

Engaging With Practitioners Through *Síolta*, The National Quality Framework For Early Childhood Education: A Workshop Model

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Introduction

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) is an initiative of the Department of Education and Science (DES). It was established in 2002 to further the aims and objectives of the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999). One of its primary objectives on its inception was to develop a set of national standards for quality practice in early childhood education, and this objective was achieved with the publication in May 2006 of *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006).

Síolta is a quality assurance programme. The materials, which have been published in draft form, comprise one strand of what is envisaged as a three strand programme - Defining, Supporting and Assessing quality practice. The current materials are based on the following elements:

- **Principles:** The twelve Principles express an agreed vision for quality provision of early childhood experiences in Ireland.
- **Standards:** There are sixteen standards which translate the vision of the Principles into statements for practical implementation.
- **Components:** Each Standard is further broken down into its component parts which function as indicators of quality practice.
- **Signposts for Reflection:** In order to prompt and promote reflective practice within the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) community, each component is accompanied by a selection of open ended questions and related prompts as a basis for discussion and reflection.

In the Introductory Handbook which accompanies the materials, preliminary discussion documents on the remaining strands of Assessing and Supporting are included. The workshop model being presented in this paper forms part of the Supporting Quality strand.

One of the most important processes utilised in the development of the Framework was consultation: an extensive public consultation process with a broad range of stakeholders was undertaken as part of the research to underpin the Framework (CECDE, 2004a); subsequently, the CECDE Consultative Committee was closely involved in providing feedback and advice on each section and every element of the *Síolta* materials. The CECDE has always emphasised that *Síolta* represents a joint endeavour between the

stakeholders and the Centre. This perspective has greatly influenced the CECDE in developing the workshop model described in this paper.

In the months before and immediately following the publication of the Framework, the CECDE focused on engaging with practitioners and other stakeholders in disseminating the materials and raising awareness of the potential of *Síolta* to support quality practice. Initially, this involved presentations on the materials to a variety of groups and audiences. It became clear within a very short period, even prior to publication - both from our own experiences of presenting and from the responses and requests of practitioners themselves - that a more direct experience of the materials and processes involved in implementing *Síolta* was required. This prompted the CECDE to prioritise the development of a workshop for practitioners which could be implemented in a variety of contexts but whose ultimate aim is the achievement of quality practice.

Purpose and Aims of the Workshop

In devising the workshop model, the CECDE was clear as to its purpose. The overall purpose of the workshop is to support implementation of the quality standards defined in *Síolta* in the context of the Principles of quality practice. The aims of the workshop are as follows:

- To promote reflective practice
- To support collegiality among practitioners
- To embed theory in practice and foster deepening of subject knowledge
- To provide a structure for engagement with *Síolta*
- To facilitate networking among practitioners
- To effect change in practice.

Tucker *et al.*, (2002: 2) have noted that "...reflection and self-monitoring... are the hallmarks of the true professional." A characteristic of *Síolta* is the centrality of and respect for the ECCE professional and the clearest manifestation of this is the unambiguous focus on reflective processes demonstrated through the Signposts for Reflection. Engaging with fellow professionals in reflective processes in a spirit of collegiality is also supportive of quality practice and is of particular relevance in the Irish context in which early childhood provision has traditionally been diverse and fragmented (CECDE, 2004b).

The aim of embedding theory in practice is an extension of the CECDE commitment to evidence informed development (CECDE, 2003a; b; 2004b). However, specific conditions are required to achieve this aim, and the *Síolta* workshop model also aims to provide those conditions and contexts. In the context of promoting evidence-informed development, Sanderson (2002: 8) refers to "[n]etworking (or 'relational interaction)'" and Kirst (2000: 385) notes that "... the primacy of personal contact emerges as a major

aspect of successful research dissemination." The workshop provides a structured context, able to address all the Standards, in which professionals and other stakeholders can interact and network in a manner conducive to improved quality practices in early childhood education. This workshop has been designed to demonstrate to participants the flexibility of the *Síolta* materials for use by individual practitioners, in team-working, in management and for education and training purposes.

