



An Lárionad um Fhorbairt
agus Oideachas na Luath-Óige

RESEARCH STRATEGY: A WORK IN PROGRESS



1.0: Introduction

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was established to coordinate and enhance early childhood development and education in Ireland, paying particular attention to disadvantaged and special needs groups. The CECDE Programme of Work (2001) outlines the integral role that research plays in the realisation of this purpose. It is the responsibility of the CECDE to draw on this in order to develop a comprehensive research strategy in consultation with major stakeholders and to supervise its implementation.

2.0: Research Focus

The CECDE Programme of Work provides the framework from which the research strategy will evolve, that is, it outlines the specific contribution that research can make in relation to the functions of the Centre.

2.1: In terms of **developing quality standards/guidelines** for the Early Years Sector in curriculum/methodology, equipment/materials, staff/qualifications and parental involvement, research is necessary in the following areas:

- To document existing and emerging national standards in the form of current legislative requirements and proposed frameworks in order to make recommendations for developing quality standards;
- To examine good practice standards internationally in order to make recommendations for developing quality standards;
- To devise a conceptual framework for how young children (0-6 years) develop and learn that considers the implications for developing quality standards;
- To use the conceptual framework to facilitate discussion and debate in the Sector regarding quality standards;
- To produce quality standards in consultation with the Sector;
- To translate quality standards into guidelines for use in all integrated education and care settings.

2.2: In order to encourage **compliance with quality standards** in the Sector, research will be pivotal in terms of the following:

- To identify what supports are needed to enable practitioners achieve quality standards;
- To determine what constitutes best practice in monitoring quality standards;
- To devise a Quality Handbook in which monitoring instruments will be presented.

2.3: In co-ordinating and enhancing provision for **children experiencing educational disadvantage** and **children with special needs**, the research components will be as follows:

- To undertake an audit of existing provision relating to disadvantaged and special needs groups. This will make proposals for (1) enhancing and where appropriate, extending existing provision, paying particular attention to Traveller children and (2) innovative initiatives for groups whose needs are currently not being met, especially children whose sensory, cognitive or language development has been impaired, children living in disadvantage in rural areas and children whose first language is not English;
- To design, support and/or evaluate innovative initiatives in the form of targeted programmes/strengthen existing initiatives;
- To develop procedures for equality proofing all of the CECDE's work and early childhood education and care more generally.

2.4: The **research and development function** itself includes undertaking a comprehensive review of national and international research in the area of early childhood education and care in order to identify gaps and future areas for study. This review is almost complete and encompassed national and international research (as it relates to Ireland) from 1990 to date. Research was categorised under the following headings: children's rights, curriculum, cultural diversity, educational disadvantage, early childhood development, Irish language education, parents and families, quality, sociological/historical, special needs and finally, training and qualifications. Primary analysis of the data has highlighted a number of research gaps. These may alter or increase as further analysis of the data takes place.

- **Quality:** There has been little research in the area of Quality in the Irish context in relation to quality indicators or the evaluation of the more intangible nuances of quality.
- **Children's Rights/ Voices:** While there have been a lot of publications in relation to the rights and voices of children in the teenage years in preparation for citizenship, the question of consultation with and empowerment of children in the early years is largely underdeveloped.
- **Parents and Families:** Recent years have witnessed a welcome focus on supporting the wider family in relation to parenthood. However, there appears to be no direct government policy in relation to parental involvement, although many government policies, such as the Report of the Commission on the Family, make indirect reference to this.
- **Early Childhood Development:** While there is a wealth of research available in relation to early childhood education and care, there is a general absence of publications regarding the transition from early years education and care to the formal education system.

- **Educational Disadvantage:** Much research has been completed in the area of disadvantage, yet there is a dearth of publications that focus on the importance of an integrated approach to tackling educational disadvantage.
- **Special Needs:** There is a need for further examination of the issue of effective intervention for children with special needs. In particular, there is a need for critical examination of the process of inclusion and integration of children with special needs in mainstream settings.
- **Cultural Diversity:** The question of the education of foreign national minority groups is relatively new in the Irish context. A considerable amount of research has been conducted in a relatively short period of time. However, there is little research available in relation to the language needs of minority groups in the Irish context.
- **International Perspectives:** While international perspectives featured as a category in all of the chapters, there is a dearth in research that compares Ireland with other jurisdictions.
- **Longitudinal Research:** The vast majority of the research is one-off, short-term evaluations of initiatives. This does not take into account long-term effects of projects, which is of vital importance.
- **Policy:** All sections are quite weak on policy that does not emanate from government. There are a few organisations such as the Combat Poverty Agency, Irish National Teachers Organisation, Pavee Point, Irish Travellers Movement and Barnardos, as well as certain individuals, that produce policy papers, but the majority of the research is categorised as descriptive/analysis. Research needs to be undertaken to inform new policy development and to generate debate and discussion on policy issues.
- **Staffing, Training and Qualifications:** There is no research in the Irish context relating to the impact of training and qualifications on the quality of services provided in settings.

