



An Lárionad um Fhorbairt
agus Oideachais na Luath-Óige

**A Conceptual Framework of Young Children's
Development and Learning in Ireland:
The Implications for Quality in Early
Years Care and Education**

*Presentation by Heino Schonfeld, Director, CECDE,
to the EECERA Conference, September 2004*



“Conceptual Framework: A statement of principles providing generally accepted guidance for the development of new practices and for challenging and evaluating the existing practices.”
Adapted from: wps.prenhall.com/wps/media/objects/461/472759/glossary.html

Early Childhood Care and Education in the Republic of Ireland

In Ireland, early childhood care and education has only very recently become the subject of major policy development and statutory provision. *The Child Care Act* (Department of Health, 1991) for the first time required the state to regulate pre-school services leading to the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 1996 and Child Care (Pre-School Services) (Amendment) Regulations (Department of Health and Children, 1997).

Since the 1990's much policy development has taken place. The *Report of the Expert Working Group on Childcare* (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 1999) and the *White Paper on Early Childhood Education* (Department of Education and Science, 1999) define the age range of early childhood care and education as between birth and six years of age, i.e. prior to compulsory school age. Throughout all policy documents we find a consistent view that early childhood education cannot be separated from early childhood care as the two are inextricably linked.

As policy around early childhood care and education developed in Ireland, there has also been a significant – if patchy – rise in provision of care and education for the pre - school age group. The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (administered by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform) will invest close to €450 million between 2000 and 2006 and has already significantly increased provision for non-school providers. However, the Department of Education and Science remains the largest source of funding for early childhood care and education with over 120,000 children in junior and senior infant classes (four and five year olds). The Department of Education and

Science has also provided for the Early Start project that serves some 1600 three-year-old children in disadvantaged areas since 1994 and for about 600 children in Traveller pre-schools.

Despite the progress in policy development and provision there remain a number of significant challenges in the area of Irish early childhood care and education. To address these challenges, the Department of Education and Science asked the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to conduct a review of Irish early childhood care and education with a particular focus on access, coordination and quality. The review took place in November 2002 and the report remains to be published.

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE)

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) is an initiative of the Department of Education and Science and was established jointly by the Dublin Institute and Technology and St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra.

The aim of the CECDE is to co-ordinate, develop and enhance early childhood development and education in Ireland, paying particular attention to disadvantaged and special needs groups. The CECDE became operational in October 2002 when it was officially launched by Noel Dempsey, T.D., Minister for Education and Science.

In the Memorandum of Agreement (CECDE, 2001) between the Department of Education and Science, Dublin Institute of Technology and St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, the CECDE was given three main objectives:

- To develop a quality framework for early childhood education, including a Quality in Education (QE) Mark for providers in the sector;

- 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 by the White Paper. (CECDE, 2001)

Why this Conceptual Framework now?

The CECDE *Programme of Work* (CECDE, 2001) and the CECDE *Research Strategy* (CECDE, 2003) prioritise the preparation of a conceptual framework discussing how children from 0-6 years develop and learn: *“It is envisaged that the first action relating to the development of quality standards will involve setting out a conceptual framework describing how children (from 0 to 6 years) develop and learn. It is envisaged that appropriate learning goals and objectives can be identified within this framework. The framework will be used as the basis for developing guidelines and standards in the areas identified in the White Paper (curriculum and methodology, equipment and materials, staff and qualifications) and in relation to parental involvement.”* (CECDE, 2001)

Increasing knowledge about childhood and child development and learning has much to contribute toward understanding the nature of quality in early childhood care and education. With this in mind, it is anticipated that the framework will be used as the basis for developing national quality standards in the areas of curriculum/methodology, equipment/materials, staff/qualifications, and parental involvement. Much of the knowledge about child development and learning is already documented. However, its distillation to consider current perceptions of what is best for children and the ensuing implications for developing quality standards in the Irish context is innovative. It is envisaged that the framework will provide a sound theoretical and evidential basis for the quality standards, and a common language for constructing quality in the Irish context. Indeed, the framework is crucial to ensure the integrity of the quality

standards and to facilitate their broad acceptance among the early childhood care and education sector in Ireland.

The conceptual framework is only one – albeit essential – contribution to the development of quality standards for early childhood care and education in Ireland. It will be complemented by a review of national and international policy and practice and by a comprehensive process of consultation with all stakeholders of early childhood care and education in Ireland.

