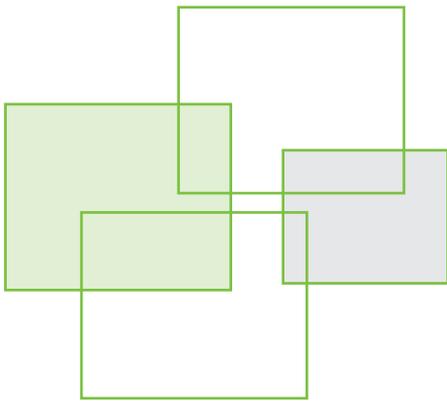




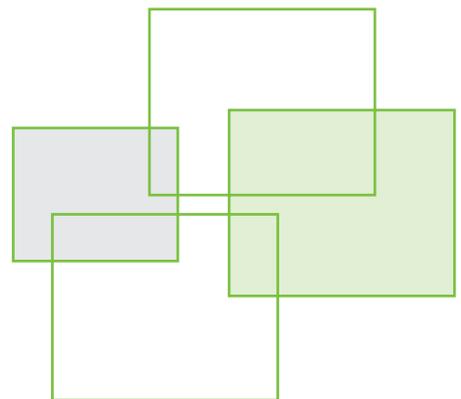
## Early Childhood Education and Care Policy



# COUNTRY NOTE

for

# IRELAND



OECD Directorate for Education  
April 2004

*The views expressed in the document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Irish authorities, the OECD or the OECD Directorate for Education.*



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Country Note for Ireland* is the outcome of an intensive review of early childhood policies and services in Ireland by an OECD review team for five days in November 2002. The review was initiated by an invitation to the OECD Directorate for Education from the Irish Department of Education and Science.

*Chapter 1* of the report outlines the framework of OECD early childhood education and care (ECEC) reviews. A premise of the OECD approach is that the development of young children in a country depends greatly on equitable social structures, on family support for early development and learning; and on the informed practice of qualified professionals who provide - in a caring environment - structured yet open frame-work programmes appropriate for young children. The chapter concludes with definitions of ECEC terminology as used in Ireland.

*Chapter 2* presents an overview of the early childhood education and care system in Ireland. It is descriptive in emphasis, outlining the political, administrative, social and economic contexts, recent policy initiatives in the field and key features of the current system. These include policy responsibility, types of provision and coverage, funding, regulatory procedures, staffing and staff training, programme regulation, and parental engagement.

*Chapter 3*, entitled *Policy Issues Arising from the Visit*, is analytic and discursive in emphasis. In addition to the central issues of access, quality, staff training and co-ordination, more contextual issues such as the impact of ECEC services on the Irish economy, the new roles of Irish women, parental engagement, early childhood education and care models, research / evaluation / information systems are explored. The question of funding new initiatives for young children in Ireland is also discussed, particularly in the context of the challenge presented by the Barcelona European Council, 16-17 March 2002.<sup>1</sup>

*Chapter 4* puts forward for consideration by the Irish authorities a number of suggestions and recommendations. They are offered in a spirit of professional dialogue, basing our proposals on experience of other countries and on our discussions with the ministries and the major stakeholders in the field whom we interviewed in Ireland. In summary, these conclusions are as follows:

### A Summary of Conclusions

#### General remarks

From the perspective of the OECD review team, significant strengths exist in Ireland:

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<sup>1</sup>The Barcelona conclusions state that Member States should remove disincentives to female labour force and strive, in line with national patterns of provision, to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years and mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age.



*A well-established early education network within the primary school system for children aged between 4 and 6.* Early education in Ireland benefits from stable funding, trained teachers, structured programming and regular monitoring and evaluation. Though insufficiently adapted to the learning patterns of young children and to the needs of contemporary parents, the network exists all over the country and is well-respected;

*The presence of an active voluntary and community sector,* which, although poorly funded, is closely in touch with the needs of working and disadvantaged parents, and acts to improve the quality of the services it offers;

*A strong spirit of partnership at local level:* Organised partnerships at county level are beginning to support the local communities, the voluntary sector and the business/local development sector to resolve the childcare needs of parents;

However, it is clear that a national policy for the early education and care of young children in Ireland is still in its initial stages. Care and education are still treated separately and coverage is low compared to other European countries. Over the coming years, significant energies and funding will need to be invested in the field to create a system in tune with the needs of a full employment economy and with new understandings of how young children develop and learn.

### **Co-ordination of ministries, agencies and resources**

In light of the urgent need to improve the present population/employment ratio in Ireland and establish a coherent and affordable system for the early education and care of children outside the home – in a context where there is a dispersion of responsibilities across many ministries and agencies - the OECD team proposes for consideration:

- The integration of all early education and care policy and funding under one ministry or under a designated funding and policy agency. Ireland has much to gain – in terms of effective policy-making, accountability and economies of scale - by taking an integrated approach to early education and care for children from one to six years, conducted by one ministry or agency, as has become the practice in many OECD countries.
- The urgent formulation of a *National Plan for Early Childhood Services Development*, rolled over on a three-year basis, with clearly spelt out goals, targets, time-lines, responsibilities and accountability measures from co-operating Departments. While universal in intent, the plan should include annual targets and specific funding for the important subsystems, such as disadvantaged children, children from Traveller communities and children with special needs.
- Decentralisation of the planning and management of all early childhood education and care services to integrated agencies or committees at the county/city level. Decentralisation to the local level needs to be backed by adequate regulatory powers and state funding.

### **Improving general access**

#### *Children aged 0-3 years*

Access to accredited developmental programmes for Irish children in this age group is very weak. Yet, research suggests that the development of quality childcare is self-financing through increased tax returns from women's work and less dependency on social security. To meet the needs of younger children, the authorities may wish to consider:

- Extending funded parental leave to one year after the birth of a child. Many countries – most recently Canada - take the view that the individualised care of infants and the planned return of women to the labour force can be achieved most effectively through this policy<sup>2</sup> (see Table 4). A measure in this sense from government would almost certainly be more attractive to Irish parents than large-scale investment in collective infant care or than the present reliance on informal care during the critical first year of the child's life;

<sup>2</sup> Parental leave schemes are financed by different mechanisms in different countries, but in general are linked to employment status. In common, they provide family care for infants, ensure the working status of women, replace lost income to some degree, and avoid the heavy costs of alternative care, which because of the age of the child requires ideally one-to-one attention.

- Increasing the supply of childcare places for young children one year and older through accrediting and subsidising the quality childminders, encouraging them to form at county level accredited family daycare networks that can look after children more professionally, and can handle on behalf of their members administrative issues such as qualifications, training, funding, salaries, insurance, social security, holidays, etc.;
- Removing barriers to affordability for low- and modest-income families through capping parental fees and providing operational subsidies to accredited centre-based or networked providers for each eligible child present in their services.
- Increasing parent support and education through professional planning and management of local services from the county level; through building model child-and family centres in each county or large centre of population; through information; and where demand exists, through the provision of professionally managed drop-in services for at-home mothers with young children.

### *Children aged 3-6 years*

By European standards, access to early education and care for children in this age group is also comparatively weak and inequality at the starting gates of school is clearly evident for specific groups of children. The OECD team recommends for consideration:

- The entitlement to a place in a free, accredited early education service for all children who have reached their 4th birthday. Where the infant school is concerned, the measure could be made acceptable to both parents and teachers by the provision of a trained Child Assistant to all infant classes, thus effectively reducing child-staff ratios for this age group to a maximum of 15:1;
- The development, based on the local school or accredited provider, of a publicly-funded morning education session for all children from the age of 3 years;
- The extension of the infant school (or accredited pre-school) day in areas where there is sufficient demand, and in all areas of disadvantage. In consultation with the local providers, the County/City Committees may wish to encourage and manage the extension of the infant school day – if possible on-site - through the provision of fee-paying, pre-school/educare in the afternoon ensured by local providers;
- DES accreditation and financial support to the voluntary, community and private organisations that are capable of delivering high quality developmental programmes to the age group, and which are willing to follow the basic requirements of public services, including agreed fee levels and an equitable and appropriate intake of special needs and disadvantaged children;

### **Improving access for special groups**

#### *Children with disabilities*

According to information received, services for children with disabilities and their families are very insufficient. With the exception of children with visual or hearing impairment, children with disabilities under 4 years have no entitlement to education provision. These children remain at home with their parents and/or are placed with the support of the Health Boards, in a variety of settings. In general, parents lack the sustained supports that are necessary. From the age of four years, some children with milder disabilities may be enrolled in the infant school where they receive periodic attention from resource teachers, who may not be qualified to support a particular type of disability or who may lack essential support services. As there is significant evidence of the positive effects of intensive early intervention from birth and during the critical early years, the OECD team proposes:

- The urgent consideration and implementation of the recommendations in favour of Irish children with special needs made in the course of the National Forum of Early Childhood Education, 1998. This would include specific legislation (as in the USA and other countries) and the creation of a comprehensive national system

of early years services for these children and their families that can lead to each child achieving "the fullest possible social integration and individual development" (Article 23, Convention on the Rights of the Child). In practice, these children should receive structured and regular educational support from birth, or at least from the time of the first identification of disability. Crucial time is lost if educational intervention starts only at the beginning of infant or primary schooling. When children with disabilities are enrolled in mainstream schools, we encourage DES, communities and school principals to ensure that they receive appropriate care, individualised learning programmes and adequate support services.

#### ***Children from disadvantaged backgrounds:***

The OECD team proposes for consideration:

- *Intensive quality programming for disadvantaged children from as early an age as possible.* As with children with special needs, appropriate early intervention is the key. The team recommends the continuation and improvement of the *Early Start Project* on a full-day basis. Improvements would include enhanced outreach to parents, more appropriate programming and better integration of school and community services. Renewed contact between DES, the county committees and the community/voluntary sector is also recommended to explore how to extend this programme on a basis acceptable to all. An improved *Early Start* programme would include a morning session conducted by the school or other accredited body, with an afternoon pre-school session taken in charge by an accredited community, voluntary or private provider, supported by adequate funding and qualified personnel.

#### ***Children from the Traveller community***

In the context of this report, the level of educational achievement of Traveller children is a matter of deep concern. The low enrolment rates of Traveller children in pre-schools and the infant school suggest that most Traveller children are entering primary school already at a great disadvantage – a hypothesis which seems to be confirmed by the massive drop-out of Traveller children before entry to secondary school.<sup>3</sup> It suggests also that a distrust of public institutions may be present, which requires, as in other countries, an active partnership approach between agencies and Traveller parents to bring appropriate education to young children on-site and in the public schools.

The OECD recommends:

- The urgent implementation of the recent DES report, *Pre-School for Travellers*, taking into account the responses of Traveller agencies and parents to the report. We would suggest also the publication by an independent agency of an annual evaluation of actual outcomes for Traveller children, covering, in particular, indicators of health, educational enrolment and achievement. A special mentoring and documentation service to support Traveller children through their studies in schools and transitions to work should also be considered. Within the infant schools used by Traveller children, a contributory element to their successful inclusion would be anti-bias teacher training, and attention to issues of diversity and identity (Derman-Sparks, 1989).
- As participation is a catalyst for change, the government may also wish to consider the appointment of representatives from the Traveller community to the relevant policy bodies concerned with early childhood, primary and secondary education. In addition, within each Traveller pre-school, and in the infant classes that receive significant numbers of Traveller children, it would seem necessary – as is the custom in other countries – to ensure that a growing number of Traveller teachers and child assistants are trained and recruited. In line with the 1999 *White Paper* sections on *Qualifications and Training*, the DES may wish to begin consultations on the most appropriate means of assisting professionals "to obtain qualifications which would enable them to hold mainstream posts in national schools".

#### **Improving the quality of early childhood education and care**

Of concern to the OECD review team was the great shortage of quality services for young children under four

<sup>3</sup> The drop from 5,500 child enrolments in primary school to only 1,600 in secondary school needs urgent investigation.

years, and the observation of a predominantly didactic approach in *Early Start* and the primary school infant classes.<sup>4</sup> In keeping with the proposal to integrate early education and care, the OECD team suggests:

- The formulation of a common *Quality Framework* for centre-based programmes for young children, focussing on agreed standards for services. A *Quality Framework* would include a description of what families can expect from centres, whether public or private: that is, licensed accreditation, qualified management, adequate facility requirements, appropriate child-staff ratios with a sufficient number of highly qualified staff, validated programmes, quality targets with regular team-evaluation procedures and external monitoring of outcomes, appropriate modalities of parent participation and community outreach...;
- A voluntary accreditation and quality improvement scheme for service providers in line with the *Quality Framework* and public sector requirements. Adherence to the scheme would be indemnified by guaranteed operational grants from the Ministry having responsibility for young children;
- A re-structuring of the infant school favouring autonomy, quality and accountability. The OECD review team encourages DES to consider the provision of a separate budget for the infant school, and specific management responsibilities given to its senior teacher. These proposed responsibilities are outlined in Chapter 4.
- A thorough re-assessment of initial training for early childhood services at all levels, including profiling, training, career ladders and issues of compensation. As a change of pre-service training takes five to ten years to be felt on the ground, regular professional development (in-service training) opportunities need to be developed in the interim for early childhood professionals and infant school teachers.

### Financing new measures

With the exception of current EOCIP budgets, funding for early childhood services in Ireland has been low by international standards. In recent decades, education funding has been directed predominantly toward expanding university provision (see Table 8).<sup>5</sup> At the present stage of development in Irish education, some of this funding may be considered as deadweight loss. Countries such as Australia have proven that student loans, generous repayment conditions and tax breaks more than suffice to maintain tertiary enrolments. We are confident that cost-benefit analyses can show that adequate public funding of early childhood services in Ireland will be amply compensated by enhanced social cohesion, improved educational levels and productivity in the next generation, greater gender equality, increased tax returns from women's work and by savings in health and social security expenditure. The OECD team recommends for consideration:

- A significant increase in ministry budgets for all early childhood services, so as to quickly reach the average rate of public expenditure for OECD countries (see Table 8). This expenditure can be paralleled by improved employment policies for women and increased support for families. Budgetary increases should also be envisaged to meet the extra costs of *appropriate* inclusion of children with special needs into mainstream education;<sup>6</sup>
- A pooling of resources and sharing of costs across ministries, social partners, local communities and users, whenever common objectives are being attained for young children and their families, e.g. if wrap-around education and care for young children improves in turn social inclusion and labour market expansion, there

<sup>4</sup> Some direct instruction is helpful for young children, in particular, direct instruction to individual children on specific issues. It is the predominance of the model that is of concern. Research indicates that didactic programmes are less effective than child-centred programmes in producing cognitive results, and compare poorly with regard to socialisation (see Bauman et al., 2001 for a fuller discussion).

<sup>5</sup> At present, a student at tertiary level receives three-times greater public funding than the child (often from a low-income background or with special learning needs) at the foundation stage of learning. American and British research suggests that as many as 25% of children now entering schools have special needs or behavioural characteristics that can seriously impede their learning achievement.

<sup>6</sup> Additional costs for special needs children in early education are more than recuperated through downstream savings on special education units, remedial teaching and social security.

is little reason why the capital and operational costs should not be shared across a range of ministries and other interest groups.<sup>7</sup>

- A shifting of educational financing toward quality early childhood education and care, where research indicates that the human and social capital returns on investment are greatest. Equality of opportunity in education needs to be ensured from the earliest age possible.
- Cost-effective coordination of early childhood policies at central level and concentration of services at local level, in particular for the 3-6 year olds. For example, rather than investments in rented and other premises, it would seem more rational in many instances to invest significantly in school infrastructure, and to bring early education, full-day and out-of-school care together in one location. This presupposes that the school as a public building can be developed to receive early childhood services, conducted also by accredited non-governmental providers. Concentration of centre-based services helps to reduce costs considerably, improves quality and facilitates working parents;<sup>8</sup>
- A sharing of tasks with the voluntary, community and private sector, and the incorporation – whenever possible - of non-public providers into a publicly funded and professionally managed system. The contribution made by non-governmental organisations and local private providers to the state network is often significant, even essential. Other countries accredit providers that maintain high quality standards and reward them with operational subsidies. Subsidies are particularly efficient when voluntary early education bodies accept children from disadvantaged or special needs backgrounds, and keep fees within the range defined by the public authorities.
- Enlisting support from the corporate and business sectors. In many countries, employers are among the main supporters of early childhood services. In the Netherlands, for example, employers are expected to provide a crèche or purchase childcare places in accredited centres for the young children of their employees. (see also the *American Business Round Table* statement in Appendix 3). In yet other countries, e.g. Korea and Mexico, firms employing a certain quota of young women are required by law to establish an on-site day care centre or subsidise child care expenses for their employees.
- A study of international funding mechanisms in the early childhood field. In the Nordic countries, local authorities have powers to raise taxes, which are devoted to supplementing the State allocation for health, social welfare and early education services. In Belgium and Italy, a significant part (about 1%) of social security and/or corporate tax is channelled toward childcare. In Finland, the alcohol tax has been used for many years to subvention early childhood services, in particular, out-of-school care. In the USA, grants from the large corporations toward early childhood services are common, as tax concessions can be granted by the public authorities for large donations. State lottery proceeds are also used to fund early childhood services and to provide subventions to needy third-level students wishing to enter college.

<sup>7</sup> In many countries, for example, builders are expected to include in their costs for housing estates, the construction of appropriately-designed crèches and schools. Local communities and industry can also be expected to contribute.

<sup>8</sup> Respect for the rhythms and interests of young children needs to be ensured in services attached to schools. In addition, the ministry, county or other body responsible for managing early childhood services at local level will need to consult and involve the community and voluntary sector in provision linked to the school.



# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

### The OECD Thematic Review

1. The *Country Note for Ireland* is an output of the *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy*, a project launched by the OECD's Education Committee in March 1998. The impetus for the project came from the 1996 Ministerial meeting on *Making Lifelong Learning a Reality for All*. In their communiqué, the Education Ministers assigned a high priority to the goal of improving access to and quality in early childhood education and care, with the aim of strengthening the foundations of lifelong learning (OECD, 1996). A detailed description of the review's objectives, analytical framework, and methodology is provided in OECD (1998a).
2. In March 1998, twelve countries volunteered to participate in the review: Australia, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States. Early in the review process, these countries reached agreement concerning the framework, scope and process of the review, and identified the major policy issues for investigation. Between 1998 and 2000, OECD review teams conducted visits to the 12 participating countries. Information on the visits and several reports from the review may be viewed on the project web site: <http://www.oecd.org/els/education/reviews>. A Comparative Report entitled *Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care*, was released at an international conference held in Stockholm, 13-15 June 2001.
3. At its meeting in November 2001, the OECD Education Committee authorised a second round of early childhood reviews. Countries were offered the choice of inviting either a *full review* of their policies and services over a ten-day period, or a *short review* of five days focussing on two or three challenges important for a country at a particular moment. To date, nine further countries have joined the second round: Canada, Germany, Hungary, Korea, Mexico and Spain for full reviews; France, Ireland, and the United Kingdom for shorter reviews. These countries provide a diverse range of social, economic and political contexts, as well as varied policy approaches toward the education and care of young children.
4. In scope, the reviews seek to cover children from birth to compulsory school age, as well as the transition to primary schooling. In order to examine thoroughly what children experience in the first years of life a broad, holistic approach is adopted. To that end, consideration is given to social policies and various environmental influences on children's early development and learning. More specifically, the reviews investigate concerns about *quality*, *access* and *equity*, with an emphasis on policy development in the following areas: regulations; staffing; programme content and implementation; family engagement and support; funding and financing. A premise of our approach is that the educational success of young children depends greatly on their well-being and involvement; on family support for early learning; on the informed practice of highly qualified professionals who provide - in a caring environment - structured yet open frame-work programmes appropriate for young children. With respect to at-risk children, particular attention by early childhood professionals to family outreach, social integration and support is also needed.

### The review process

5. In preparation for the visit of the OECD review team, the national, sponsoring ministry commissions a *Background Report* on ECEC policy and services in the country. Guided by a common framework that has been accepted by all participating countries, *Background Reports* are intended to provide a concise overview of the country context, major issues and concerns, distinctive ECEC policies and provision, innovative approaches, and available quantitative and evaluation data. Preparation is a participative exercise at country level, and normally should provide a forum of debate for the different stakeholders in early childhood in each country. After the country visit, the OECD produces a short *Country Note* that draws together the national background materials and the review team's observations.
6. After analysis of the *Background Report* and other documents, review teams composed of OECD Secretariat members and experts with diverse analytic and policy backgrounds (see Appendix 1) visit each participating country. The visit is co-ordinated by the sponsoring ministry. In the course of the visit, the team interviews the major actors involved in ECEC policy and practice, and are invited to observe a number of examples of early childhood programmes. The selection of particular sites reflects in general not only a concern for geographical diversity but also the desire to show the review team a representative selection of both typical and innovative services.

### Features of the review specific to Ireland

7. Ireland was the first country to be visited in the course of the second round of reviews, from 18th -- 22nd November, 2002. It was also the first country to invite a short review, focussing on *access, quality* and *co-ordination*. The issue of co-ordination proved particularly challenging for the team, as the early childhood system in Ireland remains fragmented, in terms both of policy responsibility and service delivery. In the course of the visit, the team met with many government departments, agencies and stakeholders in the early childhood field, and made site visits covering a range of services for young children from four months to six years.

### Structure of the Irish Country Note

8. The *Country Note* presents the review team's analyses of key policy issues in the early childhood field related to *access, quality* and *co-ordination*. Following the terms proposed by the Department of Education and Science, it seeks a) to place the issues around early childhood provision firmly within the Irish context; b) to review early care and educational policies and practices as they currently meet the needs of Irish children and their families; c) to consider ongoing developments with a critical eye for sustainability and the capacity to go to scale; d) to make tentative recommendations that would render success more likely, as well as to indicate areas for future effort and emphasis.
9. In addition to the present introduction, which forms *Chapter 1*, the structure of the Country Note is as follows: *Chapter 2* provides an overview of governance, administration, current policies and provision in Ireland, outlining also approaches to funding, regulation, staffing, programme regulation and parental engagement. In *Chapter 3*, some of the main issues related to policy and practice in ECEC in Ireland are explored. Seven areas are chosen for comment: new roles for Irish women,; access; quality; co-ordination; parental engagement; research/evaluation and funding. The conclusions, in *Chapter 4*, offer some orientations and policy recommendations for future thought and action.

### Acknowledgements

10. The OECD wishes to thank the Department of Education and Science for making this review possible and, in particular, for the comprehensive programme organised for the team review visit. The reviewers also wish to place on record their appreciation of the open and informative meetings that were held in the other ministries and agencies with responsibility for children. Our visits to the various early childhood services, and our talks with managers, providers, and early childhood professionals were also most informative, and we thank them for responding to our questions so graciously. Finally, we should like to thank warmly John Fanning and his

team at the Department of Education who organised the review with efficiency and courtesy, Carmel Corrigan, author of the Irish *Background Report*, and the inter-agency Steering Committee team who helped to produce a comprehensive report of Irish efforts in the early childhood field.

11. Throughout the *Country Note*, the suggestions offered by the review team are tentative, in recognition of the difficulty facing a visiting team—no matter how well briefed—in fully grasping the variety and complexity of a country-wide system and the range of issues that need to be taken into account. In the case of Ireland, the challenge was more difficult than usual as the team had only a five-day field visit to make an in-depth case study. Even when multiplied by the number of members of a team, a five-day review is extremely limiting in terms of the amount of data that can be collected and verified. Moreover, as this report will make clear, the clustering of so many parallel initiatives on behalf of children at central level presents a challenge even for very experienced policy analysts.
12. The facts and opinions expressed in the *Country Note* are the sole responsibility of the review team. While acknowledging with gratitude the valuable help received from ministry officials, researchers and practitioners in Ireland, we wish to underline that they have no part in any shortcomings or opinions which this document may present. To lessen the potential for misunderstanding or error, it is assumed that the *Country Note* will be read in conjunction with the *Background Report* contracted by the Department of Education and Science, as the two documents are intended to complement one another.

### Terminology

13. The terminology used throughout the report follows in general the usage of *Starting Strong* (OECD, 2001). Children aged 0-4 years covers children from birth up to their fourth birthday, but does not include 4 year olds. Children aged 4-6 years covers children from 48 months to their sixth birthday, but does not include six year olds. *Infants* are children from birth to 12 months; *toddlers* from 12 months to 30 months; and *pre-school* children from two years to two-and a half years (overlap with toddlers) to obligatory school age. *Early childhood education and care* is often abbreviated throughout the text as ECEC.
14. Among the Irish definitions used throughout this report are the following (see Hayes, 2000; Irish Background Report, 2002).

*Childcare and Education sectors.*<sup>9</sup> In Ireland, the *Childcare sector caters for children from three months to 5 years. The labour market participation of parents has been the driving force for establishing grant-aided provision in the sector, although today, the part of the sector guided by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR)*<sup>10</sup> places a strong emphasis also on quality and the development of children. The *Education sector in Ireland organises and supports provision for 4 and 5 year olds in primary schools. The curriculum focuses on child development and learning. In addition, some early intervention programmes have been initiated for 3- and 4-year old children from disadvantaged backgrounds.*

*Regulated care. The adjective "regulated" normally includes not only compliance to broad legislation, but also the conformity of a service to policy goals, protocols, pedagogical standards, outcome goals and good practice. Readers should note that the term is used in Ireland in a more restricted sense. Regulation occurs by virtue of the Child Care Act, 1991 and the Child Care(Pre-School Services) Regulations 1996 which impose an obligation on childcare providers who care for more than 3 children to notify their local Health Board.*

<sup>9</sup> For early childhood specialists, this division is arbitrary and unsatisfactory: education and care/childcare are inextricably intertwined. For this reason, a number of OECD countries have moved towards eliminating structural policy divisions in this area and creating an integrated and co-ordinated approach to early childhood services from birth up to compulsory school age, e.g. in New Zealand, Sweden, Spain and the UK under the auspices of the Education ministry; Finland and Denmark under the auspices of the Social Affairs ministry; Norway under the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs.

<sup>10</sup> Most of the sector is private and informal.

*Parental Care* – refers to children being looked after at home, almost always by the mother or by a female, live-in relative. This is the most common arrangement, particularly for children under two years (ESRI, 1998). Parental care may be supplemented by baby-sitting arrangements for short periods.

*Informal Care* – is present when parent(s) use other family members, friends, neighbours baby-sitters to look after their children for sessional periods or longer, generally in the child's own home. The term may also include childminding in the child's own home, on terms negotiated freely between the childminder and the child's parent(s). There is no legislation or regulation of this practice, and no requirement to notify the local Health Board.

*Childminding (family day care)* – In this arrangement, children are looked after on a sessional, half-day or long-day basis by a self-employed childminder in the home of the carer, on freely negotiated market terms. This sector takes in charge the majority of children in need of childcare outside the home. Under the Child Care Act, 1991 and the Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations 1996, childminders caring for more than 3 children, who are not relatives or of the same family, are required to notify their local health board. The majority of childminders do not come within the remit of the Regulations. Such childminders are encouraged to avail of a voluntary notification and support system.

*Workplace crèches*: These are crèches established in the workplaces of parents, and are generally subsidised by employers. In Ireland, they are few in number.

*Drop-in crèches* – Again, few in number, they provide irregular and very short sessional care in shopping centres, leisure centres, etc.

*Community nurseries* - These are non-profit, community-owned nurseries created through government capital grants, and generally situated in urban disadvantaged areas. They receive operational grants both from the Health Boards and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. Many of their staff are trainees from Community Employment Schemes.

*Nurseries and crèches* – These private nurseries, often in receipt of government capital grants, cater for children from 0-6 years, on a fee-paying basis. They are generally full-day, although some offer part-time places. Most are registered with the National Children's Nursery Association.

*Parent/Toddler groups* – These informal groups are generally attached to other childcare services, and offer play and social interaction to young children, with a degree of informal support to parents.

*Playgroups* – Playgroups offer a care and education programme, mainly on a sessional basis, to children aged 3-5 years. Fees are modest. Some 80 % are privately run, and most are affiliated to the IPPA (Irish Pre-school Playgroups Association) – the Early Childhood Organisation.

*Naíonraí* – These are Irish-language playgroups, offering services to children aged 3-5 years.

*Pre-school programmes* – There are a number of Montessori, High/Scope and Steiner groups operating in Ireland, generally privately owned. They provide a fee-paying, mainly sessional service to children aged 3-5 years.

*Early Start – This is a pilot pre-school project, within the primary school system, for 3- and 4-year old children from some designated urban areas of disadvantage. It is fully funded by the Department of Education and Science, and caters for 1680 children.*

*Traveller Pre-schools – Usually founded by voluntary bodies and/or Traveller support groups, Pre-schools for Traveller Children are funded to 98% of teaching and transport costs by the Department of Education and Science. 52 such pre-schools exist, catering for 530 Traveller children aged 3-5 years. Traveller Pre-schools are not considered part of the primary school system.*

*Early Primary Education (junior infant classes, senior infant classes) – This is a free, universal service (four hours and forty minutes daily) provided in primary schools by the Department of Education and Science. Over half of the 4-year olds and almost all 5-year olds avail of the service.*

*Special Schools – Special schools are schools catering exclusively for children with learning and/or physical disabilities.*

*Out-of-school care (OSC) – that is, provision for children aged 3-12 years before or after infant/primary school hours, organised either on school premises or outside. Though some community and private providers are entering the field, OSC is in general underdeveloped and unregulated in Ireland.*

*The Irish Background Report is referenced throughout the text as the Background Report and cited as Irish Background Report (2002).*





# Chapter 2

## CURRENT ECEC POLICIES AND PROVISION IN IRELAND

*Chapter 2 presents an overview of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) system in Ireland. It is descriptive in emphasis, outlining the political and administrative contexts, recent policy initiatives in the field and key features of the current system. These include policy responsibility, types of provision and coverage, funding, regulatory procedures, staffing and staff training, programme regulation, and parental engagement.*

### 1. Governance and political context

15. Ireland is a parliamentary democracy with a population of fewer than four million people. Legislation is proposed and voted by the elected representatives in the lower chamber or *Dáil*. Policy decisions are made by the Cabinet of chief ministers, presided by the *Taoiseach* or prime minister. Departmental ministers can promulgate statutory instruments, that is, rules and regulations with the force of law, e.g. road traffic rules, or the curriculum for schools.
16. Policy implementation in Ireland is the responsibility of three main groups: the central administration or civil service consisting of government departments and officials; second, autonomous state agencies;<sup>11</sup> and finally, an elected local government system based primarily at county and borough levels. There is no directly elected tier of government at regional level in Ireland, but because of European regional policies and structural funding, some Regional Operational programmes exist covering diverse groups of counties along the Border, the West and the South. Several ministries have also established non-coterminous,<sup>12</sup> regional authorities to decentralise the delivery of services in a manner more responsive to local needs.
17. Ireland has been governed in the last fifteen or so years by centrist coalition governments, aiming primarily to achieve economic stability and growth. The economy is mixed, with low direct taxation rates, and is bolstered by significant inward investment from abroad. Public-private partnerships, entrepreneurship, and job creation are seen as key elements in future development. *The National Development Plan* (2000 – 2006) includes an important chapter on social inclusion, in which both childcare and early education are given a place.

#### The European dimension

18. Ireland's engagement with the European Union is complex and spans a wide array of issues. European Community law is superior to and takes precedence over all forms of national law, and the Irish authorities,

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<sup>11</sup> These agencies carry out a wide range of advisory (e.g. the National Economic and Social Council), developmental (e.g. Enterprise Ireland; the Tourist Board); social (e.g. health boards); training (FAS); and commercial (e.g. public utilities) functions, which are often statutory, and report annually to their "parent" ministries.

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<sup>12</sup> That is, covering different groups of counties.



like other national authorities, are required to implement and give effect to it. The country has been and still remains a substantial net beneficiary from EU funding. Due to increased prosperity, it is likely to become a net contributor to the European Union towards the end of this decade.

19. Since accession to the Union in 1973, Ireland has been generally supportive of EU initiatives and strategies even when these do not have the force of law, e.g. within the framework of Employment Strategy, Ireland is seeking to achieve the target of an overall employment rate of 70% by 2010, with a rate of 60% for women (Government of Ireland, 2002). Likewise, Ireland supports European Union measures in favour of equal opportunities, with a focus on gender mainstreaming and increased participation of people with disabilities. It has committed also to developing indicators on the provision of care facilities for children and other dependants. According to the ministries which the OECD interviewed, Ireland intends to respond positively to the conclusions of the Barcelona European Council (16-17 March 2002). These conclusions state that Member States should remove disincentives to female labour force and strive, in line with national patterns of provision, *to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years and mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age.*
20. Education, social protection and health care remain a matter for the member States. Yet, in these domains, Ireland has been and will continue to be much influenced by EU norms and programmes. A significant part of European funds has been used for a variety of educational and social purposes, e.g. the increase in third-level graduations and Post-Leaving Certificates that Ireland achieved in the 1990s was assisted by European funding of the regional Institutes of Technology established at that time. At the present moment, the development of the childcare sector is being resourced under the EU Supported National Development Plan. Both EU and Exchequer funding are being made available to the childcare sector through the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform's Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) 2000 – 2006.

### **The Irish economic context**

21. Signs of the growing importance of early childhood education and care can be found in the current *National Development Plan, 2000-2006* (Government of Ireland, 1999), in the *Social Partnership Agreements* (including the most recent *Sustaining Progress*, published February, 2003) and in the various programmes for government that have been published in recent years. In these documents, the development of childcare is treated at different times as an instrument to support social inclusion and gender equality, but above all, to facilitate "people with family responsibilities to avail of employment and training opportunities" (National Development Plan, p.23)

*The lack of adequate childcare facilities has been identified as a significant contributor to exclusion from education, training and employment opportunities. This impacts most severely on women, and in particular on disadvantaged women and single-parent families. The objectives of the childcare measures include reconciling work and family life and facilitating access for women to education, training and employment. It will have both an equal opportunities and a social inclusion focus. It will also address the needs of men and women generally in reconciling their childcare needs with their participation in the labour force (National Development Plan, p.192).*

22. Early education receives less attention, It is mentioned in the National Plan and other documents, but its expansion has not been foreseen, except as a measure targeted at disadvantaged children. A section (4.1 of Framework IV) is devoted to early childhood education in the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (PPF)*, but the section heading is misleading since the text refers predominantly to primary schooling. In fact, the PPF simply reiterates three of the recommendations of the *White Paper on Early Childhood Education* (1999a), viz, the creation of an Early Childhood Education Agency, the promotion of a Quality in Education Mark, and the provision of targeted interventions for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. In parallel, *the Agreed Programme for Government* devotes two sentences to early education:

*To ensure that early education services deliver the maximum benefits for all children, we will introduce a national early education training, support and certification system, and expand funded early education places. Priority will be given to a new national system of funded early education for children with intellectual disabilities in areas of concentrated disadvantage (Agreed Programme for Government, p.23).*

The present social partnership agreement, Sustaining Progress 2003-2005, foresees also "Priority to early education and childcare facilities for disadvantaged families in the context of a joint approach between the Departments of Education and Science and Justice, Equality and Law Reform."

