

2013



Meeting needs, making changes, improving outcomes

## Professional training and supports for those working with children and families from disadvantaged areas:

### Policy Brief

This policy brief aims to share the learning from the Childhood Development Initiative (CDI) in order to inform policy and practice with regard to the higher education, professional training and practice of those working with children and families. It explores the national context and current plans that will affect the sector, the importance of quality assurance and the role of professional training and support in enhancing quality service delivery. This policy brief is targeted at those with responsibility for Professional Training and Continued Professional Development (CPD<sup>1</sup>); Early Years Training & Development, Initial and Continuing Teacher Education, Community Development Practice and Training, Training and Support for Managers and all those engaged in delivering services for Children and Families.

Funded under the Government's Area Based Response (ABR) to Child Poverty Initiative, CDI aims to build on the learning from prevention and early intervention programmes to break the cycle of child poverty in areas where it is most deeply entrenched. The ABR further aims to improve the outcomes for children and young people where these outcomes are currently significantly poorer than they are for children and young people living elsewhere in the State.

CDI provides evidence-based services in the community to improve outcomes for children and their families. The evaluations<sup>2</sup> of these programmes have identified a number of key issues and implications for education, professional development and practice. A summary of the relevant findings from the independent evaluations of each of these programmes are presented here and the implications for education policy and practice are highlighted.



<sup>1</sup> Continued professional development (CPD) refers to lifelong learning and comprises the full range of experiences designed to enrich practitioner's professional knowledge, understandings and capabilities throughout their careers.

<sup>2</sup> All CDI evaluations are available on our web-site [www.twcdi.ie](http://www.twcdi.ie)

## Background and Context:

Early intervention in education has been shown to have considerable economic benefits for society (Schweinhart et al., 2005). Studies have shown that there is a significant gap in cognitive performance and educational attainment between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and more advantaged children at pre-school age (Brooks et al., 1997). Disparities in child cognitive, health and social-emotional outcomes are evident before the child is two, highlighting the need for targeted provision of supports for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Halle et al., 2009). There are numerous challenges and demands facing all those working with children and families in these communities. The skills and knowledge needed to address these challenges need to be incorporated into initial practitioner training, practice and continued professional development (CPD) throughout the work life cycle.

The current economic climate, and the Public Reform Agenda have created a growing focus on value for money, efficacy, and 'doing more with less'. Responding effectively to increasingly complex needs, often within a context of depleting resources, requires practitioners and their managers to work efficiently, make informed choices about how to utilise resources, and maximise the potential to impact on outcomes. For example, *"there is a heightened expectation in relation to the role of teachers and a major cultural shift whereby teaching now requires a much greater degree of interaction with students, colleagues, parents and co-professionals"* (The Teaching Council, 2011, p.7). Maximising service efficacy is explored in *Quality Services, Better Outcomes* (CDI, 2011). This implementation framework is drawn from the work of Fixsen and Blasé (2011), who developed the concept of implementation phases and drivers with a view to maximising the potential for achieving positive outcomes. The three main implementation drivers in relation to this document are capacity building, organisational change and leadership. Practitioners and managers need the knowledge, skills and understanding relating to all three areas in order to maximise their effectiveness and to support the most vulnerable and impoverished children.



## Policy Context:

The following summarises a number of national developments in legislation, strategy, policy and implementation, which affect those training and supporting practitioners and practitioners working directly with children and families.

### Professional Training and CPD:

The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, has strategic recommendations in the areas of 'teaching and learning', 'research', 'engagement with wider society', 'internationalising higher education', 'system governance', a 'coherent framework' and a 'sustainable and equitable funding model,' (Department of Education and Skills, 2011).

The Higher Education System Performance Framework includes a number of key system objectives for 2014–2016, including the following which are relevant to this discussion:

*"To promote excellence in teaching and learning to underpin a high quality student experience," and "To reform practices and restructure the system for quality and diversity",* (Department of Education and Skills, 2013 p.2.)

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was established under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, amalgamating four bodies<sup>3</sup> with both awarding and quality assurance responsibilities. QQI has assumed all the functions and responsibilities of the four legacy bodies. Policies have been developed on 'Policy and Criteria for Provider Access to Initial Validation of Programmes Leading to QQI Awards' and 'Protection of Enrolled Learners'. Further policies and procedures will be developed to meet the organisation's purpose and functions, as well as those of the education and training system as a whole (QQI, 2012).

In the context of a lifelong learning agenda, the importance of flexible delivery of education and training programmes at all levels of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) has been clearly stated in a range of national and international policy documents.

<sup>3</sup> The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB).