Principles guiding the development of the Framework

- The framework is *eclectic* in orientation and examines critically a variety of theories and documented evidence to explore early childhood (birth to six years) development and learning.
- It adopts a *holistic* approach to understanding children’s development and learning emphasising the interplay between the physical, psychological (cognitive, emotional, moral, spiritual) and social aspects. It actively examines how to facilitate best children’s development and learning while recognising the diversity of their lives, for example in relation to gender, ethnicity, ability and socio-economic status.
- It understands children’s development and learning in an *ecological* context, considering the micro and macro elements of environmental influence. In particular, it considers children’s relationships, activities, and surroundings including the wider socio-cultural setting in today’s Ireland.
- The framework looks at children’s achievements in light of their *potential* and examines their development of a sense of mastery, emphasising their successes as well as their challenges.

- It views children as actively engaged in *co-constructing* their own and other's experiences. Children interact and learn from birth and probably even before. Their active learning does not begin with formal schooling.
- Acutely aware of the *UN Convention of the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989) and our own *National Children's Strategy* (Department of Health and Children, 2000), the framework adopts both a *rights and needs* based perspective.
- It emphasises both *protective and risk* factors, exploring their influence on children's development and learning.
- It examines the *historical and contemporary influences* of practice, policy and research on children's development and learning in Ireland.

Irish Childhoods

This conceptual framework of early childhood care and education in Ireland has adopted a deliberate child centred perspective throughout. This was not always easy as any attempt to assume a child's perspective, particularly in the case of very young children, is by necessity mediated by adult interpretation. It is adult society, which is defining and prescribing childhood and our relationship with and views of children is an ever-changing social construct within the mosaic of social interactions in general.

In Ireland, even more than elsewhere in Western Europe, childhood and society's view of children has undergone fundamental and accelerating change. Against the background of a rapidly changing socio-economic and demographic landscape, there have been significant modernising developments in relation to policy towards children. These developments are reflected in such seminal documents as the National Childcare Strategy, the White Paper *Ready to Learn* and of course the *National Children's Strategy*. However, much of the modernising language and policy has yet to be translated into shaping the

increasing provision in the area of early childhood care and education. The implications for the development of a National Framework for Quality in early childhood care and education are complex and urgent: it will have to reflect current knowledge but also multiple aspirations and perspectives on childhood in Ireland as well as “fit” within the emerging policy environment.

There is no single “Irish childhood” anymore and probably never has been. There are instead many very different childhoods depending on the geographical, social and cultural context in which they are experienced. This conceptual framework has tried to reflect this and proposes throughout implications for the ongoing work on a quality framework.

Children’s Rights and Needs

The conceptual framework is based on the acknowledgement of universal rights of children as enshrined and ratified by the Irish Government in the *UN Convention of the Rights of the Child*. This perspective of support for universal rights and rights-based provisions is complemented by an examination of specific needs of young children in Ireland. These needs are determined by the condition and circumstances of the individual child and highly contextualised within an Irish socio-economic and cultural landscape.

Child Welfare and Child Well-Being

In Ireland, state intervention in early childhood care and education has traditionally focussed on *child welfare* defining needs as arising from a child’s deficits and attempting to compensate for or alleviate these deficits. This conceptual framework has emphasised throughout the strengths, competencies and abilities of the child in her family and community. It has examined and proposed ways to support and enhance these strengths competencies and

abilities. This perspective focuses more positively on the *well-being* of the child and provides a far richer background for intervention and practice. It also acknowledges the subjectivity of the child's experience and the diversity of the social and cultural context

Genesis and shape of the Framework

The research for and particularly the compilation of the Conceptual Framework continues to be a complex and difficult task. As shown earlier, the Framework had been outlined as a priority in the Work Programme of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education. However, the nature and purpose of it in the context of the Centre's objectives was less clearly developed.

Following agreement on general principles and themes it was decided to commission a research institute to deliver a substantial part of the required literature review and thematic analysis. After completion of a successful tendering process, the CECDE worked closely with a team from the School of Psychology, Queen's University, Belfast and the researcher, Ms Suzanne Clendenning.

Essentially, the researcher worked to a detailed research brief developed by the CECDE directors and approved by the Board of the CECDE. Intensive supervision and frequent meetings between the researcher and the CECDE directors was an essential feature during this phase of the work. This review and thematic analysis resulted in a large draft of a central part of the Conceptual Framework compiled under the Centre's close direction and guidance. Other important parts of the Framework (The Historical and Cultural Context of Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland, Introduction and Conclusion) were entirely researched and written by CECDE staff.