23. Although well-informed discussions of the fundamental early childhood policy issues are found in departmental documents, such as the *White Paper on Early Childhood Education* (Government of Ireland, 1999a) or the *National Childcare Strategy*, (Government of Ireland, 1999b), a public debate about the nature and necessity of early childhood care and education has still to be engaged in Ireland, e.g. Why should a country invest public funds in early childhood services? Do these services actually harm or benefit young children? What is their status vis-à-vis parental care? What is the optimal length of time for an infant to receive full-time care from his/her parent(s)? How should the state act to ensure real choice for working mothers with infants? Are early years services different from primary education? Are childcare and education different functions, or should they be considered in an integrated way as educare or early years services, with strong links to family and social policy? What should take place in early childhood services for acceptable quality to exist? Is a fair investment being made in young children compared to other groups in society?

## 2. Policy

24. Compared to most other countries in Europe, policy-making in Ireland for young children outside the home environment has had a relatively short history. The care and education of the youngest children was considered until recently to be the private responsibility of the family (Hayes, 2000, p.3). Government-supported, centre-based childcare facilities were minimal in number, and these were seen as catering for children designated 'at risk' and in need of protection. Small grants were allocated to these services through the local Health Boards. The growing demand for childcare places was met primarily by non-accredited private providers.
25. A somewhat similar situation pertains in the early education sector in Ireland. Little development of the infant school has taken place in recent decades. As far as the OECD team could judge, teacher training has remained predominantly geared to primary schooling, while classroom practice has remained didactic, targeting primarily cognitive skills and school outcomes (see section on Quality in the next Chapter). In the 70s and 80s, while other countries were broadening access to 4-year olds, and then progressively to 3-year old children, access levels in Ireland remained virtually at a standstill. Today, as can be seen from Figures 5 and 6 in Appendix 1, coverage rates for children in these age groups are low by European standards, leaving an enormous challenge for government and the present generation to reach the targets set by the European Union (see para. 19 above).
26. Since the mid-1990s, renewed attention has been given to the education and care of young children in Ireland, and today, an unprecedented surge of policy interest in the field can be seen, particularly in the childcare sector. In the context of a buoyant economy, the increasing participation of women in the labour market, and slowly changing societal beliefs about the importance of early educational experience in group settings, a number of significant policy documents and implementation strategies have been introduced. Since these initiatives are far-reaching in their current and potential impact on the ECEC landscape in Ireland, they are now presented in overview as the current backdrop for a system undergoing considerable change.

## Recent policy initiatives

### Childcare

27. In 1996, the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations were introduced, followed in 1997 by the (Amendment) Regulations 1997. These Regulations are currently under review. The *National Childcare Strategy* was launched in 1999 as an outcome of the 1997 National Agreement. For the first time in the history of children's services in Ireland, an *Expert Working Group on Childcare* convened by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR) and comprising 70 stakeholders in the field formulated 27 recommendations encompassing registration, staffing, training and pay, supply and demand strategies, and examined the organisational structures and procedures needed to implement the overall strategy. In terms of reference, the *National Childcare Strategy* is inextricably linked to employment policy. It emphasises the needs and rights of children whose parent/s are active in the labour market. It was not conceptualised as a general move towards universal provision of early childhood education and care.
28. The National Childcare Strategy is being implemented through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) 2000 - 2006. The main body of funding is channelled through the two Regional Operational Programmes of the NDP which together make €328 million available (including €170 million of EU funding), while the Exchequer has supplemented this funding with a further €109 million making a total of €436.7 million available to develop childcare over the life of the Programme. Within this framework, one measure provides capital grant assistance to create new and quality-enhanced childcare places while two sub-measures support staffing grants where there is a focus on disadvantage and quality enhancement initiatives through the national voluntary childcare organizations.
29. The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform is the Implementing Department for the EOCP and the day to day administration is undertaken by ADM Ltd.<sup>13</sup> on behalf of the Department. Other support structures put in place to implement the National Childcare Strategy include the Childcare Directorate of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, the National Childcare Co-ordinating Committee, an Inter-Departmental Childcare Synergies Committee and the thirty-three County and City Childcare Committees.

### Early education

30. In the early education field, a decisive breakthrough in terms of policy *recommendations* was the publication of a *White Paper* by the Department of Education and Science in 1999, entitled *Ready to Learn: White Paper on Early Childhood Education*. Building on proposals made by the National Forum on Early Childhood Education, which convened and produced a report in 1998, the *White Paper* represents "one of the most comprehensive documents ever produced on early education in Ireland" (*Irish Background Report 2002*, p.19). The stated objective of the *White Paper* 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." (Government of Ireland, 1999b, p.14). The National Development Plan 2000 -2006 allocated €93.98 million toward the implementation of the *White Paper's* recommendations.
31. The *White Paper* made a number of far-reaching proposals, both action-oriented and structural. Actions to be undertaken included general activities to address present weaknesses and improve quality, e.g. the Quality in Education Mark, expansion of research, use of external expertise... and specific activities addressed to particular groups, such as, disadvantaged children, children with special needs, Traveller children, parents, children 3 to 4 years cared for in the home, children under 3 years, etc.

<sup>13</sup> Area Development Management is a private company established in 1992 by the Irish Government in agreement with the European Commission. ADM's mission is to support integrated local economic and social development through managing programmes targeted at countering disadvantage and exclusion, and promoting reconciliation and equality.

32. Structural proposals envisaged, in particular, the creation of:
- A specialist *Early Years Development Unit* within the Department of Education and Science responsible for policy formulation and co-ordination with other ministries;
  - An *Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA)* that would be responsible for administrative and executive tasks, such as the management of the Department's early childhood education provision, the development of a Quality in Education (QE) Mark, the production of materials and curriculum development...
33. To date, few of these recommendations have been implemented, but a start has been made to prepare the grounds to establish an Early Childhood Education Agency, and to begin the task of addressing the quality issue in early education. To this end, a *Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE)* was established by the Department in 2001 and officially opened in October 2002. The CECDE is jointly managed by two training establishments, one in the Education sector (St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, which trains primary school teachers), the other in the Childcare sector (Dublin Institute of Technology, which offers courses of study to degree level for those working in early childhood care and education). The defined objectives of the CECDE are:
- To develop a quality framework for all aspects of early education, including the development of a Quality in Education (QE) Mark for providers,
  - To develop targeted interventions on a pilot basis for children up to 6 years of age classified as educationally disadvantaged or with special needs,
  - To prepare the groundwork for the establishment of an Early Childhood Education Agency as recommended in the *White Paper*.

### 3. Administrative responsibility

#### Ministerial responsibility

34. Seven different government departments have responsibility for various parts of early childhood and family policy. In practice, however, the ministries responsible for early childhood provision in Ireland are mainly three: the Department of Health and Children (DHC); the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR); and the Department of Education and Science (DES). The Department of Social and Family Affairs has also important policy responsibilities for families, parents and young children, but in principle, it does not engage in early childhood provision.<sup>14</sup> The contribution of the three central ministries to early childhood provision is summarised in Table 5 in Annex 1. Although provision is handled *de facto* by DJELR, DES and DHC, no clear responsibility has been given to any one Department or agency to lead integrated policy or to provide coherence across the various early childhood bodies and services.

#### Box. 1 Integrating early childhood services

In England (Scotland and Wales have separate education jurisdictions), the Government is working to develop a more coherent approach to the delivery of integrated early childhood services, and to bring together various policies and funding streams into an integrated whole. Services had already been formed into three recognisable groups: childcare, early years education (with a wider range than in Ireland), and Sure Start (the cornerstone of government policy to tackle child poverty and social exclusion). In July 2002, the Government brought together these units into a single inter-departmental division called the Sure Start Unit, based in the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) but responsible to both the DfES and the Department for Work and Pensions. About 300 people work in this Unit. The new unit will be responsible for delivering integrated early years education, childcare and family support at both national

<sup>14</sup> Some Family Centres do actually provide or support childcare, but surprisingly, there is no formal co-operation between family centres and the care and education network. In other countries, Family Centres are often the preferred choice of parents for daycare, particularly in rural areas and small towns.

and local levels. One of the key objectives will be the delivery of 800 new Children's Centres. These centres will bring together good quality childcare, early years education, family support and health services in disadvantaged areas. The government also announced a combined budget for the Unit of €2.4 billion Euros. The funding will be used to provide a free nursery education place for all 3-year olds by 2004, and the creation of 250,000 extra childcare places by 2006.

35. Part of the reason for the dispersion of responsibilities in Ireland is that early childhood policy has traditionally been subsumed under larger issues, such as family policy, primary schooling, general health or other policy. The age group 0-6 years has not been considered as a defined age group with its own specific health, developmental and cognitive traits. Many small, specialised agencies and sub-structures attached to all the above ministries do exist, some important at national level, such as the National Children's Office, the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, the Family Support Agency, or the National Framework Committee on Family Friendly Policies. As these bodies are not major ministries and do not control major funding, they are not in a position to take in charge the large-scale policy renewal and integration that the early childhood and the family policy field in Ireland will require in the coming years.

### The role of local government in early education and care

36. Local government in Ireland is complex, and in recent years has undergone change and reform. During the late 1980s and 1990s, growing recognition of the limitations of councils or of central government to respond satisfactorily to local needs<sup>15</sup> led to the creation of new agencies, planning groups and partnerships to meet the challenge of social and economic problems concentrated at local level. In response to the increasingly complex policy environment, the government established in 1998 a *Task Force on the Integration of Local Government and Local Development Systems*. While preserving the autonomy of the various bodies and agencies, the report of the Task Force proposed a common framework of strategic planning at *county level* to enhance co-ordination and deliver policies effectively. The newly created City/County Development Boards (CDBs) will increasingly provide administrative and management structures, financial resources and evaluation mechanisms. Composed of local representation, the state agencies and the social partners (employers, unions, farming organisations and the voluntary sector), the Boards are delegated to formulate and implement policies relating to the economic, social and cultural development of each county (see Box 2 below).

**Table 1. Box 2. Composition of City/County Development Boards**

Sector	Members	Number
Local Government	SPC Chairs; Council Chair or Mayor; County/City Manager; Urban representative	7
Local Development	2 each from: County/City Enterprise Board; LEADER II groups; ADM supported Partnership Companies and ADM supported Community Groups	6
State Agencies	As appropriate: Health Board; FÁS; Teagasc; VEC; Enterprise Ireland; IDA; Regional Tourism organisations; D/CSFA regional officer; SFADCo/Údarás	7
Social Partners	Employers and Business organisations (1); Trade Unions (1); Farming organisations (1); Community and Voluntary organisations (2)	5
<b>Total</b>		<b>c. 25</b>

<sup>15</sup> The experience of the OECD reviews also points to the need for local solutions to early education and care, but would also underline the irreplaceable contribution of government to policy steering, regulation, funding, training, certification and quality standards.

37. Because of the relevance of childcare to local employment and human resource development, the *City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs)* have been given the responsibility of implementing the childcare policy of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. Each city and county area (thirty-three in all), has now established a Childcare Committee, with a board, management and a carefully drawn up plan. The City and County Childcare Committees relationship with the CDBs was put on a more formal footing in spring 2003 when the CCCs became working groups of the CDBs and the chairpersons of the CCCs become Board members of the CDBs. According to the proposals set out in the new social partnership agreement, *Sustaining Progress 2003-2005*, in its section on childcare: "Each County Childcare Committee will identify local needs for childcare, establish annual targets and assist in the development of childcare services in each county, to meet identified need." The CCs are assisted by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and by a professional agency, the ADM, (Area Development Management Ltd.), which takes in charge the financial management of DJELR grants. The ADM plays, on behalf of DJELR, an important role in the managing and monitoring of the grant applications at the local level. It has also carried out the National Childcare Census on behalf of DJELR, providing figures on the number of children being served at the county level and information on providers.

#### **The role of the community in ECEC**

38. Because of the shortness of the visit, the team was not able to research how the county level interfaces with the local communities, and how education and care are integrated at that level. From what was reported, it seems that there is growing dynamism, and greater sensitivity to local needs. However, early education, as part of the primary school system, is still outside the remit of the local authorities and County Childcare Committees. Although many teachers in Ireland are actively involved in local affairs, primary education (in which early education is included) is administered directly and independently by the Department of Education through school Boards of Management. It seems that there is no statute or written framework to direct the education, childcare, health, family and social welfare actors to work together at community level around the issue of child and family development.

## **4. Co-ordination**

39. A defining characteristic of the ECEC system in Ireland is the involvement of a several government ministries in the development and implementation of policies regarding support systems for families and the education and care of young children. The situation raises the issue of effective co-ordination between Departments and across sectors.

#### *Childcare*

40. Through the *National Childcare Strategy*, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR) has achieved in a short period a good level of co-ordination across the tiers and between the various stakeholders within the Childcare sector. A central networking forum is the *National Co-ordinating Childcare Committee (NCCC)*. The NCCC brings together, on a bi-monthly basis, representatives of key government Departments as well as members of the non-statutory sector, including the Social Partners and the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCOs). Sub-committees focus on specific issues (currently: certification /qualifications; after school provision; equality and diversity). The NCCC clearly plays a central role in improving co-ordination across services and professionals and contributing to coherency and partnership in aims and delivery of services.
41. Although the recent NDP evaluation was critical about the actual monitoring of quality outputs from the NVCOs, NCCC sponsorship of the voluntary organisations deserves special mention. In line with social partnership values, the NCCC has given the voluntary organisations a place at the table, and provides them with funding in recognition of the services that they continue to provide to Irish parents and their children. Their special strengths and sensitivity to the needs of particular groups of parents are most useful for the system. Moreover, if EU benchmarks are to be met by the year 2010, these organisations will need to be included in the official network providing accredited education, care and after-school care for Irish children.

**Box 7. IPPA (Irish Pre-school Playgroups Association), the Early Childhood Organisation**

IPPA has been in operation for over thirty years, and is the largest voluntary supplier of early years services in Ireland. Founded by parents to provide playgroups for young children on a sessional basis, it has evolved into an organisation of 1900 services serving 37,000 children. It seeks to engage parents not only in the education and welfare of their children, but also in their own personal development and further education. A non-profit body, its services depend on a mix of parental fees, government funding sources and voluntary labour. In the absence of statutory input, IPPA has been an important actor in organising the pre-school sector in Ireland and in promoting values, standards and guidelines. It has long offered both training and professional advice to its members.

42. Potentially, the NCCC also provides a framework for cross-Departmental consultation. However, the remit of the Committee is advisory, and decisions made as a result of consultations are - in accordance with the Committee's terms of reference - the responsibility of DJELR and located within the Childcare sector. While the DES is formally a member of the National Co-ordinating Childcare Committee, the review team was unsure about the nature of its role on that Committee.
43. A further co-ordinating structure which is variously mentioned in relation to the National Childcare Strategy is the Inter-Departmental and Inter-Agency Synergies Childcare Group, chaired by DJELR. Through it, high-level representatives of a number of Government Departments which formerly managed individual strands of childcare funding met regularly to ensure co-ordination of approach to the funding of childcare services. However the transfer of all State funding resources for childcare to the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform diminished the role of that Group. It is understood that the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform is considering the establishment in the near future of a new cross-Departmental, Inter-Agency Group to discuss cross cutting childcare policy issues. The NDP evaluation of childcare also proposes that a newly constituted Inter-Departmental committee "should focus on the co-ordination of policy and interventions towards childcare and children generally across government departments." The OECD supports the recommendation but would substitute for "childcare" "early education and care" to take into account the common tasks of DES and DJELR.

*Education*

44. The DES has responsibility for national education policies for young children. In accordance with the recommendations of the *White Paper*, it established the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) in 2002. The Centre will focus on professional issues, e.g. developing a Quality in Education Mark, conceptualising targeted interventions for disadvantaged children, encouraging parental involvement, standard-setting and play a facilitating role in relation to the field (practitioners, training, support agencies, etc.)
45. From what the review team understood, the statutes of the CECDE do not perceive direct links with DJELR as a constitutive part of its co-ordinating role, and no mention is made, for example, of the *National Childcare Strategy* in the Centre's Programme of Work (2001). While having a key contributory role to play in developing co-ordination in early childhood education policy at national and local level, the CECDE remains ex-departmental, and has limited official responsibility with respect to co-ordination of policy-making, regulation and financing.
46. The *White Paper* 1999 (p.132) envisaged that an *Early Years Development Unit* should be set up within the Department to co-ordinate the formulation, development and implementation of early childhood education policies. It was underlined that co-ordination "will be the key role of the new Unit" (p.133). However, this new Unit has not been established, and the review team members were informed that its creation is not foreseen for the immediate future. Officials explained that target groups as such were not a priority, but that

it was preferable to treat thematic goals, such as social inclusion, across the whole primary sector, including early education.

47. However, the view would seem to overlook the specific goals of early childhood systems, and contrasts clearly with practice in other OECD countries. Early years policy units exist in most European countries (See Box 1: *Integrating Early Childhood Services*), and sometimes even enjoy particular political sponsorship in government, e.g. Belgium, Sweden, the United Kingdom. These units are seen to be responsible for the first, foundation stage of lifelong learning. They formulate policy and regulations for government approval, ensure the collection of relevant data, provide guidelines for pre-service and in-service training of early childhood professionals, supervise quality, monitor infrastructure (early childhood rooms and outdoors are specific in design and layout), ensure that delivery targets are met, accredit institutions, and interface with other government ministries. It is difficult to see how these tasks can be assumed by more generalised units, particularly at a moment in Ireland when much effort will be needed to expand access, and lay the foundations of a national system.
48. *Vertical co-ordination from DES to the schools* – another aspect of co-ordination is the vertical relationship between the Department and the local schools. The relationship has traditionally been intense, with ongoing inputs from the Department in all relevant areas, such as funding, school-buildings, curriculum, inspection, etc. However, these inputs have been made almost strictly from the perspective of primary school requirements, a perspective which does not always pay sufficient attention to the particular needs and specific learning patterns of the younger children. An example is the allocation of teachers to schools, calculated on staffing ratios for primary school children. In consequence, 37% of junior infants in Ireland find themselves in classes of 25-29 children, cared for by one teacher. There is no regulation requiring School Boards to respect the principle: *the younger the child, the lower the child:staff ratio*. In contrast, the childcare regulations require for children aged 3-6 years, one care staff for 8 children (full-time), or one to 10 children (sessional). Likewise, in the education sector, there are no specific regulations for the training of teachers of the younger children, or for classroom design, classroom organisation and equipment – elements that ought to be differentiated when dealing with the younger children.

#### **Co-ordination and policy implementation at the regional / local level**

49. At a regional / local level, the major co-ordinating bodies in the Childcare sector - set up within the National Childcare Strategy - are the County Childcare Committees. To date these Committees - which operate as working groups of the County and City Development Boards and liaise with DJELR and the NCCC - have been established in all 33 counties or cities. Within the remit of the EOCP 2000 - 2006, their task is to develop and implement co-ordinated strategic plans for childcare provision within the region. Proposed implementation strategies on a yearly basis are laid down in annual Action Plans.

#### **Box 8. Galway City & County Childcare Committee**

The Galway City and County Childcare Committee was originally set up as the Galway City and County Childcare Strategy Group in response to a crisis in childcare provision following the implementation of the Child Care (Preschool Services) Regulations 1996. Its members are 26 individuals representing the Statutory Sector, Partnership Boards, the Social Partners, the Childcare Sector; and Parent Representatives.

The *Galway Childcare Development Plan 2001 - 2006* was published in December 2001. The development of childcare services is reviewed and monitored on an on-going basis and an evaluation system is being established. The role of the Committee is:

- to implement the strategies outlined in the Development Plan;
- to assist the development of new and existing childcare services;
- to assist communities in: identifying needs and gaps in service provision; developing new services to meet these needs; planning future development; developing childcare services that address cultural and linguistic diversity;

- to provide information on: existing childcare services; establishing new services; training, resources and funding;
- to support local networks of childcare providers, childminders, parents and parent and toddler groups;
- to assist in the development and implementation of a Quality Assurance system for childcare services.

Since the establishment of the Committee in 2000, 97 new childcare services and a total of 1,535 new childcare places have been established. 90 services at pre-development stage are currently being assisted which will provide a total of 1,851 new places. More than 50 % of all new services developed are community based services managed by voluntary committees and it is these not-for-profit services which are given the main input of assistance, support, staff time and resources. Special initiatives include a resource library and outreach service, 2 mobile play-bus services, 2 childminding initiatives, various information packs, and training initiatives.

50. The terms of reference of the County Childcare Committees include: developing information strategies on childcare for parents and providers, identifying gaps in childcare provision, promoting the establishment of new childcare facilities, formulating priority objectives for the region, and supporting networking initiatives of childcare providers at a local and county level. The advantages of this co-ordinated approach include: the pooling of agencies' resources for the expansion of services; avoiding duplication of services; sharing information; strategic planning with a view to identifying needs and gaps and prioritising resources; and improving service quality through a partnership approach. The Committees appear to be dynamic and purposeful bodies.
51. In general, the Education sector (e.g. the inspectorate, schools or training colleges) is not represented on these Committees. The review team was informed that because the DES is not regionalised, it is unable to nominate representatives to locally-based committees, without significant resource implications. This appears to be hindering the establishment of effective co-ordination structures across sectors at the local level. The notion of care and education as a continuum – both horizontally and vertically – is emphasised often enough in the relevant policy documents. However, in practical implementation terms, this does not seem to be happening.

#### **Box 9. A Dutch example of co-ordination to deliver programmes for disadvantaged children, aged 2-4 years old**

As in Ireland, primary schooling in the Netherlands begins at 4 years, and play groups have traditionally been the dominant form of provision outside this service. Significant investment is now being poured into early education for the 2-4 year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds both by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Affairs. This investment is co-ordinated and administered at local level by municipal authorities. A Local Authority Disadvantage Policy Act was passed in 1998, to enable the educational and local authorities to create socio-educational programmes for disadvantaged children and families in designated areas.<sup>16</sup>

The new funding goes predominantly to municipal play groups and pre-school programmes for the 2-4 year olds established in primary schools or other premises. In addition, the local municipality prescribes the number of at-risk children that groups should enrol in their programmes, and provides matching funding. In parallel, the ministries offer the local boards funding and direct help, in particular to establish

<sup>16</sup> Designated areas are those neighbourhoods having one or more primary schools at which more than 50% of the children have a weighted assessment of 1.25 or over. The concept of "weighting" is as follows: schools, receive for each child; of Dutch parents, the per capita grant x 1; of Dutch unskilled parents, the per capita grant x 1.25 grant; of Traveller parents, the per capita grant x 1.7 grant; of unskilled, immigrant parents, the per capita grant x 1.9 grant. Special needs children receive a higher weighting.

collaboration with local services, to improve their planning and management capacity, and to enhance quality through staff training.

All primary schools in designated areas are now expected to engage not only in the education of children, but also in community service and outreach to families. Collaboration between playgroups, pre-school and primary education has been made mandatory. At the same time, regular evaluations are carried out on the learning achievement of young children in both pre-school and play groups. Each must follow a special curriculum tested by the Dutch education authorities.

Although they sometimes criticise the quality criteria and accountancy levels required by the ministries, all the major municipalities in the Netherlands now implement the new programmes. The number of disadvantaged and bi-lingual children participating in pre-school programmes of three hours daily from the age of two years has greatly increased.

52. In summary:

- *Co-ordination at a horizontal level within the childcare sector* seems to be strong and well-led. The *National Co-ordinating Childcare Committee (NCCC)* brings together the key government Departments as well as the non-statutory sector, including the Social Partners and the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations. In addition, the sector is guided by a well-defined goals in the *National Childcare Strategy (1999)* and is supported both by the Childcare Directorate of the DJELR and ADM for field administration.
- *Vertical co-ordination* toward the County Childcare Committees has been initiated and is growing in strength. If devolved powers and funding can be allocated to these Committees, they may in turn be able to provide vertical co-ordination within each county, and encourage horizontal co-ordination across schools, childcare providers and community agencies. *Vertical co-ordination by the DES toward schools* in the education sector is also effective, but often overlooks the specific needs and learning patterns of the younger children. Regulations for child:staff ratios, the training of teachers of the younger children, or classroom design and organisation are rarely differentiated from those applicable to children in obligatory education.
- *Horizontal co-ordination across early education and childcare* is weak. County Childcare Committee members spoke to the team of the need for new services bridging the education/childcare divide, for the use of school premises for play groups and after-school care. It was suggested that co-ordination could be helped by more regular specialist ECEC representation from the DES in the inter-departmental committee, and at county level. Whatever the reason, no effective, cross-sectoral structure exists at decision-making level that is able to provide a clear policy and action framework agreed by the major Departments.

## 5. Provision

### Types of provision and coverage

The overall picture of ECEC provision in Ireland is as follows:

53. Provision in the Childcare sector is diverse and fragmented. A survey carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute (1998) revealed that 38 % of all parents with children aged 4 years and under rely on some form of paid childcare arrangement. 21 % of mothers with children aged less than 5 years used childminders. Centre-based care services were the second most commonly used form, taken up by 14 % of parents. "However, over one-fifth (22 %) of mothers with full-time jobs and 47 % of those with part-time jobs used no paid childcare at all, indicating a reliance on informal provision provided either by partners, family, friends or neighbours." (*Irish Background Report 2002*, p.26).

54. Apart from childminders (who, in general, remain outside any regulation), services are unequally spread across the country, are diverse in type and are funded from different sources. The *Health Boards* subsidise some 7000 places, while the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform has already made available grant assistance of over £180 million to develop new and enhanced childcare facilities and to support childcare places in disadvantaged areas. It is expected that when fully drawn down, this assistance will support over 42,000 childcare places. The remaining funding will be allocated over the period 2003 to 2006 and should lead to the creation and support of a significant number of additional places. These services use widely different programmes and cater for different group sizes and age ranges. Few outstanding models of quality or design yet exist at national level. However, since the taking in charge of the sector by the Childcare Directorate at DJELR, significant progress has been made, and no doubt, streamlining and adequate models will gradually emerge.
55. Provision within the Education sector is dominated by Ministry of Education public provision, which is centre-based, universal and free. The Department of Education and Science underwrites three main types of service: (1) Morning infant classes in primary schools catering for 56 % of 4 year olds and almost all 5 year olds; (2) Special needs facilities within a small number of schools; (3) Specific pre-school pilot programmes targeting 3 and 4 year old children from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g. the *Early Start* Pre-School Pilot Project, Pre-Schools for Traveller Children). In its coverage, DES departs from the European norm, in which education ministries generally provide for all children from 3 years. Other than DES services, the care and education of young children from 3-6 years and beyond, is low in coverage, private and located outside the education sector. Most providers will claim to have an educational component in their programme, but support to them comes currently from DJELR/EOCP funding rather than from the Department of Education and Science.

### Extent of coverage

56. Table 6 in Appendix 1, taken from the 2001 edition of OECD *Employment Outlook*, provides an idea of the comparative coverage of young children aged 0-3 and from 3-6 years in OECD countries. Where 3-6 year old children are concerned, Ireland's coverage is among the lowest in the European Union (just above Greece). The coverage rates for other countries are appreciably higher, as they have progressively expanded access over the past twenty years. Today, universal, free pre-school coverage in most European countries begins at the age of three years.
57. Where under-3s are concerned, the third column of the Table places Ireland toward the top of OECD countries in terms of coverage. This figure needs interpretation.<sup>17</sup> The ESRI survey of 1998, carried out for the Commission on the Family, gives a similar figure for all use of childcare outside the home. As we know that at least two thirds of Irish children, cared for outside the home, are looked after by private childminders, the figure of 38% for children in publicly accredited provision cannot be correct. In fact, from the raw data supplied in this table, it is not possible to know whether the childcare in question is public, grant-aided or private, whether the rate recorded refers to sessional, half-day or full-day usage, or whether programmes are monitored or completely escape inspection.
58. From the EOCP and other figures available, the percentage of 0-3 year old children in half-day or full-day, publicly subsidised services in Ireland seemed to the review team to be more probably in the range of 10% to 15%. It is estimated that grants already disbursed to childcare providers and community groups under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) will create 19,448 new childcare places (48 % of childcare places receiving support) and will also support 21,429 existing places (DJELR, 2002). However, uncertainty about basic coverage points to another challenge, namely, to develop reliable statistics and data on young children. Young children have been traditionally a hidden group in Irish society. Today, their emergence as a specific group, with their own potential, needs and rights, requires public auditing of their status, including an analysis of financial flows toward them as a group (see Chapter 3).

<sup>17</sup> In contrast, the enrolment figures provided in the Table for the Netherlands and the UK are too low...

### Features of provision in the Childcare sector

59. Childcare in Ireland has traditionally been dominated by private childminder arrangements. In parallel, some education-oriented services such as the Montessori schools existed, catering typically for a small number of mainly privileged children from 3-6 years. From the 1970s also, some private and voluntary services began to be established, in particular Playgroups and Irish-language medium Pre-schools (*naíonraí*). It was not until very recently – in the context of the *National Childcare Strategy* – that expansion of grant-aided provision to support and develop the community based/not-for-profit and private childcare sectors gathered any significant momentum.
60. Both the old and the new services within the Childcare sector are offered on a predominantly sessional basis, i.e. for less than 3.5 hours per day per child. Of a total of 3,496 services, only 1,124 (approx. 32 %) offer full-day provision (see Table 7 in Appendix 1). The most widespread forms of centre-based provision, catering mainly for 3 and 4 year old children, are the predominantly privately-owned *Play Groups* and *Pre-schools*. Approximately 80% of these services are sessional. *Montessori schools* are privately owned and managed and provide for children aged 3 to 6 years. Just over half the places offered are full-day places. *Nurseries* (*crèches*, *daycare*) offer mainly full-day services for infants and toddlers from 2 to 3 months up to school-going age and may also cater for school-age children. They are either privately owned and operated or community-based and run. *Naíonraí* are Irish language pre-schools providing for 3 to 6 year olds. They are privately owned and part-funded by the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. Other services for children up to school-going age include *Parent and Toddler Groups* (mainly for children up to 3 years of age), *Workplace Crèches* and *Drop-in Crèches* (irregular and very short-term care in shopping centres, leisure centres, etc.).
61. *Organised daily, out-of-school services for infant school and school-age children* (e.g. childcare, breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, recreation, art and music education, sports and physical education... ) are virtually non-existent. Exchequer funding has been specifically identified for the development of after-school services under the EOCP but demand for grant assistance to date has been slow. It is hoped that the publication of the Ad Hoc Working Group Report on School Age Childcare later this year will stimulate provision. This Working Group is a Sub-Group of the National Childcare Co-ordinating Committee.
62. *Childminding services* provide for children up to compulsory school age and also for school children before and after school hours and during school holidays. Childminding is typically an all-year service arranged on an individual basis to suit both the parent's and the childminder's needs. The Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations (1996) and (Amendment) Regulations (1997) requires childcare providers caring for three or more children (excluding their own offspring, offspring of their partner/spouse, other relatives or three children from the same family) to notify the local Health Board. Although strong efforts are being made to reduce the number of non-notified childminders, the great majority of family day care provision is unregulated and informally paid. Consequently, there are data gaps regarding the actual number of childminders and of children in their care, and serious concerns about quality.

#### Box 3. Childminding in Ireland

In this arrangement children are looked after on a sessional, half-day or long-day basis by self-employed childminders on freely negotiated market terms. The Pre-school Services Regulations require that when a childminder cares for more than three children under the age of 6 years in her home, she should notify to the local Health Board, and become subject to certain regulations. According to figures provided by the National Childminding Association, 95 % of childminders operate outside this framework, resulting in a lack of accurate figures for childminding in Ireland. It is estimated, however, that 70 % of long-day care places in Ireland are provided through private childminding. The arrangements are generally unsupervised and escape health, safety, developmental and programmatic regulations. According to research on similar arrangement in the USA, informal arrangements – although reported by parents to be good – are generally of low quality ( NICHHD, 1997).

The DJELR, Health Boards and Childminding Ireland are at present actively encouraging those childminders who are not required to notify to the health boards to opt for voluntary notification as a measure to enhance their overall quality. A further task will be to transform childminding in general into the grant aided, supervised and trained service that the Nordic and other countries provide. In these family daycare networks, families choose their childminder (family daycare), but contracts (including rate of remuneration) and quality control are the responsibility of the local childcare board.

### Features of provision in the Education sector

63. In most OECD countries, education ministries have responsibility for children aged 3-6 years, and in the majority of these countries, coverage for the age group ranges from 80-99%. Currently in Ireland, all 5 year olds and just over half of 4 year olds attend *infant classes* located in primary schools (OECD, 2002). Few children of 3-years of age are enrolled, giving an official overall coverage rate for the age group 3-6 years of 56%, which is among the lowest in Europe.
64. Children in the infant classes are organised into two same-age classes: the junior infant class (for 4 year olds) and the senior infant class (for 5 year olds). Statutory schooling begins at age 6. Classes run approximately from 9:00 a.m. to 1:40 p.m. Official adult/child ratios are 1 teacher to a maximum of 29 pupils. However, recent figures from the Department of Education and Science (DES) reveal that 24 % of infant class pupils are in groups of 30 pupils or above (*Irish Background Report* 2002, p.63) – a child-staff ratio that would be unacceptable for young children in most European countries. Infant classes are staffed by a trained primary teacher and in some cases, have an additional assistant for children with special learning needs. Attendance is free of charge, but meals are provided to only a small proportion of children.<sup>18</sup>
65. The *Early Start Programme* was launched by the DES in 1994 as a targeted intervention for children considered 'at risk' of not reaching their potential within the education system. Since that date, *Early Start* units have been set up in 40 primary schools in designated disadvantaged areas, reaching 1,680 children throughout the country.<sup>19</sup> 15 children are grouped together in a class staffed by a primary school teacher and a qualified childcare worker. The curriculum emphasises the development of cognitive and linguistic skills.

#### Box 4. Early Start in a suburban Dublin school

The intervention format of *Early Start* programmes is generally one of a 2½ hour session over one school year in a designated unit in a primary school, backed up by liaising visits to families by trained primary teachers. Within this National School of 15 classes, four *Early Start* units were established in 1995. The units function on a parallel, sessional basis, with 60 children aged 3 and 4 years attending for either from 9:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. or from 12:00 to 2:30 p.m. The groups of 15 children are staffed by one primary school teacher and one childcare worker.

The demand for places far exceeds supply. At present there are 30 children on the waiting list. Selection is the responsibility of the principal teacher, who admits children according to self-defined criteria in consultation with the District Nurse, *Early Start* staff and Home-School Community Link scheme teachers regarding the "most marginalised" and "most disadvantaged" families. In order to avoid social stigmatisation, admissions criteria are not made public. Following the *Early Start* year, the children are spread out across the Junior infants in classes of 20 staffed by one teacher and one special needs assistant.

<sup>18</sup> Many countries offering a half-day programme provide, in addition, a nutritious snack or full meal for young children. Preparing food and eating together is seen as an essential part of education and the socialisation process.

<sup>19</sup> There are 310 areas in Ireland designated as areas of educational disadvantage.

