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## The Role of Early Childhood Care and Education: an Anti-Poverty Perspective

Noirin Hayes

*Technological University Dublin, noirin.hayes@tudublin.ie*

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# THE ROLE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION – AN ANTI-POVERTY PERSPECTIVE

Paper commissioned by the Combat Poverty Agency

by Dr Nóirín Hayes

June 2008

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Combat Poverty Agency  
Bridgewater Centre  
Conyngham Road  
Islandbridge  
Dublin 8

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# CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Context	5
Poverty and children's rights	10
Early childhood care and education	17
Research findings from early childhood care and education	25
Conclusion	31
Recommendations	35

# INTRODUCTION

There is a need to ‘quell the flow of over promises and high hopes that continue to plague efforts to alleviate the risks faced by children growing up in poverty. Poor children simply have too much of an environmental handicap to be competitive with age-mates from homes characterised by good incomes and a multitude of advantages’.<sup>1</sup>

The remit of this paper is to explore the role of early childhood care and education from an anti-poverty perspective through considering the child outcome ‘child poverty’ and the potential benefits of early childhood services. It examines the national and international research literature on challenges and responses and identifies some recommendations for the Irish context.

The paper begins by reviewing levels of child poverty in Ireland and contextualises this within a rights framework. It identifies the early years as crucial to children’s well-being and overall development and considers the role of early education from an anti-poverty perspective. Following a review of current research on this topic, the paper concludes with a series of recommendations.

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1 Zigler, 2003

# CONTEXT

## (i) Child poverty in Ireland

Although child poverty has fallen significantly in Ireland over the last decade,<sup>2</sup> it continues to be a serious problem. According to a recent UNICEF report, despite strong economic growth and sustained anti-poverty efforts, Ireland is ranked 22nd of 25 countries on the material well-being of children. This is just below the US and UK.<sup>3</sup> This measure is determined by reference to three components: relative income poverty (using the 50% median income threshold); households without jobs; and reported deprivation. The lowest rate of relative income poverty (under 5%) is found in the four Nordic countries whilst it remains above 15% in countries such as Italy, Portugal, US, UK and Ireland.

Almost 23% of Irish children under 18 years of age are considered at risk of relative poverty (using the 60% median income threshold) with 9.7% of children in Ireland experiencing consistent poverty.<sup>4</sup> Drawing on the EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), *The State of the Nation's Children: Ireland 2006* reports that households with children had higher poverty rates than those without children and children living in households with three or more children were slightly less likely than all children to be consistently poor.<sup>5</sup> Almost 32% of children in lone parent households are likely to experience consistent poverty.<sup>6</sup>

In the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007 – 2016, the government defines poverty in the following terms:

*'People are living in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living, which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities, which are considered the norm for other people in society.'*

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2 Combat Poverty Agency, 2005

3 UNICEF, 2007

4 OMC, 2007

5 OMC, 2007

6 OSI, 2007

This definition of poverty links social exclusion directly to inadequate income. Hoelscher<sup>7</sup> points out that poverty and social exclusion can be seen as competitive concepts with exclusion being the broader and more dynamic. She contends that poverty focuses on the economic situation and social exclusion is concerned with the conditions of participation and whether society acts as an agent of exclusion. Thus, she argues, poverty and social exclusion are in fact complementary and interacting concepts. Children growing up in poor households are at risk of social exclusion and similarly children who experience social exclusion are at risk of poverty. Those who are socially excluded fail to access the opportunities and resources necessary for full participation in society.

There are complex processes through which poverty affects children. Policies have to address poverty and social exclusion among children both to ensure their well-being, participation and development in the present and to ensure a healthy and self-supporting adult life. The growing attention to this more dynamic view of poverty in the Irish literature is captured in the title of the Combat Poverty publication *Day In, Day Out. Understanding the dynamics of child poverty*.<sup>8</sup>

**‘If early childhood care and education is to have a role in eliminating child poverty it seems that it will be necessary to review the value base informing policy so that children and families are placed centre-stage’**

## **(ii) Child Policy in Ireland**

In 1992 the Irish government ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Since then there has been a substantial increase in policy developments relating to children and childhood in Ireland. The Office of Minister for Children (OMC), established in 2006 and previously the National Children’s Office, is charged with the co-ordination of policies for children across the three main departments of Health and Children, Education and Science and Justice.

A comprehensive and ambitious national strategy for children was published in 2000. It presents a vision, consistent with the guiding principles of the UNCRC, that Ireland will be a place:

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7 2004

8 Layte, Maitre, Nolan & Whelan, 2006



*...where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential.*

Guided by this vision the OMC has achieved a level of success on the first two of the three identified strategy goals of (i) giving children a voice and (ii) understanding children's lives. Action to achieve the third and final goal of providing quality services and supports has been less successful. In 2007 the OMC published the first *State of the Nation's Children report*.

The establishment in 2004 of the Office of Ombudsman for Children showed that there is a growing awareness of children, their rights and their needs. The inclusion of a chapter devoted to children in the partnership agreement *Towards 2016* is further evidence of a move towards considering children as a significant social group.

Despite the heightened level of attention, structural changes and policy publications, however, child poverty remains stubbornly persistent<sup>9</sup>. It begs the question 'what policy mechanisms might actually have a substantial impact?' It is within that context that this paper reviews the role of early childhood education.

### **(iii) Relationship between research evidence and policy development**

A review of policy documents and statements shows that in Ireland as elsewhere there is increased demand to consider research findings to inform evidence-based policy development. While research findings may contribute to the general climate in which policies are developed, the relationship between research and policy is not straightforward and its influence is indirect.<sup>10</sup>

A number of models of the relationship between research and policy exist and Weiss<sup>11</sup> identified seven different degrees to which research evidence can inform policy. The expectation that a single piece of research or 'evidence' can lead directly to policy improvements is not consistent with the way

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9 Combat Poverty Agency, 2005

10 Brown and Harlen, 1998

11 1979

decisions on policy are made<sup>12</sup>. Marston and Watts<sup>13</sup> have highlighted the importance of being thoughtful and critical about assumptions made at both research and policy level. There has also been criticism about the quality of published research<sup>14</sup> and the underpinning values driving some research, which is then used by policy makers to inform early childhood policies.<sup>15</sup>

When writing specifically about the value of drawing on findings from longitudinal research to inform policy in early childhood education Penn and Lloyd note that:

*‘...we have come to the conclusion that ‘knowledge’ is not easily transferable, and what may seem beyond question in one context is dubious in another’.*<sup>16</sup>

This cautionary conclusion challenges us to take care when reviewing evidence from international research and demands that due accord be given to the unique features that exist in an Irish situation. In addition to questioning assumptions and taking account of cultural differences when considering the evidence base informing policy, Boaz and Pawson<sup>17</sup> talk of a ‘false expectation’ guiding the ‘quest for certainty’ among those conducting research synthesis. While there is a certain comfort in the quantifiable and measurable, there are also strengths to be found in seeking to accommodate the uncertainty and dynamic of reality when drafting policy and evaluating impact.

