

Supporting Quality through Targeted Research on Special Needs and Disadvantage

Annette McDonnell

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was launched by the Minister for Education and Science in October 2002. Its objectives are:

- To develop a National Framework for Quality in early childhood care and education (NFQ/ECCE);
- To develop targeted interventions on a pilot basis for children who are educationally disadvantaged and children with special needs;
- To prepare the groundwork for the establishment of an Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA) as envisaged by the White Paper; and
- To provide advice to the Minister for Education and Science on all issues relating to early childhood care and education (CECDE, 2001).

To address this second objective, four targeted projects were developed by the CECDE and the Department of Education and Science (DES). While the projects address primarily the second objective of the CECDE, they will also inform the other two objectives, in particular the development of the NFQ/ECCE. Initially a public invitation to tender was advertised but the outcome of this process was quite disappointing and reflected a less than optimal capacity for research in this sector. By this we mean that while there are skilled people and groups of people in Ireland capable of carrying out this research, many of these people are already working to their full capacity and could not spend the time or resources to tender or to consider carrying out the project. So by providing funding for these projects and other research programmes, we hope to support the sector in increasing its capacity for research. Two projects were awarded from this process and the CECDE then began a second restricted tendering process, where selected organisations were approached and asked to consider applying for the two remaining projects. This has resulted in one of the outstanding projects being filled but one project still remains unassigned.

Targeted interventions have proven in the literature to be advantageous for vulnerable groups, such as children with special needs or those experiencing disadvantage (Riordan, 2001). The importance of providing additional support for families at risk has also been emphasised in the Report of the Commission on the Family (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 1998).

The projects will have the following characteristics:

- They will have a strong, rigorous research focus producing evidence based, meaningful outcomes;
- They will provide early interventions (in the 2-4 age group), which are known to be more effective than waiting until children reach school age;
- They will acknowledge the importance of high quality interactions in providing optimal cognitive and social outcomes for young children;
- They will acknowledge the importance of listening to children and their families;
- They will be multidisciplinary where appropriate;
- They will be rigorously evaluated.

The first project, *In Search of Quality: Multiple Perspectives* will look at different measures and perspectives of quality from different stakeholders in ECCE in Ireland. Although there is an abundance of literature available internationally demonstrating that quality in ECCE is subjective, complex and context dependent (Moss and Pence, 1994), little of this is specific to the Irish context and may lack cultural sensitivity. Research of this nature carried out in Ireland will provide a meaningful insight into the key aspects of quality in ECCE settings in Ireland.

It is envisaged that this research will provide a wide range of perspectives on quality. In addition to gathering the perspectives of parents and staff, the viewpoint of young children will also be accessed. The project will produce and validate instruments to measure quality in the Irish context and the outcomes of this research will inform and contribute to the development of the NFQ/ECCE currently being developed by the CECEDE.

The objectives of the project are:

- To develop a better understanding of quality in early childhood care and education in Ireland;
- To investigate the nature of quality in a variety of different settings where early learning takes place;
- To gain an insight into multiple perspectives on the meaning of quality including parents, staff and children's views;
- To examine both observable quality and perceived quality in ECCE settings;
- To devise methodologies for examining quality in the Irish context.

The Centre for Social and Educational Research (CSER) in the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) has been awarded this project. The underlying assumption for CSER's approach is that a universal definition of quality may be a misleading premise. Rather, it is more

useful to consider quality as a relative concept, dependent on the particular cultural values present in a particular society at a particular time. When considering quality one must therefore consider the different aims of ECCE settings. These include promoting children's development, providing a safe, nurturing environment for children as well as meeting the needs of their parents for quality affordable care.

The project aims to gather data relating to each of these objectives from a wide variety of stakeholders in order to develop a broad view of quality. It is hoped that this will identify a number of common qualities or objectives applicable to all services and establish the interdependence between them. Data on both observable and perceived quality will be gathered from a variety of settings, including both sessional and full day services for children from birth to six years. Observable quality will be measured by using the Revised Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R) (Harms and Clifford, 1990; Harms *et al.*, 1998). As this scale measures quality in the environment only and does not necessarily ensure quality interactions and experiences, measurements will also be taken using the IEA Pre-primary Project observation schedules developed by the CSER (Hayes *et al.*, 1997). These measure adult time management, adult behaviour and child activity to give an overview of the quality of the interactions in the child's environment. Perceived quality will be measured by use of both semi-structured interviews and focus groups of the stakeholders. These will include parents, staff and children, as well as policy makers and other key personnel.

