



An Lárionad um Fhorbairt  
agus Oideachais na Luath-Óige

# **Informing the National Framework for Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education (NFQ/ECCE)**

*A Thematic Perspective on Child Learning and Development in Ireland.*

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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) in pursuance of the objectives of the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999). The brief of the CECDE covers all settings for children between the ages of birth and six years, bridging the various strands of provision which have developed in Ireland; these include sessional services, infant classes in primary schools, family daycare and full daycare. Within this extensive brief, the core objective of the CECDE is the development of the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (NQF/ECCE). Work on the NQF is well advanced and it will be published in the Autumn of 2005.

The NQF is comprised of three distinct but interconnected strands:

- Defining Quality
- Supporting Quality
- Assessing Quality.

The first of these strands, Defining Quality, is the most substantial element of the NQF, as the way in which quality is defined will determine to a large degree how we support and assess quality practice. There are three elements to the Defining Quality strand of the NQF:

- Principles: these, taken as a whole, express an agreed value statement which underpins all provision for young children in Ireland.
- Standards: the Standards cover a comprehensive range of issues and activities and will serve to indicate the achievement of quality in practice. The Standards translate the values expressed in the Principles for practical application.
- Components of Quality/Signposts for Reflection: these itemise the Standards and raise questions to support reflective practice.

The Principles, Standards and Components, taken together, are intended to support quality practice in several ways. It is envisaged that they will be a resource:

- To inform the planning process;
- To support and guide the actions which take place as a result of that planning;
- To complete the cycle, to guide the evaluation process for the practitioners involved, and for external evaluation and support.

Given the national significance for the ECCE sector and the innovative and unique concept of the NQF, the CECDE based the development process on a firm foundation of research evidence. This body of research evidence has been made available in four publications, now referred to as the four pillars of the NQF. While each is important in its own right, cumulatively they come together to form a firm foundation for the NQF, ensuring that the Framework reflects and builds upon national and international best policy, practice and research.

The four pillars are as follows:

***Talking About Quality; Report of a Consultation Process on Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education (CECDE, 2004)***

The CECDE is firmly committed to the principle of consultation with the sector as an important element of the development of the NQF and the public consultation reported on in this publication was an important step in the process. Almost 400 people from all over Ireland took part, including parents, teachers, childcare workers, policymakers, students and researchers. The results present a fascinating insight into how the issue of quality is viewed in the ECCE sector here.

***Insights on Quality; A National Review of Policy, Practice and Research Relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland 1990-2004 (CECDE, 2005a)***

This report presents a detailed and comprehensive review of documentation pertaining to quality in ECCE in Ireland, focused on policy, practice and research. The report considers the themes that have emerged from the review in relation to defining, assessing and supporting quality in ECCE in Ireland. A synthesis of these themes is presented along with eight recommendations for future actions towards the development, implementation and maintenance of the NQF. This report is discussed by Walsh within this issue of Conference Proceedings.

***Making Connections; A Review of International Policies, Practices and Research Relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education (CECDE, 2005b)***

While the NQF will primarily reflect Irish developments in recent years, it is important to pursue an understanding of international models of policy, practice and research in relation to quality, and to reflect best international practice in the NQF. This report provides a valuable insight into international best policy and practice, and enables us to look critically at our own practice and analyse assumptions in a new light.

***Early Childhood in Ireland; Evidence and Perspectives. (CECDE, Forthcoming)***

This is a discussion document in which the CECDE considers various thematic perspectives on child learning and development, as well as current and historical perspectives on early childhood in Ireland. This document is one of a set of two companion documents, the other being the *Foundation Document* (CECDE, Unpublished). Initially, the CECDE commissioned a literature review on the child's physical, socio-emotional, cognitive, moral and spiritual development. This resulted

in a substantial and extensive review which will be of great interest to students, researchers, practitioners and others with an interest in the development of the young child. This significant document was augmented by two further sections ; the first of these sections describes the historical and cultural context of ECCE in Ireland from the end of the nineteenth century to approximately 1990. The second section discusses current perspectives on ECCE in Ireland from 1990 to the present.

Once the *Foundation Document* was finalised, the CECDE used it in a number of ways. Primarily, it informed the development of the NQF and secondly, it provided the evidence base for *Early Childhood in Ireland; Evidence and Perspectives* (CECDE, Forthcoming).

The CECDE considers that development does not happen in discrete blocks in the different developmental domains and we have moved away from that approach to develop a set of themes which focus on a holistic view of these processes. The themes are as follows:

- Relationships in development and learning
- Child-centred development and learning
- Holistic development and learning
- Environments for development and learning
- Diversity in development and learning
- Communication in development and learning
- Play for development and learning

This paper draws on the discussion paper, *Early Childhood in Ireland; Evidence and Perspectives* to briefly present some elements which have informed the development of the NQF. The order in which the themes are presented do not indicate a hierarchy and all the themes are interconnected and must be considered as a whole.

