

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

Jacqueline Fallon

## Introduction

The core function of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) is the development of the National Framework for Quality (NFQ) for early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Ireland. The CECDE has put in place four supporting pieces of research as a foundation for the NFQ. These are as follows:

- *Talking About Quality*, the report of a national consultation process with stakeholders in ECCE (CECDE, 2004);
- *Perspectives on Childhood* (CECDE, Forthcoming A) and its companion *Foundation Document* (CECDE, Forthcoming B), which articulate the CECDE viewpoint on the child's learning and development;
- *Insights on Quality, A National Review of Quality in ECCE in Ireland – Policy, Practice and Research, 1990-2004* (CECDE, 2005a);
- *Making Connections, A Review of International Policies, Practices and Research Relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education* (CECDE, 2005b).

Each of these four pillars extrapolates, from the research literature, the implications for defining, assessing and supporting quality in the Irish context. These implications will be instrumental in the development of the NFQ. This paper is concerned with the second of these pillars (2 above), and describes the evolution of the final document, *Perspectives on Childhood* from the initial research reviews, the *Foundation Document*, and the relationship between the two. It presents one sample theme drawn from the analysis of the initial research, and the implications for defining, supporting and assessing quality which followed from that analysis.

## Development Process

### Stage 1: Foundation Document

The CECDE *Programme of Work* (CECDE, 2001) and the CECDE *Research Strategy* (CECDE, 2003) both prioritised the development of a conceptual framework of how young children learn and develop in the Irish context. The primary research document, entitled the *Foundation Document*, comprises four distinct parts.

- The **Historical and Cultural Context of Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland** considers the socio-cultural, economic and educational conditions of children's lives

- from 1900 to 1990 and the attitudes to children and childhood throughout that period;
- **Current Perspectives on Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland** discusses the rapid changes in the socio-economic, policy and familial landscape since 1990 and how these changes have impacted on young children's lives;
  - The **Learning and Developing Child**<sup>2</sup> reviews relevant literature across the five domains of physical, social-emotional, cognitive, moral and spiritual development. For each domain, the implications of the overview for quality provision are outlined. Indicators for quality provision are extrapolated, and key characteristics of quality provision are suggested;
  - In **Facilitating Early Childhood Care and Education**, support structures to enable provision of quality environments for learning and development are described and indicators of quality environments are presented.

These four sections provide an extensive and in-depth review of the literature pertaining to all aspects of ECCE in Ireland, both past and present, and to each of the child's developmental domains. Each section includes implications for the development of the NFQ. The *Foundation Document* provides a sound theoretical and evidential basis for the formulation of national quality standards, and a common language for constructing quality in the Irish context. Indeed, *the Foundation Document* is crucial to ensure the integrity of the quality standards and to facilitate their broad acceptance among the ECCE sector in Ireland.

## Stage 2: Analysis

Once the *Foundation Document* was completed, a process of analysis was conducted in order to use its contents to define the CECDE perspective on the child's learning and development, and to identify the ways in which the Irish context has impacted on the experience of childhood here. The initial analysis was conducted on the core section of the *Foundation Document*, **The Learning and Developing Child**, which is a major review of the literature on child development between the ages of birth and six years. Seven themes were identified within which all learning and development - across the full age range and across all settings - can be conceptualised. These themes are:

- **Child-centred learning and development.** Learning must start from the child's own individual profile of strengths and needs, must acknowledge the child as an active participant in the process and ensure her<sup>2</sup> rights to quality provision;
- **Holistic learning and development.** All development is inter-connected and the child is much more than the sum of her developmental parts. Quality provision nurtures the whole child and, in particular, early intervention programmes must focus on the holistic well-being of the child as opposed to one facet of her development;

- **Environments for learning and development.** On the basis of child-centred and holistic provision, the child must have access to the entire range of environments, from the built to the natural, from indoors to outdoors and so on. Engaging in exploration of the environment, which should include an element of risk, must be part of the child's experience;
- **Relationships in learning and development.** The importance of secure early attachment relationships to the child's well-being cannot be overstated. Furthermore, secure, respectful and caring relationships with adults provide a crucial context for supporting learning;
- **Communication in learning and development.** Communication is embedded in the child's social development and is the basis for all the social relationships she will experience. By communicating with each other, the secure trusting relationships between parents and the child and significant adults and the child, which are so essential to healthy development and well-being, are developed and maintained;
- **Diversity in learning and development.** Each child is a unique personality with a particular configuration of interests, dispositions, race, culture, gender and so on. This individuality is the building block of diversity among children, and they are companion concepts in the child's experience;
- **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. It 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.

