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"THE LIGHT BENEATH THE BUSHEL "

**A DISCUSSION PAPER ON
EARLY YEARS EDUCATION
AND CARE
IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND**

by

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July, 1998

A B S T R A C T

This discussion paper builds on 'Where Angels Fear to Tread' in vol. 1, no. 1 of this journal (Horgan and Douglas 1998). It seeks to provide recommendations concerning the way forward which were submitted by the authors to the National Forum for Early Childhood Education in February 1988. These were based on research carried out for more than a decade on Early Years Education and Care in the Education Department of University College Cork.

The paper commences with an overview of the 'Early Years' in the Republic of Ireland and then considers quality child-centred provision under three headings; structures, training and curriculum. It concludes that the period from zero to six heralds the development of an individual's spiritual, emotional, moral, social, cognitive, linguistic, creative and physical growth. Hence, if we really care about educational standards, educational continuity and the spiritual and psychological well-being of future generations, Early Childhood services must be a priority target. In other words, the main concern should be the care and education of our youngest, and indeed most vulnerable, citizens - the children of this State.

"Each new generation offers humanity another chance. If we ensure the survival and development of children in all parts of the world, protect them from harm and exploitation and enable them to participate in decisions directly affecting their lives, we will surely build the foundation of the just society we all want and that children deserve."
[UNICEF, cited in Nutbrown, C., 1996, p.109]

Introduction

Since the time of Aristotle and Plato eminent educationalists, philosophers and theorists have attempted to focus attention on the importance of educating young children, but until the middle of the nineteenth century these appeals largely fell upon deaf ears. One thinks, for example, of Luther, Comenius, Rousseau, Edgeworth (the first important Irish man in this area) and Pestalozzi. It was not until the German political upheaval of the 1840s and the exile of the many disciples of Frederick Froebel that early years education became respectable and was taken up by the middle classes throughout much of the western world.

Interestingly, however, several members of the present Economic Union, such as Germany, Italy, Denmark and Belgium, have over the past 30 years allocated huge sums of money to Early Years Education. Germany, for example, as part of the major overhaul of its education system in the early 1970s recognised the Kindergarten (the education of 3-6 year olds) as the first stage of education. The ensuing great debate on the most beneficial curriculum for children at this crucial stage was highly significant. The Belgian government has also debated this area at length, spending ten years compiling their Early Years Curriculum which was finally produced in 1985 with a foreword by their (then) Minister for Education.

Indeed, there is now a general consensus on the European mainland that Bloom (1964) was correct when he stated, more than twenty years ago, that half the intellectual development of the average child has taken place by the time that he or she is four. There is also a strong commitment in Europe to doing something about it.

The importance of the Early Years is only just starting to be appreciated in the

Republic of Ireland. The vital nature of preschool/infant education cannot be overstressed. From this, flows children's linguistic, scientific and creative abilities which lead to future literacy and numeracy. Early Years Education has a cut-off point in the primary curriculum of approximately eight years of age and this is important since by then most children can be expected to have acquired the "basics". They should be able to read, write and have grasped the underlying concepts of arithmetic. They should have an extended verbal vocabulary and have escaped from much of what Halliday (1975) calls the "here and now" use of language. They should be capable of what Margaret Donaldson (1978) calls "disembedded thinking" and language should by now have become "opaque". All future learning is, of course, based on the foundations laid in the first eight years. Attitudes to schooling and knowledge acquired during these early years fundamentally affect each child's subsequent performance.

Professor Margaret Donaldson, University of Edinburgh, stresses this very clearly when she says:

"The period of life that stretches from around three to around eight years of age is a period of momentous significance for all people growing up in our culture. It is during this time that children enter the social world beyond the family and establish themselves, more or less easily and successfully, as members of a community of their peers. It is during this time too that they first encounter and deal with the challenges set to them by our system of education - challenges which, for many children, are unlike any they have ever met before.

By the time this period is over, children will have formed conceptions of themselves as social beings, as thinkers and as language-users and they will have reached certain important decisions about their own abilities and their own worth..., decisions which are of vital importance not only for their self-respect and general well-being, but also for their subsequent progress."

