



An Lárionad um Fhorbairt  
agus Oideachais na Luath-Óige

**On Target? Presentation of rationale, findings and  
recommendations from an Audit of Services  
Targeting Disadvantage and Special Needs among  
children aged birth to six in Ireland**

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## **Introduction**

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was established in 2002 by the Minister for Education and Science under the joint management of St. Patrick's College and the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). The main focus of the work of the CECDE is the development of a National Framework of Quality standards applicable to all early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings in Ireland. The other main functions of the CECDE are developing and implementing innovative research projects in the areas of disadvantage and special needs, and laying the groundwork for the establishment of the Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA) as envisaged in the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999). The CECDE remit covers all settings for children between the ages of birth and six years in Ireland, with a particular interest in the needs of children experiencing disadvantage and of children with special needs arising, for example, from a disability.

Within this context, one of the first actions determined by the CECDE Programme of Work (CECDE, 2001) was an audit of existing services targeting disadvantage and special needs among children in the birth to six year old age range. This project culminated in the publication of ***'On Target? An Audit of Provision of Services Targeting Disadvantage and Special Needs among Children from birth to six years in Ireland'*** (CECDE, 2004). This paper presents two aspects of *'On Target?'*; the rationale, which relates to the need for reliable data on which to base policy and provision, and the major findings which were used to generate recommendations for policy in ECCE in Ireland.

## **1. Rationale**

### **1.1 Introduction**

While data on provision is not available in a planned or systematic way, the CECDE has assembled a database of approximately 1,400 services. In gathering entries for the project database, a crucial question arose - how to determine whether a service was targeted or not? There is a debate about universal provision versus targeted initiatives (McGough, 2001; Hayes, 2002), but in this instance the brief was clear, namely to determine the level of targeted provision. Within the terms of this project, criteria for determining whether a service could be included or not were devised. If a service was associated with an agency, initiative, non-governmental organisation (NGO) or Government Department with a specific brief to target disadvantage, social exclusion or special needs, and if this connection could be clearly established by documentary evidence, then it was included. This methodology provided a clear solution to what emerged as the key and primary finding<sup>1</sup>. Accurate information on the range and nature of ECCE services targeting disadvantage is extremely difficult to access. The situation regarding information on services targeting special needs is even more marked. This finding led to a consideration of issues which centred on the place of empirical data in development and co-ordination work across a broad range of spheres which could be loosely described as relating to social inclusion.

### **1.2 Irish context**

The audit took place at a time when there was growing awareness nationally of the necessity for developments in service provision across many sectors to be evidence based, sustainable and supported by reliable information (Barry, 2000; Corrigan *et al.*, 2002; Department of Social and Family Affairs (DFSA) 2003; Health Research Board, 2003). In *An Audit of Research on Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland 1990-2003* (CECDE, 2003a:144) the CECDE states that “... *research to date and all future research must be instrumental in*

*shaping policy and practice in the Irish context.”* The CECDE Research Strategy (2003b: 3) further states that “*(i)n terms of providing policy advice to the Department of Education and Science on issues related to early childhood development and education, research evidence will be used to inform recommendations made.*”

Sanderson (2002:4) has noted that “*(a) key driver of modernization is evidence-based policy making and service delivery ...*”, modernisation in this context referring to development and progression. At this juncture in the development of ECCE in Ireland, when considerable developments are taking shape and progression towards a cohesive pattern of provision is becoming apparent, it is crucial that all the elements of successful development be considered. The two aspects referred to above – policy making and service delivery – are of equal importance in the work of the CECDE. Our brief includes developing policy advice and also working with service providers in the development of quality standards, using research to support both (CECDE, 2003b.). In terms of ‘*On Target?*’, as the Equality Authority has pointed out “*(d)ata is required to establish baseline positions.*” (Barry, 2000:Foreword). It is certainly germane to this rationale to add that “*(a)ddressing data gaps is an essential strategy for better policy formulation and for understanding how we live.*” (Cantillon *et al.*, 2001:xxxii)

### **1.3 Current emphasis on evidence-informed policy**

The current emphasis on evidence based, or perhaps more accurately ‘*evidence-informed*’ policy (Sebba, 1999) can be traced to the field of medical research, and the empirical basis for medical practice (Coe, Fitz-Gibbon and Tymms, 2000). Currently there is considerable debate on the nature of evidence, its relationship to the development of policy, and how to maximise the role of research evidence in both policy and practice. Considerable literature emanates from Great Britain