Once the themes had been identified, both the historic and current perspectives on ECCE were revisited on the basis of those concepts outlined above. Of course, the subject matter differs considerably between the thematic analysis of child learning and development and the historic and current contextual material. Therefore the contextual material offers, by necessity, a broader interpretation of the thematic concepts. This delivers a unique perspective on the contexts in which childhood has been lived in Ireland.

### Stage 3: Perspectives on Childhood

The CECDE considered the *Foundation Document* closely because of the importance of articulating clearly our viewpoint on the extensive research evidence contained therein. *Perspectives on Childhood* encapsulates that point of view. Increased knowledge about childhood and child development and learning has much to contribute towards understanding the nature of quality in ECCE. Current knowledge about child development and learning is already well documented. However, distillation of this knowledge to consider current perceptions of what is best for children and the ensuing implications for developing quality standards in the Irish context is innovative. The *Foundation Document*

and *Perspectives on Childhood* complement each other, one presenting the research and the other giving the CECDE's analysis of, response to and perspective on the material. In that context, the development and learning of the young child is conceptualised as being child-centred and holistic in nature, being supported through the environment, relationships and communication, and realised through play in the context of the diverse needs of each child.

### **Implications for the National Framework for Quality**

Developing the NFQ is an ambitious project. The CECDE has sought to make the process as inclusive as possible through consultation and involvement with all stakeholders (CECDE, 2004). The national and international reviews of quality-related issues (CECDE, 2005 a; b) strive to ensure that current best practice, policy and research are represented. The best interests of the child are accorded high priority as evidenced by the lengthy and comprehensive process towards the CECDE conceptualisation of childhood described in part here (CECDE, Forthcoming A; B). From the earliest planning stages of these four pillars to the NFQ, a consistent method of ensuring compatibility across the very different areas of information had to be put in place. If all of the disparate findings of these four very different processes were to coalesce into a coherent whole in the NFQ, then they had to meet similar criteria. To this end, the structure of the NFQ was determined at an early stage. This structure will be as follows:

- Standards for defining quality;
- Mechanisms for assessing quality;
- Structures for supporting quality.

Each supporting document includes implications which will feed into these three features. As an example, this paper presents one of the themes outlined earlier, from *Perspectives on Childhood*, which is itself derived from the *Foundation Document* as described. The theme chosen is **Child Centred Learning and Development**. This describes the CECDE point of view on the meaning of child-centredness for ECCE provision. It is followed by the implications for the three categories mentioned above. One theme was chosen in order to give an insight into the process by which the CECDE has derived the implications in *Perspectives on Childhood*, as presenting the implications without the discussion would lack context and meaning.

### **Child Centred Learning and Development**

Taking a child centred approach to a child's development and learning requires that the adults supporting the child take that child's unique individuality as the starting point for learning, rather than focusing on a body of knowledge that must be absorbed by the child. The child is an active agent in her own learning and development. She has her own

interests, strengths, needs, learning dispositions, potential, cultural identity, gender, relationships, competencies, abilities and complexities. These elements help constitute her holistic personality, but that personality is, of course, much, much more than the sum of its parts. Childhood is a distinct and valuable time during which this unique individuality must be acknowledged and appreciated, supported, treasured and nurtured towards fulfilment and joy through the practices of the significant adults in her life. A recognition of the child's rights provides a context for this dynamic process. The State can contribute to this child-centred view by supporting its value with rights-based legislation and policy.

Significant adults need to acquire knowledge and understanding of the child's life through listening to the child, and hearing her. Recognising that the child has a distinct voice in our society, allied with the recognition of the child's active agency in life, brings an acknowledgement of the child's right to a sense of control over outcomes in her life at an age appropriate level. 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 having special needs arising from a disability has the same rights to quality experiences as her peers. It is the child's needs 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 child outcomes which follow from the child's needs. Too often, it is the child's life which is used as a site of intervention in meeting other agendas, such as releasing parents from childcare commitments to participate in the labour force. The child's well-being must be the primary concern, and the child's life must be respected. Perhaps that is the essence of a child-centred approach, that the child and childhood are afforded respect and dignity by the State, parents, significant adults and society.

