

Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

This paper introduces *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (NQF) that has been developed under the auspices of the Department of Education and Science (DES). *Síolta* is a quality assurance programme that has been developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), in consultation with the wider early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector in Ireland. It is applicable to all settings in which children aged from birth to six years are present and therefore crosses many of the traditional divides between care and education and between the formal school sector and the informal ECCE sector. The Framework has been produced at a time when national and international attention is focused as never before on the issue of quality ECCE services, and their role in enhancing the lives of our youngest children. It distils and captures the concerted momentum of the sector in recent years towards the attainment of quality and provides a reference point for all those involved in ECCE services towards this end.

The paper begins by detailing the development process involved in creating *Síolta*. The substantive focus pivots on the content of *Síolta*, namely the Principles, Standards and Components of Quality. This is followed by an overview of the assessment and support systems proposed for *Síolta*. The paper concludes by describing the national testing and evaluation process envisaged for *Síolta*.

Introduction

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The Development Process

The process of developing *Siolta* has been underway since the CECDE was established in 2002. From the outset, the CECDE has ensured that the NQF is evidence-based and builds on existing national and international experience and expertise. As one of the core objectives of the CECDE's work programme, the production of the NQF has informed a significant body of research and development work and has, in particular, yielded four specific research projects. These were identified as instrumental in underpinning the development of *Siolta*. While important and valuable publications in their own right, collectively these documents provide a solid foundation of research evidence on which to base the development and implementation of *Siolta* in the Irish context. The main focus of the four pillars of research was quality in the Irish context, while an international perspective was also included to enhance this particular viewpoint. This culminated in the following publications:

- *Talking About Quality* is the report of a nationwide consultation undertaken by the CECDE in late 2003 (CECDE, 2004a). Approximately four hundred stakeholders (including practitioners, parents, policy-makers, researchers, health professionals and students) in the ECCE sector were consulted with regard to defining, assessing and supporting quality practice in Ireland.

- *Insights on Quality* is a literature review of policy, practice and research in relation to quality in Ireland since 1990 (CECDE, 2004b). It examines in excess of three hundred publications from both statutory and non-statutory agencies and draws implications and recommendations for the development of *Siolta*.
- *Making Connections* is an international review of quality in ECCE relating to six countries worldwide, namely; Norway, Sweden, Germany, Portugal, Northern Ireland and New Zealand. It examines policy, practice and research in these countries on a thematic basis and concludes with implications for the development of *Siolta* in the Irish context (CECDE, 2004c).
- *Early Childhood in Ireland - Evidence and Perspectives* is a thematic consideration of child development and learning in Ireland based on an extensive literature review (CECDE, 2005).

Siolta has been developed in relation to the three strands of defining, assessing and supporting quality. The main focus of the initial stages of the development process concentrated on the definition of quality, namely identifying and agreeing the Principles, Standards and Components of Quality. Drafts of each of these elements were circulated to each of the members of the CECDE Consultative Committee between November 2004 and June 2005, which is comprised of fifty stakeholder representatives of the ECCE sector. A number of organisations suggested word changes, additions and omissions within these drafts, which were subsequently implemented by the CECDE. This process of consultation greatly enriched and strengthened their wording and clarity, and helped to ensure the materials produced were reflective of the various stakeholders' views. A specific and focused consultative process was undertaken with parents in March 2005 in recognition of their primary role in the care and education of their children .

Contents of *Siolta* – Standards, Components and Signposts for Reflection¹

Siolta is designed to allow ECCE settings to evaluate the quality of the service they are providing. Accordingly, the framework recognises elements of practice that are successful within the setting, as well as identifying aspects in need of attention and improvement. In this way, it acts as a tool to promote continuous quality improvement and planning. The NQF is comprised of three distinct but interrelated elements, namely Principles, Standards and Components (and their associated Signposts for Reflection) of Quality (see Figure 1).

