



An Láirionad um Fhorbairt  
agus Oideachais na Luath-Óige

## ***'The Best for Children'***

# **Developing Quality Standards for Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland**

***Presentation by Dr. Gemma Kiernan, Assistant Director (CECDE) at  
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## **INTRODUCTION**

Good afternoon everyone. On behalf of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (the CECDE), I'd like to thank the National Children's Nurseries Association for inviting us to your annual conference and to say, we particularly welcome the focus of this conference on assessing quality. I would like to start by giving you some background information on the establishment of the CECDE before moving on to tell you about our role in relation to enhancing provision across the early childhood care and education sector. In particular, I will focus on our role in relation to developing national quality standards and devising a framework for their implementation in all the different settings where early learning takes place. Following that, I will highlight some of the key issues, questions and the areas where there is emerging consensus in the quality debate in Ireland and I will consider the implications for the CECDE's work on quality. Finally then, I will look to the future describing how we intend to make progress in our work on quality.

## **CENTRE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION (CECDE)**

### **Background to the Establishment of the CECDE**

In terms of the background to the establishment of the CECDE, it would be fair to say that while we are relatively new, we are the result of a lengthy process of dialogue and debate. There has been considerable development of the early childhood care and education sector in Ireland over the last decade, prompted to a large extent by the increasing participation of women in the labour market, but also by a growing recognition of the impact that early childhood experiences have on children's lives and subsequent development.

The quantity of services has increased and we now have diversity in the range of provision for children from birth to 6 years of age that includes playgroups, pre-schools and naonrai, drop-in centres, childminders, crèches and nurseries, infant classes, and after school groups. While we know that even greater quantity/supply is needed in order to meet demand, we have also become more and more aware that quality care and education services are vital to ensure (1) positive experiences for children in the here and now and (2) positive outcomes for children later on. These issues of increasing the quantity and improving the quality of early childhood care and education services are issues, which have moved to the forefront of professional and policy debate in Ireland.

There have been a number of milestones. The National Forum on Early Childhood Education in 1998 provided an historic opportunity for the many stakeholders to set an agenda for the way forward in early childhood provision. It also provided the context for the White Paper 'Ready to Learn' published by the Department of Education and Science in 1999. Its emphasis is on supporting the development of children through high quality early education with a particular focus on the target groups of the disadvantaged and those with special needs. It makes a series of recommendations to achieve this, recommendations which provided the impetus and brief for the CECDE.

### **Description of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE)**

The CECDE was officially launched last October by the Minister for Education and Science, Noel Dempsey. We are jointly managed by two Dublin based training institutions - the Dublin Institute of Technology, which offers courses for in childcare among others and St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, which trains primary school teachers.

Our overall purpose is to co-ordinate and stimulate developments in early childhood care and education in Ireland and to advise the Department of Education and Science on policy issues in this area. Our remit therefore covers children from birth to 6 years of age and encompasses the wide variety of settings where early learning occurs, including the infant classes of primary schools. We have 4 specific functions:

1. Firstly, to develop quality standards in relation to all aspects of early childhood education including curriculum, teaching methodologies and learning objectives, equipment and materials, staff training and qualifications, parental involvement and related areas;
2. Secondly, to develop a support framework to facilitate compliance among service providers with the quality standards;
3. Thirdly, to co-ordinate and enhance early education provision, including parental involvement, with a particular focus on disadvantaged and special needs groups;
4. Finally, to undertake and/or commission research and development through which best practice in curriculum, teaching methodology and parental involvement may be implemented and evaluated.

In addition to these 4 functions, we have also been asked to prepare the groundwork for the establishment of an Early Childhood Education Agency. It is anticipated that we will achieve all of this within 3 years –our funding is for 3 years.

### **KEY ISSUES IN DEVELOPING QUALITY STANDARDS**

The development of national quality standards is the CECDE's core function and as we set about achieving it, we are aware of a number of key issues that must be considered if we are to make progress. These issues emerge largely in relation to defining and understanding the meaning of quality. When considering what constitutes quality, we find that we are not faced with a tabular rasa in the Irish context. Rather the picture we are presented with is one of numerous initiatives and ongoing developments at various levels– the policy level, the practice level, and to a much lesser extent, the research level in Ireland.