**‘Children who have a good start in life are less likely to be poor as adults’**

Harper, Marcus & Moore<sup>18</sup> point out that there is ample research evidence that children who have a good start in life are less likely to be poor as adults and thus less likely to pass on poverty to their own children. Why, they wonder has this not led to a break in what’s called ‘the cycle of poverty’? They suggest it is due to the complexity of individual development in context, which is insufficiently understood.

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12 Reimers and McGinn, 1995

13 2003

14 Hargreaves, 1996

15 Dahlberg and Moss, 2004; Brown, 2004

16 2007, p.15

17 2005

18 2003

Recognising that development is a function of individual agency and the social and political contexts within which development occurs would, they argue, provide a rationale for a more broad-ranging policy for addressing poverty in general and child poverty in particular. It would require the interrogation of the way in which macro-economic and social policies impact on families and communities and the children therein. Unless families and children are taken into account when developing policy and drafting legislation there is a danger of negative effects, which may, inadvertently compromise the development of children.

This complex, integrated approach to addressing individuals in context in policy development underpins the NESC report *The Developmental Welfare State*<sup>19</sup> and forms the basis for the partnership agreement *Towards 2016*<sup>20</sup>. It is also the context within which the arguments of this paper are located.

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19 2005

20 2007

# POVERTY AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

## (i) Child poverty

Child poverty and social exclusion have been identified as child outcomes requiring policy attention and action across a broad range of countries.<sup>21</sup> Phipps, in a five-country review, found that many countries share the same concerns and goals for children, often informed by the UNCRC, but may not necessarily achieve them at the same rate or level.

Removing children from poverty requires attention to the family situation, to children's needs and rights and to the policies that are developed to support families and children. Social protection for children includes measures that enable children to withstand effects of poverty and deprivation and improve their overall well-being. Such protection measures include cash transfer to families and mechanisms to support families in their care and nurturing roles through access to affordable and quality services.

Generally family and communities provide children with the necessary care and support to ensure their long-term emotional stability and positive aspirations. Without this childhood nurturing there is evidence that children's aspirations are reduced and through cumulative effect their overall welfare may suffer. A well-supported, high-quality early childhood care and education system has been identified as one support mechanism that can impact both directly on children and indirectly through its effect on parents and the home environment.<sup>22</sup>

Eliminating child poverty is high on the political agenda of most OECD countries, although some have substantially higher rates than others. It remains at a 'high level' in Ireland.<sup>23</sup> Vulnerability to poverty is greater in children than in adults because they are dependent on others to meet many of their needs and they have less control over their immediate circumstances. Child poverty is a concern because children are affected to a disproportional degree by poverty with long-term impact on health and education outcomes. These factors can limit their opportunities for moving beyond poverty.

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21 Kamerman, Neuman, Waldfogel & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Phipps, 2001

22 OECD, 2001, 2006

23 Combat Poverty Agency, 2005

Harper<sup>24</sup> notes that missed schooling and/or educational underachievement can undermine all other efforts to escape poverty. As a result, the role of family supports, including early childhood education, is particularly important. They can have the dual and intergenerational impact of supporting parents leading to a decrease in stress and subsequent improvement in relationships. They can also have a direct effect on the child in terms of affective and cognitive development and achievement.

While access to and affordability of quality early childhood services is critical, the services themselves must be of good quality to meet the needs and rights of young children themselves. They are also most effective when they enhance, rather than replace, the home learning environment. Central to the potential of early education is the focus on personal development and on skills associated with learning how to learn rather than numerical and literacy skills.

### **(ii) Children's rights and making children visible**

Research shows that child poverty and social exclusion - especially in early childhood - is associated with negative outcomes for children including child mortality, low birth weight, accidents, teen pregnancy, poor housing conditions and educational underachievement. A key challenge is to ensure that children and their experiences are not rendered invisible in the policy debate by a focus on parents and families.

Ruxton and Bennett<sup>25</sup> argue that a successful strategy to tackle poverty and social exclusion among children needs social consensus on core values which see children as a shared responsibility and social investment rather than as the sole responsibility of parents. Macro-economic policies that explicitly favour measures that benefit children is a social priority.

The child's own aspirations and attitudes can be essential to breaking the poverty cycle. While attitudes and aspirations alone do not determine poverty outcomes, progress on the routes out of poverty is determined by the child's personality, his or her self-belief, the support of family and access to wider opportunities. Examining poverty and social exclusion through children's eyes could use a child's rights as a framework for analysis and action - including the right to participate. For example, UNICEF's basic

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24 2004

25 2002

framework for policy consideration is informed by the UNCRC in emphasising the rights to survival, protection, development and participation.

To seriously investigate children's experiences of exclusion from the world of other children now, as well as the likely exclusion from the adult world in the long run, the instruments used to measure child poverty need to be child sensitive. Unlike the UK, which has a child poverty index including items such as 'access to preschool', neither the former or the current Irish index has any specific child poverty indicators. Such invisibility of children in measures of child poverty compounds efforts to understand and address it and favours competing, more visible, interests. Both Hoelscher<sup>26</sup> and Ruxton and Bennett<sup>27</sup> identify the challenge of an aging society and the erosion of more traditional family structures as future barriers to making and keeping children visible.

**'The instruments used to measure child poverty need to be child sensitive'**

The UNCRC provides a useful and dynamic framework against which to measure policies for children.<sup>28</sup> It is increasingly being referenced in national and EU documents and this may secure greater visibility for children in policy and legislation and should ensure their voices are more widely heard. While not addressing the issue of child poverty directly, Irish children, in their report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child<sup>29</sup> made the following observations on poverty.