## **Relationships for development and learning**

The child's relationships are conceptualised as a continuum, not as a set of compartments which the child visits in turn. This has implications for parents, caregivers, service providers, teachers and other significant adults in the child's life. Communication and partnership between the adults is essential if the child is to experience the continuity necessary to a holistic experience of life. It must be emphasised that care and education can not be fractured, but must be integrated for the child in her<sup>1</sup> relationships. A child's holistic development and learning is best supported in the context of secure, supportive and nurturing relationships. These relationships should indicate to the child that she is valued, her contribution is important and that she is listened to and heard.

Relationships with siblings and peers can be an important source of friendship and support for young children. These relationships can promote moral reasoning, conflict resolution skills and social understanding in very young children. Play activities with siblings and peers can foster the development of pro-social behaviours, such as sharing and co-operating, and enhance the child's sense of self-esteem and self-worth. Toddlers can begin to show interest in their peers as friends even before the age of two, and adults should not underestimate the importance to the young child of her friends and friendships. Significant adults need to facilitate the child's friendships, and, in particular in out-of-home settings, foster relationships between the children in their care.

For the significant adults who interact with the child in out-of-home settings to support learning and development, it is essential to understand that it is within the adult/child relationship that much of the learning takes place. Adult interactive styles are crucially important. The adult must start from the point of the child's interests in her activities and learning situations. She must emphasise the child's

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<sup>1</sup> The female pronoun is used throughout for ease of reading.

strengths and competencies, while helping the child to cope with mistakes and frustration through to the experience of success, resiliency and problem solving. In relating to the child, the adult must be appropriately non-directive, must discuss, question and consider outcomes, and partner the child in constructing meaning.

### **Child-centred development and learning**

The child is an active agent from birth in her own learning and development, with her own strengths and needs, potential, cultural identity, gender and complexities. This personality is also, of course, much, much more than the sum of its parts. And it is part of the expertise of the practitioner to know and understand this complex individual.

Significant adults need to acquire knowledge and understanding of the child's life through listening to the child, hearing her and being responsive. For young children especially, it is the significant adults in the environment who will ensure she becomes aware of her own sense of agency, self-reliance, independence and control. To this end, the activities and opportunities for play and discovery made available to the child through quality services and supports must foster the child's sense of purpose and give meaning to her engagement with the world. Crucially, the child must be allowed to exercise choice as a requisite part of active participation.

A child-centred approach based on knowledge and understanding of the child's life must recognise also that the circumstances in which a child lives her life are not always optimally conducive to her harmonious development. A child living in circumstances of disadvantage, experiencing marginalisation on racial, ethnic or cultural grounds, or because of having special needs arising from a disability, has the same rights to quality experiences as her peers. It is the child's experience which must be the starting point where interventions are put in place to eliminate marginalisation. It is the child who must benefit directly from interventions, and all

interventions involving children must primarily focus on supporting positive outcomes for children.

### **Holistic development and learning**

The child's development does not happen in discrete categories. The child's developmental and learning domains are fundamentally inter-related, and exert reciprocal influences, each upon the others, towards holistic development. Curriculum and learning contexts, in responding to the holistic and complex personality of the child, must be child-centred and reflect the child's interests. They must provide activities and opportunities for the child to engage actively with the learning process. Learning programmes, curriculum content and adult methodologies must reflect and support the child's holistic development in which the child herself is an active participant and constructor of meaning.

It is fundamental to the CECDE that care and education are not sustainable as separate experiences in a child's life. Just as the child's developmental domains are inter-connected, so is the child's experience of the world inter-connected and holistic. To artificially divide that experience in the structures and contexts designed for nurturing the child is to deny her holistic experience. Care and education are inextricably linked in the child's life.

### **Environments for development and learning**

As an active, competent learner from birth, the child engages with the environment in a dynamic process. Discovery, autonomy, opportunity, experimentation, exploration, enthusiasm and wonder are some of the hallmarks of that activity. Ultimately, the interaction between the child and her environment should provide her with fulfilment and joy. We believe that this is true of all children, whatever the child's level of ability, and each child must be appropriately supported to fulfil her potential for interacting with the world in this way.

Environments structured to meet the child's needs should reflect the child's active approach in safety and security, yet with provision for appropriate level of risk. A level of risk can be challenging for the child and offer scope for the exercise of self-reliance, independence and autonomy, for problem-solving using individual strengths to overcome difficulties and give a beneficial sense of control over outcomes. The environment should also foster co-operation between the child and her peers within small groups.

