



An Lárionad um Fhorbairt
agus Oideachais na Luath-Óige

“Children of the Global Village?”
Opening Address to the OMEP Conference,
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Dear chairperson, friends, colleagues and distinguished guests.

I am very honoured to open this year's OMEP Ireland Conference and would like to thank OMEP for this wonderful opportunity to share some of my thoughts with you.

As you know I am the Director of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education and the relationship between the CECDE and OMEP has been very close and fruitful since the establishment of the CECDE in October 2002. These conferences of OMEP Ireland are very important in providing an arena and possibly the most important forum for research in the field of early childhood care and education in Ireland. The CECDE is of course a member both of OMEP International and its Irish branch, and very active members indeed. The CECDE and OMEP have assisted each other in many ways for example by promoting events in our respective publications and so on. Staff of the Centre delivered two presentations at last year's conference in Cork and this year we are represented with three papers including the present one which you are now – I am afraid - forced to endure.

When I was preparing this opening paper, I had a choice to discuss the development of a quality framework for early childhood care and education in Ireland, which is after all the core objective of the CECDE, **or** to take my cue from the title of this year's conference "Children of the Global Village". I am glad to say that I decided to do the latter although it turned out to be the more challenging theme to cover. I note with interest that the title of OMEP's World Conference later this year in Sydney, "One World: Many Childhoods", is also raising this important issue of tension between the global and the local and what this means for children everywhere.

The term "global village" in the title of our conference was of course coined by the legendary sociologist and theorist of media and communication, Marshall McLuhan. However, his metaphor of the "global village" for a world connected by

modern electric and electronic media has frequently been misunderstood. McLuhan saw the “village” as riven by war and conflict, not peace and harmony. He was no follower of Rousseau. He thought electric media - as opposed to print media - reduced the ability to think abstractly and would return us to a tribal world of identities in conflict. It is useful to remember this understanding of McLuhan’s global village when we unpack and test contemporary delusions in relation to “globalisation”.

In the following 30 minutes or so I will look at some issues, which arise from the current globalization debate as it impacts on early childhood settings. However, let me remind you: I am not primarily a researcher or academic. The following is not a review of the literature but if you like musings of someone who is very engaged with the matter not only as a policymaker but also as a parent and citizen. I will present research but only in a very eclectic and random way to explain the sources of my thoughts and lend them some weight.

I would like to concentrate on three questions which I believe are of major consequence and have implications for the way we want to develop early childhood care and education in Ireland. These are: (1) Is childhood sufficiently uniform across the globe with universal needs and rights demanding a global response? (2) Why is the answer to the first question important for our response to the needs of young children in Ireland? (3) How is the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education approaching the development of a National Quality Framework for young children here in Ireland?



This is an image taken from an advertising campaign by a multinational manufacturer and retailer of clothing, particularly children's clothing. We all know the name of the company - it is a global brand.

The picture – and the campaign in general – plays in to our desire to see childhood as an age of innocence when later adult divisions and conflicts have little or no impact. The sub-text to the picture is the populist phrase “children are the same all over the world” and implies that childhood is an era of harmony and equality.

However, the reality often disturbingly varies from our desires and prejudices: In October 1998, an Italian newspaper alleged the exploitation of child labour in a Turkish plant working for the Benetton group. Italian trade unions, together with their Turkish counterparts, intervened and concluded an agreement, which forbids the use of child labour in the Turkish textile plants working for the Benetton group. The company explained the events as unusual and unfortunate.

This little story illustrates the tension between the view that childhood is a universal age of man and exists aloof of time and place and the opposite view that childhood is socially constructed and deeply affected by local culture and social conditions. Or in other words, do “All children smile in the same language” (US bumpersticker)? Or do “children speak hundred languages” (Reggio Emilio motto)?

As so often the case, both perspectives are reasonable and based on evidence but I fear that we will not see the whole picture if our view is limited to one or the other perspectives.

I will look first at aspects of childhood which may reasonably be regarded as “universal” or common to all children.

Multi-lateral agreements between states are based on the reasonable assumption of a number of common aspects, needs and rights of children no matter where on

earth they live. The classic example for this is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by all countries – except Somalia and the United States.

