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Centre for **Early Childhood**
Development & Education

An Lárionad um Fhorbairt
agus Oideachais na Luath-Óige

An Overview of Research in Ireland Pertaining to Early Childhood Education and Care 1990-2003

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INTRODUCTION

The Centre for early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was launched in 2002 by the Minister for Education and Science and is jointly managed by the Dublin Institute of Technology and St. Patrick's College. The remit of the CECDE is to develop, co-ordinate and enhance early childhood care and education in Ireland. The 3 objectives of the CECDE are to:

➢ To develop a quality framework for early childhood education,

➢ To develop targeted interventions on a pilot basis for children who are educationally disadvantaged and children with special needs; and

➢ To prepare the groundwork for the establishment of an Early Childhood Education Agency as envisaged by the White Paper. (CECDE, 2001)

Rationale:

As part of this comprehensive brief, the Centre commenced some baseline research in the form of an audit of all Irish research pertaining to early childhood education and care 1990 to date. This piece of research was prioritised within the Centre's Research Strategy (CECDE, 2003) in order to highlight the wealth of research available in the Irish context. It is also valuable in identifying the gaps in current research and taking steps to implement strategies to conduct this research in the future. There has been no such undertaking in the past and this exploratory research is important to centralise the vast amount of research conducted by the sector in recent years. Research is most useful when it is disseminated and made available to the sector as a whole.

This paper provides an overview of the research audit to date, outlines the research methodology, provides preliminary findings of the research emerging and identifies some of the gaps in the research appearing.

DESIGN OF THE RESEARCH

For the purpose of this audit, a liberal interpretation of the term 'research' was employed so as to include the wealth of publications available in the Irish context. As well as academic research, the audit includes postgraduate theses, conference papers, unpublished reports and research by organisations not released previously into the public domain.

Research Parameters

Following the initial gathering of data, the following parameters were placed on the scope of the research audit:

➤ Research from 1990 to date

➤ Research pertaining to the Republic of Ireland only

➤ Inclusion of the Infant classes (Junior and Senior Infants) of the primary school

There is a vast amount of research available prior to 1990, too much to document in this research audit. In choosing the 1990 cut-off point, we recognised the essence of this research has been distilled and carried forward into subsequent research.

While publications were gathered initially from the whole island of Ireland (Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland), it became apparent that a comprehensive audit of Northern Ireland publications would not be possible with the time scale and resources available. Research pertaining to comparative studies between Northern Ireland and the republic has been included.

Research pertaining to the primary school is also included in the audit in so far as it relates to the infant classes. This is owing to the fact that the remit of the Centre is children aged 0 to 6 years of age, and in excess of 50% of four-year olds and virtually all 5 year-olds are enrolled in primary schools (Department of Education and Science, 2002).

METHODOLOGY

A variety of strategies were used in the collection of publications for this research audit. These can be largely assigned to two main categories, documentary desk-based research and the contacting of individuals and organisations.

Bibliographies:

The bibliographies of publications in relation to early childhood education and care in Ireland proved a rich source of research, ranging from government publications to unpublished conferences papers. The analysis of bibliographies also provided an insight into organisations, individuals and journals prominent in the sector that were investigated as part of our secondary-research.

Government Departments:

Contact was initiated with a number of government departments with a remit for childcare, including:

- ➤ The Department of Education and Science
- ➤ The Department of Health and Children
- ➤ The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform

The department websites also proved useful in the accessing and collection of data.

Non-Government Organisations:

A number of non-government organisations were contacted and visited in the collection of publications for the audit. Many have websites and visitor libraries, which was of great benefit in ascertaining the relevance of publications and assist in their categorisation. Organisations such as the City and County Childcare Committees and the Area-based Partnerships were contacted by letter to ensure their work was reflected in the audit.

Universities and Colleges:

A number of third level institutions were contacted in the course of the audit, primarily those with an interest and involvement in early childhood education and care. The majority of colleges had searchable on-line catalogues, but often, these did not contain up to date records of postgraduate theses. Therefore, the only way to be comprehensive was to sift through drawers of catalogues and pick relevant theses for the audit.

The Educational Studies Association of Ireland Register of theses http://homepage.tinet.ie/~esai/theses/theses.html was an invaluable document in gathering together all postgraduate research pertaining to early childhood education and care in all Irish third-level institutions

Individual Researchers:

Many researchers, including those not affiliated to colleges or organisations, were contacted directly regarding their work. Lists of their publications gathered to date were forwarded to them and they were asked to comment on the suitability of publications for the audit and to forward other publications omitted from the list. This method also yielded results that may not have been sourced elsewhere such as conference papers and localised projects.