*'If I had a magic wand --- I would make money fall from heaven [sic] and make the world candy land' [A, 9 years]*

*'There is [sic] loads of poor people in Ireland, even probably more than in bigger countries. I think that is very bad.' [E & D, 8 & 11 years]*

Against a rights background it becomes clear that child poverty is not only a concern for the future of society but is also a concern that demands action in the lives of children today. Many of the UNCRC articles have relevance to children and child poverty but Article 27 specifically refers to investing the maximum resources available for the promotion of children's economic, social and cultural rights and challenges.<sup>30</sup>

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26 2004

27 2002

28 Hayes, 2002

29 CRA, 2006

30 States parties [to] recognise the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. UN, 1989

This represents a clear statement that poverty is not an absolute concept based on basic human needs but requires a wider understanding to take account of children relative to the society in which they live.

Drawing on the UNICEF model, Harper et al<sup>31</sup> give special attention to two critical rights-based aspects of child poverty:

- survival and protection [Article 6] incorporating nutrition and family support in childcare
- development and participation [Article 6 and 12] incorporating education and child work.

In relation to survival and protection they observe that many poorer parents find they are so caught up in trying to provide adequate material resources for their children, they do not have enough time to spend supporting and guiding them. Thus the lack of affordable early years' alternatives tends to compound the negative effects of the economic and livelihood stresses.

Education, including early childhood care and education, is widely recognised as one of the main routes out of poverty with the connection between education and increased income and better labour market opportunities well established. There is also evidence of a further benefit in that educated parents seem more committed to securing a good education for their children and providing a healthy lifestyle, potentially breaking the cycle of poverty.

### **(iii) Tackling Child Poverty**

In calling for child poverty to be considered within the wider macro-economic context Hoelscher argues that:

*The reduction of child poverty rates and improvements in children's life situations are not just a by-product of general anti-poverty strategies but the result of an explicit and integrated strategy of child- and family-friendly policies that ... make children and families a political priority; secure and increase the financial resources to families; enhance child development and well being and include the most vulnerable.<sup>32</sup>*

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31 2004

32 2004, p. 7

A range of factors may account for the variety of child poverty rates around Europe. High incidence of poverty among lone parents and large families suggest that demography is important to levels of child poverty although analysis suggests that changes in the proportion of children in lone parent families have only limited impact on overall child poverty rates. Research indicates that lone mother families are at high risk of economic insecurity and poverty and the children in these families are especially vulnerable. Child poverty rates in almost all countries are disproportionately high among children living in lone mother families. Nonetheless, despite this, living in a lone mother family bears surprisingly little relationship to the child poverty rate as other factors located within the family, the community and the wider policy context exert a cumulative influence.<sup>33</sup>

Public policy ethos and agendas drive policy formation and implementation. This is as true in the field of poverty intervention and family support as elsewhere and Hoelscher<sup>34</sup> argues that the main factors determining a country's child poverty rate can be found in the macro-economic developments and welfare traditions. When considering this issue in relation to the role of early childhood education and care in addressing child poverty, it is beneficial to review the different investment models that predominate.

There are a number of ways of considering investment models in early childhood services. Bennett<sup>35</sup>, drawing on the work of Esping-Andersen, has identified three policy models for investment in public provision of early childhood services.

- In the High Investment Public Provision Model, children's rights to society's resources are widely recognised and early childhood education and care is viewed as a public good/responsibility. Examples of such models can be found in the Nordic States where state investment is over 1% of GDP.
- In the Low to Mid-Investment Pre-primary Model the state provides large-scale educational services from three to four years to compulsory school age. The policy focus is on learning and laying foundations for literacy and numeric skills. This is the model most common in European countries where state investment is between 0.4% and 1% of GDP.

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33 UNICEF, 2000; Kamerman et al., 2003

34 2004

35 2007



- In the Low Public Investment/Mixed Market Model early childhood education and care is viewed largely as the responsibility of the individual family. Such models are found in countries with traditionally weak national early years' policies and a weakly regulated market conceived as a service for working mothers. Ireland and the US are typical and show state investment of less than 0.5% of GDP.<sup>36</sup>

If early childhood care and education is to have a role in eliminating child poverty it seems that it will be necessary to review the value base informing policy so that children and families are placed centre-stage.

## Obstacles

Following a review of various policies to combat child poverty, Hoelscher<sup>37</sup> identified a number of policy obstacles to overcome the cycle of poverty. She identified the lack of integrated strategies and the dominant role of economic over social policy as key obstacles. Developing integrated strategies requires clarity about the reasons for tackling child poverty, beyond the appreciation of individual, family and societal gains that may accrue. Achieving strategies that are integrated and therefore integrating must contend with the tension between 'sectorising' children and 'marginalising' children by removing them from the midst of everyday society to 'target' supports for them. This tension needs to be carefully managed so that unintended consequences such as exclusion don't happen.

Sectorising children can lead to seeing them as a special interest group leading to targeted, one-off project approaches for tackling poverty. It also can confine attention to core areas of health or education, which leads to a piecemeal and inefficient policy approach. Marginalisation of children's issues can lead to different ministries having responsibility for different needy groups leading to disconnected policies, inefficiencies in investment and limited effectiveness.

Equitable distribution is at the heart of those economic policies that have positive social impacts. While growth is important, economic growth does not automatically translate into improvements in the social sector. The increased participation of women in the workforce has fuelled the rapid economic growth in Ireland and improved the economic circumstances

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<sup>36</sup> NESF, 2005; Hayes & Bradley, 2006

<sup>37</sup> 2004

of the population. However, in poorer communities the lack of a parallel policy on a sustainable, accessible and affordable early childhood sector has meant poorly developed early childhood services. These services are ad hoc, unstable, under-resourced and of poor quality, which impacts on child development and well-being.

In his report, Sweeney<sup>38</sup> reviews the evidence that children in poor households are disproportionately likely to suffer from an unjust intra-household distribution of income. The findings reported strengthen the case for investing in services-in-kind. He notes that eliminating child poverty will require a mix of universal and targeted interventions and supports the view that there needs to be integrated actions to combat child poverty. He identifies four dimensions for particular attention and action:

- Increase parent employment and earnings
- Support parenting
- Acknowledge the particular situation of one-parent households
- Ensure adequate income support for 'work poor' households.

Although he does not identify any child-specific dimension in this summary, Sweeney notes that improving services-in-kind from which children benefit has major potential to ease the financial pressure on low-income households with children within socially disadvantaged areas.

Positive human development depends on complex multi-level dynamic and interacting systems with the individual at the centre.<sup>39</sup> A symptom of poor strategy is the failure - at the implementation level - to recognise and work with the inter-relationships between sectors and interventions. Taking account of this complexity can lead to integrated service delivery and improvements in the core sectors of health, education and social welfare. It is central to supporting the role of early childhood care and education from an anti-poverty perspective. If synergies between economic growth, income poverty reduction and advances in child health, education and well-being are to be realised, we need a situation where social policy and social development attract equal attention and status as macro-economic policy.

