promoted *'... effective physical and emotional care of children by parents and other family members. [The nurses] also helped women clarify their goals in life and develop problem-solving skills so that they could complete their education, find work, but adapted their visits to the needs of each family and developed close working relationships with parents.'* [Ibid. p. 48] The Memphis programme set out, in 1990, to establish if the positive, long term effects of the Elmira initiative could be replicated in a different context.

Comparisons between the two are complex, and will have to await the long term evaluation of the Memphis project, but both programmes demonstrated positive outcomes.

While there is further evidence also from Europe, Ireland has its own model of a home visiting programme, the Community Mothers Programme [CMP]. The programme involves experienced mothers from within the community, who have received training in the programme, visiting first time parents to offer support in parenting. The programme also offers information on play and child development, but in a way which responds to the needs of the family. The CMP has been evaluated and while some commentators [Hanrahan-Cahuzak. 2002. P. 49] have expressed concerns about the reliability and validity of the evaluation, 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;

‘An important finding ... was the persistence of superior parenting skills and cognitive, language and educational development among the intervention families.’ [Molloy. 2002. P. 46.]

The CECDE, as well as our focus on disadvantage, also has a particular interest in children with special needs, and we are aware of parallels in approach in both contexts. To illustrate this I will describe one integrated model of Early Intervention which has been well documented, and which is noteworthy also for the fact that its development was driven by parent groups in the state of Ohio, leading to its being enshrined in legislation there.

This model of Early Intervention takes place in the context of the Individual Family Services Plan [IFSP];

‘The purpose of the IFSP is to identify and organize [sic] formal and informal resources to facilitate families’ goals for their children and themselves.’ [IFSP training pack. 2003. p. 101]

As the name 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 [2000], 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. 1997]

Anecdotal evidence gathered in the course of an audit of provision for children with special needs currently being conducted by the Centre indicates that the values of the IFSP are widely implemented in Ireland among teams working with families and children with special needs. [CECDE. 2003a. Forthcoming] This evidence indicates that practitioners in this field recognise the centrality of the family, the necessity to empower families and the importance of integration of services. 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.

At the inaugural meeting of the Educational Disadvantage Forum [Educational Disadvantage Committee. 2003] *[t]he largest number of groups cited Early Intervention as their priority.* [Op. cit. p. 17] and the *'Summary of Key Themes and Issues from the Forum'* [Ibid. p. 26] includes the following; *'Focus on early intervention and prevention, supplemented by systematic targeting and monitoring'* [Ibid. p. 26] It is unfortunate, then, to find no mention of early intervention in the *'General approach to formulating policy'* [Ibid. p. 27] Neither is there any reference to early intervention in the Chairperson's introduction. It is entirely true to state that *'[i]n an environment of budgetary constraints, it is particularly important to target investment in the most strategically effective way.'* [Ibid. p.vi] but the subsequent list of elements makes no mention of the effectiveness of money spent on early intervention.

'Schweinhart et al., [1993] carried out a cost-benefit analysis of the High/Scope programme and found that for every \$1,000 that was invested in the pre-school programme, at least \$7,160 (after adjustment for inflation) had been or will be saved by society. These calculations were based on the financial cost to society of crime, remedial education, income support, and joblessness – set against the running costs of an excellent pre-school programme.' [Sylva. 2000. p. 125]

The participants at the Forum on Educational Disadvantage were nominated ‘... to ensure that all interests were represented as fairly and transparently as possible, and secondly to facilitate the widest possible participation by all relevant interest groups and sectors.’ [Educational Disadvantage Committee. 2003a. p. 2] and this comprehensively representative body indicated that early intervention must be a priority. It is to be hoped that the Educational Disadvantage Committee will reflect that priority in its future deliberations.

Another of the ‘Key Themes and Issues’ [Ibid. p.26] is the following; ‘Greater strategic cohesion and co-ordination of services and policies across ...’ [Ibid. p.26] and certainly this was a recurring theme on the day. It is opportune that the CECDE should be starting work on its co-ordination brief at a time when integration is being recognised as fundamental to effectiveness.

In that context the CECDE has established links with the Sure Start programme in Northern Ireland and will be looking closely as it develops. The Sure Start initiative was established by the British Government throughout England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to provide early intervention supports for disadvantaged families in an integrated way;

‘Core Services

The design and content of Sure Start Local Programmes will vary according to local needs. But we expect all programmes to include a number of core services.

- ❖ Outreach and home visiting.
- ❖ Support for families and parents.
- ❖ Support for good quality play, learning and childcare experiences for children.
- ❖ Primary and community health care ...
- ❖ Support for children and parents with special needs ...

Key Principles

To ensure a consistent approach, we expect every programme to work from a shared set of key principles. Sure Start services must:

- ❖ Co-ordinate, streamline and add value to existing services ...
- ❖ Involve parents, grandparents and other carers ...
- ❖ Avoid stigma by ensuring that all local families are able to use Sure Start;

- ❖ Ensure lasting support by linking Sure Start to services for older children;
- ❖ Be culturally appropriate and sensitive to particular needs;
- ❖ Promote the participation of all local families in the design and working of the programme.'