The anticipated outcomes of the project are that:

- Empirical data on the observed and perceived essence of quality in a variety of ECCE settings in Ireland will be gathered and documented;
- Methodologies that can be used to access young children's views in ECCE will be developed;
- Valid and reliable information about what constitutes quality in ECCE settings that can be used to inform the development of the NFQ/ECCE will be gathered;
- The emergence of a common or shared language on quality in the Irish context will be facilitated;
- Relationships with the ECCE sector will be enhanced.

The second project, *Early Intervention for Children with Special Needs in Diverse Settings* will look at the provision of individualized intervention programmes for children with special needs. Many studies have shown that early intervention for children in special needs is effective (Guralnick, 1997). This study will try to isolate the factors that contribute to quality over a diverse range of settings and ensure optimal outcomes for children and their families in any of these settings. The approach taken will provide

children with individualized programmes to reflect the diversity of children's backgrounds and conditions of disability. It will look at diverse settings to isolate which children derive the optimal outcome from each setting. The current literature suggests that children with different levels of disability derive maximum benefits from different settings, but that the quality of the programme implemented has a greater effect than the nature of the setting (Cole *et al.*, 1991; Odom, 2000). In view of this, the project will offer quality intervention to three-year old children with special needs in three different settings, examining their progress in key areas of development in response to high quality teaching programmes. It will also look at how the programme and setting combinations prepare the children for their transition to the next level of education. As well as determining aspects of programme quality, the project will also examine common features of the settings, which make a positive contribution to child development.

The objectives of the project are:

- To establish the impact of the individual interventions on key areas of the children's development through the assessment and recording of children's progress on an on-going basis;
- To identify and to describe the pedagogic practices that contribute to children's development in each setting;
- To identify the strengths and weaknesses of the individual settings in terms of their capacity to meet children's present learning needs;
- To identify the strengths and weaknesses of the individual settings in terms of their capacity to support children's transition to future appropriate settings;
- To identify the factors within the individual settings which contribute to quality intervention for children with disabilities, where quality is defined in terms of ability to meet children's learning needs in an appropriate setting.

The Mid-Western Health Board was awarded this project, which will be implemented through the North Tipperary Early Intervention Centre (NTEI). It will be informed by the principles of the *National Children's Strategy* (Department of Health and Children, 2000) namely to be child-centred, family-orientated, equitable, inclusive, action orientated and integrated. The NTEI are committed to family-centred practice, which respects the family unit, takes account of family circumstance and priorities, while empowering its members to be key components of the quality intervention. This approach involves the use of multidisciplinary teams working through Individual Learning Plans (ILP) for each child designed to meet their individual needs. The project will use Transdisciplinary Play based Assessment (TDPA) and intervention, using a model which views play as being vitally important to child development. TDPA aims to support holistic development of the child and to use play as a way to engage children and increase the quality of their experiences and interactions with family and service providers.

Both quantitative and qualitative data will be gathered from eighteen children in three different settings. The children's progress throughout the study will be measured using the Carolina Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers with Special Needs (CCITSN) (Johnson-Martin *et al.*, 2004). This system closely complements the TDPA and the ILP processes. The curriculum provides functional activities, suggestions and specific adaptations to address sensory/motor issues and stresses the importance of family involvement throughout the assessment-intervention process. The CCITSN allows for the continual collection of data on the children's progress, and over longer periods of time, generates a developmental chart for each child of their progress through the curriculum

This quantitative data will be complemented by qualitative information collected using a cultural phenomenological approach to investigate how Irish children, families and educators understand high quality intervention. Discourse analysis of interviews will be used to explore their perceptions and experiences through the identification of lexical fields, key words and phrases. The interviews will produce data to gauge the effectiveness of the interventions, programmes and transition plans for each of the different settings. This examination will produce a rich body of qualitative data to give a keen insight into the socio-cultural perceptions and implications of high quality intervention for children with special needs in the Irish context.