Current research knowledge provides useful insights in the implementation of a child-centred approach which must be based on knowledge and understanding of the child and her life. Research on child development has traditionally been conducted over the five developmental domains of physical, cognitive, social-emotional, moral and spiritual

development. While this exploration or expression of understanding of the child's development and learning seeks to move away from such categorisation and to re-conceptualise learning and development, supporting research exists in this format. The CECDE would, however, reiterate the position that all learning and development is interrelated and interdependent.

From a physical point of view, the child needs balanced and healthy nutrition, but children living in poverty are most at risk of deficient diets. This finding is of particular concern in Ireland which has one of the highest rates of child poverty in the EU. In terms of preventative health care, the child's health and well-being is supported in the crucial developmental years by consistent, seamless, multi-disciplinary service provision in the context of knowledge of the child's individual needs and circumstances. Physical activity is a key and necessary element in a child's development and is strongly associated with parental modelling and facilities and attitudes in childcare centres, pre-schools, schools and other out-of-home settings. Although developmental pathways have been mapped, it must be recognised that children have individual developmental trajectories and abilities influenced, but not determined by, for example, gender and abilities.

As the young child grows and develops socially and emotionally, caregivers will need to recognise the web of elements which make up her individual profile. Emotional regulation, i.e. the ability to exercise control over one's emotions, internally and externally, in accomplishing one's goals, and the ability to recognise and label emotions in oneself and in others is a facet of the child's development. Other aspects which require knowledge gleaned from research include the child's coping skills, sense of autonomy, attachment relationships (particularly with parents), self-esteem, self-confidence, self-identity and pro-social behaviours. Currently, three major models of children's learning and cognitive development form the theoretical basis for practice – Piagetian constructivist theory, Vygotskian sociocultural interactive theory and information processing theory. Within this theoretical framework, research provides insights on the building blocks of active learning including curiosity, exploration and novelty seeking, mastery motivation and goal persistence, metacognition, problem solving and the inter-relationship between language and thinking. While there is relatively little research and theory on the moral development of the child, it is an emerging area and one in which there is noteworthy research interest here in Ireland. The existing body of knowledge can further our understanding of the child's growth and development through explorations of morality as emotion, as conformity to rule and authority, as conforming to one's own belief system and sense of self, and the ways in which the child's developing moral sense functions in overall development. In the same way that theories of moral development are in an early stage of development, so too is the case with research on the child's emerging spiritual life. Nonetheless, there are insights available into spirituality as a human capacity and an integral element of overall development.

## **Implications for Quality Standards**

### ***Defining quality:***

- Quality service provision is based on the child's individual profile of strengths and needs;
- The child is an active agent in her learning and development and is given the opportunity to exercise choice and autonomy;
- Caregivers and significant adults have an understanding and knowledge of current research and theory of child development;
- Caregivers and significant adults understand the circumstances of the child's life and have the expertise to understand and address the impact of these circumstances;
- The child has the right to quality service provision, which places her interests and well-being at the top of the agenda.

### ***Assessing quality:***

- The child's opinion must be sought and included, in an age appropriate way in the course of evaluation and assessment.

### ***Supporting quality:***

- The qualification and training of practitioners to ensure high levels of understanding of child development and high levels of professional expertise, is fundamental to providing quality child-centred services.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has described the development of one of the four pillars generated to support the CECDE's core function, the preparation of the NFQ. The NFQ will establish quality standards for ECCE provision in Ireland and the four pillars reflect the elements identified by the CECDE as necessary to successful outcomes for the process. These are - consultation with all stakeholders to ensure that the NFQ benefits from their expertise and experience; national and international reviews of quality related practice, policy and research; and a conceptualisation of child learning and development in the Irish context, both historically and currently. It is this last which has been introduced in this paper, and which will be made available in full in the near future. It is the hope of the CECDE that it will engender debate and discussion, vital ingredients for a vibrant ECCE sector in Ireland.

## **References**

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**Notes:**

- 1 The CECDE wishes to acknowledge the contribution of Queen's University, Belfast and the researcher, Suzanne Clendenning who prepared this and the following section of the *Foundation Document*.
- 2 Feminine pronouns will be used throughout for ease of reading.