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38 'Ending Child Poverty in Rich Countries: What Works' (2002)

39 Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; Hayes, 2004

# EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CHILD POVERTY

## (i) Defining early childhood care and education

When considering the role of early childhood care and education in a strategy to tackle child poverty, it is useful to be clear about what is being discussed. Defining what exactly is meant by the term early childhood care and education in Ireland poses a number of problems and suggests a continued limited understanding of this pre-primary stage of education.

Policy and planning persists in drawing a distinction between childcare and education<sup>40</sup> despite comprehensive and nuanced arguments encouraging government towards the development of a co-ordinated and integrated policy approach.<sup>41</sup>

A critical difficulty in Irish policymaking is the fact that in the main childcare refers to two different service types:

- For younger children, childcare has come to mean early childhood care and education and refers to the wide variety of settings, public and private, in which child-raising is shared with the family, including childminding and various forms of centre-based provision
- For older children, generally up to about the age of 12 years, childcare refers to the variety of afterschool arrangements that exist to meet differing needs at different times.

And so, while the early childhood dimension of childcare covers the same age range and services as addressed by early education policy,<sup>42</sup> it comes under different departmental auspices. So complex and entangled is the situation that the OMC was actually unable to report on the indicator 'early childhood care and education' in the *State of the Nation's Children* report.<sup>43</sup>

There has been extensive investment in early childhood services over the last decade in Ireland through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme

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40 OSI, 2007

41 Hayes, 1995; Hayes & Bradley, 2006; OECD, 2004; NESF, 2005

42 Ireland, 1999; CECDE, 2006

43 OMC, 2007, p.4

(EOCP) and the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP). However, investment has been largely in terms of capital grants. Funding has emphasised the quantity of development, with targets set relating to the number of childcare spaces created, rather than considering the sustainability and quality of the services developed. By this measure future economic analysis may well record a positive rate of return. However, assumptions may be made about sustainability and quality which are not supported by an equal level of funding. Over time it may well be the case that the construction sector, rather than children, families or the early childhood care and education sector, will be seen as the real beneficiaries.

## **(ii) Understanding the potential of early childhood education**

The policy distinction between childcare and early education in Ireland is not simply of academic interest. The outcome of such an approach impacts directly on the day-to-day reality of the early years experience for children and the likely effectiveness of the service, particularly for poorer children and their families.<sup>44</sup> Brown notes that:

*There is usually an assumption that there will be widespread agreement with ideas that those at the centre of wisdom 'know' to be the best way forward. On the whole, practitioners and children go along with this because this is how it has always been done, perpetuated by institutional structures and power relationships.<sup>45</sup>*

When considering the role of early childhood care and education from an anti-poverty perspective, it is useful to consider the purpose of early childhood institutions. There is a complex and contested understanding of what exactly early childhood care and education is. The purposes of 'early childhood institutions'<sup>46</sup> are not self-evident. Increasingly policy initiatives focus on only one dimension, for instance in the Irish case investing in different early childhood care and education services for poor children<sup>47</sup> and for children of working parents.<sup>48</sup> Such an approach misses the opportunity to build on the potential of early childhood services as a mechanism for inclusion in an increasingly multi-cultural society. It also fails to realise the full

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44 Corsaro, 2003; Hayes, 2004

45 Brown, 2004

46 Moss, 2001

47 DES, 2005

48 NCIP, 2006

potential of high-quality, integrated early childhood care and education for all children, families, society and the economy.<sup>49</sup>

In Ireland there has been a slow and fragmented response to the development of an early childhood care and education strategy for children. There is persistent separation of early education as a service for poor children at risk of educational failure from childcare for children of working parents. Elsewhere I have argued that this stubborn resistance to integrating care and education as a single policy focus may reflect an un-addressed conflict between the traditional ideology of the family in Ireland and the economic necessity to attract women into the workforce.<sup>50</sup>

This conflict between state and family responsibility for children may also account for the fact that there is limited attention given to policy impact on children, even when the policy issue directly affects them. This also reflects a value base, which gives dominant position to the family over the needs and rights of the young child.

**‘High-quality early childhood care and education benefits all children with a differentially higher impact on poorer children’**

A central difference in early education policies internationally is the focus on targeted as opposed to universal support, particularly for services to children aged three years and over. The case for targeted early childhood care and education, dominant in the US, UK and Ireland, argues that targeting means that public monies can be more efficiently spent on quality services for those most in need. The difficulty with this argument is that intervention programmes for poor children tend to be poor programmes. Although children may well be regarded as targeted in anti-poverty strategies, such as the provision of early childhood care and education intervention programmes, the policies are often fragmented and isolated from broader, national policy choices.

While targeted early childhood interventions may cost less, universal provision is likely to be more effective in identifying and reaching a wider population of children in need of support.<sup>51</sup> Research increasingly reports that high-quality

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49 OECD, 2006; NWCI, 2005; Stoney, Mitchell and Warner, 2005; Woodhead, 2006

50 Hayes, 2002; Hayes and Bradley, 2006

51 Lynch, 2006

early childhood care and education benefits all children with a differentially higher impact on poorer children. This view has been contested by some authors<sup>52</sup>, who continue to argue in favour of targeted rather than universal provision. Others however have argued that this added benefit could, in the long run, exceed investment costs.<sup>53</sup> This view conflicts with current policy direction in Ireland.<sup>54</sup>

In a cautionary observation on the role that early childhood care and education might play from an anti-poverty perspective, Dahlberg and Moss criticise the over-reliance on early childhood education as a form of social regulation. They are particularly critical of investing in services from a value base that purports to be equality driven. They point out that such an approach is most evident in those two countries, the US and UK, where levels of child poverty are highest. This is also the case in Ireland. In both the US and the UK, major early intervention programmes:

*targeted at poor families... are seen as means to reduce poverty and its attendant ills. ... The implicit assumption is that poverty and related social ills derive from individual failures - of children and/or parents - which interventions through preschool can rectify. These programmes avoid the need to question the 'new capitalism' under which material inequality has thrived.*<sup>55</sup>

The assumption that early interventions will provide an effective and inexpensive technology to reduce child poverty and its damaging consequences is limited. The implicit values currently underpinning certain early intervention programmes as an effective and cheap technology to counteract poverty are doomed to fail. In a caustic review of certain international programmes, Penn writes that such an approach:

*...is both technological and redemptionist - the world is a difficult place to reform but young children are innocent and unformed and we can really make a difference if we can get in soon enough with the right kind of stimulating programmes for children and convert their parents to a right or better way of bringing them up.*<sup>56</sup>

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52 Olsen, 2003; Archer & Weir, 2005

53 Barnett, Brown and Shore, 2004; Heckman, 2000; Lynch, 2006

54 Archer & Weir, 2004; DES, 2005

55 Dahlberg and Moss, 2006 p. 41

56 Penn, 2002 p.126-129

While early childhood care and education may not be the ‘magic bullet’<sup>57</sup> to eliminating child poverty, where carefully designed and adequately resourced, it can play an important role. To achieve this, consideration should be given to the features of effective programmes, to the ‘what’ and the ‘why’ dimensions. Such consideration should also reflect a context that has a broad and inclusive understanding of the diverse ways in which ‘effective’ can be measured.

