

## Questions of Quality: Some Concluding Observations

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### Introduction

It is a great pleasure to be here with you today to bring this stimulating and challenging conference to an end. The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was formed with the remit of developing a National Framework for Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education (NFQ/ECCE) to maintain, develop and support quality in diverse early education settings. To this end, it has brought together an energetic team; has reviewed, national and international 'quality' policy, practice and research; has drafted a thematic review of how young children develop and learn in Ireland to support the development of the NFQ/ECCE; has engaged in extensive consultation and has hosted this international conference.

The work is framed around the three issues of defining quality, assessing quality and supporting quality and the overall conference has been structured along these lines also. This is in recognition of the fact that the work of the Centre really only begins when the NFQ/ECCE is published. To have any impact on the lives of our young children and the quality of early education settings, it will need to be carefully implemented, supported and evaluated.

Given the task of bringing the conference to a close, I was fortunate to have advance access to the abstracts for all of the presentations, which allowed me to get a sense of the tone of contributions before the conference began. Attending the Keynote speeches has been a very pleasurable experience and has enriched my understanding of the enormity of the task ahead. Presenting you today with a synthesis is almost impossible!

In sitting down to pull my thoughts and experiences together, I found that the best way was to be guided by the three themes and prompted by words which, I believe, capture the essence of the complex dynamic that has been set up over the days of the conference. I also thought that the jig-saw icon used in the CECDE materials offered a useful context within which to blend and present these comments.

### Defining Quality

Defining quality is not easy, and yet, it is something that must be considered before any progress can be made in framing a national mechanism for supporting and assessing quality in early education. The complexity of the task has been richly illustrated in the research and academic literature. The importance of acknowledging different perspectives

when discussing definitions came through very clearly in the keynote presentations and also in the workshops. Central to this is the need to recognise and balance these multiple perspectives in any materials developed.

In much of the discussion, the importance of values was noted, as was the need to generate a debate in Ireland right now, on just what we want for our youngest children and what they are entitled to expect from us. There was a general sense that policy is moving on in the absence of this debate and that the NFQ/ECCE, among other reports and publications, will afford a useful opportunity to raise questions and seek action for the support and maintenance of high quality early education. The active and participating role of children in making quality happen was stressed and the need to assist policy makers and practitioners in considering quality from the perspective of the child was recognised as a challenge.

The discussions around the definition of quality provided opportunities to review research findings and to reflect on the key elements that contribute to quality. The importance of relationships in quality was mentioned, along with the difficulty in defining the exact role of the various elements in quality.

There is a general sense that there is far more to quality than checklist-like, measurable factors and the complexity of quality should not deter us in our task; rather the challenge of its complexity should guide us.

### **Assessing Quality**

Under this heading, the real questions centred around the where and what of assessment. Is it the settings one assesses or is it the practice? Where does assessing quality allow for considering policy? Is there a danger that quality may become a constraint to practice - tying people in their practice with unrealistic, but measurable, demands? This was the tone of many of the questions I heard over the last few days and they raised some interesting points of discussion. Generally, I sense that people see the value of assessment as more than simply in terms of regulations and control. There is a supportive and guiding role to assessment and, indeed, it can be considered a central element of pedagogy in early education.

While there was agreement that assessment had to be accompanied by standards and clear indicators, there was some concern that the term assessment might itself need careful explanation. In the current educational climate, it still conjures up notions of tests and examinations. However, we should not lose sight of the power of assessment as a guide to programme development and as a general diagnostic. The importance of sensitive assessment was also noted, particularly when applied to very young children

and in home-like settings. Once again, there must be a balance found between the need to strive for and assess quality on the one hand and the dynamic and fluid realities of practice on the other. In almost all discussions on this topic there was awareness of the value of listening and reflecting to the varied messages and messengers in the wider quality context.

### **Supporting Quality**

Following on from the concerns expressed about the danger of too rigid an approach to assessing quality, the issue of support for achieving quality presented many possibilities. The importance of supporting quality through considering children, their families and the local community was highlighted, and the need for cultural sensitivity was raised. For many people, the matching of quality at points of transition in the lives of children, warrants consideration. This related, for instance, to the group size requirements for four year olds in preschool settings when compared to the group size in classrooms - how best could these two educational environments learn from each other and move closer while maintaining quality.

It has been acknowledged that the quality of a service is very closely related to the expertise of the practitioner. In this regard, the whole area of professional preparation came up for discussion. While there was a recognition of the need to move towards increasing the number of well qualified staff in settings, there was some debate about how best to do this in a way that built on and supported the experiences of the more mature practitioner. There was also concern expressed about determining the professional requirements for different settings, with some arguing that the requirement for family day care practitioners would be different from those in centre based settings. No one disputed the need for professional preparation and continuing professional support, but there was a sense that the challenges should not be underestimated.

The uncertainty around funding in the whole area of early education was raised as a concern with respect to developing mechanisms to support quality. Annual grants needing renewal are not a firm basis on which to grow and develop a quality early education sector. In this regard, there is agreement that there is a need for improved understanding among the general public, parents and policy makers about the very valuable contribution to the economy and society, as well as to children and their families, made by high quality early educational services. In a number of discussions, the need for the sector to become 'political' was raised and suggestions as to how this might come about included fielding candidates in elections on the specific issue, or working to raise the awareness of politicians to the importance of the sector as a voting issue. While the topics of funding, policy and strategic planning came up in discussions on supporting quality early education, they were never far from the surface of discussion throughout the conference.

### **Quality - An Evolution**

Quality is not a final state out there to be achieved. Rather it is an evolving process; a responsive and local journey taken by all to meet the immediate needs of individual children and their families. There is no one-size-fits all to quality in early education, but this does not mean that we cannot know it when it is there - or more likely when it is absent! Quality is a 'to-ing' and 'fro-ing' dynamic, which is multi-level, interactive and, at times, messy. This nature of quality came across very clearly in both the keynote papers and individual papers. In some way, it makes the discussion about quality almost too complex to address - a kind of paralysing sense of awareness sets in. On the other hand, this very complexity concentrates the mind on the challenge presented, the need to articulate as clearly as possible the standards we want for our children, so that we can strive to achieve and support them.

There is a need for vision and leadership to drive the debate. A strong sense of advocacy informed by international and national research and good practice must inform discussion and debate at all levels. There needs to be partnership across the various parties from children through parents, practitioners, policymakers and academics to raise the level of awareness to the importance of early education and to the value-added of high quality. This needs passion, drive and energy and there is certainly a sense of that here today!

The pieces of the quality 'jig-saw' are coming together. We can contribute by joining in the debate, joining in the process and joining the pieces together towards achieving and maintaining quality early education across all settings and for all children in Ireland. This conference has been an important part of the jig-saw and I know that the lessons from the papers and the discussion will be taken on board by the team at the CECDE, and those of us involved with the development of the NFQ/ECCE. We are all part of an important enterprise with a lot at stake and the challenge is to leave here today energised by the task and ready to continue questioning quality.

Many thanks for your attention and for your thoughtful and considered contributions throughout the conference. Thank you.