Underpinning the aims and purpose outlined above is the value of the workshop to practitioners in terms of continuing professional development in a context of rapid change. The *Síolta* workshop model is informed by Mezirow's work on the transformative dimensions of adult learning (Mezirow, 1991). This seeks to explain the way in which adults adapt to change through reflection and critical discourse, leading to paradigm shifts in existing perspectives. *Síolta* represents a new departure in the history of ECCE in Ireland and implementing change to this degree is challenging for all stakeholders, particularly practitioners. Mezirow has identified a set of goals which should be adopted by those wishing to achieve transformational learning in adults. These goals have been summarised as follows:

- Foster independent learning
- Develop problem solving abilities - provide real life situations that are meaningful and reflective of actual challenges in practice
- Foster decision making skills - offering opportunities for choice and supporting understanding of the range and nature of choice and promoting confidence in the decision making process
- Foster a self-corrective, reflexive approach to learning
- Emphasis experiential, participative and projective instructional methods and use modelling where appropriate
- Reinforce the self concept of the learner as an active agent in the learning process by providing opportunity for progressive mastery, supportive feedback, participation in mutual support networks and avoiding competitive judgment of performance (Duignan, 2005).

These goals have influenced the processes incorporated into the *Síolta* workshop model, with particular emphasis on reflection and experiential learning centred around the critical activities of professional practice. The workshop is characterised by:

- Self-reflection
- A focus on process
- Building on existing expertise
- Capacity building.

Workshop Structure

The workshop is structured into two parts, and each part is further comprised of a number of defined sections. The workshop structure is the same for all sixteen Standards, but the example which will be used here is the workshop on Interactions.

Section 1

The initial section of the workshop introduces the work of the CECDE, its role and objectives as well as the research dimension of our brief. The workshop then moves on to describe *Siolta* to the participants; this includes an overview of its development; its place in the landscape of ECCE in Ireland; an introduction to the Principles, Standards and Components and the interconnectivity of these elements; and an explanation of the way in which it is mediated for different settings and age groups.

Section 2

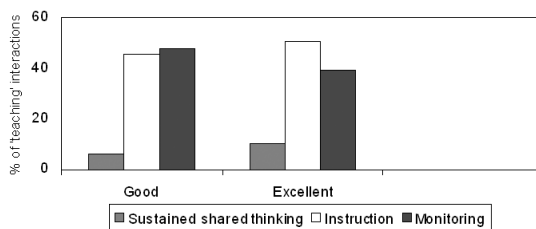
Introduction to the Standard

The workshop then moves on to the interactive section of the programme. The Standard under discussion is introduced, in this case Standard 5, Interactions which states:

Fostering constructive interactions (child/child, child/adult and adult/adult) requires explicit policies, procedures and practice that emphasise the value of process and are based on mutual respect, equal partnership and sensitivity.

Following the introduction of the Standard, a brief statement sourced from the literature is introduced to establish the relevance and importance of the standard area and the rationale for its consideration through the workshop. In the case of Standard 5, the item of information from the research is the following chart illustrating findings from the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) study (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002).

Percentage of pedagogical interactions (cognitive and monitoring) in settings varying in effectiveness



(Siraj-Blatchford, 2005)

In this instance, the facilitator explains the concept of sustained shared thinking, as explicated in REPEY and draws the participants' attention to the close parallels between this concept and the quality interactions envisaged in *Siolta*. This also introduces the participants to a source of significant research and information on best practice.

Group Discussion

The next stage of the workshop is to introduce the participants to the Discussion points which will form the basis for the group work, the core activity of the workshop. In this model, in order to encourage the participants to make full use of the flexibility and adaptability of the *Siolta* materials, the discussion points are based on the Components¹ but are not word for word transcriptions. For example:

Component 5.4: The adult interactive style is focused on process as opposed to outcomes. It is balanced between talking and listening, offers the child a choice of responses and encourages expanded use of language. It follows the child's lead and interests, and challenges the child appropriately.

Adapted for discussion as:

- When I'm with the children, I focus on what we are doing, not the end results.
- The way I interact helps each child to expand her/his use of language.

At this point, the participants are invited to break into small groups. Each participant will have been allocated to a group and given a copy of the appropriate Discussion point for that group. One person in each group is given responsibility for providing feedback in the form of an agreed three-point action plan which is the focus for the group discussion, although not a necessary outcome.