2.5: In 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.

2.6: Finally, the progress of the CECDE will be monitored and evaluated. In addition to instigating internal monitoring and evaluation procedures, an external review of the CECDE progress will be commissioned.

3.0: Research Methods

The CECDE Programme of Work highlights a variety of methods to accomplish the research:

- 3.1:** Some of the research will be carried out by the CECDE staff members. A sizeable proportion will be undertaken through the work of two post-doctoral fellowships and four doctoral studentships. One Post-Doctoral Fellow and two Doctoral Students will be jointly supervised by the CECDE and designated staff in the Dublin Institute of Technology and the other Post-Doctoral Fellow and two Doctoral Students will be co-supervised by the CECDE and designated staff in St Patrick's College. Additionally, the CECDE has the capacity to commission specific pieces of research. At a broader level, the CECDE will encourage other agencies to undertake relevant research and provide support to them where possible.
- 3.2:** Research undertaken will utilise both quantitative and qualitative techniques and will, where appropriate, include consultation with important stakeholders including practitioners, academics, parents, children and policy makers. All research will be disseminated in a user-friendly way to the Sector, including the academic community through journals and conference presentations.
- 3.3:** Research undertaken will be conducted in an ethically responsible manner and will be approved by the Ethics Committees in the Dublin Institute for Technology and St Patrick's College.
- 3.4:** The Centre will keep abreast of relevant research developments nationally and internationally and will use research to promote and facilitate commentary and debate on issues within the Sector.

4.0: Research Strategy

The focus of the research to be undertaken, coupled with the methods by which it may be achieved provides the shape and structure for the three-year research strategy (see page overleaf). A number of research strands have been identified, each with corresponding specific pieces of work, proposed methods for implementation and a timeframe. Please note that this is a Research Strategy in progress – it requires consultation with major stakeholders in order to be further developed.

Research Strategy

Research Strand	Research Title	Research Brief	Method of Implementation
Overarching Research	A Conceptual Framework of Early Childhood Development and Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The conceptual framework will critically examine a variety of theories and documented evidence to explore children’s development and learning in a holistic way and from both a rights and needs based perspective. It will therefore emphasise the physical, psychological (cognitive, emotional, moral) and social aspects of the child. It will also view the child as an active agent in the context of their similarities and differences, relationships and their wider environment. • It will make specific recommendations to inform the development of quality standards in curriculum/methodology, equipment/materials, staff/qualifications, and parental involvement. • It will be used to facilitate discussion and debate in the Sector regarding the development of quality standards. 	CECDE Staff with commissioned pieces
	The Meaning of Quality in the Irish Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document emerging concepts of quality in the Irish context and establish the value base. 	CECDE Staff

Research Strand	Research Title	Research Brief	Method of Implementation
	A National and International Perspective of Standards and Good Practice in Early Childhood Education and Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document existing and emerging national, regional and local good practice standards and research in early years provision. • Document good practices and research in the international arena in a variety of thematic areas (e.g. curriculum, teaching methodologies, equipment/materials, parental involvement, monitoring, inspecting and evaluating compliance with quality standards, supporting practitioners to meet quality standards). • Consider whether it is possible to learn from international comparisons, and if so, what can be learnt and how? What are the implications for developing, implementing and monitoring quality standards in the Irish context?. 	CECDE Staff
	An Overview of Irish Research Pertaining to Early Childhood Education and Care since 1990	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertake a comprehensive review of national and international research (as it relates to Ireland) in the area of early childhood education and care. • Use it in order to identify gaps and future areas for study. • Produce a publication for the Sector. • Update the database of research on an ongoing basis and update the publication on an annual basis. 	CECDE Staff

Research Strand	Research Title	Research Brief	Method of Implementation
	Equality Proofing the Work of the CECDE and the Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Devise and implement procedures for equality proofing all aspects of the CECDE's work. In terms of procedures for equality proofing the early childhood education and care sector more generally, numerous developments in this field in recent years¹ mean that it is preferable to 'pull together' the documentation produced, as opposed to re-inventing the wheel. 	CECDE Staff
Development of Quality Standards	The Key Characteristics of a Quality Curriculum ² for the Early Years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine and document what key characteristics constitute a quality curriculum for the early years. • Pay particular attention to disadvantage and special needs. • This will be achieved by drawing on the conceptual framework, national and international research and good practice and consulting with the Sector, particularly with practitioners. 	CECDE staff
	The Values underpinning the Primary School Curriculum in Ireland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is the Primary School curriculum (1999) being implemented in the early years classrooms? What are the values behind it? 	Ph.D Thesis student

¹ The Advisory Group to the NCCC is concerned with issues of equality and diversity and is commissioning guidelines for use by childcare providers and parents. In so doing, they are drawing on a report published by Pavee Point entitled 'Eist – Respecting Diversity in early Childhood Care Education and Training' (Pavee Point, 2001). Pavee Point have developed a diversity training course through the Eist project which is being included in the Degree course in Early Childhood Care and Education in DIT. INTO has produced and disseminated its 'Intercultural Guidelines for Schools: Valuing Difference, Combating Racism, Promoting Inclusiveness and Equality'

² We will continue to collaborate with the NCCA to develop a framework curriculum.