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<sup>1</sup> The key findings will be addressed in more detail in Section 2 of this paper.

on foot of “... *the strongly emerging philosophy, as postulated by the United Kingdom government Research and Development strategy, that policy and practice have to be based on evidence deriving from research ...*” (Iwaniec and Pinkerton, 1998: xi). While there is a high level of research activity in Ireland, there is very little specific attention given to the role of research evidence in informing policy in the public sector, specifically education policy.

*There has been little by way of study of the relationship between policy making and research in this country and, although there have been a number of analyses and discussions of the research-social-policy relationship, education has received little attention in these analyses.* (Kellaghan, 1989:193)

There is no evidence available by way of literature to indicate that the situation has changed in the fifteen years since Kellaghan made these remarks.

#### **1.4 Empirical data**

However, while this may be the case, there has been a growing awareness here of the need for reliable empirical data to underpin development in a wide range of spheres. As far back as 1986 “... *the Review Group on Mental Handicap Services, established by the Department of Health and Children, found that one major stumbling block which lay in the path of systematic planning was the absence of reliable data on the extent of the needs of people with intellectual disability in Ireland.*” (Health Research Board, 2003:1.1) Certainly the same could be said at the moment about the need for reliable data on current provision for children experiencing disadvantage and children with special needs.

The ultimate result of the findings of the aforementioned Review Group is the National Intellectual Disability Database (NIDD), which is supported by a sophisticated, well-resourced data collection, management and storage system under the auspices of the Health Research Board. A National Physical and

Sensory Disability Database (NPSDD), which will identify people with physical or sensory disabilities who are currently availing of, or require, specialised health and personal social services is in the process of being implemented throughout the country since January 2002. Data collection is at various stages of completion in each Health Board area. A challenge for the future may well be to find a way to incorporate data from the NIDD and NSPDD relating to children in the birth to six age group into a database of provision for all children in that age group.

Compatibility of data, and data collection time frames, will have an impact on any such efforts. Compatibility of data depends on the format in which information is stored across all agencies, whether the formats are similar and therefore easily compiled, and whether the items and range of information collected are similar and easily matched across agencies. Agencies generally collect their data at specific times on a regular basis, generally year-on-year, but if different agencies collect information at different times, then one agency's data is out-of-date while another agency's is still current, thus militating against the compilation of a single, comprehensive current database.

Returning to the NIDD, such a structured system is not the norm in Ireland, and much closer to the experience of *'On Target?'* is the comment from the Equality Authority that *"(g)enerally data is highly uneven and variable, dispersed across a variety of different organisations and structures, reflecting a lack of co-ordination and integration in the approach to data and data collection systems in this country."* (Barry, 2000:5). It was this experience which prompted the Equality Authority to develop its data strategy, *'Building the Picture: The Role of Data in Achieving Equality'* (Barry, 2000).

On the wider issue of social inclusion, an issue very germane to provision of early education services to children experiencing disadvantage and children with special needs, there is no equivocation about the importance of data among the

Social Partners. Corrigan *et al.* (2002:vii) point out that both “(t)he Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (PPF) and National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) Building an Inclusive Society, emphasise the collection of data for the comprehensive monitoring of poverty trends”. Monitoring poverty trends and monitoring the provision of services for children with multiple needs are different exercises. The basis for both is, however, the same - the need for data on which to base such a monitoring system.

The Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA) is also engaged in developing a data strategy. “The revision of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy underlined the need for timely, accurate and relevant statistical data to support policy development.” (DFSA, 2003:49) To this end, a Technical Advisory Group has been formed, and is engaged with the development process. While the DFSA plans for a data strategy have grown out of the specific need to monitor progress in relation to anti-poverty targets, “... all (Government) Departments are to produce formal data strategies.” (DFSA, 2003:49) Within the DES, the development of the Primary Pupil Database indicates “... the possibility of creating links with databases of other Government agencies ... ” (Educational Disadvantage Committee, 2003:3). Evidence presented by the Educational Disadvantage Committee establishes a medium to long term time frame for such links to evolve, but such moves indicate the importance now accorded to the maintenance of dependable data.