The self-defined curricular focus within the *Early Start* unit is on literacy development. Co-ordination with other community agencies is an integral part of the programme. The unit also has links with a local vocational college offering course in adult literacy and a school completion programme. A crèche has been established for parents attending adult learning classes in the school building.

The principal considers the *Early Start* experience to be a positive one for both children and parents. The programme helps to break down barriers generally and to ease the transition into formal schooling. Parents like to see their children as part of the school system, which for them represents a certain status (in contrast with prevailing views about childcare facilities). The principal would consider it a "huge loss" if the unit were to close. She sees *Early Start* as a focal point for building trusting parent-school relationships and strengthening community identity.

66. Children from the Traveller community often experience multiple effects of disadvantage, including inadequate accommodation, poor living standards, restricted opportunities and discrimination. To allow these children to have a fair start in life, grant-aided *Pre-Schools for children from the Traveller community* were introduced in 1984. In 2001, 48 *Pre-Schools for children from the Traveller community* were launched by the DES. These services cater for up to 624 children and are usually established by voluntary groups or Traveller support groups, with the DES providing 98 % of staffing and transport costs plus an annual grant for equipment and materials.
67. Most units are staffed by a teacher and a childcare assistant, many of whom are untrained. A Visiting Teacher Scheme ensures links with families and the various levels of education. There is usually one visiting teacher per 150 families. Unlike the *Early Start* units - the Traveller Pre-schools are not part of the primary school system. Each year the staff of these pre-schools may attend two days in-career development organised by the National Education Officer for Travellers and funded by the Department of Education and Science. A recently published evaluation study of 25 of these pre-schools was carried out in 2001 by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science.

## 6. Funding

### *The Childcare sector*

68. Public funding provision in the Childcare sector comes through different funding streams, but principally through the EU-supported Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000 - 2006. The EOCP is being implemented by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and is assisting an increasing number of both new and existing childcare services. About \_180 million of EU funding (from the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund) is being supplemented by an investment of \_257 million from the Irish Exchequer. Funding measures include: capital grant assistance for childcare service providers; staff grant assistance for community-based, not-for-profit organisations in areas of significant disadvantage; grant assistance to national voluntary organisations and to county childcare committees to improve the quality of childcare provision; quality improvement measures for local childcare networks and national voluntary childcare organisations; a national childminding initiative and innovative projects (DJELR, 2002). By mid-2002, 1,533 grant applications had been approved for funding under the EOCP.
69. As provision in the Childcare sector is predominantly private, parental fees remain the major source of funding. A recent (2002) survey conducted by the National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA) revealed that parents pay between €94 to €137 per week for toddlers and between €107 and €145 per week for infants less than 1 year of age, depending on the location of the facilities. More recently, the National Children's Nurseries Association reports weekly fees in excess of €170 being charged for full day care in

Dublin. Such costs to parents, averaging over 30% of disposable income for the Average Production Employee, are unsustainable even in the medium term. Through an Anti-Inflationary Package, the DJELR has made funding available for the development of childminding services. This will probably be administered through the County Childcare Committees. DJELR is at present reviewing different options around the training, networking and information for childminders, and plans a comprehensive country-wide development initiative from mid-2003.

70. The hope was expressed to the OECD team on several occasions that the current funding via EOCP – welcome as it is - should not be simply a pump-priming exercise with a commitment to 2006 only. It was alleged that uncertainty about the future funding of the sector breeds insecurity and amateurism, and may undermine current efforts to expand provision and improve quality. Assumptions that childcare provision could be self financing and sustainable after three years of EOCP funding are unrealistic, particularly in relation to the community sector.
71. In sum, as the analysis in this Note will bring out, ECEC in Ireland is now approaching a decisive moment where funding is concerned. Affordability, widening access and improving quality are major issues to be resolved in the Childcare sector. Government-led funding at the level of EOCP, prolonged over the decade, may well bring in the necessary number of providers for children aged 1-3 years, and in parallel, improve the quality and affordability of the system. Without this direct funding and the leverage that can be exercised through it, it is difficult to see how quality – and in particular, the status and training of staff – can be effectively addressed. (see discussion in Chapter 3).

#### *The Education sector*

72. The infant classes in primary schools are the only form of reasonably funded state provision for young children to be found all over Ireland. These classes currently provide for nearly all 5 year olds and just over half of all 4 year olds, on the basis of a four hour and forty minute session. From the perspective of families in employment, they are limited in terms of opening hours, both daily and round the year. For children from disadvantaged areas, the session would gain greatly if backed by afternoon educare programmes and wrap-around services (see discussion in Chapter 3). Core funding from DES now covers current and capital costs, teachers' salaries and capitation grants. Higher capitation grants are paid for children in schools with designated disadvantaged status or where a resource teacher for Traveller children has been appointed. Additional grants are awarded to schools with pupils encountering learning difficulties or at risk of educational disadvantage.
73. The Department of Education and Science also funds the targeted intervention programmes mentioned in the above section on provision (e.g. *Early Start*, Pre-Schools for Traveller Children). Again, funding covers the current and capital costs and teachers' salaries. The minimum per capita cost for the *Early Start* Programme has been estimated at €2,330 in the school year 2000/2001 (*Irish Background Report 2002*, p.56), but in general, funding for young children in the education system compares poorly to European standards, or to per capita government investment in tertiary education (see Figure 4 and Table 8 in Appendix 1). In addition, access rates in early education are much lower than other European countries, except Greece. Education sectors in other countries have been building up enrolment rates in the past decades to cover all 4-year old children and most 3-year olds.
74. In sum, a number of funding challenges for early education are now emerging: How to address the significant Irish deficit with regard to the enrolment of 3-6 year old children? How to deliver quality services to disadvantaged areas and to Traveller children? How to prolong the ECEC day, especially in disadvantaged areas, so that young children can draw the maximum benefit from the free morning education session? In Chapter 3, we shall discuss these issues in some detail, outlining some of the funding solutions adopted in other countries.

## 7. The regulatory framework

75. The regulation of early childhood education and care services in Ireland reflects the divided nature of governmental responsibility for education and childcare as described above.
76. Services in the Childcare sector (and also the DES-funded Pre-Schools for children from the Traveller community) are officially regulated by the regional Health Boards under the Child Care Act 1991. Current regulatory policy – drawn up by the Department of Health and Children - is set down in the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 1996 and (Amendment) Regulations 1997. Assessment criteria include: appropriate child development supports (activities, materials, equipment, premises); health, safety and welfare aspects; adult/child ratios and child/space ratios; record keeping; inspection; insurance; fees. The main purpose of the Regulations is to ensure the health, safety and welfare of the pre-school child, but they do not cover quality-related issues such as staff qualifications and training, curriculum and pedagogy. The first inspection generally takes place within three months of notification of service provision and after that on an annual basis.
77. However, inspection is dependent on the staff available and the number of notifications received. According to certain sources, these inspections may take place at five-yearly intervals, but more official sources claim that many services are on their fourth or fifth consecutive annual inspection. As in the Education sector, Department of Health inspectors are not required to undergo a specific training for the inspection of early years services. The team was informed that most have a background in public health nursing or environmental health. Again, not all childcare provision is covered by the Regulations, and that the majority of childcare providers need not notify the Health Boards, e.g. those looking after fewer than 3 children or providing care for children after school.
78. However, the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 1996 and (Amendment) Regulations 1997 are at present being examined by a cross-sector Review Group. A grant of €1.5 million was allocated to the Department of Health and Children in order to improve the situation by introducing a voluntary notification and support system for childminders. The Health Boards also run an advisory service on service improvement issues for prospective providers and for present providers, but the great majority of childminders remain outside this system and have no formal professional qualification.
79. Regulatory procedures for the Education sector are laid down in the Education Act 1998, the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 and the Equal Status Act 2000 (section 7) as well as existing health and safety legislation. They cover all aspects of a school's functioning, including patronage and management, staffing, and material resources. School inspectors, reporting to the Department of Education and Science, assess the quality of schooling, advise on educational policy implementation, and generally provide support for teachers (particularly for probationary teachers) and school management bodies. Approximately every six years an evaluation report is drawn up on the basis of a detailed on-site inspection. These inspections cover all age-groups in the primary school, including the *Early Start* units. There are no inspectors specifically designated or trained for early childhood education. However, the Evaluation and Support Unit of the Inspectorate carries out targeted programme evaluations, some which may focus on the early years. One such study was the 2001 evaluation of 25 Pre-Schools for Children from the Traveller community mentioned above. Currently, Education Welfare Officers are being appointed to work in close co-operation with schools, teachers, parents and community/voluntary bodies.
80. Beyond these two official systems of regulation and inspection, a number of the umbrella organisations for early education and childcare have issued their own quality standards to which members subscribe on a voluntary basis. These include the IPPA – the Early Childhood Organisation (formerly the Irish Pre-school Play Group Association), the National Children's Nurseries Association, An Comhchoiste Reamhscoliochta for the Irish medium Pre-schools, Montessori organisations, and Childminding Ireland.

## 8. The staffing of ECEC services

81. As with the policies governing regulation, staffing policies for the Childcare and Education sectors are also markedly different. Initial training, access to in-service education, working conditions, remuneration, and recruitment, retention and status are key issues. There is no agreed framework system for staff qualifications across the two sectors.

### Initial training

82. Staff in the Childcare sector may have one of a variety of qualifications of variable quality and length or – particularly in the case of childminders - no formal professional qualification at all. Until very recently there has been virtually no state involvement in this sector, which has meant that the training of childcare workers has developed in an ad hoc manner. The courses offered by the Dublin Institute of Technology – originally a two-year certificate course, now a three-year degree level course – have been an exception. In general, courses developed either in response to the needs of service providers, or in line with particular educational philosophies (e.g. Montessori training of one to three years' duration).
83. One of the key outputs of the National Co-ordinating Childcare Committee has been a recent policy document published in September 2002 entitled *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (Government of Ireland, 2002). This framework document was developed, under the direction of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and the DIT/OMNA team, through extensive consultation with practitioners, childcare providers, training organisations and certifying bodies. For the first time in the history of children's services in Ireland, it provides a co-ordinated vision for training and professional development in the Childcare sector. The document sets down core values, occupational profiles and professional standards.
84. In contrast, staff with group/class responsibility in the Education sector are trained primary school teachers, i.e. they gain their qualifications through state-supported and approved training courses. Five third level colleges offer three-year degree courses. An extension to four years has been recommended recently (2002) by the main teachers' union, the Irish National Teachers' Association (INTO). Degrees (B.Ed. or B.Ed. (Hons)) are conferred by one of three universities (University of Limerick, Dublin City University, Trinity College). The National University of Ireland, Cork, offers a three-year BA in Early Childhood Studies.

### Content of training

85. The content of training in the Childcare sector has been as varied as the courses offered. The new *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development* (2002) outlines 6 core areas of skill and knowledge for work in ECEC services: (1) child development, 2) education and play, (3) social environment, (4) health, hygiene, nutrition and safety, (5) personal / professional development, (6) communication, management and administration.
86. In the Education sector, specific course content for the training of primary school teachers varies from college to college. However, all courses include academic subjects (e.g. English, French, Irish, geography, history, mathematics, biosciences, philosophy, and music), professional studies (e.g. philosophy / history / sociology of education, developmental and educational psychology, curriculum studies), subject methodology, and classroom modules of 18 weeks. There is no early childhood specialisation within the training curriculum.
87. Primary school teachers are required to be able to teach all age levels within the primary school, i.e. children aged 4 to 12 years. In the current three-year B.Ed. course at St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, for example, within the Education component of the course of study (other components are: Academic Subjects, Professional Irish, Professional English, Certificate in Religious Studies, Teaching Practice, Gaeltacht) the focus on early childhood education is limited to 4 units (46 hours) within the first year of study. By way of comparison, the subject-areas physical education, religious education or maths are each allotted the same number of units, as are the foundation studies components sociology of education and philosophy of

education (St. Patrick's College, undated). This particular training format with its very restricted attention to early childhood education differs from the approaches adopted in many other European countries (see Oberhuemer & Ulich, 1997; OECD, 2001a).

### Remuneration

88. One of the most striking differences between the Education and the Childcare sector centres on the issue of remuneration. The pay scale for primary school teachers starts at €23,096 per annum and progresses to a highest point of €44,891. Extra allowances are allocated for the posts of principal and deputy principal and may also be awarded for additional qualifications. This contrasts starkly with the wage situation of staff in private childcare facilities, who – according to a survey of NCNA members – earn roughly from €8,900 as a junior practitioner and up to €11,900 as a senior practitioner (Government of Ireland, 1999a). It has been estimated that practitioners in public sector nurseries earn between €12,700 and €17,000 per annum.

### In-service training and professional development

89. In-service training has been a major route for practitioners in the Childcare sector for gaining qualifications. However, access to the restricted offers of in-service courses has been very patchy, and very often practitioners have had to personally fund their participation during their own time. The *Model Framework 2002* offers for the first time a clear vision of professional development and articulation of professional roles on five levels: Basic, Intermediate, Experienced, Advanced and Expert. Value is placed on recognising and accrediting learning acquired through experience and developing forms of access, transfer and progression within the articulated framework. The *Model Framework 2002* represents the main submission of the Childcare sector to the recently (2000) established National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), the government agency responsible for creating a national qualifications framework.

90. The In-career Development Unit of the DES provides for a range of in-service courses based on specific curriculum areas and targeted programmes. At present, each teacher is undergoing six days in-service training per year on the new primary curriculum, which is being phased in at two subjects per year. The Irish National Teachers' Organisation has identified a desire among teachers in infant classes for a more extensive initial training focus on early years and for more in-service training geared to a comprehensive view of supporting young children's development and learning rather than the subjects focus of the current curriculum. It also informed the review team that because some School Boards do not consider in-service training a priority, supplementary training for teachers is often voluntary and takes place during evenings or school holidays.

## 9. Programme regulation

### Childcare

91. There is no agreed pedagogical framework across the wide range of philosophical orientations and practices within the Childcare sector. However, the new training framework for the field can be seen as a step towards consensus on core principles. These include valuing:

- *Diversity by acknowledging and promoting each child's and each adult's individual, personal and cultural identity;*
- *Experiences and activities that support learning and allow children to actively explore, to experience, to make choices and decisions and to share in the learning process;*
- *Play as the natural, constructive mode of children's interactions with their peers, adults and environment.* (Government of Ireland, 2002, p.17)

### Early education

92. Programme content and implementation in the Education sector are highly regulated through national curricula, guidelines, and inspection practices. The 1971 Primary School Curriculum was superseded by a revised curriculum in 1999. The new curriculum emphasises individual learning paths and teaching approaches, children's developmental needs, guided activity learning, interdisciplinary approaches, a balance

between knowledge, concept and skills acquisition, and the importance of assessment and planning as analytical and evaluative tools. Six curriculum areas encompass eleven subjects. These areas are (1) Language (English, Irish), (2) Mathematics, (3) Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (History, Geography, Science), (4) Arts Education (Visual Arts, Music, Drama), (5) Physical Education, and (6) Social, Personal and Health Education. Curriculum content is very detailed according to each subject and each level within the school. At the same time the need for flexibility in delivery according to individual and local needs is officially emphasised.

93. There is no formal curriculum for the *Early Start Programme*. However, curricular guidelines were developed in co-operation with the teachers and childcare workers employed in the units as part of their ongoing in-service training. These were introduced in 1998 and are to be continuously updated. The guidelines identify four central elements: (1) cognitive development, (2) language development, (3) personal, emotional and social development, and (4) creative and aesthetic development. Developmental profiles are provided for the first three elements.
94. As one of the outcomes of the White Paper on Early Education (1999) - and noted again in the Education Act - the *National Council for Curriculum and Assessment*, a government agency reporting to the DES, has been asked to develop an early childhood curriculum for the age-group birth to 6 years. The objective is to develop a specimen pedagogical framework which will serve as an orientation for the field without being mandatory. Work on this "Framework for Early Childhood Learning" is ongoing. A formal consultation process with key stakeholders in the field is planned for 2003. The curriculum is to be completed by mid-2004.

## 10. Parental engagement

95. Under the Education Act 1998, parents are represented on primary school Boards of Management and - in co-operation with the Board - may establish a parents' association to promote pupils' interests. A nationwide organisation of parents in primary schools - the *National Parents Council - Primary* - represents parents' views on school-related issues and also provides a number of services to parents (e.g. advocacy service, help-line, training/workshops funded by the DES and the European Social Fund). The Council is represented on the *National Childcare Co-ordinating Committee*. The *Home/School/Community Liaison Scheme* established as part of the DES targeted initiative promotes active co-operation between home, school and relevant community services.
96. Although the *White Paper on Early Childhood Education*, 1999, emphasises the need to stimulate and support parental participation in the educational process, a National Parents' Association does not exist in the Childcare sector, nor is there a branch for parents with pre-school children within the Education sector. The recently established *Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education* (CECDE) is expected to facilitate strategies for enhancing parental involvement, which traditionally has not been strong in the Education sector in Ireland.
97. In the Childcare sector, there is at least one parent representative on each County Childcare Committee. Parental involvement in the management of community-based services (particularly Play Groups) is fairly common. Generally, however, evidence gathered from the National Childcare Census would suggest that the concept of active parental involvement is not firmly anchored in this sector. Only 40 % of facilities reported having a policy on parental engagement, and only 19 % a written policy statement (*Irish Background Report* 2002, p.53).



# 3 Chapter 3

## POLICY ISSUES ARISING FROM THE REVIEW VISIT

*Chapter 3 is analytic and discursive in emphasis. It focuses on early childhood policy issues arising from the review visit, and seeks to place them in the context of international practice. In addition to the central issues of access, quality, and co-ordination that the Department of Education and Science invited the OECD team to address, we discuss also the new roles of Irish women, parental engagement, ECEC models, research/evaluation/information systems; and the question of funding.*

### 1. New roles and issues for Irish women

98. Compared to a participation rate of 43.8% in 1990, 56.2 % of Irish women between the ages of 15 and 64 participated in the labour force in Ireland in 2000. This is a considerable achievement. Although still significantly lower than the EU average, not to mention North America or northern Europe, the participation rate for younger women in the 25-34 age group is now well over 60%. According to a 1996 Labour Force Survey, 29.3 % of mothers with a youngest child aged 2 – 4 years and 34 % with a youngest child aged 0 – 24 months were in full-time work outside the home (Government of Ireland, 1999c).
99. A research survey carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute (1998) revealed that 38% of all parents with children aged 4 years and under, rely on some form of paid childcare arrangement. 21 % of mothers with children aged less than 5 years used childminders. Centre-based care services were the second most commonly used form, taken up by 14 %. "However, over one-fifth (22 %) of mothers with full-time jobs and 47 % of those with part-time jobs used no paid childcare at all, indicating a reliance on informal provision provided either by partners, family, friends or neighbours." (*Irish Background Report 2002*, p.26).
100. In the decades to come, greatly increased working rates for women can be expected, as the older cohorts who traditionally did not join the labour force advance beyond 64 years. Already the tendency can be discerned: 54 % of women with a child under 5 years are employed, compared to only 38 % of women with children over 15 years of age.<sup>20</sup> In fact, among older women in Ireland, more than half are economically inactive, a weight that few modern economies can afford to carry. Where part-time work is concerned, the employment situation of women compares unfavourably with that of men, that is, a far greater proportion of women are in part-time work: 32.2 % of women work less than 35 hours a week, compared to 7.7 % of men. However, for the younger age-group, gains in full-time employment in Ireland in recent years have been made more by female workers than by males (see CSO, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> The tendency is confirmed by the employment/population (15-64 years) ratio, which has evolved in Ireland from 52.1% in 1990 to 65% in 2001, a little over the EU average of 64.1%. It is still well below the UK and USA figures of over 70%.



101. From a labour market perspective, the trend therefore is favourable, with the employment/population ratio showing a marked improvement on previous generations. With more women remaining in the labour market, income tax returns, social security contributions and savings are greatly increased, and higher productivity is ensured due to maintaining trained employees in work. At the same time, there is less dependency on social assistance during both the productive and retirement ages (without a woman's work, many families fall below the poverty line). This positive trend can be maintained in Ireland through intelligent tax policies and energetic child care policies, although one should not underestimate the impact of the economic conjuncture, education, training, and general labour market conditions. The preferences and cultural attitudes of a society are also important. Higher female participation may also have some costs, in particular, public childcare spending has to be increased. However, this policy is to some extent self-financing insofar as it increases both labour supply and flexibility.
102. From a family perspective, the situation is also promising as increased employment improves family budgets and the material conditions of children. However, supports for Irish working women with young children are few and inadequately funded. Parental leave is short and unpaid, and as yet, a clear commitment to creating a publicly subsidised, early education and care system for the children and families who need such services has not been made. Although the home carers' allowance can be seen as positive in so far as it subsidises the family budget - and at the moment eases the demand for childcare spaces - it may detract in the long run from women's status in the economy and Irish society. A careful balance needs to be struck in societies between the time and care that children need from their parents(s) and the advantages - at personal, familial and societal levels - that parental employment brings. Without good services, this balance is difficult to maintain.

#### Box 5. New child and family measures in France, 2003

The new centre-right government in France has recently strengthened the family/childcare policy of the previous socialist government. Under certain conditions, the following basic measures become valid in 2004:

- *A pregnancy payment*: A single payment of €800 to all mothers in the 7th month of pregnancy;
- *A child benefit*: A monthly payment of €160 for each child until the age of 3 years (90% of families benefit);
- *A home care benefit*: A monthly payment of €334 will be made to mothers who choose to leave work in order to care for their child/children at home. This payment ceases after three years. For mothers from the richer 10% of families who do not receive the basic child allowance of €160, the monthly payment becomes €493 per month. The measure is not intended to take women out of the workforce permanently: if mothers care for their child while maintaining a half-time job, more than 50% of the benefit will be granted.
- *A childcare subsidy*: Depending on revenue, a monthly subsidy of approximately €600 is accorded per month to families with at least one parent working, per child up to the age of 6 years, who is cared for in a crèche or by an accredited child-minder or by a declared employee in their home. In general, this payment will cover full costs. It is reduced by 50%, once the child is enrolled in the *école maternelle* (almost 100% of French children are enrolled in this free service from the age of 3 years).
- *Tax benefits*: Parents with children in their care will still receive (up to the 18th year and beyond) significant tax reductions, in particular, from the third child onwards. Reduced transport costs, back to school subsidies and other advantages are also offered to "familles nombreuses" (three children or more) by both the government and municipalities;
- *Workplace measures*: The costs of measures taken by firms to reconcile work and family responsibilities (including the provision of a crèche, part-time work, distance work, re-training of mothers...) will be reimbursed through remission of company tax to the level of 60%.
- *Provision of new childcare places*: A commitment has been made to invest 200 million Euros annually from 2004 to create 20,000 new crèche places - either public, public-private or in companies. (In 2000 and 2001, 46,000 new public crèche places had already been created);

- *Support to private initiatives*, especially to family and non-profit associations, who will be able to access public funding equally, especially if they can provide services to suit the working hours of parents;
- *Increasing the number of accredited child-minders*: The salaries, training and social security coverage for accredited child minders will be upgraded, so as to encourage more women to enter this profession.

The significant increase in public expenditure on families and young children is justified by the government from a number of different angles: to reconcile work and family responsibilities and to allow women to maintain without undue difficulty their participation in the labour market. The government also wishes to provide greater choice to parents. In future, parents will be subsidised: to remain at home with their children; or to enrol them in the publicly funded local or workplace crèche; or to place them with accredited childminders; or to employ a home help to look after children in their own home. The government also speaks openly of encouraging French families to have children, as the viability of the state pension regime<sup>21</sup> into the future depends, according to the government, on maintaining the present fertility rate, which at 1.9 per woman is just under the Irish figure of 1.98.

### The gender perspective

103. In Ireland, the gender assumption that women will leave aside career for a few years to care for young children is still widely held. It is a valid assumption for many families, but is unfounded for a growing number of young couples who wish to combine career with rearing their children. Increasingly, young men are part of this change, and see themselves as equally responsible for day-to-day child-rearing tasks (Ryan, 2001). In terms of equity, it may be argued that a share of parental taxes should be channelled toward financing quality early childhood services, which would allow women choice, enable them to maintain throughout the life-cycle both salaries and pensions, and bring a better life-work balance to families.<sup>22</sup>
104. Women gain greatly, both at a personal and a professional level from being able to return to work after appropriate parental leave. Returning to work enables mothers to avoid long-term poverty damaging for themselves and for their children, an important consideration in situations of lone motherhood, separation and divorce, when children are normally left in the mother's custody.<sup>23</sup> Yet, the OECD team was informed on several occasions that a return to work when a second child is born is often not an option. According to our interlocutors – and borne out by government data - many working parents cannot afford two childcare places unless they have access to a subsidised public crèche. This means, for the vast majority of parents, recourse to the private market where ability to pay determines accessibility. If this fails, they must rely on informal arrangements with family, friends, and neighbours. Such arrangements and the resulting stress can influence work practices negatively, leading in turn to reluctance to hire women with children.
105. At the economic level, other research indicates that the lifelong effects of a woman's dropping out of work - or of downgrading to part-time work - for a number of years to care for young children, has considerable negative effects on professional development, lifelong earnings, pensions and career progression (Harkness and Waldfogel, 2002). According to Gunderson (1986), lessened professional activity among women may be a root cause of the differentials between male and female earnings, which today in Europe stand at an average ratio of 100:84. The drop-out of women from the work force is also a significant loss to the economy, because it reduces the tax base and deskills a large and better educated part of the labour force.

<sup>21</sup> Where pensions are concerned, France, like Ireland, also has the challenge of improving its employment/population ratio. The recent introduction of a home-carer's benefit in Norway has resulted in the withdrawal of a significant number of women – especially with some education - from the labour force.

<sup>22</sup> In over 90% of instances, women are given custody of children in case of separation or divorce. Such situations affect over 40% of couples in some urban milieus.

<sup>23</sup> American research indicates that such care arrangements are generally of quite poor quality (NICHD, 1997).

## Parental leave

106. Parental leaves and benefits are variously referred to as family policies that protect maternal and infant health; or as employment policies that promote gender equity and respect the rights of workers to combine work and family responsibilities. The growing practice in Europe (see Table 4 in Appendix 1) is for governments to guarantee a remunerated maternity and parental leave for a period of about a year, financed by the contributions of the parents through their previous years of work. Thereafter, affordable early childhood services, regulated and partly financed by the state, are in place to supplement parental care. These services are generally open to all children, as the services are valued not just as a labour market or social inclusion support but also as a developmental opportunity for the children.
107. Although the EU Directive allowed countries to introduce more favourable conditions than the minimum laid down, Ireland's response has not matched those of other countries, many of which are now well on the way toward providing a year or more of subsidised parental leave (see Table 4 in Appendix 1). The lack of subsidisation in Ireland after the 18th week after birth makes it extremely difficult for parents on modest incomes to prolong parental leave, unless a decision is taken that one of them, generally the mother, should leave the labour market.

## 2. Co-ordination issues

108. Across countries, as policy makers seek to improve the continuity of children's early childhood experiences and make the most efficient use of resources, a systemic and integrated approach to early childhood services is gaining ground. The advantages are considerable. Adopting a more integrated approach to the field allows governments to organise common policies, and combine resources for early childhood services. Regulatory, funding and staffing regimes, costs to parents, and opening hours can be made more consistent. Variations in access and quality can be lessened, and links at the services level – across age groups and settings – are more easily created. In integrated systems, a common vision of education and care can be formed, with agreed social and pedagogical objectives.
109. *The integrated model* - In the present Irish context, the integrated model would require a radical rethinking by the ministries and chief stakeholders not only of the developmental needs of young children but also of labour market requirements, equality of opportunity, and family policy. In the Nordic countries or in the municipality of Reggio Emilia in Italy, these considerations have led to sustained public expenditure on young children, with the state/municipality becoming the main direct provider of services. Both access and quality tend to be excellent, and a seamless and clear public service is offered to families with young children from 1 to 6 years. Financing is through government subsidy to the local authorities, local authority grants and parental fees. In this vision, a single framework covers the responsibilities of the various actors, and in the Nordic countries a core worker profile – the pedagogue - has emerged, with training level and salary conditions similar to that of teachers. Work status and conditions are such that many well-educated young women continue to be attracted to the profession, unlike in profit-driven systems where pay is poor for staff, with ensuing recruitment and turnover problems. Early childhood services provided by the Nordic integrated model are among the best in the world, with a strong emphasis on the health care, socialisation, well-being and active learning of children.
110. New Zealand provides a variation on the integrated model, where although integration of policy under one ministry has existed since 1986, the system is a *mixed* one, combining private providers, voluntary providers and some services managed by employers or communities:

**Box 6 - New Zealand: a community/private provider system financed by government**

In New Zealand, the organisation of ECEC services at the national level has been a matter of discussion over the past three decades. ECEC services for young children are predominantly established by the voluntary/community and private sectors, with some developed and managed by employers or local bodies. The service programme may be 'teacher-led' or 'parent/whanau led'.<sup>25</sup> The government's role is financial and regulatory. In 1986, the whole sphere came under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education.

In its financing role, Government decided that funding (capitation grant) follows the child (not the family) to whichever ECEC service the parent chooses to use. There is no differentiation by age of children, except that children under two receive higher grants as child/staff ratios for this age of child must be lower than for older children. Government now covers over 50% of the operational costs of services. It also provides capital grants to develop not-for-profit services, and facilitates low-cost loans for caregivers or teachers who want to train as ECEC teachers. Fee subsidies are also provided by the Ministry of Social Welfare to assist low income families to pay for ECEC services.

In its regulatory role, the Ministry of Education sets standards, accredits and monitors services, and provides the curriculum (Te Whariki - a socio-cultural curriculum for infants, toddlers and pre-school children) and supporting materials. The Education Review Office, a government agency, carries out a programme of regular reviews of services. Most children in the ECEC sector are in Education and Care Centres (0-6 years) but there are also kindergartens (predominantly attended by 3 and 4 year olds), play centres, kohanga reo (Maori immersion centres), Pasifika language(s) ECEC centres and a flourishing family day care system (called "home based care" in NZ). Over 30 % of 0-3 year olds and 85 % of the 3-5 year olds are in regulated, publicly funded services.

In recent months, the government has agreed a quantified and time-referenced strategic plan for the development of the sector for the next ten years. It hopes to increase participation from disadvantaged groups, improve quality and promote collaborative relationships with other sectors. To achieve these aims, it is engaged in a complete revision of the funding and regulatory system; in the professional registration of co-ordinators of family day care and of contact personnel in teacher-led centres; and in better support for community-led initiatives.

**Source:** *A 10-Year Strategic Plan for Early Childhood Education*, Ministry of Education, Wellington (2002)

111. *The split system model with a publicly managed childcare section* – The split system model is widespread across the OECD countries: "care" from birth to 3 years being taken in charge by a social services, health, family or gender equity ministry, with the "education" of children from 3-6 years being taken in charge by the education ministry. The weakness of the conceptual basis for this model can be inferred from the opening lines of *Eager To Learn* (Bowman et al, 2000), published by the American National Research Council:

*Children come into the world eager to learn. The first five years of life are a time of enormous growth of linguistic, conceptual, social, emotional and motor competence. Right from birth, a healthy child is an active participant in that growth, exploring the environment, learning to communicate and, in relatively short order, beginning to construct ideas and theories about how things work in the surrounding world. The pace of learning, however, will depend on whether and to what extent the child's inclinations to learn encounter and engage supporting environments.*

112. At its worst, the model perpetuates the division between care and education, with low quality care being provided for the younger children, while children aged 3-6 years undergo a primary-type education in

<sup>25</sup> Kindergartens are an example of teacher led services; play centres and kohanga reo are parent/whanau led services.

crowded classrooms. The salaries and employment conditions of childcare personnel remain low, resulting in great instability of employment in the care sector, with negative consequences for young children. Because of the low educational level of staff, active learning programmes are not a feature of many care contexts in the split system. In parallel, the socialisation and care of children in the school is often far from ideal.

113. At its best, the split system model may have a well-managed childcare sector and an education sector investing adequately in young children, with quality standards and approaches to young children in constant improvement. Flanders in Belgium is an example. In the childcare system, managed by a semi-state institution *Kind en Gezin* (Children and Parents), a comprehensive system of childcare centres and family daycare networks has been established, influenced strongly by quality standards and in-service training. In parallel, the "children's school", which caters for all children from 30 months to 6 years, has reduced child-teacher ratios to 18:1. Child-staff ratios are often much better, often reaching 9:1 in those schools that hire trained children's nurses to help teachers look after the youngest children. Pedagogical approaches are being progressively influenced by *Experiential Education*, an approach that emphasises active learning, guided by the principles of well-being and involvement of children.
114. *The split system with a market model of childcare* – In addition to splitting education and care, the market model generally assumes that childcare is a family responsibility, and that childcare should be purchased from private providers in an open market. At the same time, there is the parallel assumption that early education is a public good and a responsibility of government. Where childcare is concerned, the government's chief role is considered to be regulation, or to intervene if there is market failure.<sup>26</sup> Thus, government subsidises community or voluntary bodies to provide services in disadvantaged areas, where market conditions deter the investment of private capital. In addition, government will generally subsidise the childcare costs of poorer families to enable parents to stay in work.
115. The results from this model are generally disappointing. Without public management and sustained public funding, market-led childcare provision remains fragmented and inequitable. For this reason, governments in the English-speaking countries are obliged to intervene constantly by increasing childcare allowances, reviewing quality supervision and even directly funding parts of the system, such as Head Start (USA) or Sure Start (U.K.), that are aimed at targeted groups. Although competition can lead to some good programmes, these are often confined to parents who can pay high fees. When dominated by private, for-profit interests, profits are often derived from high fees, increased numbers of children per staff and/or low staff wages. There is a tendency to employ untrained staff at the bottom end of the market, where modest and disadvantaged families are the clients. In sum, the children who need the best services often receive the poorest quality.
116. Although some regulation is provided (generally through a Children's Act), initial training, in-service training or quality improvement initiatives have no statutory right to funding. Frequently, the providers are not subject to any quality control, and are under no obligation to be trained, or provide a professional programme for the young children in their care. Parents too are confused by the multiplicity of providers and have little means of distinguishing quality except through rather external criteria such as hearsay, brochures or the appearance of premises. In addition, audits show that parents often are unable to access the childcare benefits offered by government, e.g. a recent analysis by the Daycare Trust (2003) shows that only 3% of English families receive the Childcare Tax Credit, which averages, according to the survey, only about a third of the cost demanded for an average nursery place. Recent figures from the US indicate also that faced with the uncertainties of childcare access and quality, a growing number of American parents (that is, women) are simply leaving the labour market to care for their children at home.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> For several reasons, market failure is inevitable where the care of children is involved, as explained by Cleveland and Krashinsky, OECD, 2003

<sup>27</sup> Employment rates for women in the USA and the UK still remain significantly higher than above those in Ireland.

117. Because of the present split auspices of the system in Ireland, we shall provide in Chapter 4 our recommendations concerning access, first for the Childcare sector and then for Education. This does not imply any preference for the split system, which in many respects is wasteful of resources and inhibits coherent policy. In fact, given the underdeveloped state of ECEC on the ground in Ireland and the magnitude of the challenge to create a national system (including sub-systems for disadvantaged and special needs systems), there is a strong case to be made for a single and accountable leadership for the field. An integrated system would cover all children from one to six years,<sup>28</sup> and include an out-of-school care system for children who could benefit from a quality service while their parents worked.