[Donaldson, 1978, p.43]

This discussion paper builds on 'Where Angels Fear to Tread' in vol. 1, no. 1 of this journal (Horgan and Douglas 1998). It seeks to provide recommendations concerning the way forward which were submitted by the authors to the National Forum

for Early Childhood Education in February 1988. These were based on research carried out in the Education Department of University College Cork over more than ten years [Horgan (1987), Dunlea (1990), Douglas (1993), Douglas (1994), Douglas and Horgan (1995), Horgan and Douglas (1995a), Horgan and Douglas (1995b), Horgan (1995), Horgan S. (1995), Horgan and Douglas (1995c) and Dwane (1998)]. In so doing, it proposes to highlight and address the needs of young children - children who are powerless and vulnerable but children who are intensely curious, active, instinctive and enthusiastic learners. Further, it addresses concerns about the environment and the quality of experiences which we offer these children - concerns about equality of opportunity for all, about respecting and valuing children; about carefully observing them and planning how to meet their needs, thus enabling them to maximise their unique potential as individuals now and in the future. It is further concerned with the relationships between children and adults and between all the various providers involved in the education and care of these children. This will, of necessity, involve working across boundaries.

This comes at a time of considerable change in Irish society. Recent developments in education, health and social services are changing both professional practice and its impact on children and their parents. Indeed, it could be argued that Early Years Education and care are at the crossroads. Despite this, until recently, young children were not a national priority and much apathy, confusion and misunderstanding continue to abound - all of which have been exacerbated by the dearth of research in this area. To date, no substantial, comprehensive study of all the main providers of Early Years Education in this country has been undertaken.

The provision of high quality child-centred Early Years Education can be considered under three headings: Structures, Training and Curriculum (Hayes, 1996). In what follows, suggestions are made as to how all three could be improved for the benefit of young Irish children.

Early Years Education in the Republic of Ireland

Compulsory education begins in the Republic of Ireland at the age of six and there are a variety of institutions concerned with Early Childhood Education for the three to six year old.

The principal forms of provision are as follows:

1. Junior and Senior Infants of the Primary Schools (children aged from four to six). This includes Junior and Senior Infants in *Gaelscoileanna* (all-Irish speaking primary schools). [These cater for approximately 95 percent of the five year olds and 60 percent of the four year olds (Department of Education 1997)];
2. Nursery Schools (most are Montessori Schools for children aged three, four and five);
3. Preschool Playgroups for children aged three to five. [Divided into Home Playgroups and Community Playgroups];
4. *Naíonraí* - Irish-speaking or bilingual playgroups (children aged three, four and five).

A recent development has been the inauguration of "Early Start" classes for the three to four year olds in Primary Schools in disadvantaged areas. Eight were set up by the Minister for Education in 1994/95 and a further thirty-two have been opened since.

There is presently a N.C.C.A. (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment) Committee which is looking at the Infant Curriculum for Primary Schools. It is likely to make more prescriptive the 1971 "New Curriculum" and this revised curriculum is due to commence in 1999/2000.

In the area of "Early Years" Education, Ireland lags behind almost every other European country. Primary teachers receive a limited training in the Infant Curriculum at the Colleges of Education and thereafter receive almost no in-service training. It is interesting to note that although the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) (1995) has identified Infant and 'Early Start' classes as areas where teachers require extensive in-service training, the programme of in-service courses for primary teachers presently funded by the Department of Education infrequently includes this curriculum area. The voluntary sector, which provides most of the remaining preschools, is very poorly

resourced. The training of the latter is largely based on courses set up and run by their own associations. Many of these early years educators feel inadequate when faced with a class of small children.

Recommendations (Structures)

It is suggested that Early Start classes for 3 to 4 year old children should be continued and expanded in disadvantaged areas. However, in future, for every four created in a designated disadvantaged area, it is suggested that one would be set up in a non-disadvantaged area. This would avoid the present problem of 'labelling' and would give recognition to the fact that there are pockets of disadvantage in rural/ middle class areas. It is imperative that the widest possible consultation should take place with the voluntary providers of preschools to ensure that Early Start classes are not placed right beside an already excellent preschool.

It is suggested that the ultimate aim should be to have an Early Start class in every primary school but that, financially, this is unlikely in the foreseeable future. For that reason, the Education and Science Department should coordinate all preschool services for the benefit of the Irish child.

Given the nature of the present provision, it is further suggested that:

- A permanent National Forum on Early Childhood Education and Care be created which would meet annually and appoint sub-committees;
- A Committee of Senior Civil Servants from the eight Departments catering for young children be established. This committee should meet regularly and be advised by a sub-committee of the permanent National Forum representing all the Early Years providers. The Department of Education and Science should be the 'lead' Department.
- Ancillary Personnel should be appointed to all Early Start/Infant classes. (This would provide additional employment for those who wished from the present voluntary sector.)
- A specific fund should be created to facilitate adult/parent education with respect to the 'Early Years'.
- A specific allocation for Early Childhood Education and Care should be written into the 'estimates' for each year. This should distinguish between the State and Voluntary

sectors. A greater percentage of G.N.P. should be devoted to this area.

