



An Lárionad um Fhorbairt  
agus Oideachais na Luath-Óige

**A Vision for the Future –  
Principles of Quality in Early Childhood Care and  
Education (ECCE) in Ireland**

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## **Introduction**

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was launched in October 2002 to complete a comprehensive Programme of Work (CECDE, 2001) in pursuance of the objectives of the White Paper '*Ready to Learn*' (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1999). The CECDE is jointly managed by St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra and the Dublin Institute of Technology. Our remit is comprehensive, focusing on all care and education settings for children from birth to six years of age, bridging many of the traditional divides between education and care and between the early years settings and the formal education system.

Within this context, the **objectives** of the CECDE are:

- To develop a National Quality Framework for early childhood care and education settings (NQF/ECCE);
- To develop targeted interventions on a pilot basis for children who are educationally disadvantaged and children with special needs and
- To prepare the groundwork for the establishment of an Early Childhood Education Agency as envisaged in the White Paper (CECDE, 2001:4).

This paper focuses on the first of these functions, namely the development of the NQF/ ECCE in Ireland. The framework comprises three distinct, but interrelated elements related to defining, supporting and assessing quality. It is anticipated that each of these elements will be mediated to practice settings through mechanisms and infrastructure especially designed to take account of the unique nature of ECCE in Ireland.

This paper examines the development of the first, and arguably, the most critical dimension of the NQF i.e. a set of core principles, which will inform and underpin all other aspects and processes. It briefly relates the methodology used in the development of the principle statements, describes

their breadth and scope and the vision they represent of ECCE in Ireland. Finally it describes the proposed practice related elements through which these principles will impact on practice in ECCE settings towards the development of high quality early childhood experiences for all children in Ireland.

## **Context**

Early childhood services in Ireland have only very recently attracted the attention of government and policy makers (Department of Health [DoH], 1991, Department of Health and Children [DHC], 1998, Department of Justice, Equality and Law reform [DJELR], 1999, DHC, 2000). Prior to the early 1990s, many services for children under six years of age, were not subject to statutory regulation. Even those services which were provided by the state, the most notable being the infant classes in primary schools, were not recognised as having a different needs in terms of, for example, premises, curriculum and staffing, to that of formal schooling which commenced at age six in the first year of primary school. Outside state provision, a bewildering array of provision, support infrastructure and, funding arrangements had evolved, usually managed either by the community and voluntary or private interests, to meet very specific and local needs of children and families. Whilst all these services were pursuing a common objective of addressing the care and education needs of young children and their families, they were doing so along pathways that rarely met and which had no frame of reference within which to establish such connections.

The policy initiatives that have occurred since 1990 have, for the first time, begun the process of creating a single identity for this diverse range of provision. The seminal reports of the DJELR and the DES in the late 1990s (DES, 1999) and the regulations instituted by the Department of Health in 1996 (DHC, 1996), all contributed to this development process. However, it is only since the establishment of the CECDE in 2001 that national policy

developments have been initiated which truly embrace and engage the whole range of early childhood provision that exists in Ireland. Our brief to develop a quality framework for all settings where children aged birth to six years are present is ground breaking on many fronts, not least of which is the task of accommodating this diversity of both practitioner identities and practice.

### **The approach**

Given this challenging context for development, it was recognised that strategies for encouraging ownership by all stakeholders would be a critical prerequisite for success. This is acknowledged within the CECDE Work Programme as follows:

*“Consultation with stakeholders will be a crucial part of the process of developing quality standards” (CECDE, 2001:4).*

In addition to consultation, it was also recognised that there would be multiple and perhaps even competing perspectives on quality in ECCE. It was important that these would be understood and addressed in the development of the NQF/ECCE. Analysis of literature pertaining to the development of quality standards indicated that, in order to establish the validity and reliability of the NQF materials and mechanisms, all development needed to be grounded in solid research evidence.

The first stage of the NQF/ECCE development process therefore, involved addressing these issues through the production of four key strands of research

- *Talking about Quality* documents a national consultation with stakeholders in ECCE regarding the development of the NQF/ECCE. It draws on the wealth of experience and expertise related to the promotion of quality in ECCE that exist in Ireland (CECDE, 2004).
- *Insights on Quality* presents a review of national policy, practice and research, focusing on quality and distils implications for the

development of the NQF/ECCE (CECDE, 2005A) (see Walsh, T., in this volume for further details).

- *Making Connections* examines the international context for quality through consideration of a range of selected countries and distils best policy and practice and research in relation to the development of the NQF/ECCE. (CECDE, 2005B)
- *Early Childhood in Ireland - Evidence and Perspectives* (CECDE, Forthcoming) presents the CECDE position on child development and learning in Ireland and distils implications for the NQF/ECCE. (see Fallon, J., in this Volume for further details).

It was identified during this phase that some sort of unifying mechanism, which would clearly identify the characteristics of quality in ECCE in Ireland, was a necessary prerequisite to the development of national standards for quality and their associated materials and processes for implementation. This mechanism, it was decided, could be articulated through a set of principles which represented the consensual views of all stakeholders on what the critical contributing factors in provision of quality early childhood experiences were. If this consensus could be captured and articulated clearly, it would encourage the development of a common language and common sense of purpose, both critical to the future development of a coherent identity for the sector and for the provision of quality early years services for young children.

### **Development of the Principles**

The publications, which resulted from the evidence gathering work of the CECDE, provided the material basis for the development of the principle statements. A meta-analysis of the content of these documents generated a comprehensive volume of statements, words and phrases, which collectively addressed the issue of how to provide quality early childhood experiences for young children.