## Policy Context:

The European Commission and its Member States have been working on a number of policy initiatives in the field of education and training since 2000. The European Council Conclusions on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020'), adopted in May 2009, set four strategic objectives: making lifelong learning and mobility a reality, improving the quality and efficiency of education and training, promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship, and enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

*"The challenges and opportunities are to deliver training that meets the needs of people in the workplace, particularly in relation to the provision of a range of delivery options including blended learning and online delivery; further modularisation of Further and Higher Education training programmes, and outreach from third level institutions"* (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2010, p.8).

### Early Years Training & Development:

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs' Children and Young People's Policy Framework, focuses on the key developmental periods for children and young people in relation to 0 to 6 years, 6–12 years and 12 plus years. A dedicated strategy will be developed for each developmental period, with the Government Advisory Group feeding into these strategies, the first being the National Early Years Strategy, (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, (DCYA), 2013).

In July 2013, Minister Fitzgerald announced that *"The minimum requirement of FETAC Level 5 for pre-school leaders delivering the pre-school year will be increased to Level 6. In addition, all pre-school assistants, and all other staff caring for children in a pre-school service, will*



## Policy Context:

*be subject to a minimum requirement of Level 5,"* (Dail Debates, 2013). According to the Pobal Early Years Annual Survey 2012, the proportion of staff with qualifications at Level 5 or above on the National Framework of Qualifications is 87%, a significant increase from 76% the previous year. However, the proportion of staff with degree-level qualifications remains low, with only 12% of staff at Level 7 or above.

In relation to the quality and relevance of Early Years courses, the main challenges identified are the lack of consistency by training providers, especially in relation to the hours required to achieve certification and the variability in the skills and qualifications of those delivering courses (Department of Education and Skills, 2010).

*"The development of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) workforce has been identified as a key 'pillar of quality' alongside the publication of the national practice frameworks, Siolta and Aistear, and sustained financial investment in service provision"* (Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2010).

A better prepared, skilled workforce in our early childhood care and education settings will improve the quality of centre based early childhood experiences of our children and impact positively on the lives of the children and their families (Department of Education and Skills, 2010, Piii).

The Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU) has responsibility for the implementation and monitoring of 1) Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, 2) the Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector; and 3) Targeted early years interventions for children who experience disadvantage. They provide policy advice and representation on national and international ECCE policy development initiatives.

### Initial and Continuing Teacher Education:

The Teaching Council regulates the teaching profession and promotes professional standards in teaching, assisting in developing capacity across the continuum through policy development, support for teachers, quality assurance, initial teacher education, induction, probation, and CPD.

## Policy Context:

It is working towards developing a coherent national framework for CPD by 2016, where renewal of registration with the Teaching Council will be subject to receipt of satisfactory evidence of engagement in professional development. They have introduced a new registration process for new teacher entrants for the three education sectors (Primary, Post Primary and PLC programmes). The minimum qualification required by teachers is now a level 8 degree and a teacher qualification.

The recent inclusion of a number of specific elements in the mandated Initial Teacher Education (ITE) curriculum is welcomed, two of which are 'Parents in Education – Co-operation and Collaboration' and 'The Teacher as Professional/Reflective Practitioner/Researcher', (Teaching Council, 2011).

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) continues to advise the Minister for Education and Skills on curriculum and assessment from early childhood to the end of second level, engage with learners, teachers, practitioners, parents and others to support innovation in schools and other educational settings and undertakes to use and share research as a basis for advice and debate on education. In 2013 they produced a discussion paper on 'Leading and Supporting Change in Schools' to support teachers and principals in this time of change.

### All Services for Children and Families:

The establishment of the Child and Family Agency, amalgamating the Family Support Agency, Pre-school Inspectorate and National Education Welfare Board, as well as many HSE services, will bring a dedicated focus to child protection, family support and other key children's services for the first time in the history of the State. The Agency will be as broadly based as possible and will include services that (i) may prevent problems arising for a family in the first instance (ii) identify problems and provide supports at an early stage and (iii) assist children and families in managing serious problems requiring specialised interventions beyond their own resources.

## Quality Assurance:



Implementing high quality, evidence-based programmes requires two complementary and equally important processes. Firstly, programme specific processes to support implementation (e.g. induction, fidelity checks<sup>4</sup> and coaching). They not only enhance the connection between theory and practice, but motivate practitioners to take pride in their work, offering them a better understanding of what they are doing and why they are doing it, and ultimately enabling them to be more effective in achieving identified outcomes. Secondly, there is a need to focus on the more generic aspects of delivering quality services (e.g. CPD, supporting reflective practice, professional supervision and mentoring), (CDI, 2011).