### 3. Access issues

118. Issues of access to early childhood services came up regularly during the course of the visit. As stated in the *Irish Background Report 2002*, access is a complex issue, linked to questions of affordability, geographical location, and the appropriateness of different kinds of services with regard to both cultural preference and the specific needs of individual children and families. It is also inextricably linked to quality issues. Many of the related concerns are outlined in the *Irish Background Report 2002*. In this section we shall focus on some of the most urgent issues from a review team perspective.

#### Weakness of access

119. In Chapter 2, we outlined the support of the three main ministries to access across the age range 0-6 years. Total access for children in government-financed half-day or full-day services came to approximately 56 % of children from 3-6 years and from 10 % - 15% of children (estimate) from 0-3 years. By EU standards, total coverage in Ireland is low, and falls far short of the targets set by the Presidency conclusions of the Barcelona European Council (16-17 March 2002). These conclusions state that Member States should remove disincentives for female labour force participation and strive to provide childcare by 2010 for at least 90 % of children between 3 years and mandatory school age and at least 33 % of children under 3 years of age. It is only in the year immediately preceding obligatory schooling that Ireland approaches the EU average for any one year. Table 9 in Appendix 1 shows in contrast the coverage rates of other small, northern European countries: Denmark, Flanders and Scotland.

#### Reasons for low access in Ireland

120. The low access rates for Ireland may be explained as follows:
- The very rapid transformation of the Irish economy and society in the last decade, resulting in policy and delivery gaps where young children were concerned;
  - An initial policy option of relying on informal childminding to fill the gaps, which effectively places much of the childcare provision in Ireland outside official financing, accreditation and monitoring – and international recognition;
  - A high barrier of affordability: most of the available childcare places are located within the private sector and rely heavily on parental fees. Because governmental subsidies do not exist, the costs of childcare have become prohibitive for low-income or even middle-income families.
  - The failure to expand the early education system to include all children from 3-6 years. Compared with its European neighbours, the infant school in Ireland has hardly developed over the last decades.
  - Irish parents prefer to keep their children at home until the age of 5 years. As the OECD team did not have access to parent surveys, it has no means of judging the plausibility of this reason or its underlying causes. Whatever the case - given that 60% of women are expected to be in the labour force by 2010 (implying that well over 70% of women 25-34 years will be employed) - it is an untenable option in the future.

<sup>28</sup> If parental leave can be extended to one year, then the pressure to supply services to children under that age is much lessened.

## Access challenges for the childcare sector

### 1. Children 0-3 years (from birth to 3rd birthday)

121. In terms of the European targets, a first access challenge for the childcare sector in Ireland is to multiply the number of subsidised places for children from birth to 3 years before the year 2010. We are obliged to be vague about the exact numbers of places to be subsidised, as the OECD team has not had access to national needs assessments or to reliable data giving the actual percentages of children from birth to three years of age who are at the moment in subsidised services. This type of information is now being drawn up, and no doubt in coming years, it will be possible to formulate concrete plans for young children with detailed benchmarks, targets, financing and deadlines.
122. From the *Irish Background Report* and information received during the review, we believe that most DJELR subsidised places so far have been created for three and four year old children (see, for example, Table 7 in Appendix 1). Part of the reason is that with the exception of the National Childminders' Association, the main provider networks, such as IPPA, Montessori, Naíonraí, etc., tend to cater for the older children, generally on a sessional basis. In sum, EOCP programming may be contributing more to provision for the 3-6 year olds than to provision for the 0-3 year olds. If this is true, it suggests that DJELR may need to focus more on the providers who can contribute to reaching targets set for the younger age group, viz. on *parents, childminders and community or county services*.
123. *Parents* - Maternity and parental leave is considered in almost all modern economies as a key step to ensuring that young infants have individualised attention and support during the early months of life. Paid, flexible and job-protected maternity and parental leave schemes of at least one year are seen as an essential component of any comprehensive strategy to support working parents with very young children. Leave benefits for mothers and fathers help reduce the need and demand for investment in infant provision (which because of the necessary high adult/child ratios is very costly), while acknowledging the primary role of the family in rearing young children. A generous measure in this sense from government would almost certainly be more attractive for the majority of Irish parents than large-scale investment in collective infant care. In addition, if well-administered and backed up by early childhood services, the measure would be helpful in retaining the attachment of young women to the labour market, and in encouraging male partners to invest more time with their children.<sup>29</sup>
124. However, from the perspective of an economy seeking high employment/population rates, parental leave schemes need to be time-limited and clearly linked with work. Evidence from other countries (Norway, Czech Republic...) shows that home carer allowances or a prolonged, low-paid parental leave stipend tend to take certain groups of women out of the labour market, more or less permanently. They result in a confirmation of traditional gender roles, in reinforced social welfare dependency, and a progressive isolation of some groups from employment and the life of the community. Home carer allowances also work against the rational expansion of labour markets, which for optimum functioning should rely on the best qualified people available, who increasingly are women.
125. *Increasing access through accrediting and subsidising the quality childminders*: Because of the lack of early childhood centres in Ireland and population dispersion in rural communities, most families have to rely for childcare on non-registered, untrained childminders operating in the informal sector. This can be a real strength in that local access is available, but also raises challenges where affordability and quality are concerned. Since most of the available places are located within the private sector and rely heavily on parental fees, the costs of childcare can be prohibitive for low-income or even middle-income families. The review team was informed that fees are not usually income-related and that parents may have to pay in excess of €170 per week for the full-time care of very young children. This raises serious problems of equity

<sup>29</sup> Because of traditional social expectations and present wage differentials, leaves are almost exclusively taken up by women, unless conditions are included that can attract fathers, such as "use it or lose it" clauses.

of access. According to the *Report of the Expert Working Group on Childcare*, the cost of services in Ireland as a proportion of average earnings is among the highest in Europe.

126. Faced with a situation where there is little guarantee of quality and where it becomes increasingly difficult for low- and middle-income parents to find affordable childcare, some means of regulating childminding needs to be found, and local childminding arrangements transformed into recognised *family daycare networks*. In many instances in France, for example, local childminders are supported from a professionally-run, central *family crèche*. The director and professionals in this central crèche provide training once or twice a week to local childminders, allowing them to gain a diploma, an improved professional status and better earnings from their work.<sup>30</sup> The advantages for the local community and families are likewise significant: higher quality services for children, control of fees and subsidies to families most in need, better data on where children are, and the possibility of including in the official statistics for the county and country, children attending this family-type service.
127. Funding will be needed, however, to bring childminders into a properly accredited network. Without advantages, support and subsidies, it is difficult to see why private sector childminders would want to join a regulated network, which requires the use of a developmental programme, conducted by qualified staff with adequate remuneration and in-service training. A weighted operational grant attached to each child who uses an accredited service may be an effective means of financing such a transformation, and could radically expand provision in the coming years, through bringing the non-notified providers into the regulated system. If sufficient responsibility were given to them, City/County Childcare Committees could administer the scheme, and provide the necessary training and support to enable childminders to meet the standards set by the subsidising authorities.
128. *The communities and counties* – The third group that can contribute to the goal of increasing provision for children 0-3 years are the counties and communities. In all countries, access levels for younger children grow in accordance with the growing trust of parents in the quality and management of the services offered at local level. In Ireland, the City/County Childcare Committees have potentially a central role to play in this field if a means of funding and of enhancing their responsibility for the management of childcare can be found. In addition to collecting reliable data, co-ordinating and managing service provision (including accrediting and monitoring the childminder networks), the CCCs may be able to undertake two further measures to improve access for the younger children and their families, viz.
- *To provide each county with a dedicated Child and Family Centre:* Plans have been announced by the Department of Family and Social Affairs to build family centres for family support purposes. Significant savings, a useful synergy and a much larger capacity could be achieved if the early education and care ministries were associated in the endeavour. Although equally a managerial and quality measure, the county centres could increase access significantly for disadvantaged infants and toddlers in the larger towns, and could act as the administrative centres for child and family policy within each county. They would also help to provide models of successful outreach programmes to families who are in need of support in carrying out parenting responsibilities. If associated with accredited training colleges, they could also provide management training and professional development, and model exemplary programmes. The financing of such centres is discussed in the section on funding below.
  - *To create light county and community structures:* Light drop-in structures based around health care centres, social welfare offices, school, community centres, libraries, etc. are found useful in many countries, not only for women working part-time, but also for women who are at home looking after children. When the person facilitating a service is well-trained, and when appropriate programmes, information and educational materials are supplied, the links with society and world of work are kept

<sup>30</sup> In other countries, e.g. Belgium and Denmark, *family daycare providers* are part of the official municipal childcare networks, and receive training from municipal co-ordinators. These providers have been successful in providing education and care services for young children and families, particularly in rural areas.

intact for women who might otherwise leave the labour market permanently. In other countries, such facilities are used also in the afternoon and evening for after-school care and adult education. County and municipal services are best placed to decide on need and location, but it would seem helpful if the planning of these services and for facility building could be financially supported. Again, co-operation with the Family Support Agency could be a means of sharing the costs of such structures and of increasing their outreach.

## 2. Children 3-6 years (from 3rd birthday to 6th birthday)

*Access to out-of-school services and an appropriate extension of the infant school day*

129. Whether talking to parent representatives, union officials, experts and practitioners in both sectors, the lack of out-of-school provision for children came up repeatedly as one of the urgent issues needing policy attention during the coming years. Services for children before and after school hours and during the school holidays are virtually non-existent. For the few services that do exist, there is no kind of regulatory framework and there are no stated quality standards.
130. In all forms of provision offered by the DES for children under statutory school age, the period of time that children can attend is relatively short. As previously stated, the *Early Start* units and *Traveller Pre-Schools* are open for only 2½ to 3 hours. In the primary schools, infant classes finish at around 1:40 p.m. This limited time frame raises not only questions about the curriculum balance during those hours, but also about the quality of children's experiences after school hours if working parents are largely dependent on non-formal and unregistered childminding services. In the meantime, the solutions are half-time work for women or recourse to childcare either informal or regulated, where both quality and a continuing shortage of places are continuing issues.
131. What are other countries doing to meet the challenge? Some few countries, e.g. the Netherlands, promote part-time employment. The weakness of this solution is that it quickly becomes a gender issue, as the female partner generally takes on part-time work, often at low rates of remuneration. The Netherlands, too is experimenting with shared employment, that is, the "two-times three-quarters" model in which both partners work three quarters of their time, releasing one or other partner for the care of children on a half-day basis. This model seems to be unique to the Dutch.
132. In an effort to keep women in employment, other countries prefer to build up long-day care and after-school services based around the school. The reasons for the choice of the local school are partly practical (it is much easier for parents and young children if the service is based in the same location where the morning educational service takes place), partly cultural (by its association with the school, out-of school and long-day services become more acceptable to parents) and partly economic (to set up an infrastructure and system parallel to the school is extremely costly). Thus, most countries are increasingly experimenting with educare and recreational programmes for children on school premises in the afternoon. A free educational session is provided in the morning for all 3-6 year olds at the local school, extended in the afternoon, on school or adjoining premises, by appropriate programmes – rest, arts and music education, sports and physical education, games, nature study, reading clubs etc. - provided by the community and voluntary sector. From the perspective of the child, it matters little who runs the service as long as it is of quality, provides continuity and does not involve bussing or disruption. Some cost recuperation through parental fees is practised for such programmes, and children are free to attend or not according to the contract made by the school with parents.
133. In Ireland, a beginning could be made by transforming the *Early Start* programme into a full-day service provided for children in all disadvantaged areas. For this close co-operation between DES, DJELR and the voluntary sector would be necessary. In extending the day, due care would need to be given to the best interests of children – their rhythms, emotional and physical needs, and the quality of the premises and programmes that they are offered. The role of DJELR would be vital here, to guarantee that children's

interests are protected, that proper infra-structure is in place and that the community and voluntary organisations are adequately funded to carry out this type of work.

134. The measure would also provide an official and much expanded role for the voluntary and community agencies, especially if linked with subsidies, training opportunities and proper career profiles. Supported by appropriate funding (see section below on Funding) and training, these agencies could provide the afternoon programmes for children within the school precincts. A whole-day, integrated service would also remove pressure on teachers in the *Early Start* morning classes, improve quality and make place for a more appropriate pedagogy for these groups. At the same time, the extended day would provide an enriched learning environment for disadvantaged children throughout the day, and reinforce contact with parents who need support and job training.
135. The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform has already taken a proactive stance by setting up a Working Group in School Age Childcare, which is preparing proposals for the development of school age childcare services on an all year round basis. However, the response to an EOCP initiative in early 2002 inviting applications from community/not-for-profit childcare providers, parents' groups and school managing authorities for capital and staffing grant assistance for the establishment of School Age Childcare was quite disappointing. The DJELR is hoping that the publication of the Report of the Working Group will stimulate interest in the provision of much needed out-of-school care services for children aged 3-12 years.

## Access challenges in early education

### 1. Improving general access for children

136. Taking account of the Barcelona targets, expectations are strong that by the year 2010, most European countries will have provided services for over 90% of children aged 3-6 years. Present coverage for the age group in Ireland stands at just 50%. Can it be argued – as the OECD team heard on several occasions – that the 3-year olds are not the responsibility of the Education sector and that Education should continue to concentrate on the 4-6 year olds? The practice of other countries runs contrary. Apart from the Nordic countries which have fully integrated services for *all* children under one ministry, and the Netherlands, which, like Ireland, begins the infant school at 4 years, the 3-6 year old age group is the responsibility of the ministries of education in the great majority of OECD countries. Moreover, in the Netherlands, the Ministry of Education is investing massively at the moment in morning education sessions all over the country for 2-4 year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds. These sessions are often attached to the local school.
137. Will Ireland opt for free public services for three-year old children? The OECD team was informed that when *Early Start* was launched in Ireland in 1994, the voluntary and community providers protested, seeing this better-funded programme run by trained teachers as unfair competition, particularly in areas where voluntary and community bodies had been working for years previously. The lesson to be learned from the experience is not to pull back from expanded provision for 3-year olds, but through consultation and partnership, to find an equitable means of integrating the all too few local providers into a publicly subsidised system which would be ambitious for young children. At present, all energies are needed to create a quality, affordable, long-day ECEC system of in Ireland. With government leadership, the community and voluntary bodies can be integrated fully into the official system, and receive recognition, subsidies and training support.

### *Educational access for children at 3 years*

138. Net enrolment in pre-primary education (infant school) in Ireland for 3 year olds is around 4% (Figure 6, Appendix 1). This contrasts with the situation in most other OECD member states. In over half of these countries more than 50 % of 3 year olds attend some form of state-funded provision designed to foster learning. In others, e.g. Belgium, France, Italy, over 90 % are enrolled (Figure 6). Introducing free, universal access for all 3 to 6 year olds is a goal which many countries are working towards, as they see it both as a human capital investment and an important measure in reconciling work and the care of children. For the

moment, the Irish government is committed only to providing educational services for a small proportion of 3-year olds coming from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

#### *Access for children aged 4 years*

139. While 4 year olds officially qualify for enrolment in junior infant classes, the coverage level for this age group in primary schools is only 56 %, a surprisingly low enrolment rate by OECD standards, given that the provision is free of charge. Reasons advanced for the low enrolments were:

- Children are admitted to the infant school once a year only (in September), if they have reached the age of 4 years by September 1st. This particular form of intake policy excludes children born between summer and Christmas, and since waiting lists for 5 year olds are considerable, schools tend to enrol by seniority of age, thus effectively limiting the intake of 4 year olds.
- Irish parents do not find the infant school attractive as a learning environment. Child-staff ratios are high, imposing a directive role on teachers, inhibiting child initiative and leaving little opportunity for free play and peer interaction. If this is the case, low attendance is a clear signal that quality needs to be improved.

Whatever the reason, these two areas – intake policy and quality – need to be addressed by the inspectorate and the local schools, if the European targets are to be reached. Teachers would be greatly helped in managing the increased intake if a Child Assistant were appointed to each infant school class. This would also have the advantage of reducing child-staff ratios to 15:1 or less for every infant class – an acceptable maximum level in the European context. In the section on financing, we shall discuss how this measure could be financed.

#### *Recognition of selected pre-school providers*

140. To increase access levels for the 3 and 4 year olds, the Department of Education and Science may also wish to consider recognition and support to accredited pre-school providers, as mentioned in the White Paper, 1999. Several of these groups have been working with young children in Ireland for generations. The different approaches that they bring enrich early childhood theory and pedagogy. In addition, they contribute to the national network for young children, providing places for some thousands of children. The question is often raised in countries where public services predominate: why should public funds flow toward private groups? It is a fundamental question, but solutions can be found, in particular where non-profit groups are willing to accept a quota of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and keep fees at a level within a range defined by the public authorities. Again, the measure has the advantage for governments of regulating the sector more efficiently, and of including the children served in national statistics.

## **2. Access for children from disadvantaged backgrounds**

141. The issue of child poverty in a country is always delicate, but it is an important one for early childhood administrators. No matter how good an early childhood service is, it cannot "inoculate children in one year against the ravages of a life of deprivation"(Kagan and Zigler, 1987). Commentators note, for example, that the fair start provided by Head Start programmes to disadvantaged young children in US cities is often set at naught by the living conditions of these children as they mature, and not least, because they remain in demoralised neighbourhoods and are obliged to enrol in under-performing primary schools.

142. In recent years, Irish society has become more sensitive to child poverty issues, and many initiatives are now being taken to support children from disadvantaged families and neighbourhoods, e.g. the creation of a National Anti-Poverty Strategy and the governmental obligation on building promoters to include a percentage of social housing in all large building developments.<sup>31</sup> In the education sector, similar initiatives have been made, such as the *Breaking the Cycle* initiative in primary schools and the *Early Start* programme

<sup>31</sup> Such a measure is particularly effective in combating the spatial segregation of the poor, which generally destines their children to low performance expectations and attendance at inferior schools.

in early education. In addition, significant parts of the Education Act of 1998 and particularly, the Education (Welfare) Act of 2000 are devoted to the issue of dropout and measures to encourage regular attendance at school. Likewise, the present social partnership agreement, *Sustaining Progress*, acknowledges that in tackling "educational disadvantage and procuring social inclusion, we must address disadvantaged conditions in childhood which are known to increase the likelihood of early school leaving and poor school performance."

143. Yet, inequality at the starting gates of education remains a critical challenge for Ireland. Figure 3 in Appendix 1, based on 1997 UNICEF figures (since confirmed by figures from 2000) shows the extent of child poverty in the country. To meet the challenge, the Department of Education and Science (DES) established during the 1990s, two targeted interventions to address the issues of educational disadvantage and social exclusion among young children, viz. *Early Start* and *Pre-schools for Traveller Children*. Surprisingly, there does not seem to be a strong policy commitment to expanding these programmes, and they are still described as "pilot interventions", i.e. they have not been established as an integral part of the early childhood system.
144. In addition, an initial evaluation of *Early Start*, based on assessment tests of children's cognitive, language and motor skills in the junior infant classes, failed to show progress greater than in children who had not experienced the programme.<sup>32</sup> Several reasons have been advanced for the unexpected result of the initial evaluation: the newness of the programme when the evaluation was launched; irregular attendance by children, inadequate curriculum support, insufficiency of specific training (at that moment in the programme) leading to inappropriate or unfocussed pedagogy (Kelleghan, 2002; McGough, 2002). In contrast, as evidenced from Box 4 above, parent and practitioner perceptions of the *Early Start* programme are much more positive, which suggests that evaluations might also include wider social impact measures.
145. In this context, it may be useful to recall the evaluation results of similar programmes for disadvantaged children from different countries (see, for example, Braithwaite, 1983, (Australia); McCain and Mustard, 1999 (Canada); Jarousse et al, 1992 (France); Kellaghan and Greaney,<sup>33</sup> 1993, (Ireland); Kagitcibasi et al 1986 and 1991 (Turkey); Osborn and Milbank, 1987, (UK); Berrueta-Clement et al, 1984 (USA); McKey et al 1985 (USA); Schweinhart et al, 1993 (Perry Pre-school, USA) - cited in OECD 1999, 2001). In summary, the research carried out across these countries suggests that well-funded, integrated socio-educational programmes in disadvantaged areas do improve the cognitive functioning of disadvantaged children, and almost always yield positive outcomes with regard to socio-emotional development and ability to live with other children. If properly linked to the labour, health and social services, they can also be expected to deliver additional outcomes, such as enhanced maternal employment, parenting skills, greater family and community cohesion.<sup>34</sup>
146. Because of this research, and our experience of successful programmes across the OECD countries, the OECD team encourages the continuation of *Early Start*, especially in a reformed and expanded version. Certain steps would seem necessary, e.g.
- *To expand the present Early Start session to a full-day educare service for disadvantaged children, in partnership with the voluntary and community agencies:* Not only do cognitive and social outcomes improve (see Leseman above), but the choice of a full-day programme can help resolve the concern: what happens to these children, who are largely growing up under difficult circumstances, when they leave the present 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> hour service for the rest of the day? For instance, in the *Early Start* unit visited,

<sup>32</sup> A more recent analysis by the Educational Research Centre indicates more positive developments in planning, curriculum and pedagogy.

<sup>33</sup> The Kelleghan-Greaney study researched the original Rutland Street Project, the first targeted intervention in Ireland toward children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Early evaluation studies failed to show any significant positive outcomes in the early years of schooling, whereas later follow-up studies showed that the Rutland Street cohort stayed longer at school, and were more likely to take a public examination than other children from the same area.

<sup>34</sup> See the outline of the British Sure Start project in Box 10 below.

the review team was informed that there was no other early childhood provision in the area. Families in which the parent(s) is employed outside the home are dependent on care arrangements through relatives, neighbours or (mostly unregistered) childminders in the informal sector. This means in reality that many children are experiencing poor quality and disjointed care arrangements in at least two or even more settings. In sum, for young children living in areas designated as disadvantaged, access to full-day quality service would seem to be one of the most urgent issues for policy development.

- *To improve the quality of Early Start programming:* In the section on quality that follows, the OECD team raises a number of concerns concerning structural and process conditions of quality in early childhood programmes, e.g. child-staff ratios, the undue dominance of teacher intervention, the relative poverty of classroom environments, the notion of play...
- *To strengthen parallel intervention supports:* *Early Start* was originally conceived as a socio-educational model of intervention, that is, as part of a wide range of intervention supports, including health, nutrition, social services, family support... and dovetailing with community development initiatives. However, these supports – according to teachers interviewed - have not always been present in *Early Start* areas in any comprehensive fashion. Teachers urgently need to receive sufficient support both to run an appropriate learning experience for the children and to establish the links with the social, family and community agencies, necessary in this type of work.

147. In this context, research from other countries suggests that interventions toward disadvantaged children are more effective when:

- *Early learning programmes take place within a general framework of anti-poverty and community development policies.* (Kagan and Zigler, 1987, Morris et al., 2001, Sweeney, 2002). To break the poverty cycle and thus protect the socio-emotional development of young children from disadvantaged homes, wider issues such as employment and jobs training, social support, income transfers, housing policies, substance abuse and community resources need to be addressed.
- *Programmes are multi-functional and engage families as well as children:* that is, programmes are strong on family engagement and support as well as providing high quality learning experiences to the children. A national evaluation of the Early Excellence Centres in England has shown that integrated socio-educational services bring multiple benefits to children, families, and practitioners (Bertram et al., 2002; Pascal et al., 2002).
- *Programming is intensive:* research indicates that the effectiveness of programmes for young children is enhanced by intensity (Leseman, 2002) and year-long duration (Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2003). There is evidence to show that a structured, half-day, early learning programme on a term basis can be effective, and should be incorporated into all full-day services.<sup>35</sup>
- *Programmes are pedagogically sound and conducted by appropriately trained professionals.* A high quality programme in early childhood implies child-initiative, play and involvement. If a programme is over-focussed on formal skills, it is more likely to provide opportunities for children to fail, and to develop a higher dependency on adults, promoting in them negative perceptions of their own competencies (Stipek et al. 1995).
- *Depending on the degree of disadvantage, enriched health and nutrition inputs may be necessary to ensure that young children can take full advantage of the early childhood service.*

### 3. Access for children with special needs

148. During the course of the review, the OECD team was particularly impressed by the well-organised environment, the individualised teaching strategies, careful documentation and record-keeping observed in

<sup>35</sup> The Dutch research conducted by Leseman indicates that five half-day, structured programmes per week produces more effective learning than shorter sessional programmes. Full-day programmes are even more effective especially in at-risk circumstances. The Chicago research underlines the efficacy of bridging programmes across holiday periods.

a Special School for 56 children aged 6 to 18 in Galway. According to the teaching staff, the school was well supported by the local community and by voluntary contributions. However, we were informed on several other occasions that the general situation for children with special needs in Ireland is far from satisfactory. Despite the optimism generated by the National Forum on Early Childhood Education in 1998 (Report of the Forum, 1998), the raising of the issue in the White Paper on Early Education (1999), and the overwhelming case for early intervention with regard to these children (Guralnick, 1998), there is still, it seems, no national plan for early intervention for children under four years. The situation compares poorly with other countries, e.g. with the United States where from 1975, services for special needs children were expanded with the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (Public Law 94-142), further revised in 1997 under the title *Individual with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA). According to this law, states receive funds from the federal government to assist in the education of those with special needs from age 3 to 21, and a further grant - *Grants for Infants and Toddlers* - may be used to implement state-wide early intervention services for children under age three and their families.

149. In addition, the right of American parents to be active participants in decision-making regarding educational services for their children is clearly recognised. Parents must be included in the development of a child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which lays out the goals and objectives for children from 3 through 5 years of age. Families of children from birth through two years of age are to have an Individualized Family Services Plan (IFSP), which is designed to build on each family's strengths, and provide the supports required to ensure that each young child being with special education needs receives the appropriate supports and services. The legislation also establishes specific programs for educating parents about their legal rights by establishing a network of parent training and information centres across the US.
150. Routinely, young American children with disabilities are assessed by medical services, mental health professionals and by local school district child study teams, and if necessary are referred to the most appropriate services. The law requires placements in the "least restrictive environment", and insists that, in so far as possible, children with disabilities should receive supports and services in natural environments with typical children, and not in segregated settings. Programme staff and family child care providers in most states are encouraged to enrol children with special needs, and most find it beneficial not only to the child but to all the children in the programme. Head Start programmes in particular offer health and mental health services to their children and families, and 13% of children enrolled have disabilities.
151. In Ireland, official policy states that children with special needs should be integrated into regular infant classes wherever possible. However, with the exception of children with visual or hearing impairment, DES does not take responsibility for the great majority of children with disabilities under 4 years of age. DES informed the OECD team that mainstream primary schools catered for some 9,092 children with special educational needs, out of a total of 423,344 children, that is, just over 2% of children with special needs are included. The team was not provided with figures concerning the numbers of special needs children in infant classes or the specific measures taken to ensure for them appropriate educational support. It seems that when enrolled in the mainstream school, special needs children can receive periodic tuition from a special needs teacher who may or may not have a specialisation to treat a particular disability. Moreover, these teachers report that they do not have sufficient supports to assist these children adequately. Certainly, the Department, the Irish National Teachers Organisation and school principals are aware of the issues, but despite policy initiatives and advocacy documents, a national plan does not exist to provide from birth structured public intervention in favour of children with disabilities, and to include them in a systematic and appropriate way in the mainstream school. In sum, the institutional support given to Irish children with special needs and to their families is, according to information received, irregular, under-funded and in the great majority of cases, not inclusive.

#### 4. Access for children from the Traveller community

152. From our interviews and the literature available, one group of children in Ireland seem to live in abject poverty, namely, children from the Travelling community. The team did not receive information on the

annual per capita income of the group, but the figures for infant mortality, life expectancy, health and education status of children from the Traveller community are a matter of real concern (Pavee Point, 2000). All the predictors of poor health and future school failure were present in the small Traveller pre-school that the OECD team visited: low family income and low parental education, combined with one or more of other at-risk features, such as, large family size, unemployment, and at-risk living conditions. Our reading of the recent *National Evaluation Report (2003)* of Travellers pre-schools would suggest that conditions are better in other Traveller pre-schools, but it seemed to the review team that an energetic national approach to the well-being and education of young Traveller children is urgently needed, in close partnership with the Traveller community and its representatives.

153. The recently published national evaluation report, *Pre-School for Travellers* underlines that significant resources will be required to ensure the development and enhancement of the education provided in Traveller pre-schools. The report makes a number of far-reaching recommendations concerning: guidelines for the management of the pre-schools; provision for local involvement and a range of management models; the management and the local co-ordination of pre-school provision; improving the work of management committees; admission, registration and recording of attendance, the organisation of the pre-school; the development of a standard for pre-school buildings and their locations; improving funding arrangements; professional development of teachers and childcare assistants; sharing and developing good practice; planning, pedagogy and curriculum; assessment and record-keeping; linkages with primary schools.
154. The OECD review team welcomes this document, and the future work that it foresees. We would propose also that the successful inclusion of Traveller children into mainstream primary and secondary schools will depend not only on high quality early childhood programmes, but also on significant upstream measures. A systematic and co-ordinated approach needs to be adopted in favour of the Traveller community, which will deliver in coming years anti-bias treatment, appropriate housing, employment, and enhanced funding of special services for Traveller children. In these services, a delicate balance needs to be struck between inclusion and the right of Travellers to recognition as a special group.

## 4. Quality issues

### Quality discussions and initiatives in Ireland

155. The overall picture in Ireland is one of a focus on quality issues, with ongoing developments at various levels. The National Childcare Strategy - building on the recommendations of the National Forum - favours a view of quality assessment as a dynamic, ongoing process linked to indicators such as appropriateness of provision and learning environments; low child/adult ratios; trained, registered and adequately remunerated staff; partnerships with parents and local community; diversity; accessibility (Government of Ireland, 1999a). The *White Paper (1999)*, while recognising that conceptualisations of quality cannot be fully standardised, recommends defining a set of core criteria which should include both structural (tangible) and process-oriented (non-tangible) elements of quality.
156. As a concrete measure for evaluating the quality of early childhood services outside the Education sector (primary), the *White Paper (1999)* recommended the introduction of a Quality in Education (QE) Mark. In its proposed form, the QE Mark is seen as an external evaluation measure against which provision will be assessed. It is to be awarded to "providers who reach minimum standards in a number of key education-related areas" (Government of Ireland, 1999b, p.54). These areas are defined as curriculum, methodologies, staff qualifications and training. It is planned that the standards will dovetail with the Department of Health and Children requirements as laid down in the 1996 and 1997 Child Care Regulations which focus on matters of health and safety, since under the present system, centres wishing to be assessed for a QE Mark would be inspected by two separate government agencies, each looking at different aspects of a centre's functioning. The *White Paper* proposes a combination of both sets of expertise

and the varying perspectives into one set of inspection procedures. The QE Mark is to be developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE).

157. Besides the above-mentioned approaches towards developing a quality framework for early childhood curriculum issues, the DES inspectorate is also currently working on "objectively defined evaluation and quality criteria" (*Irish Background Report 2002*, p.62) to help primary schools, including the infant classes, in conducting self-evaluations and to assist the inspectorate in external evaluations. Quality initiatives are also being funded under the EOCP, both at the level of the County Childcare Committees and in support of the work of the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations. A number of self-evaluation (e.g. by IPPA) and externally validated self-evaluation procedures have been developed (e.g. by the National Children's Nursery Association).
158. A number of issues are raised by these initiatives, e.g.
- Although the focus on quality is welcome and necessary in the present Irish context (see next section, and proposals concerning inspection in Chapter 4), a vision of quality as a matter of regulation, divorced from other system considerations, may be insufficient. There is the assumption that centres – in order to remain competitive – will wish to be awarded the QE Mark. This raises several questions: How can centres be persuaded to take part in a voluntary quality improvement programme? How will quality of provision be guaranteed in the centres that opt out of a voluntary procedure? How will the costs of maintaining an extensive system of external evaluation be met?<sup>36</sup>
  - Again, although national guidelines concerning programmatic and process requirements are important to elaborate, they would seem less urgent in the present context than a *National Goals and Quality Framework*. A national quality framework should be distinguished from a national curriculum dealing with learning areas, learning objectives and how to reach them. A quality framework focuses more on what Irish families and young children should be able to expect from accredited services whether public or private, that is: the passing of challenging accreditation procedures, adequate facility requirements, a sufficient number of highly qualified staff, favourable child-staff ratios, certified structured programmes, quality targets with regular monitoring and evaluation, certain modalities of parent participation and community outreach.
  - From a review team perspective, the proposal by the White Paper to combine the expertise of DHC and DES in inspection procedures under a specialised inspectorate is interesting and cost effective. It is also far-reaching in its implications, implying that the early childhood sector is specific. If this is so, a case should also be made for the sector to have more autonomy with regard to facility needs and teacher training profiles.
  - There is also the issue of possible overlap between different government agencies. Not only does the CECDE have a remit to develop a framework of learning goals for the age group 0 to 6, but also the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), a statutory body advising the Education minister, is working on a curriculum document for the same age-group entitled *Framework for Early Childhood Learning*. The document will cover various developmental domains (physical, cognitive, linguistic/communicative, social and emotional). Although not planned as a mandatory or prescriptive document, the NCCA sees the *Framework for Early Childhood Learning* as an integral part of the assessment procedure for gaining the QE Mark. Consideration is needed as to how these proposed frameworks interface with the quality standards laid down in the national Child Care Regulations (1996, 1997) under the Department of Health and Children, or with other curricula in use in Ireland, such as High/Scope, Montessori, Froebel...

<sup>36</sup> This is a characteristic challenge for demand-side systems in which governments indirectly subsidise but do not engage in direct management of provision. In market conditions, non-governmental providers are tempted to respect the minimal quality levels and cut back on hiring qualified ECEC staff. In such instances, non-profit providers may be a surer option as they may be less inclined to engage in opportunistic behaviour. However, if governments only give subsidies to non-profit providers, then for-profit providers have a significant incentive to masquerade as non-profits, and disperse profits under a variety of other names, e.g. management or rental fees. A solution often adopted is to invest in a heavy supervisory framework and inspectors, and to require that all ECEC providers are governed by a board of directors dominated by parents and public representatives. A more effective solution may be for governments to assume the funding and management of a public or mixed system of early education and care.