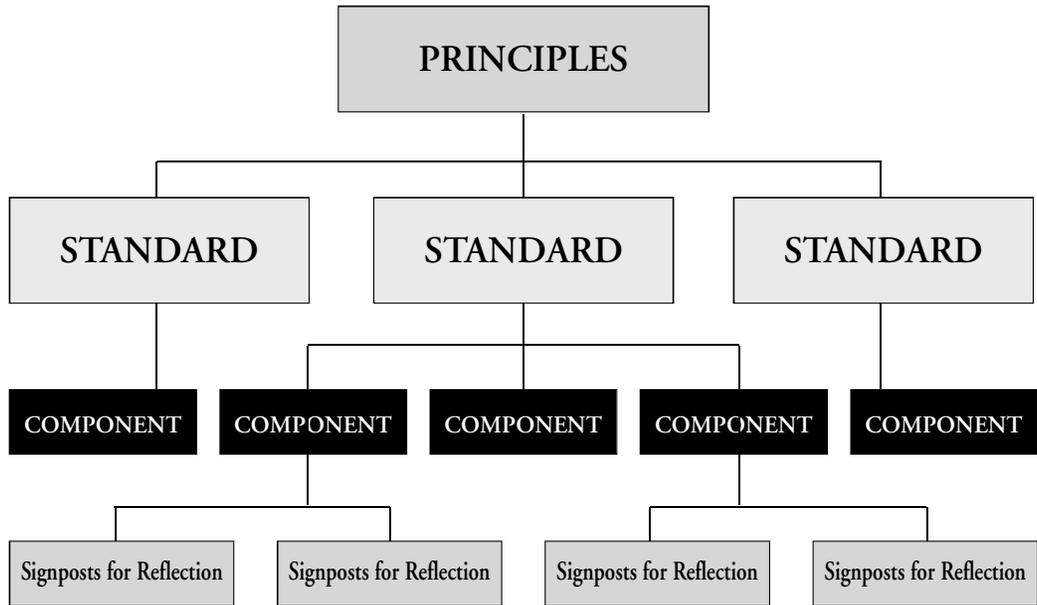


Figure 1: Elements of the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education

The Principles form the overall vision of the Framework, within which all other elements are couched. The Principles contained within *Síolta* span twelve general areas:

- The value of early childhood
- Children first
- Parents as partners
- Relationships
- Equality
- Diversity
- Enriching environments
- Safety, welfare and well-being
- Role of the adult
- Teamwork
- Pedagogy
- Play

Each of the Principles is presented individually and includes explanatory notes, intended to inform and guide the practitioner. They are inter-dependent and not intended for use in isolation. For example, while one Principle refers to the role of the adult in providing quality early childhood experiences as fundamental, it should be viewed in the context of another Principle which re-iterates the pre-eminent role of the child's parents in their well-being, learning and development. Furthermore, the role of the adult is also influenced by the environment in which adult/child interactions take place, and the extent to which play is incorporated into that environment.

The detailing of all twelve Principles is not facilitated within the confines of this paper and so, by means of practical example, one of the Principles can be highlighted. In keeping with the example outlined above, the Principle states:

Parents are the primary educators of the child and have a pre-eminent role in promoting her/his well-being, learning and development.

The explanatory note that accompanies that particular principle then offers the practitioner a more detailed interpretation:

Quality early childhood care and education must value and support the role of parents. Open, honest and respectful partnership with parents is essential in promoting the best interests of the child. Mutual partnership contributes to establishing harmony and continuity between the diverse environments the child experiences in the early years. The development of connections and interactions between the early childhood setting, parents, the extended family and the wider community also adds to the enrichment of early childhood experiences by reflecting the environment in which the child lives and grows.

The sixteen national Standards translate the vision of the Principles into the reality of practice in settings where children aged from birth to six years are present. They are broad-based and comprehensive in nature, and represent an agreed framework for quality practice within settings. As with the Principles, the Standards are interrelated and interdependent and should not be viewed in isolation, as only together do they form a cohesive and comprehensive framework for quality practice. Each Standard is

explained by a statement agreed by the representative Consultative Committee of the CECDE, with the sixteen national Standards being:

- Organisation
- Professional practice
- The rights of the child
- Parents and families
- Environments
- Curriculum
- Consultation
- Identity and belonging
- Planning and evaluation
- Interactions
- Play
- Communication
- Health and welfare
- Community involvement
- Transitions
- Legislation and regulation

The Components of Quality have a direct relationship with the Standards, with each Component further unpacking the detail within the Standards. Each Standard has a varying number of Components, incorporating seventy-five Components in total within the Framework. The Components of Quality act as indicators or guidelines for all those engaging with the Framework towards providing quality experiences for our youngest children.