Evidence based programmes need to be delivered with fidelity, being faithful to the intervention is essential to achieving desired outcomes and this requires monitoring. Achieving a high level of fidelity helps to ensure that programme integrity is maintained and original targets are met (Fixsen et al. 2005, Perkins & Berrena, 2008). Processes to promote and monitor fidelity, whilst also supporting the quality of service and programme delivery, include induction, supervision, CPD, Communities of Practice (CoP); managers' meetings and training in mentoring; clear reporting procedures; service reviews, 'on site' observations, quality support, planning time, reflective space and the development of practical reflection and audit tools.

According to the Teaching Council, "quality assurance would be genuinely seen as a dynamic process that weaves in and out of professional practice, enriching it in real time through conversations with fellow professionals, of course, but also with pupils, parents and school leaders," (Ó Ruairc, 2013 p.5).

<sup>4</sup>Fidelity checks are carried out to ensure that the programme is delivered as intended and targets are being met.

## Enhancing service delivery through the building of competencies, organisational change and leadership:

**Organisational culture** plays a central role in driving change and evidence based practice. A key strategy in enhancing quality is to assess organisational readiness to change as this is continuously demonstrated as being key to achieving successful change implementation. Core elements to support readiness for change include good governance structures, an availability of fiscal, material and human resources, and access to training or education (Dopson et al., 2002).

**Leadership** is vital to the success of an organisation achieving its goals and objectives as it enables the creation and sustainability of a shared vision, motivates others to change, fosters shared responsibility and facilitates the identification of solutions to adaptive problems. The difference between a good quality service and an outstanding one is leadership. *“Strong and effective leadership makes a good setting outstanding. It drives up the quality of a settings’ work and ensures that all children are helped to reach their potential,”* (Ofsted, 2013, p6).

Managers, trainers, facilitators or practitioners can act as **change agents** who support continual growth and development in practice (Thomas, 2008). Organisations can promote and enable quality service delivery by supporting staff to build leadership and change management competencies, and through continuous opportunities to develop the skills and abilities needed to deliver services and programmes to children and families at both practitioner and management level. Recognising that staff are your key asset and that they are worth investing in is critical to effective organisations.

Staff **recruitment** and maximising the fit between individual skills and competencies and the specific role, will promote effective work practices and staff morale. A carefully designed induction programme will inform and support the practitioner in delivering services or programmes which achieve the intended outcomes.

While the provision of **training** is central to quality service delivery and improvement in staff morale, managers need to be vigilant and consistently monitor the quality of training delivered and training needs.

Effective **supervision** is a very important structure to support practitioners in their work and to provide an opportunity to reflect on practice. In addition to this, coaching provides practitioners with on the job guidance and an opportunity to receive both positive and critical feedback on their practice (CDI, 2011). Coaching has been demonstrated as effective in staff reflecting more on their work, increased staff efficacy and improvements in collaboration with colleagues (Edwards, 2008).

The aim of **reflective practice** is to provide a mechanism to achieve best practice and quality delivery, aid reflective review and planning, develop a deeper understanding of your own practice, capture learning and identify best practice and support the application of theory into practice (CDI, 2011). Reflective practice can also support the delivery of evidence-based and integrated services, providing a valuable mechanism which supports tackling the complexities of delivering evidence-based programmes or interagency work (Canavan et al., 2009)

**Communities of Practice** (COP’s) offer a space for groups to share their experiences and knowledge in creative ways that foster new and improved approaches to delivering services and programmes (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). They are an important programme support offering practitioners the opportunity to improve practice and programme delivery, offer space for reflection, and to consider and share learning, (CDI, 2011).

Therefore quality service delivery can be enhanced through **professional training and support**, central elements of which are a commitment to capacity building, organisational change and leadership.



## Summary Findings:

This section summarises the relevant findings from CDIs evaluations:

### In relation to **Professional Training and CPD:**

- The evaluation findings of the early Intervention Speech and Language service support the CDI model of delivery with regard to staff training, and advise the adoption of such training opportunities for all staff who work in the education of young children;
- On-going professional training and regular Communities of Practice meetings were highlighted as an important component of successful programmes (Biggart, et al., 2011).

### In relation to **Early Years Training & Development:**

- The key influencing factors in CDI's Early Years Programme were the training offered to staff (High/Scope and speech and language), the adult: child ratio, the role and provision of the parent/carer facilitator (PCF); the home visits by the PCF and the delivery of parent training as part of a pre-school programme. Non-contact staff hours to allow planning and training were also identified as critical.