The anticipated outcomes of the project are that:

- Documented evidence about what constitutes quality provision for young children with special needs will be produced;
- Empirical data of the effectiveness of interventions in different settings for children with special needs will be gathered;
- Guidance for the Department of Education and Science in terms of the issues of policy and practice which are relevant to children with special needs will be collated;
- A specialised group of highly trained staff working in the area of special needs will be developed.

These findings will identify models of best practice for professionals working in the area of special needs in Ireland. The approach taken will ensure that these models will holistically integrate assessment, intervention planning, programme implementation and reassessment in response to a child's individual goals. They will also inform the nature of professional development needed for practitioners in this area.

The third project, ***An In-career Development Programme for Teachers and Management in Pre-schools for Travellers*** will encourage the development of professional practice and skills for those working in Traveller preschools. It will contain a built in evaluative aspect to allow dynamic on-going training and career development.

It is widely agreed that quality early education for children experiencing disadvantage is vitally important. Traveller children are among the most disadvantaged in Ireland and the recent *National Evaluation Report on Pre-schools for Travellers* (DES, 2003) has made many recommendations aimed at enhancing the quality of their educational experiences and improving their educational position within Irish society.

The Report recommends that:

"...the provision of in-career development courses for teachers in the Traveller pre-schools should continue and should be made more comprehensive... [and that] ...the content of in-career development courses should be determined by the In-Career Development Unit of the Department of Education and Science in consultation with the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE,) the Further Education Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the teachers and management committees of the pre-schools." (DES, 2003:83)

In line with the report's recommendations, this project will develop pre-service courses leading to a recognised minimum qualification for pre-school teachers. They will be in line with best practice in ECCE including studies of child development and psychology, language acquisition and therapy, age appropriate curricula and learning activities, as well as curriculum and pupil assessment. Specialist options will include Traveller culture and intercultural education and completion of these options should be regarded as a desirable characteristic in those seeking employment in pre-schools for Travellers.

The content of the programmes will be guided by the recommendations of the evaluation as well as by a training needs analysis with teachers and assistants in pre-schools for Travellers and consultation with relevant groups and agencies. These will include the Traveller Education Co-ordinator in the DES, parents of Traveller children, the In-Career Development Unit of the DES, the CECDE and FETAC. The training course will be accredited by FETAC and will be implemented over the course of a school year (10 months). It will be delivered in a series of 10 modules. Each module will be equivalent to one day per month and will be made available to all teachers and assistants. Two general aims of this provision are to allow practitioners to acquire and continuously develop their knowledge and skills in ECCE and to enable existing practitioners to obtain accredited pre-school teacher qualifications over time.

Similarly and simultaneously, a training programme for Traveller preschool management committees will be developed. This will be based on recommendations from the National Evaluation Report (DES, 2003), a training needs analysis and consultation with relevant groups and agencies, including leading management organisations such as the Irish

Business and Employers Federation (IBEC), the Institute for Public Administration (IPA), the Traveller Education Co-ordinator in the DES, the In-Career Development Unit of the DES, the CECDE and other organisations with experience in training and supporting people who manage schools (e.g. National Parents Council, Catholic Primary School Management Association).

This project was assigned through restricted tender and will be carried out by an Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO)/Barnardos partnership. These organisations are currently working on their combined tender.

The anticipated outcomes of this project are that:

- Increased staff expertise for those working in Traveller pre-schools will be developed;
- Enhanced practice and pedagogy in Traveller pre-schools will be encouraged;
- More effective management committee structures and processes (production of guidelines for the effective functioning of management committees) will be facilitated;
- Greater consistency in the management of Traveller pre-schools will be encouraged;
- Strengthened relationship with the ECCE sector will be developed;
- An accredited training package tailored to meet the needs of staff working with young children who are disadvantaged will be developed.