### **Multiple Approaches to Understanding and Addressing Quality in the Irish Context**

At policy level, there are a number of key initiatives that give us an insight into the overall meaning of quality.

- The National Childcare Strategy (1999) conceptualises quality as a dynamic, ongoing process closely linked to tangible or structural criteria and but also to intangible or process based criteria. So, for example, it views quality in terms of the (1) appropriateness of learning environments, (2) emphasises high adult/child ratios, (3) the need for trained, registered and adequately remunerated staff, (4) the importance of partnerships with parents and local community, and (5) it highlights issues of diversity and accessibility.
- Somewhat similarly, the White Paper (1999) favours a view of quality as a set of core criteria which should include tangible criteria such as staff-child ratios, space and equipment as well as intangible criteria such as the nature of the interactions between staff and children and the appropriateness of activities for the developmental stage of the child. It also recognises the fact that quality means different things to different people.
- The National Children's Strategy (2000) outlines Ireland's vision for children and places quality at the heart of policy development and service delivery. It emphasises the

importance of giving children a voice in matters that affect them, undoubtedly, this includes their understanding of quality.

Also at policy level, there are a number of initiatives that give us an insight into the nature of quality in specific areas.

- The Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations (1996) provide a conceptualisation of quality based on the more tangible aspects of early years settings, notably the health and safety aspects and staff-child ratios. They do not extend to the developmental component of services but are currently under review with a somewhat wider scope.
- The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (2000-2006) provides us with an implicit message, through its funding elements, about what we consider needs to be addressed in terms of quality in the Irish situation. It highlights the need for co-ordination at national and local level by providing support to the national voluntary childcare organisations and to the county childcare committees. It also highlights the need to support the development of childcare training and the need for innovative approaches in provision.
- The various Education Acts (Education Act (1998) and the Education (Welfare) Act (2000)) are relevant to the infant classes in primary schools. They set standards for all aspects of a school's functioning from the management and staffing to the materials and resources. In terms of gaining an insight into what we see as acceptable or quality standards in our infant classes and schools, this legislations emphasises areas such as (1) promoting best practice in teaching methods, (2) promoting the equality of access, (3) the rights of parents and (4) effective communication between schools and the wider community.
- There are a number of schemes run by the Department of Education and Science to tackle educational disadvantage and they provide us with a further insight what is considered to constitute quality. The Early Start programme (1994 onwards), for example, provides a pre-school service for 3 and 4 year olds who are at risk of not reaching their potential in the school system. It emphasises the importance of (1) good staff child ratios, (2) a well thought out, developmentally appropriate curriculum, (3) parental and community involvement, and (4) the importance of easing the transition into formal schooling for children.

- The Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector (2002) concentrates on the area of quality related to staffing. As the title suggests, it sets out a clear pathway of progression for staff in the sector through education and training.
- The Early Childhood Learning Framework is a work in progress and focuses on the area of quality related to curriculum. It is being developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in collaboration with the CECDE. It will provide broad principles that should underlie early childhood curricula. A working paper on it will be ready for consultation with the sector over the coming months.

When you take a step back from all of these initiatives, you realise that there is such a lot happening in relation to quality at policy or national level that its hard to keep track of it all. What is good, however, is that there are certain elements that are continuously being emphasised:

For example,

1. the importance of adequately trained staff
2. the value of a developmentally appropriate curriculum
3. better partnership with parents and the local community
4. better co-ordination at national level and local level in terms of service delivery
5. fact that quality means different things to different people

From the CECDE's perspective, in developing national quality standards, we will draw on the initiatives underway and pay attention to what they are telling us about quality.

At practice level in Ireland, a number of umbrella organisations have instigated innovative quality improvement initiatives and these give us an insight into the meaning and application of quality in services on a day-to-day basis. What the NCNA, IPPA, FAS/Barnardos and BCCN quality improvement and assurance schemes all have in common is that they emphasise the importance of conceptualising quality in terms of its tangible and intangible characteristics. In terms of tangible characteristics, to a greater or lesser extent, they emphasise

1. services' aims,
2. physical environment,
3. health and safety
4. staff training

5. management
6. need for evaluation

In terms of intangible characteristics, they emphasise

1. curriculum,
2. relationships and
3. partnerships with parents/community.

This shows that there is a level of agreement between all of these different initiatives in terms of the criteria they consider to constitute quality, though within criteria, there are differences.

