

Early Start Evaluation
Report on Observation Visits to Schools

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1. The Early Start Preschool Programme

As part of an integrated approach to problems of disadvantage in designated schools, Early Start was established in eight locations in the 1994/95 school year and in a further 32 locations in the following year to provide for three-year old preschool children.

While the programme is broadly concerned with the development of the whole child, it is primarily an intervention that was designed to promote language and cognitive development and to prevent school failure. Several features, including a number relating to personnel support, that differentiate the programme from provision for the infant classes of primary schools can be identified. First, the school day which consists of a morning or afternoon session is much shorter for Early Start pupils than for infant pupils. Secondly, class size is limited to 15 pupils. A third innovative feature is that each teacher is assisted by a full-time child care worker. Fourthly, all schools involved in Early Start have the support of a Home-School-Community Liaison coordinator (though this provision has recently been extended to all primary schools that are designated as disadvantaged) and are in a position to divert the services of the coordinator towards the promotion and development of Early Start. Outside of school, a strong emphasis on parent involvement was envisaged from the outset. It was also intended that Early Start would evolve in association with other community-based agencies and individuals involved in dealing with disadvantage at local level.

2. Early Start Evaluation Activity

An evaluation of Early Start in the original group of eight participating schools was undertaken during its first four years of operation (1994-1998) (Educational Research Centre, 1998; Kelly & Kellaghan, 1999). All aspects of implementation were examined including enrolment and attendance patterns, the nature and duration of classroom activities, the teacher-child care worker relationship, and the extent of parent involvement. Tracking the achievements (cognitive and non-cognitive) of pupils also formed a major part of the evaluation. This task was approached in a number of ways. In the first, a sample of junior-infant pupils were assessed in the areas of cognition, language, and motor skills development using the American Guidance Service Early Screening Profiles' tests. Subsequent testing of the first two cohorts of Early Start

pupils was carried out when they reached junior infants in 1995/96 and 1996/97 along with their classmates who had not participated in the programme, while additional information relating to the first cohort of Early Start pupils was also obtained in interviews with 17 junior infant teachers. In the second approach, the literacy and numeracy achievements of all pupils who were in second class in the eight participating schools in 1994/95 when Early Start was introduced were assessed with the Drumcondra Primary Reading Test (Level 2, form A) and the Drumcondra Mathematics Test (Level 1, Form B) and their performance was compared with that of the first cohort of Early Start pupils when they reached second class in 1998/99 (Kelly & Kellaghan, 1999) and of the second cohort when they reached second class in 1999/2000.

The evaluations yielded mixed results in relation to the achievement of pupils. According to the teachers who were interviewed, children who had attended Early Start adapted more readily to school than children who had not had that experience. Early Start participants, when they reached junior infants, were judged by their teachers to have higher levels of cognitive and social maturity, to be better adapted to classroom procedures, and to have higher levels of self-determination and independence. However, the literacy and numeracy achievements of the first two cohorts of Early Start pupils in junior infants were not found to differ significantly from those of pupils who had not attended Early Start, though language performance of the second cohort was significantly better than that of the first cohort (Educational Research Centre, 1998). The literacy and numeracy assessments involving second class pupils produced similar results (Kelly & Kellaghan, 1999). Differences in the achievements of pupils who had attended Early Start and those who had not were not found to be significant.

Though not inconsistent with the findings of evaluations of early childhood interventions in other countries, the results of the Early Start evaluation were regarded as disappointing by many of those who had helped to set up and develop the initiative. A review of the findings presented in the second evaluation report (Kelly & Kellaghan, 1999) recognized that the evaluation of pupil outcomes was limited to literacy and numeracy skills as measured by standardised tests. It also suggested that problems with implementation, identified in the first evaluation report (Educational Research Centre, 1998), may have contributed to the failure of Early Start to impact on achievement. In addition to the duration and intensity of the programme which were considered inadequate by international standards, attention was drawn to low attendance rates in some Early Start Centres, to difficulty in reaching parents, and to problems in the

working relationship between teachers and child care workers. More fundamentally, perhaps, the report questioned whether there had been sufficient emphasis on cognitive activities in the Early Start curriculum, while endorsing the reservations of teachers about the adequacy of inservice provision and the absence of curricular guidelines. The report also indicated that there was a need to integrate Early Start in a more co-ordinated approach to dealing with disadvantage. Finally, it raised questions about adult-child interaction in Early Start, noting that research on early intervention programmes showed that 'individual attention/tutoring' produces better results (Kelly & Kellaghan, 1999).