Sample Discussion Sheet

Group 1

Outcome: I offer each child the chance to interact with other children of the same age and of different ages.

Three things I can do:

1. I will _____
2. I will _____
3. I will _____

Note:

- 1 As referred to earlier, each Standard is broken down into a number of Components which function as indicators of quality.

Participants are asked to bear in mind what has come to be referred to as the 'Monday Morning Rule'; i.e. any action proposed must be implementable under current conditions in the setting as opposed to being dependent on increased resources or other significant structural change. The practitioners are asked to consider and reflect on current practice and endeavour to identify change which is achievable and will improve the quality of the practice under discussion. The time allocated to this activity is 30 minutes, a reasonable time for practitioners in busy settings to allocate to review and planning activities where longer periods are not an option. In this way, the workshop demonstrates to practitioners how *Síolta*, a substantial document, can be adapted for use on an ongoing basis.

Following the group discussion, each group is invited to share the action plan with the larger group and to give some background on the discussion which led to the action plan. Heretofore, the CECDE, in conducting the workshop has arranged for all the action plans to be collated into one document which is then circulated to all the participants as a resource.

Follow-on Information and Conclusion

Once the group discussion and feedback session has been concluded, and while the discussion is still fresh in the minds of the participants, some follow-up research information on the topic under discussion is presented and the references made available for follow-up by the participants. In the example of the Interactions workshop, this included closer reference to the REPEY (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002) study, the related Effective Provision of Pre-school Education study (Sylva *et al.*, 2003) and the literature review for the Birth to Three Matters programme (David *et al.*, 2003). To conclude the session, the focus is brought back onto *Síolta* and its contribution to the achievement of quality in the Standard area. In the case of this particular example of the workshop model, the role of *Síolta* in the provision of quality interactions for all children in the early education setting is explained.

Further Developments

Following a period of almost six months in which workshops on a number of different Standards were conducted, the CECDE reviewed the process. Demand for the workshops had far exceeded expectations and there was a continuous stream of requests for more workshops. Having established that the demand existed and having achieved the initial objective of disseminating *Síolta* and demonstrating its potential as a resource for practitioners, the CECDE now decided to move onto the next phase of dissemination and to share the model with the wider ECCE sector. Currently, preparations are being made for a workshop demonstration event to take place in late Spring or early Summer of this year. At that time, the CECDE will invite an initial group, drawn from agencies with responsibility for supporting quality practice, to a two-day seminar. The purpose of the seminar is to familiarise the participants with the model, its adaptation for each Standard,

organisational and facilitation issues, source materials, etc. related to conducting the workshops with groups of practitioners.

As the first step towards this event, the CECDE is in the process of developing the *Síolta* Workshop Materials Resource Pack, the production of which is being supported by FÁS, the National Training and Employment Authority. The first step being undertaken is the preparation of a set of research digests, one per Standard. Each digest will review current research literature with particular reference to the Components of each Standard and the digest will then be the source of research information for the workshops. It is envisaged that the digests will be updated at regular intervals. These research digests, along with templates of the PowerPoint presentation for each Standard, templates of discussion/feedback sheets and a CD-Rom of all the materials, will be made available to the participants in the resource pack. This resource pack will provide all the materials necessary for conducting workshops on all the *Síolta* Standards.

An evaluation of the roll-out of the workshops by the initial group of participants in the first workshop seminar will inform adaptation of the workshop materials and the seminar itself.

As a further resource, the CECDE has begun work on a dedicated website for the *Síolta* Workshop Model. Persons who have participated in the workshop seminar may register with the website and become part of a *Síolta* users network. Registered users will have access to materials and support via the website which will be responsive to the needs of those registered.

Conclusion

The impetus which led the CECDE to devise this workshop model came from the ECCE sector itself, and demonstrates the commitment of the sector to ongoing quality improvement. CECDE staff who conducted workshops were constantly surprised at the sheer numbers of practitioners who attended, further evidence of that commitment. There is an obvious thirst for opportunities and contexts in which practitioners can address issues of quality practice. By making this structured workshop available, along with all the necessary materials, the CECDE hopes to support and facilitate ongoing consideration of quality practice which empowers practitioners and other stakeholders and ultimately improves the quality of early childhood experiences for our youngest children.

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