A review of research has identified five key aspects common to effective early childhood care and education as measured by positive, sustained child outcomes. These are:

- the quality of the adult-child verbal interactions
- knowledge and understanding of curriculum
- knowledge of how young children learn
- adult’s skill in supporting children in resolving conflicts
- helping parents to support children’s learning in the home.

It is evident from this list that adults providing such a quality service must be well trained. This is supported by the findings from an IEA<sup>58</sup> study across 15 nations.<sup>59</sup> Four findings applied to all nations in the study:

- Children who had better educated teachers at age four had higher language scores at age seven
- Children who had more varied materials to interact with at age four had higher cognitive scores at age seven
- Children who spent less time in whole group activities at age four had higher cognitive scores at age seven
- Children who had more opportunities to choose their own activities at age four had higher language scores at age seven.

These findings underscore the importance of trained practitioners who understand how young children learn and who can create and maintain a rich early learning environment.

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57 Brooks-Gunn, 2003

58 International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement

59 Montie, Xiang & Schweinhart, 2006

### **(iii) Poverty research and early childhood care and education**

Poverty impacts on the development and learning of young children. There is no doubt that, in general, children who are born and raised in poverty have less enjoyable childhoods. Quality, stable, early education has a role to play in that 'here and now' as well as in the future. It is the contention of this paper that both immediate and future outcomes need to be considered in policy development.

How exactly poverty affects the life chances of young children is a question that has informed research. It is captured well in the title of a paper by Duncan and his colleagues.<sup>60</sup> Drawing on their own research and an extensive review of literature, they found that family income has stronger associations with achievement and ability-related outcomes than it does with behaviour outcomes. Specifically they note the following, of particular relevance to this paper:

- Family income has a much stronger association with achievement and ability-related outcomes for children than with measures of health and behaviour
- Early childhood appears to be the stage in which family economic conditions matter the most. This is often the period when economic pressure can be highest - setting up home, early in career, a number of small children and associated costs
- Family income had a much stronger association [with] completed schooling than non-marital fertility
- Income in early childhood had a bigger impact on completed schooling than did family income during middle childhood
- The estimated impact of family income on completed schooling appears to be larger for children in low than those in high-income families.

It is not clear why the impact of family income is greater for achievement than it is for behaviour but it may be due to the importance of school readiness skills in determining the course of schooling for children. This may be the case because pre-school ability seems to set the stage for children's transition into the formal school system.

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<sup>60</sup> How much does childhood poverty affect the life chances of children? (1998)



Studies have found that income poverty has a strong association with low level of preschool ability. Studies have also shown that family income during the early years has an effect on rates of completed schooling as well as on early cognitive and achievement test scores.<sup>61</sup> Brooks-Gunn<sup>62</sup> and others suggest that low income in early life is associated with less adequate preschool competencies and thus children are set on a trajectory for lowered school achievement that is difficult to alter. Consequently, while school readiness may be deemed important for individual children, the quality of the transitions they experience and the readiness of schools to guide individual children are also important factors to consider.

**‘It is not the provision of early years services itself that matters, but the quality and intensity of that provision in the particular context of its location’**

Economic analyses investigate factors impacting on development and family dynamics that are outside the processes of family life and child development. While such research yields evidence that poverty impacts on children’s achievements and behaviour, most particularly during the early years, it fails to identify the pathways of this impact. As Duncan and Magnusson note:

*Most economists are remarkably uncurious about the pathways by which parenting affects child well-being. Their models of child well-being posit linkages between child outcomes and the effort, time and money expended and prices faced by parent, schools and communities. But these models are typically of the black-box variety, with the mediating pathways remaining hidden inside the box.<sup>63</sup>*

While the black box approach identifies the size of the apparently causal impacts, it does not account for the mediating variables and the ways in which higher incomes improve child well-being. But when the mediating variables influence policy or suggest use of a particular service, then the detail of what is in the black box becomes a more critical factor. This is true from the point of view of value for money and more importantly from the lived experience of the child and family. It is not, for instance, the provision of early years services itself that matters, but the quality and intensity of that

61 Guo, Brooks-Gunn & Harris, 1996

62 2003

63 2002, p. 2/3 (Emphasis in original)

provision in the particular context of its location. In the case of cognitive development in children of preschool age, income matters to a substantial degree because it is associated with access to richer learning environments for children.

Duncan et al<sup>64</sup> found that early childhood appears to be the stage in which family economic conditions matter the most. Henry, Werschkul, & Rao<sup>65</sup> identify parents as key mediators in the process and argue that lifting parents from poverty requires particular attention to the supports provided. Recognising that ‘...the initial years of life are critical for children’s long-run social, emotional and cognitive development and that intervention in early childhood can help children overcome the obstacles created by poverty’,<sup>66</sup> they specifically point to the value of quality early childhood care and education that is accessible and affordable.

In relation to affordability they note that the percentage income used to pay for childcare in the US is proportionally larger among low-income families<sup>67</sup> supporting the contention of Schulman that ‘the high cost of childcare puts it out of reach of those who require it most’.<sup>68</sup>

Some 50% of the effect of family income on cognitive child outcomes is mediated by the home environment. The extended impact of early childhood interventions often profit from engaging with and influencing parent behaviour. While planning for and supporting parental engagement may be difficult, such indirect impact is crucial to understanding the complex nature of development in early childhood. In conclusion Duncan et al<sup>69</sup> note that their data is consistent with the hypothesis that raising the incomes of poor families will enhance the abilities and attainments of children. Most important seems to be the elimination of deep and persistent poverty during a child’s early years.