Research Strand	Research Title	Research Brief	Method of Implementation
	Teaching Methodologies: The Adult-Child Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine and document good practice regarding the levels and types of adult-child interaction and the role of the adult in learning for children of different ages, children experiencing educational disadvantage and children with special needs. • This will be achieved by drawing on the conceptual framework, national and international research and good practice and consulting with the Sector, particularly with practitioners. 	Commissioned Research
	Practitioner Perceptions of How to Assess Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment of learning in early education – what exists nationally? What can we learn from theory and the international context? Recommendations for enhancing practice. 	Ph.D. Thesis student
	Staff and Qualifications ³ : The Relationship Between Qualifications and Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synthesise international and national research on the relationship between qualifications and quality. 	CECDE staff
	Parental Involvement in Disadvantaged Settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and implement model structures for involving parents of children experiencing disadvantage in consultative processes. Evaluate their effectiveness. 	Ph.D. Thesis student
Producing Quality Standards and Translating them into Guidelines	Quality Standards in Curriculum, Teaching Methodologies, Equipment/Materials, Staff and Qualifications and Parental Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draw on the conceptual framework, what exists nationally, good practices internationally and the research undertaken to produce the quality standards for curriculum, teaching methodologies, equipment/materials, staff and qualifications and parental involvement in consultation with the Sector. • Translate standards into guidelines. 	CECDE Staff

³ We will continue to link with Certifying Bodies subgroup, NCCC and NQAI.

Research Strand	Research Title	Research Brief	Method of Implementation
Best Practice in Monitoring Quality Standards and Supporting Practitioners	An Infrastructure for Monitoring Compliance with Quality Standards and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop an infrastructure for the monitoring, inspection and evaluation of compliance with quality standards by drawing on the conceptual framework, looking at what exists nationally, regionally and locally (e.g. school system, NCNA Centre of Excellence Award, Border Counties Childcare Network, Barnardos/FAS training courses), what are international good practices (e.g. New Zealand) and by consulting with the Sector. 	CECDE Staff
	A Framework to Support Practitioners in Complying with Quality Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a support framework to enable practitioners meet quality standards by drawing on the conceptual framework, looking at what exists nationally, regionally and locally and by consulting with the Sector. Produce a Quality Handbook in which monitoring instruments are presented. • Develop mechanisms that encourage and support self-monitoring and self-evaluation among practitioners. 	CECDE Staff
Thematic Areas	Educational Disadvantage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audit of current provision in the area of educational disadvantage and proposals for enhancing provision (especially for Travellers) and for innovative initiatives (especially for children experiencing disadvantage in rural areas and children whose first language is not English). • Develop a framework for assessing dispersed educational disadvantage in the 0-3yrs age group (that moves beyond global indicators). • Develop and pilot a good practice target response/ intervention for 0-3 yrs age group in a given region and evaluate its effectiveness. 	CECDE Staff Fellowship

Research Strand	Research Title	Research Brief	Method of Implementation
	Special Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audit of current provision in the area of special needs. • Develop a framework documenting existing provision – analysis of what exists, theoretical underpinnings, and evidence of efficacy, recommendations regarding best practice future provision. Pilot a good practice target response/ intervention and evaluate its effectiveness. 	CECDE Staff Fellowship
	Promoting the Smooth Transition of Children from Pre-school to Formal Schooling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the principles of transition that limit stress and maximise the opportunities for all children with particular reference to Traveller children, children with special needs and children experiencing disadvantage. 	Ph.D. Thesis student
	Children Whose First Language is not English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examine children’s experiences of second language acquisition in the early years by asking them for their views. 	Ph.D. Thesis student
	The Case for Play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play and learning in the Irish context – what are practitioner’s perspectives, what are their beliefs and perceived constraints? How do they relate play to learning and development? 	Ph.D. Thesis student
Supporting External Research Initiatives that Serve our Purpose	Supporting External Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide advice/support (e.g. drafting research protocols) for practitioners who want to commission/undertake research in the area. • Participate on research boards/initiatives with other universities/institutions. 	CECDE Staff
Evaluating CECDE as an initiative	Internal Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish and implement structures and mechanisms for monitoring the CECDE progress on a continuous basis (e.g. Advisory Committee, Work Programme implementation schedule, Management Board Reports). 	CECDE Staff

Research Strand	Research Title	Research Brief	Method of Implementation
	External Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage an independent external body to evaluate the progress of the CECDE and make recommendations for continuous growth and development. 	Commissioned Research