It is clear that important national agencies have identified solid, comprehensive empirical data as the bedrock for addressing pressing national problems such as poverty, disadvantage and inequality. *On Target?* cuts across all three of these areas, and it was in this context that such an audit was identified as one of the first actions of the CECDE. “There is now little challenge to the idea that good policy requires good information, and that good information can and has influenced and informed policy and provision.” (Corrigan *et al.*, 2002:4) Kellaghan (2002:25) is less positive in his assessment of the situation here in

Ireland in relation to interventions in educational disadvantage; *“The important role that research findings and reflection on the experience of interventions have to play does not always seem to be fully recognised when a rationale for action or the nature of interventions is being determined.”* This situation raises questions about the availability of structures within which connections can be made between research evidence, policy making and practice here in Ireland.

### **1.5 Forms of evidence**

The constituent elements of evidence are wide, varied and subject to much debate (Davies and Nutley, 2002). Equally, there are many conflicting demands in the policy making process (Leeuw, 1991). While the CECDE is clear on its commitment to evidence-based policy development, evidence must be tempered by other considerations, including, for example, individual rights and values and cultural considerations.

It would be disingenuous not to recognise that policy makers derive evidence from many sources (Sanderson, 2002:5). The complexity of the social systems served by policy makers is inevitably mirrored by the complexity of proposed solutions; *“...(W)e should perceive the interaction of various interest groups, who have access to policy makers as a necessary process in rapidly changing, turbulent environments.”* (Wilson, 1999:9) Certainly, as ‘On Target?’ has shown in its profile of provision, the ECCE sector in Ireland – a social system – is heterogeneous, has a complex history of development, and consequently a broad range of stakeholders. The interaction of all stakeholders is viewed as crucial by the CECDE, and for this reason the CECDE engaged in a consultation process with the ECCE sector to further the development of the National Framework for Quality (NFQ) (CECDE, 2004a). The other sources of evidence supporting the development of the NFQ are a review of international and national quality standards, and of the implications for quality of how the child learns and develops.

### **1.6 Research evidence**

Research evidence is of critical importance to the policy development process, a position for which there is support in the literature. There is certainly evidence that “(r)esearch on children and families has the potential to contribute to the policy process at every step of the way – through theory building, agenda setting, and informing policymaking, as well as policy and program development, implementation and evaluation.” (Susman-Stillman *et al.*, 1996:2)

This would seem to be corroborated by Weiss (1999:195) who notes that;

*... in-house research within the Education Department of Tasmania concluded that what research did was to:*

- a) Develop shared understanding among policy-makers as a foundation for policy-work;*
- b) Refine policy-makers’ working knowledge of the issues; and*
- c) create a climate of expectation for policy development or implementation.*

If we take the example of *Ready to Learn*, the White Paper on Early Childhood Education (DES, 1999), the influence of research evidence on the policy position outlined there is clear. Research evidence is cited on, for example, enhancing dispositions and readiness to learn (DES, 1999:8), returns to the individual on investment in early education (DES, 1999:9) and the importance of early childhood interventions being of high quality (DES, 1999:11). The literature cites many other examples of the effectiveness of research evidence in effecting policy change (Bullock *et al.*, 1998; Wilson, 1999; Coe, Fitz-Gibbons and Tymms, 2000), but none of these examples relates to the Irish context.

While “(r)esearch can influence policy, ... it is not an easy or a direct line from study results to policy use.” (Kirst, 2000:389) There are documented examples of instances when research evidence did not make any discernible impact on relevant policy developments (Leeuw, 1991; Sanderson, 2002), and, indeed, research evidence is not always welcome to those envisaged as end users (Bullock

*et al.*, 1998; Kirst, 2000; Helmsely-Brown and Sharp, 2002;). A knowledge of the conditions pertaining to the Irish context in which research evidence both did and did not have an impact would be helpful in understanding the dynamics of policy development here.