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64 1998

65 2003

66 p.5

67 [25% to 5% in 2003 figures

68 2000

69 1998

# RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION

## **(i) Investing in early education as intervention**

Since the mid-twentieth century the benefits of early or pre-primary education, particularly for children considered to be in danger of school failure, have been debated. The initial impetus for investment in preschool<sup>70</sup> as a means of combating school failure came from the United States. There it was argued that investment in compensatory, early intervention programmes would benefit poor children, who were considered disadvantaged in the educational system even before they enrolled in elementary school.<sup>71</sup> Investment in the latent potential of such children was seen to be economically and socially prudent.

However, early interventions are not just about improving cognitive test scores and associated skills in literacy and numerical skills, they are also important for the development of social skills. Early interventions impact on aspects of self-regulation, learning dispositions and motivation. A review of the research suggests that child development is enhanced if group sizes are small; settings are child-focused and well organised, with adults playing a facilitative role rather than a didactic one.<sup>72</sup>

High-quality settings are those in which adults interact with children in a responsive and informative way, encourage verbal interaction and are not harsh with children. Organisation and structure are important and are provided by adults who carefully plan and prepare the learning environment and who have high expectations of children in terms of social and linguistic development.<sup>73</sup>

The role of early education in combating educational disadvantage, and acting as a mechanism for moving beyond poverty, has been an important driving factor in influencing the modest investment in early childhood education outside of primary school, which has occurred in Ireland over

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70 Much of the research reported, particularly from the US, refers to services for children aged three to six and is often termed preschool provision or pre-kindergarten.

71 Hayes, 1995

72 Bowman et al., 2001

73 Hayes, 2004

the latter part of the twentieth century.<sup>74</sup> The concept of educational disadvantage itself continues to generate much debate in Ireland.<sup>75</sup> The limited effectiveness of early intervention initiatives<sup>76</sup> has led to calls for more detailed analysis of how young children learn and what might be most effective for them now and in their future.<sup>77</sup>

Because of the level of investment in early education as a mechanism for improving the school success of 'at risk' children, many of the interventions have been evaluated for cost-effectiveness over time. The requirement to measure the success of investment is a characteristic of contemporary society. While it has had a positive effect in increasing the research base in early education, it has been criticised as limiting and undervaluing the complex nature of early childhood development.<sup>78</sup> There is a '...need for developing alternative cost-benefit methods based on a more straightforward calculation of benefits to young children in the here and now'.<sup>79</sup>

A UK report<sup>80</sup> suggests that when reviewing research evidence on the impact of early childhood services, attention should be diverted from longitudinal cost-benefit studies analysis. Instead a more intricate weave of factors when considering the benefit of investing in the development of the early years settings should be considered. Such factors would, they suggest, include:

- measures of the increase in employment take up by women
- the impact of early years provision on earnings
- an exploration of social benefits
- the improvement in workforce skills
- the attraction of new providers
- the information requirements of different groups
- the role of parental contribution.

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74 Hayes, 1995; 2002

75 Kellaghan, 2002

76 Archer & Weir, 2005

77 Hayes, 1995, 2004; McGough, 2002

78 Hayes, 2004; Hayes & Bradley, 2006; Moss & Dahlberg, 2006

79 Penn and Lloyd, 2007, p.16

80 PWC, 2004

This list is remarkable for the lack of attention to the children themselves and the impact of early childhood care and education on their immediate well-being, development and learning.

## **(ii) Findings from longitudinal studies**

Much of the research evidence on the impact of early years services used by policymakers in the US, UK and Ireland draws on a small sample of longitudinal studies focusing on one form of early high-quality, centre-based childhood provision. Quality services are defined by the presence of trained staff, good ratios and an articulated curriculum.<sup>81</sup> Penn et al<sup>82</sup> reviewed three of the most widely quoted studies and presented a robust caution about transposing findings and models from one setting or culture to another without due attention to the contexts in both cases. Using a rigorous set of criteria relating to programme design and research methods, the review limits itself to considering three longitudinal studies all from the US – the HighScope/Perry Preschool Project (H/S), the Abecedarian project and the Chicago Child-Parent Centres (CPCs).

The three studies reviewed differ in relation to the ages of the children served, the intensity and extent of the intervention, the support to mothers and the level of maternal participation in the intervention itself. They are similar in that two were specially designed new services (H/S and Abecedarian) while the third was research into an existing scheme. All were centre-based and analysed using a similar economic model. None of the studies measured variables associated with neighbourhood type and/or social capital. The three studies considered were developed in three different decades and all continue to be the subject of research articles.

Findings from all three studies confirm educational benefits, with experimental groups reporting lower retention rates and higher school completion. Cognitive benefits were higher as measured. Two of the studies investigated impact on criminal activity and reported a reduction in criminal behaviour, nonetheless the rate of crime recorded among the experimental groups remained comparatively quite high. Overall measures of cost-benefit comparisons are cautious because of different methods of analysis and different timings. On the ‘\$1 invested, how much saved’ model, the findings show gains across all studies. Despite some criticism of methods it is these findings that have generated most attention as

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81 Marcon, 1999; Olsen, 2006

82 2006

the reason behind public investment in early childhood care and education for disadvantaged or poor children.

However, on the issue of local applicability and transferability, Penn et al<sup>83</sup> advise caution and observe that the samples in these three studies were overwhelmingly African American children and families. All were living in inner city locations and all living in US poverty. One of the most striking findings of the studies is the focus on cost-benefit studies on crime saving. This is seen as a cultural feature related to the particularly high level of crime in many US inner cities. The authors question whether the cost-benefit measures would be as high in lower crime areas or different cultures. They argue that the findings, when mentioned, should all be prefaced by the words 'for the specific population in these studies'.

Penn and her colleagues conclude that the specificity of the context of the three studies means that generalising the findings to other contexts is not justified. In so doing they not only highlight the importance of culture and time to the impact of any interventions but actually question the benefit of such economic studies at all.

The largest UK study, the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project, is a longitudinal study of the impact of early childhood experiences across the age range of three to seven years. Unlike the studies reported from the US, the EPPE project sampled a national sample of children and settings and did not confine itself to centre-based intervention projects. Within its overall sample there was a sufficient sample of settings catering for poorer children to allow analysis on the differential impact of settings across socio-economic groups. Findings reflect those of similar studies and offer some additional insights.<sup>84</sup> They found that early educational experiences did have a positive effect on child outcomes.

Children with extensive experience of group care under age two showed slightly higher levels of anti-social behaviour. The explanation for this may be related to the quality of settings and the user population. Overall, disadvantaged children and boys in particular benefit significantly from good-quality preschool. In addition they found that the quality of the home learning environment (HLE) is more important for intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income.

