

Reflections on a National Review of Policy, Research and Practice in Ireland

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Introduction

The core function of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) is to produce a National Framework for Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education (NFQ/ECCE) in Ireland. Within the NFQ, three distinct elements can be identified. First of all, a set of standards will **define** what we understand by quality for children in the Irish context. Secondly, a system of **assessment** or inspection will be devised to ensure that quality is achieved and maintained. Last of all, an infrastructure will be devised and implemented to **support** all those working in the ECCE sector to accomplish the quality as prescribed in the standards.

Four key strands of research are involved in the devising of the NFQ:

- National consultation with stakeholders in ECCE regarding the development of the NFQ, drawing on the wealth of experience and expertise related to the promotion of quality in ECCE that exist in Ireland (CECDE, 2004);
- *Perspectives on Childhood* (CECDE, Forthcoming) reviews current research on child development and learning and distils implications for the NFQ;
- *Insights on Quality*, a review of national policy, practice and research, focusing on quality (CECDE, 2005a) distils best policy and practice nationally in relation to the development of the NFQ;
- *Making Connections*, an examination of the international context for quality through consideration of a range of selected countries (CECDE, 2005b), distils best policy and practice internationally in relation to the development of the NFQ.

This paper considers briefly some aspects of the National Review of policy, practice and research in relation to quality in ECCE. It considers three issues which have emerged as central to the assurance of quality in ECCE in Ireland:

1. Funding
2. Regulation
3. Training and qualifications.

This overview is prefaced by a brief consideration of the context for the development of quality in ECCE in Ireland.

Quality – A Recent Phenomenon?

Our concept of quality in relation to ECCE - and indeed childhood in Ireland - is context-linked and time-specific. Over the decades, this concept has been defined and re-defined and our understanding of quality has evolved. It is evident from the National Review that while some ECCE services would have historically operated within certain standards and criteria, quality was not a term that appeared often in documentation. We see a gradual emergence of this term from the late 1980s and early 1990s, to the point today where we do not speak of services without using the term 'quality'.

Even the term, 'early childhood care and education' has only appeared in the lexicon of policy in recent years, (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform [DJELR], 2002) and its use in this context remains mainly rhetorical rather than practical. This is primarily due to the fact that childcare and early education were traditionally regarded as separate issues, with services delivered by the State falling into either one or the other category. This situation remains largely unchanged in 2004. State provision of early education is the responsibility of the Department of Education and Science (DES) and provision of childcare usually falls between the Department of Health and Children (DHC), the DJELR and the Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA). Indeed as is evident from the list below (see 1.3), a complex web of influence impacts on State provision.

Policy Developments in relation to Quality, 1990 to 2004

Traditionally, there has been a dearth of activity pertaining to policy for ECCE in Ireland. While some positive developments in this regard were instigated following the economic boom of the 1960s and early 1970s, the recommendations of the few policy documents produced were largely ignored (Hayes, 2002). These developments were also hindered by the bleaker economic realities of the 1980s when budgetary contractions reduced social spending to a minimum.

Since the mid-1990s, there has been a plethora of policy documents, emanating from both statutory and non-statutory agencies, relating to ECCE. A broad range of government departments and agencies has assumed a multiplicity of roles and responsibilities for the administration of ECCE services. *The National Childcare Strategy* (DJELR, 1999), developed subsequent to Ireland's ratification of the *United Nation's (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN, 1989) in 1992, outlines the respective roles of eleven different departments in the management of policies relating to ECCE in Ireland in 1999¹:

- Department of Health and Children;
- Department of Education and Science;
- Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform;

- Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and Islands;
- Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment;
- Department of Agriculture and Food;
- Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs;
- Department of the Environment;
- Department of Tourism, Sport and Recreation;
- Department of Finance;
- Department of An Taoiseach (DJELR, 1999:11).

In the early 1990s, many of the policy documents that referred to childcare did so in the context of promoting equal opportunities for women. Whilst a commitment to quality was expressed in many of these documents, there was no exploration of the practical implications of such commitment. Despite the fact that the necessary policy commitment to quality in ECCE exists in abundance, translation of this commitment into practical initiatives has not been so successful.

The involvement of so many different government departments in the ECCE sector highlights an important issue emerging from the National Review, i.e., the existence of multiple agendas for ECCE in Ireland at policy level. Policy documentation regarding the development of ECCE has been generated by a wide variety of interested parties at national, regional and local level and reveals a variety of perspectives on what constitutes quality. For example, accessibility, affordability, catering for special needs, continuity of care etc. have all been cited as elements of quality provision.