### **1.7 Relevance and dissemination**

The CECDE is fully cognisant of the complicated, “... *dynamic and unpredictable nature of policy influence*” (International Development Research Centre (IDRC), 2002:v), but this does not mitigate our view of the critical importance of research evidence. One of the functions of the CECDE is providing policy advice to the Minister for Education and Science. Ensuring the relevance of research to that function has been a key concern in the development of the CECDE Research Strategy (CECDE, 2003b). Davies and Nutley (2002:3) have identified “*(f)our requirements for improving evidence use in policy and practice.*” The second of those requirements is “*(a) strategic approach to the creation of evidence, together with the development of a cumulative knowledge base.*” (Davies and Nutley, 2002:3) This strategic approach is characteristic of the CECDE Research Strategy (2003b:1) which refers to the “... *the integral role that research plays in the realisation of this purpose.*”

If relevance of research activity is fundamental to its function as a basis for policy development, “...*the key questions for research development continue to be about the effectiveness of dissemination strategies.*” (Bullock *et al.*, 1998:8) The complexities of the dissemination discussion are well worth airing, but such a consideration is outside the parameters of this paper. Briefly, though, there appears to be some consensus in the literature around ‘*policy diffusion*’ (Davies and Nutley, 2002). Pinkerton (1998:31) has described a model which “... *demonstrates impact as depending on the forging and sustaining of social alliances within the context of a dynamic system.*” Davies and Nutley (2002:9) have commented that “... *multiple channels of communication – horizontal as well as vertical; networks as well as hierarchies – may need to be developed ...*”.

Sanderson (2002:8) refers to “(n)etworking (or ‘relational interaction)’”, and Kirst (2000:385) notes that “... *the primacy of personal contact emerges as a major aspect of successful research dissemination.*” The CECDE is well placed in this model of research diffusion, as the Programme of Work (CECDE, 2001:2) states that “... *consultation and/or networking are seen as a prominent part of almost all of the Centre’s work.*” The inaugural CECDE International Conference - Questions of Quality; Defining, Assessing, and Supporting Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education – demonstrates the commitment of the CECDE to the dissemination and promotion of research evidence as a support to the development of the ECCE sector in Ireland.

### **1.8 Provision, practice and partnership**

On the evidence of ‘*On Target?*’, ECCE provision in Ireland is very diverse, encompassing many types of provision for young children. In particular, educational provision for children with special needs is even more diverse. While this diversity is a great strength, it poses great difficulties for those charged with co-ordinating service provision and developing common quality standards. Sanderson (2002) has commented on the importance of all key stakeholders involved in development work improving their understanding of the issue at hand, and of the possible policy options available. ‘*On Target?*’ provides an evidential basis for common understandings between the CECDE, policy makers and service providers in the key areas of disadvantage and special needs.

All work undertaken by the CECDE supports the development of the NFQ which will be held in common by all involved in provision of ECCE services. Quality provision is of special significance to children experiencing or at risk of disadvantage and children with special needs. “*The benefits of (quality early childhood education) may accrue to all children, but as in the case of children with special needs, research shows that they are particularly significant for disadvantaged children.*” (DES, 1999:97) ‘*On Target?*’ was, therefore, not an

isolated exercise but one of the initial steps towards a cohesive process of development and co-ordination of ECCE in Ireland.

All developments must be based on the principle of partnership. *“It is through open partnerships that span the creation, validation and incorporation of research evidence that we are likely to see more effective use of such evidence for the betterment of public services.”* (Davies and Nutley, 2002:12) ‘On Target?’ is not viewed as a project independent of service providers, but one which draws its data from the sector itself, and which will in turn support partnership between the CECDE and stakeholders. Nor is the commitment to partnership based only on the principles of mutual respect and recognition of expertise, but on the belief that partnership provides the most effective way to ensure successful outcomes. *“...(E)xamples of successful development of policy from suggestive evidence, policy that is then seen through to practice change and beneficial outcomes, often display an unusual degree of partnership working.”* (Davies and Nutley, 2002:7)

## **2. Findings and recommendations**

### **2.1 Introduction**

‘On Target?’ represented the first attempt to assemble information on targeted interventions in Ireland, and brings together information on the Infant classes in schools in the same context as all other out-of-home settings. This was an important aspect of the project, as such information spans one of the most important transitions of a child’s life – that from the pre-school setting, be it at home or out-of-home, to the primary school. This also represents a shift in viewpoint away from defining early years in terms of pre-school and in-school, to an identification of early years as birth to six years, whatever the setting. ‘On Target?’ did not attempt to map childminder provision as it did not prove

possible to identify childminders who target children experiencing disadvantage or with special needs.