### The reality of quality on the ground – the education sector

159. The OECD team was able to experience a number and variety of early childhood settings during the course of the review visit. However, the overall impression of our brief visits in school settings for young children was one of whole class teaching, with children sitting quietly at tables. The approach appeared to be directive and formal compared to practices observed and theoretically underpinned in various other countries, where more explicit emphasis is placed on exploratory learning and self-initiated, hands-on (as opposed to table-top) activities. In addition, the teacher/pupil ratio (currently one teacher to a maximum of 29 pupils) and class size in the infant classes is one which compares unfavourably internationally. If the aim is to meet the learning needs of children in an individualised way, it constitutes a considerable barrier to quality. Although the DES is making every effort to improve this situation, Table 10 in Appendix 1 shows that over 54 % of Junior Infants and 57 % of Senior Infants are in classes of 25–34 children.
160. From the experience of the review team, DES-funded ECEC provision was characterised by an overt focus on literacy and numeracy related activities, possibly a consequence of teachers feeling pressured because of parental expectations and the short length of contact time. In discussions with practitioners and researchers, the team noted that the evaluation criteria chosen tend to be narrowly focussed on cognitive outcomes, and from early on, the introduction of written symbols is noticeable. The arrangement of classrooms into areas or corners which children can freely choose was not evident. In few schools did we find a role-play area, a nature or biology area, sand and water, an art area (broader than painting), a construction area or recycled material... 'Play' was often used as a means of delivering a curriculum goal or a pre-academic skill, and the place of 'free play' in the schedule of the day seemed rather limited. In general, the pedagogy was not focussed on the observed interests of children but sought to interest them in the concerns of the teacher. 'Open framework' programmes, which, internationally meet with wide acceptance, were not in evidence. Problems that related specifically to *Early Start* were the general high rate of pupil absenteeism, insufficient in-service training and teacher support measures, and inadequate allocation of time for staff to review their work.

### Quality in the childcare sector

161. The team visited an excellent family daycarer in the Dublin suburbs, who showed much empathy and expertise in dealing with the young children in her care, and whose house was well-appointed to receive infants and toddlers. In general, however, the private centres we visited (charging fees of around €120 per week for full-day care) showed insufficient understanding of how to interact with and stimulate young children in group settings. Though often well-resourced in terms of rooms and equipment, again with an over-abundance of ready-to-buy plastic toys, there was again an observable emphasis on table-top games, puzzles and work cards rather than on inter-active, self-directed learning. In no instance did we see children engaged in the preparation of food, eating together or playing outdoors. In reality, outdoor facilities were generally token, and pedagogical activities that encouraged children to explore the outdoors and nature were not in evidence.
162. Again, the regulatory framework in place in Ireland seems weak in comparison to other countries. It is basically a licence to practice, but does not include sufficient incentives to train, employ qualified staff or continually improve expertise. Other countries regulate more stringently or, like Australia, introduce voluntary quality improvement and accreditation schemes. It may be noted, however, that the strength of a voluntary accreditation system depends on what the providers are offered in return. In several countries, accredited providers can receive, either directly or indirectly, normative grants or subsidies attached to young children and families who wish to avail of childcare or early education. This presupposes that a grant or subsidy scheme is in place, sufficient both to make care affordable for the low- and modest-income families, and to attract a maximum number of providers into the official system.
163. There is also the issue of childcare providers working in isolation, with much effort going into administration and the search for clients, and insufficient energy invested in training and quality improvement. To overcome

this weakness, some countries such as the Nordics and Flanders, insist on family daycarers working in networks. The network structure is able to take on many of the administrative functions, organise training and enter into negotiation with the local authority on issues of salaries, training, holidays, insurance and the setting of parental fees.

164. The team visited also a community-based, not-for-profit playgroup/pre-school in an area of high unemployment, with a growing number of refugee families. A real lack of resources, trained staff and materials was apparent. Fourteen boys and girls aged 3 and 4, many of whom are classified as 'special needs' (including autistic) children, were grouped round one table with about 6 young trainees (college students on a youth employment scheme) cutting out Christmas trees according to a given pattern. The décor was old and unattractive, there was almost no heating (in mid-November), with little equipment or play / creative materials to be seen. A "parents' room" we were shown was cold, dark, and uninviting. Despite a very committed stance, the director and her staff are faced with an almost impossible task. The centre had received a staffing grant from ADM, but the Health Board grant had consequently been cut, despite the fact that there is a long waiting list. A capital grant had not yet been applied for. With appropriate resourcing, this playgroup could be transformed into a vibrant intercultural learning environment in an area with great need of family and community support structures.

### Staffing and training

165. A particularly pressing staffing problem in Ireland which is closely related to quality issues is the generally low level of training and remuneration in the Childcare sector combined with a low level of staff retention. In most of the services the review team visited, whether private for-profit or community-based not-for-profit, the difficulty of recruiting well-qualified - or even qualified - practitioners and high staff turnover was referred to as a significant problem. A related issue is that of representation for childcare workers. While the early years staff in primary schools (i.e. those working with 4 and 5 year old children) have strong union representation through the Irish National Teachers' Association (INTO), there is no such organisation advocating in the same way for practitioners in the Childcare sector.
166. The generally low level and the disparate forms of training in the Childcare sector is a policy concern that has been acknowledged by the DJELR. In our discussions with stakeholders, there was much support for the recent policy initiative to establish a training framework through the *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (Government of Ireland, 2002). Improving training, professional development and career prospects in the Childcare sector must be seen as a key issue for the future. The Certifying Bodies Sub-Group of the National Childcare Co-ordinating Committee is working on this issue with the National Qualifications Authority. (See Abbott & Pugh, 1998, for a description of similar problems in the UK and proposals for meeting the challenge.)
167. A significant contribution has been made to the delivery of childcare, particularly in community groups, by workers participating in 'return to work' and other employment creation schemes. However, these workers are frequently untrained in childcare. Some have been encouraged to undergo childcare training to enhance their own prospects within the sector and to ensure that they understand the basic principles of quality childcare in delivering their daily work. An equally pertinent issue is that of consensus building on conceptualisations of the professional role profile considered necessary for work with young children up to statutory school age. At present the stances on professionalism and pedagogy range considerably, from a highly formalised, subject-oriented school teaching approach to a play-based, informal approach with little learning taking place.
168. In *Early Start* units, primary school teachers work alongside childcare workers in the same group. This collaboration was commented on as a "partnership challenge" because of the difference between professional perspectives and a very tangible divergence in terms of compensation. The team was informed, however, that recent analyses of *Early Start* show that collaboration between teachers and childcare workers functions well in most cases. In practice, the team perceived a need for stronger links between those

working in *Early Start* units and teachers in the Infant classes. We became aware that the childcare workers, although in the planning and review of ES activities, were not involved in the overall school planning. In terms of working conditions, the time structure of the ES programme allows practically no time for reviewing work and consultation with colleagues.

169. The current minimal focus on early childhood education and care in the Education sector training for teachers (46 hours total, all during the first year of study) is a further issue which the team sees as demanding policy attention. Training is strongly oriented towards the demands of compulsory schooling and is organised around curriculum subject areas. The kind of inter-disciplinary approach needed for conceptualising and developing appropriate pedagogies for work with young children appears to have no clear place in this kind of training format.
170. The problem of insufficient time allocation for the early years has been noted in other countries where pre-school teachers are trained alongside primary school teachers (Oberhuemer & Ulich, 1997). Compulsory schooling proves to have higher status when designing the training curriculum, with inevitably negative consequences for the quality of student expertise in early childhood education and care. A recent reform in Sweden, where a unified framework of training has been adopted for pre-school teachers<sup>37</sup> and primary teachers (and leisure time pedagogues), will possibly develop new ways of addressing such imbalances. A policy goal set and explicitly pursued by the Swedish government - that of a co-ordinated education system which emphasises upward integration, with pre-schools influencing schools in terms of pedagogy and methodologies - will presumably have a positive impact on the status of the early years within the training curriculum.

## 6. Parental engagement and information services

171. Parental engagement in early childhood services differs widely from country to country. In some countries, parents may form an automatic majority on the board of centres, control the finances and co-operate with the professional staff in elaborating the broad lines of the annual programme of a centre. In all countries, even in those in which parental input is token, it is generally admitted that good relations between teaching staff and parents are more easily formed when children are very young. Communication with parents is often considered a necessary feature of early childhood work, a prelude to winning parental support for education. Opening and closing hours are often organised to begin a half-hour or so before and after the formal programme for children, so that parents can meet and discuss with staff. Parents are also made welcome during daily 'settling-in time' and in the critical first weeks of a child's arrival at a centre.
172. In Ireland, the Education Act provides for the establishment of a Parents' Association in each school, and according to DES, parental involvement is one of the underpinning principles of *Early Start*. In the Home-School-Community Liaison scheme, specific attention to parental involvement is part of in-service training for staff, who are expected to visit children's homes. However, from our observation of Irish schools and centres, we saw little evidence of parental presence in the hallways, classrooms or activities. This may indicate that though formal participation measures are in place, informal opportunities for contacts between staff and parents may be limited in Irish settings. If this is the case, greater focus on parental involvement may be necessary, particularly in schools and centres in disadvantaged areas, where parents need both support and greater access to education opportunities.
173. According to recent research (Bowman et al. 2001), the need to include parents in learning activities with children probably depends on the situation. In some circumstances, parents acting as teachers may be effective, e.g. parents can provide real learning support to children with certain types of special need. In general, however, the appropriate conduct by trained professionals of activities in an enriched learning

<sup>37</sup> In Sweden, pre-school teachers work in centres with children aged one to six years.

environment seems to be the key variable in children's learning in a programme. What is required most of all from parents is that they provide a stable and caring home environment for the child. This may imply that other types of family support - unrelated to the issue of parents as teachers - may be more critical for achieving positive child outcomes, e.g. in areas where there are many disadvantaged parents, the implication is that alongside the high quality early childhood programme, integrated, multi-functional services should be offered in which the health, social and family agencies are involved. In other areas, it may be sufficient for ECEC centres to model for parents how to interact with young children, and provide them with regular information about what is expected of parents or how to access useful courses and services.

**Box 10. Outreach to parents with young children and sensitivity to community needs**

New conceptions of early childhood intervention in Britain encourage strongly parent and community involvement. For example, *Sure Start* services seek first to establish partnerships of parents and professionals who will work together and will share skills and expertise. The aim is to build a community's participation and capacity around its young children. Activities organised by local groups are linked with available health, family, educational and social welfare programmes. Supportive and preventive services are made available to families with children under the age of four years, thereby identifying and addressing potential difficulties at the earliest possible age. Parents are supported in the process of accessing and utilising services.

Area programmes for children are often facilitated by an Early Excellence Centre (a pre-school/parent centre), from which networks of Carer and Toddler Groups are organised. Priority needs, identified by parents, are met through the provision of child care services, support groups, vocational and other training, within a context of contributing to the processes of social and economic regeneration, e.g. the well-known Pen Green centre in Corby has four major strands of activity: 1) High quality early years education and care; 2) Parent Education; 3) Community health and family support services; 4) Training and research. The Centre has a comprehensive parent partnership programme, and over 4,000 parents have been involved over a period of 15 years. Staff at the Centre have established a model of co-operative working that respects both the learning and support needs of parents, and children's right to high quality early years education with care. This model of working with parents is underpinned by the belief that parents are deeply committed to their children's learning and development.

174. Where formal engagement as a group is concerned, Irish parents are represented on most County Childcare Committees, but they do not appear to have a strong voice at the national level. The *National Parents Council Primary* is a member of the NCCC, but, being a school-oriented organisation and short-staffed (3 staff in the Dublin office, and 20 trainers around the country to reach 500 primary schools) it cannot effectively represent parents with children in childcare facilities. This must be seen as a weakness of the system as a whole, since partnership between early childhood services and parents is necessary for future school support, and can contribute to quality provision (see also White Paper, 1999, page 114 ff).
175. During our visit we were informed that effective information policies for parents on early education and childcare issues need to be developed, both at the local and the national level. Altogether, considerable resources and training are needed to ensure that parents can effectively participate in consultative measures and management positions. This includes organised parent representation within the Childcare sector and for training opportunities for parents within the Education sector to help them become more vocal in articulating their interests and needs on School Management Boards. (The present training budget of the *NPC-Primary* was recently cut from €340.000 to €150.000.). It would seem also that parental representation across the early childhood sector could be significantly stronger than its present inclusion within the wider remit of the National Parents Council Primary in the context of statutory schooling.

## 7. Research, evaluation, information systems

176. The *Irish Background Report 2002* and subsequent discussions during the review visit made visible a number of insufficiencies in data collection at the national level. Educational statistics on primary education are generally not disaggregated in their published form. For example, there is no breakdown of the 4 year olds in infant classes in terms of socio-economic background, ethnicity, family structure. In sum, it is not possible to say who among the 4 year old population is gaining (or not gaining) access to early education. Some data is collected by Health Boards, but this is done in non-standardised ways. It seems also that in order to gain information on registered facilities inspections and their outcomes at a national level, each of the 10 Health Boards has to be contacted separately. A special module of the Quarterly National Household Survey has just looked at childcare, but with a strong perspective on female participation in the labour force (see QNHS Module on Childcare Arrangements in the *Irish Background Report 2002*).
177. Further insufficiencies are reported at the county level. A National Childcare Census co-ordinated by ADM – another of the DJELR policy initiatives - is for the first time collating data in a standardised format across the 33 counties/cities, helping to provide a baseline for the effective planning of services. However, there are – so the review team was told – considerable discrepancies between counties as to the methods of data retrieval used and the quality of data assembled.
178. While a number of short-term evaluation studies on the effects of specific pre-school pilot interventions (e.g. *Early Start*) have been carried out, we were informed that there is no tradition of evidence-based policy making in the ECEC field in Ireland. It is to be hoped that the newly established CECDE will itself contract research and direct the attention of the university departments to the key issues on which evidence-based research is needed. As in many countries, little research has been carried out on important issues on a long-term basis. In this respect, the proposed longitudinal study of 18,000 children – put forward by both the National Children’s Strategy and the Report of the Commission on the Family and accepted by the Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs and the Minister for Children in April 2002 – is to be seen as a particularly forward-looking step towards collating systematic data on children growing up in Ireland.
179. In our discussions with researchers, several research priorities for the coming years were pinpointed:
- To continue the analysis of labour force participation and patterns (half-time, temporary...), and to monitor family-friendly measures, parental leave and their use patterns;
  - To examine financial supports and incentives granted to working parents in other countries;
  - To identify the typical needs of parents vis-à-vis childcare and early education, broken down for different groups; parents of children with special needs; traveller families; low income groups (urban and rural); families with a second child...
  - To examine the effects of dual working parents on young children’s development and school performance;
  - To examine the effects of lone parenting (in rural and urban milieus) on young children’s development;
  - To develop a conceptual framework and refine the relevant indicators for comparative data collection on young children in Ireland, and the services available to them;
  - To map the density of ECEC services and schools across the country
  - To overview the descriptive features of provision throughout the country, including the number of children having access, their attendance patterns in the different geographical areas, and the employment status and situation of parents using childcare services;
  - To elaborate a conceptual and comparative framework to undertake the evaluation of the quality of various ECEC settings in Ireland; structural features; process elements...
  - To examine the types of curriculum in use, their validation and delivery implications, especially those used most widely, in pre-school and the infant school;

- To examine how parents may support young children's learning in the home;
- To examine the development of oral language and its links to school achievement
- To identify how many trained personnel are working with children in Ireland, the extent of their training, etc. so as to set feasible standards for centres.
- To look more closely at how policy decisions concerning young children are implemented.

## 8. Funding

### Public investment in young children and the funding of ECEC services

180. Figure 1 in Appendix 1 shows graphically the growth in the Irish economy from 1991 to 2001. During this ten year period, economic growth in Ireland surpassed that of all other OECD countries. As can be seen from Table 2 below, Ireland averaged a growth rate of 7.7 % during the period, compared to the OECD average of 2.8 %; to the USA rate of 3.4 % or the UK at 2.7 %. In 2001, 450,000 more people were at work in Ireland than in 1989 – a remarkable achievement in such a small economy. The new job situation has brought an enhanced standard of living to the majority of families and children, and has changed irreversibly patterns of work for Irish women.

181. However, growth rates are relative to a starting point, and as many of the comparative tables in this report demonstrate, young children in Ireland are starting from a position of relative disadvantage compared to their northern European counterparts. Public expenditure in general is relatively low in Ireland (see Figure 2 in Appendix 1), not least in the health, social and education fields (see Table 12, Table 2 and Figure 4 in Appendix 1). This is a feature that hinders Ireland's showing in the United Nations Human Development Index, where it is 18th in the world, but last among the northern European countries.<sup>38</sup> From 1985 onwards, social expenditure in Ireland increased considerably in volume, but decreased significantly as a percentage of GDP. Within this generally low expenditure, young children receive a small share in comparison with their counterparts in other EU countries.

182. Economic analyses from many other countries indicate that investment in early years services brings not only proven benefits to the children and families they serve, but also to governments and national economies (Leseman, 2002, Cleveland and Krashinsky, 2003). The following paragraphs list some of the more recent evidence:

### Analyses showing educational returns from early childhood investment

- *Success For All: long-term effects and cost-effectiveness* (Borman, G. and Hewes G. in AERA Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, Washington, Vol. 24, No. 4, Winter 2002). Success For All is a comprehensive elementary school reform programme designed to promote early school success among at-risk children. It is widely replicated in the USA, and serves over 1 million children in 2000 schools. In addition to offering an intensive, pre-K and K programme, it provides mechanisms to promote stronger links between the home and the school, and to address social behavioural and health issues. Relative to control groups, and at similar cost, Success For All children complete elementary school at an earlier age, achieve better learning outcomes, have fewer retentions or special education placements. The authors underline that for success to continue, similar programmes need to be used throughout primary and lower secondary schooling.
- *The Title I Chicago Child-Parent Centers* (Reynolds et al. 2002) – Opened in 1967, the Centers are located in public schools and provide educational and family support to low-income children from ages 3 to 9 years. Using data from the Chicago Longitudinal Study, and comparison group children born in 1980, Reynolds and his team show that participation in the Centers was significantly associated with

<sup>38</sup> Ireland performs strongly on the GDP indicator, but more weakly on social spending, health (life chances for girls and women are low by EU standards) and education (persisting functional illiteracy, and school drop-out among poor children).

greater school achievement, higher rates of school completion, with significantly lower rates of remedial education, juvenile delinquency and child maltreatment. Cost-benefit analyses indicate that in 1998 dollar values, the programme provided to society a return of \$7.14 per dollar invested by: increasing economic well-being and tax revenues; reduction of public expenditure on remedial education, criminal justice treatment and crime victims.

### Analyses showing social, economic and labour market returns from investment

- The Müller Kucera-Bauer study: *Costs and benefits of childcare services in Switzerland – Empirical findings from Zurich*, (2001) shows that the city's public investment of 18 million SF annually is offset by at least 29 million SF of additional tax revenues and reduced public spending on social aid (Müller Kucera and Bauer, 2001). Where affordable childcare was available, the rate of hours in work almost doubled, especially for single-headed households with one or more children. In sum, publicly funded childcare resulted in 1) Higher productivity and earnings due to maintaining productive workers in work. 2) Higher contributions to social security and savings; 3) Less dependency on social assistance during both the productive and retirement ages (without affordable childcare, many families would fall below the poverty line).<sup>39</sup>
- *The ongoing Berrueti-Clement et al. study* (1984, 1995-6, 2001) evaluates the educational and economic returns of a high quality pre-school programme (Perry Pre-school) on a sample of Afro-American children. Key findings were that the children from the Perry Pre-school programme had better school records, improved labour market entry and higher incomes than the control group of similar children. In a cost-benefit analysis of the data, Barnett (1995) estimated that the cost-benefit ratio for the investment in the programme was almost 1:7.
- *The North Carolina Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention* (Masse and Barnett, 2002), which began in 1972, has been subject to numerous studies. The various researches show positive cognitive and social results for the children (mostly disadvantaged) in the project, some of whom gained entry into four-year university programmes. The Masse and Barnett cost-benefit study of 2002 finds that every dollar invested in high quality, full-day, year-round preschool generated a four dollar return to the children, their families and all taxpayers. Among the study's findings:
  - Participants are projected to earn about \$143,000 more over their lifetimes than those who did not take part in the programme.
  - Mothers of children who were enrolled can also expect greater earnings - about \$133,000 more over their lifetimes.
  - School districts can expect to save more than \$11,000 per child because participants are less likely to require special or remedial education.
  - The next generation (children of the children in the Abecedarian project) are projected to earn nearly \$48,000 more throughout their lifetimes.
- *The 2001 report issued by the National Economic Development and Law Center* in the US assesses the impact of the childcare industry on the economy of California. Apart from enabling parents to work and earn higher incomes, the childcare industry contributed \$65 billion to the total value of goods and services produced in California - just over four times as much as the motion picture industry. Licensed childcare directly employed 123,000 people, including teaching and non-teaching staff, and maintained a further 86,000 jobs in transportation, publishing, manufacturing, construction, financial services, real estate and insurance (S. Moss, 2001).
- *The Canadian cost-benefit analysis* issued in 1998 by a team of economists at the University of Toronto estimates the costs and benefits of establishing a national quality childcare system for Canada

<sup>39</sup> An interesting conclusion of this paper is that as most of the returns on ECEC investments go back to the Federal authority, cantons and municipalities in Switzerland are reluctant to invest in ECEC services.

(Cleveland and Krashinsky, 1998). Although the authors make conservative assumptions about the magnitude of positive externalities, they conclude that the substantial public investment envisaged would generate important net benefits for Canadian society.

- *Labour market/taxation studies*: The provision of education and care services has allowed most OECD countries in the last decades to maintain the labour market participation of women, with a corresponding widening of the tax base. In Norway, for example, the increase has been from about 50% female participation in 1972 to well over 80% in 1997 (Kornstad and Thorensen, Statistics Norway, 2002). In particular, women of 25 to 40 years have greatly increased their participation.

183. In sum, a strong economic rationale exists in favour of establishing national networks of early childhood services (ESO/Swedish Finance Ministry Report, 1999; Sen, 1999; Urrutia, 1999; Van der Gaag, 2002; Vandell and Wolfe, 2000; Verry, 2000). Significant employment can be generated immediately, tax revenues increased, and important savings made in later educational and social expenditure, if children – especially from at-risk backgrounds – are given appropriate developmental opportunities early enough in life. The consequences of not investing sufficiently in services can also be considered. If childcare is regarded as a private family responsibility, the result will be – in modern economies - insufficient supply of services for those who need them, a fragmentation of services, a lack of equity vis-à-vis poorer families and overall poor quality of provision.
184. The economic argument in favour of greater investment in young children is perhaps particularly strong in Ireland, from both labour market and human capital perspectives. Unless the state provides more supports and services, many working women in Ireland may continue to leave employment for family reasons. Both OECD and CSO figures (see Table 11 in Appendix 1) suggest that this is already happening on a large scale, and may eventually create a vicious circle: a decrease in taxation revenues leading to an inability to fund public services, and a reinforcement of the culture of low employment rates among women. In turn, lack of income leads to social dependency and poverty, especially in single-headed households, with extremely negative consequences for young children.

### **The funding situation in Ireland – childcare and education**

#### *Childcare*

185. At the beginning of the decade, childcare in Ireland received the greatest funding boost ever in the state's history through the National Childcare Strategy and the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP). European Structural Funding, matched with significant governmental allocations, has been a major step forward in the development of childcare in Ireland. As mentioned in para. 28 above, the main body of funding is channelled through the two Regional Operational Programmes of the National Development Plan which together make €328 million available (including €170 million of EU funding), while the Exchequer has supplemented this funding with a further €109 million making a total of €436.7 million available to develop childcare over the life of the Programme, 2000 - 2006. Within this framework, one measure provides capital grant assistance to create new and quality-enhanced childcare places while two sub-measures support staffing grants where there is a focus on disadvantage and provide grants for quality enhancement initiatives through the national voluntary childcare organizations.
186. The recent NDP evaluation of EOCP performance has not been fully positive (NDP/CSF Evaluation Unit, 2003), and states that "in terms of its key objectives, the performance of the programme to date has been disappointing". Expenditure and physical progress are running below target; deadweight has occurred in the process of providing capital grants to private providers; insufficient numbers of childcare places have been created; problems have arisen with programme indicators and reliable data; and there have been deficiencies in monitoring the quality improvement sub-measures.... From the perspective of the review team, these are teething troubles, which, of course, need to be addressed. To have been able to launch such an ambitious programme is already a real achievement in the Irish context, where few or no models were available. Moreover, as the evaluation acknowledges, the programme has been able to maintain a

focus on equality of opportunity, staff support, affordability and social inclusion (92% of funding going toward the community sector).

187. From our understanding, the approach adopted has been to build up the community sector and the profession of childcare worker, while offering incentives to private providers to provide additional or enhanced childcare places. To our mind, this is a realistic and sound option in the present circumstances. Given the dearth of public services in the field, except for the early primary school service, the government has little choice other than to attract voluntary and private providers into the field, and through funding mechanisms, encourage them to become part of a regulated system. Because the initiative is government led, it has enabled the EOCP to focus to some extent on quality, which ultimately comes from the quality of the workers employed and from those inputs that government traditionally can supply: legislation, regulation, management, a national framework, equity for the poor, evaluation, training and research.

#### *Education financing*

188. Again, as in other sectors, public expenditure on education has expanded greatly in Ireland over the past decade but, parallel to health and social expenditure, it remains weak compared to other OECD countries – see Fig. 4 and Table 8 in Appendix 1. Within that expenditure, an investment imbalance of almost 3:1 has occurred in past decades in favour of the higher levels of education at the expense of primary and early childhood education (see Table 8). As a result, *per capita* investment, child/staff ratios and regular funding to renew training and pedagogy in the Irish infant school remain far behind northern European standards. Sometimes, this has been due to the assimilation of the infant classes into primary schooling, e.g. the "international best-practice guideline of 20:1" for child-staff ratios quoted in the *Agreed Programme for Government* (page 21), is not true of early education. Ratios for children aged 3-6 years, in most European school programmes, range from 10:1 to 22:1, and in the Nordic countries are much lower.
189. As noted in Chapter 2, recent figures from the Department of Education and Science (DES) show that 24% of infant pupils are still in classes of 30 pupils or above (*Irish Background Report 2002*, p.63). With such ratios, it is difficult to engage in individualised learning activities with young children, or to ensure the children's well-being and social interaction. However, as we shall indicate later, resolving the high child-teacher ratio one measure among others that needs to be addressed in reforming quality standards in early education. We shall propose in our recommendations in Chapter 4, that where quality improvement is concerned, measures such as more independence and accountability for the infant school, the restructuring of pre-service teacher training, and ongoing investment in in-service training are other measures that need to be employed.

#### *Funding for young children from the Health sector*

190. According to our interlocutors, a more significant health budget is now being devoted to children, and access to primary health care has improved. Because of the shortness of the visit, the OECD team was unable to analyse how this works out in practice for young children. However, the evidence from overall health spending (see, for example, Table 12 on *Health expenditure as a % of GDP* in Appendix 1) shows that although Ireland's expenditure on health has risen rapidly with its growth in GDP, its public spending on health in relation to GDP is significantly less (4.9% in 2001) than the OECD average of 6.07% in 2001. Again, general data available from OECD and European sources present an assessment of perinatal care and infant mortality that is not reassuring.<sup>40</sup> Given the relatively high rate of child poverty in Ireland, and the difficulty of certain groups, such as Travellers, to access primary health care, the question merits a real focus in future early childhood policy.

<sup>40</sup> A comment received from the Department of Health notes that: The infant mortality rate can vary because of variations in practices relating to the registration of deaths. Variations observed in the perinatal mortality rate are determined to a significant degree by practice in relation to termination of pregnancy. Many foetal abnormalities are detected in the antepartum period in countries that permit termination and resultant terminations are reflected in lower perinatal mortality rates



# Chapter 4

## CONCLUSIONS

*This concluding chapter of the OECD Country Note on Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland draws on the descriptions and analyses presented in Chapters 2 and 3. The points presented for consideration concern labour market, gender and equity concerns; co-ordination; expanding access; improving quality; and financing new measures. We are fully aware that our suggestions are based on an external knowledge of the ECEC system in Ireland. Despite this, we are hopeful that our independent perspective, which draws on knowledge and experience of systems of early childhood education and care in other countries, may contribute to the debate on policy development for young children and their families in Ireland.*

### 1. Labour market, gender and equity concerns

191. The early childhood period is the foundation stage of health, well-being, socialisation and lifelong learning. Increasingly, the period is recognised as the foundation stage of a sound human resources policy (see Appendix 3), and as the critical moment for ensuring the development and rights of the child. As such, early childhood services are a public good and receive significant state investment in all OECD countries. Private providers, community and voluntary bodies are partners in the early childhood field, and can be particularly effective in the climate of public-private partnerships that prevails in Ireland. At the same time – in order to promote equity, protect young children and ensure that all services support young children to reach their full developmental potential - State funding, regulation, policy guidance and development of the national system are necessary. The experience of many countries shows that without significant investment from the State in this field, market failure inevitably occurs, especially with regard to affordability and equitable access to quality services.
192. Because of the economic externalities created - such as labour market expansion and flexibility, a larger taxation base, the development of further training and education, and the creation of new jobs at local levels - early childhood services are a productive investment for a country (see Chapter 3 and Annex 3). Services are provided primarily to develop the potential of young children, but they also serve to support women and families, and to ensure of equality of opportunity in education for disadvantaged young children when they begin school. There is also a strong research consensus that the keys to ending family poverty and to giving a fair start in life to children is to build a strong family structure around them, through jobs for parents, social supports, income transfers toward the needy; adequate community resources (including housing); *and affordable, quality socio-educational services to children from the youngest age*, including, in contexts of disadvantage, strong outreach to families and communities;
193. The Irish government has committed significant funding to the expansion of childcare services until 2006. Such funding will be needed throughout the decade to support the creation of long-term ECEC institutions



capable of delivering quality services and interventions, especially in disadvantaged areas. Key issues for government in considering such an investment are: Will investment improve the labour market situation? Will investment ensure equitable educational outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds? How can investment be shared across ministries? How can expenditure be kept within budgetary limits? Are there opportunities for a fairer distribution of costs between government and beneficiaries, or across the various income groups?

194. *Will investment in early years services improve the supply and flexibility of the labour market in Ireland?* Recent analyses of the Irish labour market (see, for example, Collins and Wickham, 2001) suggest that for the moment participation by women is determined more by level of education and the opportunity to earn, than by the existence of childcare services. It is still possible for Irish women with young children to join the labour force, despite the shortage of services, because of informal networks of family and neighbours, which are still available to look after young children, at least for some hours during the day. In the medium term, this reserve pool may remain stable, especially in rural areas, but will inevitably decrease as the present cohort of working young women moves upwards in the age structure, while continuing to pursue their careers. With this change in the work patterns of Irish women, demand for publicly regulated childcare services must be expected to increase.
195. Already signs of strain can be clearly seen. Table 11 in Appendix 1, taken from the OECD Employment Outlook (2002), provides comparative figures for the drop-out of women from the labour market across European countries. Ireland shows a particularly high female drop-out rate after the birth of a first and second child. Many of these women are well educated and a real loss to the economy.<sup>41</sup> In addition to the OECD chart above, CSO figures corroborate that remaining in work is often not an option for Irish women when a second child is born (CSO, 2002). Typically, a second earner in a couple family with two young children in care, with earnings at two-thirds of average salary, has no net return from work after childcare costs (OECD, 2003). In terms both of labour market policy and the best interests of young children, affordability of childcare remains a critical issue in Ireland. Many working parents in average jobs cannot afford two childcare places in the private market, where ability to pay determines accessibility. Because of affordability barriers, they must then rely on informal arrangements with family, friends, and neighbours, or leave the labour market.
196. *A gender perspective* – It would appear that the policy implications of equality of opportunity for women are still not clearly recognised either in the labour market or family spheres (see Chapter 3). High drop-out rates from the labour market, the increasing number of women in part-time work, the low participation of older female cohorts are signs, among others, that traditional patterns of gender inequality still survive. Supports for women with children are few: parental leave is meagre, affordable early childhood services are scarce, and fiscal support for young children in childcare does not yet exist. The situation is particularly critical for young women earning modest salaries.<sup>42</sup> Yet, women (and their families) gain greatly, both at a personal and a professional level, from being in employment. Remaining at work enables women to take their rightful place in society, contribute to the national economy, and to build up independent pension benefits for their later years. In many instances also, regular employment allows women to avoid long-term poverty damaging for themselves and for their children, an important consideration in situations of lone motherhood, separation and divorce, when children are normally left in the mother's custody.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Is the drop-out a loss to the child and family? There is a growing consensus in European countries that parental care for the young child for at least a year after birth is desirable, although there is no evidence to show that care by other caregivers harms young children *unless it is of low quality*. Research also shows that toddlers from 1-3 years benefit from quality programmes, especially where socialisation, motor and socio-emotional development are concerned. From the point of view of family economics, the loss of a salary is more or less significant, depending on circumstances. The additional wage brought to households by a (second) working parent can make a great difference to family well-being, when the wage of the principal earner is modest.

<sup>42</sup> These are often women in public sector employment, notably at the user/provider interface. According to the National Economic and Social Forum (1995) and Harvey (2003), there is a marked absence of women in policy-making and management areas.

<sup>43</sup> In over 90% of instances, women are given custody of children in case of separation or divorce. Such situations affect over 40% of couples in some urban milieus.

197. From a child well-being perspective, the situation of lone mothers in Ireland is also of concern. Their employment rate compares unfavourably with levels found in other countries, that is, a 45% employment rate compared to an 81% employment rate in Austria; 76% in France; 84% in Japan. Welfare supports, a disregard of small earnings for temporary jobs, plus a lack of quality childcare ensure that it is not advantageous for lone mothers to seek regular half- or full-day employment. In consequence, long periods of unemployment are experienced, which can result in children growing up in poor, workless and even socially excluded households. In sum, more active policies concerning the participation of women are needed so as to enhance the possibility and the rewards of work both for married and single mothers women with young children. At the same time, work needs to be balanced – when young children are present – by family-friendly workplace policies. We encourage the authorities to avoid the excesses of the initial *Welfare to Work* practices in the USA, when in some cases lone mothers were obliged to work long hours for little remuneration, separated from their children for 10 hours or more per day.
198. *Parental leave* – A key policy mechanism in European countries to make work more rewarding and less stressful for women with young children is the provision of maternity and work leave for parents after the birth of a child. Paid, flexible and job-protected maternity and parental leave schemes of at least one year are seen as an essential component of any comprehensive strategy to support working parents with very young children, and a necessary element in labour market and family policy.
199. The jury is still out concerning *when* mothers should return to work and place their infants in care either in an individualised or collective setting outside the home. In the Nordic countries, there is a consensus that children should not be in services before one year (Denmark) or eighteen months (Norway and Sweden), unless there is necessity. Consistent with this conception of child development and the right of parents to rear their child especially in the critical first year after birth, these countries offer a great deal of support to parents so that they can care of their child at home during the first year of life. There is also a financial calculation involved. Few countries can afford to finance high quality crèche services for infants under one year with adequate staff-child ratios. From many points of view, remunerated parental leave for a year, with job protection, would seem to fit better with parental preferences. Actual practice in Ireland, however, lags behind the parental leave levels found in many other European countries. The comparative place of Ireland in terms of maternity and parental leave may be seen in Table 4 in Appendix 1.
200. *Will early childhood investment ensure equitable educational outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds?* According to the policy brief presented recently to the US Congress (Brooks-Gunn, 2003), mainstream research across countries agrees that:
- High quality centre-based programmes enhance vulnerable children’s school-related achievement and behaviour;
  - These effects are strongest for poor children and for children whose parents have little education;
  - Positive benefits continue into late elementary school and high school years, although effects are smaller than they were at the beginning of elementary school;
  - Programmes that are continued into primary school and that offer intensive early intervention have the most sustained long-term effects.
201. With the exception of the infant school for children from four to six years, a critical volume of centre-based services has yet to be developed in Ireland. Collective and community services are still predominantly used by low-income parents, and have not yet received the long-term funding, regulatory and infrastructural support that a high quality network requires. In parallel, a system of informal, individual childminding has grown up, covering the great majority of children who need care outside the home. Evaluative research in other countries indicates that informal childminding is far from satisfactory, and is generally judged to be of poor quality (NICHD, 1997). The situation can be even less promising for children born into situations of disadvantage, in which women with low educational levels tend to remain unemployed and live in poverty.

