

Early Childhood Care and Education

Opportunities and Challenges

Early childhood care and education is what the name implies and more: it comprises all the essential supports a young child needs to survive and thrive in life, as well as the supports a family and community need to promote children's learning.

Research suggests that significant and critical brain development occurs particularly during the first three years of life.

Therefore, what happens to a child, and the opportunities provided in the first years are crucial in determining lifelong outcomes.

It is especially important to recognize that early childhood care and education programs play a crucial role in lifelong learning. Support for young children does not merely refer to establishing preschools or infant classes. It refers to all the activities and interventions that address the needs and rights of young children and help to strengthen the contexts in which they are embedded: the family, the community, and the physical, social, and economic environment. If we believe that learning begins at birth, it is important to realise that basic education begins then too.

Emphasis must be placed on developing approaches, which build on the achievements of families and recognise the very real constraints they face in supporting their children's overall learning.

This is a very different way of thinking about education from what is normally understood when we think of the needs of primary and secondary students. While one outcome of early childhood care and education programs is that they can help children to be more successful in school, the early years are a crucial phase of human development and **not** merely a preparation for later years.

While a focus on primary

education is undoubtedly important, evidence strongly suggests that compulsory school age is far too late to start paying attention to children's learning needs. By the time a child reaches school age, most brain development, cognitive,

n "By providing a 'fair start' to all children, it is possible to modify socio-economic and gender-related inequities".

language and physical abilities have been set in place.

Early childhood care and education as a field has valuable experience to share, including effective strategies for supporting young children in their development, supporting families, and of greatest interest to many primary teachers, helping to make schools more ready for learners and learners more ready for school. Furthermore, early childhood programmes can also benefit parents, particularly women by freeing them from child care responsibility so they can learn and seek better employment and earnings.

The unhealthy conditions and stress associated with poverty are accompanied by inequalities in early development and learning. These inequalities help to maintain or magnify existing economic and social inequalities. In a vicious cycle, children from families with few resources often fall quickly and progressively behind their more advantaged peers in their development and their readiness for school and life, and that gap is then increasingly difficult to close.

Early childhood care and education in Ireland

In Ireland, early childhood care and education has only very

recently become the subject of major policy development and statutory provision. The Child Care Act, 1991 for the first time required the state to regulate preschool services leading to the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 1996 and

Child Care (Pre-School Services) (Amendment) Regulations, 1997.

Since the 1990's much policy development has taken place. The Report of the Expert Working Group on Childcare, 1999 and the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, 1999 define the age range of early childhood care and education as between birth and six years of age, ie prior to compulsory school age.

Throughout all policy documents we find a consistent view that early childhood education cannot be separated from early childhood care as the two are inextricably linked.

As policy around early childhood care and education developed in Ireland, there has also been a significant – if patchy – rise in provision of care and education for the pre-school age group. The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (administered by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform) will invest close to €450 million between 2000 and 2006 and has already significantly increased provision for non-school providers. However, the Department of Education and Science remains the largest source of funding for early childhood care and education with over 120,000 children in

junior and senior infant classes. The Department has also provided for the Early Start project that serves some 1600 three-year-old children in disadvantaged areas since 1994 and for about 600 children in Traveller preschools.

Despite the progress in policy development and provision there remain a number of significant challenges in the area of Irish early childhood care and education. To address these challenges, the Department of Education and Science asked the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to conduct a review of Irish early childhood care and education with a particular focus on access, coordination and quality. The review took place in November 2002 and without anticipating its findings, I will briefly discuss some aspects of these challenges.

Access

General access to early childhood care and education is low in Ireland compared to other European countries and falls well short of the targets set by the Barcelona European Council (16-17 March, 2002). For example, only just over 50% of 4 year-olds attend junior infant classes, a universal and free service. The reasons for the low take-up may be complex but well worth examining.

Access for children who experience disadvantage including traveller children remains extremely limited and has developed rather ad-hoc.

Access to private care and education including childminding is also limited by lack of provision and high cost affecting affordability for working parents.

Coordination

A major challenge to the development of early childhood care

and education in Ireland remains the lack of effective coordination, particularly between the traditional 'education' and 'care' divide. Given the strong policy consensus that care and education are 'inextricably linked', it is reasonable to expect a more coordinated effort at administrative level. In order to provide a continuum of care and learning the principal Departments of Education, Justice and Health will have to develop an area of shared jurisdiction.

Quality

The issue of quality in early childhood care and education is complex; the concept of quality may be quite different depending on the view of any particular stakeholder. However, international research has contributed to a growing consensus of what quality in early childhood care and education means and we also know that the efficacy of services is directly linked to high quality.

In Ireland, the issue of quality is not well researched and developed. The application of the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations has led to a strong emphasis on 'static', health and safety type indicators while the more 'dynamic', pedagogical aspects have been neglected.

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education

In 2001 the Minister for Education and Science asked the Dublin Institute of Technology and St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, to jointly establish the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, and form a board of management consisting of representatives from both institutions. The aim of the CECDE is to develop and co-ordinate early childhood education in pursuance of the objectives of the White Paper Ready to Learn and to advise the Department of Education and Science on policy issues in this area. The Centre's brief covers children from 0 to 6 years of age in a wide variety of settings, includ-

ing families, nurseries, crèches, playgroups, child minders, preschools and the infant classes of primary schools.

The main objectives of the CECDE are to develop a quality framework for early childhood education and to promote targeted interventions for chil-

drren who are educationally disadvantaged or have special needs. In addition, we are to prepare the groundwork for the establishment of the Early Childhood Education Agency as envisaged by the White Paper. Within this context, the

CECDE will develop early education quality standards and a support framework to encourage compliance with these standards by early education providers. We will also co-ordinate and enhance early education provision paying particular attention to the involvement of

parents. Finally, we are implementing an ambitious research programme. We have established a Consultative Committee, which includes representatives of the teaching profession, and we will publish a number of

reports in the coming months. For further up to date information please visit our web site at www.cecde.ie.

What next?

The coming months will be crucial for the future of early childhood care and education in Ireland. We expect the OECD to report on their review in the autumn and hope that Government will consider their recommendations very seriously. While most of the required policy framework is in place.

There is a unique opportunity for the Department of Education and Science to assume a leading role in these developments and further implement the recommendations of the 1999 White Paper Ready to Learn.

n "A lot of work remains to be done, particularly in the areas of access, quality and coordination".



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In Ireland, he worked in special education, services for people with disabilities and from 1999 to 2002 as Head of Barnardos' National Children's Resource Centre.

Mr Schonfeld has contributed to a number of organizations and bodies at senior level including the Irish Association of Social Workers, the Disability Federation of Ireland, End Child Poverty Coalition, Committee of the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations, the National Coordinating Childcare Committee and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

He has been Director of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education since June 2002.