## **2.2 Main finding**

In order to gather the data from that broad range of providers, possible sources of information were conceptualised on a continuum;

- national structures or bodies with a national profile of involvement;
- intermediary structures, or those with regional involvement;
- local structures or groups;
- individual providers.

Agencies and groups which fitted this profile were contacted with requests for information on services. Following the final date for return of information requested by the CECDE, the level of response from each county was assessed. As well as the criteria developed for the inclusion of each individual service<sup>2</sup>, criteria were also developed to determine the point at which adequate information had been received for each individual county. Information came in a variety of forms, and in many cases, such information was only available as a result of individual effort.

- **The primary and key finding of ‘On Target?’ is that accurate information on the range and nature of early childhood care and education services targeting disadvantage is extremely difficult to access. The situation regarding information on services targeting special needs is even more marked. A major contributing factor is that data on targeted services is not generally disaggregated within universal datasets.**

The valuable baseline data collected during this audit, while not comprehensive enough to yield a definitive picture of targeted service provision in Ireland, is a

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<sup>2</sup> The criteria developed for the inclusion of each service is outlined in section 1.1.

first step in developing a model for a national information bank for the ECCE sector.

Therefore, a number of general observations can be made regarding service provision:

- Sessional services dominate.
- Services targeting children in the birth to 2 age cohort (e.g. full day care and parent and toddler groups) are very limited.
- Similarly services targeting children in the 4-6 age cohort outside school hours are very limited.
- Services are more concentrated in urban centres.

These observations correspond with the findings of previous research (DJELR, 1998; 1999; Area Development Management (ADM), 2003) that has been conducted on general provision of early childhood services. This indicates that these issues continue to be challenges for the development, co-ordination and enhancement of targeted services for children aged birth to six years.

### ***2.3 Criteria for interventions***

On the evidence of this audit there is no nationally understood protocol or set of criteria in the context of targeted services for children. Criteria are developed anew for each initiative and relate to eligibility for funding rather than to the children. Criteria for targeted interventions should include a rationale for intervention. Also included should be a clear objective in terms of child outcomes. The criteria should incorporate the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and of the National Children's Strategy (Department of Health and Children (DHC), 2000) in order to ensure that

interventions involving children uphold their rights, rather than using children's lives as sites of intervention for the benefit of others.

- **The CECDE recommends co-operation between the relevant Government Departments to develop a national protocol for targeted interventions, incorporating agreed indicators, criteria and child-centred objectives. This protocol will be suitable for use in all contexts in which targeted interventions with children take place, and will lead to effective co-ordination of initiatives originating in the Government Departments involved.**

#### **2.4 Data strategy**

The process of information gathering for 'On Target?' demonstrated a broad range of capacity within the sector to deliver information. Up to this point, lack of baseline data has been an inhibitor in terms of policy development and co-ordination of services, both at national and regional level. Additionally, such information as has been gathered for various administrative purposes has reinforced the dichotomy between care and education reflecting the structural divisions which exist in this regard. There is now an awareness nationally of the importance of relevant, comprehensive information to progress in any area, and of the significance of a carefully considered, widely applicable data strategy to support the collection of such material. Data collection, as modelled in this audit, can further support efforts to move away from what is now recognised as the artificial divide between care and education.

- **The CECDE recommends that the relevant Government Departments, in consultation with key stakeholders, develop a national data strategy for the ECCE sector. The goals of any such strategy must be clearly articulated. The strategy will support a national data collection system, which will provide reliable information on existing provision to facilitate planning, policy development, and the optimal allocation of resources.**

### ***2.5 Special needs***

Identification of services for children with special needs proved especially difficult. It would appear that there is considerable regional variation in service provision. Currently, negotiating the system is difficult and challenging for parents who encounter it for the first time seeking to access services for their children. Both parents and children are dependent on local capacity in terms of service provision. Pressure on services is acute, and it is unlikely that there is further capacity available at service level to engage in the planning and integration that future development will require.