Following the evaluation, and in view of teachers' positive judgements about Early Start pupils when they reached junior infants, the Department of Education and Science initiated a series of measures designed to address at least some of the shortcomings of the programme that had been identified during its initial phase of operation. Important developments included additional inservice support involving visits to classrooms and the preparation of a draft curriculum which was disseminated to Early Start providers in 1998. Further evaluation of Early Start was proposed in light of these developments which it was believed had led to a significant improvement in the quality of the programme. In support of this view, Department of Education and Science personnel drew attention to very specific changes that had occurred since the earlier evaluation had been conducted, including an increased emphasis on the quality of adult/child interactions, the specification of behavioural objectives, and the development of assessment profiles (C. Ó Maoláin, personal communication, March 16, 2000).

Following consultation with the Early Start team and in light of the evaluation findings, a proposal for the further evaluation of Early Start was submitted to the Department of Education and Science in the summer of 2000. It was proposed, and agreed, that the evaluation would proceed on a phased or rolling basis using less resource-intensive methods (school and teacher questionnaires, examination of existing documents, and some further observation of Early Start classes) before making a decision to invest in further formal assessment of pupils' literacy and numeracy achievements (Archer & Lewis, 2000). It was also agreed that the initial focus of the evaluation would be on an investigation of the extent to which change had occurred in relation to specific aspects of the implementation and operation of Early Start, paying particular attention to those aspects identified as problematic in the previous evaluation.

A report on the evaluation indicated that a good deal of change had occurred in Early Start since the earlier evaluations had been carried out (Lewis & Archer, 2002).

Objectives were more clearly specified, there was an increased emphasis on cognitive and language development, the profiling of pupil achievements was used to assist planning and preparation, small-group work became more common, inservice provision was expanded, the role of child care workers was clarified, and parental involvement increased. The report also revealed that some aspects of Early Start had not altered, however. In particular, the duration and intensity of the intervention had remained the same; neither was there much improvement in attendance rates. Also, there were indications of considerable variation between centres with regard to a range of features of Early Start (e.g., effort made to target families, percentage of time devoted to small-group activity, direct involvement of parents, clarity of teacher preparation notes).

Since the evaluation was limited to questionnaire data and an analysis of documents (curricular guidelines, teacher notes), it was decided, in consultation with the Department of Education Early Start team, that some observation of classroom practice should be carried out in a further evaluation of Early Start. The decision was supported by the fact that recent progress in the development of observation instruments for evaluation of early childhood education settings had been considerable (Essa & Burnham, 2001). Several such instruments were published in the 1990s and a search was undertaken to establish if one of these might be applied or adapted for use in the Early Start evaluation.

3. The Observation Instrument

A revised version of the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (Harms & Clifford, 1980) known as ECERS-R (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 1998) was identified in the review. This instrument was considered suitable for use in further evaluation of Early Start for several reasons. First, ECERS-R has a strong educational focus and several items in the scale seem conceptually congruent with the educational ethos of Early Start. Second, each scale item is supported by a set of indicators to assist scoring, as well as a series of questions, which seem particularly useful in the case of non-observable behaviours, which might be put to teachers and child care workers. Third, the instrument is designed to facilitate observation of classroom units rather than of individuals within classrooms. A fourth important characteristic of ECERS-R is that it has been used in a variety of settings over a number of years and has recently been revised and refined in light of that experience. Finally, since ECERS-R can be

administered within a period of hours, it was considered feasible from a resource point of view, since it seemed likely that it could be administered during one session.

Several modifications to the scale were deemed necessary before it could be administered in Early Start centres. Using the Early Start curricular guidelines (In-Career Development Team, 1998) as a key reference for making decisions about modifications, a number of items were deleted from the scale. In some cases, as happened in relation to an item on free play, a deletion was made because the content of the item was not included in the guidelines (free play is not encouraged in Early Start). Other items were deleted because of an apparent overall lack of fit with Early Start objectives. For example, a number of items on play with sand, water, and blocks were excluded because the emphasis in ECERS-R is largely on provision and availability rather than on the treatment of these materials as aids to learning as elaborated in the Early Start guidelines. In any case, it was already known that all Early Start centres are equipped with sand, water and blocks and inclusion of these items would have yielded little comparative information.