Often it appears that agendas for ECCE in Ireland are competing, or even conflicting. An example of this at national level is the tension between policy aimed at supporting economic development which views childcare as a means to afford parents equality of opportunity to participate in the labour force, and policy measures aimed at tackling educational disadvantage which recommend high levels of parental involvement in ECCE services. Whilst one should not mutually exclude the other, it is often the case that they do due to lack of coordination between agencies implementing such policy. Coordination of both policy and practice is a real and present challenge for the future development of ECCE in Ireland and practical implementation of the policy commitment to the "...*inextricably linked*..." (DES, 1999a:45) nature of care and education is a key ingredient in this process.

Despite the evidence of fragmentation emerging from the National Review, it was interesting to note that there was a high degree of consensus in policy, practice and research materials on the necessity of ensuring ECCE services are of the highest quality possible. This high level of commitment is an excellent platform upon which to build the

NFQ, which, it is anticipated, will provide a relevant context for the promotion of quality across the entire spectrum of ECCE services in Ireland.

Consideration of Key Themes

Our international review of policy, research and practice in ECCE (CECDE, 2005b) identified a number of recurrent themes pertinent to consideration of developments related to quality in ECCE in all of the chosen countries. Three of these themes are now used to consider the situation in Ireland as revealed through a review of documentation generated by the National Review.

Funding

Ireland can be characterised as a liberal welfare regime (CECDE, 2005a) in terms of the funding for social services such as ECCE. This means that there is a high degree of market driven development and limited State subsidisation of services. Parents are accorded full responsibility for ensuring the care and education of their children and are generally regarded as consumers of, rather than partners in, the development of service provision. With the exception of infant classes in primary schools, the State does not fully fund any universal early education services. This situation means that ECCE services are usually dependant upon a 'cocktail' of funding deriving from parental fees, community employment schemes and grant aid from a wide variety of sources, including health boards, the DES, the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) and a range of charitable organisations. The establishment of the EOCP in 2000, which is supported by a fund of €449 million, represented unprecedented investment in preschool services in Ireland. Special recognition is given within the EOCP to the need to support the development of quality childcare places. A special sub-measure, designed to promote quality in ECCE provision is supported by €35.7 million or 10.2 per cent of the total budget (National Development Plan Community Support Framework [NDP/CSF] Evaluation Unit, 2003).

The difficulty with the EOCP is that it is a time limited intervention programme which is due to expire in 2006. This characteristic applies to many financial supports for ECCE in Ireland and certainly contributes to a climate of uncertainty evident in many non-statutory policy documents. It was articulated repeatedly that only when the ECCE sector is on a secure financial footing could real progress towards quality provision be achieved.

Regulation

The situation regarding statutory regulation of ECCE in Ireland mirrors to a large extent the funding picture. State provision under the auspices of the DES is subject to the school inspection system (DES, 1998), whilst the majority of other preschool services are regulated under the Pre-School Services Regulations (DoH, 1996) administered by the

DHC.² The most significant point to note in relation to regulation of preschool services in Ireland is its very recent introduction. Prior to 1997, the responsibility for ensuring quality practice was shouldered by a wide range of voluntary membership organisations through self-regulation systems. Perspectives on quality standards varied according to the philosophy and practice of these groups and, whilst there is evidence of common themes, there is a great degree of difference in their specific focus. This tradition has continued into the present day and, in fact, has been reinforced and enhanced by the availability of funding, through the EOCP, to the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCO)³ to develop and support quality. The following have emerged as the main quality programmes developed as a result of this funding:

- Barnardos - *Assuring Quality: Manual for Assessment of Community Employment Projects Providing Early Childhood Services* (FÁS and Barnardos, 2001); also *Supporting Quality* (French, 2003);
- Border Counties Childcare Network (BCCN) - *Quality Assurance Programme* (BCCN, 2004);
- Childminding Ireland - *Quality Indicators in Family based Day-care* (Childminding Ireland, 2004);
- High/Scope Ireland - *High/Scope Accreditation Pack* (High/Scope, 2003);
- IPPA - the Early Childhood Organisation - *IPPA Quality Improvement Programme* (IPPA, 2002);
- National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA) - *Centre of Excellence Award* (NCNA, 2002);
- St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland (SNMSI) - *Certification Process for Montessori Schools* (SNMSI, 2003).

In the main, these initiatives can be characterised as quality assurance/accreditation rather than regulatory or inspection based processes. Whilst each has been developed with a particular focus e.g. family day care, sessional playgroups or centre based full day-care, there is a high degree of consistency across the entire range in terms of definitions of quality, assessment mechanisms and support infrastructure.