- A statutory requirement should be introduced to ensure that all employers (either on an individual basis or collectively) provide high quality crèche/ daycare facilities for their employees. Under current legislation, corporate enterprises are entitled to a tax deduction for the provision of crèche/daycare facilities since these can be viewed as an incentive to recruit, maintain and enhance the efficacy of their employees. (*Note:* It is important that this provision should not be considered as a 'benefit in kind' with respect to employees' taxation.)
- There should be tax concessions for parents to avail of high quality child care provision.
- A voucher scheme should be introduced for all medical card holders (proportionate to the number of children in their care) to enable them to avail of high quality childcare provision.
- It is imperative that the loophole in Section VII of the 1991 Childcare Act (which allows unregistered persons to care for up to three infants unrelated to them, in addition to their own and their relatives) be addressed immediately since this, potentially, could contribute to abuse and neglect of young children.
- The Health Board's remit under the 1991 Child Care Act should be expanded since there is a critical need for some form of identification and regulation of unregistered baby-minders, baby-sitters and those offering full day-care facilities on the "black market".
- Additional child care inspectors (under the 1991 Childcare Act) should be recruited immediately if the annual inspection is to be realised. The educational component of all provision should be addressed. The Act presently concentrates on the static dimensions of quality to the exclusion of the dynamic factors (e.g. adult/child interaction/stimulation, etc.).
- A 'once-off' financial injection should be allocated to all Corporations for the specific purpose of covering the initial start-up costs of providing playground facilities, libraries and toy libraries targeted to meet the needs of the zero to three age group.
- Parent/Toddler groups should be expanded to service all urban/rural areas. Multi-agency involvement should be a central component of this initiative. (Facilitation with respect to the provision of suitable premises should be impressed upon the church bodies, the G.A.A., etc.)
- Children with 'special needs', and minority groups, should be incorporated into mainstream provision wherever possible.

Training

The complexity of preparing personnel for early childhood services is common to many countries of the world. Issues and stumbling blocks include duration of courses, prerequisites for entry, core curriculum content, the age range covered in courses, and practicum requirements (Carnegie Forum, 1986; Howey and Strom, 1987; Curtis and Hevey, 1992). In our opinion, a multidisciplinary approach provides the best way forward for both the State and voluntary sectors in this country. Teachers often think about the curriculum or their organisation of 'Early Years' activities. They often consider whether they can improve on current practice. This type of development has always been present among teachers but previously happened in an individual and *ad hoc* manner. Today, recognition of the exponential rate of change in society has resulted in a climate which views teacher development in a more thorough and systematic fashion. There is a need to help teachers respond to this change by providing a dynamic and helpful framework of professional support.

This is required across all phases of education. For 'Early Years' educators there are additional reasons for looking to professional support. The focus on nursery curriculum and pedagogy during the past twenty years has led to a much higher profile for the educator, who is now seen as a central resource for the child's learning rather than as just a benevolent provider. Increasing information about child development and learning, together with stress on the need to engage parents in this process, makes the job potentially more demanding in every way. Present provision, in this country, is a mixture of care and education - the emphasis reflecting the philosophy of the core providers.

As stated previously, the majority of four to six year olds in Ireland are taught by fully qualified primary teachers with a B.Ed. degree from one of the Colleges of Education. The Irish three to four year olds are catered for by Preschool Playgroups, *Naíonraí* (Irish speaking playgroups), Montessori Schools and 'Early Start' classes based in primary schools.

The Certificate in Preschool Care, the Diploma in Child Care and Education

(taught and validated by the Dublin Institute of Technology), the Montessori System of Education and the Diploma in Nursery Nursing awarded by the National Nursery Examination Board are the only other comprehensive training programmes available to the preschool practitioner in the Republic of Ireland. [The A.M.I. Montessori and St Nicholas graduates are presently the only Montessori teachers recognised by the Department of Education to teach in "special needs" National Schools.]

The Diploma in Nursery Nursing (CACHE) requires the students to spend two years in full-time study with 1,260 hours spent on theory and 840 hours on placement in an approved preschool. The N.C.V.A. qualification, presently required by the Department of Education for assistants in 'Early Start' classes, is a one-year full-time qualification which covers approximately half of the N.N.E.B. syllabus.