### In relation to all **Services for Children and Families:**

- Parental involvement has been proven to significantly improve children's outcomes, but most practitioners need support in engaging parents;
- The evaluation findings of the Restorative Practice Programme found a 43% reduction in disputes with greatest gains made in the workplace. Significant improvements in people's ability to manage conflict were also identified, particularly in relation to interagency work and between neighbours.
- Most managers need support to appropriately mentor their staff, despite the proven links between quality supervision and effective service delivery;
- Practitioners need significant support integrating reflective practice approaches;
- Families in disadvantaged communities have complex and multiple needs but need 'scaffolding' to effectively utilise services which can support them.

## Recommendations:

The recommendations below are drawn from CDI's experience working in the sector and from the seven prevention and early intervention programmes that CDI has delivered in Tallaght West, including initiatives to support child literacy, pro-social behaviour, speech and language, health in schools, early years services, community safety and restorative practice.

### CDI recommends:

#### 1. In relation to **Professional Training and CPD:**

- a. The QQI addresses the need to develop more flexible learning pathways for practitioners in order to maintain high quality practice and offer consistent and smooth transitions between the various education and training sectors to enable the development of skills and qualifications;
- b. The findings from prevention and early intervention research are incorporated into practitioner training in order to better support outcomes for children in disadvantaged areas;
- c. Information is provided to professionals working with children and families in regard to local services in order to promote inter agency collaboration and referral processes. Ideally this would be delivered on an inter disciplinary basis;
- d. Key training and supports are provided to appropriate structures to ensure fidelity of intervention delivery, and so maximise the potential for positive outcomes;
- e. The Further and Higher Education Training sector need to ensure that the training they deliver meets the needs of people working with children and families.

#### 2. In relation to **Early Years Training and Development:**

- a. The Early Years training curriculum needs to be revised by the QQI in order to achieve an Integrated Early Years Programme, which includes modules on speech and language development and engagement with parents;
- b. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), should address the need to increase the

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## Recommendations:

- number of staff with degree level qualifications working directly with children;
- c. There is a need for the QQI to ensure consistency of training provision, especially in relation to the hours required to achieve certification and the variability in the skills and qualifications of those delivering courses;
- d. The Government should provide financial support for CPD, through funded non-contact time<sup>5</sup> (e.g. within the Free Pre-School Year) as well as funded training and mentoring programmes.

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### 3. In relation to Initial and Continuing Teacher Education:

- a. Health promotion and mechanisms to support inter-agency collaboration should be included in training and continuous professional development for teachers and related professionals;
- b. Restorative Practice training modules should be included in all teacher training courses in order to build the capacity of teachers to deliver on the objectives of the School Self-Evaluation: Guidelines for Primary and Post Primary Schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2012).

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### 4. In relation to Community Development Practice and Training:

- a. A community engagement module should be developed for delivery to both managers and front-line staff on an interagency and cross disciplinary basis for those organisations whose work requires engagement with residents, particularly in areas of disadvantage. This would include local authorities, Gardaí, probation and youth services.

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### 5. In relation to Training and Support for Managers:

- a. Managers in all state funded organisations working with children and families should receive training in logic modelling<sup>6</sup>, and how to utilise evidence to inform planning and assess outcomes;

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## Recommendations:

- b. Managers should be trained to develop capacity, manage organisational change, mentor and develop leadership skills.

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### 6. In relation to all Services for Children and Families:

- a. It is essential that both managers and practitioners are offered continuous opportunities to develop the skills and abilities needed to deliver services and programmes to children and families;
  - b. All stakeholders invest in CPD for practitioners working with children and families;
  - c. Parental engagement needs to become more of a priority in organisations working with children and families;
  - d. There is a need to develop models of multi-agency delivery to roll out more on-site speech and language therapy;
  - e. Given the positive impact of the Restorative Practice (RP) Programme in reducing workplace conflict, all organisations working with children and families should be supported to implement the RP Programme;
  - f. There is a need for an organisational culture change in order for leaders to appropriately adapt and adjust to the growing demands of children and families and the changing external climate;
  - g. There should be a partnership approach to policy development and planning involving all the key stakeholders, with Children's Services Committees playing a key role;
  - h. Government Departments with a remit to support children and families need to work collaboratively in order to maximise the effective utilisation of resources to support children's wellbeing;
  - i. All Government Departments commit to using evidence to inform planning and service delivery, and commit to giving serious consideration to the implications of the CDI evaluations for professional training, service planning and service integration.
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<sup>5</sup> Non-contact time for Early Years staff is needed for planning and reflective practice

<sup>6</sup> It links the evidence (i.e. what research and best practice tells us about a programme), inputs (i.e. the resources available to the programme) and activities (what you deliver), to anticipated outputs and outcomes (CDI, 2011).

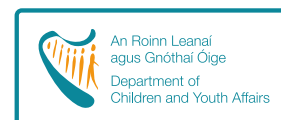


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