

Chapter 6

Conclusions and Recommendations

The consultation on quality in ECCE revealed that there is a valuable pool of experience and expertise within which can support and inform the development of the NFQ. Participants in the seminars were articulate, informed and constructive in their comments and expressed a general welcome for the need for and development of an NFQ. Synthesis of responses under the three main questions of quality reveals a number of core elements of quality under which development activities should be focused. These are presented below with specific recommendations for the development of the NFQ. These elements are not ordered hierarchically - they are interrelated and interdependent and must each be accorded equal attention.

6.1 Perspectives on Quality

It is evident from analysis of the feedback templates that a broad range of opinions, views and advice was shared in this consultation process. This breadth and depth of perspective is a valuable asset to early childhood care and education in Ireland and should not be lost in the process of developing and implementing the National Framework for Quality.

Quality in ECCE in Ireland

exists within a huge diversity of perspectives, philosophies and practices, which are also dynamic and evolving. This necessitates that quality indicators or standards must contain sufficient flexibility to accommodate these characteristics.

6.2 Environment

The majority of responses under this heading refer to the immediate environment where the child is present. Comments encompass the physical spaces in terms of space, layout, design, comfort, safety and hygiene, both indoor and outdoor. They also include all the variety of materials and equipment that is necessary to support appropriate activity for children and adults. Other dimensions that were highlighted related to the more intangible aspects of the environment such as atmosphere, openness and the welcoming nature of the setting. It was agreed that the environment should be aesthetically pleasing, welcoming, and balance the need for safety and hygiene with the opportunity for children to experience 'safe risk' in support of their optimal development. In light of this the following recommendation is made:

A clear set of minimum standards relating to the nature of the environment in ECCE settings should be developed to apply to all situations where children (0-6) are present. They should be firmly grounded in research and best practice in relation to child development, encompass all current and relevant legislation and guidelines and embrace existing best practice as exemplified in established quality assurance programmes in ECCE.

6.3 Child-centred

This heading refers to the strong consensus that the best interests of the child must inform all policies and practice in ECCE. This perspective is well articulated in the National Children's Strategy, which states.

"An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential." (DHC, 2000: 10)

Participants clearly endorsed the

need to consult with and listen to children's views when developing policies and services directly related to them. In light of this consensus the following recommendations are made:

The NFQ must support the well being and development of all the children (0-6) of Ireland. This child centred focus must inform all elements of the NFQ including standards, assessment and support mechanisms.

Mechanisms and protocols must be developed to facilitate the voices of children to be heard on all aspects of the development, delivery and assessment of quality in ECCE. Guidelines for consulting with young children should also be inherent to the NFQ.

6.4 Staffing

This heading refers primarily to the staffing issues in centre based ECCE settings. It includes:

- Concerns regarding the need for adequate ratios of staff to children in order to facilitate the optimal levels of support and interaction for children and also to facilitate essential activities such as child observation, record

- keeping, supervising students, engaging with parents etc.
- The need for managerial staff with appropriate management qualifications and expertise.
- The need for allocation of time and resources to teamwork/team building and networking and liaison with other professionals and agencies. This time should be within usual working hours.

On the basis of this consensus the following recommendations are made:

The NFQ should give clear guidelines on adult-child ratios based on research evidence and best practice. It should also provide guidelines for practitioners in centre-based settings on supporting essential activities such as teamwork, team building and reflective practice.

6.5 Education, Training and Qualifications

This heading reflects a wide range of consensus amongst participants including:

- The positive relationship between quality of provision in ECCE and the qualifications of staff.

- The need for standardised and accredited education, training and qualifications, both pre-service and in-service.
- The need for infrastructure to afford all practitioners access to accredited education, training and qualifications wherever and whenever they require it.
- The importance of continuing professional development and need for specific training programmes related to the changing nature of ECCE practice e.g. diversity, special needs, quality assurance.

On the basis of this consensus the following recommendations are made:

The NFQ must articulate the important relationship between quality of ECCE and the qualifications of practitioners. It must articulate well with and support developments regarding standard setting for qualifications, mechanisms for access, transfer and progression and quality assurance procedures currently being undertaken by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, the National Awarding bodies and

all institutions involved in the development and delivery of education and training in ECCE.

It must make provision for education and training associated with the implementation of the NFQ.

6.6 Parental Involvement

This heading refers, in the main, to the necessity for the NFQ to recognise parents as the primary carers and educators of the child. There was a strong consensus on the necessity of parental involvement in ECCE. Perspectives on this involvement varied along a continuum from asking parents to give satisfaction ratings to services, through to full partnership within the day-to-day operation, management and development of services. It was agreed that facilitating parental involvement was often difficult to achieve and that the NFQ should be able to support and develop this important dimension of quality.

On the basis of this consensus the following recommendation is made:

The NFQ should facilitate the development of infrastructure to facilitate the representation

of parents' perspectives in the development of policy and practice in ECCE. In addition it should provide guidelines for practitioners regarding supporting and developing parental involvement in service provision.

6.7 Curriculum/Programme

As is evident from the heading a number of different terms were used by participants to refer to the need for some sort of overarching national guidelines in relation to everyday practice in ECCE settings with children aged birth to six years. It was agreed that such guidance needed to have a high degree of flexibility to take account of children's needs, support the autonomy of practitioners and accommodate the broad range of existing curriculum, programmes and methodologies that exist in ECCE in Ireland.