At present there are about 400 students graduating each year with a Montessori or NNEB qualification in Ireland and less than 3% of the three to four year olds would presently be taught by someone with such a qualification.

Approximately 20% of three to four year olds are catered for in preschool playgroups whose playgroup leaders (if they are members of the Irish Preschool Playgroups Association) have all undertaken a 20-hour Introductory Playgroup Course organised and administered by the I.P.P.A. themselves. A small number of this age range (25%) are also catered for in *Naíonraí* - Irish speaking playgroups (McKenna, 1990). The training courses for *Naíonra* and Playgroup practitioners are organised by the respective organisations.

Finally, University College Cork provides a B.A. Degree in Early Childhood Studies which is taught jointly by the Departments of Education, Applied Social Studies, Paediatrics and Applied Psychology.

Notwithstanding this diversity, it must be acknowledged that all workers with young children require support and, while acknowledging the different levels of expertise involved, there needs to be some coherence and standardisation in the training offered to

those working in State, private and voluntary settings.

Unfortunately, there are several stumbling blocks which impede progress. The artificial dichotomy between care and education has endowed us with a legacy of divisiveness, limited opportunities for development and promotion, and a lack of recognition for qualifications in an area which constantly battles the stigma of low status.

Training institutions need to be facilitated in their endeavour to improve and refine courses in early childhood education, to enhance their quality of teaching and research and ultimately to acquire the greatest possible recognition for their students and the children in their care.

Recommendations (Training)

It is suggested that:-

- A sub-committee of a permanent National Forum, representing all Early Years providers, be created to advise the Department of Education and Science on all aspects of Early Years training. [*Note:* It is suggested that this pre-service training should be from a multidisciplinary perspective, i.e. health promotion, social work, psychology and education.] The Department should liaise with a specialist Inspectorate for the Early Years in both the State and voluntary sectors (which, with respect to the zero to three year olds, could be the responsibility of the Department of Health).
- The Colleges of Education should remain as the 'gateways' to Primary Teaching. The education and training of teachers by them should include the education and care of children from a multidisciplinary perspective.
- It is imperative that Infant/Early Start classes are not separated from the compulsory Primary School system as this would result in lack of cohesion within the profession and, even more significantly, in a diminution of status for this critical educative period.
- There should be a graduate entry route as well as a Leaving Certificate route into the Colleges of Education. The graduate entry route should be open to all graduates but specifically to those who had obtained an award in a cognate area (i.e. B.A. Degrees in Early Childhood Studies; B.A. Degree in Montessori Studies, etc.).
- Third Level Institutions should be encouraged to introduce a B.A. Degree in Early Childhood Studies. The essence of this Degree is that it is multidisciplinary and mature-student friendly, considering the child from conception to the age of six. Other Early Years providers should be given recognition for their qualifications by exempting their students from part of the Degree [see the O.M.N.A./D.I.T./N.O.W. Report (1997) for the necessary training steps from Level 1 to Level 6 and the respective position of each organisation's qualifications.]

- Multi-professional inservice courses, graded with respect to duration and complexity, should be provided for all Early Years Educators in the State and voluntary sectors. The provision of these courses should be administered by the Department of Education and Science but could be provided by any organisation (e.g. Health Board, University, D.I.T., College of Education, Education Centre, Montessori College, I.P.P.A., An Cómhchoiste Reámhscolaíochta) considered eligible by the Department.
- An inservice training fund should be created by the Department of Education and Science to finance these inservice courses. It is further suggested that, in general, all Early Years Educators should be encouraged to upgrade their qualifications.
- High quality Adult Education courses for parents/caregivers should be developed and made available throughout the country.
- Home visiting programmes should be developed for the education of young parents (c.f. The Child Project, Cork, which is a training of trainers programme).
- 'Centres of Excellence' models of day care and creche facilities for others to visit and emulate should be established in strategic locations in all parts of the country. (Such provision should incorporate "back to school/work" initiatives etc. for the parents.).
- An awareness campaign by the Health Boards should be introduced to highlight, in particular, the critical importance of the pre-conception to birth period. *Note:* churches, doctors' surgeries, social welfare offices, etc. should be targeted.
- Increased funding should be made available to the health boards, targeted specifically for additional visiting (by Public Health Nurses in an advisory capacity) on a monthly basis to all new mothers for the first eighteen months.
- A concerted media effort is required (T.V. chat shows/radio phone-ins staffed by experts in all aspects of early years development). *Note:* R.T.E. could acquire the O.U. Early Learning Materials.
- Second level schools should be targeted and a new subject (Parenting Education) offered at Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate levels. It is imperative that this subject be allocated the same status with respect to points as other curricular areas. *Note:* This new subject could be serviced by staff from cognate subject areas (C.S.P.E., R.S.E., Biology, Home Economics, P.E.) with occasional support staff bought in.
- An annual competition, akin to the *Young Scientist*, be introduced to promote school-based research in this area. Government and/or industrial sponsorship should be sought.