In developing national quality standards, the CECDE will be informed by all the expertise and experience that is being generated through these initiatives. At the same time, we are hopeful that in developing national quality standards, that we will provide an overarching framework that (1) facilitates a consistency of standards across the sector and (2) that avoids the current overlap, and duplication and depletion of resources as different organisations and county childcare committees develop independent structures to enhance quality themselves.

At research level in Ireland, the issue of quality has received relatively little attention.

- We have conducted an audit of all Irish research pertaining to early childhood education and care from 1990 to the present day. It is due for publication during the Autumn.
- We've collated and analysed well over 1,000 relevant publications and articles and found that only a minority relate to quality. We were quite surprised by this given that issues of quality are to the forefront of policy and practice – we discuss and debate issues of quality continuously, yet our rationales and arguments are largely unsubstantiated by published Irish research, there is a tendency I think for us to draw more on international research.
- In developing national quality standards, the CECDE would like to be informed by Irish research on quality and quality related issues and to this end, we have devised a comprehensive programme of research and we are in the process of recruiting 2 research fellowships and 4 Ph.D. studentships.

My review of the main quality related initiatives at policy, practice and research level in the country at the moment indicates we find ourselves in the midst of a hive of activity (research being the exception). While there is much merit in this, the sheer breadth and extent of it, coupled with its often fragmented nature, can at times be confusing and unhelpful. There is a danger that in the middle of all the different developments and agendas that we could lose sight of what is best for children.

In developing national quality standards, there are therefore a number of questions that we need to ask:

- What is our vision for our children...what do we want for our children?
- How can we optimise children's holistic development and learning?
- How can we best recognise the dynamic nature of quality, the fact that it varies with perspective, time and context? This comes back to the idea that quality is very much in the eye of the beholder. Children, parents, practitioners, politicians and society may all have different views of what constitutes quality. Taking any one perspective may lead to quality standards that are limited and biased, whereas finding a balance between all the different perspectives is more likely to give us a more relevant standards.
- How can we best ensure equality and acknowledge diversity?

#### **KEY ISSUES IN DEVELOPING A SUPPORT FRAMEWORK TO FACILITATE COMPLIANCE WITH QUALITY STANDARDS**

The second function of the CECDE centres on devising a framework that will facilitate the implementation of the quality standards we produce. We believe that it is really important that the quality standards we produce are implemented, there is no point in them looking good and gathering dust on a shelf, if we are to effect change and achieve the best for our children, they need to be implemented.

- Arising from the White Paper, *Ready to Learn* (1999), the CECDE have been asked to devise a method of national assessment that includes a Quality in Education (QE) Mark or an equivalent. This is to be awarded to providers who demonstrate compliance with the quality standards we produce, that is, quality standards in areas such as curriculum and teaching methodologies, materials and equipment, staff qualifications and training and parental involvement.

- We are also to exercise the role of support provider in relation to compliance with quality standards, that is, to develop supports to enable providers implement the quality standards.

As we have not yet developed the quality standards, it is far too early to speculate what the shape and nature of the QE mark will be or to anticipate what sort of supportive initiatives we might develop to help providers meet the standards. At the moment, important issues for us centre very much around considering how we can best encourage, assess and support the implementation of national quality standards – what sorts of structures need to be put in place? what sorts of resources are needed? In considering these issues, there are numerous initiatives at statutory and practice level in the Irish context for us to draw on.

### **Encouraging and Assessing Implementation of Quality Standards**

At statutory level, we have 2 principle systems of assessment in early childhood care and education.

- The Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations 1996, system of assessment based on the concept of external evaluation/validation being enforced by the health boards in the form of onsite inspections. There may be some advice given to providers by the inspectors about how to meet the standards.
- The other existing strand of inspection is the Department and Education and Science system of internal inspection of schools including the infant classes. It is also based around external validation and the provision of some support. Onsite school inspectors assess the quality of schooling, and generally provide some support for teachers, particularly probationary teachers. These inspections cover all age groups in the school including Early Start – there are no inspectors specifically designated or trained for early childhood education. An evaluation report is drawn up for a school approximately every 6 years.

At practice level, the umbrella organisations that I talked about earlier have their own systems of assessment to monitor quality. What the NCNA, IPPA, FAS/Barnardos and BCCN systems of assessment have in common is that they embody, to a greater or lesser extent, the components of self-evaluation, training and support and external validation.