The guidelines were subsequently inspected with a view to identifying omissions in the scale. An item on oral language development was added to reflect the complexity of the dialogue strategies promoted in Early Start and one on cognitive development was largely rewritten also with reference to Early Start objectives. Other items were modified to a lesser extent (e.g., some indicators and questions were altered, added or deleted). Finally, the modified scale was submitted for review to a member of the Early Start team and to an experienced independent observer of Early Start centres. Some additional amendments and editing that included cultural/linguistic proofing followed before finalising the observation schedule.

In the adapted ECERS-R scale, all of the subscales were retained but the number of scale items was reduced from 42 to 28. Items were distributed across the subscales as follows: space and furnishings (eight items); personal care (three items); language reasoning (three items); activities (four items); interaction (four items); programme structure (three items); and parents and staff (three items). In the space and furnishings subscale, which has the largest number of items, the physical layout of centres is of interest as well as the adequacy of provision for gross motor activity. The personal care subscale deals with safety practices as well as routines relating to the arrival and departure of pupils and meals and snacks provisions. The language-reasoning subscale focuses on provision of books and pictures, strategies to encourage oral language

development, and the use of language in the development of reasoning skills while other aspects of the curriculum (cognitive development, art, music and dance, and socio-dramatic play) are examined in the activities subscale. Practices relating to supervision and discipline are covered in the interaction subscale which also examines the quality of social interaction both among children and between staff and children. In the programme structure subscale, the emphasis is on time management and on the extent to which there is flexibility to make provision for children with disabilities. Finally, the parents and staff subscale is concerned with provision for parents, cooperation between staff, and staff supervision and evaluation.

Scoring Procedure

Using the score sheets developed for ECERS-R, each item was rated on a scale of 1 to 7 (inadequate =1, minimal =3, good =5, and excellent =7) depending on the number of indicators ticked during observation. For example, it was possible for a centre to attain a rating of 7 only if all the indicators under each of the scale points up to and including 7 were ticked. A rating of 6 was awarded only if all indicators under each of the points up to and including 5 were ticked in addition to at least half of the indicators under 7 and so on down the scale. This meant that the maximum score that could be assigned to a centre is 196 (28 x 7). In some centres, however, no score could be assigned to an item on disability since no pupil with a disability was enrolled, and in these cases the maximum score is 189 (27 x 7).

4. Fieldwork

Twenty of the 40 schools currently involved in Early Start were randomly selected for observation visits in May and June of 2002. School principals were informed in writing of the proposed visit and subsequently consulted by telephone on the date of the visit. Difficulty in facilitating the request to visit for reasons relating to staff turnover was expressed in one case and the school in question did not participate. In all other schools, visits were arranged with not less than a week's notice. Where possible, appointments were timed to coincide with the midday (afternoon) Early Start session. This arrangement did not interrupt staff lunch breaks and allowed Early Start teachers and child care workers an opportunity for discussion after work. Otherwise (in five cases), appointments were scheduled for the nine o'clock (morning) session.

As far as possible, the fieldwork procedures were conducted with minimal disruption of on-going activities. Observations were conducted independently by two individuals (one visited twelve schools and the other visited seven) who collaborated at an early stage of the fieldwork to ensure consistency in the interpretation of item indicators and in the application of scores. In addition to completing the observation schedule, the observers interviewed the Early Start teacher in all cases and in the majority of cases, depending on the nature of classroom activity and the time available, the child care worker. A limited amount of interaction occurred between the children and the observers but, otherwise, the observation schedule was administered in accordance with Harms et al's recommendations (1998, p.5). The average length of visits was approximately two-and-a-half hours but some took nearly three hours, while others were completed in a little over two hours.