Internet Searches:

In the course of the research audit, many keyword searches were completed in a variety of contexts. These took place on organisation's websites and on library catalogues. Some searches were initiated on the Internet, using search engines. This highlighted certain sources of information for the audit that were then investigated further.

Journals and Periodicals:

The collection of data from journals and periodicals proved difficult and time-consuming. In the absence of a dedicated early years Irish journal, many articles are published in British and international journals. There is a vast array of international journals in which such articles could be published, owing to the breadth of the early years sector, spanning education, social work, special needs, curriculum, child welfare, psychology and medicine etc.

While many journals are now available on-line, they are not always searchable and the vast majority have on-line records only since the late 1990's. It proved very difficult to locate all volumes and editions of these journals over a 13-year period. I spent many days in the St. Patrick's College Library, Trinity library and other libraries probing journal's Table of Contents but the main focus was placed on the Irish and British journals, as they contained the most articles pertinent to our search. However, we have been as inclusive as possible of this category in the audit with the current resources.

Other sources of possible research data:

A number of sources of data emerged that were not fully investigated in this audit. Many are weekly or monthly magazines that are too numerous to examine, often containing short, non-research based articles e.g. ChildLinks (Barnardos), Poverty Today (Combat Poverty Agency) and the Journal of Child-Centred Practice (ISPCC). There is also a great wealth of undergraduate theses in colleges providing early childhood studies, too numerous to include in this audit. There are a great number of research projects in the process of completion at present and these have not been included in this publication.

Many non-government organisations have valuable resources on their websites, which could not be included as 'research', but would prove valuable for providers, practitioners, researchers and academics in the sector. A number of County Childcare Committees are in the process of finalising their Strategic Plans (2002-2006), among other research. A

number of organisations and institutions, such as the Combat Poverty Agency, a number of government departments, voluntary organisations and Health Boards produce annual reports on their activities. The Department of Education and Science issue a number of Circulars and an annual Statistical Report each year to primary schools to inform them of policy changes modifications.

COLLATION AND ANALYSIS

An Access database was set-up to log the publications as they emerged. Thematic analysis was used to organise the publications into a series of themes.

Further thematic analysis produced a series of categories and sub-categories. Table 1 below shows the overall layout of the publication. Each of the 11 themes identified is divided into a number of categories and these change for each theme. The categories are then further divided into a number of sub-categories and these remain consistent throughout. These sub-categories are:

- ➢ **Description/Analysis**
- ➢ **Evaluation**
- ➢ **Guidelines**
- ➢ **Policy**

Description/Analysis:

These publications compose a commentary on or description of current contexts and initiatives without being evaluative. The scope of interpretation of descriptive/Analytic is quite liberal and thus incorporates a wide variation of research topics and styles.

Evaluation:

Evaluation incorporates the analysis and evaluation of initiatives and projects pertaining to early childhood education and care. This takes place at all levels, from international comparisons and government evaluations to the assessment of the effectiveness of an individual initiative.

Guidelines:

This section includes guidelines published by state agencies or individual organisations in relation to initiatives, regulations and services. These are often produced for providers and

consumers of the services to ensure common understandings and provision standardisation. Such publications are often in the form of an information pack that is easily disseminated to large numbers of people and is easily understood and implemented.

Policy:

This section is largely composed of the government's and organisation's policy concerning early childhood education and care in Ireland. Each chapter contains a section on Government publications in which policy papers for this category are outlined. This category also incorporates responses and viewpoints of individuals and organisations in relation to policy, such as submissions, position papers and responses to policy.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The CECDE was surprised and delighted at the vast amount of research collected in the process of conducting this audit. To date, 1,097 publications and research articles in relation to early childhood education and care in Ireland since 1990 have been gathered. A process of thematic analysis of the collected research indicated that it could be divided into these 11 themes. Table 1 lists the themes that emerged and the corresponding number of publications alongside.

Table 1: Research Themes and Corresponding Number of References

Theme	Number of References*
Children's Rights	62
Cultural Diversity	131
Curriculum	90
Early Childhood Development	362
Educational Disadvantage	133
Irish Language Education	129
Parents and Families	106
Quality	54
Sociological/Historical Perspectives	76
Special Needs	124
Staffing, Training and Qualifications	77
Total	**1344**

*This number of references is correct as of May 23rd 2003. This is a work in progress and the above numbers are subject to change in the maturation of the project.

There is some minor overlap between publications in a number of themes; for example, a publication may be relevant to two or three different themes. That is why the overall number of publications in Table 1 (1,344) is in excess of the 1,097 individual publications in the audit database to date.

Children's Rights focuses on the importance of protecting and championing the rights of children. It also contains a category on promoting children's voices as active citizens in society.