Another example for aspects of childhood, which may have universal application, is the consensus on ranges, sequence and direction of processes and events in early childhood such as motor, cognitive or social development. “Normality” here is often defined by proximity to the apex of the bell curve.

Certain physical requirements are also the same for all children, for example the need for food, sleep or shelter.

Based on these similarities across countries and cultures some organizations especially in the USA have attempted to design universal standards for early childhood care and education. One such example is the “Global Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care in the 21st Century” by the Association for Childhood Education International¹. These guidelines come complete with a detailed assessment tool in the format of a checklist.

However, whenever we look at childhood across different countries and communities we quickly arrive at a point where the diversity and differing contexts of childhood become apparent.

A large number of cross-cultural studies particularly in the field of anthropology examining child rearing practices, child development and behaviour have shown “how certain Western cultural practices and beliefs regarding infancy make sense in the American and European contexts but are not universal or natural. ‘Natural’ childbirth, mother-infant bonding, father's rough-and-tumble play, and getting the infant to sleep through the night are important practices in a contemporary American cultural context, but are infrequent or insignificant features of infant care in other parts of the world.”²

¹ Association for Childhood Education International: “Global Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care in the 21st Century”, 2002

² Hewlett, Barry S.: “Diverse Contexts of Human Infancy”

The following short narrative is based on the findings of just one well-known study observing childrearing practices of two neighbouring people:

“In a densely forested section of central Africa, a woman goes about her daily chores in a camp of Aka foragers. No matter the task, she keeps her 3-month-old baby strapped to her chest. The baby rarely loses contact with her, even at night. Breast-feeding occurs frequently, often on demand. If the youngster begins to cry, the woman may gently rock her or even pass her to a female friend for some supplemental breast-feeding. A short walk away, another mother of a 3-month-old works in a farming community of the Ngandu people. She usually leaves her baby on a soft mat and picks up the child from time to time. Breast-feeding occurs when the mother takes a break from planting, weeding, and preparing food. Her baby's cries often go unanswered.”³

It is clear that the childhood experiences of members of these two communities are very different, that children are developing at different pace and in a different sequence from each other.

One may query the studies of these small, often remote communities and their relevance at a global scale. However, similar evidence can be found across most countries, regions and cultures. I would even suggest that we would find a number of very differing child-rearing practices within many residential streets in any city of Ireland!

International comparative studies of early childhood care and education have consistently shown substantial differences in policy and practice across different countries and communities. In 2001, the OECD published a summary report, “Starting Strong”, of their thematic review of early childhood education and care policy in twelve countries. The report provides an overview of policy and practice in these countries which surprises by its diversity given the fact that the participating countries are all modern industrialised societies. The report clearly

³ Bower, Bruce: “Raising Trust (relation of child-rearing technique to social development of children)”

links the shape of early childhood care and education in a specific country to its cultural and social context: “The reasons for investing in ECEC policy and provision are embedded in cultural and social beliefs about young children, the role of families and government and the purposes of ECEC within and across countries”⁴

Another interesting and quite recent comparative study is the International Review of Curriculum and Assessment (INCA), carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales, on behalf of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in England. Tony Bertram and Chris Pascal authored a summary review of a number of participating countries. The review focussed on early years education and suggests that “Childhood is a social construction deeply embedded within societal norms and values. Different societies and sub-groups within societies, especially in multicultural societies, view what is an ‘appropriate’ curriculum for young children differently.”⁵ The authors of the report continue to emphasise the diversity of findings across the participating countries of the survey and locate the reasons for this diversity: “Policy and practice in ECEC is deeply located in national understandings of the place of family and childhood in society. Such social constructions underpin the choices that are made and these cultural norms differ, even within the relatively economically-homogenous group of nations of this study.”

The IEA Preprimary Project 1986 – 2002 is another example of an international comparative study and illustrates particularly well the difficulties comparing early childhood settings and experiences across countries.