[Sure Start. 2002]

It is interesting to the CECDE 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 CECDE sets out on its brief to co-ordinate early childhood education. We recognise the wealth of expertise among practitioners here and believe that the way forward is to capitalise on that.

Sure Start serves as an example because of its scale of implementation, not because experience from abroad is valued over experience gained here. There is very little indigenous research on integrated responses to educational disadvantage, as is evidenced by the audit of research which has been conducted by the CECDE [CECDE. 2003b. Forthcoming]. Two models which have been documented here are the Integrated Services Initiative [ISI] and the Combat Poverty Agency's Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage.

The ISI was established in 1995 in Dublin's North East Inner City with the '*... overall aim .. to develop models of provision in the areas of education, health, justice and other social services which will allow everyone in the local community to contribute actively to society and to achieve their full potential.*' [ISI. 1997. p. 5] The project focused on the needs of young parents and their children and recommended, among other things, '*... a fully integrated, multi-dimensional model, requiring the establishment of joint planning, goals, activities and policy development.*' [Ibid. p. 64] To this recommendation can be added the '*....experiences of the Demonstration Programme on Educational Disadvantage [which] has shown that there is a key role for local networks in stimulating and developing integrated responses to educational disadvantage.*' [Haran. N. d. p.26] While the Demonstration Programme did not involve work with young children, and in most instances was concerned with early school leaving among teenagers, the experience gained during the process in establishing and progressing local networks is a valuable

resource. In the case of integrated models, as in all other instances, international experience can support development here, but our own experience must always be our starting point.

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.

IDENTIFICATION OF NEEDS

However, 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. The Department of Education and Science initiative 'Breaking the Cycle', established in included a rural dimension with the intention of addressing the needs of children in situations of dispersed disadvantage. This admirable effort to tackle a particularly difficult aspect of disadvantage encountered problems which were identified in the course of evaluation;

'... the assumption was made that these pupils attended small schools, and so the scheme was limited to schools with four or fewer teachers... It would seem that pupils with low levels of achievement were attending larger schools [in small towns]... and so were missed ...' [Kellaghan. 2002. p. 25]

We must find a way, based on evaluations such as that carried out on the Breaking the Cycle scheme and on experience, to successfully identify the children who are at risk of disadvantage. We each have only one childhood.

Reference has already been made to proposed research in the area of parental involvement. The CECDE has developed a Research Strategy [CECDE, 2003c], and is proceeding to put in place doctoral studentships and post-doctoral Fellowships to support its

implementation. One of the items for which we are developing proposals relates to this question of the early identification of needs.

‘[The CECDE will] develop a framework for assessing dispersed educational disadvantage in the 0-3 years age group (that moves beyond global indicators.)’ [CECDE. 2003c. p.9]

We recognise that rural and dispersed disadvantage provide particular problems for identification, problems also recognised by the Educational Disadvantage Committee in its submission to the Minister for Education and Science *‘Identifying Disadvantage for the purpose of targeting resources and other supports’* [Educational Disadvantage Committee. 2003b]. The CECDE proposes to contribute to the effectiveness of identification structures through its research programme.

QUALITY

Perhaps the biggest issue for the development of early years education for children experiencing disadvantage is the question of quality. This paper will do no more than consider the question briefly, but the issue of quality is one which the CECDE will consider at length and in depth in the course of its work. The audit of research [CECDE. 2003b.] which is described elsewhere in this publication has shown the dearth of research in the Irish context on this most fundamental of issues.

Evidence from abroad indicates, though, that disadvantaged children benefit most from quality provision. However, *‘... 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] At the moment, though, much of the funding available here, for example through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme [EOCP], relates primarily to the provision of places, and we need to look beyond provision and ask ourselves what is best for the children? This was recognised as far back as the White Paper.

‘.... 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 goals.' [DES. 1999. p. 65]

Quality provision is the basic minimum requirement for intervention. The development of a national Quality Standards Framework for the entire early years sector, and supporting providers in relation to compliance with quality standards will be a core activity for the Centre.

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. 1999. p.53]

While it is important to provide safe and clean environments for children, the point at which the child experiences the intervention 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 developing the Quality Framework, the CECDE will consult widely with providers and practitioners, and will be active in supporting the acknowledged commitment of all practitioners to quality in line with the White Paper. We will examine best practice both nationally and internationally, and draw on our increasing knowledge and understanding of childhood and child development theory.

CONCLUSION

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education is committed to working in partnership with all stakeholders to enhance and develop the provision of early childhood education in Ireland. We will continue to develop our understanding of educational disadvantage in consultation with those who work to alleviate it. This paper gives an introduction and insight into some aspects of the context of disadvantage to which we will be paying attention, and also gives some idea of how we understand its impact on the lives

of children. The issues which have not been referred to are no less important, and over time the CECDE will consider the issue of disadvantage in as full a manner as possible. The CECDE looks forward to the consultation process, and to becoming familiar with the ongoing work of practitioners in the field.

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