5. Results

Scale and Subscale Scores

Looking first at the overall score and the subscale scores, it may be noted that the maximum scale score that could be obtained across all centres is 3,724. However, the total number of score points allocated was 2,405, or just 64.58% of the maximum scale score (Table 1). At subscale level, the highest score was achieved for items on interaction to which 84.58% of the maximum subscale score was allocated. The next

Table 1: Maximum and Achieved Scores in Early Start Centres (N=19), by Subscale

Subscale	Maximum Score	Achieved Score	Achieved Score as % of Maximum Score
Space and furnishings	1 064	728	68.42
Personal care routines	399	239	59.89
Language-reasoning	399	285	71.42
Activities	532	320	60.15
Interaction	532	450	84.58
Programme structure	399	184	46.11
Parents and staff	399	199	49.87
Total	3 724	2 405	64.58

highest scores related to language-reasoning (71.42%) and space and furnishings (68.42%) followed by activities (60.15%) and personal care routines (59.89%). Subscales associated with the lowest scores were the parents and staff subscale (49.87%) and the programme structure subscale (46.11%).

Individual Item Scores

An examination of scores at item level indicates that, within subscales, the distribution of item scores varies considerably (Table 2). In two of the subscales, scores are distributed fairly evenly across items. Relatively high scores were achieved on all items in the interaction subscale (general supervision of children, discipline, staff-child interactions, and interaction among children) while, in the activities subscale, average scores were associated with all four items on cognitive development, art, music/movement, and socio-dramatic/imaginative play. In the space and furnishings subscale, the distribution pattern may be described as bipolar: scores are relatively high for a number of items (in particular, the items on indoor space, furniture for care, play and learning, and room arrangement) but much lower for several others (gross motor equipment, child-related display, furnishings for relaxation and space for privacy). In two of the four subscales which have only three items, the bi-polar pattern is also marked. The personal care routines subscale has a low score for the item on meals and snacks but relatively high scores for the other two items on greeting /departing and safety practices while, in the parents and staff subscale, a low score was associated with the item on supervision and evaluation of staff but not with the items on provision for parents and staff interaction and cooperation. There is much less variation in the language-reasoning subscale in which two of the items (one on books and pictures and another on using language to develop reasoning skills) achieved high scores, while a marginally lower score is associated with the third item on oral language development. Finally, the programme structure subscale, also with three items, has high, average, and low scores. An item on group time and another on schedule obtained the high and average scores respectively. Surprisingly, however, the third item in the subscale, which has to do with provision for children with disabilities, could not be scored in as many as 13 of the centres visited because of the very limited enrolment in Early Start of children with identified disabilities. While the low participation of children with disabilities may reflect parental circumstances or choice as much as school policy, it is not entirely consistent with the stated aims and objectives of Early Start.

Table 2: Scale Items and Item Scores for Early Start Centres (N=19)

Scale Items within Subscales	Item Scores
Space and Furnishings	
Indoor space.....	111
Furniture for care, play and learning.....	111
Furnishings for relaxation.....	86
Room arrangement.....	107
Space for privacy.....	89
Child-related display.....	76
Space for gross motor activity.....	83
Gross motor equipment.....	65
Total	728
Personal Care Routines	
Greeting/departing.....	96
Meals/snacks.....	41
Safety practices.....	102
Total	239
Language-Reasoning	
Books and pictures.....	105
Encouraging oral language development.....	86
Using language to develop reasoning skills.....	94
Total	285
Activities	
Supporting cognitive development.....	78
Art.....	88
Music/movement.....	71
Supporting socio-dramatic/imaginative play.....	83
Total	320
Interaction	
General supervision of children.....	112
Discipline.....	97
Staff-child interactions.....	130
Interaction among children	111
Total	450
Programme Structure	
Schedule.....	72
Group time.....	86
Provisions for children with disabilities.....	26
Total	184
Parents and Staff	
Provisions for parents.....	92
Staff interaction and cooperation.....	86
Supervision and evaluation of staff.....	21
Total	199
Grand Total	2 405

Individual Centre Scores

The mean scale score for each centre was calculated by summing the item scores for each subscale and dividing the total subscale score by the number of items scored. An examination of the performance of individual centres, in terms of mean scale scores, indicates considerable variation between centres with values ranging from 3.18 to 5.71 (Table 3). The total item score in the top-scoring centre is nearly twice that in the centre with the lowest score. Otherwise, the extent of variation between centres may be illustrated in the finding that eight centres achieved a mean scale score of at least 5, seven achieved a mean scale score between 4 and 5, while in the remaining four centres, the mean scale score was less than 4.