202. According to OECD and European Union figures, the regular health, social, and education budgets are relatively low in Ireland (see Table 2 and Figures 2 and 4 in Appendix 1). Within these budgets, young children are often an overlooked group, as currently, they are subsumed under larger concerns such as labour market childcare policy, gender equality, public health, family or primary education. Yet, infants and young children form the base of society and are passing through the most critical stage of life cycle development, which will influence profoundly their health, educational and social outcomes. To support them adequately, the major social ministries – and the National Anti-Poverty Strategy - may wish to consider a significant shift in expenditure toward young children so as to generate the level of funding that integrated family and early childhood services will need in Ireland in the coming years.

## 2. Co-ordination issues

203. Early childhood intervention is multiple in its aims. Several important societal goals are attained through the investment. In addition to ensuring the holistic development of young children at a moment in the life cycle when physical development, brain growth, motor skills, language, intelligence and personality structuring are in full progress, the goals of equality of opportunity for women, social inclusion, family support, and readiness for school can also be achieved. For this reason, central co-ordination of services is ensured in different countries by different ministries, e.g. in New Zealand, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom by education ministries, in Denmark and Finland by ministries of social affair; and in many countries by two different ministries or agencies. However, in almost all countries, employers, municipal authorities, education, labour, health, social and gender equality ministries co-operate to supply early childhood education, and to extend it to a full-day, year-long service. An example of this trend can be found in the *Call To Action From The Business Community* in the USA, which is reproduced in Appendix 3.

### What model for Ireland?

204. Obviously, this is a question that Ireland must answer for itself. In view, however, of the urgent need to improve the present population/employment ratio in Ireland (especially with regard to women's participation) and to establish a coherent and affordable system for the early education and care of children outside the home – in a context where there is a dispersion of responsibilities across many ministries and agencies, and where general labour market conditions, preferences and cultural attitudes are not always supportive - the OECD team proposes for consideration:
- The integration of all early education and care policy and funding under one ministry or under a designated funding and policy agency. Ireland has much to gain – in terms of effective policy-making and economies of scale - by taking an integrated approach to early education and care for children from one to six years, conducted by one accountable agency, as is becoming the practice in many OECD countries.
  - The urgent formulation of a *National Plan for Early Childhood Services Development*, rolled over on a three-year basis, with clearly spelt out goals, targets, time-lines, responsibilities and accountability measures from co-operating Departments. While universal in intent, the plan should include annual targets for the important subsystems, such as disadvantaged children, children from Traveller communities and children with special needs.
  - Decentralisation of the planning and management of all early childhood education and care services at local level to an integrated agency or committee at the county/city level. Decentralisation to the local level needs to be backed by adequate regulatory powers and state funding.

### Horizontal policy co-ordination across ministries

205. To achieve the Barcelona objectives, horizontal policy co-ordination across ministries will also be necessary. The recent NDP evaluation called for an overhaul of the existing National Childcare Committee, proposing to make it smaller and more focussed. The OECD team has noted the recommendation, and encourages DES to take a full role in the new Committee and in strategic planning at this level. The occasion may

provide an opportunity to transform the present NCCC into a *National Policy Committee for Early Education and Care*. Benefits would include improved policy formulation, goal-setting and cost effectiveness. The Committee could also help to ensure, in formulating a *National Plan for Early Childhood Services Development*, that the different Departmental policies are consistent, interlocking and properly resourced. This would imply clearly spelt out objectives, targets, time-lines, responsibilities and accountability measures for the different Departments.

206. *County Childcare and Early Education Committees* - At the same time, the OECD team supports the subsidiarity in planning, budget and implementation that is now taking place. In parallel to the recommendation above, we propose a bringing together of childcare and education at local level through transforming the existing County Childcare Committees into *County Early Education and Childcare Committees*. If regulatory powers, stable funding and management expertise can also be transferred, the County Committees appear well capable of transforming national policy into concrete plans for each county, and of stimulating the necessary partnerships on the ground.
207. *Close co-operation between DJELR, DES, DHC and DSFA*: If an integrated ministerial structure is envisaged in Ireland bringing all ECEC under one ministry, the issue of co-ordination becomes much easier, especially if the lead ministry is open to a comprehensive approach, embracing the concerns of all the sectors involved and mobilising their respective strengths and competences. If administrative integration is not on the agenda, the OECD team would urge close co-operation between the major ministries engaged in early childhood services. In the context of the presidency of a new *National Policy Committee for Early Education and Care*, DJELR leadership may be envisaged for young children from birth to three, for parental leave measures, for afternoon services for children 3-6 years and for the development of out-of-school care. In like manner, DES would have responsibility for ensuring that a morning (3-hour) education session is made available for all children aged 3-6 years. This would mean moving away from an exclusive focus on the primary/infant school, and integrating the voluntary, community and private organisations capable of delivering high quality programmes and willing to follow the basic requirements of public child services. The contributions of both DHC and DSFA should also be sought, and leadership on certain issues given to them.
208. *Effective DES engagement in early childhood policy both at national and county levels*: The DES will continue to play a major role in the education and care of young children in Ireland. As the largest provider for children in the country, its collaboration will be essential if European Union targets are to be achieved, which presupposes that almost all 3-, 4-, and 5-year olds will be enrolled in regulated, half-day or full-day services by 2010. In addition, as the *White Paper* (1999) notes, DES has responsibility for training, for the development of a framework curriculum for 0-6 years, for accreditation and for the development of quality standards. Its expertise will likewise be needed for children with special educational needs, for whom early intervention is a national responsibility and ethical priority. On several occasions, the wish was expressed to the OECD review team that the DES should play a fuller role in the co-ordinating committees both at central and local levels. The good offices of the DES vis-à-vis the School Boards will also be crucial in establishing a safe and cost-effective out-of-school care policy, and to extend the infant school day, using qualified providers from the community and voluntary sectors.<sup>44</sup>
209. This - and other measures proposed above to expand access - will require not only greater investment in young children from the Department than at present, but also an enhanced specialist presence. The need to create an *Early Years Development Unit* (EYDU) within the DES - as initially proposed by the National Forum for Early Education (1998) and recommended again in the *White Paper* (1999) - seems an urgent priority. A specialised Unit would seem critical to ensure from the Department a policy orientation in early education more specifically linked to the needs of young children and their families, and in tune with the efforts of other major stakeholders. A DES policy unit could also guarantee effective representation of

<sup>44</sup> In many countries, organised after-school care allows children who wish to play, study or engage in sports or recreational activities to do so in programmes within school precincts that are professionally facilitated and supervised.

educational perspectives on inter-Departmental, policy co-ordination bodies, and ensure through local delegation, regular representation on the County Committees. Until such expertise is present, it would seem urgent to devolve responsibility to the CECDE or other body to engage in official co-ordination with the other ministries, in particular with DJELR, DHC and DSFA.

210. *Pooling resources*: From the perspective of the review team, the pooling of resources across Departments will be necessary, if a high quality network of services is to be established, particularly in disadvantaged areas. In every county and city, a number of common tasks are undertaken for families with young children, e.g. developmental screening of young children; family healthcare; family outreach and support services; daycare and education of young children; pre-training and professional development of contact and support staff... Government departments such as DES, DHC, DJELR and DSFA may wish to consider co-operative funding toward the County Development Boards to build 50 or so multi-functional *Child and Family Centres* across the country, to administer and integrate services for young children and families.<sup>45</sup> Jointly funded administration/training/service provision centres - located in centres of disadvantage in the county towns and cities, and linked to regional and training colleges - would provide high quality service and play a major role both in training county level staff, and in modelling innovative programmes.

### 3. Expanding access

211. The Presidency conclusions of the Barcelona European Council (16-17 March 2002) present a major challenge for Ireland. They state that Member States should remove disincentives for female labour force participation by striving to provide childcare by 2010 for at least 90 % of children between 3 years and mandatory school age, and for at least 33 % of children under 3 years of age. The OECD team recommends that the ministries concerned should take on the challenge of meeting these targets, but with a due regard for quality. At present, coverage in half- or full-day, subsidised, regulated services stands at perhaps 10-15% for children under 3 years, and at about 56% for children aged 3 to 6 years in half-day services.
212. In order to reach the European goals quickly and without excessive cost, the OECD recommends for the consideration of the Irish authorities - in line with the *White Paper on Early Childhood Education* (1999) - the expanded use of the institutions in place. The general lines we present for consideration are: enhanced parental leave; the development of accredited family daycare and age-integrated centres for children 1-6 years; an operational subsidy for each child who uses an accredited childcare or pre-school service; the development, based on the local school, of a morning education session for all children from 3–6 years, with pre-school/educare added in the afternoon. Clearly, these suggestions are long-term, but if progressively implemented, they may offer a realistic response to the European Union challenge.
213. In the proposals that follow, we speak separately for the Childcare and Education sectors. We believe, however, that Ireland would have much to gain by taking a unitary approach to all services from birth to six years, as is becoming the practice in several OECD countries. Centre-based services for young children from 1-6 years have much in common with each other, and the psychology and learning patterns of toddlers and children under six years differ significantly from those of older children. In addition, services for young children under six years – whether in care or school settings - have a triple function: viz. to ensure the well-being and global development of the child, including social and cognitive development according to age; to ensure care for children for some hours, especially if parents are employed ; and thirdly, to integrate children at-risk as early as possible into full-day tailored programmes based on family outreach and community building.

<sup>45</sup> The Early Excellence Centres in England, piloted in 1997, have been developing such services with success, either as a 'one-stop-shop' for children and families or as multi-agency collaboration centres.

### Access challenges for the childcare sector

214. From the perspective of the OECD team, two major challenges face the Childcare sector. To increase the number of full-time places for children aged 0-3 years; to co-operate with DES to lay the foundation of a full-day service and out-of-school care for children aged 3- 6 years and beyond.

#### 1. Children 0-3 years (from birth to third birthday)

215. From the *Irish Background Report* and information received during the review, we believe that most DJELR subsidised places have been created for three and four year old children (see, for example, Table 7 in Appendix 1). This would suggest that DJELR may need to focus more on the providers who can provide for the younger age group, viz. parents; *childminders*; and *community and county services*. If this proposal meets with acceptance, significant funding will need to be oriented toward these groups.

216. *Parents – provision of a year-long maternity/ parental leave linked with work*. The second principle of the National Children's Strategy states that measures toward young children should be family oriented, as the family generally affords the best environment for raising children. "External intervention should be to support and empower families within the community." Where the care of infants is concerned, maternity and parental leave are considered in almost all modern economies as a key step to ensuring that young infants have individualised attention and support during the early months of life. Paid, flexible and job-protected maternity and parental leave schemes of at least one year are seen as an essential component of any comprehensive strategy to support working parents with very young children. Leave benefits for mothers and fathers help reduce the need and demand for investment in infant provision (which because of the very low child/staff ratio is very costly), while acknowledging the primary role of the family in rearing young children. The issue is discussed more fully in Section 3 of Chapter 3.

217. *Childminders - increasing accredited access through integrating the childminders*: Because of the lack of early childhood centres in Ireland and population dispersion in rural communities, most families have to rely for childcare on non-registered, untrained childminders operating in the informal sector. The situation is positive in that local access is available, but becomes problematic where affordability and quality are concerned.

218. *Family daycare networks*: The need exists to transform childminding arrangements into recognised *family daycare networks* that can be accredited and will take in charge quality control and improvement. Networks also have the advantage of being able to take in charge initial administrative procedures and negotiations with the licensing authority concerning initial training, salaries, holidays, insurance, social security, parental fees and other issues. In many instances in France, for example, local childminders are supported from a professionally-run, central family crèche. The director and professionals in this central crèche provide training once or twice a week to local childminders, allowing them to gain a certificate, an improved professional status and better earnings for their work.<sup>46</sup> A further reward for childminders is that accreditation gains them access to subsidies paid to children using an accredited service. Because of these subsidies, the public authorities are able to cap fees charged to parents – a measure that we recommend strongly in the Irish context, where many women are forced to leave the labour market because childcare is unaffordable. Policies with regard to accreditation, subsidisation and fee capping exist in several OECD countries, for example, Canada.

219. *City/County Childcare Committees - building access levels through rigorous management*: In all countries, access levels grow in accordance with the growing trust of parents in the quality and management of the services offered at local level. In Ireland, the County Childcare Committees have potentially a central role to play in this field. Their mission is to examine all questions relevant to childcare policy, and to convene

<sup>46</sup> In other countries, e.g. Belgium and Denmark, *family daycare providers* are part of the official municipal childcare networks, and receive training from municipal co-ordinators. These providers have been successful in providing education and care services for young children and families, particularly in rural areas.

regularly the major childcare actors in childcare, including the representatives of the ministerial agencies. So as to bring early education into the picture and work toward the integration of services, the OECD team recommends the further development of these committees to become *County Committees for Childcare and Early Education*, with enhanced powers to co-ordinate policies at county level for all children from 0-6 years, within the national frameworks established by the ministries. If given the necessary powers – including perhaps the authority to raise revenues for ECEC and set conditions for spending those funds – the County Committees can deliver:

- *Needs assessments, reliable data and local training.* Guided by ADM, the Committees are well placed to gather information on the development of access in each county, its suitability to the needs of parents, its quality and equitability; and provide necessary information and orientation to parents. If financial flows can be matched to give these committees a strong management and steering role, within a clear accountability framework, the integration of services for children at local level can take place naturally.
- *Light drop-in structures for mothers and young children* – As many Irish women remain at home to look after young children, consideration may be given to the creation of light drop-in structures based around health care centres, social welfare offices, school, community centres, libraries, etc. County and municipal bodies are best placed to decide on need and location, but will need the support of a ministry in planning of these services.
- *A purpose-built Child and Family Centre in each county:* In addition to the local childminder networks animated by a professional centre, we recommend also the creation of a network of purpose-built Child and Family Centres in the larger county towns and cities. Plans have been announced by the Department of Family and Social Affairs to build similar centres for family support purposes. Significant savings, a useful synergy and a much larger capacity could be achieved if other ministries were associated in the endeavour. Although having primarily a management and training purpose, the centres would increase access for disadvantaged children in the larger towns, and could act as the administrative centres for child and family policy within each county. They would also help to provide models of successful outreach programmes to families who are in need of support in carrying out parenting responsibilities. If associated with accredited training colleges, they could also provide management training and professional development, and model exemplary programmes. The financing of such centres is discussed in Section 5 on financing below.

## 2. Children 3-6 years (from 3rd birthday to 6th)

220. From the perspective of the OECD team, a second important task is for the Childcare and Education sectors to co-operate in gradually building up a full-day service for the 3-6 year olds, and in laying the foundation of a quality out-of-school service. Historically, "childcare" has often had little to do with "education", especially where the emphasis has been on social welfare or caring for a small minority of children while their parents worked. These features of the care sector are changing radically today, as increasing numbers of young children from all backgrounds need early childhood services and full-day care. Conscious of this change, the OECD review team suggests that a strong partnership between Childcare and Education can have a number of advantages, notably:

- To ensure recognition of childcare as part of mainstream public provision;
- To create shared goals for early childhood programmes;
- To underline the common goals and educational methods of early childhood services; and
- To organise in a coherent manner the recruitment, training and career structures of staff in both sectors.

221. Services for children before and after school hours and during the school holidays are virtually non-existent in Ireland. For the few services that do exist, there is no kind of regulatory framework and there are no stated quality standards. Yet, in all forms of provision offered by the DES for children under statutory school age,

the attendance hours of children are few.<sup>47</sup> *Early Start units and Traveller Pre-Schools* are open for only 2½ to 3 hours daily. This limited time frame raises not only questions about the curriculum balance during those hours, but also about the quality of children's experiences after school hours if working parents are largely dependent on non-formal and unregistered childminding services. In the meantime, the only solution on offer seems to be half-time work for women or recourse to childcare either informal or regulated, where affordability, combined with a continuing shortage of place, remains a key issue.

222. To meet similar challenges, other countries are increasingly experimenting with educare and recreational programmes for children on school premises in the afternoon. Recent figures from the U.S. Census Bureau show that enrolments in full-day kindergarten has increased from 25% of age-eligible children in 1979 to 60% in 2000. In the last three years, a further 20 states introduced legislation related to increasing access to and funding for full-day kindergarten. A formula adopted in many countries is to provide at the local school a free educational session in the morning for all 3-6 year olds, extended in the afternoon, at school or on adjoining premises, by appropriate programmes – rest, leisure activities, motor development, music, dance, games, nature study, reading clubs etc. - provided by the community and voluntary sector. From the perspective of the child, it matters little who runs the service as long as it is of quality, provides continuity and does not involve bussing or disruption. Some cost recuperation through parental fees is practised for such programmes, and children are free to attend or not according to the contract made by the school with parents. In extending the day, due care needs to be given to the best interests of children – their rhythms, emotional and physical needs, and the quality of the premises and programmes that they are offered.
223. The OECD team recommends a move toward full-day services and out-of-school care for 3-6 year olds. This would require not only policy leadership at central level but also close consultation at local level between the local authorities, voluntary sector and the local primary school. A start could be made in the already designated *Early Start* areas, inviting the school and the accredited voluntary and other agencies to plan together so as to provide a full-day, seamless service to children in these areas. If supported by appropriate funding, the measure could provide a more effective service for young children and families, and provide an official and much expanded role for the voluntary and community agencies.

### Access challenges for the education sector

#### 1. A morning educational session for all young children from the age of 3 years, extended in the afternoon by fee-paying pre-school and out-of-school services

224. Keeping in mind, the targets set by the European Union and the large – and relatively permanent – drop-out rates of Irish women from the labour market, the main thrust of expansion in Ireland in the coming years should be the provision of a morning educational service for young children from the age of 3 years, extended in the afternoon by pre-school/educare services. Who provides the morning session should not be an issue, as long as it is provided by an accredited educational service. Learning from the first *Early Start* initiative, consultation and partnership at local level will do much to ensure that a comprehensive local service can be established to cover a high percentage of children in the age group, in the best possible conditions. With the co-operation of the local school, the challenge is not insuperable. From our interviews with teachers, parents and community leaders, we believe that the institution is capable of adapting itself to the new situation of parents in Ireland, to working with community agencies and to meeting eventually the targets set by the European Union.
225. Part of this adaptation will be to prolong the day on school premises, as discussed in Chapter 3. A fair division of labour could be an educational session provided in the morning to 3-6 year olds at the local school by DES, or on their own premises by accredited providers of structured learning programmes, with appropriate afternoon programmes being provided by the community and voluntary sector on school or adjoining premises. Such a move could begin in the present *Early Start* areas, with partnerships between

<sup>47</sup> Sessions for young children in the infant school are generally for 180 days annually, finishing about 1.40 p.m. daily. Working parents are obliged to rely on informal care or move their children to other services during school holidays and in the afternoons.

the school and the community and voluntary agencies to provide a full-day service for young children. The measure has a number of advantages:

- It would align Irish practice on the European model, where policy makers try to ensure that afternoon sessions for younger children take place in the same centre that hosts the morning period. In France, for example, different early childhood services work effectively side by side on the same premises. A sole location for services has obvious advantages both for young children and their parents. From the point of view of the child, the auspices of a service are of far less important than its continuity and quality.
- A full-day, integrated service would remove pressure on teachers in the *Early Start* morning classes, improve quality and make place for a more appropriate pedagogy for these groups. At the same time, the extended day would provide an enriched learning environment for disadvantaged children throughout the day, and reinforce contact with parents who need support and job training.
- A full-day would provide an official and much expanded role for the voluntary and community agencies, especially if linked with normative grants or a child education subsidy attached to each child participating in the afternoon session. With assistance from the county authorities, these agencies could provide the afternoon programmes for children within the school or pre-school precincts.

226. *The enrolment of all 4-year olds* - The review team also recommends that all 4-year olds, irrespective of the month in which they were born, should have an entitlement to an education place in an infant class or other accredited educational programme at agreed points during the year (at present, only 52% of 4 year-olds are enrolled in the infant classes). Teachers would be greatly helped in managing the increased intake if a Child Assistant were appointed to each infant school class. The presence of a Child Assistant would also reduce child-staff ratios for this age group to 15:1 – thus bringing Irish practice closer to European norms.

227. *DES accreditation and financial support for selected pre-school providers* - To increase access levels, the Department of Education and Science may wish to consider the recognition and support of accredited pre-school providers, as mentioned in the White Paper, 1999. Several of these groups have been working with young children in Ireland for generations, particularly with 3- and 4-year old children. Many teachers /educators in these groups have three- or four-year university qualifications. The different approaches that they bring enrich early childhood theory and pedagogy. In addition, they contribute to the national network for young children, providing places for some thousands of children. The new QE mark to be developed by the CECDE could have a section referring to the accreditation of the pre-school providers, outlining the facility, programmatic, recruitment and qualifications requirements needed to be recognised as a recognised early education institute. The measure has the advantage for governments of regulating the sector more efficiently, and of including the children served in Irish national statistics.

## 2. Strengthening Early Start and general provision for children from disadvantaged backgrounds with the community/voluntary providers

228. Ireland's attention to child poverty is noteworthy, and the situation of many young children born in poverty has improved in recent years. There is a strong NAPS strategy in place, a small *Early Start* programme in 40 schools in disadvantaged areas, and a further 270 areas of education disadvantage designated. Yet, according to our interlocutors, much more remains to be done (see also, Fig. 3 in Appendix 1). The OECD team recommends that *Early Start* should become a full day programme, and extended in agreement with the community/voluntary providers. Lessons should be drawn also from the research provided from other countries (see para. 147 above) concerning how to improve the effectiveness of this type of programme with regard both to parental/community outreach and to classroom practice.

229. In the effort to enrol all 4-year old children into the infant school, it will be helpful also to undertake research on the socio-economic background of children missing out on enrolment. The policy of designating priority education areas is a useful tool in that it allows intervention at the community level, but it is also a blunt instrument in that it fails to identify the many disadvantaged or at-risk children who live outside low-income

areas. In sum, supplementary measures need to be taken to identify at-risk children who may not be enrolled or who may not be receiving the individualised attention they need in regular settings.

230. Disadvantage is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, "resulting from the interactions of deep-seated economic, social and educational factors." (Kelleghan, 2002). Effective responses are also multi-dimensional. In disadvantaged areas, early childhood services need to be intensive, multi-functional and co-ordinated with other services and agencies. To break the poverty cycle, attention to wider issues, such as anti-bias policies, employment opportunities, social support, income transfers, housing policies and community resources will be critical. For some groups, e.g. the Traveller community, well-resourced, early childhood and family services managed conjointly by Traveller parents may be necessary, so that young children from this special milieu can join mainstream education in the best possible conditions.

### 3. Children with special needs

231. As discussed in the previous chapter - and despite some excellent schools, supportive local bodies and an increasing number of specialist teachers in primary education – the OECD team was not informed of any systematic plan, based on legal entitlement, for special education provision in Ireland for young children from birth. According to information received, the majority of children with disabilities below the age of four years do not have an entitlement to educational intervention and their parents lack the support of a professional service to reinforce the energy and optimism needed to conduct the intensive, individual learning programmes that children with special needs require. As the education and inclusion of children with special needs is a question of basic human rights, and as there is significant evidence of the positive effects of intensive intervention from birth and during the critical early years (Guralnick, 1997), the OECD team recommends urgent consideration and implementation of the recommendations made in the course of the National Forum of Early Childhood Education, 1998. The creation of a comprehensive national system of early years services for these children is urgently needed, with specific legislation to protect their human rights and provide entitlement to priority in enrolment in public services. In practice, these children should receive structured and regular educational support from birth, or at least from the time of identification of the disability. Crucial time is lost if educational intervention starts only at the beginning of infant or primary schooling. When children with disabilities are enrolled in mainstream schools, we encourage the DES, communities and school principals to ensure that these children receive on a regular basis individualised learning programmes and adequate support services.

### 4. Children from the Traveller community

232. Children from the Traveller community in Ireland urgently need enhanced access to all levels of education. Early education and care is no exception. Thanks to the voluntary bodies in charge of the special pre-schools for Traveller children, and to dedicated teachers and principals in primary schools, much progress has been made. However, the further development of early intervention programmes and of successful educational outcomes for children from the Traveller community in mainstream schools will be the acid test of national policies to combat poverty and achieve social inclusion.
233. The recently published national evaluation report, *Pre-School for Travellers*, is a key policy instrument. It underlines that significant resources will be required to ensure the development and enhancement of the education provided in Traveller pre-schools. The report makes a number of far-reaching recommendations concerning national policy on Traveller pre-schools; guidelines for the management of the pre-schools; providing for local involvement and a range of management models; the management and the local co-ordination of pre-school provision; improving the work of management committees; admission, registration and recording of attendance, the organisation of the pre-school; the development of a standard for pre-school buildings and their locations; improving funding arrangements; professional development of teachers and childcare assistants; sharing and developing good practice; planning, pedagogy and curriculum; assessment and record-keeping; linkages with primary schools.

234. The DES faces also the challenge of going beyond the collection of enrolment data, and to evaluate annually the actual outcomes for Traveller children. The drop from 5,500 child enrolments in primary school to only 1600 in secondary school needs urgent investigation. Measures need to be taken to set realistic annual targets and ensure the integration of all Traveller children into secondary education. A contributory element to the successful inclusion of children from the Traveller community at all levels of education will be anti-bias teacher training, and attention in schools to issues of diversity and identity (Derman-Sparks, 1989).
235. Throughout primary education and especially, through the delicate transition into secondary school, the DES may wish to put into place an accompaniment or mentoring service for Traveller children. With the permission of parents, a mentoring service could track and support each child, ensuring in particular that all Traveller children pass into secondary education. The low number of Traveller children in pre-school suggests that most Traveller children are entering primary school already at a great disadvantage – a hypothesis which is strengthened by the huge drop-out of Traveller children on entry to secondary school.
236. As participation is a catalyst for change, the government may also wish to consider the appointment of a representative from the Traveller community to the relevant policy bodies concerned with the first three levels of education. The purpose would be to improve and expand programming for young children and their families; to ensure the meaningful inclusion of Traveller children into primary and secondary mainstream education and later, their successful transition from education to salaried employment. Within each Traveller pre-school, and in the primary schools that receive significant numbers of Traveller children, it would seem necessary – as is the custom in other countries - to ensure that a growing number of Traveller Child Assistants are trained and recruited. In line with the 1999 White Paper sections on *Qualifications and Training*, the DES may wish to begin consultations "on the most appropriate means of assisting... professionals to obtain qualifications which would enable them to hold mainstream posts in national schools". Having teachers from the Traveller community can be expected to give a real motivation to Traveller children, in particular to young girls.
237. The Inspectors' report also recommends better integration of Traveller parents on pre-school management boards. Traveller parents and their organisations will be given the opportunity to define the type of programmes that they need for their children. Further involvement of the Travelling community and the families of the children would also be helpful, in line with good practice in this field. Not least, the agencies involved in pre-school management may wish, in co-operation with Traveller parents, to reinforce adult learning opportunities and training in occupational skills for the parents and community of Travellers who use a particular pre-school on a regular basis.

#### 4. Improving Quality

238. The National Childcare Strategy - building on the recommendations of the National Forum of Early Childhood Education (1998) - favours a view of quality as a dynamic process linked to indicators such as: trained, registered and adequately remunerated staff; appropriate learning environments guided by national frameworks; adequate adult/child ratios; partnerships with parents and local community; diversity and accessibility (Government of Ireland, 1999a). All these indicators are recognised in international research as necessary to building up quality in a system, and they are equally valid for the two existing systems in Ireland. However, as differences in the history and organisation of the systems exist, we shall propose separate quality recommendations for each, except for the first recommendations – a national goals and quality framework, which is applicable to both sectors.

##### **A common national goals and quality framework for both sectors**

239. The 1999 White Paper on *Early Childhood Education: Ready to Learn* recommended the granting of a Quality in Education (QE) mark to "providers who reach minimum standards in a number of key education-

related areas." Although a useful idea to be retained, the proposal remains premature until national goals and a quality framework for ECEC services are elaborated, and adequate evaluation and inspection mechanisms put into place. A national goals and quality framework is a major guarantor of quality and system coherence. In conception, a quality framework is wider than the traditional notion of curriculum (learning areas and outcomes for children), and focuses more on agreed standards for all services, so that parents can have confidence in what is being offered. If the growing example of other countries is followed, a national goals and quality framework would include a description of what young Irish children can expect from *all* centres, whether public or private: that is, proper accreditation, adequate facility requirements, a sufficient number of highly qualified staff, favourable child-staff ratios, validated programmes, quality targets with regular monitoring and evaluation, appropriate modalities of parent participation and community outreach... It would include also the core values that should inspire the life and practice of centres dealing with young children, as for example, the six operational principles of the National Children's Strategy:

*Child-centred - the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration and children's wishes and feelings should be given due regard*

*Family oriented - the family generally affords the best environment for raising children and external intervention should be to support and empower families within the community*

*Equitable - all children should have equality of opportunity in relation to access, participation in and derive benefit from the services delivered and have the necessary levels of quality support to achieve this. A key priority in promoting a more equitable society for children is to target investment at those most at risk*

*Inclusive - the diversity of children's experiences cultures and lifestyles must be recognised and given expression*

*Action oriented - service delivery needs to be clearly focused on achieving specified results in agreed standards in a targeted and cost-effective manner*

*Integrated - measures should be taken in partnership, within and between relevant stakeholders, be it the state, the voluntary / community sector and families; services for children should be delivered in a coordinated, coherent and effective manner through integrated needs analysis, policy planning and service delivery (Government of Ireland, 2000).*

Broad goals related to child socialisation, development and learning may also be outlined, with brief guidelines to management, staff and work teams concerning how to reach these goals *through a global approach*. The OECD team sees as necessary, widespread consultation among the major stakeholders, and close co-ordination between DJELR, DES, CECDE and NCCA on a national goals and quality framework.

### **Improving quality in the childcare sector**

240. *A voluntary accreditation system linked to a childcare subsidy* – Another urgent need in terms of quality monitoring is to provide a basic accreditation system for the childcare sector, where both regulation and monitoring are weak. Regulation has come to mean the obligation on childminders or centres who care for three or more children, to notify to their local health board. Health and safety checking is then undertaken, but in fact, there is little reason for providers to conform to national policy goals, pedagogical standards, or outcome goals.

241. The OECD team proposes the elaboration of a voluntary quality improvement and accreditation system for the childcare sector linked to funding, e.g. on the lines of the Australian QIAS<sup>48</sup> or other scheme that focuses on management, staffing, programme, developmental goals, ongoing pedagogical monitoring and support.

<sup>48</sup> The QIAS system is a national, government supported accreditation system for centre-based care that is directly tied to the provision of funding.

242. *The development of Child and Family Centres:* Opportunities for Irish professionals to experience integrated services of high quality are limited. For this reason, we suggest that the relevant government Departments may wish to come together with the City/County Boards to build or nominate 50 or so model centres around the country. These centres could be used for the administration of family and early childhood services in each county, and have both service provision and training units attached. They would provide high quality early childhood and family programmes, in which developmental screening, family outreach and innovative social inclusion programmes could be piloted. They would also have training units for professionals in the early childhood field, including for the family daycare networks in rural areas. Depending on their location, e.g. located in areas of disadvantage and/or attached to regional colleges or other training institutions, the centres would generate different kinds of expertise for the system as a whole.

### Staffing and training in the childcare sector

243. The present situation of staffing and training in the childcare sector is unsatisfactory. In the past, the sector relied heavily on committed individuals willing to work voluntarily. While strong efforts are being made to train and professionalize, the sector is still characterised by high staff turnover (with negative effects on young children), low pay, weak professional profiling, limited access to in-service training and limited career mobility. Making the profession more attractive is therefore a key concern. Some of the questions the review team raised were: How can the National Voluntary Organisations be supported effectively in this respect? What kinds of incentives should be put in place in order to encourage staff retention? Can the professional associations come together in one body to represent more effectively staff across the sector and advocate for appropriate wages, higher qualification requirements and better working conditions?

244. The review team acknowledges the progress made through the introduction of the *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (2002). A co-ordinated structure of training for the childcare sector, easily available in all counties, would help to consolidate this initiative and bring together the work of the various training providers (IPPA, High/Scope, National Children's Nursery Association, regional colleges...). The nomination of an administrative/training/service-provision centre in each county (see section on Co-ordination below) for family support and early education and care could provide the infrastructure for this training. At some future stage, as is happening in other countries, an agreed accreditation scheme may be envisaged to enable practitioners - through a credit-based framework of qualifications - to move upwards and across sectors.<sup>49</sup>

### Staffing, training and quality in the education sector

245. The structures for quality definition, good practice and monitoring have been in place in the education sector for decades: stable financing, school buildings and materials, management structures, trained professional teachers with good conditions of work, an active inspectorate, curriculum units, an educational research unit... However, of real concern to the OECD review team was the lack of specific quality guidelines for the reception of younger children, and our observation of a predominantly didactic approach towards early development and learning in the primary school infant classes.<sup>50</sup>

246. *Quality guidelines for the reception of younger children in the primary school – With the exception of the White Paper on Early Childhood Education* (1999), the specific needs and learning patterns of young children have not always received attention in primary school regulations and policy guidelines. In fact, there is no specific policy unit for the younger children in the Department of Education. The lack of specific policy guidelines sorely impacts quality in the infant school. An example is the allocation of teachers to schools,

<sup>49</sup> The OECD review (2002a) identified a cross-national trend towards at least a three-year tertiary degree for ECEC staff with group / centre responsibility. In many countries this is the case for work with children from 2\_ or 3 years upwards, in some countries (Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Spain) for work with children from birth to six years.

<sup>50</sup> Some direct instruction is helpful for young children, in particular, direct instruction to particular children on specific issues. It is the predominance of the model that is of concern. Didactic programmes have been found to be less effective than child-centred programmes in producing cognitive results, and compare poorly with regard to socialisation (see Bauman et al., 2001 for a fuller discussion).

calculated on staffing ratios for primary school children. 37% of junior infants in Ireland find themselves in classes of 25-29 children, cared for by one teacher. In contrast, the childcare regulations require for children aged 3-6 years, one care staff for 8 children (full-time) or one to 10 children (sessional). Likewise, there are no specific regulations for the training of teachers of the younger children, or for classroom design and organisation – elements that ought to be differentiated when catering for young children. A recommendation to establish an expert policy unit in the DES with expertise in this and other ECEC fields is made in the section on *Co-ordination*.