Why are the answers to the previous discussion important? Does it really matter whether childhood is defined as a timeless and universal phenomenon or as

⁴ OECD: “Starting Strong”, 2001

⁵ Bertram, Tony and Pascal, Chris: “Early Years Education - An International Perspective”, 2002

socially constructed and reconstructed, changing over time and across cultures? I believe it matters a lot for three main reasons: First of all, there is strong evidence that continuum of care from family to early years setting is crucial for child outcomes. Indeed, the presence or otherwise of this continuum can be identified as an important indicator of quality. Secondly, the implementation of any policy, curriculum or practice in early childhood education requires acceptance and “buy-in” among parents, practitioners and the interested public to be ultimately successful. Finally, the design of policy and practice frameworks for early childhood care and education has to match the stage of development any particular country or community is in. In other words, it has to “pick people up where they are”.

Commenting on the issue of continuity, Lisa da Silva and Sarah Wise from the Australian Institute of Family Studies in their recent paper on continuity between parental child rearing beliefs and practices across different child care settings, summarise the research evidence as such:

“Although complete continuity between parents and care providers is near impossible, due to the different roles and experiences of parents and care providers, research investigating continuity across care settings is important. Levels of continuity or discontinuity across care settings influence the experience of the child in care, and are increasingly being recognised as an important dimension of good quality childcare. Continuity is also thought to be optimal for children's development.”⁶

The following anecdote recounted by Lisa Delpit illustrates the important aspect of “buy in” or acceptance by the community of learners and teachers: “The teacher wanted to bring the children's culture into the class. She asked D. (Alaska Native bilingual aide in an Anglo teacher's classroom.) to write the directions for making an animal trap on the blackboard so the children could make traps in class during the activity period. D. told me she had a hard time writing up the

⁶ da Silva, Lisa and Wise, Sarah: “Continuity of childrearing models across childcare settings”, 2003

directions, but struggled through it. The kids, however, were the ones who really had a hard time. They found the directions impossible to follow. Finally, in utter frustration, D. went home and got a trap. She took it apart and let the children watch as she put it back together. Everyone made his or her own trap in no time”⁷ And Louis Laosa points out, "Groups differ in their views of what constitutes desirable behavior on the part of their children; they differ, moreover, in the conceptions of the attributes that define 'optimal development'"⁸.

I have been in correspondence with a colleague from British Columbia in Canada who has been working with the British Columbia Aboriginal Child Care Society on the development of a statement that defines quality from the perspective of Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia. Her name is Victoria Mulligan and she describes herself – quite tongue in cheek! – as an advocate of “locally appropriate practice”. I find myself agreeing with her and furthermore believe that the “whole child perspective” or holistic view of children as documented in our National Children’s Strategy ⁹ as well as an ecological understanding of childhood encompasses both our knowledge of how children develop and the culture and values of their communities.

Sometimes administrators ask me why we couldn’t just “import” a successful framework of early childhood care and education from another country, for example New Zealand or Sweden? Wouldn’t this save us much time and expense on our own journey? Why not take a convenient short cut? The answer to this question is evident from the above: It just wouldn’t work for three reasons: (1) It would not match the cultural and value pattern of contemporary Irish communities. (2) It would not find the necessary acceptance among stakeholders. (3) It would ignore the particular stage of development of the Irish early childhood care and education sector. But there is another important reason why