Table 3: Item Scores and Mean Scale Scores, by Centre

School	Total Item Score	Mean Scale Score
1	160	5.71
2	157	5.60
3	154	5.50
4*	151	5.59
5*	148	5.48
6*	146	5.41
7*	142	5.26
8*	137	5.07
9	129	4.61
10*	124	4.59
11	121	4.32
12*	118	4.37
13*	115	4.25
14*	110	4.07
15*	108	4.00
16*	104	3.85
17	100	3.57
18*	95	3.52
19*	86	3.18

* Mean scale scores are calculated excluding the item on disability

The subscales on which centres differed most are programme structure which has mean subscale scores ranging from 1.50 to 7.00 and personal care routines which has mean subscale scores ranging from 2.00 to 7.00 (Table 4). Somewhat smaller differences between centres are evident on the subscales for language-reasoning, interaction, space and furnishing, and activities. There is less between-centre difference on the parents and staff subscale which has values ranging from 2.00 to 4.66.

Table 4: Mean Scale Scores (Minimum and Maximum Values), by Subscale (N=19)

Subscale	Minimum Value	Maximum Value
Space and furnishings	2.75	6.50
Personal care routines	2.00	7.00
Language-reasoning	3.00	7.00
Activities	2.50	6.00
Interaction	3.25	7.00
Programme structure	1.50	7.00
Parents and staff	2.00	4.66

Overall, it may be concluded that while there is scope for improvement in all Early Start centres, some performed much better than others. Further, the need for improvement is indicated in several of the subscales featured in the observation schedule, though most centres did well on classroom interaction. While differences between centres are greater on some subscales than on others, the subscales with the greatest inter-centre differences (with the exception of the subscale containing the item on disability) are not of central importance to Early Start.

6. Discussion

The observation schedule provided useful information on practice in Early Start classrooms, highlighting a number of strengths and weaknesses some of which had not received attention in earlier evaluation findings. In particular, it drew attention to the positive interaction between adults and children that is a feature of provision in all of the centres visited. High standards of general supervision were maintained throughout and, with one or two exceptions, no discipline problems were observed. Staff behaved

gently with children, enthusiastically encouraging their efforts and achievements. Every effort was made to ensure that all children were involved and there seemed to be a strong emphasis on the development of children's interpersonal skills (e.g., turn taking and give and take). Daily routines were structured and enlivened with a mix of whole-group and small-group activities.

The physical environment (space and furnishing) of Early Start classrooms received a good deal of attention in the observation schedule and, confirming earlier evaluation findings (Educational Research Centre, 1998), it is clear that these aspects of provision are of a high standard. Rooms are spacious, bright and cheerful and there is an abundance of equipment and materials. Most of the gross motor equipment observed is portable (sports equipment, bicycles) rather than stationary (slides, swings, climbing ladders). In some cases, there is a problem with storage (e.g., the equipment has to be locked in a strong room or gym and is not easily accessible) and/or with safety issues regarding the use of outdoor space. While such difficulties are not easily overcome, there is scope for improvement in other aspects of the classroom environment including the display of children's work. In many of the classrooms there seemed to be very little emphasis on individualised work (children tended to follow the teacher's example which does not reflect the ethos of creative independence promoted in the Early Start guidelines) and in some cases none of the work that had been completed was displayed at children's eyelevel.

Analysis of the observation schedule results also highlighted the focus in Early Start on language development. Again, the visits to classrooms confirmed that provision of books and other language development materials for children (and parents) is excellent overall. Wall displays and room layout suggested that children were introduced to a wide range of topics including animals and nature, as well as domestic and work-related themes. Story telling is a major activity in Early Start and, in many classrooms, children were afforded some opportunity to make a contribution. Even so, there was relatively little one-to-one sustained interaction between children and adults, as recommended in the Early Start dialogue strategies, and it would seem that more might be done to encourage individual children to complete full sentences and/or to express themselves more explicitly.

Observation of creative endeavours involving music, art, and socio-dramatic play proved somewhat difficult, perhaps because teachers and child care workers were reluctant to engage in them in the presence of observers. The plentiful supply of

materials (percussion instruments, art materials, dressing-up clothes) suggested that such activities may feature more strongly in Early Start than was revealed during the visits. However, it would seem that practice fell short of the aspirations expressed in the Early Start guidelines. Music activities more often than not were confined to rhythm appreciation and tended to be viewed as a support to language and cognitive development. In centres where art activities were observed, there was considerable variation in the extent to which teachers engaged in discussion with children about their work. In some cases, there was no discussion. Socio-dramatic/ imaginative play featured a lot in storytelling but received much less attention in small-group work where the emphasis was mainly on cognitive development.