- **The CECDE recommends a national strategy to afford equity of access to,**
  - **Information;**
  - **Identification;**
  - **Service provision;**
  - **Ongoing support;**

**for all children with special needs. Such a strategy will require the co-ordinated efforts of all Government Departments, Health Boards, Voluntary Agencies, parent groups and the National Council for Special Education.**

### ***2.6 Provision between birth and three years***

'On Target?' has revealed that within the context of targeted services, there is also a big discrepancy between the number of full day and sessional services. In addition, the distribution of these services is concentrated in urban locations. Sessional services tend to accept children from two and a half to three years of age onwards, which, combined with minimal numbers of parent and toddler groups and home visitation schemes, suggests that children aged birth to three are poorly served by targeted interventions. This finding is of concern given the body of research that exists in support of the critical importance of early intervention in the first three years of life in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion. (Hart and Risley, 1995; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). It is the view of the CECDE that focused attention must be given to deepening our understanding of the role of targeted interventions with children aged birth to three years in Ireland.

- **The CECDE recommends that research be undertaken and disseminated by the Early Childhood Education Agency<sup>3</sup> on the following issues affecting provision for children in the birth to three age group at risk of disadvantage:**

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<sup>3</sup> The CECDE was established to prepare the groundwork for the Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA). The functions of the ECEA are described in Ready to Learn, the White paper on Early Childhood Education (DES, 1999;133).

- **Suitable indicators for identifying disadvantage among this age group;**
- **Criteria for interventions;**
- **Models of intervention.**

### **2.7 Transition**

It has been recognised for some time that the ECCE sector in Ireland would benefit from co-ordination and development, hence the CECDE's brief to “*develop and co-ordinate early childhood education ... and to advise the Department of Education and Science ... on policy issues in this area*” (CECDE, 2001:2) One aspect of that co-ordination in terms of targeted interventions is continuity of services at key transition points in a child's life, notably from pre-school settings (in-home or out-of-home) to 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, 2002:40)*

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. It is particularly important that intervention conditions be continuous, as the experience of Rutland St. has shown (Kellaghan, 1977), to ensure that early gains are not lost on entry to the Primary school.

- **The CECDE recommends that research be undertaken to identify, evaluate and disseminate effective models supporting co-ordination and continuity of provision for children experiencing disadvantage and with special needs. Such models must protect and enhance any gains from early intervention.**

### ***2.8 Inter-face of disadvantage and special needs***

'On Target?' dealt with special needs and disadvantage separately to ensure clarity. However, it would not be accurate to give the impression that as categories they are mutually exclusive. Reference is made, for example, to evidence of a higher incidence of Mild General Learning Disability (MGLD) among children experiencing disadvantage. There is also concern for children with MGLD for whom environmental factors, arising from social disadvantage, are contributing factors to the disability. Neither is there any reason that a child with any other type of disability cannot also be experiencing disadvantage. What is of concern is not that such an intersection exists, but how children in such circumstances are served by the system of intervention.

- **The CECDE recommends that flexible inter-departmental and inter-agency structures be developed to meet the needs of those children who experience both disadvantage and special needs.**

### **3 Conclusion**

'On Target?' sought to place its main finding in the wider context of the relationship between evidence, policy and practice. However, there is no evidence here in Ireland of a debate on the inter-connected relationship between

these three elements which interact to drive and underpin development. There does not appear to be an ongoing discussion here on how, or even if, research evidence impacts on policy and practice, particularly in relation to education. The audit of research conducted by the CECDE (CECDE, 2003a) demonstrated the amount of work which has been carried out here on ECCE. Yet the community of interest made up of researchers, policy makers and practitioners have no context within which to debate how, for example, research is made available to policy makers; how policy can draw upon the wealth of research evidence available; or indeed, how practice relates to what research tells us about what works for specific children in specific circumstances. Such questions are being addressed in the international context, but these debates are of limited value here. ECCE in Ireland has its own particular history and, more importantly, its own particular future, and needs its own particular debate.

While the connection between provision and policy make seem tenuous and remote at times, especially in Ireland where provision of services for young children has developed in the absence of national policy, we should not lose sight of the importance of good policy in supporting best practice. For good policy, we need good information, and for that we need good data. *'On Target?'* has identified areas of ECCE about which we know little, a position which makes it difficult to determine how to proceed. It has also, however, identified the kind of information which is necessary, and how it might be collected.

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