This data was then subjected to thematic analysis that identified ten key areas of provision. Using the language generated through the meta-analysis, principle statements were devised for each area, to attempt to convey the ideas succinctly and with clarity. In the process of doing so however, it was recognised that given the diversity of perspectives that existed amongst all the stakeholders, it would be necessary to accompany each statement with a brief explanatory note to ground the vision in practice and remove the opportunity for ambiguity.

The following were the ten key areas that comprised the initial ten principle statements:

- The distinct and unique nature of early childhood
- The centrality of the child
- Parents and families
- Relationships
- Environments
- Diversity
- Equality
- Safety and welfare
- Role of the adult
- Pedagogy
- Play
- Coordination and Communication

## **Consultation**

Once the principles and their explanatory notes were drafted, a process of consultation with stakeholders was initiated. This process was mediated through the representative structure of the CECDE Consultative Committee. This committee comprises representatives of 50 different stakeholder organisations. Each organisation was afforded the opportunity to engage with the proposed principles and explanatory notes and give their collective feedback through their representatives to the CECDE development team. A feedback template was designed for the purpose and circulated in hard copy and also via email attachment. In addition, representatives were encouraged to send their feedback through a confidential web based version of the feedback form.

## **Revision**

The most surprising result from the consultation process was the overwhelming consensus evident across all the diverse stakeholder groups regarding the validity of the key areas of quality. A total of 24 of the 50 organisations submitted feedback (48%). In relation to the question: “Do you agree that this statement should be a core principle underpinning the National Quality Framework?”, the numbers indicating ‘Yes’ ranged between 79% (Play) and 96% (Environments).

Taken as a whole, the average level of agreement across the ten principles was 88%, a very positive response by any standards. This positive response was further reinforced when the remaining 12% of responses was analysed in more detail. Of this 12%, a total of 9% had left the Yes/No box blank. This left only 3% of responses indicating No.

In all of these cases, however, it became apparent that even those who had ticked ‘No’ did not intend this to indicate disagreement with the validity of the principle. Rather it meant that they wished to suggest changes to the wording

of either the principle or explanatory note. We therefore concluded with some confidence that there was 100% agreement with and endorsement of the ten Draft Principles for inclusion in the NQF/ECCE.

A number of organisations suggested word changes within the principles and the explanatory notes. Each organisation's response was reviewed in detail - in particular for evidence of trends and consensus. Each decision taken in relation to the changes to the original wording was recorded and where there was evidence of consensus, the changes were incorporated into the revised principle statements or explanatory notes. This process of record keeping was felt to be important to ensure openness, transparency and accessibility of the revision process to all interested stakeholders. Some Principles attracted very little comment or suggested changes e.g. Safety, Welfare and Well being of the child (25%). Others, such as the role of the adult stimulated more debate and therefore more comment (58%). The statistics were quite similar for the explanatory notes, with the majority of changes overlapping and minor in nature. During this process of review, it became apparent that much of the comment focused on the use of language and terminology. Differing perspectives were evident in this feedback and this evidence prompted the development of a Glossary of Terms that would clarify exactly how language was being used in the context of the NQF/ECCE.

There is no doubt but that the principles were enhanced and solidified by the feedback from the Consultative Committee. In some cases changes were suggested to reinforce the message already contained within the statement e.g. changing 'a' to 'the' or changing 'should' to 'must'. A number of the suggestions included focused on the practical application or implementation of the principles.

In addition to alterations to the existing 10 draft principles, a number of organisations proposed the inclusion of additional principles. Following analysis of the feedback, a further two principles were devised and added to the existing list, which now rests at twelve. The first of these principles relates

to Parental Partnership, which was suggested by 30% of organisations who felt that this aspect was not represented adequately within the draft principles. The second additional principle relates to the issue of Coordination and Communication between all adults working with the child, both within the settings and also external adults who are involved in the care and education of the child. The feedback and suggestions from the Consultative Committee was used to phrase these principles and explanatory notes.

### **Realising the vision**

Collectively these twelve principles articulate a vision of early childhood provision that supports the centrality of the child in all his/her unique complexity, as the starting point for the provision of quality services. They are inter-related and interdependent and reflect the Bio-ecological model of child development, which states that:

*“The effective functioning of child rearing processes in the family and other child settings requires public policies and practices that provide place, time, stability, status, recognition, belief systems, customs and actions in support of child rearing activities not only on the part of parents, caregivers, teachers and other professional personnel, but also relatives, friends, neighbours, co-workers, communities and the major economic, social and political institutions of the entire society.”* (Bronfenbrenner, 1997:38)

In addition they mediate this theoretical perspective within the Irish context.

The Principles have, for the first time in the history of early childhood provision in Ireland, gained the endorsement of all stakeholders regardless of their traditional, philosophical and professional or practice contexts. They therefore have the potential to act as a framework for the development of a distinctive identity for all. In the first instance, the principles will provide the overarching frame within which the NQF/ECCE will be developed and implemented. They will be the benchmark against which the standards and indicators (or components) of quality will be measured. They will inform the

development of assessment mechanisms, tools and processes and they will act as the catalyst for the provision of a comprehensive range of support.

## **Conclusion**

These principles developed by stakeholders in the ECCE sector in Ireland in 2005, express for the first time a vision of the future of service provision. It is very positive to note that this vision is a shared one and that it reinforces and complements existing national policy. Through the mechanism of the NQF/ECCE, it is to be hoped that the vision becomes reality. This will not be an easy road to travel and will undoubtedly throw up many and varied challenges for all of us whether we are parents, professionals or policy makers. As usual in Ireland, we have set ourselves a high bar to achieve. However, the commitment, passion and enthusiasm articulated in these vision statements demonstrates that we have abundant potential to reach our self-imposed goals.

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