Cognitive development was supported by several different kinds of table-top activity based on a variety of sorting materials (e.g., jigsaws, blocks, and beads) which children were encouraged to work with. In adult-child interactions about table-top activities, the focus of discussion tended to be on naming objects and some of their properties. There was little emphasis on number, however, or on the attributes of materials other than basic size, shape, and colour and it would seem that the scope of the Early Start guidelines was also not fully reflected in this domain.

Personal care routines (greeting/ departing, meals/snacks, and safety code), an integral part of school experience, were not addressed to any extent in the Early Start guidelines but were included in the observation schedule. In all of the centres visited, the issue of safety (indoor and outdoor) was treated seriously and it would appear that every precaution was taken to avoid accidents and to promote awareness of potential hazards. In contrast, poor hygiene standards in relation to washing of hands before food handling were observed in many Early Start classrooms which is surprising given the separate toilet and washing facilities provided in nearly all of the units. Greeting and departing arrangements were well organized, friendly and positive, though in a few centres none of the parents came into the classroom when collecting their children, which seemed at odds with the major emphasis on parental involvement in Early Start.

Other indications from the observation schedule and from the visits generally suggest that every effort was made to involve parents in Early Start and teachers were quick to highlight the contribution of the Home-School-Community-Liaison Co-ordinator in this regard. In ten of the centres visited, at least one parent or grandparent (mother or grandmother) was present for at least 20 minutes of activity. Teachers reported that parents were also invited to participate in outings with their children

(though, according to one teacher, the parental allowance has not increased since 1994 while the cost of hiring transport has escalated in the meantime). The practice of distributing packs of reading and play materials, designed to help parents to help their children, at the beginning of the school year was also referred to in a number of centres. It is not clear whether this occurs in all of the centres visited.

Teachers and child care workers worked well together in most classrooms. Responsibilities seemed clearly defined and, with one or two exceptions, the work seemed to be fairly divided. In some centres, a very positive air of teamwork was discernible and in such cases the supportive role of the school principal was frequently acknowledged. In these centres too, Early Start staff seemed open and were reflective and critical in their appraisal of their own progress. Support for staff by way of external or internal supervision is not a feature of Early Start and was not identified as a requirement by staff. Existing levels of support through in-career development were generally regarded as satisfactory even though in recent years only new teachers and their child care workers who may have several years experience of Early Start have been invited to attend in-service days. In two of the centres in which programme implementation seemed particularly satisfactory, and in which staff were experienced providers of Early Start, both teachers and child care workers expressed a wish to observe practice in other classrooms.

In addition to the information obtained in the observation schedule, further information was obtained on the use of assessment profiles, enrolment, and attendance. In relation to profiling, it was clear that detailed records of pupils' progress were maintained in most but not in all cases. A number of teachers had devised their own systems of assessing pupils that were less detailed. While, in many cases, the profiles were passed on to the junior infants teacher at the end of the year, Early Start teachers expressed reservations about their value, in particular about what they perceived as the limited use made of the profiles in relation to the amount of time spent producing them.

The information that was obtained on enrolment and attendance suggests that both issues present an on-going challenge in Early Start. A total of 267 children were enrolled in the classrooms visited. The maximum number that could have been enrolled, allowing for 15 children per classroom, is 285. Most of the under-enrolment is attributable to just two centres, however. In one of these, only ten children were enrolled and in the other only eight. Attendance problems are more widely experienced. On the days of the visits, a total of 207 children were present: the numbers ranged from

four to 14 per classroom. Eleven or more children were present in 13 classrooms but an additional three classrooms had just nine children, two others had only seven children, while in the remaining classroom there were just four children in attendance.

7. Conclusion

Observation of practice in the centres visited lends support to the conclusion that Early Start is a high quality intervention with a strong emphasis on adult-child interaction. Further, the results of analysis of the observation schedule confirm the findings of the last evaluation report that a number of improvements had occurred in the implementation of Early Start following the introduction of a new regime of inservice (Lewis & Archer, 2002, p.44). These included greater parental involvement, better working-relationships between teachers and child care workers, and a shift from whole-group to small-group learning contexts. Certainly, there were no indications from the entire observation exercise to contradict teachers' reports of progress in these aspects of Early Start.