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83 2006

84 Sylva et al, 2004

At the transition to primary school, researchers found that preschool experience, when compared to none, enhances child development on both the cognitive and social/behaviour dimensions. The attainment proved more long lasting in reading and maths than social/behaviour. The research was carried out across a wide range of early years' settings and they found that some settings were more effective than others. The more effective were high-quality settings integrating care and education.

The duration of experience and the quality were also important. The number of months a child attended had a stronger impact on academic skills than on social behavioural development. The quality of the experiences was significantly related to children's scores on standardised test of reading and mathematics at age six and seven. Quality was not simply measured by reference to numbers and space but also took account of practices and pedagogy, what actually happens and what seems to be important. Settings where education and social development were seen as complementary and equal were most effective. The authors conclude that high-quality preschool provision combined with longer duration had the strongest effect on development.

The study also found that early beneficial effects remain though some outcome effects are not as strong at age seven years as on school entry. Once children enter school the preschool children do not make more gains than the 'home' children. This suggests that the impact of preschool operates through a stronger start to school and not through increased capacity to learn more in subsequent years.

The EPPE team point out that findings are comparable to existing research findings rather than new findings. The adverse impact of social disadvantage (poverty) on children's development has been established wherever it is studied. Short-term positive effects from quality early childhood education are greatest where there is relevant staff training and qualifications. Early day care has been linked to increased cognitive outcomes, better independence, peer sociability and increased anti-social behaviour. Sylva et al<sup>85</sup> point out that EPPE is the first study to show convincingly that individual preschool settings have lasting effects on child development for all children. While this latter finding can be found in the literature, it has not, they argue, been demonstrated empirically with such a large sample.

In her review Brooks-Gunn<sup>86</sup> summarises research findings and concludes that researchers and policy experts agree:

- that high-quality programmes enhance vulnerable children's school-related achievement and behaviour
- that effects are strongest for poor children and for children whose parents have little education
- that positive benefits continue into the late elementary school
- that programmes that are continued into elementary school and that offer high 'doses' of early intervention have the most sustained long-term effect
- that it is unrealistic to expect the benefits of short-term early interventions to last indefinitely.

A key to enhancing the effectiveness of early childhood education is investment in the training and qualification of staff<sup>87</sup> and the EPPE findings suggest that attention to the link with home learning environment is also a crucial factor.

There have been few studies on the impact of early childhood care and education on outcomes for Irish children.<sup>88</sup> What findings there are confirm that early childhood care and education 'can enhance cognitive functioning, ease transition from home to school and improve the long-term educational prospects of children from disadvantaged backgrounds'.<sup>89</sup> Research exploring the impact of early childhood care and education on child outcomes in Ireland has been limited and no substantial study of the impact of recent investment has been designed.

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86 2003

87 Helburn, 1995; Montie et al, 2006

88 ERC, 1998; Hayes, O'Flaherty & Kernan, 1997; Hayes & Kernan, 2001; Kellaghan & Greaney, 1993; Lewis & Archer, 2002; Omsted & Montie, 2001

89 Archer & Weir, 2005, p.8



## CONCLUSION

Despite strong economic progress over the past decade, Ireland continues to have an unacceptably high level of child poverty. Children growing up in poverty experience serious deprivation across a wide range of areas such as health, education and social integration. Poverty and vulnerability impair the quality of childhood and contribute to difficulties in adulthood. Research confirms that child poverty is a significant factor in persistent and chronic poverty and income poverty impacts more severely on children in their early years. Investing in a comprehensive, high-quality early childhood care and education infrastructure can contribute to counteracting the predictable negative impacts of growing up in poverty while also addressing the intergenerational transfer of poverty.

There have been many different policies and initiatives developed in Ireland to tackle child poverty. They have, however, failed to bring the level of child poverty down to levels similar to many of our European neighbours. It may in fact be because there are so many different policy approaches that we are failing to succeed in ending child poverty.

**‘There is limited attention given to policy impact on children, even when the policy issue directly affects them’**

Evidence from countries with low levels of child poverty suggests that where macro-economic and social policies are closely aligned and part of an integrated approach that places children at the centre of child poverty strategies, they are most successful. For example, Sweden’s per capita GDP is lower than the US and comparable to the UK<sup>90</sup>, yet comparisons of child poverty show the US as second and UK as fourth of 23 OECD countries in levels of child poverty with Sweden showing the lowest level.

Analysis suggests that economic and social policies have been successful in providing accessible and affordable early childhood care and education while at the same time overcoming and preventing child poverty.<sup>91</sup> Underpinning such approaches is a fundamental recognition of the value of children and childhood and a recognition that the state and the family together share responsibility for them. This is reflected in sustained investment and support for early childhood services as a common good.

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90 2001 figures

91 Dahlberg & Moss, 2006

In Ireland on the other hand children continue to be seen as the primary responsibility of the family. This position of respecting the autonomy of the family in matters relating to children ignores the extent to which the state intrudes on the capacity of families to 'go it alone'. Apart from the universal child benefits and education, the state is loathe to 'interfere' until such time as families are quantifiably failing in their efforts to raise their children. Services to support families and children are mainly characterised as worthy of investment when they are addressing a particular problem such as educational disadvantage in children or barriers to employment for parents.

For example, the decision to commit €350m exchequer funding annually from 2006 to assist all parents of children under six years in buying childcare through the Early Years Supplement is one that will do nothing to strengthen the early childhood sector, improve and sustain quality or improve life chances for poorer children. This crude measure was guided more by an attempt to treat all parents equally than by any commitment to improve and maintain the quality of the early education experiences of young children. There is no guarantee that the supplement will be used to fund the early education of young children.

Had that money been directed towards the services themselves - through, for instance, a quality linked fee subsidy scheme or a capitation system - it would have marked the beginning of addressing the sustainability of a quality early childhood care and education system. Research indicates that such a development would have benefits for children, families, society and the economy.

James Heckman makes a strong case when analysing, mainly from an economic perspective, the value of investing in early years' services. He emphasises human capital rather than social capital. Writing for a US audience he notes that:

*The best evidence suggests that learning begets learning, that early investments in learning are effective. As a society, we cannot afford to postpone investing in children until they become adults, nor can we wait until they reach school age - a time when it may be too late to intervene. Since learning is a dynamic process, it is most effective when it begins at a young age... The returns to human capital investments are greatest for the young for two reasons: (a) skill begets skill; and (b) younger persons have a longer horizon over which to recoup the fruits of their investments.<sup>92</sup>*

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92 Heckman 2002, p.5

Early childhood care and education does have a role in ending child poverty. To achieve this role, however, it must be part of an integrated policy developed in a context where social and economic policies are in harmony. Countries with low levels of child poverty have integrated policies and strategies for supporting early childhood care and education. Recognising the nature of child development as holistic they avoid - structurally and organisationally - fragmenting service development and support across welfare and education domains. As a result early childhood services are directly supported as a good thing for children and a common responsibility for all.