On the basis of this consensus the following recommendation is made:

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is presently engaged in the development of a national framework for early learning. This initiative will provide overarching curriculum

guidelines for all adults working with children birth to six years and may resolve concerns expressed by participants in this consultation. The NFQ should support the development and dissemination of this initiative.

6.8 Standards

It was clearly acknowledged that standards were an essential element of the development of quality in ECCE. The role and nature of such standards attracted the following consensus:

- They should support the harmonisation of existing regulations, standard and guidelines;
- They should be applicable to all settings where children aged birth to six are present and be flexible enough to have relevance to a wide variety of practice;
- They should be based on a clear set of values and principles, which should emerge from the consensus of stakeholders in ECCE;
- Implementation materials should be developed that are easy to administer and facilitate regular reviews of practice.

On the basis of this consensus the

following recommendation is made:

Clear, standardised guidelines in relation to the development of policies, procedures and practice in a wide variety of ECCE settings should be included in the NFQ. In addition any assessment materials developed should be uncomplicated, straightforward and easy to complete.

6.9 Adult-Child Interactions

This heading refers to the consensus that emerged regarding the critical importance of positive adult child interaction in the development of quality in ECCE. It also highlights skilled and purposeful child observation as a key tool for the development of such positive interaction.

On the basis of this consensus the following recommendations are made:

The NFQ should take account of the literature regarding the role of adult child interaction in the development and provision of quality in ECCE.

Observation is a valuable tool in the assessment of quality in

adult child interactions and the NFQ should include clear guidelines and policies on this important issue.

6.10 Respect for Diversity

This heading refers to the significant consensus that ECCE provision must be guided by a fundamental respect for diversity in society. This loosely translates into two key perspectives; the first is that all children and families must be treated with respect regardless of their circumstances and secondly that there recognition of the individuality of children should result in policy and practice that avoids uniformity and instead supports difference.

On the basis of this consensus the following recommendation is made:

Respect for diversity is a key issue, which must be central to the development of the NFQ. A review of literature and best practice on this issue should underpin this development process.

6.11 Networking, Linkages and Information

This heading refers to the consensus that emerged regarding the necessity for the establishment of

networks at local, regional and national level, which would facilitate the sharing of information and best practice amongst ECCE practitioners. It was emphasised that these networks should build upon established infrastructure. A number of practical suggestions related to the nature of a networking infrastructure, including a national clearinghouse for research and information, mentoring systems for practitioners at all levels, discussion groups and telephone help lines. A separate theme emerged out of this heading related to the need for promotion and profile raising of ECCE itself within society in general.

On the basis of this consensus the following recommendation is made:

The NFQ should facilitate the development of infrastructure to support networking and meet the information needs of the broad range of stakeholders in ECCE. This should build upon existing infrastructure and expertise and should be accessible at national, regional and local level.

6.12 Assessment

This heading refers to the consensus regarding assessment mechanisms in ECCE. It is divided under two clear sections that of external and internal assessment. External assessment referred primarily to existing inspection systems that operate within ECCE. Comments stated the need for:

- Inspectors and assessors to be qualified in ECCE;
- Formative and supportive assessment;
- Consideration of the more dynamic variables of quality;
- Standardisation, coordination and consistency of external inspection.

Internal assessment can be conceptualised as a continuum from the individual practitioner through to the team within a centre and ultimately to the wider community of practice involved in ECCE. It generally involves review and reflection on practice towards the development and improvement of same. Such elements were viewed as essential to the development of quality.

On the basis of this consensus the following recommendations are made.

The NFQ must take account of the variety of established approaches to the assessment of quality and be able to accommodate, support and where necessary develop current practice to achieve the desired levels of consistency and co-ordination.

Assessment of quality must have relevance and involve all stakeholders in the provision of ECCE. The NFQ must acknowledge and support the importance of internal assessment at all points along this continuum.

6.13 Government Support, Commitment and Funding

This heading reflects the unequivocal consensus that quality in ECCE is only achievable if strong government support is present. This support can be realised by clear and coordinated policy across all departments. Financial support emerged as a major issue for participants and it was widely viewed that exchequer support for ECCE was essential for the sustainability of growth and development. Funding was identified as necessary under a variety of different headings

including, development for infrastructure, capital development of service provision, adequate terms and conditions of employment for staff and support for parental choice of ECCE.

On the basis of this consensus the following recommendations are made:

Analysis of current Government policy and initiatives should be undertaken to identify potential for accommodation and coordination within the NFQ. Government support for ECCE in Ireland must be clearly evidenced by the publication of strategic, coordinated policy and adequate allocation of financial support to realise and sustain these policy commitments.

6.14 Conclusion

The premise upon which this consultation process was conducted was that the formation of the National Framework for Quality should be based upon wide ranging consultation with all stakeholders in early childhood care and education in Ireland. The CECDE would like to reiterate its appreciation to all those who participated in the

consultative process and who consequently have played an integral role in the development of the NFQ. The wealth of data generated during the consultative seminars outlined in this report provides invaluable insights from a diverse array of stakeholders. This complements other elements of the CECDE's work in developing the NFQ, such as the Conceptual Framework and the review of national and international best policy and practice. It is now envisaged that these elements will be amalgamated and synthesised to produce the core elements of the NFQ, i.e. a set of national quality standards, and mechanisms for implementing and supporting achievement of these standards in early childhood care and education in Ireland. The CECDE is committed to ongoing consultation in the development of the NFQ and we look forward to further collaboration and partnership with the sector in the process of developing and implementing the NFQ.