While some differences between centres were revealed in the results of analysis of the observation schedule, the extent of variation was limited overall. Three distinct groups of centres emerged which may be described as above average, average, and below average. However, no centres did extremely well on the rating scale and no centres did extremely poorly. Performance was judged to be better on some parts of the scale (interaction, language-reasoning, and space and furnishings) than on others (activities, personal care routines, parents and staff, and programme structure), but most of the under-performance can be explained by low scores in a few items that may be regarded as peripheral to the concerns of Early Start. There is still some scope, however, for improvement in all centres in aspects that are central to the intervention, notably in those aspects of the curriculum involving cognitive development, music, art and socio-dramatic or imaginative play.

During the visits, implementation of all aspects of the curriculum (language and cognitive development, art, music and socio-dramatic play) was observed, though not to the degree or depth presented in the curriculum guidelines. This seems surprising in view of the fact that the visits took place at the end of the school year, when one might have expected implementation to be at an advanced stage. A preliminary examination of the assessment profiles contained in the guidelines supports this conclusion. It

suggests that, in the core aspects of oral language and cognitive development at any rate, the progress of the children observed reflects standards that are more consistent with beginning-of-year than with end-of-year objectives. All of these indications endorse the view expressed in the last evaluation report ‘that to proceed with testing of pupil achievement would be premature at this stage’ (Lewis & Archer, 2002, p.44).

It is not yet clear why the standards observed are somewhat lower than expected. One or more explanations may be relevant. It may simply be that the problems of low intensity and poor attendance that have beset Early Start from the outset have resulted in a more diluted intervention than was originally envisaged. Given the pervasiveness of the attendance problem, which was confirmed during the visits, there is a need for continuing monitoring and it is clear that more detailed records of both attendance and enrolment should now be obtained. Another explanation for lower than expected standards may have to do with the evaluation process itself and the impact of observation on classroom interaction. There is the possibility that, during the evaluation visits, the children knew more than they were prepared to reveal and/or the related possibility that their teachers did not give them sufficient scope to demonstrate the extent of their knowledge. Some further investigation of learning outcomes, beginning with a review of the Early Start profiles to determine the most appropriate method of assessing pupils’ achievements, would be necessary to reach a definitive judgement on these issues. More fundamentally, perhaps, it may be necessary to ask if the standards in the guidelines are pitched at a level that is beyond the reach of most three to four-year-olds. To address this question, a review of the appropriateness of curriculum objectives, especially in oral language and cognitive development, will be required in addition to some exploration of the standards expected in these areas at junior-infant level.

8. Postscript

In April and May 2003, some months after sections 1 to 7 of this report were presented to the Early Start team, six pairs of teachers and child care workers participated in an in-career development initiative. The initiative was designed to improve teaching and learning strategies by focussing the attention of the teachers and child care workers on four key objectives (narration, drawing inferences, concepts of quantity and problem solving) of the oral language and cognitive development components of the curriculum guidelines issued in 1998 (In-Career Development Team, 1998). It consisted of an initial two-day seminar, three support visits to each school, and a closing one-day seminar that was also attended by a member of the evaluation team.

The decision to work with the teachers and child care workers was partly prompted by observations in this report to the effect that aspects of oral language and cognitive development appeared not to be receiving the kind of attention in Early Start classrooms that had been expected following dissemination of the guidelines. Those conclusions were subsequently endorsed by members of the Early Start team at a meeting between the Early Start team and the evaluation team in July 2003. In further discussion at the meeting about how teaching strategies might be improved, the overall quality of the curriculum document was considered. While the main substance or contents were deemed to be adequate (particularly when compared with text produced for other programmes designed for similar age-groups in Ireland) it was felt that, with some additional work, the existing material might be transformed into a more attractively presented user-friendly teaching guide. It was also concluded that, while some progress with teaching and learning strategies had been made during the in-career initiative, a lot more support would be needed by way of further in-career development, along the lines of the initiative described above, if the full potential of Early Start is to be experienced by pupils and providers.

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