The theme of **Cultural Diversity** in the early years presents research in relation to the education and care of minority groups in Ireland. This includes both our indigenous minority groups such as the Travelling Community and foreign national groups.

Curriculum in the early childhood care and education sector is investigated in relation to curriculum development and implementation. It also focuses on the range of methodologies in use and the assessment of teaching and learning.

The theme of **Educational Disadvantage** in the early years outlines the impediments that disadvantage imply and analyses some of the interventions to reduce its detrimental consequences. These include local based initiatives, integrated approaches and school based programmes.

Early Childhood Development is a large theme, incorporating publications from child development and child welfare in the Irish context. Service provision in relation to early childhood education and care is also examined here.

Irish Language Education in the early years sector focuses on Irish language acquisition for both native and non-native speakers. Publications focus on the role of the family, community and society in this regard and the acquisition of Irish in preschool and school settings.

The crucial role of **Parents and Families** in early childhood education and care is outlined in this theme. The publications here examine the importance of parental involvement and participation in out of home education and care settings and supports available to parents to fulfil this role.

The theme of **Quality** examines the provision of services in the early childhood education and care sector. It also outlines the difficulties in defining the more subtle and intangible nuances of quality in the Irish context

Sociological Perspectives focuses on the historical, economic, sociological and cultural constructions of childhood in Ireland over the period 1990-2003.

The theme of **Special Needs** relates to the provision for and categories of needs in early childhood care and education. This focuses on the need for early identification and the provision of appropriate intervention for the needs of the child.

Staffing, Training and Qualifications analyses the education and training of early years practitioners working in the sector. It also focuses on the delivery mechanisms in operation and the development of managerial skills.

For the purpose of this paper, I will examine 4 of these 11 themes in detail; the two themes with the most publications, that is to say Early Childhood Development and Educational Disadvantage and the two themes with the least number of publications; Children's Rights and Quality. Their categories and sub-categories, including the number of references for each will be listed, and a short commentary provided.

Theme - Early Childhood Development [362]

Early Childhood development is by far the largest in the research audit, containing 304 references. Following thematic analysis, the categories below emerged and the corresponding number of publications for each category is listed:

➢ **Child Development [60]**
  -Description/Analysis [52]
  -Evaluation [3]
  -Guidelines [1]

-Policy [4]

➢ **Child Welfare [33]**

   -Description/Analysis [24]

   -Evaluation [1]

   -Guidelines [0]

   -Policy [8]

➢ **Government Publications [63]**

   -Description/Analysis [4]

   -Evaluation [2]

   -Guidelines [3]

   -Policy [54]

➢ **International Perspectives [20]**

   -Description/Analysis [15]

   -Evaluation [2]

   -Guidelines [1]

   -Policy [2]

➢ **Service Provision [186]**

   -Description/Analysis [48]

   -Evaluation [81]

   -Guidelines [23]

   -Policy [34]

The voluminous amount of research in this area reflects economic and societal changes in Ireland in the last decade. This has led to increased parental involvement in the labour force, thus increasing demand for early childhood care and education outside the home (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 1999). Child protection and welfare is also a topical issue in the current climate.

There is also growing recognition of the paramount importance of early childhood education and care on future development (Hayes, 2000; 2002). Service provision is a large category within this theme, reflecting a growing societal and state interest and

involvement in the area (Department of Education and Science, 1999a; Department of Health and Children, 2000).

Theme – Educational Disadvantage [133]

Educational disadvantage has received much attention in the Irish context in recent years. This theme accounts for 128 of the references in the audit, classified under the following categories:

➢ **Government Publications [25]**
  -Description/Analysis [4]
  -Evaluation [2]
  -Guidelines [0]
  -Policy [19]

➢ **Integrated Approaches [7]**
  -Description/Analysis [4]
  -Evaluation [2]
  -Guidelines [1]
  -Policy [0]

➢ **International Perspectives [4]**
  -Description/Analysis [3]
  -Evaluation [0]
  -Guidelines [0]
  -Policy [1]

➢ **Local Initiatives [21]**
  -Description/Analysis [5]
  -Evaluation [8]
  -Guidelines [0]
  -Policy [8]

➢ **School-based Programmes [37]**
  -Description/Analysis [11]
  -Evaluation [19]

-Guidelines [0]

-Policy [7]

➢ **Socio-Economic Disadvantage [39]**

-Description/Analysis [14]

-Evaluation [4]

-Guidelines [0]

-Policy [21]

Research internationally and nationally has emphasised the decisive nature of early intervention to alleviate disadvantage (Kellaghan, Weir, Ó hUallacháin and Morgan, 1995; INTO 1994; 2000) Investment in the early years yields greater returns than subsequent attempts at remediation, both in terms of personal enrichment and societal benefits (Department of Education and Science, 1999a). Children experiencing disadvantage often do not achieve their educational potential and this may reduce their chance of success in life and perpetuate the cycle of disadvantage (Coolahan, 1998; Department of Education and Science, 1999b; 2001).

Despite a myriad of interventions and initiatives to eliminate educational disadvantage, at both national and local levels, disadvantage remains a prevalent issue for a significant number of young children in Ireland (Department of Education and Science, 2001; Zappone and Haran, 2002). The CECDE will play a pivotal role in addressing this challenge, due to its particular brief to consider the needs of children affected by or at risk of educational disadvantage.

Theme - Children's Rights [62]

The issue of promoting children's rights and voices in society has come to the fore of Irish policy in recent years, catalysed by Ireland's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992. Publications in this area represent 55 of the overall amount and are categorised as following.

➢ **Government Publications [16]**

-Description/Analysis [0]

-Evaluation [1]

-Guidelines [0]

-Policy [15]

➢ **Promoting Children's Voices [21]**

-Description/Analysis [14]

-Evaluation [4]

-Guidelines [0]

-Policy [3]

➢ **Protecting Children's Rights [25]**

-Description/Analysis [11]

-Evaluation [1]

-Guidelines [0]

-Policy [13]

While much research has been conducted in this area in Ireland, it largely focuses on older children and teenagers (McAuley and Brattman, 2002). Research in relation to methods to ascertain the views and voices of young children must be developed to ensure that children play an active and constructive role as citizens in society (Guardian Ad Litem Group, 2001; O'Doherty, Wieczorek-Deering and Shannon (2002). The recent launch of the ISPCC Children's Consultation Unit is a welcomed development in this regard.

Theme - Quality [54]

It is surprising to note that the subject of quality, which has received so much attention in the Irish context, is relatively unsupported by published research. The 53 research items have been categorised as follows:

➢ **Government Publications [20]**

-Description/Analysis [2]

-Evaluation [0]

-Guidelines [0]

-Policy [18]

➢ **International Perspectives [5]**

-Description/Analysis [3]

-Evaluation [0]

-Guidelines [1]

-Policy [1]

➢ **Quality Indicators [12]**

-Description/Analysis [10]

-Evaluation [0]

-Guidelines [0]

-Policy [2]

➢ **Quality of Service Provision [17]**

-Description/Analysis [3]

-Evaluation [7]

-Guidelines [5]

-Policy [2]

Quality is a complex and subjective term that is difficult to define in simple statements or checklists (Department of Education and Science, 1999a; IPPA, 2002). As quality is a dynamic and context-specific term, the importation of models and research from other jurisdictions must be mediated for the unique Irish context and complemented by our own research.

The absence of Irish material in relation to quality makes discussion difficult to ground and much research needs to be conducted in this area to ensure a comprehensive and informed discussion of the topic. The CECDE will play an integral role in the progression of this debate in the development of the Quality Framework.

GAPS IN THE RESEARCH

This immense number of publications is a credit to the early years sector in Ireland, which has remained under-funded and underdeveloped for many years. On primary analysis of the information to date, a number of research gaps are prominent. These may alter or increase as further analysis of the data takes place.

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.

Transitions:

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.

Quality:

As already noted, there has been little research in the area of Quality in the Irish context, both in relation to quality indicators or the evaluation of the more intangible and dynamic elements of quality.

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.

Educational Disadvantage:

Much research has been completed in the area of disadvantage, yet there is a dearth of publications that focus specifically 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.

Staffing, Training and Qualifications:

There is little research in the Irish context relating to the impact of training and qualifications on the quality of services provided in 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 lack of 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The early childhood care and education sector should take great pride in the vast amount of Irish research produced since 1990. It is hoped that the research audit will be of great benefit as a resource that draws together in excess of a decade of hard work and dedication within the early childhood education and care sector.

The gaps highlighted will perhaps provide a basis and focus for further research projects in the future. The Centre is in the process of drafting its Research Strategy and this has incorporated these aforementioned gaps in research. Moreover, the dissemination and accessibility of such research is imperative to benefit the sector as a whole.

It is hoped to publish the research audit in the summer and it will be available as a searchable on-line database when the CECDE's website becomes operational.

This on-line database will be updated regularly to take account of new and emerging research and there will be an annual update of the hard copy publication. This will be a valuable centralised resource for the whole of the early childhood care and education sector. It is hoped that the Centre can become a clearinghouse for research in the early childhood education and care sector in the future.

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