- In the case of self-evaluation, in some of the systems, providers actually determine what criteria to assess and set goals for themselves and review their progress, whereas

in others, criteria are set and standardised questionnaires or checklists are used ascertain progress.

- They differ in terms of the type and amount of training and support offered to practitioners to enable them achieve the quality standards – in some cases there may be little training and support (e.g. telephone support), whereas in others, there may be higher levels of training and designated quality specialists who visit services to provide support.
- They also differ in relation to external validation with some viewing the achievement of quality standards as an ongoing process and others providing an independent certification of quality as an end point.

These existing initiatives provide us with an insight into the sorts of questions we need to ask ourselves in developing a national system of assessment – what level of self-evaluation should there be?, what are the most suitable assessment techniques? (*when we think of assessment, we often automatically think in structural terms such as checklists, criteria, facts and figures, and overlook the more process orientated approaches such as observation of children and what they can do*), what type and amount of support and training do providers need?, and what is the role of external validation? The answers to these questions will be instrumental in helping us make progress, regardless, however,

- we recognise that enhancing quality is highly resource intensive and consideration should be given to the capacity of services to respond positively to assessment and evaluation.
- ultimately though, we see assessment as a means of reviewing services, and strengthening and enhancing them so that we can be confident that we are providing the best for children.

### **ACHIEVING QUALITY STANDARDS: THE WAY FORWARD**

Over the course of this presentation, I have talked about developing quality standards and a support framework to facilitate their implementation and the sorts of questions that need to be considered. Making progress on these tasks and answering these questions will involve different strands of work.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Firstly, we are producing a conceptual framework of how children (from 0-6 years) develop and learn. Our rationale for this is that our increasing knowledge about childhood and child development and learning has much to inform us about the nature of quality in early childhood care and education. While there is a lot documented about childhood and child development and learning, we want to take it a step further and specifically explore holistic development and learning for the child in the Irish context and consider the implications of this for quality provision.

### **National Scene**

Second, I have talked about the wide variety of initiatives at policy and practice level and to a lesser extent, at research level here in Ireland. We believe that there is a wealth of expertise and experience inherent in all of these, which if brought together in a co-ordinated manner will allow us to develop and implement quality standards that provide the best for our children.

### **International Scene**

What can the international scene offer us? We recognise that good practices, policy and research from overseas can never be transported in their entirety from one cultural context to another. However, that does not mean that we cannot learn from approaches in other countries – with extensive change and adaptation, they often have a very worthwhile contribution to make.

### **Consultation and Networking**

We see consultation and networking with the broad spectrum of stakeholders in the sector as being of vital importance. We will work in partnership with all of you to develop the quality standards and the support framework for their implementation. To this end,

- We are in the process of establishing a national advisory committee representing all of the stakeholders in the sector from government bodies, national voluntary organisations, to academic institutions, and parents associations.
- We also intend to run a series of consultative seminars towards the end of this year with practitioners and have plans to host an international conference next year.
- We are currently represented on a number of committees and boards including the committee reviewing the pre-school regulations, the National Co-ordinating Childcare

Committee, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, High/Scope, the Forum on Educational Disadvantage, and the North/South Early Years Network to name but a few.

- We have a quarterly newsletter called 'Alana', a web site in progress and an open door policy for everyone in the Sector.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education represents an exciting opportunity to develop national quality standards building on the progress already made within the Sector and delivering tangible results on the ground. We believe quality standards need to be dynamic, inspiring services to strive for better practice and creating centres of excellence. It would be relatively straightforward for us to establish a number of minimum standards to tell the 'good enough' services from the 'not yet good enough' services and to give parents using childcare some assistance in their difficult choice. This approach would miss the opening we have at the moment to provide the best for young children in Ireland today. We recognise that their implementation needs to be resourced and supported. Their implementation will be integral to giving services an increased confidence in their value and to providing practitioners with the satisfaction of a job well done and raising the professional status of the Sector. There is still a lot for us to do, but the journey towards national quality standards for our early childhood care and education services has begun. Enhancing quality in early childhood care and education services requires an investment, it requires time, patience, collaboration, resources and funding, but it pays dividends, not least of which will be the memories that our children will share of their early experiences as adults.