Each Component of Quality is accompanied by a variety of Signposts for Reflection. These are open-ended questions that act as a tool for self-reflection for practitioners to review and consider their current practice within the broad area of the sixteen Standards. They further support the dialogue required for the achievement of the national Standards. While the Principles, Standards and Components are applicable to all settings in which children aged birth to six years are present, the Signposts for Reflection are mediated in two different ways to ensure they are apposite to the needs of all children. First of all,

they are moderated for four distinct settings that were identified by the NQF, specifically: Full and Part-time Daycare, Sessional Services, Infant Classes of Primary Schools, and Childminding. Secondly, where appropriate, they are mediated for three specific age ranges, namely; birth to eighteen months, one to three years and two-and-a-half to six years.

Many of these Signposts for Reflection are further supported by a list of ‘Think Abouts’, which prompt the reflective practitioner to consider various aspects of her/his practice. They can be used by individual practitioners or by groups/teams that are planning for an entire setting. The selection of Signposts for Reflection and ‘Think Abouts’ provided act as examples or prompts to stimulate discussion. They are neither comprehensive nor exhaustive in nature and practitioners are at liberty to add to, edit, or remove those presented to make them more supportive, personalised or relevant to their own unique situation.

Assessment

The White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn*, envisages that assessment would form an essential part of the National Quality Framework and would ultimately award a ‘Quality in Education mark’ (QE), where providers reached predetermined quality standards. It also envisaged that assessment associated with the QE mark would take account of the developmental processes that services were engaged in:

Inspectors will also assist providers to attain the QE standards by identifying the areas where improvements are required and by suggesting approaches which providers could take to achieve the improvements. (DES, 1999:121)

Síolta has drawn on both the national and international models of assessment for quality in ECCE. It has also been informed by the national consultation research conducted by the CECDE, which asked for specific opinion about assessment in ECCE in Ireland. The outcomes of this consultation revealed that there was strong agreement that any assessment of quality must be informed by the multiple dimensions of, and perspectives on, quality itself. In addition, great emphasis was placed on the need for both internal and external assessment and on both formative and summative assessment processes. Furthermore, the importance of openness and transparency in assessment processes to ensure validity and reliability and ‘fairness’ of the criteria for quality was emphasised (CECDE, 2004a).

Stolta is designed to facilitate and support all forms of assessment. Multiple assessment methods will be necessary and it is envisaged that an essential aspect of the supports for quality (outlined in the next section) will focus on preparing practitioners and assessors to engage with a wide variety of assessment methods and approaches. This flexibility is only possible because of the strength and solidity of the core elements of the NQF, specifically the national Standards and Components of Quality. These are the benchmark for all assessment and as such will inform and be the focus of developments in practice. An individual practitioner, keen to assess her/his own practice, for example, may draw on a range of assessment data. These could include, keeping a practice journal, inviting peer observation, participating in formal educational examinations or testing. As long as the benchmark for assessment in all of these processes is the core Standards, then the data will provide valuable evidence for the practitioner on her/his level of performance in relation to the NQF. Indeed, it is good practice to draw upon more than one source of assessment data as consistency across all methods means the overall outcome of assessment is more likely to be accurate and reliable.

At this stage of *Stolta's* development, assessment processes are not fully finalised and will benefit from discussion and consultation with stakeholders. The system outlined does, however, reflect a synthesis of best practice both nationally and internationally in relation to assessment processes that foster developmental processes of change towards the achievement of quality. It is envisaged that there will be a number of distinct stages that services will engage with in relation to assessment under the NQF; registration, evidence collection and portfolio building, and validation.

During the **registration** stage, the service provider indicates interest in becoming registered on the NQF quality assurance programme. Details of the service are recorded and introductory information is sent out. This may include an overview of the NQF process, a set of Standards, Components and Signposts for Reflection (appropriate to the type of setting), guidelines for evidence collection, and the relevant application form for registration

The service provider reads and reflects upon the Standards and if she/he feels that the NQF process is appropriate for the service, then the next step is to invite a visit from an NQF assessor to conduct a baseline assessment visit. During the visit, the assessor will

consult with the practitioner/s in the setting and will discuss in detail the processes involved in participation in the NQF programme. On the basis of this visit, the setting will be given a baseline rating and if it meets the minimum requirements, and if the setting wishes to continue with the NQF process, formal registration is completed.

Once registration is complete, the setting will be allocated a quality support person and, where appropriate, will be assigned to a quality cluster network. As part of the contract, a date for application for assessment for the QE mark will be agreed. Supporting materials, resources and documentation will be sent to the setting and, in the case of larger settings, a quality coordinator will be identified. The time frame between registration and validation will have been determined as part of the registration process. This will usually last for no more than one year. During that time, it is anticipated that the setting would participate in a range of development activities towards the achievement of the quality standards, such as curriculum review, professional development activities and engagement in reflective practice.

When the setting feels that it is ready to progress to the next stage of the NQF process or when the agreed time frame has elapsed, the quality support person would assist the setting in the preparation of a **quality assurance portfolio** to submit for validation. This portfolio should contain fully completed assessment forms for each standard and any relevant documentation to support the application. Upon submission of the portfolio, an appointment for a **validation** visit would be established. The duration of this visit would depend upon the nature and size of the setting and may involve more than one validator. During the visit, the validator would carry out such interviews, observations and review of documentation as is deemed necessary to verify the contents of the portfolio. This visit would culminate in the production of both summative and formative reports. The summative report will be based upon the awarding of merit according to a Likert scale². In addition, a narrative report which focuses on areas of strength and target areas for future development would be prepared. If the setting has achieved a satisfactory level of performance to warrant the achievement of an award, they would receive a certificate for display within the setting and a continuing development pack to encourage their continued efforts towards quality practice. The award would be made for a time-limited period. Both national and international practice in this area suggests that this should not exceed two years. If the setting has not achieved the required level of quality practice to

merit the award, the quality support person would engage with the setting to renegotiate a new time frame and identify areas from the validator's report which need to receive attention and support.

Supporting Quality

The following section presents possibilities for the provision of supports for the implementation of *Siolta*, drawing on the views of stakeholders, policy analysis, CECDE research and the submissions of members of the CECDE Consultative Committee. It profiles the variety of measures which experience and current practice indicate will be central to the successful implementation of the NQF, and endeavours to bolster the fact that the implementation of quality improvement processes is a project which must include all stakeholders across the ECCE sector, and not just practitioners.

The CECDE has recognised, from the earliest stages of the development of *Siolta*, that practitioners should receive support in engaging with the framework in pursuit of quality improvement. The provision of such high quality services is not viewed to be the responsibility of practitioners alone, but as a mutual effort, undertaken co-operatively and involving all facets of the system – individual, local, regional and national. The pursuant discussion of possible elements of support takes as its starting point the results of the consultation seminars which the CECDE held in late 2003. Participants were asked to enumerate supports required to enhance quality provision, which were prioritised as follows:

- Funding/financial support
- Professional development
- Staff training and qualifications
- Networking and mentoring
- Standards/guidelines/regulations/curriculum (CECDE, 2004a).

For the purposes of establishing a comprehensive picture of current views from practice, policy and research in ECCE, this initial analysis was augmented with information from a number of other sources. The implications for supporting quality which emerged from the research undertaken for the national review (CECDE, 2004b), the international review (CECDE 2004c) and the review of child learning and development (CECDE,

2005), were considered. A number of other recent and relevant policy documents, for example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report (DES, 2004), the report of the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) (NESF, 2005) and DEIS (DES, 2005) have also been examined. Finally, as part of the CECDE consultation process on the development of *Síolta*, submissions were requested from the Consultative Committee on the subject of the supports members viewed as necessary to the implementation of the Framework.

Following analysis of this material, two separate levels of support were identified. The first concerns the macro level of support for quality and highlights issues that need to be addressed at national level, and which were identified as fundamental to the overall development of quality ECCE provision in Ireland. The second relates more specifically to supports which stakeholders have identified as necessary in order for practitioners and services to successfully implement *Síolta* in practice settings.

At a macro level, a number of issues were identified as being pivotal to supporting *Síolta*. First and foremost, funding and financial support emerged as the main support required to promote and safeguard the delivery of quality provision. Participants in the consultation seminars acknowledged the critical influence that government policy and practice exerts upon the provision of ECCE services. The OECD (DES, 2004) have, likewise, emphasised the economic and social benefits of investing in ECCE, and have recommended a shift in investment towards services for young children in Ireland. In addition, participants were anxious to see greater coordination between government departments and organisations dealing with ECCE. The OECD proposes, in fact, that one ministry or designated funding and policy agency be the focus for such integration (DES, 2004) and movement in this direction is now evident with the recent establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC). Levels of staff training and qualifications are recognised internationally as a major contributor to, and support for, the quality of service provision (CECDE, 2004c). Issues of concern for the ECCE sector in this area include access to education and training, and flexibility of training pathways. The training and qualifications levels of practitioners will impact on the capacity of services to engage with the quality improvement process, and therefore a related programme of professional development will support the implementation of *Síolta*.

A clear consensus emerged from consultation on the ecological nature of the relationships between ECCE services, the family and the community. Specific measures will be required during the implementation of *Siolta* to make sure that services and children can benefit from the contribution of parents and families, and that they can both contribute to their communities and gain from the relationship. The need for a national data strategy to gather and provide accurate, reliable information to support the development of all aspects of ECCE emerged from both *Insights on Quality* (CECDE, 2004b) and *On Target* (CECDE, 2004d). Such data is necessary for the co-ordination of policy and provision and, most importantly, will make children in the birth to six years age group visible within society.

A number of possibilities for the provision and dissemination of information to services engaging with the NQF at a practice level were forthcoming. Great emphasis was placed on the availability of on-site support from an advisor with practice experience and expertise, complemented by telephone support, where the advisor would be available to respond to telephone queries from settings and practitioners. Other proposals included a web page on the *Siolta* website (www.siolta.ie), a dedicated newsletter for participating services, the publication of additional materials to support various aspects of practice and the dissemination of information through seminars at local, regional and national level. The opportunity for networking among practitioners was emphasised in several of the submissions, through possibilities such as quality support networks under the auspices of statutory or voluntary groups or an on-line network with a link from the dedicated web page.

Implementation

Siolta is envisaged as the basis for the development of a national quality assurance scheme for all ECCE settings where children aged from birth to six years are present. As outlined in *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999), this would initially be a voluntary scheme with the ultimate objective of developing capacity in service provision to deliver high quality ECCE experiences for young children. In order to realise the ultimate objective of a national quality assurance scheme for early childhood education in Ireland, a period of test implementation and evaluation of *Siolta* is essential. This phase will need to facilitate a number of key aims and objectives:

- To review, refine and revise the indicators of quality outlined within the NQF
- To model, evaluate and refine the assessment and support functions within the NQF
- To develop the capacity of the ECCE sector to engage with quality improvement processes
- To develop ancillary support materials
- To facilitate aspects of the overall CECDE Research Strategy, such as exploration of parental involvement structures, professional development issues and targeted interventions, such as those suggested in the DEIS strategy (DES, 2005)
- To raise awareness of the critical nature of early education in the lives of young children.

It is envisaged that the pilot will take place throughout 2007 and 2008 and will proceed through a number of distinct but interdependent stages. It is essential to note from the outset that this proposed timeline is dependant upon the achievement of critical milestones along the way. These include; the approval of budgetary and recruitment plans; invitation and recruitment to participate; recruitment of Quality Advisors; development of the final sample profile; settings selection; the commissioning of an external evaluation; quarterly implementation reports; the review and revision of quality improvement plans; the appointment of a validator's panel; and the implementation of validation processes. Such milestones are inextricably linked. Quality Advisors, for example, must be recruited and inducted before settings can be recruited; assessment structures must be developed and approved before validation processes can commence.

As previously outlined, it is envisaged that the pilot process will be externally evaluated. This evaluation will seek to identify the critical aspects of the NQF materials and processes which contribute to its effectiveness in stimulating and supporting the development of quality ECCE service provision. The evaluation brief will have multiple dimensions, and will seek to represent the broad range of stakeholders' perspectives including practitioners, parents and children. This evaluation process is essential to establishing reliable and objective data on the efficacy of *Siolta*. Ultimately, it is envisaged that the findings of this evaluation will combine with a project narrative and recommendations for a revised NQF in a final report in September 2008. The evaluation brief will be put to public tender at an early stage in the pilot process and awarded on the basis of the expertise and capacity of interested institutions and individuals.

It is anticipated that a minimum of one hundred settings will be recruited to participate in the pilot process of the NQF. This number will facilitate representation of the broad diversity which characterises the ECCE settings identified through the national research conducted in support of the development of *Stolta* (CECDE, 2004a; 2004b). The sample will recruit equal numbers of settings from the four categories identified within the NQF – Full and Part-time Daycare, Sessional Services, Infant Classes in the Primary School and Childminding. Within each of these sub samples, effort will be made to ensure representation of settings within the following parameters; rural/urban, disadvantaged/non-disadvantaged, large/small, special needs/diversity, community and voluntary/private, curriculum approach/ethos. It is acknowledged that due to the limited nature of the sample size and also the voluntary nature of participation in the pilot process, it will not be possible to achieve representation of the entire complexity of existing early education provision in Ireland. However, these key categories have emerged from research (CECDE, 2004d) as the most critical elements of this diversity and therefore will form the basis of the selection criteria.

The support provided to all participants at all stages of the pilot process will necessitate the provision of information, mentoring and coaching and will require access to a range of skills including observation, assessment, portfolio building and facilitation skills. A further challenge for the provision of support will be the fact that this is a national pilot programme and will therefore involve participation by settings in geographically dispersed locations. This support will be delivered to settings primarily through the intervention of specialised Quality Advisors working in conjunction with the core staff of the CECDE, and with other organisations and institutions in their region (such as County Childcare Committees and Education Centres).

In light of the specialised skill set necessary for the role of each Quality Advisor and the national spread of participant settings, it will be necessary to recruit appropriately qualified and experienced individuals who can be located regionally. A minimum of five such personnel will facilitate the recruitment and support of one hundred settings nationally. This ratio of quality advisors to settings is important during the pilot process to mediate the establishment of new processes with the diverse range of participants, to integrate with and, where necessary, establish new networks of providers and support structures. Moreover, for the pilot process, these staff must facilitate the close scrutiny of

all aspects of the NQF process. This will, therefore, necessitate the collection of a substantial amount of data in the participant settings. In addition to these specialised staff, the core staff of the CECDE will provide a range of supports to the pilot process. This will include management functions, coordination and supervision of project staff, administration, communication and information services, development of resource materials, training and induction and research and development.

Conclusion

Siolta has been designed to achieve a number of key objectives in relation to the development of early childhood education services in Ireland. As detailed throughout the course of this paper, it seeks:

- To clearly identify a vision of quality which reflects the unique cultural, social and environmental context of Ireland
- To build on existing knowledge and expertise relating to the provision of quality ECCE services
- To promote and support the rich diversity of provision that characterises ECCE service in Ireland
- To develop the capacity of ECCE services to provide quality experiences for children aged from birth to six years and their families
- To promote assessment as an essential element of the developmental processes necessary for the achievement of quality
- To recognise and reinforce quality practice
- To provide a coordinating framework for all aspects of early childhood provision in Ireland
- To support the development of professionalism in all aspects of practice in a dynamic and expanding sector.

Siolta is a significant contribution to the development of ECCE, and education generally, in the Republic of Ireland. Together with the *Framework for Early Learning* by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2004) it will provide the vision and blue print for a future of ECCE that will meet the needs of our youngest children.

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Notes

¹ For detailed information on the contents of *Siolta*, please visit www.siolta.ie.

² The Likert scale is a four-point scale gauging observed, reported or documented evidence of progress towards the achievement of a particular Component within the setting, with level one indicating no evidence and level four indicating extensive evidence of progress. In order to meet the minimum requirements for registration on the NQF process, a setting must achieve a rating of two on all Components of Quality.