At this point in time, there are very few evaluative studies available to allow any assessment of the impact of either the national regulatory systems or the voluntary schemes on the quality of provision. Even the mid-term review of the EOCP (NDP/CSF Evaluation Unit, 2003) was unable to quantify the impact of the Quality Sub-measure funding programme. One small-scale study completed in 2003 as an M.Phil Thesis, on the impact of the Preschool Regulations did conclude that:

"Findings suggest that the Regulations may be directly responsible for the fall in the maximum group figure. They may also be responsible for the slight reduction reported in average ratio size." (O'Kane, 2004:22)

The availability of evaluative research would make an important and valuable contribution to the development of the NFQ and a key recommendation of the National Review is that this situation should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Training and Qualifications

The positive correlation between the level of education, training and qualifications of adults working with young children and the quality of service provision is an issue which has attracted much support in literature in Ireland and in other countries (Ball, 1994; Oberhuemer and Ulich, 1997; DJELR, 1999; DES, 1999a; DJELR, 2002). This presents a particular challenge for the ECCE sector in Ireland as, in the absence of statutory qualification requirements for ECCE practitioners outside the formal education system, a proliferation of courses, of varying length, content and, indeed, quality have flourished.

Education, training and professional development opportunities for those who work with children from birth to six years are as diverse and varied as the range of early years settings that exist in Ireland. Primary school teacher training has been to degree level since the mid 1970s, and, whilst it is argued that in-service training is inadequate (DES, 2002; INTO 2004), there is a standard level of in-service available to all qualified teachers. The situation for personnel working with children in settings other than primary school is not so straightforward or standardised. Degree and postgraduate level programmes in early childhood studies have only been available since the mid 1990s. The majority of education and training for ECCE personnel, therefore, is offered by education and training providers whose courses may be nationally or non-nationally accredited to sub-degree level, or which indeed may not have any recognised accreditation at all. A further challenge is that of establishing an accurate picture of the national qualifications profile of those working in ECCE services. Research carried out in 1999 and published in 2003 suggests that the general picture is one of low levels of qualifications, if any, amongst a wide range of pre-school services (ADM, 2003). This research is now somewhat dated and funding initiatives have stimulated increased uptake of opportunities to gain qualifications by ECCE personnel. Again, research in this regard would yield very beneficial data for the future development of quality provision.

Some attempt to establish cross-sectoral consensus on appropriate levels of training and qualifications for ECCE practitioners is in evidence. In 2002, the National Coordinating Childcare Committee published a *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development for Early Childhood Care and Education Practitioners in Ireland*

(DJELR, 2002). This document represented the culmination of a comprehensive and lengthy consultation process and outlined the core skills and knowledge appropriate to each occupational profile within the sector. In addition, it set out for the first time the agreed core values that should underpin quality practice of all personnel. The *Model Framework* recognises that achieving 'quality practice' places increasingly complex demands upon ECCE personnel. It also acknowledges that all professional practitioners involved in the development and delivery of education and care services for children in Ireland must be prepared to meet the challenges of the future.

Conclusions

This paper has considered the findings of the National Review, *Insights on Quality* (CECDE, 2005b). It has given a brief insight into the national context for this development process and has considered the insights afforded on three issues; funding, regulation and training and qualifications. The Irish context is characterised primarily by diversity of provision, practice and perspectives on quality. Additionally, whilst policy rhetoric strongly supports holistic approaches to meeting the needs of young children and families, practice and provision remain largely divided between care and education. In our favour, Ireland is fortunate to have a strong and vibrant tradition of universal free early education for four and five year old children within the State school system. However, the situation for those children not participating in this system or children under four years of age is less than satisfactory.

It is difficult to comment with authority on the nature of quality in ECCE services in Ireland, as there simply is not enough reliable research evidence available. Our National Review has uncovered evidence of huge dynamism and commitment, both in policy and practical domains, to the pursuit of quality in ECCE. However, these activities continue to be uncoordinated and unrelated and this applies at national, regional and local levels. Review of these initiatives has demonstrated a substantial degree of correlation between the core themes and principles of quality. For example, concern for the environment, supporting positive relationships and the importance of appropriately trained adults repeatedly feature, amongst others. This bodes very well for the introduction of the NFQ/ECCE, which intends to develop and enhance existing good practice.

Ireland is poised at a unique crossroads in the evolution of ECCE services. Dedicated and visionary policy makers, researchers and practitioners have prepared excellent foundations for the creation of a national infrastructure to support the development of ECCE. We must now realise the potential of these foundations by constructing a framework, which will continue to support the journey towards quality in all its aspects in ECCE in Ireland. Only by engaging fully in this process can we hope to achieve our common goals of affording each child in Ireland the necessary opportunities to realise their full potential as active, valued citizens of the future.

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Notes:

- 1 Some titles of government departments have changed since the publication of the *National Childcare Strategy*, (1999).
- 2 There are notable exceptions to these national inspection systems which include childminders caring for less than three children in their own home and after or out of school services.
- 3 These organisations were identified and funded by the EOCP under the quality sub-measure to develop and support quality initiatives amongst their membership. They include Barnardos Ireland; Childminding Ireland; Children in Hospital Ireland; IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation; St. Nicholas Montessori Teachers Association; Forbairt Naíonraí Teo (formerly An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta Teo); Irish Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Association and the National Children's Nurseries Association.