247. *An adequate pedagogy* –Of real concern to the OECD review team also was its observation of a predominantly didactic approach towards early learning in the primary school infant classes.<sup>51</sup> The model of the teacher as the source of learning, from whom young children receive knowledge, is still strongly felt within the system, while the notions of the well-being and involvement of children or the construction of knowledge through play, participation and choice, need to be developed. In sum, a more active and experientially-based pedagogy would improve learning and quality in the junior infant classes, and could even be extended – as in other countries - through the senior infants into the first years of compulsory schooling.
248. *An organisation of the infant school favouring autonomy and accountability.* In the past three decades, the infant school has developed little in Ireland compared to other countries, a result perhaps of the inclusion of early education within the primary school branch. Although a strong link with primary education is advantageous, the education authorities may wish now to improve quality and visibility by giving early education a clearer profile and more independence within the primary school. The OECD team would encourage the provision of a separate budget for the infant school at local level, and specific management responsibility given to its senior teacher. This teacher would be responsible: for managing facility requirements for the well-being of young children; for the layout, furnishings and materials of the infant school classrooms; for the provision of an exploratory outdoor environment; for the elaboration of the annual project and programme with her staff and parents; for regular team planning of activities; for organising professional development days for teachers and child assistants, and, in co-operation with the local school inspectorate, team-evaluations of quality and outcomes. She would also organise liaison with parents and community bodies, with the community/voluntary bodies responsible for afternoon activities, and with the relevant health, social and educational and services. If the recommendation is acceptable, support for these teachers could be provided at national level by the ministry (ECEA).
249. *Teacher training:* The review team recommends a thorough reassessment of teacher training for the early childhood classroom. Teachers working with young children should have considerably more exposure to research-based ECEC pedagogy, and in so far as possible, prolonged practical training in model early childhood programmes. Several validated programmes are already practised in Ireland; High/Scope, Montessori, Froebel, Steiner... to which, no doubt, Reggio Emilia, Experiential Education and other programmes may be added. The OECD review suggests reviewing the three-year B.Ed. teaching degree, with a possible lengthening of it to four years, but above all, ensuring that a focus on ECEC-related theories and methodologies are included in all three (four) years of the training. The current two hours weekly during the first year, accounting for roughly 5 % of total training duration, is totally inadequate to change the predominant teaching model or to allow students to learn the practical-aesthetic skills that characterise good practice in the early childhood field. The teacher training authorities may also wish to consider holding classroom practica in centres outside the present school system, which implement some of the validated programmes mentioned above. On a long-term basis, an education degree course, with the possibility of specialising in early childhood education and care (covering the age-group 0 to 8), may be more appropriate to the needs of the field.

<sup>51</sup> Some direct instruction is helpful for young children, in particular, direct instruction to particular children on specific issues. It is the predominance of the model that is of concern. Didactic programmes have been found to be less effective than child-centred programmes in producing cognitive results, and compare poorly with regard to socialisation (see Bauman et al., 2001 for a fuller discussion).

250. *Intensive professional development*: As a change of pre-service training takes ten years or so to be felt on the ground, professional development (in-service training) needs also to be established on a regular basis for early childhood staff. The third-level colleges and the professional associations, including the INTO, may be in a position to ensure such training if funding is provided.
251. Where *Early Start* is concerned, several teachers expressed the need to reinforce the newly developing collaborative teamwork between staff from differing professional backgrounds - between primary teachers and childcare workers in the *Early Start* units; and between primary teachers and special needs assistants in schools; and between early childhood teachers and educare staff. For *Early Start* teams, an essential measure would be targeted in-service training, e.g. on teamwork with disadvantaged families, on multi-professional collaboration, on self-evaluation techniques, on outreach strategies... A further supportive measure would be the establishment of a networking system for *Early Start* workers across the country. This would not only encourage professional exchange and clarity of focus, it would also enhance the status of inter-professional work teams and thus contribute to a wider perspective on the professional role of ECEC practitioners.

### Inspection, monitoring and evaluation

252. *Supportive inspection* – Supportive inspection is critical to raising quality in schools. National reports, such as the recent inspectorate report on the Pre-schools for Traveller children, are very useful, helping to set future goals and policy. Local inspection visits will also be vital to improving quality in individual schools. Until the Early Childhood Education Agency is founded and can recruit its own inspectorate, as outlined in the 1999 *White Paper on Early Childhood Education: Ready to Learn*, the education authorities may wish to ensure that at least one inspector at regional level has the necessary background and training in early childhood programming, pedagogy and evaluation methods. Chapter 10 of the White Paper provides many useful suggestions concerning inspection and evaluation, which if implemented could do much to improve quality across the whole early childhood spectrum.
253. *Formative, self-evaluation procedures* – Related to the question of inspection and external evaluation is that of formative self-evaluation. In a mixed public-private system, the development of externally validated, self-evaluation procedures would seem to be not only a professionally sound policy step but also a pragmatic means of building up a culture of quality improvement in the system. Individual national voluntary organisations such as NCNA or IPPA are adopting this approach. When linked with advisory support services, the approach has been found in other countries to be both cost-effective and motivating for professionals (Bertram, 2001).

### Child-staff ratios

254. *Child-staff ratios* – The issues was raised with the team on several occasions. Unfavourable ratios were often evoked as the cause of didacticism and of the formal teaching of pre-academic skills in the infant classes. Although the trend in the reduction of child-staff ratios is positive, the actual ratios for 4-year old children practised in Ireland are unacceptable in terms of active, open framework pedagogies. The OECD team wishes to underline the general principle of providing the lowest ratios for the youngest children, with a gradual child ratio increase as young people mature. In recent research (see DfES, London, 2001), a ratio of 15 children to one adult is cited as maximum ratio, if individualised and small group learning strategies are to be supported in the early childhood classroom.
255. It is unlikely, however, that a practical resolution of high numbers of children per class can be reached in Ireland in the immediate term through the recruitment of more teachers. A significant increase in the numbers of public servants is not on the agenda. In addition, there are trade-offs to be considered, such as the need to fund morning education sessions for all children from the age of three onwards. We would recommend therefore for consideration the employment of a trained Child Assistant in each early childhood

classroom, thus reducing present ratios to 15:1. We are conscious that significant expenditure will be needed to achieve this goal, and for this reason, we outline in Section 5 below, some funding mechanisms used in other countries to cover such expenses.

### Other quality measures

256. In addition to the crucial issues of strengthening the autonomy of the infant school, appropriate training of staff, and a reduction in child-staff ratios, the review team wishes to draw attention to three further quality initiatives in the education sector, viz. appropriate programming for children from disadvantaged backgrounds; parental engagement and information service; and the reinforcement of research, evaluation and data collection systems:
257. *Appropriate programming for children and families in disadvantaged areas* – In Chapter 3, the features, identified by research and evaluations, of effective programmes for disadvantaged children and families were discussed, namely:
- Effective early learning programmes take place within a general framework of anti-poverty and community development policies. (Kagan and Zigler, 1987, Morris et al., 2001, Sweeney, 2002).
  - Programmes are multi-functional and engage families as well as children: that is, programmes are strong on family engagement and support as well as providing high quality learning experiences to the children (see the entire Head Start literature). Linking early education programmes with child and family services, with primary health and nutrition programmes increases their effectiveness;
  - Programming is intensive: research indicates that the effectiveness of programmes for young children is enhanced by intensity (Leseman, 2002) and year-long duration (Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2003);
  - Programmes are pedagogically sound and conducted by appropriately trained professionals. A high quality programme in early childhood implies well-being, child-initiative, play and involvement. If a programme is over-focussed on formal skills, it is more likely to provide opportunities for children to fail, and to develop a higher dependency on adults, promoting in them negative perceptions of their own competencies (Stipek et al. 1995);
  - Depending on the degree of disadvantage, enriched health and nutrition inputs may be necessary to ensure that young children can take full advantage of the early childhood service.
258. *Family support, parental engagement and information services*: The review team experience in Ireland suggests that family support, parental engagement and information may be weak in the ECEC system as a whole. There was little evidence of parental presence in the hallways, classrooms or activities visited. We were informed, however, that the effective support provided by centres to parents at risk was improving steadily, but was still far too rare. Moreover, the *White Paper on Early Education* (1999) and Departmental regulations foresee strong parental participation. Quality early years centres that we have seen in other countries offer, as a matter of course, family support, referral, educational and recreational courses, and up-to-date information on all matters of concern to parents. In sum, supports, information and engagement policies for parents could be further developed in the Irish early childhood field both at local and national levels. The review team suggests that the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education should be invited to make some practical recommendations for the early childhood field, based on the research already undertaken by Reardon (2001).
259. *Strengthening research, evaluation and data collection systems*; Ireland has no single child care information system. In Chapter 3, we noted considerable data gaps and a lack of disaggregated data for many key indicators in the ECEC field. At the same, two very significant research initiatives are being planned: the proposed longitudinal study of 18,000 children, put forward by both the National Children's Strategy and the Report of the Commission on the Family, and the proposed *State of the Nation's Children Report* to be

produced on a bi-annual basis under the National Children's Strategy. By any standards, these initiatives must be seen as a particularly forward-looking step towards collecting systematic data on children growing up in Ireland. The OECD team recommends support for these ventures, with appropriate resources.

260. A stable research framework and a long-term research agenda are essential to providing the evaluations and in-depth studies necessary to inform policy making. The review team suggests that the National Children's Office examines the issue of insufficiencies in the national (and regional) data systems on children in general and on children in ECEC services in particular, recommending ways and means of standardising data collection across the Departments, so as to ensure both accuracy and conformity to international norms. We would also suggest that the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education should become a clearing-house to collect and disseminate the best international research on topics of particular relevance to ECEC in Ireland.

261. The team also noted in previous chapters a number of issues for further research. Among the research topics recommended to us were:

- To develop a conceptual framework and refine the relevant indicators for comparative data collection on young children and families in Ireland, and the services available to them;
- To map the density and location of ECEC services and infant schools across the country;
- To collect reliable data on those services: the number of places by year of age available in each type of provision, the features of this provision; the characteristics of users (labour market attachment, socio-economic status; gender...);
- To overview the descriptive features of each kind of provision across the country, including the number of children having access, their attendance patterns in the different geographical areas, and the employment status and situation of parents using childcare services;
- To identify the typical needs of parents vis-à-vis childcare and early education, disaggregated for different groups; parents of children with special needs; traveller families; low income groups (urban and rural); families with a second child...
- To map the key target groups considered disadvantaged in Ireland;
- To research the values basis of ECEC policy-making in Ireland, with special reference to the participation rights of young children;
- To elaborate a conceptual and comparative framework to undertake the evaluation of the quality of various ECEC settings in Ireland; structural features; process elements...
- To disseminate research on cross-national systems policy

In addition, and perhaps more urgently, action research will be needed to elaborate some of the quality proposals made above, in particular:

- To elaborate a national quality framework;
- To organise a national accreditation scheme for childminders and other providers;
- To reform pre-service training for early childhood teachers, and provide validated in-service training programmes for teachers in infant schools;
- To produce an effective approach at the early childhood level toward children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds....

## 5. Financing new measures

262. The advantages of investing in the childcare field are outlined clearly in the Müller Kucera-Bauer study from Zurich (see Chapter 3). These authors emphasise the economic and social benefits that come from the maximum number of people being in work, and the employment opportunities offered to women at local level. The disadvantages are equally clear: a worsening of women's situation in the labour market; growing child poverty, especially in single parent families; prolonged social welfare dependency and its attendant ills. In Ireland, there is also the urgency of building up services, and the impossibility of reaching European targets unless a start is now made. The following is a short list of the financial challenges in the childcare field:

263. The childcare sector

- *Lengthening the period of parental leave to one year, with a guarantee of job protection;*
- *Providing a normative grant to accredited providers or a weighted subsidy to every child who uses an accredited childcare, educare or out-of-school place.* If the grants or subsidies are adequate, the measure could have the effect of raising the salaries and retention rate of staff in the sector, bring childminders into the official network, strengthen greatly the capacity of the voluntary and community sector to work, and enable the public and county authorities to require higher quality levels.
- *Supply side financing, for example, increased building grants and operational subsidies for communities providing childcare services in disadvantaged areas; financing to build or refurbish community and voluntary childcare facilities; tax breaks for family day carers/childminders (who account for over 85% of total provision for the under 4-s)...*
- *Building and staffing of a network of light drop-in structures for parents with young children, based around health care centres, social welfare offices, school, community centres, libraries, etc.;*
- *Supporting communities and voluntary organisations to organise and take on afternoon sessions in schools and out-of-school care;*
- *In co-operation with DSFA, enhancing access for disadvantaged children and families, through building a network of Child and Family Centres around the country.* These centres could also act as administrative centres at county level for family and ECEC policy, and become early excellence and training centres.

### The education sector

264. The financial implications of increasing access and improving quality are significant also for the education sector. In sum, we propose for consideration the expansion of access to all 3-6 year old children (as in other European countries) on the basis of a free morning education session, followed by a subsidised, fee-paying pre-school session in the afternoon at the local school or adjoining premises, conducted by the community or voluntary sector. Private providers can also participate, and if accreditation has been given, receive likewise the normative grant or childcare/pre-school subsidy. In this way, full-day care for Irish children, on a sound educational basis, can be gradually built up. The benefits of so doing are clearly announced in the major research (see discussion in Chapter 3). The disadvantages of ignoring the challenge will be a further widening of the gap in comparison to other European countries; the reproduction of a cycle of educational failure for at-risk children in Ireland, leading to future low employment rates, social security dependence, and at times, wasted lives and delinquency (see, for example, the *Call to Action by the Business Community* in Appendix 3). The recommendations made include the following:

- An entitlement for all 4-year olds to a free education place in school or pre-school settings, with expansion of access for the 3-year olds;
- Parallel improvement of child-staff ratios through the employment of a trained Child Assistant for every infant classroom;
- Gradual extension of the present half day *Early Start* and infant school to whole-day education and

- care based on the school, the afternoon session being in charge of accredited community and voluntary providers and funded by parental fees, communities, and normative grants or child subsidies;
- An increase in budget for each infant school, including the creation of a post of responsibility for the senior infant school teacher, as outlined in para. 248 above;
  - Until a new pre-service training regime for early childhood teachers can be created and introduced, the organisation and funding of in-service training for all teachers in the infant classes, in particular for the senior teachers with managerial responsibility;
  - The urgent implementation of the *White Paper on Early Childhood Education* (1999);

Each of these recommendations has significant funding implications, and we are conscious that all cannot be accomplished in a short period. However, if reaching the European targets is real goal for Ireland, the present funding commitment must increase.

265. *A pooling of resources and sharing of costs across ministries and users:* As provision for young children is a concern shared across several government departments, a pooling of funding sources may also be suggested. The ministries involved – DES, DJELR, DHC, DSFA, DETE, DELG, DCRGA and the National Anti-Poverty Strategy – all have a stake in contributing funding toward high quality early childhood services for young children. Cost recuperation through light user fees – supplemented by county and municipal funding – can also be used to meet the costs of afternoon ECEC activities below the obligatory school age, with a waiving of fees for families most in need. Cost recuperation on a sliding scale from parents is practised in many countries, until the year when it is considered essential to have all young children enrolled in an early education programme. In publicly subsidised services, costs are generally much less onerous for parents than fee levels charged in the private sector;
266. *A transfer of some costs toward local communities:* Though infant classes have been free to parents for many decades, it was only in the school year 2001/2002, that primary schools became 100% funded by the state. Prior to this, the school management boards were required to raise a local contribution (at least 25% of the state grant) toward running costs. The Irish authorities may wish to consider the use of constitutional or statutory powers to provide legal authority for communities to raise revenues for non-obligatory education, and to set conditions for spending those funds;
267. *A shifting of educational financing toward early childhood:* As can be seen from the Table 8, a real imbalance between early childhood and tertiary investments exists in Ireland and other countries. In response, an increasing number of education economists<sup>52</sup> are urging governments to channel more educational investment to the young children at the base. The argument is essentially one of equity and returns on investment. The personal economic returns from university education are such that it is in the interest of students and their families to invest. Subventions from the State at this level can be seen as "middle-class welfare" or, in economic terms, as dead weight, as student enrolments continue to grow even when subsidies are abolished. Australia is a case in point (Gallagher, 2003). In particular, analysts of the question point out that blanket subventions, such as free fees, are inefficient, as they take away the state's power to subvention needy students or to orient students toward certain disciplines to meet the changing needs of the economy. In contrast, early education is grossly under-funded. Yet it serves all children, and is especially effective where children from disadvantaged or dysfunctional backgrounds are concerned. In addition, early childhood services deliver other externalities important for an economy and society.
268. *The co-ordination of childcare and early education for the 3-6 year olds,* in particular, the co-ordination of services for the 3-6 year olds based on the local school. This would be a far more rational development for

<sup>52</sup> For example, James Heckman, a labour market economist at the National Bureau of Economic Research in Cambridge, MA, joint winner of the Nobel Prize in economics in 1999, and a leading human capital policy expert.

parents, and would help to reduce costs considerably. Rather than large investments in rented and other premises, it would seem more rational *in most instances* to invest significantly in school infrastructure and bring the early education, full-day and out-of-school care together in one location. It is to be hoped that as a public resource, the school plant can be further developed for early childhood services professionally run by any qualified and accredited provider. An important lesson from the first *Early Start* initiative was the need to consult with the voluntary/community sector in the early education of the 3-6 year olds. Any centring of services for this age group around the school would have to ensure the involvement of the sector, and guarantee it an equal and subsidised role in building up the local network of care and education.

269. *A sharing of tasks with the voluntary early education bodies:* Official enrolment rates for 3- and 4-year olds would immediately increase in Ireland if recognition were given to a selected number of non-profit educational bodies who are now providing pre-school education to a significant number of children. Attracting private providers into the regulated network will require subvention, but this seems reasonable when the voluntary or private bodies provide expertise and share costs. Subsidies are particularly efficient when voluntary early education bodies are willing to accept a quota of children from disadvantaged or special needs backgrounds, and keep fees at a level within a range defined by the public authorities.
270. *Support from the corporate and business sector:* In many countries, as for example in the US, employers are one of the main supporters of early childhood services. Their reasons for so doing are outlined by the *American Business Round Table* in Appendix 3. In summary, business leaders are conscious that high-quality early childhood education is important for the development of young children and their future success in school. In addition, "employers increasingly find that the availability of good early childhood programs is critical to the recruitment and retention of parent employees." For these reasons, businesses in a wide range of countries supply workplace crèches and early education at the place of work, or purchase places in centres accredited by the public authorities. In the USA, grants from the large corporations toward early childhood services are also common, in particular, when tax concessions are granted by the public authorities for such donations. In yet other countries, e.g. Korea and Mexico, firms employing women are required by law to establish an on-site day care centre or subsidise child care expenses for their employees.
271. *Special funding initiatives:* By special funding initiatives are meant, the raising of funds for early education through special taxes, national lotteries and the like. In Belgium and Italy, a significant part (about 1%) of social security and/or corporate tax is channelled toward childcare. In Finland, the alcohol tax has been used for many years to subvention early childhood services, in particular, out-of-school care. In the state of Georgia in the US, the state lottery proceeds are used to fund early childhood services. In some of the Nordic countries, local authorities have powers to raise taxes, much of which is devoted to supplementing the State allocation for health, social welfare and early education services.
272. *Funding a Child Assistant in each infant class -* The salaries for trained Child Assistants in all infant classes will be a challenge but, as in other countries, a means of sharing that expenditure can be found, without breaching the present funding and hiring limits set by government. Grant aid for staff costs for community-based/not-for-profit services is already a feature of the EOCP programme. Adequate salary levels for staff could be achieved through sharing costs with other relevant government programmes, the county, and the local community. Some responsibility for salaries may be placed also on parents who wish to have better child-staff ratios in the local community school, leaving DES and the NAPS to assume the responsibility of subsidising Child Assistants in the disadvantaged areas.
273. *Funding a whole-day service:* If adopted as a policy, a solution to reducing the cost to public finances of an extended full-day service for children aged 3-6 years needs to be found. The OECD has argued above that the use of the local school would greatly reduce expenditure on other premises and programmes. In addition, it would impose collaboration between the Education and the Care sectors, a goal that is important to achieve. To attempt to set up two parallel systems will lead to duplication and waste, with the probability

– if we can judge from other countries - of childcare remaining a low quality service. Combined funding from the two ministries could build up a strong local school infrastructure, and bring together the education and care of young children from 3-6 years. Consideration may also be given as to whether designated lines of government expenditure, regional and local authority grants could be used for the refurbishing of local schools and support to the salaries of personnel. Again, as in the past, some local responsibility for school facilities may need to be envisaged.

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*This Country Note for Ireland* represents the views of the OECD team after an intense five-day visit, aided by a comprehensive *Background Report* contracted by the Irish Department of Education and Science. Our reflective comment is offered in a spirit of professional dialogue, basing our judgements on our discussions and observations. During the visit, the OECD team was impressed by the approachability of the people we met at all levels within the system and their willingness to engage in a critical debate. We especially commend the manner in which the visit was organised by our host, the Department of Education and Science, the open access we enjoyed to all levels of the system and the richness and variety of the programme. Despite the shortness of our visit, we spoke to a wide range of providers and sectors at national, regional and local levels.

The National Co-ordinator, the author of the Background Report, the Steering Committee and all who contributed to the project are to be congratulated on their approach and professionalism. It should be noted, however, that the facts and opinions expressed in the Country Note are the sole responsibility of the review team. While we have received every help from the Department of Education and Science, and from many researchers and practitioners in Ireland, they have no part in any shortcomings, which this document may present.



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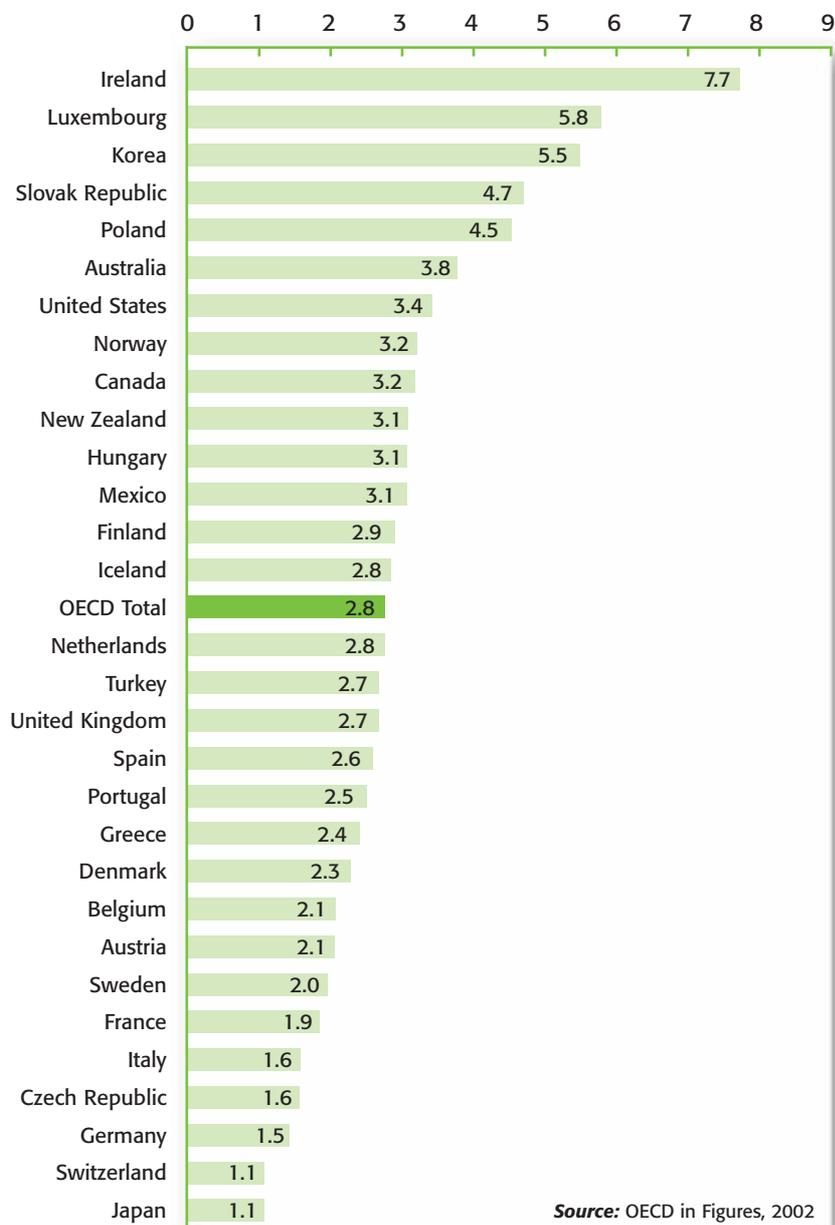
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# Appendix 1

## FIGURES AND TABLES

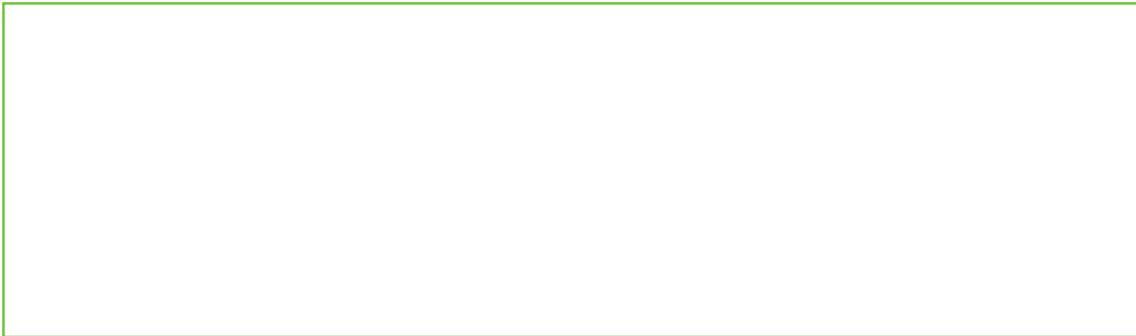
Figure 1

Comparative growth rates across OECD countries, 1991 - 2001





**Figure 2**  
Public expenditure in OECD countries as a percentage of GDP, 2000

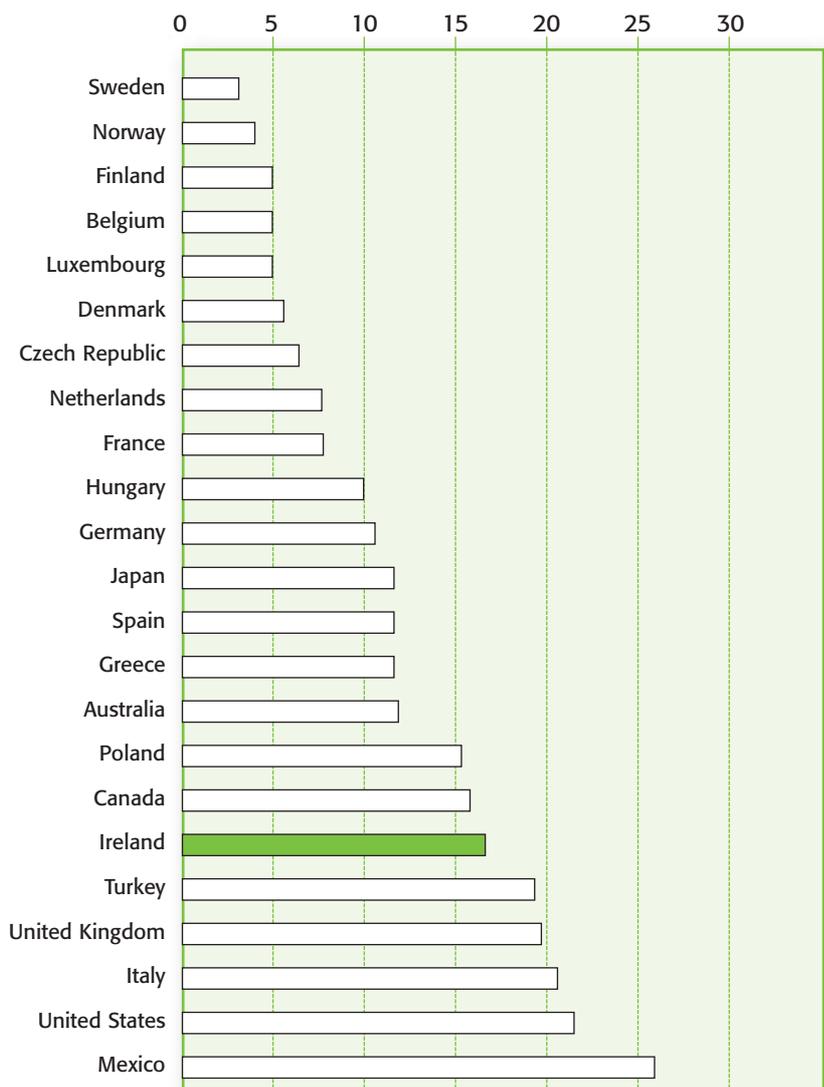


1. Weighted average.

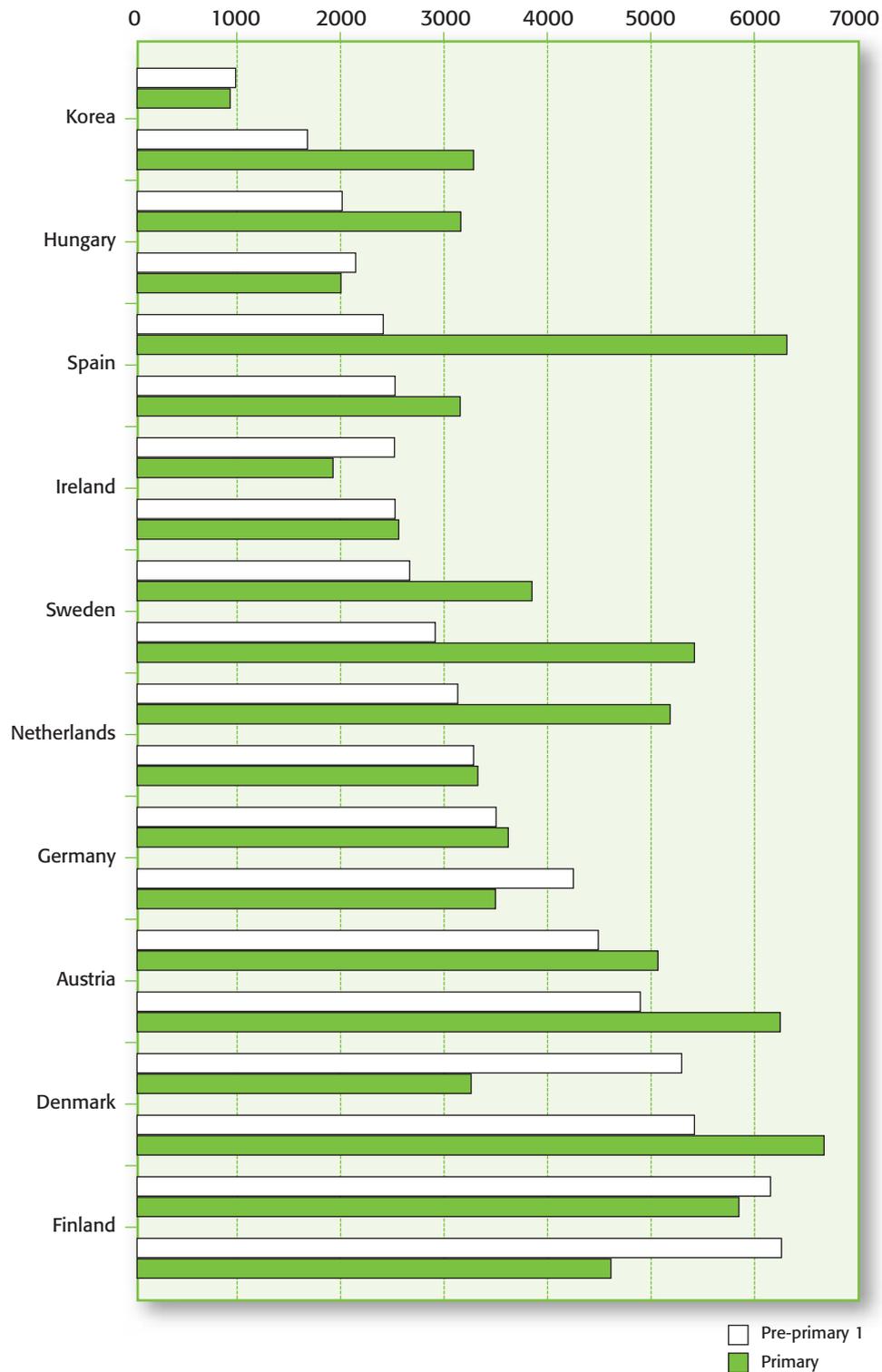
**Source:** Administration fédérale des finances and OECD *National Accounts*.

**Note:** Ministry officials have suggested to the OECD team that calculations in terms of Gross National Product give a fairer picture of Ireland's investment effort in the social and educational domains

**Figure 3**  
Child poverty in rich nations



**Figure 4**  
**Expenditure per student on public and private pre- and primary schools,**  
**based on full-time equivalents, and US dollars converted using PPPs.**

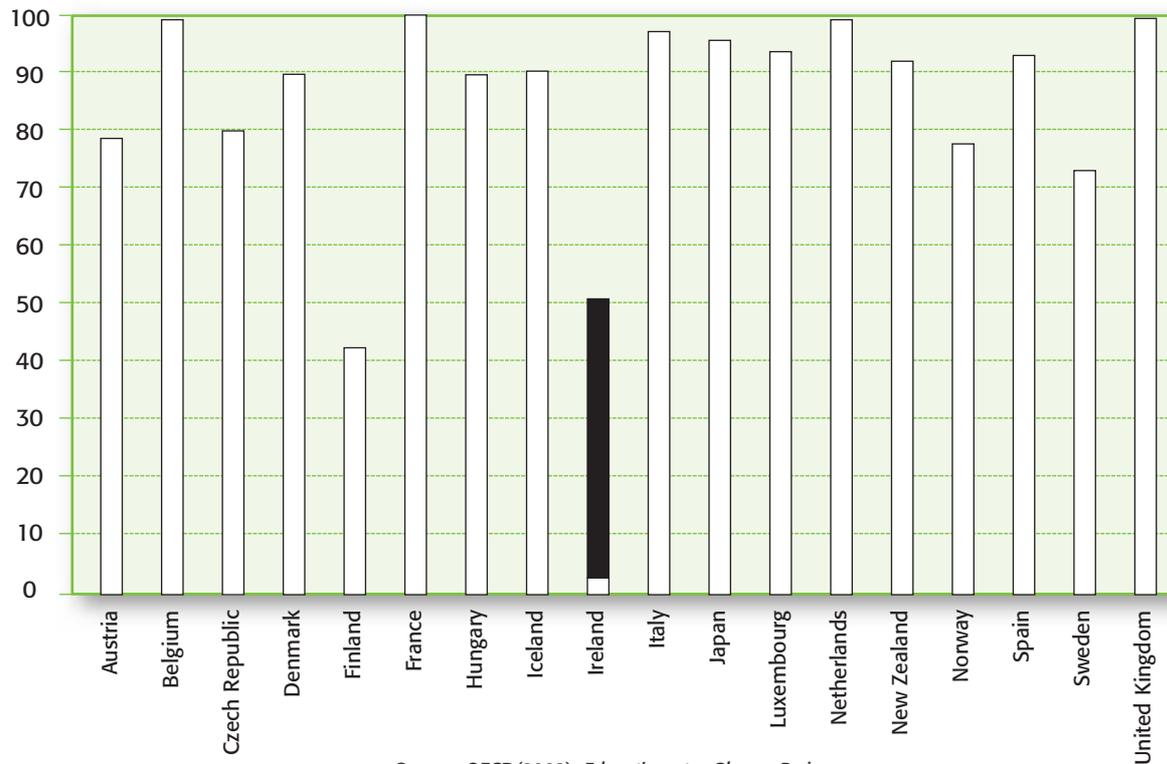


Source: OECD education data base, 2001

**Note:** The expenditures given for Denmark Finland and Sweden concern only the pre-school class for 6-7 year olds. In these countries, the average government/local government expenditure for children 3-6 years is significantly greater than for children in the pre-school class or in primary school, owing to the much lower child// staff ratios for the former.

**Figure 5**

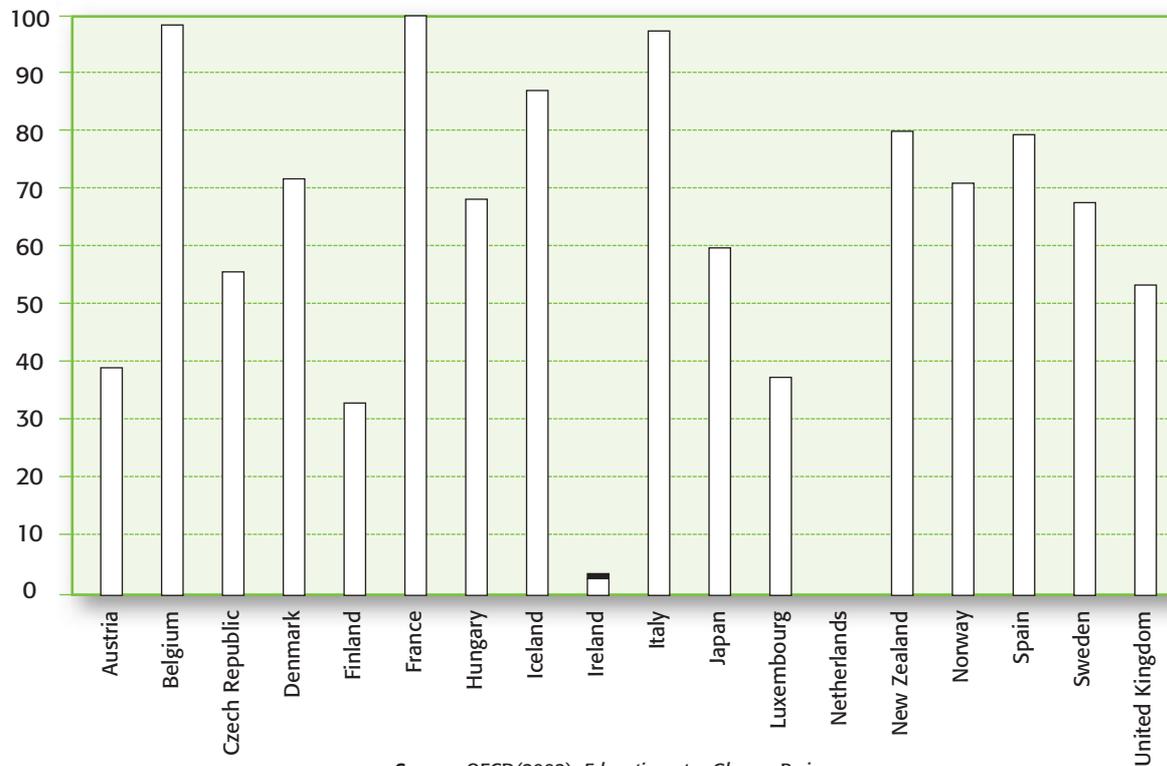
**Enrolments of 4-year old children in early education in selected OECD countries**



Source: OECD(2002), Education at a Glance, Paris.

**Figure 6**

**Enrolment of 3-year old children in state-funded early education in selected OECD countries**



Source: OECD(2002), Education at a Glance, Paris.

**Note:** Many 3-year olds attend some form of sessional education in Ireland. However, as these sessions are organised on a private basis and are unsupported by state funding, ministry statisticians do not include them in figures supplied to the OECD and other international organisations.

**Table 2**  
**Social expenditure in OECD countries as % of GDP**

	1980	1985	1990	1995	1996	1997	1998
Australia	11.3	13.5	14.4	17.8	17.9	17.6	17.8
Austria	23.3	25.1	25.0	27.9	27.9	27.0	26.8
Belgium	24.2	27.0	24.6	25.1	25.5	24.2	24.5
Canada	13.3	17.0	18.2	19.2	18.4	17.8	18.0
Czech Republic	--	--	16.8	18.6	18.6	19.4	19.4
Denmark	29.1	27.9	29.3	32.4	31.7	30.7	29.8
Finland	18.5	22.9	24.8	31.2	31.0	28.7	26.5
France	21.1	26.6	26.5	29.0	29.3	29.3	28.8
Germany	20.3	21.0	20.3	26.7	26.0	26.4	26.0
Greece	11.5	17.9	21.6	21.2	21.8	21.9	22.7
Iceland	--	--	--	18.6	18.3	18.1	18.4
Ireland	16.9	22.0	19.0	19.6	18.5	17.2	15.8
Italy	18.4	21.3	23.9	23.7	24.4	24.9	25.1
Japan	10.1	11.0	10.8	13.5	13.9	14.3	14.7
Korea	--	--	3.2	3.7	3.9	4.3	5.9
Luxembourg	23.3	22.8	21.7	23.3	23.5	22.3	22.1
Mexico	--	1.8	3.2	7.4	7.5	8.0	8.2
Netherlands	27.3	27.4	27.9	25.9	25.9	25.5	24.5
New Zealand	19.1	19.4	22.5	19.3	19.7	20.8	21.0
Norway	18.5	19.7	26.0	27.6	26.5	26.2	27.0
Poland	--	--	16.2	24.7	24.9	24.2	22.8
Portugal	11.6	12.3	13.8	17.5	18.2	17.8	18.2
Slovak Republic	--	--	--	13.5	13.4	13.1	13.6
Spain	15.8	18.0	19.3	20.9	20.9	20.2	19.7
Sweden	29.0	30.2	31.0	33.0	33.0	32.3	31.0
Switzerland	15.2	16.2	19.7	26.0	27.3	28.3	28.1
Turkey	4.3	4.2	6.4	7.5	10.4	11.7	11.6
United Kingdom	18.2	21.3	19.4	22.7	22.2	21.1	20.8
United States	13.1	12.9	13.4	15.4	15.3	14.9	14.6
<b>OECD Countries</b>	<b>18.0</b>	<b>19.1</b>	<b>19.2</b>	<b>21.1</b>	<b>21.3</b>	<b>21.0</b>	<b>20.8</b>
<b>EU Countries</b>	<b>20.6</b>	<b>22.9</b>	<b>23.2</b>	<b>25.3</b>	<b>25.4</b>	<b>24.6</b>	<b>24.2</b>

-- Data not available.

Source: OECD(2001), CD-Rom on social expenditure database, 2001.

**Table 3****Monthly Child Benefits in Ireland, UK, Sweden, France and Germany (Euros, July 2001 – France, 2003)**

	<b>Ireland</b>	<b>UK<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Sweden</b>	<b>France</b>	<b>Germany</b>
1 child	85.7	108.2	105.4	160	138.0
2 children	171.4	180.5	220.0	288.8	277.1
3 children	280.6	252.8	355.74 <sup>b</sup>	390 <sup>b</sup>	430.5

- a) Since child benefit is paid weekly in the UK, amounts have been calculated based on a 30-day month.  
b) Supplements for large families are included in this figure.

*Source:* Daly & Clavero, 2002

**Table 4****Childbirth-related leave policies in selected OECD countries**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Type of leave</b>	<b>Duration in months</b>	<b>Payment rate</b>
Austria	16 weeks maternity leave plus 2 years parental leave	27.70	100 % of prior earnings 18 months unemployment benefit, 6 months unpaid
Canada	17 weeks maternity leave plus 35 weeks parental leave	12.00	55 % (ceiling) for maternity leave; unemployment rate + part-time earnings for parental leave
Denmark	28 weeks maternity leave plus 1 year parental leave	18.50	60 % of prior earnings 90 % of unemployment benefit
France	16 weeks maternity leave plus Parental leave to child's 3rd bd	36.00	100 % of prior earnings €334 (plus child allowance of €189), or €493 monthly.
Ireland	26 weeks maternity leave plus 14 weeks parental leave	9.30	70 % (ceiling) of wages for 18 weeks. All else unpaid
Norway	52 weeks parental leave plus 2 years child-rearing leave	36.00	80 % of prior earnings Flat rate
Sweden	Each parent entitled to 18 months parental leave	36.00	80 % for 12 months; 3 months flat rate; rest unpaid

- a) Since child benefit is paid weekly in the UK, amounts have been calculated based on a 30-day month.  
b) Supplements for large families are included in this figure.

*Source:* Waldfogel (2001) and Irish Background Report 2002

**Table 5**  
**Subsidised access to ECEC services for children 0-6 years**  
**provided by government departments**

	Typical service	Number of children covered	% of cohort 0-6 covered
DHC	Social Services nurseries from birth to 4 years	c. 7000	2 %
DJELR	Support to actual EOCP places from birth to 6 years	c. 23,466	7.3 %
DES	Provision (in primary schools) for pre-school children aged 3-6 years	104,437*	32 %

\* Strictly speaking, there are 104,437 children in early education services, but another 21,656 children are already enrolled in 1st or 2nd class in primary school by January of the current year, when figures are collected. For the report, the smaller figure is chosen, and access data, financing data, child-staff ratios etc. are based on this figure.

*Source: Irish Background Report 2002*

**Table 6**  
**Percentage of children enrolled in early childhood services in EU countries**

	% coverage for 3-6 years	% coverage for 0-3 years	Year of data validity
France	99	29	1998
Netherlands	98	(6)	1998
Belgium	97	30	2000
Italy	95	6	1998
Denmark	91	64	1998
Spain	84	5	1998
Sweden	80	48	1999
Norway	80	40	2000
United Kingdom	(79)	(34)	1997
Germany	78	10	1998
Portugal	75	2	2000
Austria	68	4	1998
Finland	66	22	2000
Ireland	56	(38)	2000
Greece	46	3	1999

*Source: OECD Employment Outlook 2001. Brackets indicate data inaccuracies. Figures were provided by national sources*

**Table 7****ECEC services in the Childcare sector in Ireland**

Type of service	Sessional	Full-day	Total number of services
Playgroup / Pre-school	1 276	252	1 528
Montessori school	402	229	631
Nursery / day care centre	–	414	414
'Other service'	113	118	231
Drop-in crèche	124	68	192
Naíonraí	159	3	162
Parent & toddler group	136	–	136
After school group	97	–	97
Workplace crèche	22	40	62
Homework club	43	–	43
<b>Total</b>			<b>3 496</b>
<b>Total number of childminders (estimated)</b>			<b>37 900</b>

*Source:* Forthcoming report of the ADM: *National Summary of the County Childcare Census 1999/2000*, cited in the *Irish Background Report 2002*, adapted. The figure for childminders is taken from Government of Ireland, 1999a.

**Table 8****Expenditure on educational institutions per student, relative to GDP per capita, by level of education, based on full-time equivalents**

OECD countries	Pre-school 3-6 years	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary level
Austria*	20	26	33	47
Belgium*	12	16	26	39
Denmark*	15	24	28	39
Finland*	16	18	25	35
France*	17	18	31	34
Germany*	20	16	27	42
Hungary 1*	21	19	21	51
Ireland	13	12	17	37
Italy 1	21	22	27	32
Netherlands 2	15	16	21	46
Norway 1	40	20	26	43
Portugal*	13	20	30	28
Spain	15	19	26	30
Sweden	14	24	25	61
United Kingdom*	27	16	24	41
United States 4*	20	20	24	57
<b>Country mean</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>44</b>

*Source:* OECD, *Education at a Glance, 2002*. The investment in early education of the Nordic countries is much greater than the table shows, as with the exception of Norway, the expenditure figures here were provided only for the "pre-school class", that is a special induction class for 6-7 year olds, which takes place in primary school in Denmark, Finland and Sweden. Sweden spends, in fact, over 2% of its GDP on integrated services for young children.

**Table 9**

Percentage access to publicly subsidised early childhood provision in small northern EU economies

Country	Children from 0-3 years	Children from 3-6 years
Denmark	48%	93%
Flanders	58%	97%
Ireland	15%	56%
Scotland	n.a.	96%

**Table 10**

Proportion of pupils in junior and senior infant classes by class size 2000/2001

Group sizes in the Irish infant school							
	0 - 19	20 - 24	25 - 29	30 - 34	35 - 39	40+	Total
Junior Infants	17.0 %	28.0 %	37.0 %	17.1 %	1.9 %	0.0 %	100 %
Senior Infants	14.5 %	26.4 %	34.2 %	22.8 %	2.0 %	0.1 %	100 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>15.7 %</b>	<b>27.3 %</b>	<b>34.8 %</b>	<b>20.1 %</b>	<b>2.0 %</b>	<b>0.1 %</b>	<b>100 %</b>
Total number of children according to group	16,349	28,319	36,120	20,932	2,072	40	103,832

Source: Department of Education and Science, forthcoming (cited in the Irish Background Report 2002, p.63)

**Table 11**

Women's employment rates by presence of children in 2000, as a percentage of cohort 25-54

	No children	One child	Two or more children
Austria	76.0	75.6	65.7
Belgium	65.6	71.8	69.3
Canada	76.5	74.9	68.2
Czech Republic	80.8	72.3	59.4
Denmark (1998)	78.5	88.1	77.2
Finland (1997)	79.2	78.5	73.5
France	73.5	74.1	58.8
Germany	77.3	70.4	56.3
Greece	53.1	53.9	50.3
Iceland	89.1	89.3	80.8
<b>Ireland</b>	<b>65.8</b>	<b>51.0</b>	<b>40.8</b>
Italy	52.8	52.1	42.4
Netherlands	75.3	69.9	63.3
Norway	82.9	83.3	78.0
Portugal	72.6	78.5	70.3
Spain	54.6	47.6	43.3
Sweden	81.9	80.6	81.8
Switzerland (2001)	84.3	75.5	65.5
United Kingdom	79.9	72.9	62.3
United States (1999)	78.6	75.6	64.7
<b>OECD 23</b>	<b>73.7</b>	<b>70.6</b>	<b>61.9</b>

Source: EULFS and OECD (2002), Employment Outlook, Chapter 2, Women at work

**Table 12**  
Public expenditure on health, as % of GDP

	1960	1970	1980	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Australia	2.1		4.4	5.2	5.4	5.4	5.4	5.4	5.5	5.5	5.7	5.8	6	6.1
Austria		3.3	5.2	5.2	5.2	5.5	5.9	5.9	6.1	6.1	5.6	5.7	5.6	5.6
Belgium									6	6.4	6	6	6.2	6.2
Canada	2.3	4.9	5.4	6.7	7.2	7.4	7.2	6.9	6.5	6.3	6.2	6.5	6.4	6.5
Czech Republic				4.9	5.1	5.2	6.8	6.9	6.8	6.5	6.5	6.5	6.5	6.5
Denmark				8	7	7	7.2	7	6.8	6.8	6.8	6.9	7	6.9
Finland		4.1	5	6.3	7.2	7.2	6.3	5.8	5.7	5.8	5.5	5.3	5.2	5
France				6.6	6.7	6.9	7.2	7.1	7.3	7.2	7.1	7.1	7.1	7.1
Germany		4.5	6.8	6.5		7.7	7.6	7.8	8.1	8.4	8.1	7.9	8	7.9
Greece		2.6	3.7	4	3.9	4.3	4.8	4.8	5	5.1	5	4.9	5.1	5.3
Hungary					6.4	6.8	6.7	7.2	6.3	5.9	5.6	5.5	5.3	5.1
Iceland	2.5	4.1	5.5	6.9	7.1	7.1	7	6.9	7.1	7	6.8	7.1	7.6	7.7
<b>Ireland</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>6.8</b>	<b>4.4</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4.9</b>	<b>4.7</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>4.7</b>	<b>4.6</b>	<b>4.7</b>
Italy				6.4	6.6	6.5	6.2	5.9	5.3	5.4	5.6	5.6	5.6	6
Japan	1.8	3.1	4.6	4.6	4.6	4.8	5.1	5.3	5.3	5.4	5.3	5.5	5.8	6
Korea				1.7	1.5	1.6	1.6	1.6	1.7	1.9	2.1	2.4	2.4	2.6
Luxembourg		3.2	5.5	5.7	5.5	5.7	5.8	5.6	5.9	5.9	5.5	5.4	5.4	4.9
Mexico				2	2.3	2.4	2.5	2.6	2.4	2.1	2.4	2.5	2.7	2.7
Netherlands			5.2	5.4	5.7	6.1	6.3	6.1	6	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.5
New Zealand		4.1	5.2	5.7	6.1	5.9	5.5	5.6	5.6	5.5	5.8	6.1	6.1	6.2
Norway		4	5.9	6.4	6.8	6.9	6.8	6.7	6.7	6.6	6.6	7.2	7.3	6.5
Poland				4.8	5	5.1	4.7	4.3	4.4	4.7	4.4	4.2	4.4	4.2
Portugal		1.6	3.6	4.1	4.3	4.2	4.6	4.6	5.1	5.5	5.6	5.6	5.9	6.2
Spain	0.9	2.3	4.3	5.3	5.3	5.6	5.8	5.6	5.5	5.5	5.4	5.4	5.4	5.3
Sweden		5.8	8.2	7.4	7.2	7.3	7.5	7.1	7.1	7.3	7.1	7.1	7.2	7.1
Switzerland				4.5	4.8	5.1	5.2	5.3	5.4	5.7	5.7	5.8	5.9	5.9
Turkey		0.9	0.9	2.2	2.4	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.4	2.7	3	3.5		
United Kingdom		3.9	5	5	5.4	5.8	5.9	5.9	5.8	5.8	5.5	5.5	5.8	5.9
United States	1.2	2.5	3.6	4.7	5.2	5.5	5.7	5.9	6	6	5.9	5.8	5.7	5.8

OECD Health Data, 2003

**Table 13**  
**Comparative extent of child poverty across countries in relation to family type**



**Poverty Rates for Children by Family Type**

**Note:**

- \* Poverty line is defined as 50% of median adjusted disposable income for all persons
- \* Equivalence scale is the square root of family size
- \* The definition of two parent and single mother households allows other adults to be present.

Country	Year	% Children in poverty	In Two-Parent Families	In Single-Mother Families	% of Children Living in Single-Mother Families
Australia	1994	15.8	11.9	46.3	10.6
Austria	1997	10.2	8.4	23.5	12.7
Belgium	1997	7.7	7.2	10.1	8.9
Canada	1998	16.3	10.5	49.6	14.3
Czech R.	1996	6.6	3.2	36.2	10.0
Denmark	1997	8.7	4.9	30.2	14.1
Finland	2000	2.8	2.1	8.1	12.8
France	1994	7.9	6.1	25.3	9.3
Hungary	1999	8.8	8.2	11.8	6.7
Ireland	1996	14.4	11.1	43.4	10.3
Italy	1995	20.2	19.6	30.6	5.2
Luxembourg	1994	4.5	2.9	19.3	9.6
Netherlands	1994	8.1	6.6	26.4	7.6
Norway	1995	3.9	2.0	13.5	15.2
Slovenia	1999	6.9	5.8	19.6	6.6
Spain	1990	12.2	11.5	25.4	4.9
Sweden	2000	4.2	2.3	12.9	17.8
United Kingdom	1999	15.4	10.0	34.0	21.7
United State	2000	21.9	14.8	49.3	19.5

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# Appendix 2

## THE OECD REVIEW TEAM

**Ms. Pamela Oberhuemer**, Rapporteur  
State Institute of Early Childhood Education and Research (IFP)  
Munich, Germany

**Ms. Anke Vedder**, Senior policy adviser  
Youth Policy Directorate of the  
Netherlands Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport

**Ms Colette Kelleher**, Head  
Early Childhood Partnership Unit  
Department for Education & Skills, London.

**Mr. John Bennett**, Project Manager  
OECD Directorate for Education  
2 rue André Pascal  
75775 Paris Cedex 16 , FRANCE



# 3 Appendix 3

## A CALL TO ACTION FROM THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

### WHY AMERICA NEEDS HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Over the past two decades, business leaders have invested time, expertise, and resources in efforts to improve K-12 education in the United States. What we have learned leads us to conclude that America's continuing efforts to improve education and develop a world-class workforce will be hampered without a federal and state commitment to early childhood education for 3- and 4-year-old children.

As states implement the *No Child Left Behind* Act, designed to ensure that all students are proficient in reading and math by 2013-14, we also need to ensure that children enter school ready and able to succeed. Research shows, however, that far too many children enter school ill-prepared.

Studies document a wide gap between lower- and higher- income children before they enter kindergarten. When children begin school behind, they tend to continue to fall further and further behind. High-quality early childhood education can help close this gap. Long-term positive outcomes and cost-savings include improved school performance, reduced special education placement, lower school dropout rates, and increased lifelong earning potential (see the Appendix for a summary of this research).

Not only does high-quality early childhood education make a difference for children, it matters to their employed parents. Employers increasingly find that the availability of good early childhood programs is critical to the recruitment and retention of parent employees.

In today's world, where education and skill levels determine future earnings, the economic and social costs to individuals, communities, and the nation of not taking action on early childhood education are far too great to ignore, especially when the benefits far outweigh the costs. Estimates of the return on investment of high-quality programs for low-income children range from \$4 to \$7 for every \$1 spent. However the research is clear: the return on investment is linked to quality; simply increasing participation without ensuring program quality will not produce positive results.

As business leaders, we see the discussion around early childhood programs for 3- and 4-year-olds as largely an education issue. Since states have primary responsibility for education, we believe that states need to take the lead in developing and funding a coherent early childhood education system from the patchwork of programs and services that exist today. The federal government also must play a leadership role. It must make high-quality early childhood education a national priority, and continue its historic role in focusing on the children most in need. Federal and state investments in early education must be coordinated in order to improve program quality and to serve more children.



## Statement of Principles

The Business Roundtable (BRT) and Corporate Voices for Working Families (CVWF) believe federal and state efforts to develop early childhood education systems for 3- and 4-year-olds must be based on a set of guiding Principles that define the components of a successful system and high-quality programs. These Principles draw on current early childhood research, lessons from K-12 education reform efforts, and applicable lessons from the nation's experience in building a voluntary system of higher education. Although our focus is on 3- and 4-year-old children, we fully recognize the importance of quality improvement efforts for early childhood programs serving children under 3.

The six principles below are interconnected; they are not listed in priority order. BRT, CVWF, and others will use these Principles to assess existing early education programs, consider philanthropic priorities, evaluate policy proposals on Pre-K, Head Start, and other programs, and formulate policy positions.

### 1. Learning:

A successful early childhood education system views children's learning as the central mission. It should:

- Provide positive learning experiences that foster the interconnections among children's social, emotional, and cognitive development and nurture children's innate joy in learning;
- Engage children in developmentally appropriate experiences with English language literacy and numeracy, and encourage family literacy programs to reinforce these experiences;
- Hold the same high expectations for success for all children while also respecting and supporting the diversity of children's families, cultures, races, socio-economic backgrounds, as well as the different ways that young children learn and the rates at which they progress; and
- Include healthy nutrition, safe environments, facilities conducive to learning, and diagnostic screening with effective follow-up services to treat disabilities or health problems that might affect children's ability to learn.

### 2. Standards:

A successful early childhood education system articulates standards for children's learning and program quality that align with state K-12 academic standards. It should:

- Align the objectives of the early childhood education system and the state's standards in the early grades of school;
- Adopt research-based curriculum options and program standards that enable early childhood education to achieve and sustain results for children;
- Endorse research-based indicators for what children need to know and be able to do when they enter school that respect the diverse ways that children grow and learn; and
- Use the results of regular and appropriate diagnostic assessments of children's performance to improve instructional practice.

### 3. Teachers:

A successful early childhood education system ensures that teaching staff possess the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to help young children enter school prepared to succeed. It should:

- Employ skilled teaching staff who have a college degree and/or demonstrated knowledge and skill commensurate with the requirements of the position and meet performance criteria such as English verbal skills and the ability to connect with and teach young children;
- Require effective preparation as well as ongoing professional development that helps staff improve the quality of their teaching, become ongoing learners, and move through an articulated, degree-granting system, where appropriate; and

- ❑ Institute differentiated salaries based on the experience and competencies of teachers that, given the importance of consistent relationships to children's learning, are adequate to attract and retain a qualified teaching staff.

#### 4. Parents:

A successful early childhood education system supports parents as their children's first teachers and provides high-quality program options to parents who choose to enrol their children. It should:

- ❑ Provide access to high-quality early childhood programs for families seeking out-of-home early childhood education for their 3- and 4-year-old children, regardless of their socio-economic status;
- ❑ Offer seamless ways to meet the need of some families for care during the time they are working as well as the need for early learning experiences for their children; and
- ❑ Promote practical and effective strategies for parents to be involved in and support their children's learning at home and in early education programs.

#### 5. Accountability:

A successful early childhood education system embraces accountability for measurable results. It should:

- ❑ Collect the data and conduct the research needed to identify best practices, assess system performance, and report these results to stakeholders;
- ❑ Evaluate the progress of children who have participated in early childhood education programs on the state's annual assessments required by the No Child Left Behind Act;
- ❑ Implement continuous improvement processes that put the lessons learned from research and evaluation into program standards and practice; and
- ❑ Establish incentives for meeting or exceeding objectives as well as consequences for persistent failure to achieve intended outcomes for children.

#### 6. Partnerships:

A successful early childhood education system builds crosscutting partnerships to govern, finance, sustain, and improve the system. It should:

- ❑ Create effective and efficient governance mechanisms that support community planning, program development and oversight;
- ❑ Involve key stakeholders at the federal, state, and local levels, and encourage public/private partnerships to improve effectiveness, efficiency, and accessibility;
- ❑ Include participation among all sectors of the early childhood field within the state, including public and private programs as well as those that take place in schools, centers, and homes; and
- ❑ Insist on adequate, efficient, and shared financing mechanisms that minimize duplication of effort and identify priorities for public investments in times of budgetary constraints as well as a blueprint for future expansion.

## From Principles to Policy

In 1990, the nation's governors and the Administration set as their first National Education Goal, "By the year 2000, all children will start school ready to learn." Thirteen years later, there has been progress—45 states are now providing some early childhood education services and programs, using both federal and state funding sources. The reality of today's families—including those with working parents and those with a parent at home—is that 69 percent of 3-year-old children and 82 percent of 4-year-old children are in some form of early childhood program on a regular basis. Yet most of these programs are not high quality, despite the research that shows that only high-quality programs produce a strong return on investment. Thus, the goal of school readiness remains largely unmet.

Three groundbreaking initiatives pave the way toward realizing this goal. Two reports by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences summarize current research on early development and early learning: *From Neurons to Neighborhood: Applying the Science of Early Childhood Development* in 2000 and *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers* in 2001. In addition, the Committee for Economic Development developed a vision for applying this knowledge in its publication, *Preschool for All: Investing in a Productive and Just Society* in 2002.

The Principles outlined in this statement take us the next step in formulating federal and state policies. As noted earlier, education is largely a state responsibility, but the federal government has always played a very significant financial role in early childhood programs and must continue to do so. Although the federal role in early childhood is different from its role in K-12 and higher education, policymakers should examine relevant lessons from federal initiatives that have strengthened both higher education and K-12 education.

In higher education, the federal government's first priority is to help low-income students gain access to postsecondary studies. The federal government also helped states build a voluntary higher education system that is the envy of the rest of the world. The federal government could take a similar role in the early childhood arena, supporting low-income children's participation in high-quality programs while also helping states to build the infrastructure for high-quality programs—including building staff capacity.

In elementary and secondary (K-12) education, the federal government only provides 7 percent of the overall resources, but influences the entire system because these resources link their assistance for low-income students in low-performing schools with requirements for rigorous state accountability systems that include all students. Although early childhood education is very different from the public K-12 system because it has a higher percent of federal funding and a mix of public and private providers, we believe that the federal government could use a similar model of linking resources with accountability by pairing federal investments with requirements for strong state accountability systems that measure results, ensure high program standards, and expand the numbers of children served.

We are well aware that economic conditions, budgets, and political considerations can hinder or hasten domestic policy initiatives. But even in uncertain times, we can begin to plan for the future. We urge decision makers in the public and private sectors—the U.S. Congress, the Administration, local and state governments, school boards, the business community, and other leaders—to make early childhood education a high priority by supporting and endorsing these Principles and launching a multi-sector planning process to identify incremental and additional revenue streams required for implementation. BRT and CVWF are committed to working with all stakeholders to build a quality early learning system for today's and tomorrow's young children.

***The Business Roundtable (BRT)** is an association of 150 chief executive officers of leading corporations committed to advocating public policies that foster vigorous economic growth and a dynamic global economy. In 1990, the BRT adopted a nine-point policy agenda, "Essential Components of a Successful Education System," which outlined the framework for standards-based education reform. One of the nine essential components includes high-quality pre-kindergarten education for disadvantaged children. BRT member companies created or joined*

state business coalitions to promote higher standards, and business leadership has been a critical factor in many of the states that have significantly improved student achievement. The BRT also strongly supported the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which creates a national imperative to raise student achievement and close the achievement gap, and the Roundtable's Task Force on Education and the Workforce is actively involved in the law's implementation.

**Corporate Voices for Working Families (CVWF)** is a coalition of 36 leading corporations that have been engaged in listening to and addressing the challenges of their employee families for over two decades. The CVWF coalition was created in 2001 to bring this private sector voice and experience into the public dialogue on issues affecting their working families. CVWF is focused on communicating the business case for early learning to policymakers, corporations, and other stakeholders interested in strengthening working families. CVWF's partner companies believe that the care and education of young children is critical to the attraction, recruitment and engagement of today's parent employees as well as a key to economic growth. CVWF recently released an issue brief outlining why early education is an important business issue.

# Appendix 4

## SUPPORTING RESEARCH

### **By the time children enter kindergarten, there already is a wide gap in their readiness for school.**

- At age 3, high socio-economic status (SES)<sup>1</sup> children have average vocabularies of 1 100 words, middle SES children have average vocabularies of 750 words, and low SES children have average vocabularies of 480 words (Hart and Risley, 1995).
- Lower SES children enter school with much poorer skills in the major areas of development and learning. Average achievement scores for kindergarten children in the highest SES group are 60 percent higher than those in the lowest SES group (Lee and Burkam, 2002).
- Only 47 percent of low SES kindergarteners are likely to have attended a center-based program (including Head Start) prior to kindergarten entry, compared to 66 percent of higher SES children. Moreover, higher SES children have access to higher-quality programs, further benefiting them (Lee and Burkam, 2002).

### **When children begin kindergarten behind, they continue to fall further and further behind.**

- During the kindergarten year, children who are deemed at risk for later school failure because of their family backgrounds make gains in basic skills such as letter recognition, counting, and comparing object size. Yet these children remain farther behind children with fewer at-risk factors because the more advantaged children make even greater gains in reading and math skills in school than their less advantaged counterparts (West, Denton, and Reaney, 2001).

### **High-quality early childhood programs can make a difference in school readiness despite poverty and other risk factors in children's backgrounds.**

- Children, including those of low and high SES, who attend high-quality centers, score significantly higher on measures of skills and abilities that are important for school success compared to children from lower quality centers. While children's abilities are typically related to their families' income level, the quality of the early childhood experiences can make a difference over and above the effects of family characteristics (Bryant, Maxwell, Taylor, Poe, Peisner-Feinberg, and Bernier, 2003).

### **High-quality early childhood education programs have a high return on investment for low-income children<sup>1</sup>**

- In the short term, longitudinal studies of high-quality early childhood programs, including the Perry Preschool Program, the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention Project, and the Chicago Child Parent Center Program find increased achievement test scores, decreased rates of being held back in school, and decreased placement in special education among low-income children. In the longer term, studies

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report we refer to the effects of socio-economic status (SES) and family income, which are different. In addition to income, SES takes into account such characteristics as parental education and social status.

<sup>2</sup> In this calculation, low-income children are in the bottom 20 percent of family income levels, middle-class children are in the 20-80 percent range, and high-income children are in the top 20 percent.

also find increased high school graduation and decreased crime and delinquency rates (Schweinhart, Barnes, and Weikart, 1993; Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, and Miller-Johnson 2002; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, and Mann, 2001).

- Cost-benefit analyses of Perry Preschool and the Chicago Child Parent Center Programs find a cost savings of \$7 for every dollar invested (Barnett, 1996; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, and Mann, 2002). Cost-benefit analysis of the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention Project finds a cost savings of \$4 for every dollar invested (Masse and Barnett, 2002).
- When using an internal rate of return, which compares public and private return on investments, high-quality early childhood programs fare well. The internal rate of return for the Perry Preschool Program has been calculated at 16 percent, supporting the notion that early education can be a good investment (Rolnick and Grunewald, 2003).

#### **There is evidence that high-quality programs will benefit middle-class children as well.**

- At the beginning of kindergarten, the gap between middle and higher SES children is larger than the gap between lower and middle SES children in achievement scores assessing literacy and mathematics (Lee and Burkam, 2002).
- An indication that middle-class children might substantially benefit from preschool education is that they have relatively high rates of being held back in school and school dropout rates—problems that early childhood education has been found to reduce. Middle-income children have a 12 percent rate of being held back in school compared to 17 percent for low-income children and 8 percent for high-income children. Likewise, middle-income children have an 11 percent school dropout rate, compared to 23 percent for low-income children and 3 percent for high-income children (Barnett, 2003).

#### **High-quality early childhood education is important to business.**

- Numerous studies reveal that there is a cost to business in not responding to its employees' need for reliable and good-quality early childhood programs. Employees are likely to miss work when they spend long hours trying to find early childhood programs or when they deal with the often-tenuous arrangements they have, especially when these arrangements fall apart. When employees with these problems are at work, they have difficulty concentrating because they are worried about their children (Galinsky and Johnson, 1998).
- Companies have also found that there are business benefits in providing their own employees assistance with early childhood programs, including improved recruitment and retention (Galinsky and Johnson, 1998; Galinsky and Bond, 1998). Employees with access to family-supportive programs and policies are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs, to be loyal, to go the extra mile to help their companies succeed, and to stay at their jobs (Bond, Galinsky and Swanberg, 1998).