⁷ Delpit, Lisa: “Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom.” 1995

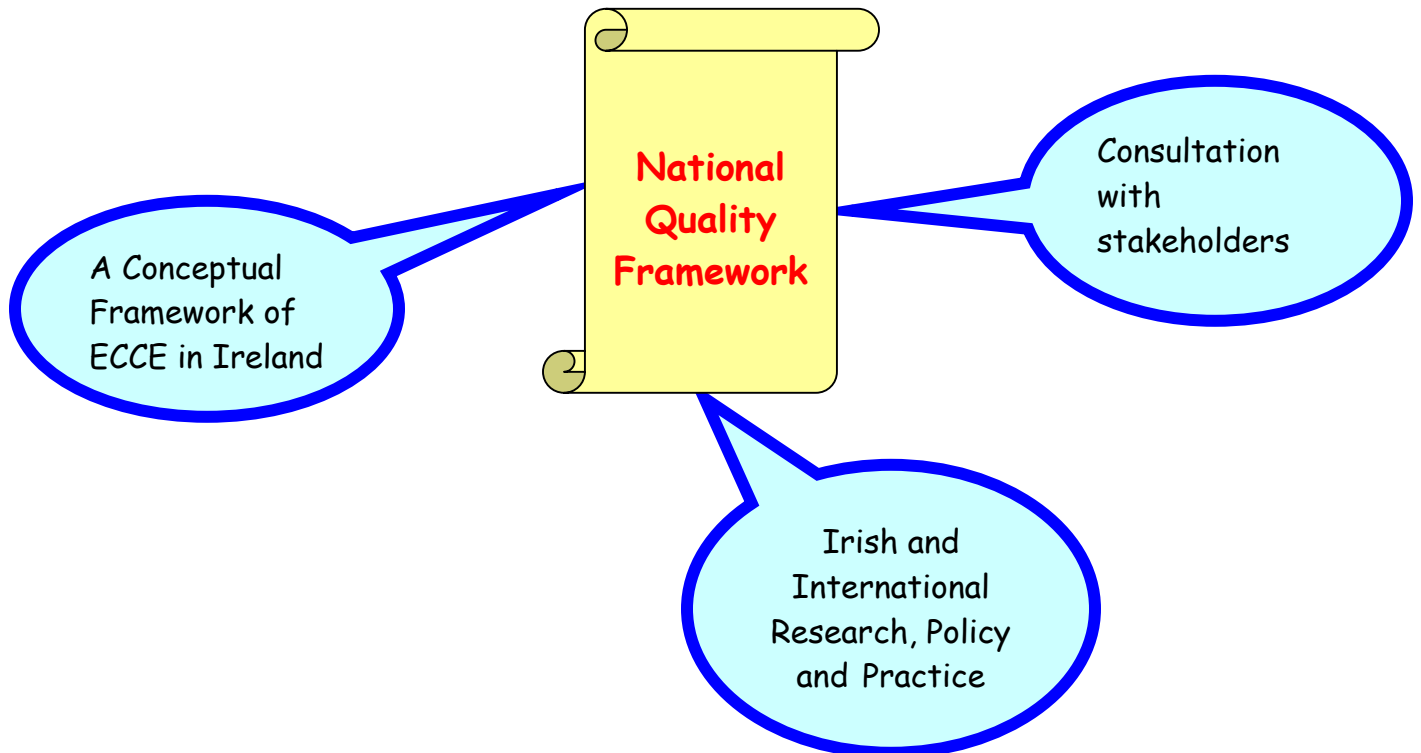
⁸ Loasa, Louis. M.: “Parent education, cultural pluralism, and public policy: The uncertain connection.” In R. Haskins & D. Adams (Eds.), *Parent education and public policy*, 1983

⁹ Department of Health and Children: “National Children’s Strategy”, 2000

we have to take the longer and less traveled road: The process and the debate towards a framework is in itself a great opportunity for development and cannot be skipped.

How, then, is the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education approaching the development of a National Quality Framework? To take account of the various contributing strands the Framework will be developed and supported by three main areas of work:

- Reviews of National and International research, policy and practice in relation to quality in early childhood care and education
- Consultation with stakeholders in early childhood care and education in Ireland
- A conceptual framework of early childhood care and education in Ireland



The process so far leaves me very confident that the National Quality Framework will be soundly based on current research evidence and at the same time reflect

the socio-cultural reality of contemporary Ireland. I believe that our framework – with your help - will emerge through a fruitful process of debate and that it will enjoy broad participation and acceptance.

I will refrain from going into further detail at this stage, as I don't want to overstay my welcome and test your kind patience for too long. In any case, two of my colleagues, Maresa Duignan and Jacqueline Fallon will present papers on some of the aspects and details of our work later today. We are very much looking forward to a lively debate on your views on all of these issues.

I started off with a picture of idealised childhood from a commercial advertising campaign and would like to leave you with a couple of different pictures clearly based in their cultural and social context.



I would like to thank you again for giving me this opportunity to share some of my views with you and wish you a productive and enjoyable conference!