The environment should stimulate curiosity, choice, interests, and be varied and dynamic, without overwhelming the child. Expert planning by the adult, on the basis of knowledge of each child gleaned from observation, is vital. Cycles of observation, planning, action and evaluation are crucial to ensure that the environment supports each child's developmental potential.

### **Diversity in development and learning.**

The child's individuality is the basic source of diversity among children.

Individuality and diversity are companion concepts in the child's life experience. The concern of the significant adults in the child's life must be to make both individuality and diversity a celebration of the unique complexity of each child. An appreciation of this individuality contributes to the application of the principles of child-centredness and holism in relationships with the child.

Accompanying this principle of individual profile is the awareness of diversity among children. Diversity is not about placing a child in a category in which the child is identified only by, for example, special needs arising from a disability, by ethnic origin or by the level of disadvantage she experiences. Any of these conditions can exist together in a child's life, along with many other attributes and experiences. The child must know herself to be valued, her first language respected and supported while additional language learning is proceeding. She must find that her culture is visible, a necessary part of supporting self-identity. Her needs must be identified

and met in the context of holistic development. For example, special attention may be required to meet the needs of a child whose health suffers because of socio-economic and/or cultural disadvantage.

### **Communication in development and learning.**

Each child needs to communicate and be communicated with. Communication is about more than language – a parent can communicate love, comfort and reassurance through a hug as, or more effectively, than with words. It has been pointed out that a baby's first language is the language of the senses. A child who does not acquire language, for example, because of a disability, can communicate with her environments and be responded to.

Technology provides alternatives to speech, as does sign language; we can have reciprocal communication through the senses, self-expression through the arts and so on. Each child must be supported in communicating within her environments through the most appropriate means. In most cases, this will mean supporting the child's language learning, and this requires different levels of support in different contexts. For example, the effects of disadvantaged circumstances can impact on a child's language development and specific interventions may be required. Hearing problems can also impact on the child's ability to communicate. Children for whom English is not their first language also require specific interventions, and there are other possible scenarios. The core principle remains that each child must be able to engage in reciprocal communication within her environments.

The interactive styles of the adults who are supporting the child's learning are most important in affirming the child as an active co-constructor of meaning and as an active agent in her own holistic development. It is fundamental to the effectiveness of the adult interactive style that the relationship with the child be conceptualised as a dialogue and a discussion. Adults need to communicate with the child in ways which show empathy, sympathy, kindness, sensitivity and responsiveness. But the

communicative process should also challenge the child, in a way appropriate to her developmental potential, to move towards new learning, understanding and meaning-making.

Ongoing communication between parents and other significant adults is a further necessary element in promoting the child's well-being. Such communication is essential to a full understanding of the child. It is also fundamental to developing a partnership between home and out-of-home settings, and an absolute prerequisite of parental involvement. Equally, in settings and circumstances which involve more than one person working with the child – for example in centre based day care and therapeutic teams – communication between the members of the team is crucial. Sharing knowledge of the child, maintaining consistency in meeting the child's needs and ensuring that all relevant information is available to all involved with the child and to those keeping records is crucial.

### **Play for learning and development**

Play is the process and state of being in which the child will predominantly engage with her own holistic development. There is no single definition of what play is, but the child is not in need of a definition – play is what she does. Perhaps the difficulty which adults have in defining play is a reflection of the ownership which children have over the process. It may well also be a reflection of the immediacy and spontaneity of play, and the open ended, flexible nature of what happens when children are playing. What is not contested is that play is a source of fulfilment and joy for the child, a source of wonder to adults and a major contributor to the well-being of children.

During play, the child can be solitary or social. She can deploy previous experience and knowledge and exercise meta-cognitive skills. She can explore her own developmental process and incorporate new learning. She can engage with concrete

objects and/or ideas. She can explore emotion and culture, and experience autonomy and purpose, and much, much more.

Activities characterised in this way require an element of risk if they are to be truly experimental and exploratory – difficulty and challenge are needed too. Coping with mistakes and frustration is part of learning and development. Provision for play – in whatever context or for whatever age – must provide opportunities for risk taking in what is ultimately a safe and secure environment.

### **Conclusion.**

These seven themes have contributed to the development of the NQF in conjunction with the other elements of the research evidence base elucidated by the four pillars referred to in the Introduction. Having one of the four pillars of the NQF focused specifically on the child has ensured that the Framework itself reflects the centrality of the child in quality provision. This perspective is evident from even a cursory examination of the sections completed so far, i.e. the Principles and Standards, which have been finalised and subject to extensive consultation. The high level of consensus from the ECCE sector, which both the Principles and Standards have achieved, indicates that the CECDE perspective on child learning and development resonates very well with current best practice. Of course, such consensus also illustrates a fundamental of ECCE in Ireland – the universally held concern to provide the best quality services for all children.

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