



Making Connections

**A Review of International Policies,
Practices and Research Relating to
Quality in Early Childhood Care and
Education**

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The Gate Lodge,
St. Patrick's College,
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Tel: 353 1 8842110
Fax: 353 1 8842111
Email: early.childhood@spd.dcu.ie
Website: www.cecde.ie

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Edited by Heino Schonfeld, Dr. Gemma Kiernan and Thomas Walsh.

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Foreword

The OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland encouraged the major stakeholders in Ireland to improve quality in early childhood settings, and proposed a number of policy initiatives. Among these were proposals to strengthen research and to open dialogue with other countries which have faced similar challenges in raising quality in their early childhood systems. With the launching of a successful international conference in September 2004 and now through the publication of this outstanding report on quality, the CECDE has responded to this challenge. This is a comprehensive and well-researched text, which will be extremely useful for policy makers and the major stakeholders in children's services in Ireland.

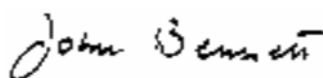
From the experience of the country reviews undertaken by the OECD, it is clear that in many countries practical reasons underlie the attention given to early childhood education and care. Children's services play an important role in contemporary economies in supporting young children and families. They contribute greatly to the well-being, development and learning of young children, and support young parents in their fundamental role of rearing and educating their children. Affordable services help to reconcile family and work responsibilities and contribute to equal opportunities for women. When good quality services are present, more women return to employment, helping to sustain economic growth and pension systems in the future.

Quality services help also to tackle child and family poverty and, in the case of Ireland, could provide - particularly on an extended-day basis - security and well-being to a substantial number of young children. A well-run service in every neighbourhood also contributes to the early identification of children with special learning needs, and to including them in mainstream education. If barriers to social participation are removed at the beginning of life, a powerful signal about a society's commitment to basic human rights is sent out.

The CECDE review of quality is particularly timely. A focus on *quality* in children's services demarcates a child-centred approach from a strictly labour-market reflex that seeks only to provide places. The quality of what is offered to children must be a priority in services. Although as this review outlines, such quality can be described and measured in many ways - through structural, process, cultural or outcome variables - the well-being, identity formation and learning of young children should remain at its centre. This focus corresponds well to the growing awareness in Irish society of the fundamental interests, needs and rights of young children.

The policy implications for quality in Irish services are skilfully drawn from this comparative review of six countries. The CECDE authors call for: a coherent, co-ordinated policy framework; a broad definition of quality to incorporate different perspectives; a support system that is advisory and empowering; the consultation and engagement of all stakeholders; parental involvement; adequate quality supports, such as a curriculum framework; high levels of training; and particular attention to children with special or additional learning needs.

It gives me great pleasure to acknowledge this contribution, made by Heino Schonfeld and his team, to the policy and quality debate in Ireland. Other important national reports and analyses have also examined the issue from a more domestic perspective and have reached similar conclusions. The time now seems ripe to test aspirations in action. I wish all stakeholders courage, wisdom and the spirit of compromise in this task. Efforts over the next years will lay the values and structural foundations of an early childhood system in Ireland that is worthy of a progressive, democratic society.



John Bennett, M.Ed. Ph.D.
OECD Education and Training Division

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Acronyms

ADM	Area Development Management	ERO	Educational Review Office
BCCN	Border Counties Childcare Network	FDCRS	Family Day Care Rating Scale
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education	HMSO	Her Majesty's Stationery Office
CIS	Caregiver Interaction Scale	ICCE	International Child Care and Education
CRRU	Childcare Resource and Research Unit	IDP	Individual Development Plan
CRSS	Centros Regionais de Segurança Social (Regional Social Security Centres)	IEA	International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement
DENI	Department of Education Northern Ireland	IEP	Individual Educational Plan
DES	Department of Education and Science	IPSS	Union of Private and Social Solidarity Institutions
DfES	Department for Education and Skills	ITERS	Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale
DHC	Department of Health and Children	NAEYC	National Association for the Education of Young Children
DHSS	Department of Health and Social Services	NCNA	National Children's Nurseries Association
DIT	Dublin Institute of Technology	N.D.	No Date
DJELR	Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform	NDP/CSF	National Development Plan/Community Support Framework
DOPs	Desirable Objectives and Practices	NFQ	National Framework for Quality
DRE	Direcções Regionais de Educação (Regional Office of Education)	NICHD	National Institute of Child Health and Human Development
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education	NICMA	Northern Ireland Childminding Association
ECD	Early Childhood Development	NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
ECCD	Early Childhood Care and Development	NZCER	New Zealand Council for Educational Research
ECE	Early Childhood Education	OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
ECERS	Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale	PFH	Pestalozzi-Fröbel-Haus
ECERS-E	Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale - Extension	PIECCs	Pacific Islands Early Childhood Centres
ECERS-R	Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale - Revised	QE	Quality in Education Mark
ECP	Early Childhood Programmes	STAR	Student-Teacher Achievement Ratio
ECS	Early Childhood Services	T and EA	Training and Employment Agency
EEL	Effective Early Learning	UK	United Kingdom
EOCP	Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme	UN	United Nations
EPPE	Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project	UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
		USA	United States of America