Continuous editing and feedback from consultations have led to the current late stage of drafting. The resulting document will be concise and accessible while resting on a very substantial foundation of research and analysis.

The framework is presented in four related parts:

- Historical and Cultural Context of Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland
- Current Perspectives on Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland
- The Developing and Learning Child
- Facilitating Early Childhood Education and Care

To understand children's development and learning in Ireland, we must acknowledge the particular cultural and historical environment in which they occur. The *Historical and Cultural Context of Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland* reviews demographic, economic and socio-cultural changes over the last century and examines our evolving attitudes to childhood and children. It considers the development of early childhood care and education and considers the implications for quality.

Current Perspectives on Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland considers our present demographic, economic and socio-cultural context and how it influences the conceptualisation of children and childhood. We review recent and existing policy, practice and research initiatives pertaining to early childhood care and education, in particular focusing on issues of quality.

The Developing and Learning Child examines those elements, which support physical, social, emotional and cognitive development in early childhood. An analysis of factors influencing physical development identified the value of nutrition, preventative health care, physical activity and physical safety and security. An investigation of the dynamics of these elements, supported by

current Irish and international research and theory, highlights the implications for the development of quality standards in the physical domain.

A review of the research and theory related to young children's physical, social-emotional, cognitive, moral and spiritual development has identified a number of important implications for the development of quality standards in the early years, which caregivers and educators must not only appreciate but also understand and integrate into their practice if young children's needs are to be met in all aspects of their lives. There are a number of key experiences, which young children must have the opportunity to participate in, and these are explored in more detail in the fourth section of the framework.

The purpose of *Facilitating Early Childhood Education and Care* is firstly, to overview indicators of the types of environments, which young children need to fulfil their potential. Subsequently, to propose support structures which can be implemented to ensure the achievements of these environments for quality development and learning for all young children. These support structures include, preschool and school education, family support services and early interventions.

Conclusion

It is anticipated that the conceptual framework will be used as one of the 'pillars' to facilitate the development of a national quality framework for early childhood care and education. Moreover, this framework is also a very important and timely document in its own right. It develops for the first time a perspective and vision of early childhood care and education in Ireland based on comprehensive research evidence from a child centred perspective and firmly placed within the historical and cultural context of Ireland at the beginning of the 21st century. We hope that this document will contribute to the development of a common

language and a fruitful debate among all stakeholders of early childhood care and education in Ireland.

Early Childhood Care and Education in Modern Ireland

What is the vision emerging from the conceptual framework? What are the messages emanating from policy and contemporary research evidence?

There is unquestionably powerful evidence to suggest that the early years are of crucial importance in all aspect of child development and learning. The message is clear: for optimal well-being, young children's development and learning needs to be viewed from a holistic perspective which appreciates the interactive nature of the elements of development and learning both within and across domains.

Furthermore, it is apparent that young children are eager to learn and must be understood as active participants in their own development and learning.

However, this is not to draw emphasis away from the major influence, which environmental factors can have on the developing and learning child, and the key role of relationships and social interactions, particularly with nurturing adults.

Quality standards in the provision of early childhood care and education services should be supported by evidence-based guidelines. They should provide experiences and learning opportunities appropriate to each child's stage of development, recognising the interdependent nature of the domains of early childhood development and learning. Children are supported to engage as active agents in their own development and learning and explore their environment and participate in problem solving and decision-making. Carers and teachers who appreciate the value of play in the learning process should actively collaborate with children to provide structure and scaffolding their learning experiences. It is crucial to value the role of parents and families in the lives of young children and to reflect this by providing for parental primacy and involvement in children's education and care.

The diversity of childhoods in contemporary Ireland deserves a culturally sensitive, flexible and accommodating ethos of provision and curriculum. At the same time, there is a strong need for a coordinated and consistent approach within a policy of lifelong learning, across important transitions, such as the path to compulsory schooling.

These principles are true for *all* children and the case for universal provision is strong. However, some children who experience disadvantage or have special needs will benefit from early education and care to a higher degree than others and can expect particular attention in a caring and nurturing society.

Next Steps

This conceptual framework will be available for scrutiny and debate, a debate open to everybody with a stake in early childhood care and education in Ireland. It is hoped that this debate will be as positive and fruitful as it is overdue and important. With this document, we will offer a first step towards a new and common language to facilitate this debate.

Ultimately, and following the public discourse, this framework will significantly contribute to a set of national quality standards for early childhood care and education. The shape of these standards is slowly emerging through research, the process of consultation, good practice and the application of cultural values.

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