Our current approach to supporting early childhood services is fractured across the welfare (childcare) and educational (early education) domains and is targeted in nature. These features combine to perpetuate rather than eliminate child poverty and social exclusion as they separate children out from the mainstream from an early age. They also fail to ensure that the services provided are meeting an adequate level of quality to address the problems they are intended to address.

Any serious attempt to end child poverty will require a number of fundamental changes at political, structural and organisational level.

Economic policy approaches to supporting parents through income transfer will have to be looked at with a view to moving towards subsidising early childhood services. This is a move away from the broadly universal approach currently characterising the support towards a more targeted approach.

**‘Creative ways to fund high-quality services can be found in many countries where there is a mixed policy approach to provision’**

While recommending a move away from universal to targeted income supports for poor families with children, this paper recommends a move away from targeted measures towards a universal early childhood care and education policy. Subsidising early childhood services in general will make them more accessible and affordable for poorer families. It will also allow for more careful attention to the quality of services provided. Research shows that poorer families pay a higher proportion of their income on early childhood services. Yet poorer children are more likely to attend poorer quality settings thus compounding rather than addressing any difficulties. A universal policy approach has the benefit of minimising the social exclusion of poorer children and their families through recognising the value to all children

of quality early years experiences. It is also more effective for disadvantaged children<sup>93</sup> and may be considerably cheaper in the long run.<sup>94</sup> A subsidised model of early childhood care and education does not necessarily mean a free model. Creative ways to fund high-quality services can be found in many countries where there is a mixed policy approach to provision with a mixed funding model drawing on contributions from the state, employers, unions and parent fees.

To begin the move towards a model of early childhood care and education that would have a contributing role in tackling child poverty, there is a need for a fundamental shift in policy approach. Such a shift would be an explicit manifestation of a commitment to children and flow directly from Ireland's ratification of the UNCRC and the vision for children articulated in the National Children's Strategy (2000). It would recognise the shared responsibility of state and families to the rearing of children and understand the valuable role of early childhood care and education in the lives of all children. Early years services would be seen as a common good.

Such a change in direction would require an alteration in the current funding model towards direct subsidy for services and a move away from investing in childcare spaces. Instead investment would be aimed at enhancing and maintaining quality of early childhood care and education services. To enhance the quality of provision it will be necessary to actively integrate current childcare and early education policies which, despite co-location within the Office of the Minister for Children, are not yet coordinated. At a period where there is substantial budget allocation to various childcare, early education and anti-poverty strategies for children, with the development of two early childhood practice frameworks (Síolta and the National Quality Framework)<sup>95</sup>, the forthcoming Framework for Early Learning (NCCA, Forthcoming) and a National Training Strategy for the sector, the time is ripe for serious policy reform. There is now an opportunity to bring together the various initiatives in a coordinated and integrated way. This would benefit children and families in general and would make a considerable contribution to ending child poverty in Ireland.

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93 Syla et al, 2004

94 Lynch, 2006

95 CECDE, 2006

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop an agreed value base for investment in early childhood care and education that is primarily child centred and moves from a 'market-led' approach to the principle of 'common good', taking the vision for children expressed in the National Children's Strategy as a lead.
2. Review the variety of policies impacting directly on the provision of services for children from birth to six with a view to integrating them within a clear, integrated and integrating definition of early childhood care and education.
3. Remove distinctions at a policy, planning, funding and implementation level between early childcare and early education.
4. Activate the possibilities of co-location provided by the Office of the Minister for Children. Specifically, broaden the remit of the Early Years Education Policy Unit and merge it with the section of the Childcare Directorate concerned with early childcare.
5. Refocus the National Childcare Investment Programme into a National Programme of Investment in Children's Services, of which early childhood services would comprise a significant part.
6. Develop a specific Child Poverty Index or include explicit child poverty items (such as access to quality early childhood education) on the existing index.
7. Adjust the income support model for childcare to target poorer families with children.
8. Develop a mixed funding model involving public, private and business contributions along with parent fees.
9. Develop early childhood care and education policy away from a targeted approach towards a more universal model of provision with additional supports as necessary.

10. Move investment focus beyond provision of more space to include the development and support of a high-quality sustainable early childhood care and education sector.
11. Develop a quality-linked subsidy model for early childhood care and education services for settings that value and enhance diversity and support children's affective development as well as their cognitive development.
12. Provide funding incentives for settings by linking subsidy to the two emerging practice frameworks for the sector - Síolta, the National Quality Framework and the Framework for Early Learning and to the National Training Strategy.
13. Encourage settings to develop and maintain close links with parents to enhance the home learning environment.
14. Amend the current regulations to consider the training and qualification of staff working in early childhood care and education with attention to the variety of services and differing demands.
15. Design a rigorous research and evaluation of the impact of investment in early childhood care and education.

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Despite strong economic progress over the past decade, Ireland continues to have an unacceptably high level of child poverty. Children growing up in poverty experience serious deprivation across a wide range of areas such as health, education and social integration. Poverty and vulnerability impair the quality of childhood and contribute to difficulties in adulthood.

Early childhood care and education does have a role in ending child poverty. To achieve this role, however, it must be part of an integrated policy developed in a context where social and economic policies are in harmony.

In this paper Dr Nóirín Hayes discusses the importance of integrated policies and strategies for supporting early childhood care and education. She analyses the current context of child poverty and children's rights in Ireland and internationally. She addresses the importance of early childhood care and education before discussing findings from international research in early childhood care and education.

Dr Hayes explains that the move towards a holistic model of early childhood care and education would have a major contributing role in tackling child poverty, however it requires a fundamental shift in policy approach. She discusses how the time is right to bring together the various initiatives in a coordinated and integrated way.



**Bridgewater Centre  
Conyngham Road  
Islandbridge, Dublin 8**

Tel: 01 670 6746 Fax: 01 670 6760

Email: [info@combatpoverty.ie](mailto:info@combatpoverty.ie)

Website [www.combatpoverty.ie](http://www.combatpoverty.ie)