The final project, the **Early Start Integration Project** will research the Early Start programme with a view to further developing some key aspects. These will include in-service training, community involvement and the role of staff as researchers. The Early Start programme has been operating since 1994 in designated disadvantaged schools and has been evaluated twice.

An initial evaluation of the project focused on the original eight centres, commenced with the project itself. This evaluation found that in:

“...an assessment of cognitive language, and motor behaviours, no differences were found between the performance of the first two cohorts of Early Start pupils when they reached Junior Infants class and the performance of Junior Infant pupils who had not experienced Early Start.” (Educational Research Centre, 1998:109)

However, as the children were not tested on entry to Early Start, and were given places having been identified as the most in need, it is not certain if this indicates that they had in fact caught up with children whose needs were not as acute, or if the programme had not met with all its objectives. Positive outcomes included the Junior Infant teachers'

assessments of children's ability to adapt to the junior infant curriculum, and parents' positive attitudes to Early Start." (Educational Research Centre, 1998)

This project has been designed to make changes to the delivery of the Early Start programme, in particular to its structural elements. These include the length of session and exposure to the programme, age of child, in-service training, parental involvement and wider links with the community. This project therefore will look at creating models of best practice in these areas for use in all Early Start centres and the wider ECCE sector.

The objectives of the project are:

- To expose the children to the Early Start programme for longer periods than heretofore;
- To ensure that an ongoing in-service training programme, based on an on-site support model from appropriately qualified staff is implemented;
- To determine effective structures and procedures through which the school as a whole, and Early Start in particular, can integrate with community initiatives in ECCE;
- To develop, in consultation with parents, attractive, mutual and effective models of parental involvement, both in the classroom and elsewhere;
- To document all developments, to engage the staff in active research, to establish ongoing evaluation structures and procedures, and to produce an overall evaluation of all objectives.

The anticipated outcomes of the project are:

- Effective models of in-service training for staff working with children who are disadvantaged will be developed;
- Empirical data on the effectiveness of the intervention for children experiencing disadvantage will be generated;
- Successful models of sustainable, increased, flexible parental involvement in areas of disadvantage will be developed;
- Useful, widely applicable solutions to establish Early Start as part of the community response to the needs of children experiencing disadvantage will be made available.

While these projects primarily focus on children who experience disadvantage or who have special needs, it is important to point out that each project will generate universally applicable knowledge. We hope that the evidence and learning gained from the projects will benefit the development of quality ECCE for all children in Ireland. We also hope that funding such projects will lead to an increase in the capacity of this sector to carry out research.

References

Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2001). *Programme of Work*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.

Cole, K., Mills, P., Dale, P. and Jenkins, J. (1991). Effects of Preschool Integration for Children with Disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, Volume 58, pp. 36-43.

Department of Health and Children (2000). *The National Children's Strategy. Our Children-Their Lives*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (1998). *Strengthening Families for Life: Final Report of the Commission on the Family to the Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Educational Research Centre (1998). *Early Start Preschool Programme: Final Evaluation Report*. Dublin: Educational Research Centre.

Guralnick, M. (Ed.) (1997). *The Effectiveness of Early Intervention*. Maryland: Paul H. Brookes.

Harms, T. and Clifford, R. (1990). *Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Harms, T. and Clifford, R. (1998). *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Hayes, N., O'Flaherty, J. and Kernan, M. (1997). *A Window on Early Education in Ireland, First Report of the IEA Pre-primary Project*. Dublin: Dublin Institute of Technology.

Johnson-Martin, N., Attermeier, S. and Hacker, B. (2004). *The Carolina Curriculum*. Maryland: Paul H. Brookes.

Moss, P. and Pence, A. (1994). *Valuing Quality in Early Childhood Services*. London: Paul Chapman.

Department of Education and Science (2003). *National Evaluation Report on Preschools for Travellers*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Odom, S. (2000). Preschool Inclusion - What we Know and Where we go from Here. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, Volume 20, No. 1, pp. 20-27.

Riordan, S. (2001). *Supporting Parenting: A Study of Parent's Support Needs*. Dublin: Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs.