

# READY TO LEARN

## White Paper on Early Childhood Education

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# FOREWORD

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Minister for Education and Science.

High-quality early education can make the crucial difference in helping each child develop to their full potential. In recognition of this, the Government included a clear commitment to early childhood education in its Action Programme for the Millennium.

Quality of provision is the key theme of the White Paper. Its aim is to support the development and educational achievement of children through high quality early education, with a particular focus on the disadvantaged and children with special needs. The Paper sets out a comprehensive strategy to raise and maintain standards in respect of professional competencies, curriculum and methodologies. It seeks to support providers by providing expert advice and support, access to the very latest research findings on children's development and education and a range of tangible supports such as curriculum guidelines and subsidies to promote availability of suitable premises in our primary schools for early childhood education providers.

The White Paper focuses on children from birth to six years. It covers the whole spectrum of educational needs: the development of very young children in the home, supports to parents concerning how best to help their children to learn, a wide range of supports for private providers and voluntary/community groups and a strategy to enhance the quality of infant education in primary schools. The vital role of parents in their children's education is recognised and as a fundamental principle, the State seeks to support and strengthen, but not to supplant this role. Specific additional measures are also set out in respect of the priority target groups – the disadvantaged and children with special needs.

In formulating and developing the proposals, particular attention was paid to the need to build on existing provision. We must take what is best in existing provision, both nationally and internationally, and incorporate it into our early childhood education system. The Paper recognises the need for coordination of the range of State services for young children and acknowledges that consultation will be crucial to ensure a consistent and effective approach.

Implementation of the White Paper proposals will ensure that quality becomes and remains the hallmark of early childhood education. Its publication marks a milestone in this regard, but does not represent the end of the process. Change cannot occur overnight and a planned, phased approach will be necessary. Progress will be achieved

in consultation and partnership with all the interests involved and channels for this partnership approach are outlined in the Paper.

An intensive process of consultation, the National Forum for Early Childhood Education, preceded the development of the White Paper. The White Paper has been informed by the Report on the Forum and by extensive research.

# 1 CONTEXT

This chapter outlines the context within which the White Paper has developed. It summarises the recent policy debate on childcare in Ireland and sets out the rationale for the White Paper and for an increased focus on early childhood education.

## **1.1 What is Early Childhood Education?**

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The purpose of this White Paper is to set out Government policy on all issues relating to early childhood education. An essential starting point is to define what we mean by early childhood education.

The Department of Education and Science's mission is to support the development of a high quality education system which will enable individuals to develop to their full potential as persons and to participate fully as citizens in Ireland's social and economic development. For many years, it was considered that education began when children went to school and ended when students left the formal education system at the end of first,



second or third level. There is growing recognition of the importance of lifelong learning and the idea that children learn from the earliest moment and continue to learn throughout their lives. Education is concerned with all the phases of life, including the very early childhood phase.

At the same time we must recognise that young children have needs for both education and care and that the focus can never be exclusively on either. For very young children, their education and care needs are closely intertwined, and must be met in a unified way. The Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare acknowledges this, noting that “Care and education are inextricably linked elements in a child’s holistic development – this reality must be reflected in the ethos and programme of all services”.<sup>1</sup>

Depending on children’s level of development and circumstances, their care and education needs may be met in a variety of ways. In certain situations, for example in the home, education and care may be provided simultaneously in a seamless fashion, with children exposed to a variety of stimuli and experiences which enhance their development, knowledge, disposition and readiness to learn. The nature of provision in external settings will vary across a spectrum from a primarily care-orientated environment to the provision of a substantial component of early childhood education. The location of a provider on this spectrum will depend on the aims, objectives and duration of provision, the developmental ages of the children involved and the skills and competences of staff. Early childhood services provided to children will usually encompass both care and education, with the distinction between the two increasingly blurred as the age of the children decreases. Formal education, generally speaking, tends to become more important for older children.

This White Paper sets out Government policy on education for young children. It is concerned chiefly with the formulation of policy concerning the education component of early education services, whatever the context, while, at the same time, taking account of the care needs of children when planning education provision in a variety of contexts. Kellaghan issues a warning on this issue:

“First of all, there is the need to consider the balance between educational and child-care provision. It is perhaps unfortunate that child-care and educational programmes have grown independently of each other and that communication between the two traditions has been rather limited since, viewed from the child’s point of view, it is unlikely that either type of programme on its own can fully meet the needs of the child”.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, while the focus of the White Paper is on education, one of its key underlying principles is that, for young children, education and care should not be separated, but should be provided in a complementary, seamless fashion.

It is also necessary to define the age group covered by early childhood education. Although the choice of any age group may, to an extent, be seen as arbitrary, some parameter must be set to clarify the scope of this Paper. In line with national and international thinking, therefore, early childhood will be taken to mean children who have not yet reached their sixth birthday.<sup>3</sup> Six years of age also corresponds to the statutory school starting age as set out in the Education (Welfare) Bill, 1999.<sup>4</sup>

Although the age range is very short, international research and practice, as well as practical considerations, suggest that different policies apply to children under the age of 3 years and children aged between 3 and 6 years. Care is the dominant requirement of children aged less than 3 years and, because education is a more significant need of older children, the principal, though not exclusive, policy focus of this White Paper is on children aged between 3 and 6 years.

More than half of 4 year olds and almost all 5 year olds benefit from an established system of early childhood education provided by State-funded primary schools. The White Paper focuses (in particular in chapter 6) on improving the quality of such provision. However, most of the policy initiatives set out in the Paper will seek to develop and raise standards in the pre-school sector. In particular, proposals will focus on meeting the developmental needs of children aged 3 to 4. Neither sector, though, can be treated in isolation and the need for greater continuity and links between the pre-school and primary school systems will also be addressed.

Early childhood education is very important for children aged 3 and under, given the long-standing research evidence that the pace of development is most rapid in the earliest years. However, “The rationale for early childhood education for children under 2 years of age is not as well established as that for 3-, 4-, 5-year old children”.<sup>5</sup> This difference in need will be reflected in the differing nature of the interventions and supports recommended for this age group.

## **1.2 Policy Debate on Childcare in Ireland**

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The inextricable linkage between education and care means that early education comprises just one element in an all-encompassing policy concerning the rights and needs of young children. A number of factors has combined to bring early childhood issues to the top of the policy agenda in recent years. Firstly, there is growing recognition of the benefits for all children of good quality early childhood education. Secondly, the importance of early education in addressing socio-economic disadvantage and the contribution of education to economic development have given

rise to demands for improved early education for all children. Thirdly, the needs of employers for increased numbers of workers, as well as increased participation in the labour force, have simultaneously increased the demand for and reduced the supply of childcare places.

As a result of the increased focus on early childhood issues, these issues have been considered in a number of fora. One of these was the National Forum for Early Childhood Education, a week-long consultation process which took place as part of the process of preparing this White Paper. The aim of the Forum was “to provide an opportunity for all interested groups to engage in a full exchange of views, to put forward their own particular concerns and objectives while, at the same time, taking account of the objectives and concerns of the other partners in the process”.<sup>6</sup> Other recent studies dealing with early childhood issues were the report of the Commission on the Family<sup>7</sup> and the Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare. The development of early years policy will continue with the preparation of a coordinated national children’s strategy, work on which has recently commenced.

The conclusions and recommendations of the various groups which have reported to date are considered as part of chapter 2 and inform this White Paper as a whole. While the Paper will focus on the education aspects of care and education for children under 6 years, the policy proposals made herein will obviously feed into the wider debate and policy formulation process. In particular, in line with the discussion in the previous section about the importance of a seamless provision of education and care, the White Paper will set out the policy for early education in the context of an integrated provision of early education and care. It should, however, be emphasised that early education is important in its own right. As will be outlined later in this chapter, experience of early childhood education is a key factor in a child’s capacity to learn and in determining a child’s life chances. In this connection, it has been noted:

“Educational research stresses the importance of the preschool period for a child’s later educational development and performance. This suggests that a policy of extending pre-primary provision, especially to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, would probably yield high private and social returns. However, it would be important to emphasise education in any such strategy as opposed to one of simply extending childcare.”<sup>8</sup>

## **1.3 Why a White Paper?**

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The Government is committed to developing a national policy framework for early childhood education and the Programme for Government includes a specific commitment to “The provision of a specific budget for pre-school education”.<sup>9</sup> The

publication of this White Paper is a core part of the fulfillment of this commitment and seeks to point the way forward for the future development of the sector.

Addressing the National Forum on Early Childhood Education, the Minister noted that “it is clear that over the years the public policy response to this has been inadequate and piecemeal. Recognition of this was central to the Government’s decision to place this issue on the political agenda”.<sup>10</sup> This White Paper seeks to address this deficiency by developing an overarching policy framework which will build on existing provision and improve the extent and quality of service provided. The State’s role in this regard is central. “In most countries, the provision of services for children under 3 years and providing care and recreation for school-age children depend on local authorities and private organisations. What these high growth developments mostly have in common has been the role played by national governments or legislatures in stimulating growth”.<sup>11</sup>

Apart from primary school provision for infants, the Department of Education and Science’s involvement to date in early childhood education, has focussed principally on pilot interventions for children who are disadvantaged or have special needs. Traditionally the focus in education has been on schools and third level institutions, but in recent years there has been a shift in emphasis towards a continuum of lifelong learning. In line with this, the education system is being broadened at a number of levels; for example, adult learners are becoming more and more part of the mainstream education system. The need to broaden the coverage of the education system at the lower age range was highlighted in the Background Paper to the National Forum for Early Childhood Education. “The concentration of policy in developed countries, over a sequence of past generations has meant that the age range of 6 to 22 has been the predominant beneficiary of investment in educational provision. As society plans for a new future, this is no longer regarded as an adequate or satisfactory response in the light of greatly changed social conditions. As well as developments in adult and community education, much new thinking has been taking place regarding early childhood education which emphasises its vital importance, in contemporary circumstances, for individuals, families and society.”<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, just as adult education policy will shortly be set out in its own White Paper, this White Paper sets out Government policy for early childhood education.

## **1.4 Why do we need Early Childhood Education?**

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This section assesses the value of early education under a number of headings, including its importance in preparing children for the challenges of formal primary education, longer-term returns to the individual in terms of life chances and earning

power, and the broader returns to society which flow from investment in the area. It also highlights the crucial importance of quality of provision.

## Enhancing Disposition and Readiness to Learn

Most children enter the primary school system well-equipped to learn and to cope with the transition to formal education. However, for various reasons, some children have problems coping with this transition. Such children do not have a solid foundation upon which to accumulate knowledge and build their education. Without this initial foundation, the gap between these children and their peers tends to widen over time, and this creates the need for subsequent intervention to narrow the gap. This intervention is considerably less cost-effective than preventive action prior to entry to the education system: “Prevention of educational failure and social exclusion beginning at the pre-primary level is less expensive and more effective in solving a wide range of social problems than treatment after problems have emerged.”<sup>13</sup>

Studies have shown that quality early education can have a significant impact on children’s capacity to cope with the transition to formal schooling and to develop a capacity to learn. Large-scale studies undertaken in the UK in the early 1990s showed that, at the age of 7, children who had experienced pre-school out-performed their peers in several subject areas.<sup>14</sup> Early intervention is also seen as vital in preventing reading difficulties later in life: “Research provides ample evidence of the importance of cultivating cognitive, language and social development during children’s early years... it (is) critical that the preschool opportunities ... be designed in ways that fully support language and literacy development.”<sup>15</sup> In Ireland, significant improvements in attainment at pre-school level were recorded in an evaluation of the Rutland Street project.

Some studies have indicated that the IQ gain in attainment as a result of pre-school education may be transitory.<sup>16</sup> Research has shown that the attainment differential was lost following the transfer to primary school.<sup>17</sup> The use of IQ in assessing the value of pre-school intervention, however, takes a narrow, short-term view of the educational benefits for individuals of early childhood education. Longer-term improvements in academic achievement have been identified in various studies, with improved retention rates, higher participation in third level and lower rates of grade repetition recorded among the benefits. Evaluation of intervention programmes in the USA showed that academic performance gains were recorded even after the initial IQ differentials had faded.<sup>18</sup> Similar conclusions have been drawn in Ireland in respect of the Rutland Street project. Follow-up evaluation has shown that participants stayed longer at school and were more likely to take a public examination than were non-participants from the same area.<sup>19</sup>

An in-depth review of evaluations of nine American programmes concludes that “Although the IQ effects produced by early intervention programs may be short-lived, there appear to be strong and longer-lasting benefits in terms of educational outcomes, such as academic achievement and other aspects of school performance ... the gains in academic success ... may be stronger the longer the duration of the intervention program”.<sup>20</sup> In the same vein, an OECD review of international research notes that findings suggest that participants “in a quality ECEC environment are likely to develop reasoning and problem-solving skills, to be more co-operative and considerate of others and to develop greater self-esteem. ... Even if their IQ advantage fades, many of these positive effects may linger and contribute to children’s positive classroom learning behaviour, motivation and academic achievement. Early learning experiences may help ease children’s transitions through compulsory schooling, ... leading to long-term school success”.<sup>21</sup>

## Returns to the Individual on Investment

Limited long-term follow-up of pre-school participants means that findings are less extensive concerning the impact of early childhood education on employment patterns and earning power. However, there are indications that participants in quality pre-school education achieve long-term returns to the individual. Summarising the research literature, O’Flaherty notes that “the most rigorous studies ... showed that high-quality early education leads to lasting cognitive and social benefits which persist throughout adolescence and adulthood”.<sup>22</sup> These benefits include increased probability of completing high school and of securing employment.

## Benefits to Parents

Parents may benefit from involvement in early childhood education through improved self-confidence and better relationships with their children. Opportunities for further education and career development will also arise.

## Social Returns on Investment

Significant benefits to society as a whole accrue to investment in education. Research has shown that the rate of return is greatest at lower levels of education.<sup>23</sup> Returns may be in the form of increased economic growth: better educated workers yield higher productivity. Indeed, in a review of the Irish situation, the ESRI identified an increase in human capital as one of “five medium-to-long term factors which have ... made a considerable contribution to the growth of the economy”.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the OECD noted that “the growth in human capital ... is estimated to have contributed 0.8 percentage points to the average growth rate of Ireland between 1960 and 1985.”<sup>25</sup>

Social returns may also accrue in the form of measurable savings on Government expenditure. In particular, improved levels of education lead to reductions in costs

associated with unemployment, crime and healthcare. A recent analysis compared the costs of two American pre-school interventions with the savings accruing to the Government.<sup>26</sup> Extensive long-term evaluations of both projects had been carried out, including assessments of their impact on juvenile crime rates, health care and welfare.<sup>27</sup> Cost-savings analysis showed that both projects “generate more than enough savings to offset program costs”.

Analyses of costs versus savings to Government are more easily quantifiable and receive attention because the Government is likely to be the principal source of funding for the relevant interventions. However, “This is not to say that programs for which the measured costs are greater than the measured savings should not be funded by the government. Early childhood intervention programs might be deemed worthy even if their costs exceed their savings to government, because not all their benefits can be monetized. For this reason, measured net savings to the government should not be the sole basis for deciding whether to fund a program or which of a set of competing programs to fund. However, positive net savings should help allay the concerns of those troubled by the potential budgetary burden of government-funded early intervention”.<sup>28</sup>

When wider benefits are added in to the equation, the scales tip even more in favour of early intervention. However, the benefits may be widely dispersed and difficult to quantify. For example, a reduction in crime rates attributable to intervention will lead, not only to measurable benefits to the State (custodial, security and administrative savings), but also to less pain, suffering and property loss by victims. “It is difficult ... to monetize the benefits of improved behaviour or IQ ... (we cannot) determine ... the monetary value to society of greater academic achievement ... (or) for many of the health benefits realized”.<sup>29</sup> Despite these difficulties, some estimates are possible. Cost-benefit analysis of the Perry programme is cited by (among others) the National Forum Report: “...the ratio benefit-to-cost of a well-run early education programme can be high - in the case of the Perry Pre-school Programme, seven to one in terms of educational and social expenditure savings”.<sup>30</sup>

## Benefits are greater for Disadvantaged Children

Research suggests that the benefits of early childhood education are more significant for children who are disadvantaged. This issue is discussed in detail in chapter 8.

## Quality Matters

All early childhood services must encompass, not only childcare, but also education. Put simply, care without education cannot succeed in promoting educational objectives. Moreover, the benefits of early childhood education accrue only where interventions are of sufficiently high quality. Researchers consistently preface findings on the benefits of early

childhood education with the word “quality”, and a forthcoming OECD review of the area notes that “studies uniformly show that the quality of provision has an important impact on children’s development” and that benefits are more marked and “less likely to ‘fade out’ in well-designed forms of early childhood education and care ...”.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, early childhood services, if they are to tackle the problems of educational disadvantage, must encompass quality.

Similarly, the evaluation of the Early Start pilot project (chapter 8) shows that investment of resources alone is not sufficient to guarantee effectiveness.<sup>32</sup> Careful planning and review is required to ensure that quality is maintained and real benefits for participants achieved. The lessons learned from the Early Start pilot project have been used to inform the policy proposals in this White Paper.

## Intervention Must Be Early

The early years of life are central to a child’s education and development. As far back as 1964, it was noted that 50% of mental development takes place in the first four years of a child’s life.<sup>33</sup> In more recent years, significant advances have been made in the field of brain research and neurologists have determined that 90% of brain growth occurs by age 3.<sup>34</sup> Research indicates that brain growth results from changes in cell size and maturity and from changes to the connections among brain cells. These changes are influenced by environmental factors and everyday experiences: “The more areas of the brain which are stimulated and used, the more neuronal pathways and networks are established.”<sup>35</sup> The nature of the opportunities and the supports provided for a child’s development during the formative period, and the quality of the educational experiences over this period, can have a far-reaching effect on the individual’s long-term development and prospects: “Experiences may alter the behaviour of an adult, but experience literally forms the mind of a young child.”<sup>36</sup>

Most children will benefit from a supportive and caring home environment and, during these vital early years, will receive sufficient stimulation to foster rapid brain development. However, children are also vulnerable in the early years: the early years constitute a “period of both opportunity and vulnerability”.<sup>37</sup> Without adequate levels of care and support, without exposure to everyday experiences and stimulation, a child’s development may be damaged: “once the critical period (0-4 years) is past, that system of the brain will never be able to develop or function normally”.<sup>38</sup> This concern was echoed at the National Forum for Early Childhood Education. “In the early years of life, brain maturation and neurological development proceed at a pace never equalled at later stages of development ... As childhood comes but once in a lifetime, these years are irreplaceable and the opportunities they provide for the satisfactory life of the child ... should not be missed”.<sup>39</sup>



It is clear, therefore, that quality education intervention is vital at a very early age, particularly for those who are disadvantaged.

## Supporting Parents

The most important educators and carers during a child's first years are the parents. In recent years, however, parents have increasingly sought to have their children cared for and educated outside of the home from a very young age, and this must be acknowledged in Government policy for the area. The aim of this White Paper is to support parents' role in their children's care and education, not to supplant it. This is not merely a legalistic acknowledgement of the parents' constitutional role as the primary educators of the child, but a recognition of the fact that parents are best placed to choose the most appropriate form of care and education for their children. At all times, the aim will be to maximise parental involvement and choice. Chapter 9 sets out the strategy to achieve this aim. This will include involving parents in the consultation and partnership process and in the development of curricula and standards. Support will be provided for the establishment of a representative organisation for parents of young children. Parents will also be included on the expert advisory group (chapter 11) and will be involved in the decision-making process where the State funds direct provision. In addition, proposals will seek to improve the quality of the information available, to provide curriculum and materials for use by parents, and to support educational and training courses.

## International Experience

The importance of early childhood education is also illustrated by the growth in provision and support for the service internationally. Ireland's entry into this arena has been comparatively late, as noted by an EU Commission Network: "In most countries, pre-primary schooling or kindergarten provision for children aged 3-6 years is already high, so that there is less scope (than in the case of the under 3's) for development. An important exception was the introduction of pre-primary education in Ireland ..."<sup>40</sup> In Ireland's case, of course, participation in formal education at age 4 and 5 compares very well with the rates in other member states.

## Conclusion

There is compelling evidence of a wide range of benefits generated by quality early intervention programmes. The benefits which high-quality early education interventions offer to children constitute the principal argument in favour of developing the early childhood education area, and the policy as set out in this White Paper will reflect that position. These include initial gains in IQ, enhanced capacity to learn, longer-term improvements in educational performance, private returns to individuals (both financial and developmental), economic returns and wider benefits to society. Social and economic

returns are additional important benefits which the State must, as guardian of the common good, take into account when considering the extent to which it should become involved in the process.

However, not all early childhood education programmes yield benefits and care is required in designing and implementing an early education intervention. The programme must be high quality, focus on achieving a balance between short-term and long-term gains and take account of the circumstances of children who are educationally disadvantaged, including children with a disability. An effective strategy must also support parents in the home as first educators of a child.

## 1.5 Objective

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The principal objective of Government policy in regard to early childhood education is:

to support the development and educational achievement of children through high quality early education, with particular focus on the target groups of the disadvantaged and those with special needs.

The objective will be achieved through a strategy of facilitating and supporting the provision of quality early childhood education for all children. Early childhood education should be child-centred, providing children with the opportunity to enhance all aspects of their development. In this regard, the White Paper seeks to take account of Article 29 1(a) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Article notes that

“the education of the child shall be directed to: (a) The development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.”

Early childhood education will engender in children a disposition and state of readiness to learn in both formal and non-formal settings. Disposition to learn involves the development of social skills and behaviour patterns in young children which will facilitate their integration into a formal education environment. This will ensure that children will adjust well to the transition to the primary school system and culture and have the capacity and motivation to master new skills and challenges.

Readiness to learn relates to the fact that children who begin schooling with solid foundations in place will be better placed to develop to their potential. It involves many aspects including health, social and emotional development, language use and general knowledge. It is an essential part of the idea that, though not necessarily

involving formal education, the early years represent a vital part of a life-long involvement in learning.

It is important to stress that the two concepts – disposition to learn and readiness to learn – are not mutually exclusive and both are vital to the child.

The development of policy for early childhood education, as outlined in this White Paper, is underpinned by a number of guiding principles, of which the following are particularly important:

- | Quality must underpin all aspects of early education provision.
- | The State will seek to build on existing provision and to use the existing regulatory framework, where possible.
- | Implementation will be undertaken on a gradual, phased basis, to allow all the participants in the system to prepare adequately for the challenges which lie ahead.
- | Progress will be achieved through a process of consultation, dialogue and partnership with parents, providers and interested parties.

Consultation and partnership are fundamental to progress in the education field. In the early childhood education arena, the National Forum has already provided an opportunity for the various stakeholders and interested parties to exchange views and ideas and to make recommendations as to the development of future policy. This White Paper draws on the views expressed at the Forum and in the Secretariat's report and on other reports and research in general. Consultation and partnership will continue to be central to the development of the area.

## **1.6 Outline of the Remainder of the White Paper**

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The intention in this White Paper is to build on existing provision and chapter 2 outlines the wide range of existing providers of early childhood education. The chapter evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of the present system, assesses provision in other developed countries and isolates common trends in early childhood education policy.

The focus in chapter 3 is on the objective and broad principles of the White Paper.

Quality of provision is crucial to the attainment of lasting benefits. There is little point in using childcare as a mechanism for tackling disadvantage if it does not address the educational and developmental needs of children. Chapter 4 gives an overview of some of the factors which affect quality of provision and deals with the concept of the Quality in Education (QE) mark. The QE mark will be awarded to providers of early education who meet standards set by the Department concerning qualifications, training, learning objectives, methodologies and curriculum.

The proposed model for State involvement in the early childhood education sector is outlined in chapters 5 through 8. Chapter 5 sets out the proposed model for State intervention concerning children aged 4 and under who do not attend primary school. The main component of State involvement is facilitating provision and promoting quality. Provision will be encouraged by offering incentives to schools, and also through a broader Government strategy to increase supply of childcare places. Quality will be enhanced through a combination of support, encouragement and regulation. The State will also be involved in direct provision for a number of key target groups of children. Finally, the chapter will consider the early education needs of children and parents in the home.

An extensive State-funded system of primary education is already available for children aged 4 to 6 and it is not proposed to put in place a parallel pre-school system for this age-group. Instead, chapter 6 outlines proposals to improve the quality of provision for infants classes.

Chapter 7 outlines proposals concerning early childhood education for children with special needs.

Chapter 8 considers provision for children who are disadvantaged.

As already noted, parents play a central role in their children's early education and proposals to support parental involvement in early childhood education are outlined in chapter 9.

Inspection will be vital to help providers to attain high standards and to ensure that these standards are maintained subsequently. Evaluation will be required at various levels to determine and improve the effectiveness of State intervention. The mechanisms proposed for inspection and evaluation are outlined in chapter 10.

Finally, chapter 11 considers the structures which will be required to facilitate effective coordination of provision, regulation and improvements in quality. The chapter considers how coordination may be facilitated at national level. It also sets out

the roles and responsibilities of the Department of Education and Science and outlines a strategy to assign all executive functions in the early childhood education area to a new executive agency.

# 2 EXISTING PROVISION

This chapter first summarises the main early education services provided in Ireland and discusses some aspects of the current system. The intention in the first half of the chapter is to highlight and build on strengths and to identify weaknesses and gaps in the Irish system with a view to ensuring that these are addressed in the new framework.

The chapter goes on to consider developments in four countries – France, New Zealand, Norway and the United Kingdom and identifies some common international trends.

## **2.1 Department of Education and Science**

The main channel of State support for early childhood education is found in the national school system. Although a child is not required by law to attend school until s/he has reached her/his sixth birthday, virtually all 5 year olds and more than half (52%) of 4 year olds attend primary schools.<sup>1</sup> The participation rate among 4 year old girls is four to five percentage points greater than that for boys.<sup>2</sup>

Provision in national schools for children aged 4 and 5 is an integral part of the regular school system. The Primary Education Review Body acknowledged this, noting that “since children are entitled to enter school in Ireland from the age of four years, much of what is considered pre-schooling in other countries is already incorporated in the primary school system.”<sup>3</sup> Children in infants classes follow a prescribed curriculum (a revised curriculum is being introduced on a phased basis into schools starting in September 1999) and are taught by fully-trained national school teachers.

State provision for younger children is significantly less developed. Just over one per cent of 3 year olds were classified as in full-time education on 1 January 1998, and the majority (64%) of these were enrolled in private (non-State-funded) primary schools, with the rest split between ordinary classes and special schools or classes.<sup>4</sup> The Department also operates a range of other programmes which have particular focus on early education: the Early Start Pre-school pilot programme, pre-school provision for travellers and for children with disabilities, and the Breaking the Cycle pilot project. However, its first involvement in the pre-school area – the Rutland Street Project – commenced 30 years ago. These programmes are outlined in chapters 7 and 8 which deal with special needs and disadvantage, respectively.

## **2.2 Early Childhood Programmes of other Departments**

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This section outlines briefly the roles of some of the other Government Departments - Health and Children, Justice, Equality and Law Reform and Social, Community and Family Affairs - in the early childhood area.

### **Department of Health and Children**

Traditionally, the Department's focus was on children considered to be at risk. In this connection, it provides grants, via the Health Boards, to assist with the costs of nurseries and other day care services (many run by voluntary groups) catering for such children. These services generally involve some early education provision. The

Department's role was broadened by the Child Care Act, 1991. The Act places a statutory duty on Health Boards to secure the welfare of children and to promote the development of children attending pre-school services.<sup>5</sup>

In December 1996 the Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations were introduced under section 50 of the Act. These regulations require that organisations or persons providing a pre-school service to four or more children (there are some exceptions) must notify the local Health Board of their activities. The regulations set down minimum standards (explained in detail in accompanying guidelines) – in relation to adequate space and staffing, record keeping, first aid and safety procedures, equipment and materials and insurance – which providers must meet. Officials from the Health Boards carry out inspections to ensure compliance with these standards.

Under the existing system, there are no minimum standards prescribed concerning the educational component of services or the training and qualifications of staff. The Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare recommends that the childcare sector should aim to achieve the European Commission Network on Childcare target of a “minimum of 60% of staff working directly with children in collective services should have ... training of at least three years ... which incorporates the theory and practice of pedagogy ...”.<sup>6</sup> The report also sets out recommended roles for various staff in the childcare sector. The role suggested for childcare worker includes reference to “activities ... to provide for children's physical, emotional, social and cognitive development”.<sup>7</sup>

There is growing support for an increased focus on the developmental and educational aspects of childcare. This reflects greater awareness generally of the value and benefits of early childhood education and increasing demands from parents concerning the developmental needs of children. However, some concern has been expressed regarding the possible impact on the supply of places of improved standards and quality, and of greater emphasis on development and early education. Concerns have also focussed on the logistics of an inspection process.

While recognising that supply and logistics are important concerns, we take the view, supported by international research, that quality of provision is critical. However, quality enhancement need not mean any reduction in the supply of childcare: quality may be enhanced while quantity is maintained. This issue is addressed later in this White Paper, particularly in chapter 10, where an approach to a proposed inspection process is outlined.

Finally, under this heading, it should be noted that the Department of Health and Children is responsible for coordinating the preparation by an inter-departmental committee of a National Children's Strategy.



## Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform

The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform plays a central role in childcare policy, having chaired the expert working group drafting the Partnership 2000 Childcare Report.

The Department also operates the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme. The programme, delivered on behalf of the Department by ADM Limited,<sup>8</sup> aims to facilitate participation by socially excluded parents in training, education and employment, by supporting the development of community childcare facilities in areas of disadvantage. Assistance is provided for capital costs and, in 1998, support was introduced towards recurrent costs of 25 flagship projects which provide childcare in disadvantaged areas.

The Department supports national “umbrella” bodies involved in the childcare area to expand their membership base, encourage childminders to become involved in more structured networks, and promote training and standards among members.

## Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs

The Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs operates a number of grant schemes for community and voluntary organisations and for women’s groups. The Community Development Programme seeks to support communities in tackling local problems and to foster partnership between parents, providers and the various other interests in the areas concerned. Funding is also allocated by the Department to Family Resource Centres. These centres provide childcare facilities to enable parents to attend adult education and support programmes.

## Other Departments

Various other Government Departments are involved in the early childhood area. For example, the Department of Agriculture and Food provides funding for the development of rural childcare. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment supports a number of early childhood programmes, including FÁS training and support for initiatives of the County Enterprise Boards. Pre-schooling in Irish has been traditionally funded by the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands (Bord na Gaeilge/Údarás na Gaeltachta). The report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare lists eleven Departments as involved in the childcare area.

## 2.3 Non-Governmental Provision

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A wide variety of pre-school services is provided by or in association with voluntary and community groups, private business and individuals. The State’s role in existing

non-Government provision is confined to: an element of funding (voluntary/community groups), inspection concerning basic standards (under the Child Care Act), and provision of training courses in institutions of further and higher education.

## Parental Care

The Constitution recognises that the primary and natural educator of the child is the family. Much of a child's development and education in the earliest years takes place through normal experiences in the home, although many parents now choose to have their children cared for, from a very early age, outside of the home. Other parents choose to provide their children's pre-school care inside the family home. Parents have the benefit of unique expertise derived from their intimate knowledge of the child's development and their awareness of particular needs, interests and circumstances. The nature and extent of education provided in these cases will vary according to individual circumstances, backgrounds and subjective priorities. Proposals to involve and support parents are outlined in chapter 9.

## Private Households (other than the family home)

Integrated care and education is provided in many cases by childminders, some of whom are relatives or friends of the child's parents and others of whom are employed by the parents for the purpose. As in the case of parental care in the home, the nature of care and education provided by childminders will depend on individual circumstances and there is no standardised provision. Some efforts are made to encourage minders to benefit from local networks through the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform's programme of support for national organisations involved in the early childhood area.

## Nursery Schools, Crèches and Playgroups

The objectives of these organisations range across a spectrum from educational services to provision of substitute childcare in loco parentis. Many involve a formal schooling component. Parents generally fund the costs privately, although some funding may be provided by the State through one of the programmes outlined in the previous section, or, in a small number of cases, a crèche may be provided and at least part-funded by an employer.

Playgroups tend to emphasise educational aspects and may be classified into three broad types: private playgroups, community playgroups and naóinraí. Private playgroups are most likely to be organised in private households and parents pay the full costs; community playgroups tend to be run by committees and the costs to parents are lower. In some cases, costs are subsidised by a Health Board, voluntary organisation, FÁS (assignment of Community Employment Scheme trainees) or the

State, via Area Development Management. Naoínraí involve pre-school education through the medium of Irish. Support for playgroups is provided by national “umbrella” organisations.

All providers in this category are obliged, under the terms of the Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations, 1996 to notify their local Health Board of their activities, and they are subject to the requirements of the regulations concerning staffing and other matters. As noted previously, the regulations do not set out educational standards and, accordingly, standards concerning qualifications, training, content and methodology of provision will vary widely across and within each category.

## Relative Significance of Various Providers

A survey carried out for the Commission on the Family reveals substantial variation by age group in the prevalence of the various early childhood arrangements.<sup>9</sup> Nearly two thirds of children aged between 2 and 3 are cared for in the home by a parent or relative. The most popular arrangement for 4 year olds is school-based instruction (49%) with nurseries/crèches accounting for one in four cases. Figure 2.1 shows the scale of the change between the two age groups.<sup>10</sup>

**Fig. 2.1 Comparison of Care Arrangements (1998)**

### 2.4 Analysis of the existing Irish System

There are many positive aspects to the provision of early childhood services in Ireland: childcare workers show high levels of commitment and dedication to the children in their charge, many parents become deeply involved in and support their children’s education at this early age and many of the physical facilities, curricula and methodologies employed can be of a very high quality. This said, the provision of early childhood education in Ireland has been described as “limited and patchy”<sup>11</sup> while, in a comparison of services in the EU, Ireland is identified as a member state where publicly-funded services for young children are least developed.<sup>12</sup>

This section considers the principal weaknesses and criticisms of existing early education in Ireland, with a view to informing the nature of the policy proposals which will be made later in the White Paper.

## Gaps in Provision

Despite the wide range of early education options available, it is likely that there are some gaps in provision in the existing system. The quality (and cost) of provision is even more likely to vary. The factors which contribute to this variation include:

- | geography - remote areas
- | demographics - low population density of young children in a number of areas
- | affordability – inability to meet increasing costs of private provision due to rising demand and prices or as a result of economic disadvantage
- | coordination problems (see below).

The lack of hard data makes it difficult to be more precise about the gaps in provision. However, ADM are in the process of developing a national database of childcare provision. The database, which is scheduled for completion by the end of 1999, will provide details of the extent and nature of provision by location. The availability of these data will improve knowledge of the extent of existing provision and of unmet demand, so that policy formulation in the early childhood area will be more informed and the policy responses more accurate and targeted.

## Lack of Coordination

Section 2.2 outlined the involvement of a number of Government Departments in the early childhood area and noted that as many as eleven Departments are involved in the childcare area. The large number of State Departments involved, and the close linkages and overlaps between education and childcare, would suggest that coordination of effort between the various Departments and agencies should be a key element of provision.

However, lack of coordination has been identified by the National Forum for Early Childhood Education, among others, as a significant problem inhibiting the development of adequate systems of early education and childcare. The Forum report pointed out that “the fragmentation and lack of co-ordination of early childhood services are a cause of great frustration to the personnel involved and contribute to much inefficiency and wastage of time and effort”.<sup>13</sup> The report notes that Government Departments have “tended to work largely in isolation from each other” and that coordination problems occur within Departments as well as between them. The Secretariat took the view that poor coordination was contributing to various problems, including gaps in provision, lack of awareness concerning services, and dissemination of good practice.

Hayes has noted the importance of coordination of provision: “Coordination is essential to ensure equality of access to early education services ... to ensure standards and regulation.” She states that, while “there is no shortage of government commitment and initiative” concerning early childhood education, the involvement of multiple Departments suggests a “worrying lack of coordination which must have

serious implications for the quality and effectiveness of such services for young children in Ireland.”<sup>14</sup>

## Deficiencies in Provision for Infants in the Primary School System

Criticisms of the provision for infants in the existing primary school system focus principally on class size, resourcing and methodology. “Research on the quality of early years provision has identified structural factors such as the quality of human resources, organisation of the physical environment, group size and ratios, as being significant.”<sup>15</sup>

Although the pupil teacher ratio has improved steadily in recent years, the existing ratio in primary schools remains high compared to the ratios applicable in pre-school settings.<sup>16</sup> The fall in the ratio is reflected in a substantial reduction in class sizes and in the proportion of pupils in very large classes.<sup>17</sup> There is some evidence that primary schools achieve better class sizes for infants and sixth class. However, the differences are small and 64% of junior infants and 70% of senior infants were in classes of at least 25 pupils in 1997/98.<sup>18</sup> Ratios are significantly lower for schools which benefit from the Breaking the Cycle pilot programme and for participants in Early Start. Assessing the relative class sizes in pre-schools and primary schools, Hayes and O’Flaherty note that “Not only is the ratio in the preschool settings more appropriate to the needs of (3 to 4-year-olds) but the presence of a second adult (not a feature of the school settings) has a positive impact on the type of interactions that can occur between adults and children”.<sup>19</sup>

In terms of class sizes in schools, an extensive synthesis of research undertaken by the U.S. Department of Education suggests that class size matters, but only in defined cases. The analyses show that “A consensus of research indicates that class size reduction in the early grades leads to higher student achievement. ... The significant effects ... on ... achievement appear when class size is reduced to a point somewhere between 15 and 20 students ...”<sup>20</sup> They conclude that the key benefit of class size reductions is for disadvantaged young students.

An extensive analysis undertaken at the University of Nottingham also concludes that “The vast body of research ... clearly shows that it is incorrect to say that class size does not matter.”<sup>21</sup> The authors argue that the principal aim of reductions should be to improve the quality of teaching and learning and that these should be accompanied by consideration of teaching methods and forms of classroom organisation. In particular, the report finds that “the advantages derived from being taught in small classes in the early years of schooling are likely to persist into later years and enhance subsequent

learning.” They also confirm the particular benefits of small classes for children from low income families.

Reduced numbers of pupils per class means that teachers have more space to work with and greater flexibility in terms of instruction methods. However, as noted by an extensive US review, class size reductions may facilitate but do not guarantee improvement in the quality of education provided. “In summary, although both the quantity and quality of teacher-student interactions are necessarily limited by large class size ... reduction efforts must be accompanied by professional development and planning that supports the desired changes in curriculum, instruction and assessment.”<sup>22</sup> Professional development of teachers is discussed in the next sub-section.

Research has also shown that schools and pre-schools differ in the type and availability of equipment. Although schools have been found to be better equipped for pre-academic work and with audio-visual equipment, pre-schools tend to have a wider range of materials generally.<sup>23</sup> In recognition of these difficulties, the Government introduced, in September 1999, a special grant allocation to assist the purchase of equipment and materials for infants classes in primary schools. The additional payments are based on schools’ infant enrolments and will range up to a maximum of £1,500.

## Training and Qualifications

There are three aspects to this issue: the provision of training for pre-school staff in multiple agencies, the skills and competencies required by early childhood education professionals and the content and duration of the training programme for teachers of infants in primary schools. Training is of crucial importance, since the knowledge and skills of the teacher, which include a deep understanding of the subject matter to be taught and of learning and pedagogical theories, critically influence the quality of education provided. Moreover, the skills required for teaching infants are not the same as general teaching skills in all respects.

The wide range of provision of pre-school services and the absence of regulation on training or qualifications has resulted in the development of “a bewildering diversity of training courses and qualifications”.<sup>24</sup> Providers include the university sector, institutes of technology, PLC colleges, Montessori colleges and national representative organisations. Such a wide variety of provision facilitates greater choice and leads to competition, which in turn should ensure improvements in course quality. However, the ad hoc development of the area risks duplication of effort and inconsistency in standards. The Report on the National Forum for Early Childhood Education concludes that: “existing provision is of a fragmented character, with little dialogue or worthwhile exchanges between the different providers. Many of the involved organisations evinced the view ... that it was time to bridge any divisions ... and to

adopt a sharing, co-operative approach.”<sup>25</sup> In addition, the absence of regulation of qualifications, together with a low level of awareness by parents concerning the qualifications of staff employed by early education providers, limits the scope for informed decision-making on the part of parents.

Some work has been done in this area. Dublin Institute of Technology, in collaboration with the New Opportunities for Women programme, have developed a core standard in collaboration with stakeholders in early childhood education. This includes developing equivalences of the variety of training approaches with a view to highlighting strengths and gaps in training programmes.

The methodologies and skills required of an early childhood education specialist differ from those required in formal primary education. Effective training of such professionals should develop skills and expertise across a range of areas including the development of very young children, learning through play and traditional education theory. Training should be multi-disciplinary and draw upon the fields of education, care and welfare. Proposals concerning the training and qualifications of early childhood education specialists are considered in chapter 4.

Training for primary school teachers was highlighted by the Forum report, which stated that it was “generally accepted that there was a need for reform and renewal ... Existing provision had not kept pace with the changed context of early childhood education.” Teaching is a demanding role. “Today’s teachers must understand a great deal about how children develop and learn, what they know, and what they can do. Teachers must know and be able to apply a variety of teaching techniques to meet the individual needs of students.”<sup>26</sup> Teachers of infants have to cope with the additional demands of very young children who, in many cases, have difficulty coming to terms with the transition from home life to school. They must also develop an understanding of how young children learn and of the importance of play in this regard.

Several options available to enhance the quality of teaching for infants in primary school are examined in chapter 6. These include:

- | increasing the emphasis in teacher training courses on infant education
- | the introduction of an element of specialisation
- | flexibility in terms of the qualifications which permit a person to teach infants classes.

## Parental Involvement

As noted earlier, parents have an important role to play in their children's education, particularly during the early childhood years, whether in the home or in an out of home setting. The Forum report states that "the involvement of parents in early childhood education ... is a matter of central importance to the well-being of society".<sup>27</sup> However, in the existing system, the opportunities for parental involvement in provision outside the home are limited by the environment in which education is provided (space, access) and by the impact of other commitments (such as family commitments and work commitments). Parents' capacity to become actively involved in their children's education, in pre-school or in the home, may be hampered by a lack of skills (such as literacy or numeracy skills) or a lack of awareness concerning the early childhood curriculum and how they may play a useful role.

## Retention of Trained Staff

The current rapid growth in the economy means that more career alternatives and openings are available and skills shortages have emerged in a number of areas. Relatively low pay and status and the absence of a career structure has led to difficulties in retaining qualified and experienced staff within the pre-school sector in other countries. Staff turnover has repercussions both for the extent of training required and, more importantly, for the quality of education and care provided to a vulnerable group of individuals. "Low status of personnel inevitably means high turnover which cannot work for the benefit of young children who rely more than ever before on nurseries and early education for stable relationships and the structuring of personality and values."<sup>28</sup> Hard data are lacking in this area though, and it is difficult to gauge the true extent of the problem. It is noteworthy that the Department's Early Start pilot programme does not seem to encounter significant staff turnover problems. Despite an initial high departure rate (five care assistants left in 1994) the rate of attrition has since been very low - just five assistants (out of a total cohort of 56) have departed in the last four years.

## Lack of Guidelines on Provision

A very extensive revised curriculum is being introduced into primary schools from September 1999. The curriculum builds on its predecessor and was developed through a wide process of consultation between the partners in education. In particular, it draws heavily on the experiences of teachers. The curriculum will focus, inter alia, on content and methodologies for infants.

Under existing arrangements, the form and content of early education provision outside of the primary school system is a matter for the various providers. In some cases, a standardised curriculum and recommendations concerning teaching practice and methodology may be issued by an umbrella organisation to its members. However, no such



recommended standards are made available to other providers and the quality of pre-school education varies as a result. The absence of recommended codes of practice concerning methodology and curriculum means that parents may not be in a position to make an informed judgement on the merits of specific providers. It may also limit the capacity of some individuals or groups to enhance the service which they provide. Parents educating their children in the home could benefit greatly from access to recommended approaches and curriculum.

## Conclusions

In reviewing existing provision for early childhood, and, in particular, in highlighting the deficiencies in the present system, it is important to emphasise the high quality and standards of service provided by many groups and individuals and the importance of maintaining diversity of provision and choice. However, the State has a duty to promote best practice generally in provision; high standards must be promoted throughout the system, for the benefit of all children and their parents. In particular, where State support is provided, compliance with minimum standards must be ensured.

In this context, the purpose of this section has been to draw on experience to date in Ireland with a view to ensuring that deficiencies are addressed and gaps filled. The following, therefore, is a brief summary of issues which must be attended to in devising a model for future early childhood education provision in Ireland.

The lack of effective coordination between the Government Departments involved in the provision of early childhood services must be addressed in whatever model is adopted. As far as provision for infants in national schools is concerned, there must be some modification of the provision to ensure that the special needs of very young children are accommodated. Although it is unlikely that there will be a standardisation of training and qualifications for those involved in early childhood education, a method must be devised whereby the quality of training/qualifications is maintained and enhanced, where possible. Similarly, consideration must be given to how qualified and experienced staff may be retained in the pre-school sector and may proceed through the sector on the basis of a structured career path. Finally, as far as parents are concerned, any model of provision devised must ensure their involvement in the system to the optimum degree.

## 2.5 Provision for Early Childhood Education in selected Countries

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The development of policy proposals has been informed by an examination of the systems which operate in a number of other countries. Particular attention was paid to

four countries: France, New Zealand, Norway and the United Kingdom. There were selected in order to obtain a broad cross-section of the spectrum of provision:

- | France has a long established State-run system
- | New Zealand has a similar geographical (peripheral location, beside a larger neighbour) and economic context (strong emphasis on agriculture) to Ireland
- | Norway is widely seen as having an extensive, comprehensive and progressive system
- | The UK has a similarly structured education system, which has undergone significant change in recent years.

## France

An extensive system of early childhood education in France has been provided by the State in nursery schools since 1870. The majority of nursery schools are publicly funded. In urban areas, they are usually separate from primary schools, although there are some fully-integrated schools. In some rural areas, where there may not be a sufficient concentration of pupils at younger ages, infant sections may be integrated into primary school classes. Alternatively, several communes/locales may join together in order to recruit sufficient numbers of children to open a nursery class. This may involve children being brought together to a single location and the provision of transport.

Teachers may be helped by nursery assistants, who are recruited by the local authorities and whose functions vary depending on their skills and teachers' requirements. The average number of pupils per class was 27.1 in the public sector and 26.7 in the private sector in 1995.

## New Zealand

Responsibility for early childhood education is divided according to function: policy development and implementation (Ministry of Education), support to providers (Early Childhood Development Unit), children with special needs (Specialist Education Service), national qualification framework (Qualifications Authority) and quality assurance and evaluation (the Education Review Office).

A wide range of early childhood education services is available, with strong emphasis on active involvement of and support for parents. Play centres and community playgroups are mainly organised by parents. Kindergartens, which provide for children aged 3, have parents' committees linked to regional and national associations. Support is provided for parents of very young children (birth to 3) through regular home visits, designed to assist parents to help their children to develop the language, intellectual and social skills on which to build learning. Family service centres offer additional early childhood services and self-help programmes to help educationally

disadvantaged parents to prepare their children for school. Support is also provided, through a distance education service, to parents of young children who, for various reasons (such as remote location) are unable to attend provision. Trained and registered teachers work closely with parents to plan home-based early childhood education and materials are provided on loan for use with children.

Special provision is also available for minorities. Te Kohanga Reo are community-based early childhood education programmes delivered through the medium of the Maori language while programmes are also offered based on the values and languages of the Pacific Islands cultures.

## Norway

Early childhood education and care is provided by three types of day care institutions. These are required to be educationally oriented and to operate within a framework plan prescribed by the State.

Ordinary day care institutions open at least 41 hours per week and children may attend full time or part time. There are no formal links between day care institutions and primary schools, but there are plans to provide a gentle transition from day care to primary schools. Family day-homes provide care and education in private homes, for small groups of mainly younger children. Groups of homes are supervised by pre-school teachers. Open care institutions are drop-in centres where parents can bring their children whenever they choose within the opening hours of the institution and meet with other parents and pre-school teachers.

Parental involvement is actively encouraged and each day care institution must have a parents' council comprising all parents and guardians of children attending the day care institution. Parents are also entitled to be members of the coordinating committee, which establishes an annual plan for the educational activity of the institution.

## United Kingdom

The Department for Education and Employment is responsible for early childhood education. The education of children between the ages of 2 and 5 is provided for under the Education Act, 1996. A wide variety of services is available in different settings, including nursery schools, nursery centres for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, day nurseries, playgroups and private pre-schools.

In general, provision of pre-school education emphasises early literacy, numeracy and the development of personal, social and other skills. Specific "Early Learning Goals" were published in October 1999 by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. By the age of 6, children should have learnt to count to ten, know the alphabet, have

gained confidence in their ability to learn and have learned to concentrate on their own play.

A national framework to rationalise hundreds of qualifications available in early childhood education and care is also being developed.

## 2.6 International Trends

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Notwithstanding the variety of delivery methods employed internationally, there are some common themes. These include the move from targeted provision to universal provision, from separate education and care to seamless provision, a trend towards allocating responsibility to a single Department for the education element and from centralised administration to local community-based provision.

### The Scope of Provision

A variety of pre-school services is available in each of the countries reviewed. This may be simply the consequence of provision developing as early childhood needs evolved. It may also be indicative of the importance each country places on early childhood education or a recognition of the importance of providing for parental choice in this key area. In several EU member states (Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Germany and Spain) a national commitment or statutory entitlement to a place in a publicly-funded service was introduced or extended for certain age groups, although this commitment was not always delivered in full. The model outlined in chapter 5, by building on the infrastructure already in place, seeks to emulate this principle of high-quality provision for all children.

### Seamless provision for under 6s

Countries with developed childcare services have tended towards an evolving relationship between schools and services providing care and recreation for school-aged children. In France, nursery schools have long been integrated into the formal education system, providing children from the age of 2 with the opportunity to acclimatise to the daily routine of education and care. In Norway, day care institutions plan to provide a transition from childcare to formal schooling. In line with this international trend, the proposed model will give priority to the integration of education and care, both by building a high-quality educational element into State-funded childcare and by providing priority in funding to providers to develop strong links with local schools.

### Coordination Structures

A coherent and integrated system, offering flexible and multi-functional services, is considered more able to adopt a holistic approach to children and families, recognising the breadth and inter-connectedness of their needs for, for example, care, education, health, socialisation, support and recreation.

Effective coordination is crucial to the success of a multi-disciplinary approach and the choice of supporting structure in this regard is of key importance. Two approaches to the structures issue are followed internationally: allocating responsibility to a single Department/agency or retention of responsibility within a number of separate Departments accompanied by high-level coordination.

With the exception of New Zealand, the countries reviewed have opted for a single State Department responsible for early childhood education. In New Zealand, policy development remains in the Department of Education, while implementation and support is the responsibility of the Early Childhood Development Unit. It is understood that the Netherlands is moving away from a dual Department system towards allocating responsibility for early childhood to the Ministry of Education. The development of appropriate structures in Ireland is considered in chapter 11.

## Local Community Based Provision

Across each of the countries reviewed, local community involvement is encouraged. This involvement takes many guises, with, in many countries, provision being based in local communities, which come together to pool their resources in providing services. Increasing parental involvement is widely viewed as a vital part of drawing the local community into the delivery of early childhood education and is an approach that is adopted in each of the featured countries. The model proposed in chapter 5 emphasises local community involvement in the delivery of early childhood education while proposals to involve parents in all parts of the process are set out in chapter 9.

# 3 GUIDING PRINCIPLES

This chapter considers in more depth the objective of the White Paper and briefly outlines the strategy designed to achieve it. The strategy is underpinned by a number of guiding principles, set out in chapter 1, which are also examined in detail throughout this chapter; these principles are:

- | Quality will underpin all aspects of early education provision.
- | The State will seek to build on existing provision and to use the existing regulatory framework, where possible.
- | Implementation will be undertaken on a gradual, phased basis, to allow all the participants in the system to prepare adequately for the challenges which lie ahead.
- | Progress will be achieved through a process of consultation, dialogue and partnership.

## 3.1 The Core Objective

The core objective of the White Paper, as stated in chapter 1, is:

to support the development and educational achievement of children through high quality early education, with particular focus on the target groups of the disadvantaged and those with special needs.

The primary focus of the White Paper is on enhancing child development and educational achievement. Chapter 1 showed how quality pre-school provision can have beneficial effects on children's educational performance. The nature and duration of the effects may vary. Some programmes yield short-term gains in IQ and attainment, which dissipate in the medium to long term.<sup>1</sup> Although the gains made are important in terms of easing the transition from home to school and in moderating the influence of educational disadvantage,<sup>2</sup> they are, essentially, transitory in respect of IQ. Other programmes record long-term benefits, in terms of higher participation rates beyond compulsory schooling age and in third-level education, lower incidence of grade repetition, and higher probability of taking a public examination.<sup>3</sup>

This White Paper seeks to ensure lasting benefits in terms of educational achievement for all children. In this context, it focuses on supporting and developing early childhood education which prepares children for the transition to school and creates in them a disposition and state of readiness to learn. These concepts are discussed in more detail in the opening chapter (section 1.5).

Education seeks to enable individuals to develop to their full potential in a wide variety of areas. Accordingly, the proposed programme of early childhood education will involve curricula, methodologies and settings designed to maximise children's potential, not only in purely educational areas, but also in areas such as socialisation and personal development. Children's related needs for care and support will be addressed in an integrated way, in line with the discussion in chapter 1.

The policy outlined in this White Paper is centred on the needs and rights of the child. Proposals will seek to enhance the education and development of children in their early years and to secure lasting benefits for these children in later life. Although early education also yields benefits for participants' families, the economy and society, as set out in chapter 1, these benefits are additional, and supplementary to the benefits to children. They are, in some sense, a spin-off, rather than the driving force behind the provision of quality early childhood education. "Social and economic arguments in favour of early education ... should not blind us to its inherent educational value. A substantial body of literature now points to the effectiveness of early childhood education for the future development of the child ... The primacy of the discipline of

early childhood education over and above its social and economic benefits was a concept that was frequently emphasised in many of the submissions to the Forum”.<sup>4</sup>

## **3.2 Strategy to achieve the Objective**

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Given the diverse nature of the needs for early childhood education, coupled with the variety of measures available to meet these needs, it is clear that the policy adopted must be comprehensive and multi-faceted. The implementation strategy proposed involves facilitating and supporting the provision of quality early childhood education for all children. Providers of early childhood services will be facilitated and supported to enhance the quality and increase the quantity of their education provision. Supports will be both financial and technical: the former might include, for example, financial assistance to schools and other institutions to assist them to enhance their early education facilities; the latter could include guidelines on curriculum and methodologies and support for pre-service and in-service professional development. Where funding for early childhood services is provided for developmental places by the State, providers will be required to provide early childhood education to defined standards.

The main model of intervention is outlined in chapter 5, while later chapters deal separately with other key elements of the strategy. Primary school education for infants is covered in chapter 6. A range of proposals concerning children with special educational needs is envisaged and set out in detail in chapter 7. While many educationally disadvantaged children will participate in existing programmes operated by other Government Departments, the Department of Education and Science will continue to make direct provision for disadvantaged children. Proposals in this regard are outlined in chapter 8.

## **3.3 Quality**

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The quality of the early childhood education provided determines, to a very great degree, the nature and duration of the benefits obtained. The objective of this White Paper is to facilitate the development of a high quality system of early childhood education. Achieving this objective requires progress across a wide spectrum of areas, including curriculum, training and qualifications and the quality and quantity of inputs (staff, equipment, premises).

Enhanced quality will be achieved through a combination of supports and regulation. Providers, both State-funded and non-funded, will be eligible to apply for a Quality in Education mark, to certify that they have reached certain standards relating to quality. State-funded providers which seek to meet children’s developmental needs will be



required to meet prescribed standards while others will be supported and encouraged to meet them.

The development of suitable measures of performance and a system of inspection and evaluation is also essential to ensuring high quality of provision. These issues are discussed in more detail in the next chapter and in chapter 10 (inspection and evaluation).

## **3.4 Building on existing Provision and Structures**

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The White Paper seeks to underpin and support the growth of, rather than replace, the wide range of existing provision in the early childhood area (summarised in chapter 2). Existing providers have developed a substantial expertise in early childhood education and their input at the National Forum was invaluable. Many provide high quality services. However, not all providers reach these standards and State intervention will be aimed primarily at raising standards in these cases so that all children can receive a quality early education. In this way, diversity of provision and parental choice will be retained while quality is enhanced.

Providers will have the benefit of access to the State's work in technical support areas: development of curricula and materials, research and development of best practice, inspection and evaluation service and development of recommended standards of good practice. A proposed Early Childhood Education Agency (chapter 11), following consultation with existing providers, parents and interested parties, will advise the Department of Education and Science on the development of these standards. Agreed standards concerning quality will mean that parents can have confidence that the provider they select for their children will offer a quality service.

The use of existing administrative structures will also be maximised so that:

- | red-tape for providers and parents will be minimised
- | co-ordination of provision and policy-making will be enhanced
- | administration will be more effective and cost efficient.

## **3.5 Maximising Effective Implementation**

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The nature of provision required in any individual case will vary according to the target group and local circumstances. In addition, the many needs of organisations and

individuals already providing services, at both national and local levels, must be taken into account, and their expertise built on, in planning for national policies and local implementation strategies. The following key principles will, therefore, be vital to success:

- | Implementation will be undertaken on a gradual, phased basis, to allow all the participants in the system to prepare adequately for the challenges which lie ahead.
- | Progress will be achieved through a process of consultation, dialogue and partnership with parents, existing providers and other interested parties.

Given the nature and complexity of the issues involved, and the range of interests concerned in provision, implementation of the measures (discussed in more detail in chapter 11) set out in this White Paper will take place incrementally. The Forum Report refers to “A Gradualist Approach to Planning and Funding” and suggests “a series of interim steps ... which would prepare for the creation of a national system.”<sup>5</sup>

Phasing is also necessary to:

- | Ensure that, where necessary, providers have sufficient time to prepare for the implementation of the new strategy.
- | Ensure that, where necessary, providers and staff have adequate time to enhance their education/skills base to the required levels.
- | Minimise the risk of short-term labour shortages.

Consultation has been fundamental to the process of educational reform and policy formulation in recent years. Consultation with concerned interests enhances mutual understanding and enables the State to benefit from the cumulative expertise of both experts and practitioners in the area. The National Forum for Early Childhood Education, which took place in March 1998, provided a forum for consultation and exchange of views on many of the issues discussed in this White Paper and the report of the Forum has informed the development of the Paper. Consultation with parents, providers and other interests will remain central to the implementation phase of the White Paper.

Partnership and consultation between Government Departments will be promoted through the mechanisms proposed for delivery of educational support, which are outlined later in the White Paper.

## 3.6 The Disadvantaged and Children with Special Needs

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All children should have the opportunity to reach their full developmental and educational potential. For a number of reasons, associated with educational disadvantage, and circumstances, including the presence of a special educational need, some children have less opportunity than others to reach their potential in the education system. The policy set out in this White Paper seeks to address as a priority, the needs of children with special education needs and the educationally disadvantaged.

Addressing the needs of the disadvantaged through early childhood education is necessary in order to:

- | promote equality of opportunity
- | tackle the cause of disparities in attainment and opportunity early (this is more effective and cost-efficient than later intervention)
- | maximise the private and social returns on investment.

Ensuring that opportunities are equal does not mean that the same form of provision must be introduced for all participants. Equality does not mean uniformity and it is important to allow for positive discrimination in favour of those most in need. The principle of positive discrimination to tackle disadvantage was supported by the Educational Research Centre's report "Educational Disadvantage in Ireland", whose authors considered that the elimination of disadvantage must involve more than just a "levelling of the playing pitch" and, as a consequence, recommended concentrating resources on a limited number of schools where there is a high concentration of disadvantage.<sup>6</sup>

Appropriate early childhood education programmes can be expensive to provide. Extending education provision generally to children aged less than four would have significant resource implications for other educational sectors. In this context, finance available for pre-school education is finite and must be allocated in areas of greatest inequity. Moreover, research has shown that the benefits of early childhood education may be greatest for the disadvantaged.<sup>7</sup>

These factors support targeting of early childhood education on children from backgrounds of educational disadvantaged and on children with special educational needs. However, in giving priority to disadvantaged children, it is important, for two reasons, to avoid setting

them apart from other children or stigmatising them in any way. Firstly, there is a risk that early childhood education may be perceived as something for the disadvantaged and this may affect participation rates. Secondly, identifying disadvantaged children as a separate group may result in labelling of such children and reinforce rather than alleviate the divisions in society. While priority for the disadvantaged is necessary, efforts will be made (in line with international trends) to promote participation in integrated settings with a mix of abilities and social classes.

## 3.7 Criteria for Provision

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As noted previously, early childhood education will be child-centred and will promote all aspects of children's development. Its primary aim will be to engender in children a disposition and state of readiness to learn and it will also address the related areas of socialisation and personal development. Early childhood education will, where possible, be provided as part of a seamless provision of care and education.

The nature of the proposed model of early childhood education broadly satisfies the desirable criteria identified at the Forum. The criteria and the extent to which they are addressed by the model are outlined below.

- 1 "Universal – covering all children from 0-6 years."  
The White Paper sets out a range of proposals in respect of children from birth to 6 years. The nature of the provisions will vary according to age and circumstances, with support being directed in particular to those with a special educational need or in situations of disadvantage.
- 1 "Two-generational – focussing on the development of young children and the health, welfare and education of parents, in particular of mothers."  
The development of young children is a central objective of the White Paper. The involvement of parents is considered to be basic to the achievement of this objective and chapter 9 will outline strategies to involve parents in provision and to support them in providing early childhood education in the home. There are likely to be considerable benefits for the health, welfare and education of parents, and for their employment and educational opportunities. However, the White Paper is child-centred, and the proposals contained herein can be justified solely on the basis of the benefits which they will bring to children.
- 1 "Mixed – with differing levels of responsibility, with both home and centre-based modes of delivery and with a variety of service delivery providers including statutory, local authority, voluntary and private sector bodies."

A guiding principle is that the White Paper build on (not replace) existing provision and this principle is central to the proposals made. The policy set out in the White Paper also recognises the importance of diversity in the provision made.

- | “Integrated – health, welfare and education services working together at central and local levels.”

Integrated provision is a cornerstone of the White Paper. In addition, coordination between Government Departments at central level will be vital and coordination between schools and other interests at local level will be encouraged and supported. Proposals for coordination are outlined in more detail in chapter 11.

- | **“Democratic – catering equitably for all parents and children, partly decentralised, based on partnerships and local responsibility.”**

The White Paper seeks to promote early childhood education for all children. As indicated earlier in this chapter, priority will be given to the greater needs of disadvantaged children and of children with disabilities. This is necessary to ensure equality of opportunity and equitable treatment.

- | “Consistent with long-term economic objectives – the envisaged early care and education system should be seen not only as preparing young children to enter successfully the formal education cycle, but also as a significant investment in human capital. It would be an educational mechanism to help parents to move from home to work.”

The economic and other benefits for individual children have already been discussed at great length. In addition, as indicated earlier, although the White Paper is child-centred, implementation will result in spin-off benefits to parents and the economy.

- | Educational – the unifying thread through the system would be education. The integrated service would be a privileged locus for early education and the personal development and further education of parents.

Improvement of educational achievement of children is at the heart of the White Paper’s core objective. Parents will benefit from educational, training and employment opportunities as spin-off benefits.

Provision will accord with best international practice. “International comparisons confirm that the salient features of good practice in the direction and management of the provision of Early Childhood Services include:

- | The integration of education and care.
- | Unified responsibility for provision.

- | Targets for growth by a specified year.
- | Coherent and thorough training of early years staff.
- | A curriculum based on the principle of ‘purposeful play’.
- | Effective linkage between the home and pre-school and smooth progression between pre-school and primary school.
- | Adequate resources.”<sup>8</sup>

Previous discussion has outlined how the White Paper will support integration of care and education, the involvement of parents and linkages between pre-school and primary school (points 1 and 6). Chapter 11 will outline the proposed assignment of responsibility for early childhood education to an executive agency and will set out the proposed structures to enhance co-ordination between Departments (point 2). Chapter 10 will propose a system of evaluation and inspection which will include specific performance indicators (point 3). Training and the curriculum (points 4 and 5) are outlined in the next chapter.

# 4 ISSUES OF QUALITY

The link between quality of provision in early childhood education and the nature and extent of benefits to children is, as outlined in chapter 1, well established. Quality may often be considered as a rather vague term, the definition of which will vary according to individual perspectives. This chapter first considers the meaning of quality and identifies some of the important variables which determine the quality of early childhood education provision.

A key element of the White Paper strategy to raise and maintain quality of provision concerns the development of a Quality in Education (QE) mark, which is discussed in section 4.2. The awarding of a QE mark to a provider will signify that provision meets defined quality standards. A system of supports, evaluation and inspection will be introduced to assist providers to meet these standards and to ensure that standards are maintained among funded providers and those applying for the QE mark.

The areas to be covered by the quality standards - curriculum and methodology, qualifications and training and inputs - are set out in the second half of the chapter. Quality will also be enhanced through the development and dissemination by the State of models of good practice.

Quality of provision in primary schools and for children with special needs or who are educationally disadvantaged will be dealt with in chapters 6, 7 and 8 respectively.

## 4.1 Definition of Quality

Qualitative aspects of early childhood educational provision are difficult to define. Interpretations of quality vary and are linked to individual perspectives and circumstances. What might be seen by some as a quality service may be seen by others as poor quality.

“Any definition of quality depends upon which values are given priority. Quality can be defined from the perspectives of parents, child care workers, employers and children.”<sup>1</sup> The White Paper is child-centred. It seeks to achieve lasting educational and developmental benefits for children and quality must be viewed in this context. This corresponds with the “child development perspective (which) is concerned with the potential effects of children’s experiences ... on their intellectual, physical and motor, social and psychological development.”<sup>2</sup>

It is recognised that quality is no longer viewed as one standard of excellence identified for all children in all services, but rather as a set of core criteria towards which services may progress and against which their progress may be measured. Different children will have different needs which must be addressed in a variety of ways. Consequently, the nature and extent of provision may vary according to the target group.

Although there is no universal definition of quality in early childhood education provision, a number of variables are generally associated with it. Some of these concern inputs such as staffing ratios, equipment and premises, and are easily quantified. The existing Child Care Regulations, for example, require that pre-school providers comply with minimum standards concerning adult-child ratios, insurance, size and condition of premises. These factors affect the quality of provision in various ways. For example, high adult-child ratios mean that children receive less intensive and individualised attention which may have a detrimental effect on the quality of the service they receive.

Such quantitative factors are of crucial importance to children’s services, but they tell only half the story. It is necessary to look beyond the quantitative factors for a more comprehensive view of quality: “In seeking to measure quality, it is not sufficient to focus on static, tangible variables such as space, ratio and toilets at the expense of more dynamic, intangible aspects of quality such as interaction between adults and children and the developmental appropriateness of activities and expectations. While it may be a difficult task to legislate for or assess such quality criteria, they must be discussed and debated if effective early education, that will impact positively on the later educational experiences of children, is to be provided.”<sup>3</sup>



Factors which are not currently covered by the Child Care Regulations, but which influence quality of provision and the scale and duration of benefits to children, include: curriculum and methodology, staff qualifications, training and retention, the extent to which parents are involved and the nature of the setting (non-physical aspects). Minimum standards will be recommended concerning some of these factors, while, in other cases, recommendations will be made concerning best practice. Providers who receive State funding for developmental/educational places will be required to meet these standards. Other providers who satisfy the required standards may obtain special recognition through the awarding of a Quality in Education (QE) mark.

## **4.2 The Quality in Education (QE) Mark**

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Many providers have consistently sought to deliver quality early childhood education to their young clients and their parents, while other providers would like to achieve higher standards but may lack the necessary skills and materials to do so or may be unsure of an objective standard against which to measure their provision. In recognition of these matters, a QE (quality in education) mark will be developed. The QE mark will be available to providers who reach minimum standards in a number of key education-related areas.

The QE mark will fulfil a number of functions. Firstly, it will improve the quality of early childhood education provision generally. Secondly, the QE mark will signal that a provider has achieved certain standards and is subject to inspection and evaluation. At present, the absence of a national system of education standards in the pre-school sector means that parents and guardians often cannot make an informed choice of pre-school. In choosing a provider with a QE mark, parents can be confident that their child will receive a quality early education.

Thirdly, as far as providers are concerned, availability of the QE mark will provide an incentive to them to raise and maintain quality in line with the standards. The awarding of the QE mark may be used by providers in their advertising, giving them an advantage over other competitors who have failed, or opted not to meet the standards. This in turn should provide an added impetus for their competitors to achieve standards, and lead to a general improvement in quality of provision, a target which is at the heart of the White Paper.

The QE mark will apply only to educational standards concerning curriculum, methodologies, staff qualifications and training. These standards will operate in tandem with the Department of Health and Children requirements under the Child Care Regulations, 1996. The definition of appropriate educational and developmental standards will be undertaken by the proposed Early Childhood Education Agency

(ECEA) and the Department of Education and Science, following extensive and ongoing consultation.

The mechanism for introducing the QE mark is discussed as part of the description of the intervention model in the next chapter. The requirement for funded providers to meet defined standards will be phased in gradually, following consultation with the various interested parties. This will allow early childhood education providers and staff sufficient time to upgrade their skills, qualifications and provision to the required level.

An evaluation and inspection mechanism (discussed in more detail in chapter 10) will be introduced to support and assess standards of early childhood education among funded providers and among non-funded providers seeking a QE mark. This will involve an initial inspection and subsequent periodic visits to ensure maintenance of standards. In keeping with the principle of building on existing structures, set out in chapter 3, it is proposed that the assessment of compliance with existing Child Care Regulations and with minimum educational standards will be undertaken as part of a single inspection. This will limit the amount of red-tape and minimise disruption for providers, improve coordination between Government Departments and contribute to the integration of childcare and early childhood education.

Continuous review of the quality standards will also be a function of the ECEA. The review will cover the extent of adoption of the standards, their impact on quality and supply, and the need for ongoing updating of standards in the light of new research and models of good practice. The ECEA will also oversee the provision of support and advice to providers on the attainment and maintenance of good practice.

## **4.3 Curriculum and Methodology**

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“While educators are more likely to believe in the superiority of the curriculum in which they have been trained ... research appears to show that curricula ... are similar in their short-term effects so long as they are consistently of a high quality ... we cannot state that the specifics of the actual curriculum employed by any pre-school are a significant factor in terms of positive gains for the child.”<sup>4</sup> It is only where a curriculum fails to conform to basic principles - lacking quality or structure – that a difference in effectiveness may be observed.

Various curricula are followed by existing providers and, in keeping with guiding principles, this diversity of provision and choice should be maintained. Moreover, a “one size fits all” approach is not suitable for young children since “ ... curriculum has to be matched to children’s developmental status. Curriculum design must take a

developmental approach, showing a cognisance of the qualitative differences in children's behaviours at different periods in development and recognising those behaviours and skills which are typical for a particular stage or period in development.”<sup>5</sup>

The aim of establishing curriculum standards, therefore, is to ensure that early childhood education provision is structured, developmental, of high quality and designed to create in young children a readiness to learn. Thus, curriculum guidelines, rather than prescribing specific curricular details, will outline the broad principles with which curricula should comply. Individual providers will have discretion to design and modify their particular curriculum within these guidelines.

The development of guidelines on developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education will be undertaken by the Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA) and the Department of Education and Science in consultation with all of the agencies currently working in the field. In accordance with the provisions of the Education Act, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, which has recently completed the development of the revised primary school curriculum, will also be consulted.<sup>6</sup> The guidelines will have regard to the need to provide a range of experiences and learning opportunities to enhance all aspects of a child's development – cognitive, emotional, linguistic, moral, physical, sensory and social. They will also take account of the need for structure and for learning through play.

As well as drawing up curriculum guidelines, the ECEA and the Department, in consultation with the various agencies, will also develop a recommended or “specimen” curriculum for pre-school children, which will provide more specific detail on content and methodology. This may be used by providers who may not wish to follow, or have difficulty in selecting, one of the established curricula, and who, despite the availability of the guidelines, do not feel able to develop their own curricula. It will also be valuable as a template for parents who wish to help their children in their early childhood learning. The “specimen” curriculum will develop over time in light of the outcome of research and development undertaken by or on behalf of the ECEA.

The Forum highlighted concerns at the lack of a curriculum for very young children: “Within the age range 0-3 years ... the absence of guidelines on developmentally appropriate curriculum (was) identified as a major concern.”<sup>7</sup> To address this concern, development of a less formal curriculum, for children up to 3 years, will also be undertaken by the ECEA, in consultation with interested parties, and in light of the best international research in this area. The emphasis at this level will be on how children learn and how parents can help their children to learn.

In order to be effective, even the most comprehensive curriculum must be accompanied by appropriate methodologies. Although the Early Start pilot programme was based on the Rutland Street curriculum, it has not so far yielded the gains which were recorded in the initial Rutland Street evaluation; this outcome was ascribed to a number of factors. Areas identified by the evaluation as offering scope for improvement (see chapter 8) included teaching practice. The work on curriculum will, therefore, be accompanied by analysis and development of best practice in the area of methodologies since “ ... it is the teacher’s responsibility to create a learning environment that is appropriate for (a child’s) development ...”<sup>8</sup>

## 4.4 Qualifications and Training

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“The task of ensuring that high-quality education and care services are made available to young children depends, in a crucial way, on the quality and training of the personnel involved ...”<sup>9</sup> The system of training and qualifications for early childhood workers, like the pre-school system generally, has developed in a somewhat ad hoc manner in Ireland. This has resulted in certain weaknesses in the existing system. These weaknesses, outlined in chapter 2, concern duplication of provision, inconsistency in standards, lack of consumer awareness as to the skills which courses develop, and difficulties regarding progression between levels of qualification. To tackle the weaknesses, a strategy will be developed, which will include the designation of suitable qualifications, establishment of clear routes of progression between qualifications and improved provision of information on all aspects of qualifications.

Tackling these issues will be done within the framework of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999. The Act provides for the setting up of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, which (section 7) will have three objectives:

- | to establish and maintain a framework for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in the State based on standards of knowledge, skill or competence to be acquired by learners
- | to establish and promote the maintenance and improvement of the standards of further and higher education and training awards
- | to promote and facilitate access, transfer and progression.

The national qualifications framework envisaged will include a qualifications framework for the early childhood sector. This framework will be designed in consultation with the Early Childhood Education Agency, existing early childhood education providers and organisations involved in the provision of early childhood education courses. It will identify the core competencies required for early childhood education teachers and childcare

workers and determine which courses can equip participants with those skills. Clear routes of progression will be established between the various courses.

The ad hoc development of the existing systems of qualifications means that some persons employed in early childhood education may not have acquired formal qualifications. However, their accumulated experience will have equipped them with the necessary skills to deal effectively with children's needs. An emphasis on qualifications as the sole criterion of suitability would place such individuals at a disadvantage and would imply that their experience counted for nothing. Concerns that this matter should be addressed in any new system were voiced strongly at the Forum.<sup>10</sup> The framework developed in accordance with the Act will address this issue. Part VII of the Act sets out arrangements for the protection of learners including (section 46) whether and to what extent a programme of education is accommodated through procedures in the Act for access, transfer and progression.

Phasing in of the new arrangements will be important to allow early childhood education providers and staff sufficient time to upgrade their skills to the required levels and to take account of the risk of initial skills shortages in an expanding area.

The State agrees with the consensus expressed in the National Forum report that a uniform approach to provision of training is not desirable.<sup>11</sup> Thus, apart from the arrangements set out above, the State does not propose to introduce compulsory rationalisation of courses. Supply and demand, particularly in the context of the improved level of information which will be made available, should ensure the survival of the most effective courses. Flexible delivery of courses - including course times and entry requirements - will be encouraged, to maximise the options available, including for parents, to acquire skills and competencies relevant to the needs of children. Dialogue and exchange of ideas between course providers will also be encouraged to improve coordination and quality.

An ongoing process of training will be required to facilitate updating of qualifications and skills to take account of developments in best practice. A programme of training and development will be devised under the aegis of the ECEA, with input from parents, existing early childhood education providers and other partners in education.

## Staff Retention

Standardisation of training should lead to the creation of career ladders and movement between the different areas of the early childhood education system, resulting in improved retention and professionalisation of the sector: "Status is also an important issue. Ireland has been fortunate in having a highly professional and well-respected

teaching profession. Research shows that we shall do well to extend this profile to early education.”<sup>12</sup>

Low esteem can be tackled by raising awareness of the importance of early childhood education and the qualities required in those who provide it. The measures set out in the preceding paragraphs will help to enhance the career status and structure for early childhood education staff. In addition, growth in demand for services and the proposals in this White Paper to develop the sector, should provide scope for improvement in overall career prospects. This should lead, in turn, to lower turnover of staff and enhanced quality of provision.

## 4.5 Inputs

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Some of the inputs which have a bearing on the quality of early childhood education provision are already covered by the existing Child Care Regulations. These Regulations set down minimum standards for adult-child ratios, insurance, and size and condition of premises. All pre-school providers currently covered will continue to remain subject to the Regulations.

The Regulations set down a recommended staffing ratio concerning sessional services for children aged from birth to 6 years, of 1 adult to 10 children.<sup>13</sup> Lower ratios, which vary by age group, are specified for other settings. These ratios are seen as necessary to ensure that the care and welfare of children is safeguarded. Adult:child ratios for educational purposes may differ. In certain cases, lower ratios may be appropriate. These might, where supported by research, include children from disadvantaged backgrounds or settings which include children with special educational needs. These particular cases, and the specific circumstances of the infant classes in national schools, will be discussed in later chapters of this White Paper.

The Regulations do not cover the provision of educational equipment and materials and minimum standards in this area will be drawn up by the ECEA in consultation with interested parties. Size and quality of premises are, however, covered in detail in the Regulations. As a result of falling enrolments, some schools will have spare capacity which could be made available to early childhood education providers. Schools may also be in a position to make accommodation available outside of regular school hours. To assist providers to acquire suitable premises, incentives will be provided to schools to release accommodation. This approach, which is supported by the Commission on the Family, will improve the quality of premises and strengthen the links between early childhood education and primary education.<sup>14</sup> It will also complement broader strategies (for example, tax allowances for capital investment) to improve supply and quality for provision of childcare places.

## 4.6 Research, Development and Dissemination

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Research and development is vital to ensure best practice and improve quality of provision. It is particularly important in the early childhood education area, given the extent of variation in effectiveness of interventions and the somewhat ad hoc nature of the development of the provision in Ireland to date.

A significant research and development programme will be funded and overseen through the Early Childhood Education Agency. In devising the programme of research, the Agency will take account of the views of international experts in the early childhood education field. Co-funding of research projects of common interest, with other agencies and Departments, will also be pursued.

The programme of research will involve an element of provision aimed at key groups, through which models of best practice in curriculum and methodology may be implemented and evaluated. Evaluation of the various initiatives proposed in this White Paper will be undertaken as part of the research programme. Dissemination of the research findings will help to encourage best practice and raise standards. Particular emphasis will be given to longitudinal studies of early childhood education participants and to projects which focus on the disadvantaged and children with special needs.

# 5 MODEL INTERVENTION

This chapter builds on the material in previous chapters to set out a general model of provision of early childhood education for children from birth to 6 years. Proposals concerning three specific groups are discussed in later chapters. Chapter 6 outlines the early childhood education model for children in primary school, chapter 7 considers children with a special educational need and chapter 8 deals with proposals regarding children who are disadvantaged.

The model described will adopt a child-centred approach, with the aim of improving the educational achievement of children and enhancing all aspects of their development, through high-quality early childhood education. There will be a particular focus on tackling the educational needs of children who are disadvantaged. Although the main focus in the chapter will be on children aged 3 to 4, catered for in a formal childcare/education setting outside of the home, consideration will also be given to younger children and to children whose parents opt to care for them in the home.



## 5.1 Overview

State interventions will be designed to facilitate and support providers to deliver quality early education as an integral part of all early childhood services. Providers who are funded by the State with the aim of meeting the developmental/educational needs of children will be required to meet prescribed standards as set out in chapter 4; other providers will be supported and encouraged to meet these standards, and will be given the opportunity to have this fact recognised through the award of the Quality in Education (QE) mark. In line with the key principles set out earlier in this Paper, the State, in making provision for early childhood education, will seek to build on existing provision and to use the existing regulatory framework, where possible. The State's role in this area will largely be executed by the Early Childhood Education Agency (chapter 11).

## 5.2 Framework for Provision

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A large number of Government Departments and State agencies already fund early childhood services; an outline of these services was given in chapter 2. The aims of these services vary: services provided by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform have the general objective of facilitating equal participation by parents in the labour force or the education system; services provided by the Department of Health and Children are largely aimed at ensuring the care and protection of children.

Most State-funded services have, as a primary or secondary aim, the alleviation of disadvantage. As set out earlier in this paper, the research indicates that the provision of places is not sufficient, in itself, to achieve developmental/ educational goals, which are basic to the alleviation of disadvantage: the State must be concerned with the developmental experiences of the children who fill these places and must ensure that the provision is actually helping in the achievement of the developmental/educational goals. The basic principle underpinning State intervention is that where provision is funded by the State with the aim of meeting the developmental/educational needs of children, the provision of quality early childhood education must be ensured.

## 5.3 Building on Existing State-funded Provision

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In line with the key principle that the State will seek to build on existing provision and to use the existing regulatory framework, where possible, the State will:

- | continue to provide early childhood education for priority groups – children with special needs, travellers and children who are disadvantaged
- | establish strategies, at national level, to ensure an educational/developmental content to provision
- | set down minimum quality standards for the educational/developmental content, in accordance with the principles laid down in chapter 4
- | develop and publish guidelines in a number of areas, as set out in chapter 4
- | develop and publish a “specimen” curriculum which may be used for pre-school children, including children under 3 years of age
- | establish and maintain a framework for the development, recognition and award of qualifications and for the promotion and facilitation of access, transfer and progression throughout the sector
- | where necessary, provide funding and other supports to providers to assist them in developing their services to the required standards
- | inspect/evaluate the provision, in accordance with the framework developed in chapter 10, with a view to ensuring that standards are enhanced and maintained; in the case of a serious breach of educational standards, which remains unaddressed, State funding may, as set out in chapter 10, be withdrawn
- | review quality standards on a continuing basis in the light of new research and models of good practice.

The structures through which the State’s intervention in this area will be managed will be set out in chapter 11. The requirement for funded providers to meet minimum standards will be phased in gradually, following consultation with the various interested parties. This will allow early childhood education providers and staff sufficient time to upgrade their skills, qualifications and provision to the required level.

Is mór an ceann oibre a dhéanann Naíonraí a sholáthraíonn oideachas trí Ghaeilge, chomh fada agus a bhaineann le forbairt agus luathoideachas leanaí agus le tacaíocht don Ghaeilge. Liamhnaítear go bhfuil Naíonraí faoi mhíbhuntáiste seachas saghasanna eile réamhscoileanna, i dtaca le háiseanna a bheith ar fáil iontu. Tacaíonn an scáthghrúpa, An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta, le soláthar áiseanna agus soláthraíonn Údarás na Gaeltachta maoiniú teoranta ceannsraithe.

Beidh na tacaíthe uile do réamhscoileanna atá luaite sa Pháipéar Ban ar fáil mar an gcéanna, dar ndóigh, do Naíonraí. Beidh áiseanna agus comhairle ar fáil, i nGaeilge agus i mBéarla, ón Áisíneacht Luathoideachais Leanáí. Chomh maith leis sin, beidh sé mar chúram speisialta ar an Áisíneacht curaclam agus áiseanna do réamhscoileanna lán-Ghaelacha a chomh-mhaoiniú agus a thacú agus cúrsaí oiliúna agus tuismitheoireachta trí mheán na Gaeilge a fhorbairt. Ina theannta sin, beidh rol lárnach sna cúrsaí seo ag an gCoiste Gaeilge a éilítear in Alt 31 den Acht Oideachais.

The Government recognises the important role played by Irish pre-school education in fostering the language. As noted, all provisions that apply generally to pre-school education will apply to Irish medium pre-schooling. However, the Government recognises that pre-schooling in Irish has been traditionally funded by the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands (Bord na Gaeilge/Údarás na Gaeltachta) and sees no reason to change this. It should be stated that the amounts concerned are on a very limited scale. It is envisaged that, particularly in the context of the establishment of the North/South Irish language body, increased funding will be made available to the Irish language pre-schooling sector from 2001 onwards.

## **5.4 Direct State Intervention**

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There will be instances where the educational needs of disadvantaged children, or those with special educational needs, are not being met by existing State-funded services. Some of these will be dealt with through the research strand, outlined later in this chapter. The particular requirements of children with special educational needs will be dealt with in chapter 7. Proposals concerning disadvantaged children are set out in chapter 8.

## **5.5 Facilitating Quality Early Education for all**

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While direct State funding or provision of early childhood education will be targeted largely at children in key groups, mainly those experiencing educational disadvantage or those with a special educational need, the State has an interest, for all the reasons set out in chapter 1, in facilitating the incorporation of quality education provision into all early childhood services.

The Quality in Education (QE) mark, outlined in chapter 4, will be the main instrument by which the State will seek to ensure that quality early education services are widely available. The QE mark will be available to all providers of early childhood services, who may apply for the mark.

The State, through the Early Childhood Education Agency, will promote the QE mark, and will facilitate and support providers in obtaining it. In particular, the State will:

- | make available to providers guidelines in a number of areas, outlined in chapter 4, including the recommended or “specimen” curriculum for pre-school children
- | promote the framework established for the development, recognition and award of qualifications and for the promotion and facilitation of access, transfer and progression throughout the sector
- | facilitate and support providers and childcare staff in acquiring qualifications, through the development and provision of training courses, and through the provision of incentives for training
- | consider providing limited funding for the upgrading of facilities and materials to enable provision of quality early childhood education
- | provide an inspection and evaluation service for purposes of assessing quality in line with QE standards
- | insofar as possible, provide general advice and support to providers
- | disseminate the results of research and good practice
- | encourage funded providers to develop links with other providers in the neighbourhood, and with local schools, to ease the transition to primary school.

## **5.6 Children aged 3 to 4 cared for in the Home<sup>1</sup>**

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A considerable number of parents choose to care for their pre-school children in the home. Where parents opt to do this, the State will make available a number of supports which they may use to develop and encourage the educational dimension of their children’s care.

A variety of educational materials, including, most particularly, the guidelines on curriculum and methodology, and the “specimen” curriculum developed by the State (see chapter 4), will be made available to parents, in a number of formats (hard copy, Internet), and through a number of channels - the local library network, community health care centres, social welfare offices and the National Parents Council. In addition, chapter 9 proposes that the Early Childhood Education Agency develop courses, with particular emphasis on development of early literacy skills, of which parents may avail.

The Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA) will work with other Departments and agencies to examine the feasibility of facilitating and supporting the establishment of “drop-in” centres, or parent and toddler groups, where parents may receive and exchange advice and experience on issues relating to early childhood education. The possibility of building on the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs support for Family and Community Services Resource Centres will be examined. Typically, these Centres provide a wide range of services including crèche and pre-school facilities, after school activities and usually provide a general ‘drop-in’ facility for parents. In addition, adult education and training courses (including parenting) are available in the Centres.

The ECEA will consider, in particular, the possibility of locating centres in vacant classrooms in national schools, which would have the added advantage of linking the early education experience to the mainstream education system; incentives would be provided for schools which provided vacant classrooms for use in this way. The possibility of recognised national early years agencies being supported to establish centres of this sort in particular locations will also be considered.

## **5.7 Children under 3 Years**

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Although the needs of this age group are predominantly care-related, as outlined earlier, there are substantial benefits to be gained from supportive education, even at this early age. While it is not necessary to provide a formal early education system for these children, it is desirable that they be provided with opportunities to develop in a number of areas – cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, aesthetic, sensory, physical and moral areas. The initiatives concerning curriculum, advice and support will be available to this age group.

The active involvement of parents is crucial to the development of their children and this is particularly the case for children aged under 3. Assistance is therefore most effective when provided to parents, to assist them to help their children. A range of proposals is outlined in chapter 9. Interventions will also aim to build on the existing involvement of the Department of Health and Children. The Early Childhood Education Agency will also, in cooperation with maternity hospitals, provide support materials and developmental guidelines and advice to parents of newborn children.

### **5.8 Research Strand**

General provisions with regard to research, development and dissemination were set out in chapter 4. It is envisaged that the research programme will involve the establishment of a number of pilot projects, under the aegis of the Early Childhood Education Agency, to test

models of provision, with a view to dissemination of the results. Existing Early Start projects will form the core of the initial research pilot projects.

Providers will be encouraged to engage in the research process from the outset. Funded providers which seek to tackle disadvantage will be required to implement “best practice” findings from the research strand; non-funded providers will be encouraged to implement these findings.

## **5.9 Implementation**

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Two of the key principles underpinning this White Paper are that implementation will be undertaken on a gradual, phased basis, to allow all the participants in the system to prepare adequately for the challenges which lie ahead, and that progress will be achieved through a process of consultation, dialogue and partnership. An incremental, phased implementation will be necessary to ensure that early childhood education staff have adequate time to update/enhance their existing skills base to the required levels and to allow providers sufficient time to adjust to the new system. An incremental approach also recognises the pressures that exist in the childcare sector and avoids any danger of reductions in the supply of early childhood places.

# 6 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

This White Paper encompasses policy for all children aged up to 6 years. Chapter 5 has focussed on children up to the age of 4 years; the focus in this chapter is on children above this age, most of whom, as pointed out in chapter 1, attend State-funded national schools. These children form an important infant cohort which, in international terms, is regarded as a pre-school cohort. It is important, therefore, that policy in relation to the early childhood education needs of these children be set out clearly in this White Paper.

## 6.1 Existing Provision

The first few years a child spends in primary school have a profound effect on the child and on her/his later achievement throughout the education system. The experience can be daunting, as the child has to cope with the transition from a setting which is partly, or indeed largely, care based, to a more formal and structured learning environment. The services provided to children in these infant classes must recognise this and must assist the children successfully to make the transition to primary school.

The general aims of early education for children in the infant classes of primary schools are essentially the same as those outlined for younger children in a pre-school setting. If children have experienced quality early childhood education during the pre-school years, they will enter the early years of primary school with a disposition and in a state of readiness to learn. It is important that, for these children, the benefits of early childhood education are not lost but rather are consolidated as they progress through the education system. Children who have not benefited from early childhood education, either in a home or other setting, must also be enabled to benefit to the maximum degree from the education provided in the early classes in primary school.

While there are many positive aspects of the education provided in the infant classes in primary schools, it is clear, from the analysis in chapter 2, that some aspects of provision require some modification to ensure that provision remains of the highest possible quality. Chapter 2 highlighted class size for target groups, resources and inconsistent application of new methodologies as particular issues which must be tackled in this context.

## 6.2 Curriculum and Methodology

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Chapter 4 has dealt in a general way with the issues of curriculum and methodology and proposed that the Early Childhood Education Agency should develop appropriate guidance for curriculum and methodologies for pre-school children. A revised curriculum for primary schools, including infant classes, has recently been introduced into schools. The revised curriculum also includes guidelines on methodologies. It builds on the latest research into, and the most up-to-date expertise on, childhood learning. Used by teachers in the infant classes in primary schools, and coupled with additional resources for equipment and, in particular cases, by smaller child:adult ratios, the curriculum guidelines and methodologies should prove adequate to address the educational needs of the children in infant classes in primary schools. Further evaluation and development of curriculum and methodologies for infants classes will continue on an ongoing basis. The proposed programme of research and development will be important in this regard. In particular, it



will be necessary to ensure that provision continues to take account of developing knowledge and best practice.

## 6.3 Qualifications and Training

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The twin issues of qualifications and training were addressed in a general way in chapter 4, which also noted that the issues will be addressed for the system as a whole by the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, with input also from the Early Childhood Education Agency. To enhance and maintain the integrity of the primary school system, and of the primary teaching service, there is a case for maintaining the system whereby fully-trained teachers are deployed as the leading classroom professionals in infant classes.

However, other teaching professionals will also have developed skills which may be particularly suited to the needs of infants in primary schools. These include, for example, qualified Montessori teachers, who have been awarded an NCEA accredited degree qualification, following a full-time course of no less than three years in duration. Recognition extends to such teachers to teach in special schools and special classes in national schools. Difficulties, of course, arise in relation to further extending this recognition to mainstream teaching posts as it is necessary for all teachers to have qualifications in relation to the full range of the primary curriculum since each primary school teacher may be required to teach any age group. This said, the Department of Education and Science intends consulting on the most appropriate means of assisting these other professionals to obtain qualifications which would entitle them to hold mainstream posts in national schools.

More generally, an Expert Advisory Group, established by the Minister for Education and Science, is currently undertaking a review of the pre-service education programme for primary teachers provided by the colleges of education. The Group has been particularly asked to consider issues relating to pre-service training for teachers in infant classes. It would be premature to recommend changes in advance of this Group's final report. However, it is clear that its findings will inform any changes in training for teachers.

The Early Childhood Education Agency, in its capacity as an originator and disseminator of research findings, will liaise with and have an input into in-career development provision for teaching professionals in infant classes, insofar as the particular needs of early childhood education are concerned.

## 6.4 Inputs

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Much debate in recent years has centred on the optimal child:adult ratio and the implications of this ratio for effective learning. International research indicates that smaller ratios (18:1) in the initial years are beneficial, in particular for disadvantaged and minority students – “The research suggests that minority and economically disadvantaged students benefit most from smaller classes.”<sup>1</sup> However, the benefits are likely to be lessened unless teachers adapt their teaching methodologies in line with the reductions “...the clearest evidence of positive effects is in the primary grades, particularly kindergarten through third grade, and that reducing class size is especially promising for disadvantaged and minority students. ... positive effects were less likely if teachers did not change their instructional methods and classroom procedures in the smaller classes.”<sup>2</sup>

The Department of Education and Science has traditionally employed lower child:adult ratios as one method of targetting the needs of disadvantaged children, particularly in the early years in primary schools. This measure, combined with changed teaching methodologies and other arrangements is seen, for example, in the Breaking the Cycle pilot programme, which makes provision for reduced class sizes for each of the first four years of primary school. The Childcare Regulations also make provision for relatively small child:adult ratios, which vary according to the age of the child and the circumstances of the setting.

Children who are in situations of relatively small child:adult ratios in pre-school settings may find it difficult to adapt to the much larger class sizes in primary schools. The Department will continue to address this issue in the context of prioritising schools which serve significant numbers of disadvantaged children.

Evidence from recent international research suggests that early identification of and intervention concerning a child’s special needs is most effective for the individual child, and most cost-effective in the long term. Particular attention will be directed by the remedial service (extended to all schools with effect from September 1999) towards the needs of children in the early years in national schools.

The Department accepts that quality provision should be supported by appropriate facilities, equipment and materials. It considers that where resources are allocated to the primary education system, priority should be given to the needs of infant classes and materials for infant classes. The introduction of the new infant capitation grant for the school year 1999/2000 is evidence of this priority. The grant may be used by schools to purchase equipment according to their individual needs. In utilising the grant, schools will have to have regard to the enhancement of quality in the early classes and to the importance of making available materials that support learning through play and activity. Schools may also link into relevant initiatives at primary

level. For example, the grant may be linked into the “Schools IT 2000” programme, through the purchase of CDs and computer software.

# 76 CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Since the 1930s, there has been research evidence that the provision of stimulation and education at an early, pre-school age tends to accelerate the physical, social and cognitive development of children with disabilities. In the last decade, in particular, there has been significant research into the effectiveness of early intervention programmes for children with disabilities. The evidence emerging from these studies is unequivocal in highlighting the significance of the early years in the development of children with disabilities and in stressing the value of targeted systematic, intensive and high-quality interventions.

## **7.1 Definition of Children with Special Educational Needs**

The Report of the Special Education Review Committee in its definition of pupils with special educational needs included all “those whose disabilities and/or circumstances prevent or hinder them from benefiting adequately from the education which is normally provided for pupils of the same age, or for whom the education which can generally be provided in the ordinary classroom is not sufficiently challenging.”<sup>1</sup> The Report described particular categories of pupils with special educational needs, including pupils with mental handicap, emotional and behavioural disorders, physical and sensory disabilities, specific learning disabilities, specific speech and language disorders, and autism.

## **7.2 Rationale for Early Education for Children with Special Needs**

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The rationale for early childhood education for children generally was set out in chapter 1. The arguments outlined in that chapter apply equally, or even more so, to pupils with special educational needs. In particular:

- | a child’s early learning provides the foundation for later learning, so the sooner intervention is begun the greater the opportunity and likelihood for the child to go on to learn more complex skills and have development enhanced
- | there is the possibility that, with quality early childhood educational interventions, the handicaps and difficulties of a child with a disability such as autism, cerebral palsy, hearing impairment or Down’s Syndrome may experience will be reduced and additional problems will be prevented
- | early intervention can support families in adjusting to having a child with special needs; moreover, if parents have the assistance of an early childhood teacher, who is trained and experienced in special needs education, they may be assisted to acquire the skills they need to help their child to develop to his/her full potential.

These arguments are persuasive for all young children with special needs. However, they are particularly strong in the case of children with severe disabilities in whom the development of language, communication and social skills are affected as a result of their disabilities. Children who can benefit from early childhood special education and other forms of early intervention include children with:

- | intellectual impairment and general learning difficulties, including children who are diagnosed as such from birth or soon after birth; children with multiple disabilities and children with certain syndromes, including Down's Syndrome, form part of this group
- | severe physical disabilities, including those with spina bifida and/or hydrocephalus, cerebral palsy and muscular dystrophy
- | sensory disabilities, particularly those with severe visual impairment and those with profound or severe hearing impairment
- | emotional and/or behavioural disorder
- | delayed or disordered speech or language development
- | autistic spectrum disorders.

Consideration of best practice in the United States and elsewhere leads to the conclusion that early intervention is effective when it provides high quality, intensive and clearly articulated programmes, delivered by highly skilled and carefully trained personnel in contexts of small group and individual instruction, and which are planned specifically to address individual, identified needs. Intervention programmes require a range of supports and services in order to maximize benefits to the child. These supports and services come through access to and coordination with other relevant agencies and professionals. They extend the focus of attention beyond the immediate context of the actual intervention programme to include the child's family and home/community environment, providing a comprehensive web of support. Each element has its own clearly defined role but, equally, each contributes to the effectiveness of the other, necessary components of the intervention programme.

## **7.3 Identification and Assessment**

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A National Intellectual Disability Database has been established and planning is already underway to set up a similar database for physical and sensory disabilities. The existence of these databases will assist in planning services and policy at the national level. However, children with disabilities live at local level and each health board must maintain its own database to cover the broad range of disabilities. The collection and recording of data must lead to appropriate planning of intervention services, including early childhood special education, at local level.

In the absence of accurate statistics for each disability category, only an estimate can be made of the numbers of young children who will require early childhood special education. Not all disabilities will be detected in the years before children reach the age of six years. Many children with mild intellectual impairment and the resultant

general learning disabilities are identified only after some time in school. A reasonable estimate of the number of children who will require special education in the early years is about four per cent of an age cohort.

The diagnosis and identification of disability at health board level is crucial. To do this effectively it is essential that, within each health board, there are well-staffed, multidisciplinary teams available to function in hospitals where children are born and at local level where a variety of health services is provided to young children. Multidisciplinary teams already function within the health boards. Their ultimate goal is the improvement of the general welfare of children through the early identification and assessment of difficulties and disabilities.

Teams should have the range of professional expertise needed to identify and advise on the range of disabilities they will meet in young children. While the contribution of each specialist in the diagnosis of special needs is to be valued, the data from certain specialists is of particular use. The insights and recommendations of psychologists, speech and language therapists, physiotherapists and occupational therapists, can be of immediate value in pre-school settings and in schools in developing education plans for pupils with disabilities. The advice and support of these professionals should be available to staff who are working with young children with special needs. Teachers with expertise in special needs education should be members of teams when planning for the early education of a child with a disability is being discussed. The teacher member of the multidisciplinary teams should be the main channel of communication between the team and pre-school staff and teachers in schools.

Shortcomings that exist in present provision and will need to be addressed include:

- | the restricted composition of multidisciplinary teams and, particularly, the absence of teachers with expertise in special education on those teams
- | the shortage in the supply of key professionals, which is a matter of immediate and ongoing concern
  - | the need to promote and increase take-up of the services offered at developmental check-ups
- | the absence of liaison between these teams and the pre-school settings and schools which children identified with disabilities will attend.

## **7.4 Existing Provision for Children aged 4 to 5 years with Special Needs in the School System**

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The State currently makes extensive provision for children with special needs in the school system, including the infant classes in national schools. Since November 1998, every child with an identified special need has an automatic entitlement to special provision, from a range of supports, including resource teachers, special needs assistants, special classes, visiting teachers and enhanced additional supports, such as special school transport, equipment and assistive technology. A significant feature of the expanded provision of special education services is that it is largely happening within mainstream schools on an integrated basis. Very many individual pupils with special educational needs are being supported in their mainstream classes with the assistance of resource teachers. This support is becoming increasingly available to 4 to 6-year-olds.

A range of special schools caters for children with special needs; these schools enroll children from four years of age. This option, in particular, is the one preferred for children with autism and those with specific speech and language disorders. In the case of one special school for children with physical disabilities – the Central Remedial Clinic School - a class for 3-year olds has been established. These children are included on the roll of the school and are taught by a member of the teaching staff of the school.

Three new pre-school special classes have been established on a pilot basis for young children diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorders. All three classes – two in Dublin and one in Cork (CABAS) - have favourable staffing levels and are supported by multidisciplinary teams as required.

## **7.5 Provision for Children with Special Needs under 4 years of Age**

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The Visiting Teacher Service of the Department provides a service to young children with visual and/or hearing impairment, from the age of 2 years. Teachers with specialist qualifications visit and teach the young children in their homes. They also demonstrate model teaching approaches for the benefit of parents, and advise parents on appropriate management of their child's special educational needs.

The health boards and/or voluntary bodies provide services for many young children who have been assessed with severe or profound disabilities. These preschool services, which include varying amounts of education provision, are availed of by children who have been assessed, by early intervention teams, usually with mental handicap. However they also cater for children with multiple disabilities and children within the autistic spectrum. The services are provided in Child Education and Development Centres and are generally run by a Clinical Director and staffed by nurses with a



mental handicap qualification, with teaching inputs supplied typically by Montessori-trained teachers. Play therapists are also employed in some of these centres.

The pre-school service provided varies. In all cases, there are direct teaching services to young children. In some cases, principally in the case of hearing and visually impaired children but also in the case of disadvantaged children, they are indirect, advisory services offered to parents and classroom teachers. In a small number of cases, particularly with hearing impaired, related services, such as the provision of assistive technology, are provided.

## 7.6 **Developing a Policy for Early Special Needs Education**

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The range of services already provided by the Department of Education and Science, although relatively limited to date, typifies the range of services that may be provided more generally. This range of services will continue to be provided and will be expanded. However, in the matter of early childhood education generally, but especially in the matter of early childhood special education, one size does not fit all. Young children with special educational needs form a very varied population. They have very different combinations of needs and abilities and are living in very different environments. A wide range of issues impinges on any policy that can be developed for their early education. These are discussed in the following paragraphs.

### **Demographic and prevalence issues**

Demographic and prevalence issues arise and must be tackled. Some disabilities are more common than others and there is a wide spread in terms of prevalence. In urban areas it may be possible to provide expert supports, both in pre-school settings and in designated schools where children under 4 years old who have disabilities can be brought together for stimulation and education. Such an arrangement in a rural setting might prove very difficult because of lower prevalence, greater dispersal, transport problems and the difficulties inherent in bringing young children with disabilities long distances to services.

### **Education and care issues**

The issues of care and education should also be mentioned here. Development happens across a spectrum, in an uneven manner. This has an impact on the services which can be made available to children generally, but the effects are more severe for children with disabilities, where the existence of the disability may seriously delay the emergence of particular competencies or abilities. The developmental age level of the

child across the spectrum can be important in regard to whether the focus is principally on care or education. It can never be exclusively on one or the other. This, in turn, may determine whether the provision made is indirect, through advice on stimulation and education to parents and carers, or direct, in terms of teaching the child. At times, it may be both.

A related and important issue is the significance of the benefit to the child from getting early education as opposed to care and stimulation. The justification for the provision of early education to certain groups such as those who are disadvantaged or who are Travellers already exists. Whereas care, stimulation and early education are of benefit to all children, including all those with disabilities, a more focussed early education may reap greater benefits for certain sub-groups among those disabilities. These sub-groups would include, in particular, children whose speech and language is seriously delayed or disordered, children with gross sensory impairments where language, cognitive and social development are very seriously disrupted, and children whose behaviour and impairments present very difficult management problems for their parents or carers. This latter group would include children with certain syndromes and children within the autistic spectrum, where early education can focus on the specific areas of impairment.

## Curriculum issues

It is vitally important that the curriculum/programme, and the teaching approaches and methods, be appropriate to the needs of the children. As children with disabilities are a very varied group, their needs and abilities are quite different. For some young children the acquisition of certain personal skills may assume greater significance at a particular stage. For a young child, being able to manage his/her own needs in regard to the toilet, personal hygiene, feeding and behaviour is a great boost to feelings of competence and self-esteem. For a deaf child, it is critical to make decisions at an early stage about an approach to language development and the option of sign language. A special focus on language development may be the most significant reason for the provision of early special education to young children who have been diagnosed with serious delays or disorders in that area. The development of communication, social and cognitive skills and the elimination of certain behaviours may all be very important in the case of young children with autism.

All children can benefit from a broad curriculum, but with children with special needs, some areas of the curriculum may be more important at particular times and may need greater focus. They, like all children, will need to follow a programme that caters for the acquisition and use of sensorimotor skills, pre-school cognitive skills and processes, play and social skills, self-help, communication and motor skills. The approaches used need to be flexible enough to cater for the range and specificity of the special needs at any

particular time. They will include imitation, play that is structured and unstructured, direct teaching and at times behavioural approaches.

Another issue concerns what is possible for young children with disabilities in terms of inclusive or integrated early special education as opposed to segregated education. Many factors impinge on this issue alone and flexibility will be required in its resolution. Here, it is certainly the case that one size does not fit all, and that different arrangements may be required at different stages in a child's life-span.

## **7.7 Elements of an Early Intervention for Children with Special Needs**

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Although children with special needs will benefit from the general improvements proposed as part of this White Paper, a number of particular improvements will be made to the services available for these children. In keeping with the general thrust of this White Paper, the approach in regard to early special education is to build on and improve the extent and quality of existing services.

The parents of all pre-school children with diagnosed disabilities will have access to an early education expert. Initially, the experts' involvement will be as advisers to parents and as disseminators of models of best teaching approaches. Later, it may be to teach the children for short periods. Once children begin to attend a pre-school or care facility in which they will receive education, special education advice will be extended to those who work with the children.

The Visiting Teacher or resource teacher will be a significant source of special education support to parents and those who run early childhood facilities. However, there should also be access to the advice and support of other specialists, such as psychologists and speech and language therapists in particular, but also physiotherapists and occupational therapists in relation to specific children. The shortages in the supply of key professionals, mentioned in 7.3, are relevant here also. Care will be taken to ensure that there is liaison between the different specialist advisors so that duplication is avoided and parents and those in charge of facilities are not confused.

Steps will be taken to ensure that all teachers have access to appropriate pre-service and in-service development to ensure that they have the expert skills and knowledge to develop the potential of pupils with special needs. This will require improved training in areas such as early child development, how young children learn most effectively and the content of the early childhood curriculum, and how it can be most appropriately adapted to meet the varying needs of pupils with disabilities. It will be

necessary for teachers of children with special needs to update their skills continually to take account of the rapid growth in knowledge of disabilities and the development of best practice in this regard.

A range of induction courses and post-graduate courses will be made available, through colleges of education and education support centres, to those teachers who are working specifically with pupils with special needs. These courses are already available in a number of colleges of education. Initially, the courses will contain a mixture of generic and specific special education content. Courses may also be modular, for teachers who work with specific populations of special needs pupils, such as those with autism or those with severe or profound intellectual impairment and associated general learning difficulties.

Those who already work with young children with special needs will have access to training in special education. All such personnel will need training in areas such as child development, the effects of different disabilities, how children with different disabilities learn best and curriculum design for special needs.

Appropriate curriculum guidelines will be made available to meet the needs of pupils with disabilities. The revised curriculum is appropriate for pupils with disabilities who do not have an intellectual impairment and general learning difficulty. Adaptations to the curriculum and access to it through the use of assistive technology will be required by some pupils with disabilities. This will be the case, in particular, for some children with physical disabilities and with visual impairments. For other pupils there will be an increased emphasis on the development of language and communication. The NCCA is already working on the development of curriculum guidelines for pupils with intellectual impairments and general learning difficulties.

A range of professional services will be made available, as required, to support pupils with special needs and their teachers, although the difficulties with supply, noted earlier, are again relevant here. The multidisciplinary teams mentioned earlier will be facilitated to provide these support services.

Support will be made available to those who run pre-school services that enrol young children with disabilities. For some children who are already in dedicated services for children with disabilities, principally with learning disabilities, arrangements will be made to expand the services to provide for five-days per week coverage. Centres will be facilitated in employing teachers to provide direct education services to these children.

Where necessary, further classes for young children with disabilities between the ages of 3 and 4 years will be established. The issues raised earlier that impinge on the feasibility of this proposal will matter, of course, but, in principle, provision will be made for sub-groups of children with disabilities such as those referred to earlier, some of whom are already

getting such a service. Such classes may be established for children with autism, and for children with particular severe difficulties in language development arising from a delay or disorder, or from a hearing impairment.

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) will be extended to all schools and will be availed of by pupils with special needs.

## 7.8 Structural Matters

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Arrangements will be made to ensure better coordination of the work of all of the professionals involved in the interests of children with special needs. The Early Childhood Education Agency, proposed later in this White Paper, will play a particular role in this regard. It will ensure high quality of provision of early special education services and that providers:

- | have the requisite training to provide a service that is effective and have access to further staff development
- | are supported by professionals with particular expertise when such is required and by an Inspectorate who will monitor standards and advise in regard to improvements.

Multidisciplinary teams, which can function in an effective, coordinated and flexible way, will be established or expanded. The teams, which need not be very large, will consist of the key players, representing professionals in special education and health, who can call on other professional expertise, as required, in the case of particular children with special needs. Teams will meet to:

- | consult with and advise parents of a child with disabilities in regard to best options for the education of their child
- | make decisions with parents in regard to the form of provision that will be made and the location in which it will happen
- | draft the outlines of an education plan for each child which can be carried out by those involved in the education of the child with assistance and advice from relevant professional as required.

It is important that a multi-disciplinary team is tightly structured, well managed and focussed. As its key purpose in this case is educational, it should be chaired by an educationalist who can ensure that any decisions arrived at are carried out effectively. While the Early Childhood Education Agency will have a role that involves the

coordination of the services of different Government Departments and groups at a national level, the multidisciplinary team will be responsible for efficient and effective coordination of provision at local level. The Agency will operate in tandem with evolving structures in the special needs area.

# 8 CHILDREN WHO ARE DISADVANTAGED

Research indicates that early childhood education can be particularly beneficial for children in disadvantaged circumstances. This chapter examines current State involvement in the area and outlines a strategy to enhance provision.

## 8.1 Definition

Together with children with special needs, disadvantaged children represent a key target group for the White Paper. Section 32 of the Education Act, 1998, defines educational disadvantage as “the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools.”

Educational disadvantage is a complex, multi-faceted problem which may arise from a number of factors. These include financial hardship, parental unemployment, low levels of parental (particularly maternal) education, location and family size. In many cases, children will be affected by combinations of these factors. The importance of the various factors and the degree of disadvantage varies with individual circumstances.

Two related difficulties must be overcome even before steps can be taken to tackle educational disadvantage. Firstly, educational disadvantage is difficult to identify. In some cases, the symptoms may be relatively easy to spot - location, financial hardship. However, other variables, such as low levels of parental education, may not be so obvious. Moreover, it must be stressed that the presence of a given factor may not equate with disadvantage.

The second difficulty is to quantify the degree of disadvantage. Many children may be affected by specific factors, but the impact of these factors may be mediated by individual circumstances. Accordingly, variation in the severity of disadvantage should be taken into account when designing and implementing intervention programmes.

## 8.2 Importance of Early Childhood Education

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Chapter 1 provides a detailed account of the range of benefits which may accrue from quality early childhood education. These include benefits to the individual child, his or her parents, as well as the wider economic and social returns. The benefits 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.

An OECD review cites research in the USA which shows that early intervention “can produce long-term cognitive and academic benefits for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.”<sup>1</sup> Further American research shows clearly that interventions which tackle disadvantage may yield significant financial returns in terms of savings and may be much more cost-effective than equivalent interventions for other children. Assessments of savings to Government from the Elmira Prenatal/Early Infancy Project



vary substantially according to the risk factor involved. Analyses indicate savings of \$24,694 per child for higher-risk families to \$3,775 for lower risk families.<sup>2</sup> In Ireland, evaluations of the Rutland Street project have shown that quality intervention can yield lasting benefits.<sup>3</sup> O’Flaherty notes that “the benefits are strongest in children from disadvantaged backgrounds.”<sup>4</sup> The results of the interim evaluation of the Early Start pilot pre-school programme (discussed in the next section) show that, as is the case for all early education programmes, careful planning and review are required to achieve benefits for disadvantaged children.

Brain research, discussed in chapter 1, indicates that during the early years most children will benefit from a supportive, caring home environment and will receive sufficient stimulation to assist rapid brain development.<sup>5</sup> However, this environment and support will not be available in some homes and children’s development may be hampered as a result. The research further suggests that if intervention is not undertaken early, lasting damage may be caused, and that if children fall behind their peers at an early stage, it becomes extremely difficult to close the gap.

## **8.3 Existing Provision for Disadvantaged Young Children**

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Intervention by the Department of Education and Science comprises the Early Start pilot pre-school project, the Rutland Street project, pre-school provision for Travellers and, at primary school level, the Breaking the Cycle pilot programme.

### **Rutland Street Project**

In 1969, a pre-school was established and attached to the Rutland Street primary school in Dublin. The project, which is still in operation today, aims to ease the transition for young children from home to primary school. A purpose-designed curriculum is in operation and parents are actively encouraged to participate in the education process by attending at the pre-school. Advice is also provided to parents in their homes as to how they may best assist their children. The importance of active parental involvement has since achieved recognition in a number of other schemes operated by the Department, most notably the Home School Community Liaison Scheme.

Early evaluation of the impact of the Rutland Street Project showed that, over the course of their two years in the pre-school, participants made good progress in acquiring school-related skills and knowledge. However, “they failed to keep pace with the achievements of children in the general population when they transferred to primary school.”<sup>6</sup> Later follow-up of the participants showed that they stayed longer at

school and were more likely to take a public examination than were non-participants from the same area.<sup>7</sup>

## Early Start

The Early Start pilot programme aims to tackle educational disadvantage by targeting children who are considered to be at risk of not reaching their potential within the education system. The programme was introduced in 1994 and catered initially for 368 3 and 4 year old children. It was expanded the following year and now caters for more than 1,500 pupils in 40 schools. The approach is to establish groups of 15 pupils in existing primary schools in disadvantaged areas. Each class is run by a primary school teacher and a qualified childcare worker. While the Early Start curriculum emphasises the development of cognitive and linguistic skills, due recognition is also given to personal and social development.

The Early Start programme seeks to draw on the Rutland Street Project curriculum and methodologies. Staff visited the Rutland Street pre-school to observe its modus operandi and to discuss activities and curriculum with pre-school staff.

An interim evaluation of the pilot programme undertaken by the Educational Research Centre found that “On a range of objective tests which involved an assessment of children’s cognitive, language and motor behaviour, no differences were found between the performance of ... Early Start pupils when they reached Junior Infants class and the performance of Junior Infant pupils who had not experienced Early Start. ... While ... we might not be too surprised that participants did not show any benefit on assessments of higher order skills, it is somewhat surprising that the emphasis placed in curricula on perceptual skills was not reflected in the test performance of pupils.”<sup>8</sup> The evaluation also records surprise that the emphasis on language skills was not reflected in participants’ test performance. However, potential improvement in this area was noted: “the language performance of the second cohort of ... pupils was significantly better than the performance of the first cohort. This may indicate that the emphasis on language development ... was gaining momentum.”

Teachers’ perceptions of Early Start pupils when in Junior Infants were more positive than the test results. Teachers also considered that participants were superior in terms of a range of non-cognitive characteristics including self-determination, adaptation to classroom procedures, ability to concentrate, creativity and originality. However, it must be noted that the number of teachers interviewed was small (17) and that views differed within this group. Moreover, the correlation between teachers’ ratings of pupils’ cognitive ability and objective tests of ability, although statistically significant, was moderate in size.

The test findings on cognitive ability run counter to evaluations of similar programmes, including the Rutland Street project, where an initial immediate impact on test performance was found. The evaluation identifies a number of possible causes for the difference in impact between Early Start and the Rutland Street project:

- | There was less emphasis on cognitive development in the Early Start classrooms than in the Rutland Street project.
- | Early Start is administered in a number of schools while the Rutland Street project is located on a single premises. The opportunities for Early Start staff from all of the schools involved to meet, while considerable by normal standards, were much less frequent than in Rutland Street. This has had implications for the implementation of the programme and particularly for achieving homogeneity of practice across all of the Early Start centres.
- | A review of the in-career development for the programme has led to a revised approach which includes a series of classroom visits from experienced trainers.

The effectiveness of Early Start was also affected by:

- | Poor attendance (attendance is voluntary)
- | Methodologies: “The fact that the teachers had a lot of experience of teaching ... language probably also contributed to ... the high level of quality in language teaching. The development of broader cognitive abilities was not as well handled.”
- | Despite the existence of a universal commitment to parental involvement on the part of all staff, a need for greater clarification of the role which parents might play in the classroom.
- | “Lack of involvement and different expectations about procedures led to frustration among some Child Care workers ... There is an obvious need for greater clarification of the roles of teachers and Child Care workers and for procedures to ensure that the roles are adequately and harmoniously implemented.”

Whether the Early Start programme will lead to gains in the longer term remains to be seen. A follow-up analysis of participants to be undertaken will illustrate whether the programme has had more lasting effects on literacy and numeracy.

## Pre-school Provision for Travellers

Fifty-four pre-schools provide special preparation for approximately 660 Traveller children before enrolment in national schools. The State provides 98% of the tuition

costs for a maximum of three hours tuition per day for the regular national school year. Transport costs, where necessary, are also almost fully-funded by the State, while additional support is provided for the purchase of equipment. The health authorities contribute toward the cost of care assistants and the provision of meals. In some cases, the local authorities provide accommodation for the pre-schools.

Voluntary groups such as Barnardos, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and Traveller Support Groups undertake the management and administration of the pre-schools, including accommodation, recruiting and employing staff, content of the education programme and the general delivery of the service.

## Breaking the Cycle

The Breaking the Cycle pilot project, which is an integral part of the national school system, targets disadvantage in primary schools through the provision of enhanced capitation and special grants for equipment and consumables. Class sizes are reduced in the first four years of primary school and significant emphasis is placed on school planning and teaching methodologies. The Breaking the Cycle pilot project is currently being evaluated and the results of this evaluation will inform any further developments in this area.

## Other State Intervention

A range of programmes aimed at alleviating disadvantage, run by other Departments, is summarised in chapter 2. These include support from the Department of Health and Children for nurseries and the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

## Lessons from existing provision

The difficulties outlined in chapter 2 concerning the need for coordination, greater involvement of parents and raising quality also apply to provision for disadvantaged children. Increased participation of disadvantaged children in early childhood education is vital for the children concerned. Disadvantaged groups generally have lower participation rates, are least able to afford private provision and have most to benefit from participation.

Targetted early education provision for very young disadvantaged children in this country is still at an early stage of development. All of the initiatives supported by the Department of Education and Science are still at pilot stage and this should be borne in mind when evaluating the effectiveness of the existing system. Significant improvement in terms of coverage and impact should be possible as lessons are learned from the pilot programmes.

Scope for improvement exists in a number of areas. The method of selection used, while satisfactory for pilot projects, would require refinement. In particular, the use of schools could be seen as a blunt selection instrument. The need to address qualifications and training is also apparent from the Early Start evaluation.

Opportunities for parental involvement, although more significant than in other sectors, have been limited to date. Parental involvement, as chapter 9 will show, helps to raise quality and participation rates and leads to benefits for children and parents alike. These benefits are particularly strong where educational disadvantage is concerned.

Although priority for and targetting of the disadvantaged is necessary, care must be taken to avoid stigmatising children. It is also important to avoid giving the impression that early childhood education is only for the disadvantaged. Accordingly, where possible, provision should take place in integrated settings.

## **8.4 School-based Interventions**

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Chapter 2 highlighted research which showed that the benefits of smaller class sizes are strongest for children who are disadvantaged. The existing pilot Breaking the Cycle initiative, which provides for smaller class sizes in the first four years in schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged pupils, will be continued. The future development of support for pre-school initiatives will be informed by the results of evaluation of the programme and other (including international) research.

It has already been noted in chapter 6 that, in the allocation of support to primary schools, priority will be given to infants classes. The introduction of a new grant for equipment for infants classes is evidence of this commitment. However, within this group, particular emphasis will be given to the needs of disadvantaged children.

The extension of a remedial service to all schools with effect from September 1999 will permit greater attention to the needs of all children in primary school with learning difficulties, including those in infant classes. New guidelines and reforms, along the lines of the report on the remedial service, are crucial to improving the effectiveness of this scheme.

The benefits of involving parents in early childhood education are outlined in detail in chapter 9. These benefits are particularly significant for both parents and children who are educationally disadvantaged. Structures are already in place to allow parents to become involved in their children's primary school education. These include the Home School Community Liaison Scheme. Under the Scheme, schools provide a range of

training opportunities for parents, including parenting courses and classes to advise parents on the primary curriculum and how best to assist their children's work. Home visits are also undertaken. The Early Childhood Education Agency will assess the effectiveness of these arrangements, insofar as the infant classes are concerned, and will make proposals, where necessary, to strengthen parental involvement.

## **8.5 Provision for Children Aged 3-4 Outside Primary School**

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As indicated earlier in this chapter, a number of schemes are already in place to cater for the pre-school needs of disadvantaged children. These include the Rutland Street project, the Early Start pilot programme, and pre-schools for Travellers.

The Department will continue to support and improve a range of programmes for the disadvantaged. As part of the research and development programme proposed in chapter 5, particular attention will be given to addressing the weaknesses identified by the Early Start evaluation. The programme will also focus on development of best practice for early childhood education for the disadvantaged.

In addition to improving existing programmes, the Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA) will encourage disadvantaged communities and groups to establish their own pre-school programmes. Many such groups already receive assistance from other Government Departments. Communities' circumstances will vary widely and they are best able to identify their own needs and strategies. For this reason, programmes may take a number of forms. Local schools will be encouraged and given incentives to make premises available to community-based groups and to develop links with them. Assistance will be provided by the ECEA in the form of advice, a Visiting Teacher service, materials and support, while inspectors will be available to assist groups to raise standards and quality to the levels required for awarding of the QE (Quality in Education) mark.

Some local communities may not be in a position to develop services themselves. In such cases, a more proactive role will be undertaken by the ECEA to stimulate and develop a strategy for early childhood education. As well as the range of supports outlined above, start-up funding will be made available to "kick-start" programmes.

The Department of Education and Science will also become involved in direct provision in disadvantaged areas, where gaps exist. Provision will be in a variety of settings, depending on the circumstances. Provision will be put in place only following full consideration with schools and communities.

Where demographic (small numbers of children), geographical (remote location, dispersed population) or cultural (ethnic minorities) factors prevent the development of conventional strategies, the ECEA will seek to develop innovative approaches to providing an early education service. Options may include the provision of a distance education service, a mobile pre-school and provision of transport for disadvantaged children and parents. As shown in chapter 2 (particularly in the case of New Zealand), these approaches have been developed elsewhere, and the ECEA will take account of international experience and best practice in this regard. Where small numbers of disadvantaged children are located in advantaged areas, the ECEA will also fund provision of early education by private providers for such children. In order to qualify for such funding, providers must qualify for the QE mark discussed in chapter 4. The placement of disadvantaged children in mixed settings will be in keeping with the need, referred to earlier, to avoid stigmatising such children or labelling early education as something for the disadvantaged only.

## **8.6 Children under 3**

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Assistance to parents is crucial for this age group. The rationale for intervention and the range of services and assistance outlined in other chapters will also apply to parents of disadvantaged children under 3 years of age.

### 8.7 Traveller Children

The Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community and the Report of the National Forum for Early Childhood Education draw particular attention to the importance of early intervention for children of the Travelling community. Traveller children and their parents who have a positive experience of pre-school provision are better prepared for primary school and are, therefore, more likely to obtain maximum benefit from their primary and post-primary schooling. The management and staff of Traveller pre-schools should, in co-operation with the staff of local primary schools, develop and maintain close links to ensure more effective participation of Traveller children in primary schooling.

The Report on the Forum makes reference to the fact that provision has developed on an ad hoc basis and is bewildering in its variety in terms of quality of accommodation, staffing programmes and accountability. The current arrangements for funding (both current and capital), staffing and management are inadequate to meet the needs of the children attending the pre-schools. The voluntary agencies that are involved in this area are finding it increasingly difficult to meet the costs associated with the organisation, administration and maintenance of pre-schools. At the same time, the White Paper seeks to underpin and support the growth of, rather than replace, existing provision in this area. Existing providers have developed expertise in early childhood education for Travellers. The role of the State

will not be to undermine their expertise but rather to raise standards so that all Traveller children can receive early education of a high quality.

## Parental involvement

The important role of parents in the early education of all children has been emphasised earlier in this White Paper. Traveller parents should be encouraged and empowered to become involved in the management and administration of Traveller pre-schools and, where State-funded mainstream provision is available, Traveller parents should be able to exercise choice between integrated and Traveller-specific pre-school education.

## Proposals

The Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA) will be responsible for all aspects of early childhood education for Traveller children, including standards of quality, materials and curriculum, research, development and inspection/evaluation. In carrying out its role in this area, the Agency will consult with existing providers, parents and Traveller organisations on the range of issues affecting Traveller pre-schools.

# 8.8 Research and Development

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The research and development programme outlined in chapter 5 will have a particular focus on the priority groups: children with special needs or who are educationally disadvantaged. The development and initial implementation of best practice will be undertaken primarily through direct provision by the State. Analysis of effectiveness and dissemination of findings will be vital components. Particular attention will be given initially to tackling the weaknesses identified by the interim evaluation of the Early Start pilot project. The input and cooperation of schools and staff participating in the pilot programme will be an essential component of the ongoing review and improvement of strategies to tackle educational disadvantage at pre-school level. Non-governmental organisations, particularly in the case of pre-schools for Travellers, have developed extensive experience and expertise concerning the education of disadvantaged children and will have a significant input into the development and improvement of programmes. Longitudinal analyses, particularly important to determine whether intervention is effective in combating disadvantage, will also be undertaken.

# 8.9 Other Matters

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Educational intervention to combat disadvantage will not be effective unless accompanied by initiatives from other sectors such as health, housing, social welfare



and employment. Accordingly, cross-sector coordination of effort is particularly important in this area. Structures to enhance coordination are outlined in chapter 11.

Some structures additional to those proposed in chapter 11 will be required to develop services for disadvantaged children. In particular, structures must focus on the identification of disadvantage and must provide a means of tracking disadvantaged children through the education system.

As noted earlier, educational disadvantage may stem from many causes and the identification of disadvantage may be complex and difficult. The use of proxy indicators for disadvantage, such as the catchment areas of designated schools, will provide some measure of need in an area. However, since designated primary schools capture about 30% of disadvantaged pupils, significant refinement is required.<sup>9</sup> Census data and other sources, including surveys of the extent of poverty by area, may be drawn on. The input of local knowledge and the perspectives of the various Health Boards will also be valuable.

A tracking system for disadvantaged children will also be necessary for two reasons. An effective strategy to combat educational disadvantage requires a continuum of support through the education system. Also, longitudinal studies of the effectiveness of early education will involve follow-up of assisted children, creating the need for some means of tracking these children and assessing their progress.

# THE CENTRAL ROLE OF PARENTS

The importance of involving parents in their children's early education has been highlighted in earlier chapters. Chapter 1 outlined how most young children benefit from a supportive and caring home environment and receive sufficient stimulation to assist rapid brain development. However, chapter 2 noted that the absence of appropriate support structures and, in some cases, a lack of skills and awareness as to how to help children to learn, may hamper effective involvement by parents in the early education of their children. The chapter also noted that existing systems of provision of early childhood education may limit parents' scope to become involved in provision outside the home.

This chapter focuses on parental roles in more detail.<sup>1</sup> It explains why the contribution of parents is crucial and considers aspects of provision which may have the effect of preventing parents from being involved fully in their children's early education. A strategy to enhance parental participation is then discussed, with the emphasis on:

- | providing advice and support to parents regarding the learning process and how they may assist their children.
- | facilitating and encouraging parental involvement in provision

## 9.1 Why should Parents be involved in Early Childhood Education?

The active involvement of parents at all stages of the policy formulation process is recognised as vital to the quality of education policy development and the effectiveness of its implementation. This partnership and consultation approach is now well established in the education field and represents an essential ingredient for effective policy-making. The important role of parents in the education system was given statutory underpinning in the Education Act, 1998.

Parents bring with them a vast quantity of expertise and different perspectives on the needs of their children. Parental involvement is particularly important in the case of pre-school children, where, as this White Paper has already acknowledged, parents are the prime educators and experts on children's needs. Chapter 2 illustrates the value which other countries attach to active parental involvement. In particular, involving parents in the management and delivery of provision outside the home is a key feature of the systems in countries such as New Zealand and Norway. A range of supports is also provided for parents in the home, including a visiting teacher service, "drop-in" centres and (in the case of New Zealand) a distance education service.

Parental involvement in early childhood education is important for a number of other reasons. Firstly, (as outlined in chapter 1) brain research findings indicate that the first three years of a child's life are crucial in terms of development. Parents play the central educational role in the early years and provide the stimulation, care and interaction required to ensure their children's rapid development. It is important that this parental involvement be continued through to the period of more formal education. Secondly, parents prepare their children for the transition to formal education. Effectiveness of formal education is linked to the acquisition by a child of certain skills, such as socialisation skills and readiness to learn. These skills are developed, not only in the formal education system, but also in the home environment. Thirdly, the benefits of participation by parents in a child's education outside the home are also significant. "Even when high-quality public child care is provided, the weight of research indicates that parents make an irreplaceable contribution to the child's development, and their active involvement in their children's programmes outside the home greatly increases the likelihood of the child's success in later life."<sup>2</sup>

Two-way communication between the parents and the more formal pre-school system enhances the quality of the early childhood education received by the child. Each child is unique and has specific needs, qualities and characteristics which parents are best placed to identify. By participating in meaningful and regular dialogue with teaching staff, parents may communicate such information to schools and pre-schools. Dialogue also enables teaching staff to make parents aware of any areas where they may be able

to assist their children's learning; teachers will also be in a position to notify parents of any issues or difficulties which are arising in the formal education setting.

A positive attitude in the home towards education is linked to improved performance by the child. As the Hargreaves Report notes: "parental commitment is a cornerstone of the school's success. If parents are interested in their children's schooling, ... are supportive of the school's endeavours, ... act in partnership with teachers, then the children will achieve more in school."<sup>3</sup> Recent research highlights the "positive association between the extent of such involvement and pupil outcomes" present in Irish second-level schools.<sup>4</sup> The importance of partnership between parents and teachers in the education endeavour is recognised in existing Department of Education and Science programmes, such as the Home School Community Liaison Scheme, which operates at both first and second levels. Research also shows that involving parents from minority or disadvantaged groups in provision helps to raise early childhood education participation rates among those groups.

Parents also derive some benefits from their participation in their children's early childhood education. Parents involved in pilot early education programmes have reported improved self-confidence and better relationships with their children. Parental involvement also creates scope for further educational and career development in the early childhood education area.

Substantial benefits from parental involvement in early childhood education are shown by international research. As shown in previous chapters, these benefits are particularly significant for children with special needs or who are disadvantaged. However, some studies suggest that parental participation may not make a difference in all cases. For example, an evaluation of the Even Start Programme shows that supports for parenting skills lead to positive gains in learning activities, story reading and parent-child interaction; however, similar gains were recorded for the non-participating control group.<sup>5</sup> White, Taylor and Moss "examined the belief that early intervention programmes that involve parents are more effective than those that do not. They found no convincing evidence ..."<sup>6</sup> These are, however, relatively isolated incidents: O'Flaherty concludes that "There is general agreement in the literature to support the view that participation by parents in the development and education of themselves and their children is a positive and perhaps necessary force."<sup>7</sup> and that further research on the issue is required. The interventions proposed in this White Paper will seek to build on the identified positive aspects of parental involvement in early childhood education while, at the same time, through the research strand, examining aspects of parental involvement with a view to identifying positive aspects and building on these in later interventions.

Mention must also be made of the Constitutional provisions in regard to parental involvement in education. Article 42.1 of the Constitution enshrines the role of the family as “the natural and primary educator of the child”. The reference in the article to the right and duty of parents to provide for their child’s education confers on them the right to active participation in the child’s education. This view is reflected by the Commission on the Family: “ ... parents are the first educators of their children. The role of the State ... is to support parents in carrying out these responsibilities ... The Commission’s approach is underpinned by a belief that children are generally best looked after within the family ...”<sup>8</sup>

## **9.2 Factors which inhibit Parental Involvement**

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The previous section noted the essential contribution which parents make to the development and effectiveness of education policy. Education policy and the education system generally has become increasingly parent-friendly in recent years. Parents are becoming centrally involved in the development of education policy at a national level; at individual school level, parents are involved in the school’s activities through their involvement in the school’s parents association.

Despite this, several factors combine to inhibit the active participation by parents in their children’s early education. Representative bodies at national and local levels represent the interests of parents at first and second level. Further development of the roles of these bodies is envisaged by the Education Act, 1998. The interests of parents of children in infant classes in primary schools are represented by the National Parents Council, Primary. However, the absence of a formal representative structure for other parents of pre-school children hampers their involvement in the policy process and limits the quality of policy development. This is particularly unfortunate in the early childhood area given the primary role of parents.

Unlike some other countries, Ireland lacks a mechanism to involve parents in the management and organisation of services, other than school-based services, outside the home. As stated earlier, parents are best placed to understand and meet the early educational and development needs of their children. Their input in a management/supervisory/advisory capacity would enhance quality of provision and increase participation, particularly (as experience in the Netherlands and elsewhere shows) among minorities and the disadvantaged. In addition, some parents would gain in terms of increased self-confidence and greater understanding of early education approaches and methodologies.

For a variety of reasons, associated with changing family structures and increasing economic and social pressures, many parents may not be able to care for their children in the home setting for substantial periods each week and much of the care of young children may be provided by a third party. Families in this situation may face a range of additional problems. For example, the Commission on the Family notes that low educational attainment and less secure housing tenure are characteristics of lone parent families.<sup>9</sup> Such families also face a greater risk of poverty and have lower rates of participation in employment. As a consequence they may lack the confidence, or in some cases the skills, to assist with their children's education. The need to deal effectively with these issues is pressing, given the ongoing change in family structures in Ireland.

Other parents may not be obliged, but may choose to send their children outside the home for pre-school education. However, such parents may equally not have the opportunity to play an active role in early childhood education. Even where parents have the time to devote to their children's education, practical constraints of the environment in which education is provided (space, access) and policy of providers may effectively prevent their involvement.

Other factors, which apply equally in the home and out-of-home situations to inhibit parents from effective involvement in their children's education, include lack of confidence, lack of skills (for example in literacy or numeracy areas) or lack of awareness concerning how children learn and how they may play a useful role.

## **9.3 Strategies to enhance Parental Involvement**

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A multi-faceted strategy is proposed to facilitate and encourage parental involvement. This involves greater involvement of and consultation with parents in the development of early education policy, support for parents providing early childhood education in the home, enhancing parental skills, improving access to and dialogue with providers and research on best practice concerning the involvement of parents.

The State will seek to involve parents at every stage of the early education process. This will ensure strengthening of the parental voice and the development of a strong and expert interest group which will participate in the consultation/partnership process. As a result, early education policy will be better informed, of higher quality, have greater acceptability among the public and achieve greater participation.

The simplest and most direct approach to enhancing parental involvement in their children's early education is to facilitate greater provision in the home or in parent-child groups. This would involve progress on two fronts. Firstly, parents would have to be facilitated, through a combination of financial support (to cushion the impact of loss of earnings) and continuing improvements concerning access to flexible working arrangements (such as jobsharing, term-time working and career breaks) to provide some or all of their children's care and education in the home setting. These issues are linked to wider policy matters which go beyond education; they are being considered in depth by the Government and will not be pursued further here.

Secondly, appropriate supports would have to be made available to parents in undertaking their children's early care and education at home. One option, which has been explored in other countries, and in Ireland by private providers, concerns funding the establishment of mobile units with equipment, materials and books. These units could serve as a resource for community groups or individuals, or in some cases, could be used as mobile pre-school premises. The production of information packs and provision of advice on how children learn and how parents may assist their children, is another important support. The provision of such supports at maternity hospitals to parents of newborn children, and through the community health service will be pursued by the ECEA. In addition, parents will, in connection with the revised primary school curriculum, be sent newsheets outlining how they may best assist their children's acquisition of literacy skills.

As indicated earlier, some parents may feel ill-equipped to deal with the early education needs of their children and this inhibits their involvement in it. One way to address this issue would be to increase the availability of, and access to, appropriate parenting courses. Courses would also have to cater for different levels of prior parental education and for the diverse needs of those with special requirements. Introductory courses would have to be pitched at a suitable level, where necessary, either linked to, or including basic literacy and numeracy components.

To facilitate maximum participation, courses should be provided in a flexible manner and in a variety of settings. This is not unexplored territory and it should be possible to build on existing provision for adult education and on courses run in the private sector and by community and umbrella groups. The National Forum "learned of several examples of good parenting programmes which hold great promise for the future."<sup>10</sup> It is understood also that the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs is developing a Parenting Awareness Programme. In addition, the Department of Health and Children is developing (in conjunction with the Health Boards) strategies for family support (including parenting programmes). The recent publication of the Children Bill, 1999, with its provisions for the introduction of Family Welfare Conferences, is relevant in this context. In keeping with the principle of building on

existing provision and structures, arrangements will be made to incorporate additional material into these programmes concerning the learning process in young children and how parents may contribute to this process.

Early education may also be built in as part of more general parenting programmes: the Forum report notes that “There is a need ... to avoid patronising and stigmatising labels with regard to ‘parenting skills’.”<sup>11</sup> There is also an argument for using more ‘upbeat’ terminology to raise the profile of courses: use of titles like “Child Development” or “Early Years”, or other titles with a more specific education focus should assist in this regard.

The importance of meaningful dialogue and exchange of ideas between parents and teachers was highlighted earlier. Formal arrangements for dialogue are already in place in the national school sector. In accordance with the provisions of the Education Act; similar arrangements should be facilitated and encouraged in the pre-school sector generally. Important in this context is a general raising of the awareness of the mutual benefits of such arrangements. Existing structures provide for the involvement of parents in the education of first and second-level children. However, it is essential that parents of pre-school children should have significantly more involvement than parents at other levels. The development of an appropriate structure to facilitate and encourage the involvement of parents in their children’s early education will be considered by the Early Childhood Education Agency.

In seeking to promote parental involvement in early education sectors, the Government is aware of concerns expressed that the goals and objectives of parents, teachers and schools may not always coincide. However, in light of the arguments earlier, genuine partnership is essential to effective early childhood education. Nevertheless, in promoting participation by parents in their children’s education, it will be important to strike a balance between the needs of teachers, parents and, most importantly, pupils. Unfettered access to the classroom is neither sought by parents nor desirable for teachers and pupils. However, designating specific days or introducing a rota system for access should ensure that parental participation can be facilitated while minimising disruption in the classroom.

Further research is required into best practice on parental involvement. This will be undertaken as part of the research and development programme which will be overseen by the Early Childhood Education Agency. The Agency will also be responsible for developing and implementing the broad strategy outlined in this chapter, to enhance parental involvement. In consultation with parents and providers, the Agency will develop mechanisms to support greater involvement of parents in the management and delivery of provision outside the home.



# 10 INSPECTION AND EVALUATION

The White Paper strategy seeks to raise and support the quality of early childhood education provision. In order to ensure that this objective is met, and that enhanced quality is being achieved both at an aggregate level and among specific providers, a system of evaluation and inspection is required. This chapter outlines the importance of effective inspection and evaluation and sets out the aims of the proposed system. It describes the levels at which inspection and evaluation will take place and outlines the mechanisms which will be used to implement the evaluation and inspection strategy.

## 10.1 Inspection

Providers in receipt of State funding for developmental places and other providers who wish to obtain the Quality in Education (QE) mark will be subject to inspection. The purpose of inspection will be to determine whether provision meets the developmental and education standards set by the Department of Education and Science and the Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA). Inspectors will also assist providers to attain the QE standards by identifying the areas where improvements are required and by suggesting approaches which providers could take to achieve the improvements.

A system of inspection is already in place to ensure compliance with the Child Care Regulations, 1996. Under the existing system, inspection staff from the relevant Health Board visit the premises of each notified provider (provider who, within the terms of the Regulations, notifies the Health Board that they are providing childcare services) to determine whether the provider is complying with the Regulations and to offer advice concerning compliance. Where a provider is in breach of the Regulations, the deficiencies noted are communicated in writing and a further inspection is carried out later to determine whether the problems have been addressed. If a breach of the Regulations continues, the provider may be obliged to close or (in the case of overcrowding) to scale down operations.

The Child Care Regulations cover matters of health and safety and standards and do not extend to the developmental or educational component of services or the training and qualifications of staff. The inspection staff, most of whom come from a public health background (either Public Health Nurses or Environmental Health Officers), are selected and recruited by the health boards.

To simplify matters for providers and to improve coordination between the various State agencies involved, the inspection of early childhood education provision outside of the primary school system should, where possible, be linked to the existing framework for inspection under the Child Care Regulations. Where a provider does not, and is not required to, offer an early childhood education service, the inspection would relate primarily to health and safety matters and would remain the responsibility of the Department of Health and Children. However, where an early education service is provided or required, inspection under the existing Child Care Regulations and of educational provision will both be required.

This approach raises two structural issues: the composition of the inspection team and the allocation of responsibility for inspection between Government Departments and agencies. The Report of the Partnership 2000 Group recommends that “one member of the inspection

team should be trained in the area of Early Childhood Care and Education”<sup>1</sup> and suggests that a two-person team is required. This approach allows for flexibility in qualifications and each team may comprise a health specialist and an education expert. However, the Department of Education and Science sees advantages in a single person inspection system. The use of two person teams is more unwieldy and less efficient than inspection by a single official with dual health and education expertise. In addition, it is understood that health boards are already stretched in complying with their inspection obligations under the Child Care Regulations. The use of a single person system would ensure a rapid and responsive inspection system, which in turn would enhance the level of care and protection available for young children.

It is interesting that a switch from dual inspection to a single inspection system has recently been introduced in the UK where OFSTED (the Office for Standards in Education) will now be responsible for inspections of health, care and educational aspects of provision for young children, the aim being to “help to create one consistent and uniform set of standards for all providers offering early years services” and to deal with “the confusion, the duplication and the unfairness which two separate regimes have created.”<sup>2</sup>

Where no education service is provided or required, the existing arrangements will remain unchanged. However, it is proposed that where early educational services are provided, in accordance with the quality or developmental provisions outlined earlier, one inspector with expertise in both public health and education should carry out the inspection and provide a single report on all aspects of provision to the health boards and the Early Childhood Education Agency. The use of a single person system will require the provision of training in both public health and early education. Consultations on this matter will first be undertaken between both Departments, the Health Boards and the Early Childhood Education Agency.

The ECEA will be authorised to recruit its own inspection staff. By drawing on a wide and varied pool of expertise, the ECEA will maximise the range of skills and competencies within its inspection corps. Recruitment should be organised through open competition and might include arrangements for secondment or for employment on a contract basis.

The ECEA inspectors will be independent of the Department’s Inspectorate. However, exchange of information and staff placements will be encouraged, since there will be many parallels in the areas covered by both groups. To ensure that the expertise across the education system, which currently resides in the Department’s Inspectorate, is available to the early childhood sector, members of the Department’s Inspectorate will retain responsibility for inspection of the infant classes in primary schools. Personnel involved in

these inspections must acquire appropriate expertise in other areas, relating to both care and developmental/educational aspects of early education. Expertise in the Irish language will also be necessary for inspection of Naoínraí.

To ensure quality, the ECEA's inspection service will itself be subject to independent, expert review. This review may involve observation of inspection visits as well as assessment of inspection reports.

The new arrangements for inspection will be phased in, following consultations between relevant Departments and their agents and pending the development of educational standards and the training and recruitment of inspection staff. As indicated in Chapter 5, childcare or early childhood education providers will continue to be bound by the standards applicable under the Child Care Regulations. Providers in receipt of State funding for developmental places will be inspected for compliance with the educational standards as they are phased in and applicants for the QE mark will be inspected once the relevant standards are in place. Inspection will take place on application and, subsequently, every two years. Provision may also be made for special inspection where the ECEA or a health board has reason to believe that there is a serious breach of standards.

As in the current system, providers in breach of the standards will be informed of the deficiencies which they must address. Continued failure to comply with the standards may lead to funding (in the case of State-funded providers which seek to tackle disadvantage) or QE recognition (in all other cases) being withdrawn or withheld.

The White Paper seeks to support and develop quality early childhood education, while maintaining an adequate supply of provision. Accordingly, efforts must be made to prevent loss of supply where possible. Thus, in addition to their inspection role, inspectors will be available to support providers and suggest ways of remedying deficiencies. This may involve assistance with staff recruitment, training and curriculum, and analysis of the most common breaches of standards, together with dissemination of the results and design of strategies to tackle issues arising. It may also involve the visiting teacher service, advice help-line and other services proposed in earlier chapters. The supportive role of the inspection staff is at least as important as its monitoring role.

Under the existing system, standards for many providers are developed and promoted by their national "umbrella" organisations. These organisations are well placed and have a duty to assist their membership in meeting standards. The development of a parallel system of self-regulation for providers would be beneficial. This could complement and operate in tandem with the ECEA inspections and would provide an additional safeguard for quality. Funding will be

provided to national organisations to promote the development of a self-regulation system. In addition, secondment of qualified personnel from these organisations to the inspection and evaluation teams in the ECEA will be considered.

## 10.2 Evaluation

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While the purpose of inspection is to ensure compliance with best practice, evaluation seeks to determine what constitutes best practice, to assess the effectiveness of various early childhood education approaches and interventions and to indicate how effectiveness and efficiency may be enhanced. Evaluation will be carried out at three levels: specific project(s) level, thematic level and aggregate or national level. At project level, the impact of specific interventions, approaches and innovations will be analysed. These will generally be pilot projects, the future development of which will depend on the evaluation results. Thematic-level evaluation will be undertaken to assess the impact of an approach or intervention across a range of providers or to compare the relative impact of different approaches. In each case, the results will be widely disseminated to assist development of good practice.

Evaluation will be undertaken at an aggregate level to assess the extent to which the White Paper objective – the attainment of lasting educational and developmental benefits for children, particularly the disadvantaged and those with special needs – is achieved. The nature of the analyses undertaken will vary. Ongoing evaluation will be required to determine the effectiveness of provision on young children’s development while in pre-school settings and on their transition to primary school. In addition, longitudinal studies will be necessary to determine whether long-term benefits accrue to participants. This will require follow-up of children from participation in early childhood education, through formal education at primary and second levels and beyond. Particular attention will be paid to the impact of provision on the special target groups. The results of the evaluations will be central to the policy formulation process.

Evaluation will be carried out by ECEA staff and by independent researchers and will form part of the research and development programme referred to in chapter 5. The programme will be overseen by a steering group representative of the ECEA, the Department of Education and Science, other Departments, parents, providers, partners in education and independent experts.

A key element in the evaluation process will be the development of performance and process indicators. The primary focus will be on the extent to which programmes succeed in meeting children’s developmental needs. In particular, effectiveness will be benchmarked by the success in engendering among participants a disposition and readiness to learn and the extent to which children successfully make the transition

from pre-school to primary school. Longitudinal studies will focus on the academic participation and attainment of early childhood education participants and on their broader development and socialisation skills. The effectiveness of interventions will also be judged by the extent to which the specific needs of target groups are addressed. Indicators will also be designed to cover specific aspects of early childhood education including:

- | quality of provision, staff training, premises and environment
- | effectiveness of parental involvement
- | effectiveness of partnership arrangements and approach
- | efficiency and effectiveness of coordination and structures.

To maximise transparency and inform parental choice, all evaluation reports will be available to the public.

# 11 STRUCTURES

It is clear that suitable structures must be put in place to permit efficient and effective implementation of the policy proposals discussed in earlier chapters since “unless structure follows strategy, inefficiency results”.<sup>1</sup> This chapter first describes some of the challenges which must be taken into account when designing structures. The proposed two-tier structure is then outlined: this will involve allocating policy and macro-level co-ordination to the Department of Education and Science and devolving administrative tasks to a new executive agency. The involvement of parents, providers and other partners in education is considered in the final section.

## 11.1 Structural Challenges

A number of factors combine to make the development of appropriate structures in the early childhood education area a difficult task. These include the comparative lack of development in the early childhood education area, the wide range of proposals in the White Paper and the need to deal with co-ordination problems and other weaknesses of the existing system, identified in chapter 2.

Although private provision is well established, the provision of universal early childhood education outside of the primary school sector is still relatively new to Ireland. The State's role to date has been confined to provision for specific groups: Travellers, children with special needs and the pilot Early Start project. Participation rates in early childhood education are low compared to other European countries, appreciation of the benefits of participation is only beginning to increase and considerable effort will be required to develop the sector.

The proposals outlined in previous chapters concern a wide range of activities aimed at various target groups. In addition to provision for key groups, the State will develop standards of provision, a quality assurance programme (the QE mark), curriculum guidelines and materials, and will undertake a research role concerning the development and dissemination of best practice. Incentives will be provided to primary schools to become involved and additional resources will be made available for infants classes in primary schools. Proposals are also directed at training and advice for parents and provision for children with disabilities. The wide range of tasks involved means that a comprehensive and flexible structure for administration and development will be required.

Chapter 2 outlined weaknesses in the existing system which must be taken into account in designing a new structure. In particular, the need to improve coordination of services across Departments is highlighted by the Commission on the Family, the Partnership 2000 Group on Childcare and the National Forum for Early Childhood Education. Coordination is vital in view of the wide range of provision, the risk of duplication of effort, the numerous training courses available and the need to strengthen provision, raise awareness and build on existing strengths. The issue arises at three levels: within the Department of Education and Science, between Departments, agencies and other providers, and at local level. The new structure must address the coordination issue and ensure adequate exchange of information and coordination of strategy and effort between the various parties involved in the early childhood education sector.

## 11.2 Meeting the Challenge

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The structures issue was analysed in some detail at the National Forum for Early Childhood Education. There was consensus that although “many successful initiatives were operating ... the efforts involved in establishing and maintaining services was being dissipated through weakness in co-ordination ...”<sup>2</sup> The Forum considered that coordination would be best served by allocating a lead role to a single organisation and there was unanimous support for the establishment of an Early Years Development Unit to take on this role. Views differed on the choice of an appropriate home for such a unit and several options were considered. Locating the unit in the Department of the Taoiseach would place early education in the spotlight and at the centre of power and influence. However, since “this particular department had little engagement or experience in the provision of services to families and children”, such a move was seen as short-term option. The Departments of Health and Children and of Education and Science each received support as suitable locations, and some delegates suggested locating separate units in each, with responsibility for the age group 0-3 given to the Department of Health and Children, while the management and coordination of services for those in the age range 4-6 would lie with the Department of Education and Science.

As regards the childcare sector, the Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group recommends a three-tier structure:

- l county committees, representative of the main stakeholders in childcare; these committees would prepare county childcare plans and would coordinate provision to avoid duplication
- l a National Childcare Management Committee (NCMC) to assess and resource the county plans, undertake research and coordinate existing national developments in childcare
- l an Interdepartmental Policy Committee, which would provide a link between the NCMC and the Government.

It is understood that there is some support for an alternative format of a three-tiered structure for childcare. At intermediate level, in the short and medium term, this would involve the health boards convening the county committees, with possible alternatives in the longer term.

The focus of the Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group is on childcare in general, whereas this White Paper deals specifically with early childhood education. However, the need for seamless provision of both early education and childcare is a continuing theme of the White Paper. The structure devised must, therefore, facilitate

provision of care and education in an integrated manner and must enable coordination of strategy and exchange of information between the main players.

The White Paper envisages that the Department of Education and Science will oversee educational input into early childhood services and will provide this input through existing and planned structures. Structures for the integrated provision of early childhood services – care, welfare and education – are required and will be developed through a process of dialogue between Departments and other interested parties. In keeping with the principle of building on existing provision and minimising red tape, the development and management of early childhood education will, where possible, be organised using existing structures.

The wide range of early childhood education activities, noted earlier, may be classified under two broad headings – policy and administration. Allocating the latter tasks to an independent agency is attractive for a number of reasons. The establishment of an independent agency would highlight the importance of early childhood education as a key area within the education system and ensure that it would not be overshadowed by larger established areas of education. In addition, the Department would be freed from the burden of executive tasks and would be enabled to focus more closely and effectively on policy issues. The retention of executive matters within the Department could be complicated since many executive tasks cross traditional sector boundaries. The Department is moving away from a sector-based structure towards a thematic organisation, where responsibility will be allocated in line with the nature of the service to be provided or tasks to be undertaken, rather than on the basis of a target group. Devolving executive tasks to an agency would enhance coordination while greater scope for task specialisation would enhance management efficiency.

The need to incorporate expertise in the early childhood education area into any new structure has been noted in the Forum report: “it is obvious that the (Early Years) Unit would need ... to have access to external expertise.”<sup>3</sup> The evaluation of the Early Start pilot programme also considers that expert input would be valuable: “The officials responsible for Early Start were given responsibility for the entire programme including practical issues relating to the setting up of ... classrooms, the planning of the programme, and the preparation of staff ... they would have benefited greatly from having support from a small team of experts in early childhood education”.<sup>4</sup> Establishing a specialist agency would facilitate the development of a critical mass of expertise in the early childhood education area. In particular, there would be greater flexibility to recruit specialist staff and to second experts from existing national organisations of providers.

For these reasons, it is proposed to establish and allocate executive functions concerning early childhood education to an independent Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA). The roles and responsibilities of the Department and the ECEA are set out below.

## **11.3 Role of the Department of Education and Science**

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The Department of Education and Science will be responsible for formulating and developing early childhood education policy. Initially, the Department will focus on establishing the ECEA and on implementing the proposals outlined in this White Paper. When the Agency has been established, the Department will devolve executive functions and focus on broad policy issues and on high-level coordination.

A specific Unit – the Early Years Development Unit (EYDU) – will be established in the Department, to oversee the implementation and devolution strategies. Although the establishment of a Unit for a specific sector might seem contrary to the theme-based re-organisation of the Department, a specialist Unit is necessary for several reasons. Firstly, dispersing early childhood education activities across several units would risk a loss of status and priority for the area and would hinder coordination of provision and policy formulation. Secondly, early childhood education is a relatively new area for the Department and is under-developed nationally. The impetus required to “kick-start” the development of the sector can only be achieved by a specialist Unit. Finally, particular expertise required in the early childhood education area may be provided by a specialist Unit comprising a multi-disciplinary team, including representatives of the Inspectorate.

Responsibility for some executive tasks will remain with the existing primary administration and teachers sections. For example, the salaries of teachers of infants in primary schools will continue to be paid by the teacher salary section. These arrangements will evolve in line with planned restructuring of the Department of Education and Science.

Coordination will be a key role of the new Unit. This will require action at three levels:

- 1 coordination of policy and activities within the Department; in particular, ongoing liaison with the primary teacher, primary administration and special education sections will be necessary
- 1 continuous contact with the ECEA; although policy and executive tasks will be split between the two organisations, ongoing exchange of information is essential

to ensure that policy is adequately informed by reality “on the ground” and that implementation of policy is managed effectively by the Agency

- | liaison with other Government Departments and agencies and others involved in the early childhood area.

The Unit will also be responsible for evaluating the effectiveness of the ECEA in the discharge of its functions.

The Unit’s initial priorities will be to facilitate effective implementation of the White Paper, to “kick-start” the development of the sector, and to assist the establishment of and transfer of responsibility to the new Agency. Once the Agency is established, a reduction in the size of the Unit will be possible.

## **11.4 The Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA)**

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The ECEA will function as the primary support for parents and providers and will be responsible for executive and administrative tasks, including inspection and evaluation. Its principal activities will concern implementation of the White Paper proposals including:

- | management of the Department of Education and Science early childhood education provision
- | development of the QE mark and associated minimum standards of quality
- | production of materials and curriculum development
- | research, development and dissemination of best practice
- | inspection of provision
- | advice to providers on how to raise quality and address deficiencies in provision
- | development of strategies and structures to involve parents and to assist them in helping their children to learn.

However, the Agency’s role will not be confined purely to executive tasks: it will also have an input into and advisory role concerning policy formulation. Although a division of

responsibility between the Department and the ECEA is desirable, policy and executive functions cannot be disaggregated entirely. Ongoing consultation between the two bodies will be essential. The ECEA must also be able to link into the variety of services provided by or under the auspices of the Department, in particular the In-Career Development Unit, the Inspectorate and the National Educational Psychological Service, and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

## 11.5 Coordination Structures

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The structures for coordination of early childhood issues more generally have yet to be defined. However, it is likely that three tiers will be involved – a local or county structure, an intermediate tier and a national coordinating committee.

The Department of Education and Science takes the view that effective coordination of early childhood education will require development of structures at two levels. Firstly, coordination of early childhood policy and provision is required at a high level between Departments and State agencies. It is considered that the most effective means of coordination is the establishment of a high-level interdepartmental committee. Membership would be drawn from Departments and agencies with significant involvement in the early childhood area. It is envisaged that the committee will comprise representatives from the Departments of Health and Children, Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Social Community and Family Affairs, Tourism, Sport and Recreation and Education and Science. The Department of Education and Science will play the key role on the committee in regard to establishing standards for early education services to ensure that provision takes full account of children's right to and need for early education and development. Agencies which operate in the early childhood area on behalf of these Departments – such as the health boards and ECEA – should also be represented. Other Departments will be consulted as issues of relevance to them arise.

Secondly, coordination between the various stakeholders is essential to promote understanding, co-operation and effective provision and to avoid overlap and duplication of effort. An advisory expert group will therefore be established, drawn from parents, existing providers, trainers, researchers and academics, staff interests, national early childhood organisations, relevant Government Departments and agencies and other interested parties.

In addition to facilitating coordination and exchange of views, the group will also:

- 1 advise the EYDU and the ECEA on policy formulation and executive tasks

- l evaluate and select proposals for funding for research and development in the early childhood education area
- l oversee the evaluation and inspection function of the ECEA
- l assist in the development of an early childhood curricula and methodologies.

As well as representation on the advisory expert group, additional structures to promote parental involvement are proposed. The vital contribution of parents to the effective development and implementation of policy at an aggregate level and to management and delivery of provision at local level was highlighted in chapter 9. All early education providers will be encouraged to involve parents as much as possible. Support for the development of a representative body for parents of pre-school children is also envisaged.

## 11.6 Implementation – Next Steps

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Implementation of the White Paper proposals will initially be the task of the EYDU. One of its first tasks will be to establish the Advisory Group and the ECEA. The Unit will draw up a timetable for implementation and will issue position papers on the key issues involved. These will then be considered by the Advisory Group and all interested parties will have an opportunity to comment on the position papers. These views will be considered carefully before decisions are finalised.

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- 5 National Forum Report, p. 43.
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- 21 OECD, *Early Childhood Education and Care Policy: A Proposal for a Thematic Review*, DEELSA/ED(98)2, 1998.
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- 24 David Duffy, John Fitzgerald, Ide Kearney, Fergal Shortall, *Medium-Term Review: 1997-2003*, ESRI, April 1997 p. 64.
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- 26 Karoly, L., Greenwood, P., et al., 1998. The programmes compared are the Perry Preschool programme and the Elmira Prenatal/Early Infancy Project (PEIP).
- 27 Crime: arrests and convictions through age 15 in Elmira PEIP, arrests through age 27 in Perry. Health: hospital visits/days (Elmira PEIP), teen pregnancies (Perry). Welfare: receipt of various forms of public assistance.
- 28 Ibid., pp. 74/5.
- 29 Ibid., p. 74.
- 30 National Forum Report, p. 118.
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- 37 Karoly, L., Greenwood, P., et al, 1998, p. 3.
- 38 Winkly, D., 1999.
- 39 National Forum Report, p. 9.
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- 1 Statistical Report 1997/98, tables 1.4 and 2.1. According to the Statistical Report, the participation rate at age 5 is 100%. However, these rates are based on provisional inter-censal estimates of population by single year of age and must be interpreted with caution.
- 2 Average of rates from 1993/4 to 1997/8: girls 54.9%, boys 50.2%.
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- 5 Pre-school service has a broad scope and is defined by section 49 of the Act as "any pre-school, playgroup, day nursery, crèche, day care or other similar service which caters for pre-school children ...".
- 6 National Childcare Strategy, Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare, Stationery Office, Dublin, January 1999, p. 29.
- 7 Ibid., Appendix 3.2

- 8 Area Development Management Ltd. was established in 1992 to manage the allocation of funds to local level partnerships for various services, including childcare.
- 9 Strengthening Families for Life: Final Report of the Commission on the Family, Stationery Office, Dublin, July 1998, p. 238.
- 10 Care from relative includes relative's home and child's home; childminder/other covers childminder's home, at home with non-relative and mother and toddler group.
- 11 O'Flaherty, J., *Intervention in the Early Years An Evaluation of the High/Scope Curriculum*, National Children's Bureau, London, 1995, p. 38.
- 12 *A Review of Services for Young Children in the European Union, 1990-1995*, European Commission Network on Childcare, January 1996, p. 2.
- 13 Forum Report, p. 27.
- 14 Hayes, N., 'The Case for a National Policy on Early Education', Poverty & Policy Discussion Paper No. 2, Combat Poverty Agency, Dublin, p. 19.
- 15 Hayes, N., O'Flaherty, J., *A Window on Early Education in Ireland: The First National Report of the IEA Preprimary Project*, Dublin Institute of Technology, 1997, p. 110.
- 16 The ratio has fallen from 27.5 in 1988/89 to 21.8 in 1997/98. Source: *Key Education Statistics*, Department of Education and Science.
- 17 In 1977/78, 81% of infants were in classes of at least 30 pupils. By 1987/88, this figure had dropped to two thirds of infants, while 4% were in classes of 40 or more. The equivalent proportions ten years later are substantially lower at 33% in classes of 30+ and 0.2% in classes of at least 40 pupils. Source: *Statistical Reports*, 1977/78, 1987/88, 1997/98. Further improvements have since been recorded.
- 18 Source: *Statistical Report 1997/98*, table 2.5. The equivalent percentages for 1st through 5th standards ranged from 72% to 76%.
- 19 Hayes, N., O'Flaherty, J., *op. cit.*, p. 110.
- 20 *Reducing Class Size, What Do We Know?*, National Institute on Student Achievement, Curriculum, and Assessment, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, March 1999, p. 10.
- 21 *Class Size Research and the Quality of Education*, NAHT and the University of Nottingham, 1996, p. 65.
- 22 *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, National Research Council, National Academy Press, Washington, D.C., 1998, p. 230.
- 23 Hayes, N., O'Flaherty, J., p. 111.
- 24 Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
- 25 National Forum Report, *op. cit.*, p. 108.
- 26 National Research Council, 1998, *op. cit.*, p. 279.
- 27 Forum Report, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
- 28 Background paper for the National Forum for Early Childhood Education, *op. cit.*, p. 164.
- 1 Kellaghan, T., 1977; Barnett, W.S., 1995.
- 2 OECD, 1998.
- 3 Schweinart L., and Weikart D., 1980; McKey et al, 1985; Kellaghan, T., & Greany, B.J., 1993; Karoly, L., Greenwood, P., et al, 1998.
- 4 National Forum Report, 1998, p. 43.
- 5 National Forum Report, 1998, p. 121.
- 6 *Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*, Kellaghan, T., et al, Combat Poverty Agency Research Report Series No. 20, Dublin, 1995, p. 63.
- 7 O'Flaherty, J., 1995; OECD 1998.
- 8 Ball, C., *Start Right – The Importance of Early Learning*, RSA, UK, 1998.
- 1 O'Flaherty, J., *op. cit.*, 1995, p. 19.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Hayes, N., 'The Case for a National Policy on Education', Poverty & Policy Discussion Paper No. 2, Combat Poverty Agency, 1995, pp. 12-13.
- 4 O'Flaherty, 1995, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
- 5 Forum Report, p. 203.
- 6 Section 4(1)(a).



- 7 Forum Report, p. 204.
- 8 Hayes, N., & O'Flaherty, J., A Window on Early Education in Ireland: The First National Report of the IEA Preprimary Project, Dublin Institute of Technology, 1997, p. 14.
- 9 National Forum Report, p. 103.
- 10 Ibid., p. 111.
- 11 Ibid., p. 108.
- 12 Ibid., Background Paper, p. 165.
- 13 Sessional services are defined in section 2 of the Guidelines as the provision of: a service offering a planned programme to pre-school children, a service of up to 3.5 hours. Services may include pre-schools, playgroups, crèches, montessori groups, naíonraí or similar services which generally cater for children in the 2-6 year age bracket.
- 14 Commission on the Family, 1998, p. 248.
- 1 This should be taken to mean in the home or in another relatively informal setting, such as a childminder's home. The appropriate adult in these instances is the parent or other adult playing a significant part in the child's care and education; for ease, the term "parent" is used to cover all of these persons. Specific issues arise in the case of children in foster care and it may be appropriate for the Working Group on Foster Care (established by the Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children) which is due to report early in 2000, to comment on these issues.
- 1 Reducing Class Size: What Do We Know? National Institute on Student Achievement, Curriculum and Assessment, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, US Department of Education, p. 2.
- 2 Ibid.
- 1 Report of the Special Education Review Committee, Stationery Office, Dublin, October 1993, p. 18.
- 1 OECD, 1998.
- 2 Karoly, L., Greenwood, P., et al, 1998, p. 99.
- 3 Kellaghan, T., and Greany, B.J., 1993.
- 4 O'Flaherty, J., Intervention in the Early Years An Evaluation of the High/Scope Curriculum, National Children's Bureau, London, 1995.
- 5 Karoly, L., Greenwood, P., et al, 1998; Winkly, D., 1999.
- 6 Kellaghan, T., et al, Educational Disadvantage in Ireland, Combat Poverty Agency Research Report Series No. 20, Dublin, 1995.
- 7 Kellaghan, T., & Greaney, B.J., The Educational Development of Students following Participation in a Preschool Programme in a Disadvantaged Area, ERC, Dublin, 1993.
- 8 Educational Research Centre, Dublin, Early Start Preschool Programme, Final Evaluation Report, 1998.
- 9 Kellaghan, T., et al, Educational Disadvantage in Ireland, 1995, p. 62.
- 1 Throughout this White Paper, references to parents should be interpreted as including guardians, foster parents and other significant adults in a child's life.
- 2 National Forum, 1998, p. 36.
- 3 Hargreaves, D., Improving Secondary Schools, London, I.L.E.A., 1984, cited in Early Childhood Education Issues and Concerns, INTO, Dublin, 1995.
- 4 Smyth, E., Do Schools Differ? Academic and Personal Development among Pupils in the Second-Level Sector, Economic and Social Research Institute/Oak Tree Press, Dublin, 1999, p. 222.
- 5 National Evaluation of The Even Start Family Literacy Program, U.S. Department of Education, 1998.
- 6 White, K., Taylor, M., and Moss, V., Does research support claims about the benefits of involving parents in early intervention programmes?, Review of Educational Research, 1992 cited in O'Flaherty, J., 1995, p. 24.
- 7 O'Flaherty, J., *ibid.*, 1995.
- 8 Commission on the Family, 1998, p. 86.
- 9 Commission on the Family, 1998, pp. 99-100.
- 10 National Forum Report, 1998, p. 39.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- 1 Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare, 1998, p. 26.
- 2 Department for Education and Employment, Press Release 371/99, 2 August 1999.
- 1 Chandler, quoted in Organizational Theory: Structure, Design and Applications, Stephen P. Robbins, 3rd Ed. 1990, p. 126.
- 2 National Forum Report, 1998, p. 199.
- 3 Forum Report, p. 138.
- 4 Early Start Evaluation, 1998, p. 114.