Curriculum

Curriculum is not an abstract concept. It is a cultural construction - a method of organising human educational practices which in turn emanate from human experience. Hence, any endeavour to explicate a set of curriculum practices must be grounded in an appreciation of the fact that they result from a set of historical circumstances and, moreover, that they reflect a particular social milieu. Indeed, beneath the ripples of educational practice are found, not universal, immutable, natural laws, but instead a set of beliefs and values. These influence the direction in which the curriculum moves. The value systems which underpin education are determined by a variety of ideologies - both tacit and explicit. It is worth noting that when a particular ideology becomes pervasive or lacks competition, it tends to become invisible. Moreover, it should also be stressed that ideologies, in practice, are rarely as clear and watertight as they may appear on paper. Nevertheless, what follows are general characterisations of two possible conceptualisations of education.

The "Product" Approach

The origins of the objectives movement can be traced back to the beginning of this century in the United States. It was the brainchild of those who were impressed by scientific and technological advances and believed that the 'age of science is demanding exactness and particularity' (Bobbitt, 1980) in the field of education. One of the leading lights in this movement was Bloom, who developed a hierarchy of goals in his taxonomy of educational objectives (Bloom *et al*, 1956). He divides educational objectives into three distinctive domains: cognitive or intellectual; affective or emotional; and psychomotor. Kelly (1989) refers to these as "the head, the heart and the hands". Within these three categories, he offers us a hierarchy of goals, or intended learning outcomes, which describe in detail the type of behaviour a pupil is expected to display through his or her thoughts, feelings or actions if the objective is deemed to have been accomplished. The fact that all learning appears to be able to be slotted into neat step-by-step categories

makes this a very attractive method of curriculum design. Those who support this model do so because it outlines clear goals and objectives for teaching. It is also very structured and attempts to bring a scientific accuracy and precision to education. Moreover, it is an attractive method of proving to taxpayers that their money is being utilised effectively since it can be claimed that the objectives are being reached. Finally, it is relatively easy to evaluate a curriculum which lists behavioural objectives that can be investigated and analysed on completion.

The main difficulty with this form of curriculum design is that it is "behavioural". Kelly (1989) claims that "the notion of behaviour modification is essential to this model of curriculum planning". The second major difficulty is that, although it specifies the types of behaviour which are deemed desirable, it ignores the critical questions regarding the nature of education. Is education merely training or instruction or indoctrination? Pring (1973) states that this model "does not take account of the incipient and developing autonomy of the students and cannot be accurately described as educative". Moreover, as Kelly (1989) argues, "every activity in which a pupil engages will have a range of purposes both within and between the three domains". This suggests that they cannot be neatly divided into Bloom's three watertight categories.

The "Process" Approach

An alternative - the process model - views education as development. This notion of education does not focus primarily on the nature of knowledge to be transmitted or on the aims and ends to be achieved. Instead, it looks at the nature of the student and tries to discover what is the best possible way of promoting that student's development in all areas of growth - intellectual, social, physical, emotional, moral, spiritual, and so on. "It is for this reason that this general movement has been termed child-centred" (Kelly, 1989).

It thus tries to avoid the mistake of focusing on ends to the exclusion of all else, resonating Dewey (1916) who argued that it is a mistake if "growth is regarded as *having*

an end, instead of *being* an end". So the process model of education, although it is not simplistic enough to maintain that education has no purpose, looks first and foremost at the intrinsic features of the process rather than at the external goals or aims. "Its concern is with the enhancement of capability, the extension of the individual's powers, competencies and, in general, control over his or her environment and, indeed, destiny" (Kelly, 1989). Therefore, although the process model accepts that education should, for example, seek to promote literacy or mathematical or scientific understanding, its focus is on the child's thought processes, understanding and development, rather than on the specific pieces of mathematical, scientific or literary information to be transmitted.

Much of the support for this view of education has come from the recent work of developmental psychologists like Piaget (1969) and Bruner and Haste (1987) who looked at intellectual development; Kohlberg (1963) who studied moral growth; Donaldson (1978) who analysed linguistic and intellectual growth, and others. Since their central concerns are the advancement of the "growth of competence" (Connolly and Bruner, 1974), this model does not merely offer us a new way of teaching but rather an entirely new concept of education. It is an education which has its starting point the view of children, not as empty receptacles waiting to be filled up with information, but as human beings with vast reserves of potential and ability which may be brought to fruition by a sagacious, insightful teacher who guides their development and growth at different stages.

While investigating the implementation of early years curricula by the various providers, all of whom espouse the child-centred models, research in U.C.C. (Horgan, M. 1987; Dunlea, 1990; Douglas, 1993; Horgan, S., 1995; Dwane, 1998) highlighted the value of a highly-structured curriculum akin to the Montessori approach which has been shown to correlate significantly with cognitive advancement. However, such research has also revealed the critical need for programmes which enable children to maximise their potential for linguistic and social development. Indeed, these findings have been further substantiated by the recent I.E.A. study undertaken by Hayes, N. *et al* (1997).

The challenge of designing such a curriculum and the requisite environment and materials is a complex task, requiring meticulous planning and organisation.

At an informal level, much work has already been undertaken by practitioners towards developing the curriculum for the three to six year old child. There is a common belief, by all the providers, that children learn best through play and structured, first-hand experience.

Recommendations (Curriculum)

The implementation of our current child-centred curricula should be facilitated.

It is suggested that:

- A sub-committee of a permanent National Forum, representing all Early Years providers, be created to advise the Department of Education and Science on matters pertaining to the curriculum. This would include suggestions as to the most beneficial methods of stimulating children from birth onwards.

- A Curriculum Development and Evaluation Fund should be established by the Department of Education and Science to promote research on the Early Years Curriculum, with a view to identifying the distinctive patterns of children's play and behaviour which would inform educational practice. (The curriculum for the zero to three year old should categorise the many areas of stimulation which are vital for the holistic development of such children.) All the Early Years providers should be eligible to apply for this research money (Colleges of Education; the I.P.P.A.; Montessori Colleges; An Cómhchoiste Reámhscolaíochta; the I.N.T.O.; Centres of Research; Education Centres, etc.)

- Adequate buildings, resources and equipment should be provided (including day-care and crèche facilities).

- Adult:child ratios should be appropriate to the age of the child. A significant key adult should be allocated to all children under the age of three. The importance of adult/child interaction and the fostering of learning through play is highly dependent on the amount of time that the adult can spend with the child.

- Each Early Start class, Junior and Senior Infant class, should have an N.C.V.A. qualified assistant (or equivalent). [This resource, however, should be optional rather than compulsory.] The maximum size of an infant class should be 20:1 which, with an assistant, gives an adult/child ratio of 10:1. Further improvements in the ratio should be made as money becomes available. Multi-classes in small schools should avail of assistants on a *pro-rata* basis.

- It is recommended that children in Infants/Early Start classes should only be integrated with more senior pupils in exceptional circumstances.

In the voluntary sector even a small injection of capital would make a huge difference to the provision of equipment and materials. Presently, money has to be raised from parents or other private means. It is suggested that the Department of Education should pay an annual grant to each registered (under the 1991 Child Care Act) preschool classroom for their purchase. In the primary school system, annual grants to each Early Start/Primary classroom should be paid directly by the Department of Education to teachers for the purchase of materials and equipment. (Guidelines on the purchasing of suitable materials and equipment should be provided by the Department of Education to all Early Years educators.)

Conclusion

If one were to liken structures, training and curriculum to a kaleidoscope, we believe that irrespective of how it is twisted, whatever the focus, the centre should always remain constant. In other words, the main concern should be the care and education of our youngest, and indeed most vulnerable, citizens - the children of this state.

As stated earlier, many would concur with the research findings above, that the period from zero to six heralds the development of an individual's spiritual, emotional, moral, social, cognitive, linguistic, creative and physical growth. Hence, deficits in these areas can have long-term implications for the child. The importance of the Early Years is only just starting to be appreciated in the Republic of Ireland and arguably the recent National Forum on Early Childhood Education (1998) marks the beginning of the watershed. If we really care about educational standards, educational continuity and the spiritual and psychological well-being of future generations, Early Childhood services must be a priority target. The time is right, or indeed one may say ripe, for a radical re-think of structures, training and curriculum in Early Childhood Education for as Shakespeare said:

"There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries; on such a full sea are we now afloat; and we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures."

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